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Child Labor Exploitation in The Textile Sector: A Concern Embedded in Sustainable Development 2025

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ABSTRACT

Child labor in the textile industry represents a critical and persistent violation of human rights that fundamentally compromises global sustainability goals. Despite the estimated 160 million children engaged in child labor worldwide, academic and corporate discourse on textile sustainability has historically prioritized environmental dimensions over social ones. This study quantitatively investigates this asymmetry through a bibliometric analysis of 68 scientific documents indexed in the Scopus database (2005–2024), complemented by a systematic content review. Using co-occurrence analysis, the literature was categorized into four thematic clusters: (1) Structural Determinants of Child Labor, (2) Health and Well-being Impacts, (3) International Economic Pressures, and (4) Eradication Policies. The analysis reveals a profound epistemic disconnect: the literature on environmental sustainability (41.2% of publications) and child labor (17.6%) operate in distinct, non-overlapping clusters, with no single document explicitly integrating both dimensions. These findings confirm that the persistence of child labor is not solely a function of economic factors, but is also sustained by a fragmented scientific knowledge architecture that systematically marginalizes social violations. We conclude that achieving genuine textile sustainability requires an urgent rebalancing of academic and regulatory attention toward the effective and integrated study of both environmental and social dimensions.

Keywords: child labor, textile industry, sustainability, bibliometric analysis, human rights, environmental-social asymmetry, corporate social responsibility.
JEL Code: J81 - Q56.

INTRODUCTION

Child exploitation in the textile industry is one of the most persistent human rights violations in the 21st century. According to data from the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2022), approximately 160 million children are engaged in child labor globally, of which 79 million perform hazardous work. This reality contrasts

sharply with the international commitments made under the Sustainable Development Goals, highlighting a critical gap between corporate social responsibility rhetoric and prevailing practices in global supply chains.

The textile industry, although it generates approximately $450 billion annually and accounts for 4% of global exports (ILO, 2020), hides a devastating reality: approximately 25,000 children die each year in textile factories for various reasons.

The seriousness of the problem is intensified when forms of child labor involve slavery, family separation, exposure to serious hazards and diseases, as warned in Article 3 of ILO Convention No. 182 (OIT & UNICEF, 2021). According to data from the ILO, UNICEF, and the US Department of Labor's "2023 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor" report, the highest concentration of child laborers is in the Asia-Pacific region with approximately 122 million (61% of the total), followed by Africa with 31% and Latin America with 7%.

This problem reveals a fundamental contradiction in contemporary models of sustainability. While companies in the textile sector have developed sophisticated environmental management systems, ecological certifications, and carbon footprint metrics, systematic violations of children's rights remain invisible in global supply chains. This asymmetry between the attention paid to environmental and social sustainability is not accidental, but rather responds to an architecture of scientific and regulatory knowledge that has historically privileged certain aspects of sustainable development over others.

The situation is exacerbated by the fragmented and opaque nature of textile supply chains. As documented by Baskaran et al. (2011), "the use of child labor was considered a critical criterion for suppliers" (p. 109), but isolated efforts can have counterproductive highly effects: "The elimination of child labor from suppliers in the garment industry has simply diverted it to other, more dangerous industries, such as construction" (p. 155).

This reality leads us to formulate a central question that guides our research: Are there explicit theoretical connections between the literature on environmental sustainability and children's human rights in the textile sector? How marginalized is the literature on child labor compared to other dimensions of textile sustainability?

The theoretical-argumentative hypothesis holds that the persistence of child labor in the textile industry responds, in part, to a fragmented scientific knowledge architecture that has kept violations of children's human rights invisible. While studies on environmental sustainability operate within a robust literature (41.2% of publications), research on child labor remains marginal (17.6%) and disconnected from human rights frameworks, preventing an integrated understanding of genuine textile sustainability (OIT, 2023a, 2023b, & 2023c).

Understanding this gap is essential. If the academic invisibility of child labor is part of the problem, then effective solutions require not only economic and political interventions, but also an urgent rebalancing of how the scientific community produces, integrates, and disseminates knowledge about genuine sustainability in the textile sector.

A review of the literature confirms that the most common causes of child exploitation that permeate the textile industry despite its professed commitment to sustainable development are summarized in **Figure 1** below.

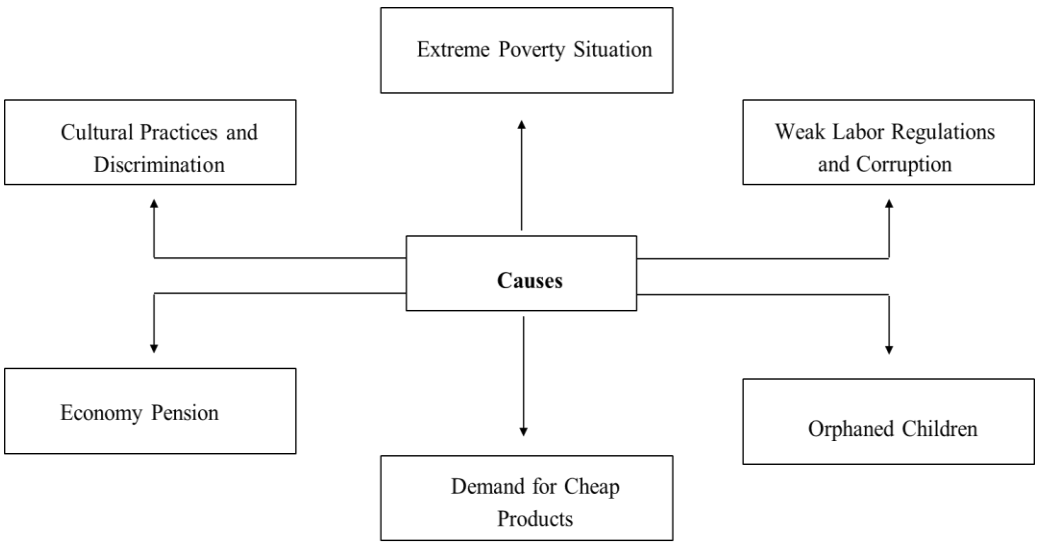

Figure 1. Recurring causes of child exploitation in the textile and fashion industry
Source: Own elaboration

With regard to the consequences of child exploitation in the textile and fashion industry, the illustration suggests that they have a negative impact on physical development in childhood, in which children may suffer from illness, malnutrition, burns, accidents, chronic ailments due to exertion at work, among others.

The positive side of the textile industry is that it generates approximately $450 billion per year and accounts for at least 4% of total global exports. However, 150 million children are involved in child labor worldwide, 63 million girls and 97 million boys, of whom 40% work in the textile industry alone, and around 25,000 children die each year in textile factories for various reasons (ILO, 2020).

Child exploitation in the textile industry is due to a combination of economic, social, and legislative factors (Kiron, 2024). In terms of the consequences of child exploitation in the textile and fashion industry, the illustration suggests that it has a negative impact on physical development in childhood, in which children can suffer from illness, malnutrition, burns, accidents, chronic ailments due to the effort of work, among others. According to data from **the ILO**, **UNICEF**, and the US Department of Labor's *"2023 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor"* report, the largest number of child workers are found in the Asia-Pacific region, with approximately 122 million, accounting for 61% of the total. Africa follows with 31% and Latin America with 7%. It should be noted that two of the main causes of child exploitation in the textile and fashion industry are the poverty experienced by millions of children, where 1 in 10 children worldwide are exploited due to limited economic resources to buy food, have housing, receive education, and obtain medical care. On the other hand, the need for cheap labor in developing countries has led to millions of children being exploited in long working hours for low pay. This is where "an obligation to contribute to the family economy and a need to survive" comes in.

Child labor exploitation contributes to a cycle of environmental degradation. Production practices that employ children are often less rigorous in terms of environmental standards, resulting in increased pollution and unsustainable use of natural resources. This environmental impact perpetuates child suffering by contributing to a more harmful and less healthy environment.

Child exploitation in the textile industry and other sectors arises from a combination of economic, social, and legal factors. The demand for cheap labor, failures in the implementation of labor policies, and deficiencies in education contribute to the perpetuation of these practices. Lack of access to quality education and economic opportunities for families also plays a crucial role in this problem.

Table 1. Strategies to combat child labor

STRATEGY	KEY ACTIONS	RESPONSIBLE ACTORS
SOCIOECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT	• Anti-poverty programs and creation of decent employment for adults • Conditional cash transfers • Strengthening family social protection	Governments, international organizations (ILO, UNICEF), private sector
UNIVERSAL EDUCATION	• Expansion of free, quality education coverage • Elimination of barriers to access • School retention programs	Governments, ministries of education, local communities, NGOs
REGULATORY FRAMEWORK	• Strengthening of labor and child protection legislation • Effective inspection and monitoring systems • Penalties for employers who resort to child labor	Governments, judicial systems, labor inspectorates
CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY	• Independent audits in supply chains • Verifiable ethical certifications • Zero-tolerance policies on child labor	Multinational companies, textile industry, independent certifiers
CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION	• Awareness campaigns on children's rights • Community participation and local leadership • Promotion of responsible consumption	Civil society organizations, media, communities, consumers

Source: own elaboration

Note: These strategies must be implemented in an integrated and coordinated manner among actors, recognizing that no single intervention is sufficient to eradicate child labor (Baskaran et al., 2012; ILO, 2022).

EMPIRICAL BACKGROUND

Child labor in the textile sector has been extensively documented through evidence revealing dangerous and exploitative conditions in various geographical contexts. Benencia (2009) recounts a fatal incident in a sewing workshop in Buenos Aires where workers and children locked in facilities under conditions of semi-slavery died, highlighting the persistence of these practices in the 21st century.

In the context of fast fashion, Chugchilán and Rivera (2025) directly link the accelerated production model in Bangladesh, India, and China with excessive working hours, unsafe conditions, and low wages that affect both children and women. This dynamic is reinforced by what Arcos (2013) identifies as the rise of clandestine workshops, spaces where intensive exploitation mainly takes the form of the employment of migrant labor, including minors.

Quantitative data reinforce this alarming reality. Rocha Silva (2019) points out that in regions of Argentina and Brazil, 9.4% of workers between the ages of 5 and 15 perform hazardous tasks. Globally, Acata Águila (2012) reports that more than 80 million children work under inhumane conditions, with boys predominating in these contexts of exploitation.

The consequences of this exploitation are multidimensional and devastating. Álvarez Tapia et al. (2021) document that the psychological consequences on child workers have negative effects on their personal maturity and cognitive development, not to mention the physical risks to which they are exposed on a daily basis. The Information Network on Children's Rights in Latin America and the Caribbean (RED CLADE, 2023) emphasizes how child labor prevents children from attending school or participating in educational activities, limiting their future opportunities and perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

From a broader social perspective, Pereira da Fonseca (2021) argues that child exploitation weakens family ties, as children are separated from their homes or become a primary source of income, creating intra-family tensions and eroding community values. Rausky (2009) complements this view by pointing out that child labor violates children's fundamental rights, including the right to education, rest, play, and protection from hazardous work, thus undermining the basic principles of justice and social equity.

On the economic front, Acevedo González et al. (2011) show that depriving children of adequate education and exposing them to unhealthy working conditions reduces their ability to contribute to economic development in the future, resulting in a less skilled and less competitive workforce. Europa Press (2019) documents how companies that exploit child labor face significant reputational and legal risks, especially when exposed by human rights organizations or conscious consumers.

The environmental dimension of this issue cannot be ignored. The Green Chamber of Commerce (2023) points out that child labor is often associated with unsustainable industrial practices, such as excessive use of natural resources, chemical pollution, and unrecycled textile waste. SINC (2022) documents how pollution generated by the textile industry directly affects local communities, including the child workers themselves, with rivers contaminated by toxic dyes that cause illness in those who depend on these water sources.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A comprehensive understanding of child exploitation in the textile industry requires a multidimensional theoretical framework that articulates economic, social, ethical, and human rights perspectives. This section presents the main theories that underpin our analysis and allow us to understand the complexity of the phenomenon.

Capability Theory, developed by Amartya Sen (1999) and expanded by Martha Nussbaum (2011), provides a fundamental framework for understanding how child exploitation limits human development. Sen (1999) argues that development should be assessed not only by economic indicators, but also by the expansion of human capabilities—what people can actually be and do. In this context, child labor represents a fundamental deprivation of capabilities, restricting children's access to education, health, play, and comprehensive development. Nussbaum (2011) deepens this perspective by identifying ten core capabilities that constitute minimum requirements for a dignified life, including life, bodily health, physical integrity, senses, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, play, and control over one's environment. Child exploitation in the textile industry systematically violates each of these capabilities, creating what Sen calls "interlocking capability deprivations" that reinforce each other and perpetuate intergenerational cycles of poverty.

The human rights framework, specifically the Theory of the Rights of the Child institutionalized in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), establishes that children are rights holders with specific protection needs. This approach transcends the traditional paternalistic view to recognize children as active rights holders. UNICEF (2021) emphasizes that child labor violates multiple interdependent rights: the right to education (Article 28), the right to rest and leisure (Article 31), and the right to be protected from economic exploitation

(Article 32). The indivisibility of these rights means that the violation of one necessarily affects the others, creating a cascade effect of violations that compromise the child's overall development.

The Theory of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), conceptualized by Carroll (1999), establishes a pyramid of corporate responsibilities that includes economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic dimensions. However, as Arnold and Hartman (2005) demonstrate, the implementation of CSR in the textile industry has shown significant limitations, particularly in the protection of children's labor rights. Winter and Lasch (2016) show that although companies in the fashion sector have incorporated environmental and social factors into their supplier evaluations, obstacles such as information scarcity, high audit costs, and the complexity of global supply chains persist. This gap between CSR theory and practice reveals what Nurhayati et al. (2016) identify as a response that is more oriented toward external pressures for legitimacy than genuine internal ethical convictions.

Social contract theory, from Rousseau to Rawls, underpins the moral and legal obligation of the state to protect children as part of the social contract between government and citizens. Rawls (1971) introduces the concept of the "veil of ignorance," which suggests that a just society would prioritize the protection and dignity of its most vulnerable members—in this case, child laborers. This theoretical perspective implies that the state must not only legislate against child labor, but also ensure the structural conditions (accessible education, social protection, decent employment for adults) that eliminate the economic need for child labor. The state's failure to fulfill these obligations represents a breach of the fundamental social contract.

The paradigm of responsible consumption, developed by Carrigan and Leek (2004), argues that consumers have transformative power through their purchasing decisions. Shaw et al. (2006) demonstrate, however, that there is a significant gap between consumers' ethical intentions and their actual purchasing behaviors, influenced by factors such as price, availability, and perceived style. This theory is crucial to understanding how the demand for low-priced "fast fashion" indirectly perpetuates child exploitation. As Tran and Bartsch (2024) point out, in emerging markets in Asia, moral concerns are still weak in the face of economic motivations, perpetuating a demand that sustains exploitative practices.

The theory of Global Value Chains provides an analytical framework for understanding how the fragmentation and globalization of textile production facilitates child exploitation. Bonacich (2009) argues that global outsourcing strategies and the pursuit of competitive advantages based on low costs have created a "race to the bottom" in labor standards. This theoretical perspective reveals how the geographical, cultural, and regulatory distance between end consumers and production sites allows human rights violations to be rendered invisible. Zamani et al. (2018) use social life cycle assessment models to demonstrate that the most significant risks are concentrated in raw material production and manufacturing in developing countries, precisely where oversight is weakest.

The integration of these theoretical perspectives reveals that child exploitation in the textile industry is not simply a problem of poverty or lack of regulation, but the result of a convergence of structural, economic, social, and ethical factors operating at multiple scales. As Parkes (2008, 2009) argues, there can be no real sustainability in the textile industry as long as child labor persists, since its eradication is a prerequisite for truly sustainable production models.

This theoretical synthesis underpins our hypothesis about the asymmetry between environmental and social sustainability. The architecture of scientific knowledge, influenced by these different theoretical traditions that often operate in disciplinary silos, has allowed environmental sustainability to develop in isolation from the protection of children's human rights. Only through a conscious integration of these perspectives can we aspire to a comprehensive understanding and response to the problem of child labor in the textile industry.

Table 2. Categorization of the consequences of child exploitation in the textile sector

CATEGORY	KEY CONSEQUENCES	MAIN REFERENCES
INDIVIDUAL	Physical/psychological harm, disruption to education	Álvarez et al., 2021; RED CLADE, 2023
SOCIAL	Family breakdown, human rights violations	Pereira, 2021; Rausky, 2009
ECONOMIC	Loss of productivity, impact on supply chains	Acevedo et al., 2011; Europa Press, 2019
ENVIRONMENTAL	Unsustainable practices, impact on public health	Cámara Verde, 2023; SINC, 2022
GLOBAL	Sustainable underdevelopment, commercial mistrust	Más Vida Foundation, 2020

Source: Own elaboration

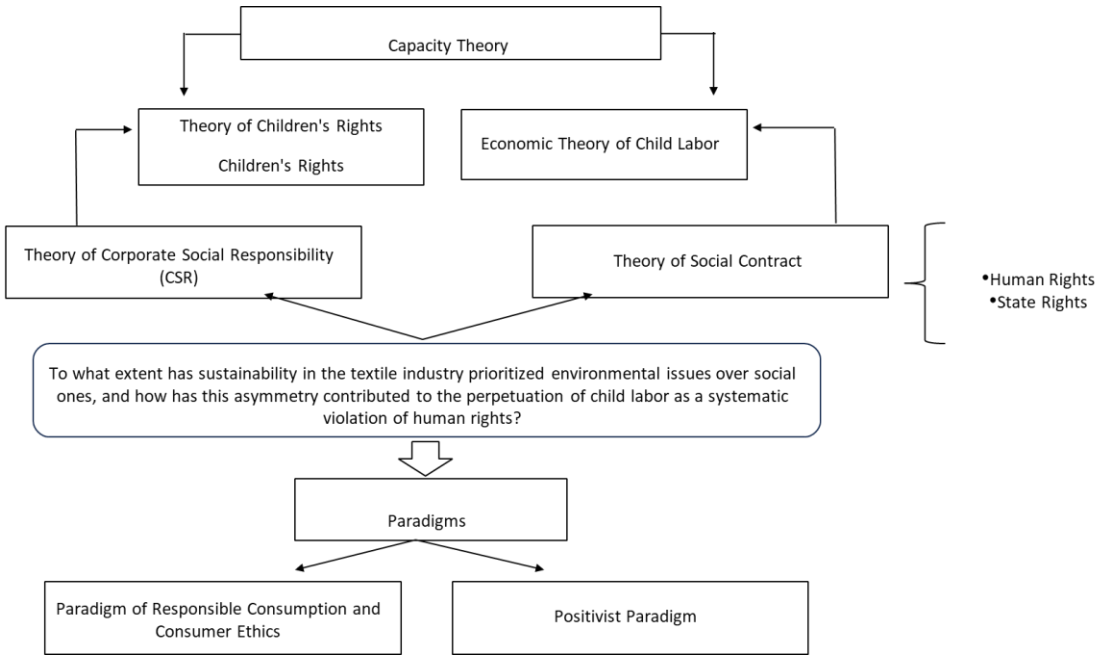

Figure 2. Theoretical framework
Source: Own elaboration

METHODOLOGY

To carry out this study, a bibliometric methodology was adopted following the guidelines of Donthu et al. (2021), using the academic databases Scopus and SCImago Journal & Country Rank (SJR) as the main sources. The search strategy used the terms: ("child exploitation" OR "child labor" OR "child labour") AND ("textile industry" OR "fashion" OR "textile") in the title, abstract, and keyword fields. The search was conducted on March 6, 2025, covering the period 2005-2024 in studies focused on scientific articles, review articles, books, and book chapters. After applying these criteria, a total of 68 results were obtained.

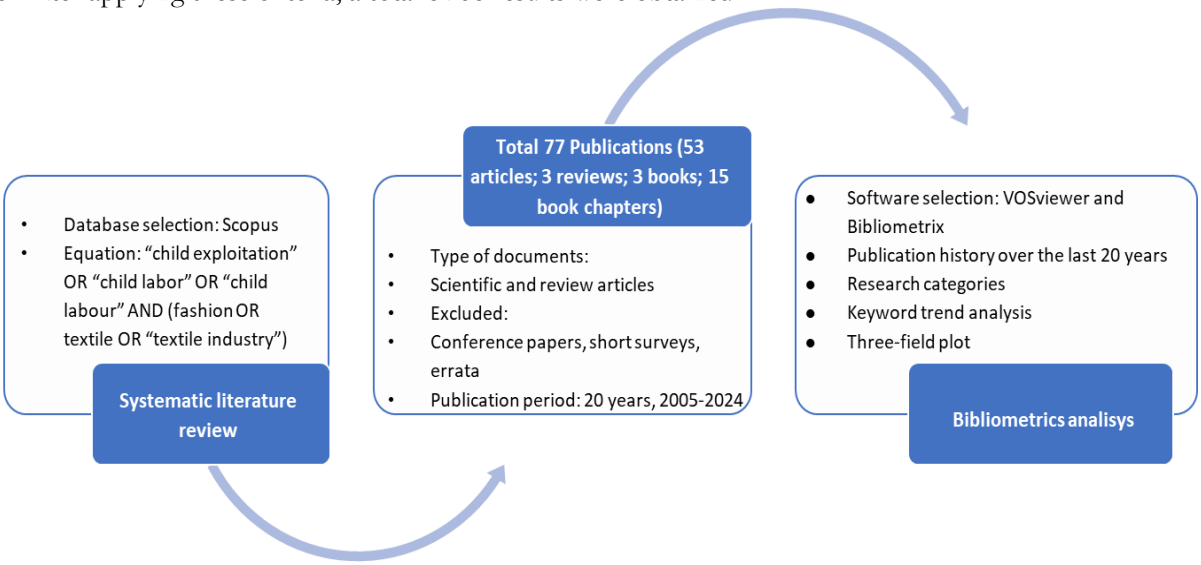

Figure 3. Research outline
Source: Own elaboration

Bibliometrics Analysis

Scientific output related to child labor and pollution in the textile sector during the period 2005-2024 was analyzed. To this end, specialized bibliometric software tools were used, specifically Bibliometrix, taking advantage of the functionalities of Biblioshiny in RStudio, and VOSviewer, following the methodologies established by Aria and Cuccurullo (2017), Campina-López et al. (2024), Lozano Mejía et al. (2025), and Van Eck and Waltman (2010).

The evolution of publications over these twenty years was analyzed using bibliometric indicators that included: articles with the highest number of citations, authors most prominent in terms of number of publications and impact (measured by citations received), journals with the greatest influence considering publication volume and H-index (Hirsch, 2005), and leading countries in scientific production on the subject.

Additionally, the most relevant research categories were identified through frequency tables. Keyword analysis focused on identifying recurring terms, represented graphically to highlight emerging trends. To complement this analysis, a three-field plot was generated using Bibliometrix, visualizing the interconnections between authors, keywords, and publication journals.

The analysis of scientific production in **Figure 4** reveals a pattern of intermittent but growing interest in recent years. Relatively low activity is observed in the first half of the period analyzed, with peaks of up to 7 articles published in 2009 and 2014, followed by a notable increase in 2023 and 2024. This pattern suggests renewed academic attention to the issue of child exploitation in the textile sector, possibly influenced by growing global concern for sustainability and human rights in supply chains.

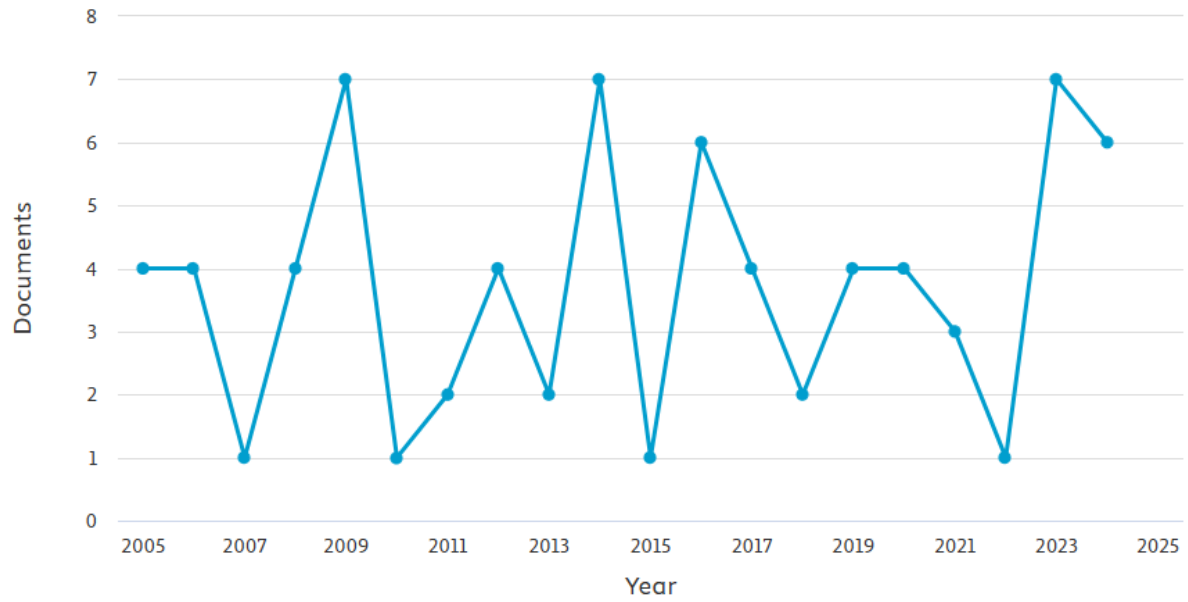

Figure 4. Timeline of scientific production in Scopus on child exploitation in the textile industry
Source: generated using Bibliometrix

The most cited articles in **Table 3** reveal complementary perspectives on the problem. Baskaran et al. (2012) lead with 192 global citations, analyzing social sustainability in the textile supply chain in Bangladesh and India. Their central finding is compelling: "The employment of child labor was considered a critical criterion in the case of suppliers" (Baskaran et al., 2011, p. 109). Even more concerning is their observation that "The elimination of child labor from suppliers in the garment industry has simply diverted it to other, more dangerous industries, such as construction" (p. 155), underscoring the need for comprehensive approaches that address structural causes.

Shaw et al. (2006), with 162 citations, examine the discrepancy between ethical intentions and actual consumer behavior in clothing purchases, identifying barriers such as cost, limited availability, and perception of style. Winter and Lasch (2016), with 110 citations, provide a framework for fashion companies to incorporate environmental and social factors into supplier evaluation, although they point to significant obstacles such as information scarcity and high auditing costs.

Nurhayati et al. (2016) investigate the determinants of social and environmental reporting, finding that transparency responds more to external pressures than to internal ethical convictions. Finally, Zamani et al. (2018) use social life cycle assessment models to identify that the most significant risks are concentrated in raw material production and manufacturing in developing countries.

Table 3. Most cited articles in Scopus on child labor in the textile sector

#	TITLE	AUTHOR	GLOBAL CITATIONS	JOURNAL	YEAR
1	Sustainability evaluation of Indian textile suppliers using the grey approach	Baskaran, V., Nachiappan, S., Rahman, S.	192	International Journal of Production Economics, 135(2), pp. 647–658	2012
2	Fashion victim: The impact of fair trade concerns on clothing choice	Shaw, D., Hogg, G., Wilson, E., Shiu, E., Hassan, L.	162	Journal of Strategic Marketing, 14(4), pp. 427–440	2006
3	Environmental and social criteria in supplier evaluation, Lessons from the fashion and apparel industry	Winter, S., Lasch, R.	110	Journal of Cleaner Production, 139, pp. 175–190	2016
4	Factors determining social and environmental reporting by Indian textile and apparel firms: A test of legitimacy theory	Nurhayati, R., Taylor, G., Rusmin, R., Tower, G., Chatterjee, B.	52	Social Responsibility Journal, 12(1), pp. 167–189	2016
5	Hotspot identification in the clothing industry using social life cycle assessment, opportunities and challenges of input-output modeling	Zamani, B., Sandin, G., Svanström, M., Peters, G.M.	51	International Journal of Life Cycle Assessment, 23(3), pp. 536–546	2018

Source: Own elaboration

The authorship analysis in **Table 4** reveals that Baskaran, Nachiappan, and Rahman lead the field with two articles each and the highest citation impact. Parkes (2008, 2009) provides a critical perspective on global supply chains and corporate governance, questioning the effectiveness of CSR initiatives in eradicating child labor. Eaton and Goulart (2009) and Eaton (2014) document the persistence of child labor in the Portuguese textile industry and internationally, highlighting how this phenomenon perpetuates cycles of poverty. Hindman (2014, 2016) provides a valuable historical analysis, noting that "cotton textile mills were major employers of child labor" during the early industrialization of the United States.

Table 4. Most relevant authors in scientific production on child exploitation in the textile sector in Scopus

#	AUTHORS	N. OF ARTICLES	N. OF CITATIONS*	H* INDEX	AFFILIATION	COUNTRY
1	Baskaran V	2	280	4	Bannari Amman Institute of Technology	India
2	Eaton M	2	111	6	Ulster University, Coleraine	United Kingdom
3	Hindman Hd	2	83	5	Appalachian State University	United States
4	Nachiappan S	2	8,271	48	University of Sussex	United Kingdom
5	Parkes D	2	17	2	Dyehouse Solutions International	United Kingdom
6	Rahman S	2	4,336	30	East West University	Bangladesh

Source: Prepared by the authors based on Scopus data*

Table 5 analyzes the journals with the highest number of publications using indicators, first the H-index or h-factor (Hirsch, 2005), which measures the productivity and impact of authors, journals, or institutions based on their most cited publications and the number of citations they have received. CiteScore (Scopus) measures the average number of citations received by documents published in a journal over a three-year period; and finally, the SCImago Journal Rank (SJR) is a way of ranking journals into quartiles according to their scientific influence.

Plos One and American Journal of Industrial Medicine, both from the United States, stand out with an H-index of 467 and 120, respectively, in addition to being ranked in the Q1 quartile, which highlights the dissemination of high-impact research. Next is the Journal of Cleaner Production, which, despite having a lower H-index (10), stands out with a high CiteScore of 20.4 (Scopus), which is interpreted as high influence and citation in its field. The ranking also includes journals in the Q1 (Asian Studies Review) and Q2 (Applied Economics / Journal of Cleaner Production) quartiles from the United Kingdom and Switzerland.

Table 5. Journals with the highest impact by H-index on child labor in the textile sector in Scopus

#	JOURNAL TITLE	*H-INDEX	SCOPUS CITESCORE	*JJR - QUARTILE	COUNTRY / PUBLISHER
1	Plos One	467	6.2	Q1	United States / Public Library of Science
2	American Journal of Industrial Medicine	120	5.9	Q1	United States / Wiley-Liss Inc.
3	Applied Economics	121	3.8	Q2	United Kingdom / Taylor and Francis Ltd.
4	Asian Studies Review	39	2.8	Q1	United Kingdom / Taylor and Francis Ltd.
5	Journal of Cleaner Production	10	20.4	Q2	Switzerland / Elsevier

Source: Own elaboration *SCimago

Figure 5 highlights the participation of countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and Germany, with 25, 17, and 15 publications, respectively. Countries such as the Netherlands, Sweden, and India also contribute significantly to this research topic. The United States and Canada are also present and stand out for their role as potential partners. Finally, the only Latin American country in the top 10 is Brazil, which, with 8 publications, leads as the main player in the region in this emerging area of research.

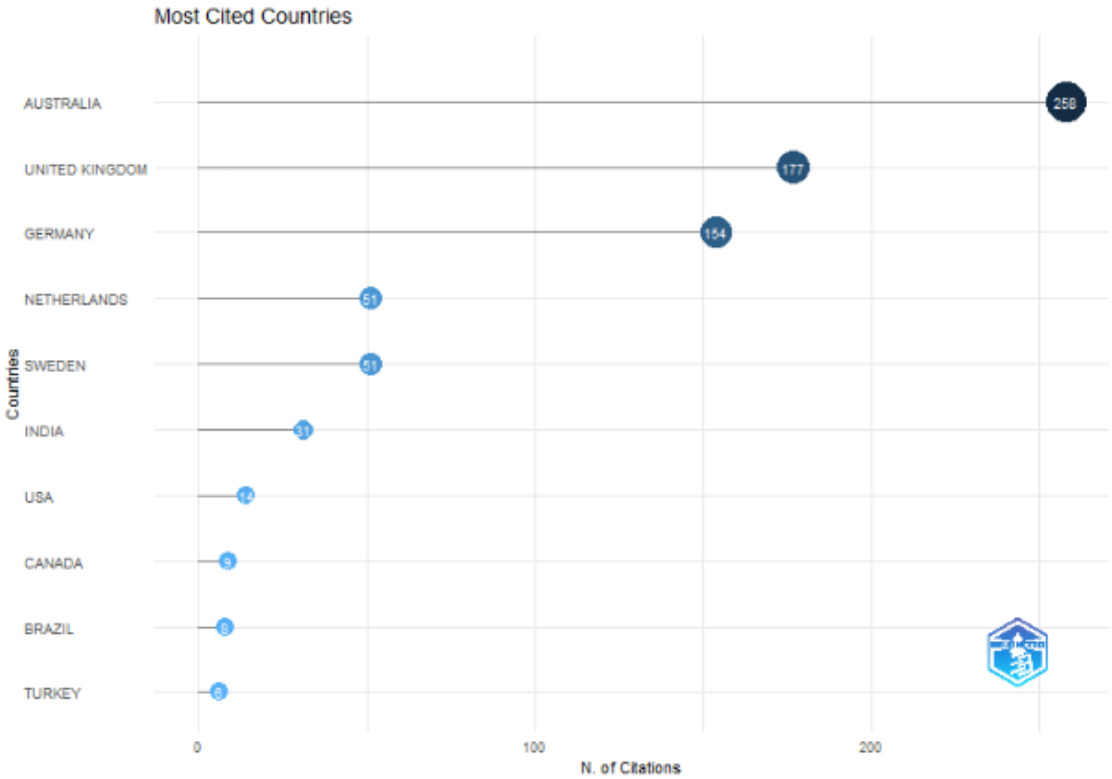

Figure 5. Comparison of countries with the highest number of citations in publications on child labor in the textile sector in Scopus
Source: generated using Bibliometrix

The analysis in **Figure 6** of occurrences by keyword on child exploitation in the textile sector reveals a correlation between the concepts. The research focuses mainly on the term "child labor" (19 occurrences) and its context in the "textile industry" (15), establishing the core of the study. The results show that the topic is addressed

from several perspectives, including that of "adolescents" (7) as a vulnerable group, and "working conditions" (5), with a focus on "occupational health" (5) and "occupational disease" (4) to which they are exposed. In addition, socio-econom al causes such as "poverty" (4) and ethical and legal implications such as "child abuse" (3) and "human rights" (3) are identified, indicating a comprehensive approach to the problem.

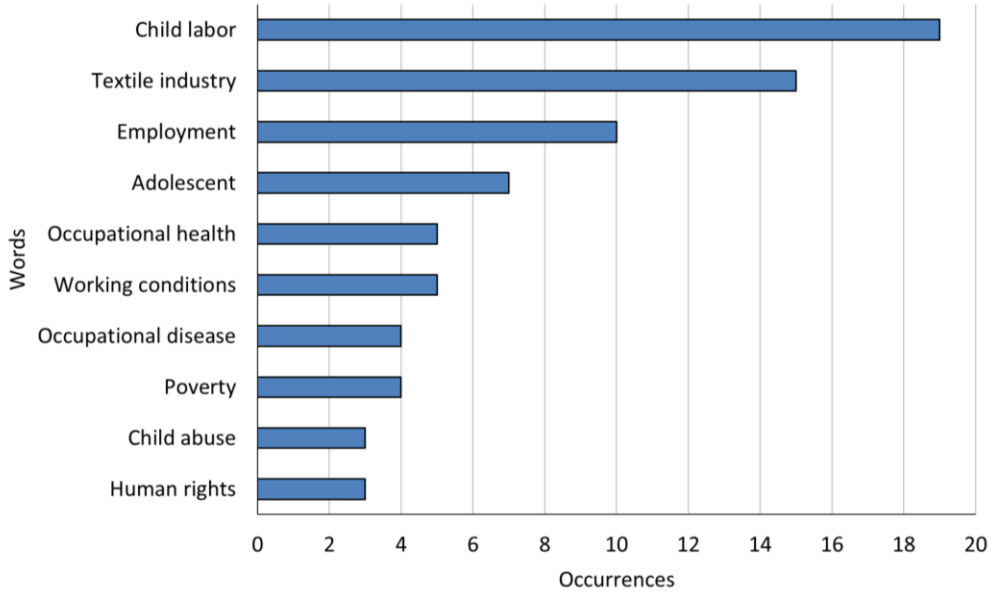

Figure 6. Occurrences of keywords in scientific production among trends in SCOPUS
Source: Own elaboration

Figure 7 shows the co-occurrence map on child labor in the textile sector, revealing a well-defined research structure centered on the green cluster that groups the most relevant terms: "child labor" and "textile industry," with a high density of connections. This thematic core is directly linked to a blue cluster that focuses on social and health implications, such as " " "employment," "occupational health," "working conditions," and "adolescent." There is also a pink cluster that includes "textile-clothing industry" and is connected to working conditions, while the more peripheral clusters address broader issues such as "education," "human rights," and "sustainable development." The presence of a node for "Bangladesh" highlights the relevance of research in specific geographical contexts. Overall, the analysis shows a multidisciplinary research network that addresses the problem from its industrial and labor roots to its social, health, and ethical consequences.

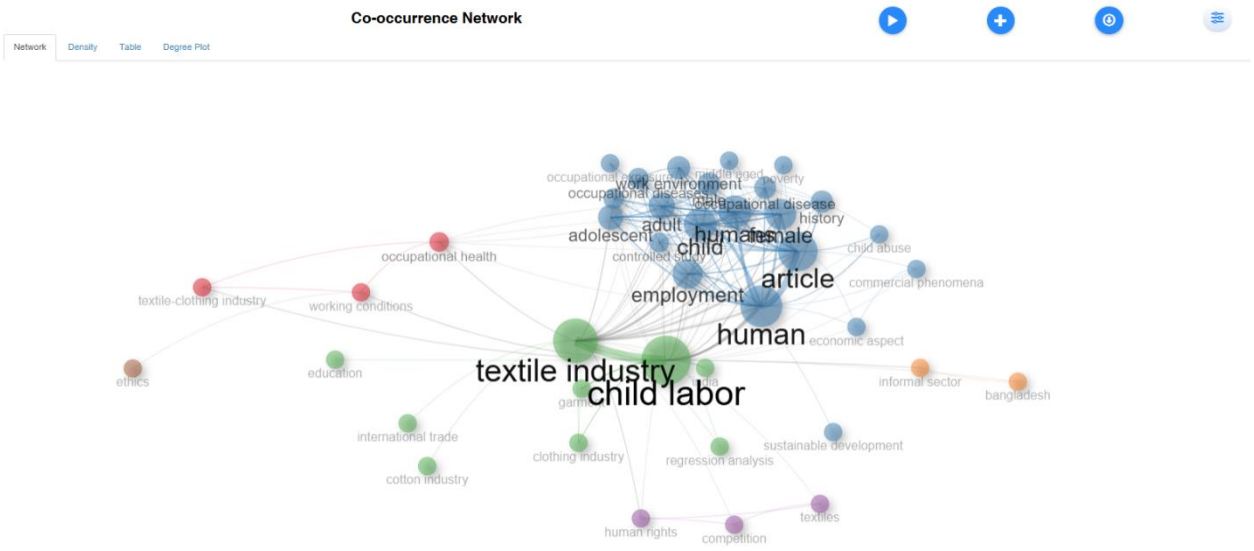

Figure 7. Correlation map with categories on child exploitation in the textile sector
Source: generated using Bibliometrix and VOSviewer

Figure 8 shows that research is concentrated among a core group of authors, such as Nachiappan S., Rahman S., and Baskaran R., who publish in high impact journals such as Plos One, American Journal of Industrial Medicine, and Journal of Business Ethics. These authors, in turn, are strongly linked to central themes such as child labor and related concepts such as sustainability, corporate social responsibility, and supplier evaluation. The prominent presence of geographical keywords such as "India" and "Bangladesh" in the field of destinations, together with terms such as "needle industry" and "fashion industry," underscores a specific geographical and sectoral focus in the research.

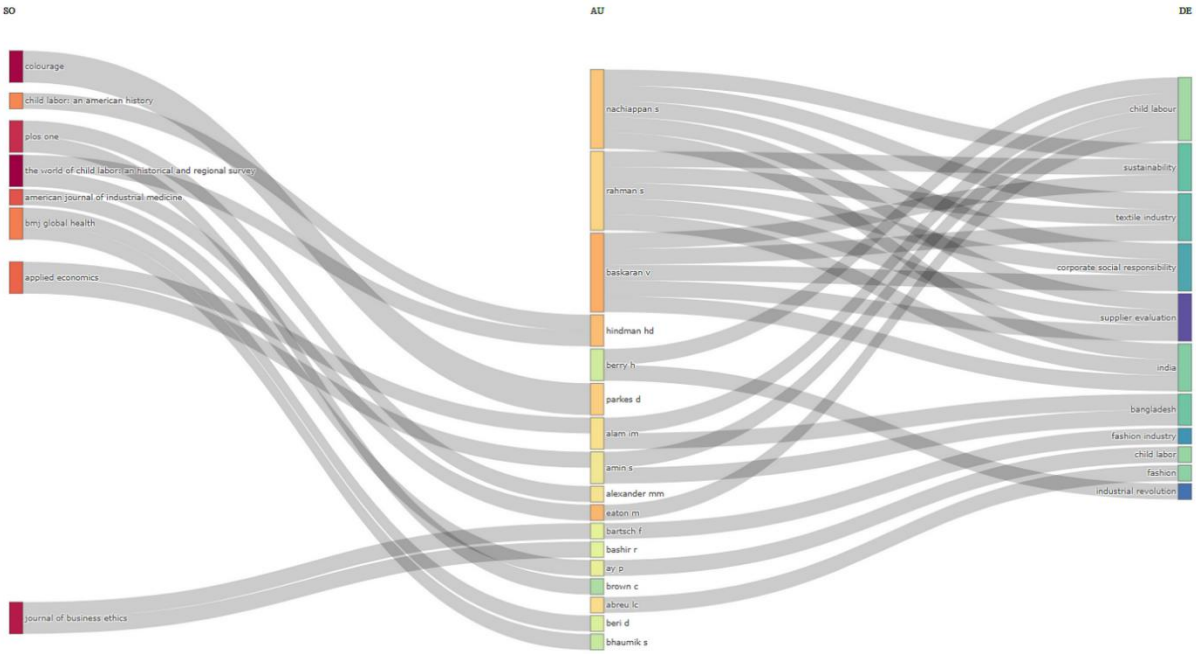

Figure 8. Three-field plot map showing the relationship between trends in child exploitation in the textile sector, authors, and journals
Source: generated using Bibliometrix

Trends in child labor exploitation in the textile sector and its impact on sustainable development

1. Structural determinants of child exploitation

Various studies have identified the factors that drive children into work in the textile industry. Alam et al. (2015) analyzed the occupational choices of child workers in Bangladesh and concluded that most work in the informal sector due to a lack of regulations. Their results show that children are less likely to be employed in the service sector and more likely to work in the textile industry. Child vulnerability in this sector stems from the absence of legal protection and the normalization of child labor in the family and community settings. Similarly, Berry (2023) offers a historical perspective on the phenomenon by analyzing the child apprenticeship system during the English Industrial Revolution. The central finding of both studies points to a disturbing pattern: when economic conditions become adverse and institutional support is weak or non-existent, child labor ceases to be a choice and becomes a survival strategy. Far from being an autonomous choice, the participation of children in labor dynamics is embedded in a web of structural poverty and normalized vulnerability, where daily urgency overshadows any guarantee of rights.

In the context of the global textile industry, labor flexibility and market expansion have had profound consequences. Author Bonacich (2009) asserts that the relocation of production seriously weakened unions in the United States, leaving room for the reappearance of clandestine workshops with appalling conditions. In this sense, the urgency to reduce costs has increased job insecurity and normalized practices such as child exploitation, revealing how global dynamics directly affect the rights of those at the weakest links in the production chain.

1. Multidimensional impact on children's health and well-being

Working conditions in the textile industry can be highly detrimental to children's health. Faraz et al. (2014) show that precarious child labor generates high levels of stress, , and anxiety. Children are under constant pressure to meet production quotas or the expectations of adult supervisors, which leads to feelings of fear, insecurity, and, in severe cases, childhood depression. The lack of time for leisure, play, and education exacerbates this situation, limits their overall development, and perpetuates cycles of social exclusion. Gowland et al. (2023) conducted a

bioarchaeological study of textile apprentices in 19th-century England, showing how child labor was linked to respiratory diseases, malnutrition, and stunted growth. Although this historical analysis reflects a past reality, its findings have current implications, as the risks persist in many textile factories in the global south.

In a more recent context, Tyagi et al. (2023) conducted a review of the occupational risks of bidi workers in India. Their findings indicate that children and their families working in this textile related industry have high rates of respiratory diseases, miscarriages, and low birth weight in their offspring. This shows that child exploitation not only affects the workers directly involved, but also has intergenerational repercussions.

3. Economic pressures and international markets

International trade and the demand for cheap products have encouraged job insecurity in the textile industry. Bonacich (2009) argues that global outsourcing strategies promote precarious working conditions in developing countries, where low costs take priority over labor rights.

Faraz et al. (2013) analyzed the textile industry in Pakistan and found that international retailers have imposed ethical and social standards on their supply chains, including the eradication of child labor. However, failure to comply with these standards has led t r sanctions and contract cancellations, which, paradoxically, may push more children into informal work in even more precarious conditions.

For their part, Tran and Bartsch (2024) examine consumer responses to ethical scandals in fashion and find that in emerging markets in Asia, moral concerns are still weak in the face of economic motivations, perpetuating a demand that indirectly sustains child exploitation practices. Both studies emphasize that without systemic changes in global value chains and consumer awareness, the problem will persist.

4. Alternatives and policies for the eradication of child labor

Authors such as Abreu (2019), Bonacich (2009), Faraz et al. (2013), Arfò et al. (2020), Bonnici et al. (2024), and Butler (2008) propose various strategies to address child labor. Bonnici et al. (2024) advocate for the revival of ancestral community knowledge as the basis for production models that respect human rights. Finally, Butler (2008) emphasizes that ethical and reputational pressure from consumers has begun to position the eradication of child labor as a priority on the agenda of large retailers.

Possible solutions to child exploitation in the textile sector include the implementation of public policies, the improvement of working conditions, and the promotion of education. Various authors have agreed that education is key to reducing the incidence of child labor. However, as Bonacich (2009) points out, the lack of economic alternatives for families forces many children to work.

Another alternative is ethical certification and transparency in supply chains. Research by Faraz et al. (2013) shows that ethical standards imposed by international buyers can encourage the reduction of child labor. However, their success depends on the monitoring capacity and political will of producing countries.

Finally, corporate social responsibility policies can play a key role in eradicating this problem. Abreu (2019) highlights the need to integrate fundamental rights into fashion regulation by establishing mandatory child protection standards. Arfò et al. (2020) propose that the fashion industry implement environmental and social management systems to ensure decent working conditions. Certification (ISO 20121 standard) as a tool to promote sustainable processes could encourage companies to respect labor rights and reduce the incidence of child labor.

To empirically test the hypothesis of environmental-social asymmetry, the 68 documents were categorized according to their focus (environmental, social, child labor, human rights, and integration). The findings in **Table 6** reveal a deeply unequal distribution. While 41.2% of the documents (n=28) address environmental issues, only 17.6% (n=12) focus specifically on child labor. Even more alarming is that none of the 68 documents explicitly integrated environmental and social dimensions, confirming a fundamental thematic fragmentation in the architecture of scientific knowledge on textile sustainability.

Table 6. Asymmetry analysis: Thematic distribution of the literature on textile sustainability (n=68)

DIMENSION	DOCUMENTS IDENTIFIED	% OF TOTAL (N=68)	KEY TERMS DETECTED	OBSERVATION
ENVIRONMENTAL	28	41.2	Carbon footprint, waste management, water efficiency, textile pollution	High presence of environmental impact studies
SOCIAL/LABOR	22	32.4	Labor rights, working conditions, CSR, labor protection	Underrepresented compared to environmental issues

SPECIFICALLY CHILD LABOR	12	17.6	Child labor, child exploitation, data mining	Notably low
HUMAN RIGHTS GENERAL	6	8.8	Human rights, dignity, vulnerability	Marginal presence
ENVIRONMENTAL/SOCIAL INTEGRATION	0	0	Not identified	**Critical lack of integration**

Source: Categorization based on content analysis of titles, abstracts, and keywords.
Critical finding: Although 68 documents address textile sustainability, only 12 (17.6%) focused specifically on child labor, confirming the asymmetry hypothesis. No document explicitly integrated both dimensions.

DISCUSSION

A central finding of this bibliometric analysis is the notable disconnect between the literature on environmental sustainability and human rights in the textile sector. While studies on carbon footprints, waste management, and water efficiency proliferate, research on child labor remains relatively marginalized and disconnected from dominant discourses on sustainability.

This asymmetry is not merely academic; it has devastating practical consequences. As documented by multiple studies, the fast fashion model has generated up to 52 seasons per year, leading to extreme working conditions throughout the production chain. Platforms such as Shein and Temu order massive volumes with extremely short delivery times, creating pressures that are passed on to the most vulnerable links in the chain, where children are exploited at multiple stages of the production process, such as cotton cultivation, spinning, and garment manufacturing, and remain undetectable by audits.

The conditions documented in key agricultural regions are alarming. In Uzbekistan, children are forced to harvest cotton under threat of school punishment, working from dawn to dusk in unhealthy conditions (ILO, 2023c). In Egypt, approximately one million children between the ages of 7 and 12 have worked in cotton pest control for up to 11 hours a day, seven days a week, exposed to toxic pesticides and physical and sexual abuse (UNICEF, 2020).

The media has played a crucial role in bringing these realities to light. Documentaries and investigative reports have questioned the veracity of corporate reports on child labor , revealing significant gaps between social responsibility rhetoric and actual practices. Public Eye (2024) and Reuters (2025) have documented recent cases of child labor in the supply chains of major brands, forcing policy reviews and public commitments to social sustainability goals.

However, independent analyses continue to show that significant gaps persist between stated commitments and reality on the ground. The fragmentation and opacity of textile supply chains make it easy for children in rural communities to be exploited in ways that are almost undetectable by conventional audits.

Although companies proclaim "zero tolerance" policies on child labor, there have been cases of children present in production workshops, informally recruited by their parents to perform seemingly minor tasks.

Conditions in key agricultural regions are also alarming: children in Uzbekistan are forced to harvest cotton under threat of school punishment, working from dawn to dusk in unsanitary conditions, suffering extreme exhaustion and physical punishment if they do not meet quotas. Similarly, in Egypt, around one million children between the ages of 7 and 12 worked to remove pests from cotton crops for up to 11 hours a day, seven days a week, exposed to toxic pesticides and physical and sexual abuse.

These contemporary cases reflect patterns of exploitation from past decades, exacerbated by globalization (Sánchez-Rico, 2004). In fact, according to multiple studies, the fast fashion model systematically degrades working conditions throughout the supply chain, worsening working conditions through temporary contracts, informal subcontracting, and severe penalties for those who fail to meet production targets.

Deregulation, structural poverty, and global market pressures have consequences for children's health and well-being. The risks to the physical and mental health of child workers in the textile industry are manifold. Similarly, in the agricultural sector, with regard to cotton cultivation and natural dyeing processes, children inhale cotton dust and are exposed to pesticides. Medical studies associate this exposure with the development of asthma, chronic bronchitis, and other respiratory diseases.

Finally, the media has disseminated field research through documentaries and reports that question the veracity of corporate reports on child labor. This media pressure has forced many companies to review their practices and publicly commit to social sustainability goals, although independent analyses show that significant gaps remain between rhetoric and reality.

Limitations of the Study

This bibliometric analysis has several methodological limitations that should be considered when interpreting the results. First, the search was limited to the Scopus database, potentially excluding relevant literature indexed in Web of Science, Google Scholar, or specialized regional repositories. Second, the restriction to publications in English and Spanish may have omitted important research in other languages, particularly from South Asia, where the problem is prevalent. Third, the co-citation analysis may be biased toward authors and journals with greater international visibility, underestimating contributions from researchers in the Global South. Fourth, the thematic categorization, although based on systematic content analysis, involved a certain degree of subjective interpretation. Finally, the 20 year time window, although comprehensive, may not fully capture the historical evolution of the problem or the most recent trends after 2024.

CONCLUSIONS

Child exploitation in the textile industry constitutes a serious human rights violation that simultaneously compromises global environmental sustainability. Internationally documented experiences highlight the importance of adopting effective and sustainable measures to combat this problem. It is essential that companies, governments, and civil society organizations work together to create an environment where children's dignity is respected.

The findings confirm the initial hypothesis: the persistence of child labor in the textile industry cannot be fully understood without considering the structural limitations of contemporary models of sustainability. This asymmetry has directly contributed to the invisibility of systematic violations of children's human rights, allowing the structural causes and socioeconomic consequences of labor exploitation to remain marginal in the academic, regulatory, and business agendas.

The analysis reveals that while 160 million children work globally, with 40% in the textile sector and approximately 25,000 deaths annually in textile factories, scientific production on the subject shows an intermittent pattern with only 68 relevant publications in two decades. This scarcity contrasts dramatically with the proliferation of studies on environmental sustainability in the same sector.

Evidence documented by authors such as Baskaran et al. (2011), Bonacich (2009), Parkes (2008, 2009), and Hindman (2014, 2016) converge in pointing out that isolated efforts and voluntary CSR initiatives have proven insufficient. As Baskaran et al. (2011) warn, partial interventions can have counterproductive effects, shifting the problem to even more dangerous sectors rather than solving it.

Strengthening legislative frameworks and regulatory mechanisms at both the local and global levels is emerging as a fundamental condition for effectively combating this form of exploitation. Education, the implementation of public policies, and the certification of sustainable processes form the key strategic tripod for its eradication. The elimination of child labor in the fast fashion industry requires a coordinated response between consumers, governments, and companies that transcends borders (Kiron, 2024). Millions of children continue to be victims of exploitation in both industrialized and developing countries, deprived of their childhood, potential, and dignity, with harmful consequences for their physical and mental development.

A review of the narrative and systematic literature derived from bibliometric analysis confirms that, among the worst forms of child labor, such as prostitution, child trafficking, and drug trafficking, forms of slavery characterized by servitude and dangerous and compulsory forced child labor are prevalent in the textile industry. These practices respond to supply and demand in the textile sector without considering whether their contribution promotes sustainable development.

This study leaves open future lines of research on labor exploitation in the textile industry, such as labor exploitation of adults. It also highlights the need to develop public policies that adopt effective and immediate measures to end child labor in all its forms (UN, 2024), linking them at least to the Sustainable Development Goals: SDG 1 "No Poverty," SDG 2 "Zero Hunger," SDG 3 "Good Health and Well-being," SDG 8 "Decent Work and Economic Growth."

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