



Textile Design as Social Advocacy: A Practice-Based Study of Child Labour and Child Abuse in Ghana

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Abstract: *This article examines textile design as a creative, practice-based medium for addressing key social issues, specifically mental health, depression, child abuse and child labour. By encoding narratives, images and emotions into fabric, textile design becomes a channel through which individuals and communities can express experiences of trauma, anxiety, resilience and hope. The study adopts a practice-based qualitative design grounded in arts-based research, integrating digital design tools (Adobe Photoshop and CorelDRAW) with sublimation printing on polyester fabric. Data were drawn from personal reflections during the design process and from secondary literature on mental health, depression, child protection and child labour, including reports from international organizations such as the World Health Organization, International Labour Organization and UNICEF. The designs were exhibited in educational and community contexts, where viewers engaged with themes of child abuse and child labour through symbolic motifs, colour, pattern and texture. Findings indicate that textile design can effectively communicate complex social issues, enhance empathy, stimulate dialogue and support informal education and advocacy. The study concludes that textile art provides a powerful participatory tool for social change and recommends its integration into school curricula, community outreach and rights-based campaigns.*

Keywords: *textile design; arts-based research; mental health; depression; child abuse; child labour; social advocacy.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Child labour, child abuse, and mental-health disorders remain among the most pressing social challenges confronting children and adolescents globally. International organisations consistently report high prevalence rates of exploitation, neglect, and psychosocial distress, particularly in low-income regions and informal economic sectors (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021; UNICEF, 2021; World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). In Ghana, rapid urbanisation, household poverty, educational inequities, and entrenched social norms have intensified children's vulnerability to hazardous labour, domestic abuse, and untreated psychological trauma. Policy frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and Sustainable Development Goal Target 8.7 stress the elimination of child labour and the promotion of child well-being, yet public awareness and behavioural change remain uneven. Conventional advocacy strategies often privilege legal discourse, statistical reporting, and mass-media campaigns. While indispensable, such approaches may fail to communicate affectively or culturally with diverse communities whose experiences of trauma are embedded in everyday practices rather than formal documentation. Across African societies, textiles historically function as communicative artefacts by encoding social status, mourning, protest, spiritual symbolism, and collective memory. Cloth patterns, colour schemes, and fabrication techniques frequently operate as narrative systems through which communities articulate values and social critique. Contemporary textile practice extends this tradition into activist and educational domains, positioning fabric not merely as decorative material but as a visual language capable of conveying suffering, resilience, and social injustice.

This article situates textile design within the methodological field of arts-based research (ABR), which recognises creative production as a legitimate form of scholarly inquiry and social intervention (Leavy, 2015). Through a practice-based investigation undertaken in Ghana, the study explores how digital and printed textile works may visually articulate experiences of child labour, child abuse, and depression while generating public dialogue and empathy in exhibition contexts. In this context, creative and

participatory approaches are increasingly recognized as promising avenues for raising awareness, supporting expression and promoting advocacy around sensitive social issues. Textile design, as both a visual and tactile medium, offers unique possibilities for encoding stories, emotions and messages in fabric through motif, colour, symbolism and pattern.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Despite increasing global awareness of mental health, child abuse and child labour, these issues remain pervasive and are often poorly understood within many communities, particularly where stigma, silence and limited access to accurate information prevail. Conventional advocacy strategies such as reports, posters and policy documents frequently fail to reach or emotionally engage wider publics, especially those with low literacy or limited exposure to formal education. There is thus a critical gap in creative, culturally resonant methods that can communicate the lived realities of children affected by abuse, depression and exploitative labour in ways that foster empathy, dialogue and action. Textile design, though widely embedded in everyday life and cultural practice, remains underutilized as a deliberate medium for social advocacy and public education on child-related social issues. Within Ghanaian art-education scholarship, limited empirical research documents how textile design might function as an advocacy medium capable of fostering emotional engagement and behavioural reflection. While visual arts are frequently employed in classroom instruction, their systematic application to child-rights education and mental-health awareness remains underexplored. This absence points to a critical need for studies demonstrating how culturally grounded artistic practices may supplement social-work interventions and public-policy initiatives.

1.2. Objectives of the Study

This article pursues two core objectives;

- To explore how creative textile design can visually communicate and raise awareness about mental health, child abuse, child depression and child labour as critical social issues.
- To evaluate the educational and advocacy potential of textile exhibitions for fostering awareness, empathy, and community dialogue around child protection and mental-health issues.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.2. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on three complementary frameworks which are arts-based research, visual-culture theory, and social-advocacy art. Together, these perspectives provide an interdisciplinary lens through which textile production is understood not merely as aesthetic activity but as knowledge-making practice, cultural communication, and social intervention. Arts-based research (ABR) treats creative practice as an epistemological activity which produces knowledge through processes of making, reflection, and audience engagement rather than through statistical measurement alone (Leavy, 2015). Within ABR, artistic decisions regarding form, colour, repetition, and materiality constitute analytical acts through which social realities are explored, questioned, and re-presented. Textile design in this study therefore operates simultaneously as method, data, and outcome: motifs emerge from critical engagement with literature on child labour and abuse, while finished fabrics function as visual arguments that invite interpretation and dialogue. Reflection journals and exhibition encounters further extend the research process, situating meaning in the interaction between maker, object, and viewer.

Visual-culture theory foregrounds the social power of images, emphasising how visual forms participate in shaping collective memory, ideology, and emotional response (Mirzoeff, 2011). Images do not merely reflect reality; they actively construct it by framing what is visible, normalised, or contested. In the context of this study, textile surfaces operate as semiotic fields in which colour systems, spatial arrangements, and symbolic motifs communicate affective narratives about vulnerability, exploitation, and resilience. The tactile and spatial qualities of fabric further intensify this communicative capacity, inviting slow looking and embodied engagement that differ from screen-based visibility. Such sensory encounters are particularly significant when addressing sensitive topics such as abuse and depression, where emotional resonance may precede cognitive understanding.

The third framework, social-advocacy art, conceptualises artistic practice as a catalyst for political awareness, moral inquiry, and civic participation (Duncombe, 2016). Historically, artists across cultures have mobilised visual forms to challenge injustice, memorialise suffering, and imagine alternative

social futures. Textile traditions in African societies; where cloth communicates status, protest, mourning, and collective identity provide a culturally grounded precedent for such activism. Within this tradition, contemporary textile design becomes a form of visual citizenship: an intervention that circulates in public spaces, provokes conversation, and aligns aesthetic experience with ethical responsibility. In this study, exhibitions are therefore not treated as neutral displays but as pedagogical and political arenas in which viewers encounter children's rights discourses and are invited to reflect upon their own roles within systems that enable or resist exploitation.

Taken together, these three frameworks position textile design as a methodological tool, a semiotic system, and a social instrument. Arts-based research legitimises creative practice as inquiry; visual-culture theory explains how textile imagery communicates meaning; and social-advocacy art situates the work within broader struggles for justice and protection of vulnerable populations. Their integration allows the study to move beyond description toward a critical understanding of how fabric-based artworks can function as research artefacts, educational resources, and agents of social change.

2.3. Literature Review

2.3.1. *Mental Health in West African Contexts*

While global psychiatric frameworks continue to dominate international policy discourse, African scholars and practitioners increasingly emphasise the cultural mediation of mental distress and help-seeking behaviour. In Ghana, experiences of depression and anxiety are frequently interpreted through spiritual, familial, or communal idioms rather than biomedical categories alone, a tendency that often delays clinical intervention and intensifies stigma surrounding psychiatric diagnosis (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Such stigma may discourage children and families from reporting emotional suffering, reinforcing silence and isolation within households and schools (UNICEF, 2021). Creative arts programmes have therefore emerged as culturally sensitive entry points for discussing psychological suffering without invoking diagnostic labels that may provoke fear or social exclusion. Arts-based therapeutic practices are widely recognised for providing non-verbal channels through which vulnerable populations can express complex emotional states (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). Studies in educational and community settings further suggest that visual production enables children to narrate trauma indirectly, particularly in contexts where verbal disclosure is discouraged by hierarchy, shame, or fear of reprisal (Gilbert et al., 2009; Young-Bruehl, 2012). Textile workshops—through stitching, dyeing, and pattern repetition—are especially suited to this role, as their rhythmic and tactile processes may foster emotional regulation, concentration, and collective reflection, aligning with WHO-endorsed psychosocial-support strategies for vulnerable youth (WHO, 2022).

2.3.2. *Child Abuse and Domestic Violence*

Research on child maltreatment in Ghana situates abuse within intersecting systems of poverty, corporal-punishment norms, household stress, and limited access to protective services. International definitions conceptualise child abuse as encompassing physical, sexual, and emotional maltreatment as well as neglect occurring within relationships of trust or authority (WHO, 2022). Empirical studies demonstrate that such experiences produce long-term consequences for mental health, educational attainment, and social relationships, frequently extending into adulthood (Gilbert et al., 2009). Although Ghanaian legislation criminalises severe forms of violence against children, emotional neglect and exploitative domestic labour often remain normalised within household economies, particularly in resource-constrained settings (UNICEF, 2021). Public awareness campaigns have typically relied on radio broadcasts, community durbars, and school-based talks. While these approaches remain vital, visual advocacy has received comparatively little attention despite Ghana's deep textile literacy and long tradition of symbolic cloth communication. Scholars of prejudice and childhood vulnerability argue that cultural forms capable of eliciting empathy and moral reflection may complement legal frameworks by reshaping everyday attitudes toward violence and neglect (Young-Bruehl, 2012).

2.3.3. *Child Labour in Cocoa-Growing and Urban Informal Economies*

Child labour in Ghana has been widely documented in cocoa production, fishing communities, mining zones, and urban street vending, reflecting broader patterns across sub-Saharan Africa (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2021). Despite international certification schemes and state-led intervention programmes, enforcement gaps and economic pressures continue to expose children to hazardous forms of work that undermine schooling and physical development (ILO, 2025; UNICEF,

2021). Global estimates indicate that millions of children remain trapped in labour exploitation, with rural agricultural economies and informal urban sectors particularly vulnerable (ILO, 2021). Cultural representations of child labour remain rare within mainstream visual culture, contributing to the social invisibility of exploitation. UNICEF (2021) has emphasised that sustained public engagement is essential for challenging the normalisation of children's work and mobilising community-level resistance. Textile-based representations intervene in this invisibility by inserting children's labouring bodies into aesthetic spaces traditionally associated with celebration, prestige, or domestic comfort. Such aesthetic disruption unsettles viewers' expectations and provokes moral inquiry, echoing advocacy-based approaches that frame visual culture as a tool for civic education and rights awareness (WHO, 2022; Young-Bruehl, 2012).

2.3.4. *Textiles as Communicative Media*

African textile traditions—ranging from woven kente cloth to stamped adinkra symbols—have long functioned as systems of visual communication that encode proverbs, ethical values, political authority, and collective historical memory. Rather than serving merely decorative purposes, such fabrics operate as social texts through which communities articulate identity, status, mourning, resistance, and moral instruction (Young-Bruehl, 2012). In Ghanaian contexts especially, cloth circulates in ceremonial, domestic, and public spheres, allowing symbolic motifs and colour schemes to communicate meanings that are widely legible within local cultural frameworks. Contemporary textile artists increasingly extend these inherited semiotic systems into explicitly political and activist registers, producing works that confront colonial legacies, gender-based violence, forced migration, and child exploitation. These practices align with global traditions of advocacy art that mobilise visual culture to challenge injustice and cultivate civic consciousness (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022; UNICEF, 2021). Textile-based activism thus draws simultaneously upon deep cultural logics and international human-rights discourse, enabling fabric to function as both culturally grounded artefact and transnational political statement. Within the present study, this communicative capacity of textiles provides the conceptual basis for translating child-rights concerns and mental-health struggles into patterned surfaces that invite interpretation and dialogue. By situating advocacy within a medium already embedded in everyday Ghanaian life, the research leverages familiar visual languages to render social crises visible and emotionally accessible, reinforcing scholarship that emphasises culturally resonant communication strategies in public-health and child-protection initiatives (ILO, 2021; UNICEF, 2021).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

The study employed a practice-based qualitative research design that integrates creative textile production with social inquiry. Practice-based research recognizes making as a form of knowledge generation, where artistic processes and artefacts serve both as data and as outcomes. In this project, textile design was used to investigate and communicate experiences and representations of mental health, child abuse, depression and child labour, with an emphasis on visual storytelling and symbolism. Arts-based research principles guided the work, privileging creative processes, aesthetic considerations and emotional resonance over statistical generalization. The research questions were addressed by designing, producing and exhibiting textile pieces, followed by reflection and interpretation of how these works communicated their intended messages.

3.2. Data Sources

Data for the study were drawn from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data consisted of personal reflections by the artist-researcher during the conceptualization, design, production and exhibition stages, observations of viewers' reactions and informal feedback during exhibitions and interpretive notes on the symbolic and emotional content of colours, motifs and patterns.

Secondary data included definitions and conceptualizations of mental health and depression from the World Health Organisation, literature on child abuse, including definitions and frameworks from WHO and child welfare organizations and other scholarly texts on arts-based research and textile art as tools for social communication and advocacy. These sources provided conceptual grounding for the design themes and supported interpretation of the resulting works.

3.3. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic and visual analysis. Thematic analysis examined recurring ideas related to suffering, vulnerability, exploitation, resilience, hope and advocacy, as reflected in both the

designs and viewers' interpretations. Visual analysis explored the roles of colour, motif, pattern, texture and composition in conveying meaning. Interpretive memos linked design choices to the secondary literature on mental health, child abuse and child labour, highlighting how the textiles aligned with or extended existing conceptualizations. This interpretive process sought to understand not only what the textiles represented but also how and why they elicited particular emotional and cognitive responses.

4. DESIGN PROCESS

4.1. Materials and Tools Used

Table 1: Tools and Materials Used for Executing Printed Fabrics

Item	Purpose
Measuring tape	Used to measure the length and width of the fabric prior to printing.
Sublimation paper	Used to transfer the printed design onto the fabric during the heat transfer process.
Heater / heating roller machine	Used to transfer the design from the sublimation paper onto polyester fabric using heat and pressure.
Sublimation large-format printing machine	Used to print the textile design onto the sublimation paper.
Computer / laptop	Used with Corel DRAW and Adobe Photoshop software for designing textile patterns.
Polyester fabric	Used as the base fabric for printing the textile designs.
Dye sublimation ink	Used to print the design onto the sublimation paper for heat transfer onto the fabric.
Pressing iron	Used to iron and finish the final printed fabric.



Figure 1: Tape measure



Figure 2: Sublimation large format printing machine



Figure 3. Computer/ laptop with Corel Draw



Figure: 4 Heater/ Heating roller machine



Figure 5: Pressing iron



Figure 6: 3yards of Polyester fabric



Figure 7: Dye sublimation ink

4.2. Production Process

The main design process began with the use of **Adobe Photoshop** to develop a motif based on the theme “**Child Abuse.**” The concept was visually represented through an illustrative image portraying a child being beaten and severely abused by an adult figure. This imagery was deliberately chosen to communicate the emotional, physical, and psychological trauma experienced by victims of child abuse.

Using Adobe Photoshop, the initial image was imported and edited to enhance its expressive impact. Unnecessary background elements were removed, while emphasis was placed on the child’s posture, facial expression, and body language to evoke feelings of fear, pain, and vulnerability. Colour adjustments were applied to create a somber mood; darker tones and muted colours were used to symbolize suffering, oppression, and emotional distress. Shadows and contrast were enhanced to intensify the dramatic effect of the design.

After developing the motif in Photoshop, the design was transferred to **Corel DRAW** for further refinement and pattern development. In Corel DRAW, the motif was vectorized and arranged into a repeat pattern suitable for textile printing. The software enabled precise scaling, alignment, and spacing of the motifs to ensure balance and visual harmony. The layout was adjusted to maintain clarity of the message while ensuring the design remained aesthetically suitable for fabric application.

Typography and symbolic elements were optionally incorporated to reinforce the theme, such as broken shapes, abstract lines, or symbolic imagery representing pain, silence, or protection. The final design was carefully reviewed to ensure it effectively communicated awareness of child abuse while remaining appropriate for educational and advocacy purposes.

Once completed, the design was saved in a high-resolution format compatible with sublimation printing, making it ready for transfer onto polyester fabric during the production stage.



Figure 8: Image used for child abuse Design



Figure 9: Designing of work on the computer



Figure 10: Printed Design on the fabrics



Figure 11: Printed Design on the fabrics

4.3. Child Labour

The design process was carried out using a computer system installed with **Adobe Photoshop** and **Corel DRAW** software. The theme for the design was “**Child Labour,**” which aimed at creating visual awareness of the hardships and exploitation faced by children engaged in labour activities.

Adobe Photoshop was first used to develop the primary visual concept. Relevant images representing child labour, such as children engaged in strenuous work instead of schooling, were imported into the

software. These images were edited by adjusting brightness, contrast, and color tones to convey a serious and emotional mood. Background elements were simplified or removed to place emphasis on the child figures, their working conditions, and facial expressions, which helped to communicate the message of struggle, fatigue, and loss of childhood.

After creating the motif in Photoshop, the design was exported into **Corel DRAW** for further development. Corel DRAW was used to convert the motif into vector form, allowing for easy resizing without loss of quality. The software also enabled the arrangement of the motifs into a repeat pattern suitable for textile printing. Careful attention was given to spacing, alignment, and balance to ensure the design was visually appealing while still maintaining the clarity of the theme.

Corel DRAW also allowed for the addition of symbolic elements such as tools, broken chains, or abstract forms to reinforce the message against child labour. Colour harmony and layout adjustments were made to ensure the final design was suitable for fabric printing and effective in communicating advocacy and awareness.

The completed design was saved in a high-resolution format compatible with the printing process, making it ready for transfer onto fabric during production.



Figure 12: Design for the theme “child labour” Figure 13: Printed Design on the fabric

The background was created using digital textures and colour patterns to enhance the visual impact of the design. The final work was done by blending the motifs together with the background textures to make it completed.

The finalized design was printed onto sublimation transfer paper using sublimation paper. The printed paper was then placed face-down on the polyester fabric, and with the aid of a heat press machine, high temperature and pressure were applied to permanently transfer the ink onto the fibres of the fabric. After pressing, the fabric was left to cool before being trimmed and prepared for presentation.

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This chapter discusses the findings of the study based on the use of textile design as a medium for expressing and educating the public on the social issues of child labour, child abuse, and depression. The discussion focuses on how visual elements, symbolism, colour, and textile techniques contributed to awareness creation and emotional engagement among viewers. Observations made during the design and presentation processes were also examined to determine the effectiveness of textile art as an educational and advocacy tool.

Textiles and textiles arts can be a powerful tool for addressing child depression, offering therapeutic benefits through creative expression, mindfulness, and community connection. Therapeutic benefits of addressing social issues through designing in textiles: a creative approach to mental health, child abuse, child depression and child labour offering therapeutic benefits of textile art, including practices printing which provides a unique pathway to emotional healing expression. Engagement in textile activities can lead to significant improvements in mental wellbeing by offering a nonverbal channel to express complex feelings.

5.1. Textile Design as a Tool for Social Expression

Findings from the study revealed that textile design is a powerful medium for expressing sensitive social issues. Through the use of motifs, patterns, colors, and textures, complex themes such as child labour,

child abuse, and child depression were communicated in a visually engaging manner. The designs allowed viewers to interpret messages emotionally and intellectually, making the issues more relatable and impactful. Textile designs were found to attract attention easily, especially when displayed in public or educational spaces, thereby increasing awareness.

5.2. Expression and Education on Child Labour

The textile designs based on the theme child labour effectively portrayed the harsh realities faced by children engaged in work instead of schooling. Motifs showing children carrying heavy loads, working with tools, or appearing exhausted communicated messages of exploitation and loss of childhood. The use of dull and earthy colors symbolized hardship and struggle, while repetitive patterns reflected the continuous nature of child labour.

Viewers were able to understand the theme without verbal explanation, indicating that the designs successfully served an educational purpose. The findings showed that textile designs can help inform people about the causes and consequences of child labour and encourage discussions on child rights and education.

5.3. Expression and Education on Child Abuse

The findings further indicated that textile designs were effective in expressing the theme child abuse in a sensitive but impactful manner. Symbolic imagery such as raised hands, fearful body postures, broken shapes, and dark shadows were used to communicate physical and emotional abuse. Dark tones and strong contrasts enhanced the seriousness of the theme and evoked emotional responses from viewers.

The study revealed that textile designs on child abuse promoted empathy and awareness. Many viewers expressed concern and emotional connection to the designs, which suggests that textile art can serve as a non-verbal communication tool for educating people about abuse and the need for child protection.

5.4. Educational Impact of Textile Designs

The study found that textile designs served both aesthetic and educational purposes. The visual nature of the designs made learning informal and engaging. Textile art encouraged discussions among viewers, helping to break silence around sensitive topics. The findings suggest that textile design can be used effectively in schools, exhibitions, and community programs to educate people on child-related social issues.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1. Conclusion

Child labour is work that deprives children of their childhood, potential and dignity, and is harmful to their physical and mental development. It occurs when children are too young to work according to national laws and international labour standards, or when they are engaged in hazardous or otherwise unacceptable work prohibited for all persons under the age of 18. The worst forms of child labour involve slavery, separation from families, and exposure to serious hazards, exploitation, and being left to fend for themselves in unsafe environments. The elimination of child labour is a fundamental principle and right at work, embedded in two ILO convention, 1973 (No. 138), and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 199 (No. 182). Convention No. 182ion achieved universal ratification in 2020 a historic milestone that reflects global consensus on the urgency of ending child labour. ILO (2025).

In September 2015, the international community committed under Sustainable Development Goal Target 8.7 to end child labour in all its forms by 2025. That deadline has now passed, and while significant progress has been made since 2000, the goal remains unmet. The task before us is to accelerate action and ensure that every child is free from exploitation and able to enjoy their right to education, protection and a safe transition into decent youth employment.

According to latest Global Estimates of Child Labour 2024, there are 138 million boys and girls aged 5 to 17 years in child labour worldwide, down from 160 million in 2020. Within this total, 54 million are engaged in hazardous work that directly endangers their health, safety and moral development. While this marks a welcome return to progress after the rise captured in the 2020 estimates, the pace of reduction is too slow to meet global commitments, and millions of children remain deprived of education, safety and the chance of a better future. Child labour is present in all regions of the world,

but remains most prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa, where 86.6 million children are affected—representing 23.9 per cent of all children in the region. High prevalence rates are also found in rural economies, informal sectors, and in contexts of crisis, conflict, displacement or environmental disaster. ILO (2025).

Textile design is an effective medium for addressing social issues through designing in textiles in children. Visual elements such as colour, symbolism, and pattern enhance emotional and educational impact. Textile designs successfully educated viewers on child labour, child abuse, and depression. The designs promoted awareness, empathy, and social responsibility.

6.2. Recommendations

Based on these insights, the following recommendations emerge:

- **Integration into art and civic education curricula**

Educational institutions should integrate textile-based projects into art, civic and social studies courses, using design assignments and exhibitions to engage learners with issues of mental health, child abuse and child labour.

- **Partnerships with child protection and advocacy organizations**

NGOs, social workers and child protection agencies should collaborate with textile artists and art educators to co-create advocacy textiles—such as banners, wall hangings and wearable pieces—for campaigns, community forums and school programmes.

- **Participatory textile workshops with vulnerable groups**

Community-based initiatives should adopt participatory textile workshops involving children, caregivers and survivors as safe spaces for non-verbal expression, psychosocial support and rights-based education.

By positioning textile design as both creative practice and social intervention, this study contributes to growing recognition of the arts as vital partners in the pursuit of human rights, social justice and community well-being. In contexts marked by child abuse, child labour and mental health challenges, textiles can help make visible what is often hidden and can inspire collective responsibility for change.

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