

Sustainable Threads

How Iran's Fashion Industry is Stitching a Greener Future

Abstract

This article examines the evolution of sustainable fashion practices in Iran, focusing on the intersection of environmental responsibility, cultural heritage, and grassroots innovation. Using the Hanas Project as a case study—an initiative addressing textile waste through eco-conscious design and women's employment—it outlines systemic challenges such as water scarcity and inadequate recycling infrastructure. It explores how Iran's fashion industry is navigating the shift toward circular economy principles. The findings highlight both achievements and persistent barriers, suggesting that the integration of cultural preservation with environmental action is contributing to a distinctive path toward sustainable fashion in the region.

Keywords: *Sustainable Fashion, Circular Economy, Textile Waste, Cultural Heritage, Iran*



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The fashion industry is the second most polluting industry, accounting for 8% of global carbon emissions. With an anticipated 50% increase in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, it is expected to surpass the combined emissions of all international flights and maritime shipping (Bailey et al., 2022). It is estimated that one garbage truck of textiles is landfilled or incinerated every second (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017), and 20% of global wastewater is attributed to textile dyeing and treatment processes (UNEP, 2018). These figures reveal the fashion industry's environmental impact and emphasize the need for urgent reform (UNEP, 2018; Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017).

In Iran, the situation is dire due to a severe water crisis exacerbated by climate change and groundwater depletion, inadequate recycling infrastructure, and smuggling in the garment sector—factors that heighten the urgency of redefining the current fashion system (Madani, 2014; 2021). Sustainable fashion in Iran combines cultural heritage with modern environmental awareness, reflecting long-standing respect for nature through both traditional practices and recent efforts promoting responsible consumption (EcoClicky, 2024). Iran's commitment to environmental stewardship may stem from the ethics and cosmology of Zoroastrianism. This ancient religion emphasizes purity, balance,

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harmony, and gratitude between humans and nature, encouraging sustainable practices in everyday life (Foltz & Saadi-nejad, 2008; Tam, 2022).

Iran's ethnic and tribal communities produce distinctive clothing styles adapted to their local environments, using materials like handwoven wool, natural dyes, and traditional weaving techniques (Yoshida, 2002). Iranian rural women serve as cultural stewards, preserving traditional textile crafts and artisanal skills that emphasize local production and sustainability. These heritage practices provide a strong foundation for contemporary efforts to promote ethical sourcing, minimal waste, and sustainability (Rezaeizadeh, 2023).

Case Study: The Hanas Project

To examine how local initiatives in Iran are responding to sustainability reforms, I analyze the Hanas Project as a case study. Hanas demonstrates how environmental and socio-economic concerns are addressed through community-based strategies within Iran's fashion sector.

Founded by Soheila Jabri (Chia) with Khatoun Shahbazi during the COVID-19 pandemic, the project promotes sustainable fashion in Iran by integrating environmental responsibility with cultural heritage and social equity (The BRICS Women's Business Alliance, 2020; Chiamode, 2014).

In Iran, small production workshops generate over 15 million kilograms of textile waste annually, more than 90% of which is typically incinerated—contributing significantly to carbon emissions and air pollution (Trendz Magazine MENA, 2024). In response to this environmental crisis, Hanas applies circular economy principles to repurpose textile waste into clothing, accessories, furniture, and art using natural dyes, patchwork, and traditional embroidery. This approach mitigates environmental harm while preserving cultural aesthetics and creating economic opportunities (Trendz Magazine MENA, 2024).



Reused fashion waste items, Hanas Center (Image from Hanas Archive 2024, used with permission).

Hanas focuses on producing minimal waste through made-to-order and limited batches. Artisans are encouraged to reuse older materials to “designing out waste” (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2017). The project also promotes product longevity by offering customers incentives to return used garments for discounts or remakes.

Beyond environmental impact, Hanas emphasizes gender equity and community engagement. Women have historically played central roles in Iran's textile heritage. The Hanas project continues this legacy by centering women in its leadership and workforce. Its goal to create 3,800 jobs over five years speaks to a broader mission of inclusive, sustainable development aligned with the Sustainable



Workshop on textile sustainability (Image adapted from 2024 Hanas Internal Report, used with permission).



Textile waste from fashion producers in Iran (Image adapted from 2024 Hanas Internal Report, used with permission)

Development Goals (SDGs) of No Poverty, Gender Equality, Sustainable Cities and Communities, and Responsible Consumption and Production.

Beyond production, Hanas also invests in educational outreach. The project's Fashion and Environment Facilitation Center conducts over 1,500 hours of training across six months. These workshops aim to raise awareness about the environmental consequences of textile waste and promote sustainable fashion practices. While these activities underscore the project's commitment to public engagement, questions remain regarding their long-term impact on consumption patterns and broader behavioral change (Shahbazi, 2025).

The Hanas Project has been recognized by the Intellectual Property Organization and the Iranology Foundation for its efforts. However, Hanas continues to face challenges balancing cultural preservation with environmental sustainability.

Challenges and Limitations of the Hanas Project

The Hanas Project faces significant structural and operational challenges common in the Global South. In a May 2025 interview, Khatoun Shahbazi noted the lack of formal textile waste infrastructure, requiring reliance on informal networks and manual labor, which raised costs and limited scalability. Public perception also remains a barrier, as recycled fashion is often viewed negatively. Despite efforts in brand storytelling and education, changing consumer attitudes is a long-term challenge.

On the economic side, Shahbazi reflected on the tension between social impact and business growth, admitting that prioritizing environmental and social outcomes over profit has made it difficult to scale and attract investors. The project's production methods, while sustainable, limit its ability to meet market demands.

Internally, the project has learned valuable lessons through trial and error, such as the need for sustainability to be practical and the need for greater training and quality controls to maintain consistent production. At one point, rapid scaling efforts led to team burnout, revealing the critical need for better structural, financial, and human resource planning in social enterprises.

While Hanas continues to evolve, limitations remain. Heavy reliance on manual labor constrains production capacity and raises concerns about sustainability without automation or technological augmentation. Moreover, its hyper-local model—though socially empowering—is difficult to replicate elsewhere. Finally, current evaluations of the project's impact are qualitative; the lack of rigorous, quantitative assessments may limit academic and policy engagement in the short term.

Iran's fashion sector, as seen through initiatives like the Hanas Project, holds significant potential for advancing sustainable practices by drawing on traditional knowledge alongside

contemporary environmental approaches. Yet, efforts in this space are often constrained by fragmented policy frameworks that separate environmental protection from cultural heritage preservation (Cheraghchi, 2018). This disjointed approach, coupled with the pressures of rapid urban development that can marginalize historical and cultural sites (Asadi, 2023), complicates the scaling of sustainability initiatives. Overcoming these barriers, while also shifting public perceptions of recycled fashion, will be key to enable broader adoption. By continuing to align cultural heritage with ecological goals, Iran's fashion industry could chart a distinctive and sustainable path forward. 🌱

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