The Role of Government in Sustaining or Creating Barriers Towards Ethical Textile and Apparel Manufacturing Practices in the United States

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Fashion consumers' spending in the 2020s has reached an all-time high, with over 80 billion new garments purchased globally each year—more than a 400% increase compared to two decades ago (Fashion United, 2021). This unprecedented demand has contributed to the textile and apparel industry's reliance on unethical and unsustainable production and distribution practices (Weber & Weber, 2022). Historically, governments have played a significant role in the textile and apparel manufacturing sector through incentives and regulations (Rahman, 2019). In several countries, such as Japan, Scotland, Iceland, and Sweden, government intervention has helped promote ethical and sustainable manufacturing practices (Macarthur, 2013). As one of the world's largest textile and apparel exporters—alongside China and India—the United States operates within a framework of environmental laws (Gerard & Lave, 2005; Sjöberg & Xu, 2018; Weinmeyer et al., 2017). Given these regulations, it is crucial to examine how government legislation impacts the U.S. textile and apparel industry and sustainable futures.

In our work, we aim to explore the gaps, opportunities, and potential successes of environmental policies relevant to the textile and apparel manufacturing industry in the United States. To achieve our purpose, we ask, what role does the United States government play in sustaining or creating barriers towards ethical textile and apparel manufacturing practices (TAMP) in the United States?

Methods

Given the limited understanding of how current U.S. government policies support—if at all—the textile and apparel manufacturing industry's shift toward sustainability, we employ an exploratory qualitative approach. Specifically, we utilize a case study research design (Creswell, 2020). To gather data, we analyzed publicly available official government websites that detail environmental laws, regulations, government incentive programs, and climate agendas. Data collection concluded once we reached saturation, meaning no new relevant and valid government sources were identified. To examine historical events related to textile and apparel sustainability, we conducted search engine queries using keywords such as "environmental disasters,"

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"manufacturing worker rights," and "climate legislation," combined with "United States." We focused on data from 2013 to the present, as it is framed by events following the Rana Plaza disaster—widely regarded as a turning point in the industry's movement toward more sustainable business strategies (Rahman, 2019). To analyze the data, we followed open, axial, and selective coding. In our study, an open coding process was the initial coding stage, where data was broken down and analyzed to identify initial codes. In the secondary coding stage, axial coding provided us with a systematic examination of the codes and we began grouping like codes together. Finally, we used selective coding to identify the core themes and subthemes (Creswell, 2020).

Results

We identified several key themes and subthemes regarding the role of the United States government in sustaining and creating barriers towards ethical TAMP. First, the government contributes to ethical TAMP by drafting and enacting environmental legislation aimed at sustainability. Second, lack of government investment, fragmented legislation, and trivial sanctions for violations, prohibits the development of circular economies for fashion-related products. These themes illustrate the nuanced and sometimes contradictory role of government in promoting and/or prohibiting ethical TAMP in the United States.

Draft and/or Pass Environmental Legislation Relevant to Sustain Ethical TAMP

The first key theme identified was the role of environmental legislation in sustaining ethical TAMP in the United States. This environmental legislation that directly impacts ethical TAMP exists at both the local and federal levels. Sometimes, these environmental-related legislations are textile-industry specific, yet most of the time, the legislation is broad in scope. The broad scope of legislation includes protecting drinking water, waste management, landfill management, and protecting clean air. For the legislation, the sanctions, if any, are oftentimes financial penalties.

At the local level, some legislation is highly specific, outlining clear goals, assessment measures, and future directions for improvement. However, in local legislation, very few are directly related to TAMP and are limited to only a few states, including New York and California. One example of local legislation directly related to the textile industry occurred in California; journalists reported California's Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery needs to "submit a plan for collection, repair, and recycling of the textiles by July 1, 2030" (Deppen, 2024, para. 6). One example at the local level that is not TAMP specific, but influences it, is the legislation defining and regulating per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS); this legislation restricts certain

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chemicals frequently used in manufacturing. Additionally, reporters highlighted how some of these local policies have the potential to influence legislation elsewhere by serving as models.

At the federal level, legislation is most often broad and less fashion-industry specific, making enforcement and direct impact on TAMP more difficult to measure. For example, an Environmental Protection Agency report described a broad framework for solid waste management (e.g., textiles, clothing) at the federal level that the states would then implement.

Lack of Government Investment, Fragmented Legislation, and Trivial Sanctions for Violations Prohibits Ethical TAMP

In our second theme, we identified how the U.S. government played a role in creating barriers to ethical TAMP by lack of investment in resource allocation such as grants or program. The legislation that was in place was often fragmented and not specific. That is, the legislation did not engage in any structural change from a systematic perspective and took a more band-aid approach. Finally, if violations were detected, the sanctions were trivial for large-scale companies engaging in TAMP.

Discussion, Conclusion, and Implications

Our findings align with existing literature highlighting governments' significant role in shaping textile and apparel manufacturing practices (Rahman, 2019). Similar to interventions seen in Japan, Scotland, Iceland, and Sweden (Macarthur, 2013), the U.S. government has enacted environmental legislation and invested in circular economies to promote sustainability. However, as previous studies have noted, the broad scope and inconsistent enforcement of environmental regulations (Gerard & Lave, 2005; Sjöberg & Xu, 2018; Weinmeyer et al., 2017) create challenges in measuring their direct impact on ethical TAMP. Our findings suggest that, while government efforts contribute to sustainability, they often lack the specificity and regulatory strength necessary to drive meaningful change. Given the fashion industry’s rapid growth and ongoing reliance on unsustainable production methods (Weber & Weber, 2022), future policy interventions must move beyond broad environmental protections toward more industry-specific, enforceable regulations. Further research should examine how lessons from other nations' policy frameworks could inform more effective U.S. strategies.

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