



With most donated clothes exported or thrown away, experts are calling for a shakeup of how we deal with the growing fashion waste issue.

A first of its kind study, published in Nature Cities, analysed what happens to clothes and other textiles after consumers no longer want them in Amsterdam, Austin, Berlin, Geneva, Luxembourg, Manchester, Melbourne, Oslo and Toronto.

Across most western cities from Melbourne to Manchester it found the same pattern of textile waste being exported, going to landfill or being dumped in the environment.

Global textiles waste each year weighs 92 million tonnes and this could double by 2030.



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Charity shops handle a large amount of used clothes, but the study found because many are poor quality and there's little financial benefit to manage them locally, charities trade some valuable items and discard or export the rest.

In Melbourne, charities export high-quality, often vintage, second-hand clothes to Europe, forcing the city's

independent resale businesses to import similar apparel back from Europe or the United States.

But overall, charities and collectors have been reporting the plummeting quality of garments over the past 15 to 20 years, decreasing resale potential.



Dr Yassie Samie. Credit: Aeden Ratcliffe, RMIT

Study co-author Dr Yassie Samie, from RMIT University, said local governments and charities need to coordinate more to manage textile waste.

“We're used to charities doing the heavy lifting, but they've been unable to fully handle the volume of donated clothes for a long time now,” Samie said.

“Charities are driven by social welfare values and need to raise funds for their programs.

“However, their operations are ill-equipped to deal with the volume of used textiles that need to be reused and recycled.

“Given the role of charities within communities, it's essential they expand beyond direct resale in second-hand shops and explore other business models, such as swapping and repair centres.”

Overconsumption and oversupply were the main drivers of the cities' textile waste, causing the export of between 33% (Australia) and 97% (Norway) of donated clothes.

Collaboration in local networks the key

Most local governments in the cities studied did not get involved in textile waste beyond providing public spaces and licenses for charity bins and commercial resellers.

Across cities like Melbourne, local governments send dumped textiles directly to landfill, instead of diverting to recycling or reuse facilities or other local alternatives.

“This indicates the lack of mechanism and incentives in place to drive real systemic change,” Samie said.

Amsterdam was the opposite – its municipality manages collection and sorting of unwanted clothes and encourages collection of all textiles, including nonreusable ones.

From January 2025, European Union Member States [must](#) establish separate collection systems for used textiles.

But the biggest per capita discarders of textile waste, Australia and the US, have no such regulation.

Fashion advertising ban

Samie said it was important to incentivise promotion of local alternatives to fast fashion, including reselling, swapping and repairing.

“Sustainable fashion initiatives like second-hand retailers struggle to compete with fashion brands’ big marketing budgets and convenient locations,” she said.



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“Fast fashion alternatives exist but they are under-promoted, despite their potential to significantly reduce cities’ textile waste.”

To create more space for these alternatives, the study’s authors called for a ban on fashion advertising in cities. “A ban on fashion advertisements would give more space to promote more sustainable alternatives,” Samie said.

France [recently introduced a ban](#) on advertising ultra-fast fashion, while each item will come with a penalty of up to 10 euros by 2030.

Samie said she would like to work with local governments to find better uses for discarded textiles.

‘[Urban transitions toward sufficiency-oriented circular post-consumer textile economies](#)’, with Katia Vladimirova, Yassie Samie, Irene Maldini, Samira Iran, Kirsi Laitala, Claudia E. Henninger, Sarah Ibrahim Alosaimi, Kelly Drennan, Hannah Lam, Ana-Luisa Teixeira, Iva Jestratijevic and Sabine Weber, is published in *Nature Cities* (DOI: 10.1038/s44284-024-00140-7).

Source: Aeden Ratcliffe, RMIT University