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Purpose of the journal

The ***Journal of Social Policy, Social Change and Development*** is an Academic journal of Faculty of Social Administration, Thammasat University Journal are published articles on all dimensions of social policy, social change and development. The academical, philosophical, theoretical, empirical and methodological intuitive understanding and knowledge building in the social policy, social change and development arena. Also, welcome articles from young researchers, Ph.D. scholars, and academicians to submit articles to the journal.

The journal scheduled to be published twice a year:
Issue 1: January – June
Issue 2: July - December

Dean Forwarding Message

Dear Readers,

It is my pleasure to present the December 2025 issue of the *Journal of Social Policy, Social Change and Development*, a scholarly platform committed to advancing critical inquiry and policy-relevant research on contemporary social challenges. This issue reflects the journal's continued engagement with interdisciplinary perspectives that connect social policy, social change, and development within diverse national and global contexts.

The contributions featured in this issue address some of the most pressing concerns shaping societies today caregiver well-being and disability support, digital activism and artificial intelligence, migration and reintegration policies, sustainable consumption within welfare systems, and gender justice in the workplace. Collectively, these articles demonstrate how social policy must evolve to respond to structural inequalities, technological transformations, and emerging social risks while remaining grounded in principles of equity, inclusion, and human dignity.

This issue also highlights the importance of evidence-informed policymaking. Through rigorous methodologies, comparative analyses, and theoretical innovation, the authors offer insights that are highly relevant to scholars, practitioners, and policymakers alike. The diversity of geographical contexts spanning Southeast Asia, Latin America, South Asia, and advanced welfare states further enriches the journal's global outlook and comparative strength.

I would like to commend the Editor-in-Chief, Dr. Mahesh Chougule, for his academic leadership and editorial vision in curating this issue. His commitment to scholarly excellence and relevance has strengthened the journal's role as an important forum for dialogue on social policy and development. I also extend my appreciation to the contributing authors and reviewers for their valuable intellectual contributions and dedication to advancing knowledge in this field.

It is my hope that this issue will stimulate meaningful debate, inform policy discourse, and inspire future research that contributes to more just, inclusive, and sustainable societies.

With best wishes,

Associate. Prof. Dr. Auschala Chalayonnavin
Dean of Faculty of Social Administration
Thammasat University
Bangkok, Thailand

Editorial

Dear Readers,

As Editor-in-Chief, it gives me great pleasure to present the December 2025 issue of the *Journal of Social Policy, Social Change and Development*. This issue brings together five timely and diverse contributions that collectively illuminate how social policy must respond to changing social risks, technological transformations, and persistent inequalities across global and local contexts. Despite their varied thematic field, all articles share a common concern: the need for rights based, inclusive, and forward-looking policy frameworks that place human well-being at the center of development.

The first article by Helen Nkechi Greg-Agbo et al., *Children with Intellectual Disabilities: Impact on the Well-being of Primary Caregivers*, foregrounds an often-overlooked dimension of disability policy the lived realities of caregivers. Drawing on a systematic review of literature from the past decade, the study demonstrates how early childhood intervention programs can significantly enhance the mental, psychological, and social well-being of primary caregivers. The article powerfully argues that caregiver well-being is not peripheral but fundamental to effective interventions for children with intellectual disabilities. Its policy relevance lies in advocating family-centered early intervention models that integrate counselling, stress management, workplace flexibility, and financial support.

The second article, by Wending Zhang et al., *AI-Powered Entertainment-Oriented Activism*, advances social policy debates into the digital and algorithmic realm. Using Indonesia as a case study, the authors propose an innovative conceptual framework that captures how artificial intelligence and entertainment media are reshaping political participation in Southeast Asia. By theorizing activism as culturally performative, algorithmically mediated, and transnational, this article challenges conventional models of civic engagement. Importantly, it also raises ethical concerns around algorithmic manipulation and unequal digital visibility, offering valuable insights for scholars and policymakers grappling with AI governance and digital rights in the Global South.

Migration and reintegration policy are examined in the third article by Maria Chalen, *The Route Back Home? The Challenges of Migrant Reintegration Policies in Ecuador*. Through a comparative analysis of reintegration programs under ideologically distinct governments, the study highlights the limitations of reintegration policies that focus narrowly on economic

assistance. The findings underscore the importance of long-term political vision, intersectoral coordination, and robust social protection systems. This contribution is particularly relevant in the current global context of forced returns and deportations, reinforcing the case for rights-based and inclusive reintegration strategies.

The fourth article by Nishita Chatradhi, *Responsible Consumption and SDG 12*, repositions sustainability as a core social policy concern. Moving beyond environmental discourse, the article introduces the concept of "responsible welfare systems" by integrating sustainable welfare theory and the capability approach. Through comparative cases from Europe, Canada, India, and South Korea, the study demonstrates how welfare policies can either reinforce or challenge unsustainable consumption patterns. This article makes an important theoretical contribution by aligning social justice with ecological responsibility.

Finally, Nancy Mengi et al. address workplace gender justice in *Reimagining Gender Justice at Workplace: The Case for Period Leave Policy in India*. Based on qualitative evidence from organizational settings, the study highlights how menstrual health remains inadequately addressed in labor policy. While organizations increasingly recognize the need for period leave, persistent social taboos and concerns about misuse hinder policy adoption. This article contributes meaningfully to debates on gender-sensitive labour laws and inclusive workplace policies.

Together, the articles in this issue reaffirm the journal's commitment to critical, interdisciplinary scholarship that bridges theory, policy, and practice. I sincerely thank the authors, reviewers, and editorial team for their valuable contributions, and I hope this issue stimulates informed dialogue and policy innovation across diverse social contexts.

Dr Mahesh Chougule
Editor-in-Chief
Journal of Social Policy, Social Change and Development, December 2025 Issue,
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Children with Intellectual Disabilities: Impact on the Well-Being of Primary Caregivers

Helen Nkechi Greg-Agbo[1]
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Abstract

Caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities experience mental, psychological, and social challenges, yet relatively limited research has examined these effects on their health and well-being. This paper adopts a literature review approach to gather information from peer-reviewed journals, online books, and reports from the last ten years. A total of 32 literature sources met the inclusion criteria. Research evidence shows the impact of early childhood intervention on the mental, psychological, and social well-being of primary caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities. The successful strategies to enhance caregiver well-being include early intervention programs that incorporate stress management, counselling, mental health support services, workplace flexibility, and financial support initiatives for caregivers. The findings indicate that caregiver well-being is a critical factor in the effectiveness of interventions for children with intellectual disabilities. It is recommended that policies and programs that support family-centered early interventions be designed.

Keywords: Children, Early intervention, Intellectual disability, Well-being

Introduction

Intellectual disability, formally called as a neurodevelopmental condition that impacts the cognitive ability, intellectual functioning, and adaptive behaviour of an affected person (Hooda & Gupta, 2017). It is a general term denoting the difficulties in the use of knowledge in practice and can include Down syndrome, Fragile X Syndrome, fetal alcohol syndrome, birth defects, and infections (Abdul Hameed & Kotian, 2022). Children with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) usually experience challenges in key aspects of daily life, such as thinking and learning, paying attention and communicating, socialising and interacting with others, and managing daily living (Llobet et al., 2024; Schlebusch et al., 2022; Abdul Hameed & Kotian, 2022; Gopalan, 2016). Children with severe intellectual disability are likely to have other health conditions, such as seizures, mood disorders (including anxiety and autism spectrum disorder), poor coordination, and vision or hearing impairments (Abdul Hameed & Kotian, 2022). Caregivers' mental health is one of the most important factors influencing children's development (Bai et al., 2022). Thus, well-being is broadly understood as a multidimensional construct that encompasses both subjective and psychological dimensions. Subjective

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well-being relates to an individual's evaluation of life satisfaction and overall emotional experiences, while psychological well-being pertains to personal growth, self-acceptance, and the ability to find meaning through life's challenges (Linley, Maltby, Wood, Osbourne, & Hurling, 2009; Keyes, Shmotkin, & Ryff, 2002, cited in Palamaro Munsell et al., 2012). In the context of this study, well-being is defined as a combination of caregivers' subjective life satisfaction and the absence of mental or physical symptoms commonly associated with anxiety and depression (Palamaro Munsell, Kilmer, Cook, & Reeve, 2012, cited in Palamaro Munsell et al., 2012). In addition, good mental health is a significant asset to parents and caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities, given the important role that mental health plays in allowing responsive caregiving (Marguerite et al., 2022).

However, the global prevalence of intellectual disabilities among children continues to increase his, therefore, calls for attention, especially to the family caregivers who provide long-term support such as medication administration, monitoring their physical condition, and behaviour management, to enable them to attain their potential despite their disorder (Leonard et al., 2024). Hence, a child with an Intellectual Disability (ID) can present multiple stressors for parents and families. The difficulties are spread across multiple areas of family life, including housework, finance, lack of leisure and relaxing time, stress on all family members, family members' poor physical health, neglected needs of other children, and tense family relationships (Abdul Hameed & Kotian, 2022).

Early childhood intervention (ECI) refers to a range of evidence-based services and support provided to children from birth to eight years of age and their families to promote optimal development, learning, and well-being (McCabe & Klein, 2025). Within this review, ECI encompasses multidisciplinary programs such as: (1) family-centred developmental programs, including parent coaching, skills training, and home-based therapy; (2) health and allied-health services such as speech, occupational, and behavioural therapy; (3) psychosocial support programs, including parental counselling, stress-management, and mental-health interventions; and (4) educational or community-based supports, including inclusive early-education and social-participation initiatives. These interventions collectively aim to enhance children's developmental outcomes and caregiver well-being by recognising the uniqueness of each family unit and are grounded in evidence-based principles that support both children and their families (McCabe & Klein, 2025).

However, one of the factors is that parents' effectiveness at being the best caregivers that they can be depends on their experiences and well-being. Hence, the focus should not only be on children with disabilities and their intervention, but attention should be given to caregivers, as there is much more to be researched on how best to support and improve the well-being of the primary caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities (Friedland & Perks, 2022). As parents or caregivers interact daily with their children with disabilities, these continuous caregiving experiences influence their well-being in varying ways, sometimes enhancing emotional resilience and satisfaction, but at other times contributing to stress, fatigue, or psychological strain (Tan, 2017; Schlebusch et al., 2022; Abdul Hameed & Kotian, 2022). This, in turn, affects their efficiency in discharging their care duties. Therefore, this paper aims to explore how caregiving impacts the well-being of caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities and then to suggest ways for improvement.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded on the Stress Process Model (SPM), as described by Pearlin et al. (1981). The model offers a strong theoretical base for explaining how caregiving stressors affect caregivers' well-being and how coping resources and support systems act as mediators of these effects (Atkins, 2021). Grounded 'in' the stress process model which includes: 1. Caregiving context, such as caregivers' socio-economic background, work-life balance, nature and demands of their child's disability, and the

duration and intensity of caregiving responsibilities. These contextual elements determine how caregivers perceive and react to stress, which leads to the experience of primary and secondary stressors (Johnson, 2020). 2. Primary stressors, such as behavioural challenges, cognitive limitations, and the need for assistance with activities of daily living. These stressors often lead to role overload and role captivity, In which caregivers may feel overwhelmed or trapped in their caregiving roles (Pearlin et al., 1990, as cited in Johnson, 2020).

3. Secondary Stressors, for example, role strain, such as balancing caregiving with employment and other family responsibilities, and intrapsychic strain, which refers to the erosion of self-concept, self-esteem, and identity. It has been revealed hat caregivers may feel their career identity, social roles, or personal goals are diminished or inaccessible, which can lead to psychological distress, anxiety, or depression (Johnson, 2020), although resources such as coping strategies and social support from family and friends can help mitigate these adverse effects (Johnson, 2020). This paper uses the SPM to systematically capture the caregiving experience, identify critical stress points, and evaluate how intervention and support systems can mitigate negative outcomes.

Materials and Methods

A systematic search was conducted in the following electronic databases to identify and synthesise relevant studies: ProQuest, PsycINFO, PubMed, and Google Scholar for peer-reviewed journal articles, and other credible research publications that focus on the well-being of parents or caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities. To achieve this, the search was focused on keywords such as ‘well-being,’ ‘caregivers,’ ‘parents,’ ‘intellectual disability,’ ‘intellectually disabled children,’ ‘mental health support for caregivers,’ and ‘effect of early intervention on the caregivers/parents.’ This review discusses the welfare of the caregivers of children with disabilities and then narrows down to the caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities. Furthermore, literature on early interventions concerning children with intellectual disabilities was reviewed.

The inclusion criteria for this literature review were determined based on the central research objective of understanding how early childhood intervention affects the well-being of primary caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities. A systematic and comprehensive search strategy was developed to identify studies that directly addressed the mental, psychological, and social health outcomes of caregivers. The search was also influenced by the need to include recent, relevant, and high-quality sources of evidence on caregiving experiences and early intervention practices. The eligibility criteria included the following: 1. Publication type: The study included peer-reviewed journal articles, together with government and non-governmental organization reports, and credible online books. 2. Language: Publications available in English. 3. Date range: The study included publications from 2013 to 2025 to ensure current findings and relevance, although a few studies from up to 12 years prior were retained due to their relevance to the research topic. 4. Topical Relevance: Studies had to focus on the mental health, psychological well-being, or social well-being of caregivers or parents. Moreover, the information sources had to be about children (aged 0–8 years) with intellectual disabilities, developmental disabilities, or autism spectrum disorder. However, studies involving caregivers of adults with disabilities were also included to provide additional insights into caregiver well-being and coping, as these experiences share relevant similarities with those of caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities. Additionally, studies had to focus on the impact of early childhood intervention strategies or programs on caregiver outcomes.

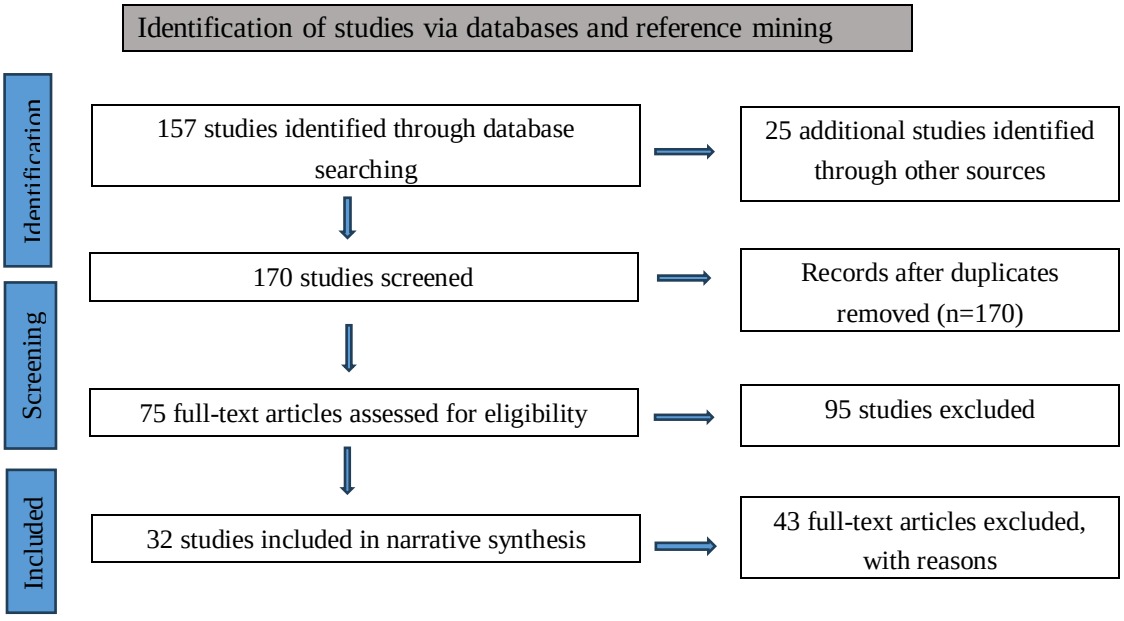
The target population for the study was primary caregivers (including parents and legal guardians) of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The study's global geographical scope was adopted. The emphasis was on including a combination of low-, middle-, and high-income

countries to reflect a wide range of caregiving contexts. The research included studies conducted using quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method designs. The review also incorporated secondary data from scientific repositories such as PsycINFO, Google Scholar, Web of Science, and the Scientific Information Database.

A total of 32 pieces of literature, including peer-reviewed journals, online books, and reports from the last ten years that are related to the topic (inclusion criteria) were used, except in a few cases where publications from 12 years ago that were relevant were cited. Out of 32 literature sources included in the study, 14 centred on caregivers of children with intellectual/ or developmental disabilities, 4 discussed caregivers of children with autism, 2 focused on caregivers of adults with disabilities, 1 on both developmental disabilities and autism, and 11 were about caregivers' well-being with no specific child disability. The selection strategy included both inclusivity and focus to ensure that the literature review contained rigorous findings that captured the diverse experiences of primary caregivers in early childhood intervention settings. Sources were excluded if they did not meet the following criteria: 1. Studies published before 2013 that did not have enduring relevance. Enduring relevance was defined as studies with findings, frameworks, or evidence that remain applicable to contemporary caregiving contexts (McKenzie et al., 2019); studies focusing on outdated interventions or populations no longer relevant were excluded. 2. Studies in which the authors did not directly examine caregiver well-being. 3. Studies that focused exclusively on adult caregiving or institutional care without any connection to family caregiving. 4. Studies for which the full text was unavailable for download or review. 5. Studies not published in English.

A search strategy conducted through databases such as ProQuest, PsycINFO, PubMed, and Google Scholar identified 157 literature sources. 25 additional records were identified through other sources such as grey literature and hand-searching. In total, 182 records were identified. After removing the 12 duplicate records, 170 studies remained and were screened by title and abstract. Of these, 95 were excluded for not meeting the inclusion criteria. The remaining 75 records were assessed for eligibility. This process of using full text led to the exclusion of a further 43 records, which were excluded due to reasons of having the wrong population and for not describing the intervention. Finally, 32 records met the inclusion criteria and were reviewed for this study. The PRISMA flowchart is presented in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 Prisma Flowchart



Results

The first section of the findings is reflected in Table 1, which discusses the characteristics of the selected papers. A narrative presentation of the emerging themes regarding the impact on the well-being of primary caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities follows this. The impacts discussed thereafter pertain to mental health as well as psychological and social well-being.

Table 1 Findings from selected papers.

Author(s)	Year	Country of origin	Type of article	Type of method	Summary findings on the impact of informal caregiving
Abdul Hameed, P.V., & Kotian, S.	2022	India	Peer Reviewed	Systematic review	Parents who provide informal care to children with intellectual disabilities experience substantial physical and psychological challenges, which negatively impact their mental health and raise their chances of developing mental health problems.
Bai, Y., Abulitifu, R., & Wang, D	2022	China	Peer reviewed	Randomised controlled trial	The high rates of depression, anxiety, and stress among female caregivers in rural areas are largely due to informal caregiving, which is shaped by caregiving roles and socioeconomic factors, but interventions can help reduce anxiety and enhance social interactions.
Bongelli, A., Busilacchi, G., Pacifico, A., Fabiani, M., Guarascio, C., Sofritti, F., Lamura, G., & Santini, S.	2020	India	Peer reviewed	Cross-sectional study	Parents who provide informal care to children with intellectual disabilities experience substantial physical and psychological strain, which negatively impacts their mental health and elevates their chances of developing mental health problems.
Bunga, D., Giriprasad, H., Nikhil, M., & Shankar, R. U.	2020	India	Peer reviewed	Cross-sectional study	Parents who provide informal care to children with intellectual disabilities experience substantial physical and psychological strain, which negatively impacts their mental health and elevates their chances of developing mental health problems.
Capri, C., Abrahams, L., Mckenzie, J., Coetzee, O., Mkabile, S., Saptouw, M.,Hooper, A.,	2018	South Africa	Peer reviewed (scoping review)	Document analysis	Informal caregivers experience challenges advocating for the rights of people with intellectual disabilities due to systemic barriers in a discriminatory and under-resourced environment, which requires more

Author(s)	Year	Country of origin	Type of article	Type of method	Summary findings on the impact of informal caregiving
Smith, P., Adnams, C., & Swartz, L.					rights-based support and inclusive services.
Duxbury, L., Ding, R., Stevenson, M., & Sadavoy, J	2024	Canada	Peer reviewed	Validation study	Informal caregivers face multiple condition-related demands when providing care for the recipients, because they must handle daily activities and manage various health issues, including mental health problems, cardiovascular conditions, and immune system disorders.
Falk, N. H., Norsk, K. & Quin, M. G.	2014	USA	Peer reviewed	Quantitative study	The level of stress, anxiety, and depression experienced by informal caregivers of children with autism is more closely related to their own beliefs, perceived support, and socio-economic conditions than to the severity of the child's symptoms or behaviours.
Friedlander, S. & Perks, B.	2022	Global (UNICEF)	Grey literature	Narrative report	Children's development strongly relies on the informal caregiving they receive. The research shows that early childhood development programs that support both children and caregivers result in better caregiver mental health, improved parenting practices, and sustained positive effects for the entire family in crises.
Garcia-Grau, P., Martinez-Rico, G., Gonzalez-Garcia, R., Escorcia-Mora, C. T., & Canadas-Perez, M.	2024	Spain	Peer reviewed	Empirical study-Quantitative survey	The burden of informal caregiving creates negative effects on family quality of life, but family confidence at higher levels helps reduce these effects, which demonstrates why caregivers need empowerment to enhance family well-being.
Singh, G. & Dubey, A.	2016	India	Peer reviewed	Literature review	The psychological impact of informal caregiving for chronically ill family members results in depression and reduced quality of

Author(s)	Year	Country of origin	Type of article	Type of method	Summary findings on the impact of informal caregiving
					life, but research about positive caregiving experiences remains scarce.
Githera M., Obondo, A., Tele, A., Thornicroft, G., & Kumar, M	2020	Kenya	Peer reviewed	Cross-sectional study survey	Providing care for children with intellectual disabilities in informal settings creates a high risk of depression among parents, especially women, younger caregivers, and those who experience stigma, thus requiring specific mental health interventions and stigma reduction programs.
Gopalan, R. T.	2016	Global Handbook	Grey literature	Theoretical	Parenting children with intellectual disabilities is challenging, as many of these children are misunderstood, while their parents are often blamed for their difficulties.
Harris, E. C., D'Angelo, S., Syddall, H. E., Linaker, C., Cooper, C. & Walker-Bone.	2022	UK	Peer reviewed	Longitudinal study survey	High-intensity informal caregiving results in worse physical and mental health outcomes, particularly for socio-economically disadvantaged individuals. It also affects their employment status, thus requiring immediate supportive policies and resources for caregivers.
Hooda, S. & Gupta, A.	2017	India	Peer reviewed	Empirical study	Fostering a child with intellectual disabilities results in increased risk of mental agony, frustration, stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and other psychological problems among the primary caregivers.
Irfan, B.; Irfan, O.; Ansari, A., & Qidwai, W.	2017	Pakistan	Peer reviewed	Cross-sectional study survey	Young caregivers experience substantial physical, psychological, and professional challenges because of high caregiving demands and insufficient support, which demonstrates the requirement for healthcare provider-directed targeted assistance.
Leonard, R., Hughes, N., Forbes, T., Brown, M., Marsh, L.,	2024	UK/Ireland	Peer reviewed	Systematic literature review	The results indicate that online intervention programs may be useful in reducing stress and enhancing the psychological well-being of caregivers of people with intellectual

Author(s)	Year	Country of origin	Type of article	Type of method	Summary findings on the impact of informal caregiving
Truesdale, M., Todd, S., & Linden, M.					disabilities, but more research is required to confirm the effectiveness of the programs.
Llobet, M. P., Roger, M. R., Silva, T. N., Gimenez, G. P., Agüera, Z., Canut, M. L., Merino, J. F.R., Arroyo, C.M., Arimon, M. P., Ortega, M.A.S., Mascaró, X. D., Blanco, M. A, H., & Poyato, A. M.	2024	Spain	Peer reviewed	Qualitative study	The COVID-19 lockdown period caused increased stress for informal caregivers of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in residential care because of disrupted routines, social isolation, and communication challenges, thus demonstrating the necessity of crisis support.
Mahak, A.	2023	India	Grey literature	Expert validation	The development of a child depends on ten factors, including heredity, environment, sex, exercise and health, hormones, nutrition, familial influence, geographical influences, socio-economic status, and learning and reinforcement.
Marguerite, M., Skeen, S., Hunt, X., Sundin, P., Robert, E. W., Soeshoe, M. Makhetha, M., Cluever, L., Sherr, L. & Tomlinson, M.	2022	Lesotho	Peer reviewed	Cross-sectional study survey	Most informal caregivers experience severe psychological distress, together with depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts, because of food insecurity and parenting stress. The situation demonstrates the necessity to tackle public health and socioeconomic issues that intersect with each other.
McConnell, D., & Savage, A.	2015	Canada	Peer reviewed	Literature review	Providing care for children with intellectual disabilities by their parents leads to increased psychological distress and family dysfunction, because of the child's behaviour problems; thus, interventions that focus on child behaviour and parental coping skills can lead to better caregiver well-being.

Author(s)	Year	Country of origin	Type of article	Type of method	Summary findings on the impact of informal caregiving
Moosa-Tayob, S. & Risenga, P. R.	2022	South Africa	Peer reviewed	Exploratory, descriptive, and contextual research design.	Multiple challenges affect informal caregivers because they experience stress, lack of support, and their work remains unrecognised by the community, thus requiring institutional support and skill-building programs for effective caregiving.
Mundakir, M., Choliq, I., Sukadiono, S., Fitriyani, V. R., & Firman, F.	2024	Indonesia	Peer reviewed	Qualitative systematic review	The caregiving responsibilities for children with physical and intellectual disabilities create emotional strain, physical demands, and social challenges on families because of discrimination, insufficient support, and unclear situations. This requires family-focused, well-informed, and inclusive interventions.
Muthukaruppan, S. S., Cameron, C., Campbell, Z., Krishna, D., Moineddin, R., Bharathwaj, A., Poomariappan, B. M., Mariappan, S., Boychuk, N., Ponnusamy, R., MacLachlan, J., Brien, M., Nixon, S., & Srinivasan, S. R.	2022	India	Peer reviewed	Intervention Study	Family empowerment and reduction of informal caregiving strain can be achieved through Family-centered early intervention programs that provide caregivers of children with developmental delays with targeted training and education.
Palamaro Munsell, E., Kilmer, R. P., Cook, J. R., & Reeve, C. L.	2012	USA	Peer reviewed	Empirical Study	The care of children with severe emotional disturbances by informal caregivers leads to caregiver strain, but caregivers who maintain strong social connections experience better well-being, which leads to positive outcomes for their children.
Razaei, H., Niksima, S. H. & Gheshlagh, R. G..	2020	Iran	Peer reviewed	Systematic review and Meta-analysis	The informal caregivers of chronically ill patients in Iran experience substantial physical, mental, social, and financial

Author(s)	Year	Country of origin	Type of article	Type of method	Summary findings on the impact of informal caregiving
					challenges because of insufficient healthcare resources, insufficient training, and the heavy burden of caring for patients, which frequently results in neglect of their health.
Roberson, M., Hayes, K., Shekouh, K. R., Alhich, E., & Zlomke, K..	2024	USA	Peer reviewed	Empirical study	The negative effects of informal caregiving stress on the quality of life for caregivers of children with autism can be buffered by positive mood and strong social support. This suggests that interventions could be targeted at enhancing caregiver well-being.
Scheibner, M., Scheibner, C., Hornemann, F., Arélin, M., Hennig, Y.D., Kiep, H., Wurst, U., Merkenschlager, A., & Gburek-Augustat, J.	2024	Germany	Peer reviewed	Cross-sectional Study	The high stress levels experienced by informal caregivers primarily affect mothers, single parents, and part-time workers, which negatively impacts both their mental health and child development, thus requiring systematic stress assessment and targeted support.
Schlebusch, L., Chambers, N., Rosenstein, D., Erasmus, P., & De Vries, P. J.	2022	South Africa	Peer reviewed	Quantitative Study-Program evaluation	A well-being program improved caregiver resilience but did not eliminate caregiving challenges
Schulz, R., & Elden, J.	2016	USA	Grey literature	Policy analysis/Report	The responsibilities of informal caregiving result in substantial effects on caregivers' physical and mental health while changing family relationships and affecting their ability to work.
Shepherd, D., Landon. J., Goedeke, S., & Meads, J.	2021	New Zealand	Peer reviewed	Quantitative survey	The research shows that informal caregiving for children with autism leads to psychiatric distress in parents at clinical levels, while parenting stress stands as the main predictor and mediator of poor mental health outcomes, rather than parent or child characteristics.

Author(s)	Year	Country of origin	Type of article	Type of method	Summary findings on the impact of informal caregiving
Soytac, E., Kahraman, T., & Genc, A.	2022	Turkey	Peer reviewed	Case-control study	Primary caregivers who provide care for children with autism experience high caregiver burden together, including increased anxiety, reduced sleep quality, and health-related quality of life, but their pain, fatigue, and depression levels remain similar to those caring for typically developing children.
Tan, S. H.	2017	Malaysia	Grey literature	Qualitative study	The informal caregivers of children with learning and multiple disabilities experience substantial unmet needs regarding information, coping support, childcare, and financial assistance, especially among those with lower education levels and medical issues.

Discussion

Impact on the well-being of primary caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities

The analysis of the above literature sources reveals three themes regarding the impact on the well-being of primary caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities. These emerging themes are: 1. Mental health impacts. 2. Psychological well-being and implications. 3. Social well-being and implications. Caregivers, according to Capri et al. (2018), are individuals who support care recipients in carrying out their essential daily activities, which can be formal or informal. They face more burdens in caring for children with disabilities. These burdens, however, may be dependent on the age of the caregiver, the intensity of caregiving responsibilities, and the nature of the disability of the child. An understanding of the burden of caregivers, according to Moosa-Tayob and Risenga (2022), is vital in developing empowerment programs for caregivers to optimally fulfil their caregiving role.

This literature review enhances understanding of the challenges faced by caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities. It also highlights opportunities to improve parental well-being by reducing caregiver stress and burden. (Abdul Hameed and Kotian, 2022). Thus, the impact of caregiving on the caregivers is presented in themes to address the research question: “How does early childhood intervention impact the mental health, psychological, and social well-being of primary caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities?"

The impact on the mental health of primary caregivers

Among the factors that affect child development, the caregiver and their mental health, which is a part of the environment, are most important. Previous studies have indicated that parents’ mental health is a key determinant of their effectiveness in caring for their children with disabilities (Mahak, 2023; Friedlander and Perks, 2020). Hence, it is crucial to know the health of the caregiver to offer the right treatment to the children with disabilities (Falk et al., 2014). In the study of the effect of caregiver social connections on caregivers, children, and family well-being, Palamaro Munsell et al. (2012) pointed out that caregivers in most families have the responsibility of meeting the basic needs of family

members and making sure that everyone is protected and in good health. In their view, therefore, the health of the caregivers is important for the adjustment of the child as well as for the family cohesion and harmony.

In their study, Muthukaruppan et al. (2022) explained that caregiving stressors of children with disabilities may negatively impact the physical and mental health of the caregivers to the extent of seeking medical attention, which may, in turn, affect the quality of care provided to the child. Thus, new knowledge on health-related needs of the caregivers is important for improving the current services and developing new strategies to address the vital role they play. In the same vein, Marguerite et al (2022) examined the rates of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress among the caregivers of young children in rural Lesotho and examined the relationship between the caregiver, child, and household factors and depression symptoms, anxiety symptoms, psychological distress, suicidal ideation and help-seeking for mental health. The result shows that the rate of symptoms of psychological distress was 42%, depression 25%, anxiety 17.1% and suicidal ideation 27.5% among caregivers.

In another study, McConnell and Savage (2015) reported that stress levels were higher among families of children with intellectual disabilities than the national average. This is in line with the findings of Bai et al. (2022), who investigated the rates of depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms in rural family caregivers. Similarly, Garcia-Grau et al. (2024) conducted a study on caregiver burden and family quality of life in early intervention. They found that the child's support needs were positively related to caregivers' burden experienced through depression, anxiety, and stress. Therefore, the more demands are made on the caregiver in the context of caring for someone with a disability, mental illness, cancer/immune issues, and cardiovascular disease in a typical month, the more likely it is that an employee will report subjective caregiver burden (SCB) (Duxbury et al., 2024). In the meantime, the overall evidence from the works of various authors and researchers suggests that caregiving responsibilities, particularly for parents of children with disabilities, negatively impact the mental health of caregivers.

To help caregivers who are anxious, depressed, and psychologically distressed, mental health services should be made more accessible and cost-effective (Marguerite et al., 2022; McConnell & Savage, 2015). Some measures like stress management programs, counselling, and peer support groups designed for caregivers may enhance mental resilience (Muthukaruppan et al., 2022). Furthermore, integrating mental health support into early childhood intervention services can also assist in identifying caregivers' distress, thus providing timely and appropriate support (Garcia-Grau et al. 2024).

The impact on the psychological well-being of primary caregivers

Caring for children with intellectual disabilities presents several challenges, including psychological issues. Bunga et al. (2020) in their study established that intellectual disabilities, also known as 'intellectual disability, are associated with low socioeconomic status (SES). So, the parents of these children feel guilty, sad, resentful, and shocked, along with new roles and responsibilities. In addition, studies have pointed out high levels of psychological distress, like anxiety and depression, in parents and other family members of children with intellectual disabilities, including siblings (Bunga et al., 2020).

In addition, Bongelli et al. (2024) in their study of caregiving burden, social support, and psychological well-being of families, reported that caregiving burdens affect caregivers' psychological well-being. Furthermore, Sheferd et al. (2021) also provided a summary of it when they established that 65% of the parents they studied have reached clinical levels of psychiatric distress, including anxiety. In essence, the burden of caregiving can indeed affect parents/ caregivers of children with disabilities. In supporting this, Duxbury et al. (2024) reported that the caregiver's burden and psychological well-

being are influenced by the care recipient's health condition. This could be due to the extra energy that is required in caring for children with disabilities.

Moreover, Razaei et al. (2020) concluded in their study on psychological distress as a predictor of caregiving burden in Iranian families that caregivers experience significant care-related burdens, largely due to psychological distress such as depression and anxiety. This suggests that caregiving negatively impacts caregivers' psychological well-being. Similarly, studies on the psychological well-being of children with intellectual disability, specifically about stress, depression, and anxiety, reveal that the stress and frustration levels of these parents are higher than the national average (McConnell & Savage, 2015).

These findings are concerning. Furthermore, a systematic review of the mental well-being of caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities found that the demands of caregiving usually led to psychological and physical distress of the caregivers, which, according to the researchers, negatively affects their overall well-being in daily life. Roberson et al. (2024) examined the daily impact of mood and the quality of social support on caregivers of children with autism spectrum disorder and observed a positive correlation between caregiving and stress and depression. This suggests that caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities experience a high level of stress and depression. Similarly, Soytac et al. (2022) examined the experiences of mothers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), focusing on pain, anxiety, depression, fatigue, sleep, and health-related quality of life. Based on their findings, these caregivers had a greater caregiving burden, more anxiety, worse sleep quality, and an overall worse health-related quality of life than mothers of typically developing children. However, the results of Bunga et al. (2020) contrast with other studies, in that their study showed that most parents of selected children with intellectual disabilities experienced a positive rather than a negative impact of it. To them, this indicates that these parents became more patient, tolerant, sensitive, and had stronger and more enduring relationships with their children. Despite this contrast in parental well-being, most studies indicate that the psychological well-being of primary caregivers of children with developmental disabilities is negatively affected.

To prevent the psychological impact and strain, caregivers should be provided with structured respite care and opportunities for relaxation (Bongelli et al., 2024). Workshops on coping mechanisms, positive parenting, and time management to empower caregivers to handle stress effectively should be organised (Duxbury et al., 2024). Additionally, family-based intervention approaches that strengthen family dynamics and promote patience, tolerance, and emotional bonding can be encouraged to improve caregivers' psychological well-being (Bunga et al., 2020).

Impact on the social well-being of family caregivers

It is important for a caregiver to sustain positive relationships within society for them to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Thus, caregiving can either foster social isolation or enhance connections. Schulz and Eden (2016) in their literature review pointed out that caregiving is associated with negative consequences for caregivers, and that they do not work in isolation; they also have other roles and responsibilities in their lives. Singh and Dubey (2016), in their study, observed that the impact of caregiving is both broad and unique to each individual. They opined that caregivers may be vulnerable to potential risk in virtually every aspect of their lives, including social aspects, and may be impacted negatively. Supporting these findings, Irfan et al. (2017) investigated the experiences of primary caregivers of children with disabilities and discovered that most of them were negatively affected. Their study established the impact of caregiving on different areas of life, with 40.8% having physical effects, 47.8% having psychological distress, and 51.8% having professional challenges. The researchers

opined that these adverse effects were mainly due to the extensive demands of caregiving combined with the limited available resources.

Caring for a child with an intellectual disability can be not only challenging and stressful but also stigmatising (Scheibner et al., 2024). In line with this, Githara and Obondo (2020) conducted a cross-sectional study to examine depressive symptoms and stigmatisation among parents in Nairobi, Kenya, and the results showed that 24% of participants were at risk of developing depressive symptoms and, therefore, needed screening for these tendencies. Moreover, according to Mundakir et al. (2024), parents who are the primary caregivers of their children with ID are likely to feel socially isolated because of the specific demands of caregiving. The need for specialised care and constant attention may limit their capacity to engage in social activities, which in turn may lead to feelings of loneliness and exclusion (Mundakir et al., 2024).

In their study on the relationship between informal caregiving, health, and work within the Health and Employment After Fifty study, Harris et al. (2020) established that most respondents were socio-economically disadvantaged. They were also unlikely to be employed, especially if they were trying to juggle caregiving with part-time or shift work. This suggests that caregiving responsibilities can negatively impact employment opportunities for this group. These findings show that caregivers' burdens are not only on behavioural issues but also on other aspects of their health. Moreover, characteristics such as caregivers' age, level of training, and the intensity of caregiving tasks may also influence their overall health and stability. Likewise, parents and caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities make numerous lifestyle changes that include restricted access to social activities and loss of personal time. Their leisure and recreational activities are often sacrificed (Bunga et al., 2020). To cope, they seek support from relatives, neighbours, and friends; however, such help is often limited. Therefore, improving both formal and informal support systems may be crucial for their quality of life (Bunga et al., 2020).

To reduce social isolation and stigma, public awareness campaigns aimed at changing societal perceptions of intellectual disabilities are essential (Githara & Obondo, 2020). Developing community-based programs and inclusive recreational activities will help caregivers engage socially and rebuild connections (Mundakir et al., 2024). Furthermore, workplace flexibility policies, caregiving leave, and financial support initiatives can ease the socio-economic pressures on caregivers, enabling better work-life balance and social participation (Harris et al., 2020).

Conclusions

This literature review has established the profound impact on the mental, psychological, and social well-being of primary caregivers of children with intellectual disabilities. The findings of the studies reviewed indicate that caregivers, especially mothers, experience high levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and social isolation because of the demanding duties of caregiving. These burdens often lead to negative consequences in the family, little or no personal time, and reduced employment opportunities. However, some positive outcomes included enhanced family cohesion, resilience, and resourcefulness in some instances; although the overall impact was mainly negative.

To this end, the literature advocates for easily accessible mental health services, structured respite care, Family-centered support programs, and community integration strategies that aim at eliminating prejudice against the affected individuals. Moreover, public awareness campaigns and flexible workplace policies are crucial in improving the caregivers' quality of life. Further research and policymaking should be directed towards enhancing both formal and informal support systems to help caregivers support their children and themselves.

Limitations

The analysis of the included literature shows multiple important limitations that impact the reliability and usefulness of the research results. Firstly, most studies reviewed stem from low-and middle-income countries, including India, South Africa, Kenya, and Lesotho. The findings lack generalizability to high-income countries such as Australia because their service structures, social expectations, and support systems differ substantially. Secondly, there is an underrepresentation of diverse caregivers, as most of the studies reviewed are based on mothers, with little attention paid to fathers, grandparents, siblings, or other informal caregivers. This gives a limited view of caregiving experiences and ignores different family structures. Most of the studies reviewed focus on primary caregivers of children with various disabilities, including autism spectrum disorder, developmental delay, and intellectual disabilities, which can mask the specific effects and challenges associated with intellectual disability.

Thirdly, there is a lack of longitudinal evidence, as most of the studies reviewed employed cross-sectional designs, which present only a momentary view of caregiver experiences without showing how caregiving changes throughout time. Fourthly, inconsistent measurement tools: The measurement tools used to assess caregiver well-being and psychological distress, and social impacts, show limited consistency between studies, which creates challenges for comparison and synthesis. Lastly, limited intervention-based evidence: The reviewed studies lack direct assessment of how Early Childhood Intervention or ECI programs affect caregivers' well-being. Most of the studies document stress and burdens, but they do not assess intervention effectiveness.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are proposed for further research and program development, practice, and policy based on the identified limitations:

Recommendations

Future research should be conducted in high-income and multicultural settings like Australia to mirror the actual caregiving situations found in these regions. The research should increase participant selection criteria to include fathers and grandparents, and extended family members, to achieve a more complete understanding of caregiving experiences. Moreover, research should concentrate on caregivers who care for children with intellectual disabilities to identify the distinctive difficulties that this condition presents. Future research on caregiving impact needs to employ longitudinal and mixed methods studies to understand how caregiving impacts evolve and how interventions influence well-being. Using consistent and validated tools to measure caregiver stress, well-being, and burden will allow for better comparison across studies and improve the reliability of findings. Further research is needed to evaluate the direct effects of ECI programs on caregivers' mental, psychological, and social well-being.

Practice implications

The research findings from the literature review produce multiple essential implications that affect social work and healthcare practice. Early childhood programs must provide caregivers with regular mental health screenings, together with counselling and support services. Services should focus on supporting both the child's developmental requirements and the emotional, practical, and psychological needs of their caregiver. Social workers, together with health professionals and educators, need training in trauma-informed and caregiver-sensitive methods to improve their support delivery. Community-based caregiver support groups should be established to reduce isolation and enable knowledge sharing among members.

Policy implications

The following policy directions are proposed as informed by the literature: 1. The disability and healthcare systems need official policy recognition of informal caregivers because they serve as vital contributors who deserve support and representation. 2. The government should allocate funding to support caregivers through financial assistance and respite care services, and subsidised mental health programs. 3. Legislative frameworks need to establish caregiver leave provisions and flexible work arrangements, and job protection for parents who have children with disabilities. 4. The government should allocate funding to launch national awareness campaigns that aim to reduce stigma about intellectual disability while promoting the acceptance of caregiver support seeking.

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AI-Powered[1] Entertainment-Oriented Activism: The Emerging Form of Political Participation in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Digital activism is increasingly shaped by the convergence of artificial intelligence (AI) and entertainment media, yet existing theories of political participation remain inadequate to explain these emerging dynamics. This study proposes an AI-Powered Entertainment-Oriented Activism (AEA) framework, which reconceptualises digital activism across four interrelated dimensions: 1) AI Algorithmic Environment; 2) Networked Resource Mobilisation and Micro-Influencers; 3) Cultural Performance and Algorithmic Aesthetics; 4) Transnational Solidarity and Decentralisations. Given Indonesia's youthful demographics, vibrant protest culture, and expansive social media ecosystem, this study employs Indonesia as a case study, drawing primarily on literature analysis of academic sources, media archives, and digital traces. Empirical evidence from Indonesia validates the AEA framework, revealing how actors navigate algorithmic governance, leverage AI tools for communications, and transform political dissent into culturally resonant and entertaining forms. These findings also expose structural inequalities in digital visibility, the prevalence of symbolic participation, and ethical challenges surrounding algorithmic manipulation and AI-Powered content. By theorising these dynamics, the research advances discussions within digital activism, social policy, and development studies, demonstrating that AI and entertainment are not peripheral elements in contemporary Southeast Asian political participation patterns but are progressively becoming core components. Consequently, the AEA framework offers conceptual and theoretical contributions for analysing how algorithmic infrastructures and affective cultures jointly reshape activism in Global South nations.

Keywords: Artificial intelligence, Digital activism, Algorithmic, Political participation, Southeast Asia

Introduction

Digital political participation encompasses the use of information and communication technologies (ICT), social media and other digital tools to engage in political and civic life (Khasnabis et al., 2010). In a literature review commissioned by the EU-Council of Europe Youth Partnership, Șerban and Lüküslü (2024) describe "digital participation" or "e-participation" as an online form of participation that "involves the use of ICT, social media and other digital tools to enable young people

[1] In this article, "AI-Powered" refers to the combined effect of AI algorithmic mechanisms embedded in short video platforms (e.g., recommendation, visibility, and content curation) and AI creative technologies (AI-generated or AI-enhanced). When these two dimensions operate in tandem, they shape both the production and circulation of political content.

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to influence and engage with political and civic life". This form of participation expands beyond accessing political information online to include expressive activities such as sharing political content, organising campaigns, signing petitions, joining online forums, and even participating in digital governance through e-voting platforms (Uhlaner, 2015). Digital participation is rooted in a broader conception of political participation. Venus et al. (2025) define political participation as "any activity that shapes, affects, or involves the political sphere". van Deth's (2021) typology of political participation emphasises four features—activity, voluntariness, citizenship role and the political nature of the aim—and distinguishes between conventional activities (e.g., voting, party membership), unconventional/alternative activities (protests, strikes, petitions) and individualised activities (consumption choices reflecting ethical or political values). Digital participation intersects with all three categories: social media users use digital tools to follow conventional processes such as online voter registration; to engage in unconventional protests through hashtags, memes and online petitions; and to make individualised expressions of political identity through social media posts or consumer activism.

The contemporary discussion of digital political participation is grounded in the broader history of activism. Anderson and Herr (2007), in the *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice*, define activism as "activism is characterised as a form of civic engagement that goes beyond conventional or routine politics". Brian Martin (2007) also highlights that activism ranges from door-to-door canvassing, rallies and protests to forms such as fasting or boycotts, and that activists are typically challengers seeking social goals rather than personal power. The term thus encompasses a wide repertoire—both non-violent and confrontational—aimed at social change. As digital technologies have evolved, the repertoire has expanded to include digital activism and online protests, where tactics such as virtual sit-ins, hacktivism, email campaigns and social-media mobilisation become integral parts of activist strategies (Fenton, 2016; Kırık et al., 2021).

In detail, digital activism can be understood as organised, collective action that employs digital media and online platforms to make claims on a target authority (Gerbaudo, 2012; Poell & Van Dijck, 2018). For example, practitioners also define a digital activism campaign as "an organised public effort making collective claims on a target authority in which civic initiators or their supporters use digital media (Edwards et al., 2013)." From this perspective, digital activism is inherently collective, aims to shape political outcomes, and relies on digital media as the central infrastructure (Earl et al., 2022).

Literature Review

Understanding how digital activism, AI, and entertainment-driven platforms reshape activism requires revisiting classic theories of social movements and situating them in today's digital and AI contexts. Resource mobilisation, political process, and new social movement theories were developed before the rise of AI; they emphasise, respectively, the importance of mobilising tangible resources (McCarthy & Zald, 1973), seizing political opportunities, and constructing collective identities through cultural expression (Flynn, 2021). Cyber-activism theory, by contrast, highlights the networked, individualised nature of online participation. Furthermore, AI-driven digital activism has evolved into an entertainment-centred mode of political expression in which algorithmic curation, affective humour and meme culture produce fleeting, playful and often incidental forms of participation that existing theories and affective publics cannot fully explain. To grapple with AI-driven "entertainmentization" in digital activism, one must weave together these lenses, acknowledging their complementarities and their limitations.

1. Revisiting Core Theories of Activism

Resource mobilisation theory emerged in the 1970s as a response to earlier theories that viewed social movements as irrational outbursts. It argues that protest emerges when groups mobilise resources—money, labour, skills, and media access—through formal organisations (Olson, 1971; Verba et al., 1993). McCarthy and Zald's (1973) influential work treats movement organisations as social enterprises that must constantly secure contributions, recruit members and manage their infrastructure. The theory recognises that grievances are ubiquitous; what differentiates successful movements is access to resources and the ability to mobilise them efficiently (McCarthy & Zald, 1973).

Although resource mobilisation remains foundational, it was shaped in an era of industrial media and hierarchical organisations. It tends to privilege formal networks over loosely linked communities and sees resources as exogenous and tangible. The rise of social media platforms complicates this picture. In today's attention economy, visibility, algorithmic ranking and memetic creativity function as critical resources. Young activists often operate outside formal organisations, mobilising digital labour through hashtags, dance challenges or AI-generated videos. In other words, in the AI era, those resources include not only traditional funds and members but also visibility and cultural capital.

New social movement theory complements this by emphasising how shared identities and cultural narratives constitute a resource in their own right (Flynn, 2021). New social movement theory emerged in Europe in the 1980s to explain movements around post-material values—peace, feminism, environmentalism—among new middle classes. The scholars emphasise identity, symbolic expression and cultural meaning over material grievances, noting that contemporary movements are often horizontally organised, loosely structured and oriented toward lifestyle and cultural change (Buechler, 2015). These movements use media to construct collective identities and to fight for recognition (Flynn, 2021). This theory presciently recognises the importance of culture and identity in mobilisation. Yet, the theory was developed before the rise of AI technologies and algorithmic culture. It takes for granted the capacity of movements to produce and disseminate meanings, without analysing how platform recommendation algorithms or AI-Powered entertainment content filter and reshape cultural expressions. Moreover, new social movement theory assumes participants voluntarily choose identities; contemporary AI systems often *assign* identities through predictive profiling and micro-targeting, which can both empower and constrain activism.

On the other hand, political process theory centres on the idea that social movements are shaped by political opportunity structures—openings within the institutional political system, shifts in elite alignments or state repression (McCarthy & Zald, 1973; 1977). This is a commentary on "movement" from the top-down dimension. Movement success depends on strategic timing: movements take off when political opportunities expand and recede when authorities close space for dissent. Scholars such as Sidney Tarrow and Doug McAdam highlight how movement entrepreneurs must read changing contexts and employ framing strategies to seize opportunities. In the AI era, however, it needs to consider that political opportunities are increasingly mediated by platform policies, recommendation algorithms and content moderation rules. For instance, a movement's visibility may depend less on electoral cycles than on whether an algorithm surfaces its content. Political process theory remains useful for highlighting the structural environment, but it needs to broaden its conception of opportunity to include algorithmic governance and digital repression (Oancea, 2024; Hong et al., 2025). States can now close political space through subtle algorithmic interventions, shadow bans, targeted surveillance or the amplification of counter-frames that are not easily captured by conventional measures of openness (Ünver, 2024).

2. Digital Activism: From organisational structures to individual networks

Resource mobilisation and political process theories were developed in an era of formal organisations and hierarchical leadership. Cyber-activism shifts the focus toward networked individuals and leaderless movements (Wihbey, 2013). With the proliferation of the Internet, scholars have argued that digital tools enable "individualised collective action." Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2012) suggest that activism has shifted from identity-based membership organisations to networked individuals who coordinate via digital media. Digital tools allow people to organise "without organisations," lowering barriers to participation and enabling dynamic, often leaderless campaigns (Herasimenka, 2019).

Furthermore, online networks, highlighted by cyber-activism theory, provide the infrastructure for mobilising these resources efficiently, enabling activists to garner attention and support with minimal material investment (Wihbey, 2013). Social media lowers the cost of broadcasting, allows immediate feedback and fosters low-threshold participation (Hall et al., 2020). Academia also underscores the significance of these digital activities. It notes that digital platforms provide new spaces for youth to express political aspirations and organise activities, but also stresses that the phenomenon is often dismissed as "slacktivism" because of its low cost and perceived superficiality (Halimatusa'diyah, 2024). Scholars also find that many young people who engage in online activism also participate in offline protests and community organising, suggesting a reciprocal relationship between online and offline activism (Ibid, 2024). The study thus challenges the notion that meme-driven activism is inherently shallow; rather, digital campaigns may serve as gateways to sustained engagement. While scholarship foregrounds the role of digital networks, it underplays the role of AI as both content generator and circulation driver. Algorithmic mediation compresses exposure timelines and produces unpredictable cycles of surge, decay, and resurgence, challenging stable models of network diffusion.

3. The increasing role of AI technology in digital activism

Lastly, contemporary digital activism is increasingly shaped by AI technologies. First is the AI algorithm in online networks, which curates content, recommends posts and personalises user feeds (Maina, 2025; Taha & Abdallah, 2025). Online networks' algorithm is notable for its sophisticated recommendation system that matches diverse user interests, enabling content to go viral even when posted by accounts with few followers (Koç, 2023). The platform's algorithm does not rely on follower count or prior performance but instead uses user behaviour data to determine which videos appear on the "recommendation" page. This design lowers barriers to entry for activists and fosters unpredictable virality, encouraging creative experimentation and playful messaging. However, the algorithm's "black-box" nature and its addictive qualities raise concerns. A review observes that short video platforms (SVPs) advanced algorithm intensifies user engagement and personalisation, making it more addictive than other social media platforms; its opaqueness means that users experience content through personalised feeds that shape self-perception and behaviour (Ionescu & Licu, 2023). Scholars note that algorithmic curation can suppress content related to marginalised identities or controversial topics, creating "algorithmic privilege" and "algorithmic representational harm (Ibid, 2023)." As a result, while algorithms enable activists to reach broad audiences, they also risk reinforcing biases and limiting visibility for certain groups.

Not only the algorithm, but also the latest iteration of AI technology and the absence of a robust regulatory framework for AI-based content, have created new opportunities and conditions for informal political participation among netizens. AI-Powered political entertainment content has consequently flourished on the region's online media platforms. It is worth noting that there is no fully consensus

definition of AI-Powered in existing research. Akter et al. (2023) argue that AI-Powered which refers to the use of artificial intelligence as a core driver in content creation, decision-making, and automation. Analyst Keenan (2024) holds a similar opinion, suggesting that AI-Powered refers to a technological tool for which AI serves as the driving force. Kumar et al. (2024) believe that AI-Powered technologies facilitate real-time content adaptation and audience-targeted messaging, restructuring communication strategies through algorithmically optimised content delivery. Software company Microblink (2023), for its part, considers AI-Powered to be technology or systems that incorporate AI capabilities to perform tasks or make decisions that would normally require human intelligence. By utilising advanced algorithms and machine learning techniques, AI-Powered systems can analyse massive amounts of data, recognise patterns and adapt their behaviour to continuously improve performance. Currently, furthermore, social media content creators are leveraging AI-generated or AI-enhanced technologies to produce virtual cute avatars, humorous memes, and parody videos. Their objectives range from self-amusement and audience mobilisation to shaping political narratives or even reshaping the images of political actors. Audiences' engagement with this AI-Powered political entertainment often originates from entertainment-oriented motivations rather than political agendas. With AI technology, online social media users can now engage through shorter-form, more entertainment-oriented content, thereby empowering digital political participation in the region once again. Combining the above information and the research object of this paper, this study chooses to define AI-Powered from the technical level, which as a technology incorporating AI-based functions, can not only provide driving force in user content creation, but also play an important role in the process of content dissemination through algorithmic optimisation.

A particularly striking case study is the protests that erupted in Indonesia in August 2025, sparked by lawmakers' votes to increase allowances and cut public spending. Protesters used SVPs to livestream clashes and organise. Alarmed by viral footage, the government summoned representatives of SVPs and other platforms and demanded tighter moderation (Swanston et al., 2025). SVPs then suspended the app's live-streaming feature across Indonesia (Reuters, 2025). Surprisingly, this did not completely curtail Indonesians' digital political participation, as they continued to use AI technologies on SVP to create entertaining renditions of photos, people, and events representative of the protests. This example, along with the current state of AI-Powered content creation on SVPs in Southeast Asia, indicates that while opaque, AI censorship policies and platform governance can hinder civic mobilisation, AI-Powered algorithms and technologies can also empower civic political participation in alternative ways.

4. The Entertainmentization of Politics in Digital Activism

Finally, although the academic community has taken note of the entanglement between entertainment and digital activism, systematic discussions are still inadequate. The dissemination of AI-Powered political entertainment content is not always for clear appeals, and the connection action model is insufficient to explain "incidental political effects" and "entertainment-oriented" Responding to the critical feature, AI-driven digital activism is often entertainment-driven, utilising memes, humour and popular culture to communicate political messages.

Firstly, affective and cultural studies recognise the centrality of humour, parody, and symbolic expression. For example, affective publics, performative activism, and memetics (Papacharissi, 2015; Thimsen, 2022; Chagas, 2023). These remain vital, yet AI intensifies its effect by engineering emotional cues and by blurring the line between entertainment and political expression; this is not something that

can be explained by raw emotional dynamics. As a result, participation often manifests as ephemeral, playful interaction rather than sustained commitment, complicating definitions of activism itself.

Other research indicates that content creators highlight how the SVP algorithm and virality logic encourage creators to blend entertainment with voice discontent and coordinate actions (Sinpeng, 2021; Lertchoosakul, 2023). The SVP's algorithm does not prioritise follower count but instead recommends content based on user interests, allowing lesser-known creators to reach broad audiences. This mechanism has enabled minority and marginalised groups to articulate political messages through seemingly light-hearted videos—an illustration of how platform design shapes the micro-politics of visibility (El Sayed & Notait, 2024). Scholars describe SVP as a "third space" where users negotiate identities and challenge mainstream stereotypes while facing both empowerment and harassment. The platform's emphasis on virality fosters playful activism, whereby satire, dance and memes become vehicles for resistance (Ibid, 2024).

Research gaps and theoretical Problems

Existing studies treat digital activism largely as a continuation of conventional protest, emphasising mobilisation and networked public spheres but giving little attention to how AI technologies and entertainment culture are reshaping collective action. Young activists now express dissent through memes, dance challenges and game-like interactions. While some scholars dismiss these practices as mere "slacktivism," others show that playful online engagement can lead to offline participation (Halimatusa' diyah, 2024), even though meme activism may encourage virtue signalling or oversimplify complex politics (Moskowitz, 2021). This debate exposes a theoretical gap: existing models rarely consider the temporal dynamics of entertainment-oriented activism—whether it builds sustained engagement or evaporates once a trend subsides. In the present context, where AI technologies are closely integrated with political content creation in SVP, this warrants even more attention.

A second lacuna concerns algorithmic governance. Platform algorithms filter what users see, curate identities and may inadvertently suppress dissent or amplify particular political actors. Yet dominant activism theories, which focus on collective identities and resource mobilisation, seldom integrate these technological mediators (Earl et al., 2022). Finally, the local context remains underexplored despite high digital penetration and recent mass protests. Local cultural norms and political structures shape how online and offline activism intersect, but comparative analyses are scarce. Region-specific research that integrates cultural, technological and political factors is therefore needed to understand the distinctive dynamics of AI- and entertainment-oriented activism.

Based on the above review, three interrelated problems emerge, which motivate this paper's theoretical exploration:

(1) Temporal extension: Does entertainment weaken or sustain political participation?
(2) AI-Powered political entertainment: What's the new logic of digital political participation?
(3) Contextual specificities: Does local entertainment-oriented activism carry particular significance?

Research Questions

To address the problems outlined above, this article poses two interrelated research questions:

1. How do AI and entertainment mechanisms reshape the political participation of netizens?
2. Are existing theoretical frameworks sufficient to explain the political participation within the context of AI and entertainment mechanisms, or is there a need for a new framework?

Research Objectives

1. To investigate how AI algorithms and entertainment-oriented formats influence the political participation of Southeast Asian netizens, identity formation and mobilisation.
2. To assess whether concepts like resource mobilisation, political opportunity structures and collective identity formation can account for algorithmic governance and entertainment logics.
3. To explore a theoretical model that integrates the temporal rhythms of viral content, the role of AI in curating political messages and the cultural specificities.

Hypothesis

Building on the problem statement, this study posits that the convergence of AI and entertainment logics on SVPs has reconfigured the temporal, affective, and organisational foundations of digital activism. Accordingly, three interrelated hypotheses are proposed to guide the analysis and to ground the development of the AI-Powered Entertainment-Oriented Activism (AEA) framework.

First, digital platforms embedding AI algorithms, such as short-video platforms, are hypothesised to foster micro-level, expressive, and affective political acts that heighten visibility and awareness but seldom consolidate into durable collective mobilisation. While digital participation often coexists with offline protests, its sustainability and transformative potential remain temporally compressed and uncertain.

Second, existing theories of activism, emphasising resources, identity formation, and political opportunities, are insufficient to account for the algorithmic mediation and viral dissemination cycles distinctive to AI-Powered political content. These theoretical limitations justify the need for a new analytical model that integrates algorithmic governance, creative agency, and entertainment-based affective triggers. The proposed AEA framework thus seeks to address this gap by reconceptualising digital activism as an emergent assemblage of generative AI, platform algorithms, and cultural performance.

Finally, it is hypothesised that political regime type and cultural norms mediate these dynamics. In Southeast Asian contexts, AI-Powered entertainment content often functions as covert or symbolic dissent; in more open democratic settings, it tends to extend deliberation and public debate. Hence, the meaning, form, and efficacy of entertainment-oriented activism are expected to vary across socio-political environments.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative design combining documentary analysis, inductive model building, and reflexive verification. The methodological approach aims to develop and substantiate a theoretical framework: AI-Powered Entertainment-Oriented Activism (AEA), through systematic synthesis of existing knowledge and empirical illustration using Indonesian cases.

1. Documentary Analysis

This methodology involved an extensive documentary analysis, which integrated peer-reviewed academic literature, media reports, policy statements, and relevant digital materials. Documents were filtered through a three-step process:

1) Relevance requires a direct focus on political participation, activism, or digital mobilisation.
2) Authenticity, ensuring that sources originated from verifiable institutions or widely recognised news agencies.
3) Credibility, which involved cross-referencing claims and tracing citations.

Given the diversity of materials, the study employed a directed thematic approach rather than a strict content-coding protocol. The themes were derived from the research questions and organised around core analytical categories: actors, discourse, strategies, technological mediation and outcomes. Analysis proceeded through iterative reading, memo writing and pattern identification instead of line-by-line coding, consistent with interpretive qualitative synthesis. To strengthen transparency and analytic coherence, emerging interpretations were repeatedly reviewed, compared and refined across multiple rounds of reading and discussion.

2. Theoretical Model Building

This research also focused on inductive theory construction. Building on the documentary analysis, this study also adopts a regional lens (Southeast Asia) to compare and synthesise the "divergences" and "convergences" between theory and empirical reality. The regional perspective is essential because regional dynamics form the structural foundation of individual national environments. This step ensures that the proposed theoretical framework attains a degree of "universal" and can be meaningfully reapplied across regional studies. On this basis, through constructive theoretical interpretation and empirical reality check, the study develops a theoretical framework (AEA).

3. Reflexive Verification and Case Selection

To assess whether the AEA framework extends beyond conceptual speculation, this study employs a reflexive verification approach and applies Indonesia as an empirical case. Reflexivity requires researchers to maintain critical self-awareness regarding their positionality, biases and interpretive influence throughout the analytical process. Accordingly, the AEA framework is treated as a form of contextualised knowledge—one that is subject to empirical testing, refinement and iterative adjustment through practical application.

4. Reasons for Selecting the Case

Digital activism has flourished across the globe, but Southeast Asia provides a particularly vibrant context for studying its forms and impacts. The region is home to one of the world's largest youth populations, and young people spend extraordinary amounts of time online. Relevant data indicate that youths aged 16–24 in Southeast Asia spend around 7 more hours per day on the internet, with nearly 99.6 % of them actively using social networks (Halimatusa'diyah, 2024). On average, a young person in the region uses 7.4 different social media platforms each month, with maritime Southeast Asian states' (Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines) youths using around 8 platforms and those in Thailand and Indonesia using 7.5 and 7, respectively (Ibid, 2024).

Among them, Indonesia presents an especially compelling case for examining AI-Powered, entertainment-oriented activism in Southeast Asia. First, the country has witnessed a series of large-scale demonstrations between 2019 and 2025, where digital media played a decisive role in connecting online mobilisation with offline protests. Social media users were not passive observers but active participants, revealing how AI-Powered platforms link digital expression to street-level action.

Second, Indonesia's social, political, and cultural diversity makes it ideal for testing the AEA framework's adaptability across contexts. As the region's largest democracy, with complex governance structures and deep youth engagement, Indonesia embodies the tensions between state regulation and participatory innovation.

Third, Indonesia provides abundant and accessible data. The availability of open-source media coverage and visible digital traces, including hashtags, user-generated videos, and algorithmically mediated content, supports a rigorous and replicable document-based analysis.

Finally, the demographic profile of Indonesia reinforces its analytical importance. With one of the world's largest youth populations and high digital penetration, Indonesian youth have become central actors in hybrid online–offline activism, making the country an essential site for understanding how AI-Powered entertainment logics reshape participatory behaviour.

5. Ethical Statement

For ethical and practical considerations, this study refrains from disclosing specific names of social media platforms, political figures, and organisations mentioned in collected materials. The decision to anonymise such information aligns with standard qualitative research ethics, ensuring respect for the privacy, safety, and reputational integrity of all actors mentioned.

6. Methodological Limitations

As a theory-oriented and exploratory study, this research prioritises conceptual innovation over exhaustive empirical verification. The reliance on publicly available documents limits access to activists' lived experiences and evolving practices. Accordingly, interpretations are bounded by discursive visibility rather than direct observation. While reflexive verification enhances theoretical robustness, it cannot substitute for longitudinal or ethnographic immersion. Future studies may extend this model through mixed-method approaches, such as digital ethnography, computational social network analysis, or survey-based validation, to further test and refine the AEA framework.

Proposing an AI-Powered Entertainment-Oriented Activism Framework in the Southeast Asian Context

In Southeast Asia, AI functions both as a tool of governance and a stage for civic engagement. Governments deploy high-resolution surveillance and algorithmic information management to constrain public space and shape narratives. Meanwhile, digitally savvy netizens harness the same platforms for resistance, turning entertainment communities into vehicles for political expression. By mastering AI technologies and algorithmic preferences, these activists and SVP users transform entertainment networks into transnational communities that challenge the top-down control. This section unpacks the interplay between bottom-up and top-down dynamics, highlighting how entertainment, identity and solidarity coexist in an AI-Powered entertainment-oriented activism framework.

1. The Top-Down Algorithmic Governance

AI technologies are now integral to the way public and civic life is governed across Southeast Asia. High-resolution cameras, predictive policing software, risk-scoring tools and AI-Powered content moderation are used by some governments in the region for infrastructure management and security (Cina et al., 2025). Some of the Southeast Asian governments have coupled these technological tools with legislative frameworks to discipline digital spaces. The criticism opined that algorithmic governance decentralises authority into technical infrastructures; it reduces the discretionary power of human officials by embedding action-scripts into software so that authority is increasingly embedded in "underlying code," steering citizens' behaviours through opaque and unaccountable systems (Peeters & Schuilenburg, 2023).

For example, a comparative study of four Southeast Asian governments documents how they politicise vague definitions of "fake news" to justify digital repression (Sombatpoonsiri & Luong, 2022). The study identified four tactics—prosecution of internet users, coercion of service providers to remove content, expanded social media monitoring, and full internet shutdowns—which are deployed under the

pretext of combating disinformation (Ibid, 2022). By locking down fake news, authorities can criminalise dissent and legitimise algorithmic surveillance, creating a governance climate in which both law and machine manage public space (Vese, 2022). In this case, scholars pointed out that recent elections illustrate how such strategies are expanded through AI. Scholars reported that "buzzers"—bots, celebrity influencers and cyber-troopers—are now an organised industry that political actors employ to amplify themselves and undermine opponents through hate speech, historical revisionism and parody accounts (Tan & McIlvaney, 2025). These AI-driven tactics illustrate how top-down algorithmic governance is not only about surveillance but also about shaping public narratives through data and artificial media.

2. The Bottom-Up AI-Powered Resistance with Entertainment

Against this backdrop of algocratic repression, Southeast Asian activists increasingly mobilise bottom-up, culturally embedded strategies that appropriate the very infrastructures used to regulate them. Since the mid-2000s, the spread of smartphones and platformised communication has enabled digitally native youth to navigate restrictions by shifting platforms, exploiting trending functions, and leveraging the affordances of networked publics (Lim, 2023; Sastramidjaja, 2020). This adaptability reflects a broader pattern of algorithmic literacy, in which activists learn how recommendation systems, visibility metrics and remix cultures can be tactically repurposed to amplify dissent while minimising exposure to surveillance.

However, Southeast Asia's distinctiveness lies in the fusion of entertainment culture and political expression. Young citizens mobilise not merely through rational debate or formal protest, but frequently through humour, parody, aesthetic play, and fan-created content. Within this environment, entertainment is not the antithesis of politics, but a medium through which politics manifests. As Sastramidjaja (2020) observes, for digitally native youth, the digital sphere constitutes a space where identity, culture, and citizenship are simultaneously enacted. Fan culture epitomises this dynamic. Research on K-pop fan activism in Indonesia and Thailand (Andini & Akhni, 2021) demonstrates how fan culture equips young people with digital competencies, such as collaborative livestreaming, aesthetic creation, and cross-platform mobilisation, which naturally translate into political collective action. The emotional bonds, participatory ethos, and transnational networks of fandom culture enable political messages to circulate under the guise of entertainment, rendering interventions less confrontational yet resonant on a broad scale (Barnes, 2022). This phenomenon, often termed fan activism, blurs the boundaries between fiction and politics, allowing communities to transform symbolic worlds into pathways for civic participation.

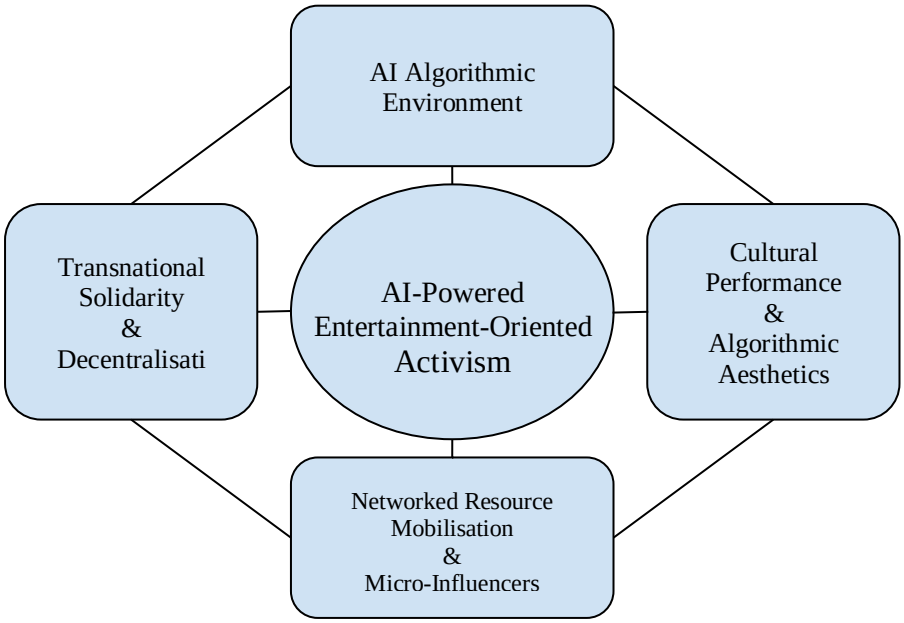
Across the region, similar dynamics shape how youth appropriate global cultural symbols. Entertainment creations, whether drawn from anime, gaming, local humour or pop aesthetics, are recontextualised as vehicles for critique, hope or solidarity. Their remixability renders them particularly suited to AI-Powered environments: generative tools enable users to rapidly stylise, exaggerate or repurpose symbols, while recommendation algorithms reward visually distinctive or emotionally resonant content. These symbols cease to be isolated protest markers, instead becoming algorithm-friendly carriers of dissent capable of crossing linguistic and national boundaries through AI-Powered viral dissemination. Crucially, entertainment-oriented activism also exploits the ambiguity inherent in cultural symbols. Humorous, playful, or fictional content often circumvents automated censorship systems more readily than explicit political statements, allowing critique to flow beneath the surface currents of platform governance frameworks. The result is a low-risk, high-visibility form of resistance where, even when offline mobilisation is constrained, emotion, humour, and shared cultural references sustain community-building.

In short, Southeast Asia's bottom-up, AI-Powered resistance movements are characterised not only by activists' ability to evade suppression, but also by their creative transformation of entertainment culture into political infrastructure. These practices demonstrate that AI-Powered activism in the region cannot be understood solely through the lens of repression and empowerment; instead, we must focus on the cultural, emotional, and symbolic resources mobilised by Southeast Asian youth in confronting increasingly algorithmic power structures.

3. Toward an AI-Powered Entertainment-Oriented Activism Framework

The characteristics outlined above, top-down algorithmic governance and bottom-up algorithmic resistance, and the entertainmentised forms of political expression, suggest that AI-Powered activism in Southeast Asia cannot be fully explained by classical theories such as resource mobilisation or political opportunity. While these theories emphasise organisational resources, framing and opportunities, AI-Powered activism introduces new dynamics: the role of algorithms in shaping visibility, the blending of cultural and political domains, and the transnational nature of digital networks. Building on the literature review of existing theories, which highlights personalised, networked mobilisation in digital environments, and on algocracy studies that examine the bureaucratic logic of algorithmic systems, this research proposes a new theoretical framework: AI-Powered Entertainment-Oriented Activism (AEA).

Figure 4.1 AI-Powered Entertainment-Oriented Activism Framework



Source: Drawn by the authors.

The AEA framework consists of four interconnected components:

1. AI Algorithmic Environment (Governance–Resistance Dialectic). Activism now operates within a *double algorithmic logic*: platforms and governments use AI to surveil, moderate, recommend and shape public discourse, while activists strategically engage with these algorithms, through trending hashtags, AI-generated content and cross-platform mobility, to maximise visibility and circumvent

repression. Understanding activism requires analysing how algorithmic governance structures opportunities and constraints, and how activists exploit algorithmic features to their advantage.

2. Networked Resource Mobilisation and Micro-Influencers. Traditional activism relies on formal organisations; AI-Powered entertainment-oriented activism depends on fluid, decentralised networks of micro-influencers, fan communities and viral creators. Activists leverage AI tools (e.g., machine translation, generative art, data analytics) to produce and disseminate content, often without central coordination. Meanwhile, cultural networks provide resources, affective bonds and digital literacy that translate into political participation.

3. Cultural Performance and Algorithmic Aesthetics. AI-Powered entertainment-oriented activism is deeply cultural; memes, humour and entertainment serve as frames that align with local values and circumvent censorship. Borrowing from performance theory, the framework emphasises that activists choreograph actions for algorithmic optimisation—livestreaming protests, using AI-generated art, and remixing popular culture to engage audiences. This resonates with Sastramidjaja's (2020) observation that digital youths see the digital sphere as a mode of identity performance and with fanactivism's fusion of fiction and politics.

4. Transnational Solidarity and Decentralisation in Identity Construction. AI-Powered entertainment-oriented activism fosters transnational solidarity by linking communities through shared entertainment cultures and identity formation. In Southeast Asia, digitally-savvy netizens see the digital sphere as a stage for performing citizenship; protests become spectacles populated by memes, pop songs and film gestures. The adoption of an anime pirate flag as a symbol of resistance in Indonesia, Nepal and the Philippines shows how global pop culture provides a shared language of liberation. Rallying around such symbols, especially youth, builds transnational solidarity through mutual recognition and collective emotion. AI tools, from translation algorithms to recommendation systems, amplify these connections, allowing micro-influencers to cross linguistic and national boundaries and shape new identities without formal organisations.

Collectively, these four components form an integrated framework for understanding how AI-Powered entertainment-oriented activism redefines participation in contemporary Southeast Asia. While the framework provides a theoretical lens to conceptualise the hybrid logics of algorithmic governance, creative resistance, and entertainment-infused participation, its explanatory validity must be examined against real-world evidence. The next section, therefore, applies the AI-Powered Entertainment-Oriented Activism framework to empirical cases from Indonesia, using them as reflexive verification to assess how far these theoretical dimensions manifest in practice and interact in context.

Reflexive Verification: Assessing AEA through the Indonesian Cases

This section undertakes a reflexive verification of the AEA framework through empirical evidence from Indonesia. Rather than restating its conceptual premises, the focus here is to determine whether and how the dynamics proposed by the AEA—AI algorithmic governance and resistance, resource mobilisation, cultural performance and algorithmic aesthetics, as well as transnational solidarity and decentralisation—are reflected in Indonesia's recent experiences of digital activism. As the largest democracy and one of the most digitally connected societies in Southeast Asia, Indonesia offers a compelling terrain for testing the framework's analytical capacity. As illustrated in Figure 1, the AEA framework consists of four interrelated dimensions—*AI Algorithmic Environment, Networked Resource Mobilisation & Micro-Influencers, Cultural Performance & Algorithmic Aesthetics,* and *Transnational Solidarity & Decentralisation*. The following subsections examine each pillar in turn, drawing on documentary and media evidence from Indonesia to evaluate how these mechanisms manifest empirically.

1. AI Algorithmic Governance and Resistance

(1) State-Sponsored Algorithmic Governance

Yatun Sastramidjaja and Wijayanto's (2022) work records an increase in organised digital campaigns in Indonesia since 2019. These campaigns use networks of "buzzers" and automated bots that amplify government-aligned messages while limiting the visibility of opposing views. A report from *Inside Indonesia* describes these so-called cyber troops as loosely coordinated groups of paid influencers and bots that help shape trending topics and can target critics (Wijayanto & Berenschot, 2021). The report further indicated that during debates over reforms to the Corruption Eradication Commission and the passage of the Omnibus Law on Job Creation, such networks boosted pro-government narratives and presented protesters as disorderly. It shows a case that Communication for the "New Normal" COVID-19 policies was also outsourced to these networks, leading them to emphasise economic recovery and public reassurance (Ibid, 2021). Observer warns that these digital manipulations of propaganda and suppression of dissent may shape information flows, discourage dissent and reduce the space for open debate (Margiansyah, 2025).

(2) Algorithmic Resistance

Despite disparities in resources, people in Indonesia have used social media algorithms to develop online activist activities. Jalli's (2025) research notes that activists across Southeast Asia engage in "trend-jacking" and meme creation to leverage the recommendation systems of popular short video platforms. She points out that a particular hashtag opposing a job creation law became a focal point on Indonesian social media, and content opposing the law reached millions, reflecting concerns over labour rights and environmental protection. In addition, digital activism has facilitated coordination of offline mobilisation, contributing to the maintenance of democratic norms (Pratama et al., 2025). Furthermore, reporting from Indonesian media describes how critics employed social media tags to challenge official narratives, while organised online campaigns responded with negative messaging, including slander, 'trolling' and 'doxxing' (Sastramidjaja et al., 2021). These observations illustrate a dynamic in which institutional actors and activists employ similar algorithmic strategies, making digital platforms a space for contestation. This emphasis on managing information flows differs from traditional activism theories that focus primarily on structural opportunities and resource mobilisation.

These cases collectively confirm the *AI Algorithmic Environment* dimension of the AEA framework (Figure 1), illustrating that algorithmic governance and resistance form a dialectical dynamic in which both state and civic actors use platform recommendation systems to shape public discourse.

2. Decentralised Resource Mobilisation Through Micro-Influencers

A core element of the AEA framework is that resource mobilisation in AI-Powered activism arises not from large organisations but from decentralised individuals. Evidence from Indonesia is consistent with this observation.

During a presidential election, an SVP became an important medium for political messaging. An academic work notes that the platform's algorithm highlights content based on engagement rather than follower count, which enables ordinary users to gain significant visibility (Jalli et al., 2025). According to Jalli et al. (2025), one leading presidential campaign leveraged this environment by incorporating AI tools into its outreach. These AI tools allowed both supporters and opponents to produce memes, parody videos and customised images aligned with campaign themes, resulting in millions of unique pieces of content within weeks (Pinatih et al., 2024). Well-known entertainers also

lent their online profiles to the campaign, illustrating how established public figures can further extend reach. Despite these celebrity endorsements, much of the momentum originated from everyday users who remixed and shared content, demonstrating how peer-to-peer activism feeds the recommendation system. Separate digital protests against a labour law and a youth-oriented movement expressing political and economic grievances likewise relied on dispersed digital influencers (Pranata & Riyanta, 2025). Sastramidjaja et al. (2021) have also noted that organised online networks have enlisted influencers to shape public narratives.

Collectively, these examples suggest that digital activism in Indonesia functions through a wide base of individual contributors, supporting AEA's second pillar. In contrast to traditional activism that depends on organisational capacity, AI-Powered activism is grounded in networked individuals whose combined efforts influence algorithmic visibility.

3. Algorithmic Aesthetics and The Cultural Performance of Activism

Section III noted that AI-Powered entertainment-oriented activism often relies on algorithmic aesthetics—memes, popular music, filters and AI-generated visuals—that align with platform recommendation systems and resonate culturally. Examples from Indonesia illustrate this trend.

Kułaga's (2024) work report on a widely used SVP explains that its algorithm promotes emotionally engaging and visually rich content, which tends to reward playful, meme-like posts over substantive discussions. During the most recent presidential election in Indonesia, one candidate's campaign sought to soften his image through viral videos depicting light-hearted activities such as dancing and interacting with pets, encouraging viewers to perceive him as more relatable (Sihombing, 2024). This prompted supporters of presidential candidates to use AI tools to create personalised avatars and memes, enhancing engagement. The same AI-created content could also be used by opponents, for example, during an offline protest in February 2025, where thousands of students gathered around Jakarta's National Monument Park, they held posters featuring reimagined AI versions of a politician's image to voice their opposition (Lau & Nugroho, 2025). Jalli et al. (2025) caution that this emphasis on entertainment can dilute complex issues by simplifying political discourse into shareable fragments and creating echo chambers. Engagement often occurs through liking, sharing or commenting, rather than through deeper deliberation (Ibid, 2025).

By foregrounding style, humour and imitation, algorithmic aesthetics integrate activism into pop-culture practices. This aligns with AEA's third pillar, suggesting that activism becomes a cultural performance shaped by AI technologies and platform design. Traditional theories that prioritise rational debate and collective identity may not fully account for this performative aspect. The Indonesian case indicates that algorithmic aesthetics can expand participation yet reduce depth: AI-generated memes and viral dances draw a wider range of participants but risk turning activism into digital entertainment.

4. Transnational Solidarity and Entertainment Cultures

Reports on transnational solidarity in Southeast Asia show that protest movements sometimes draw on symbols from popular media rather than local politics. One example concerns the adoption of a pirate flag from a widely known Japanese comic series. Journalistic accounts explain that, ahead of a national holiday, Indonesians displayed this emblem alongside official flags as a way of expressing dissatisfaction with government policies (Guzman, 2025). The symbol had originally been used by truck drivers protesting transportation reforms; it then spread through social networks and became a wider sign of discontent. A sociologist interviewed by a major news outlet notes that the flag's appeal lies in its low barrier to participation and its ability to resonate across age and class boundaries, giving marginalised groups a sense of community (Renaldi & Salim, 2025). Observers suggest that themes of

the series—centred on resistance against oppression and inequality—also encourage supporters to draw parallels between comics and real-world grievances (Guzman, 2025).

Coverage by international media indicates that the symbol was not limited to Indonesia; similar flags have appeared at demonstrations in other countries, from Kathmandu to European capitals (The Week, 2025). Commentators view this as part of a broader trend in which younger activists adopt characters and motifs from entertainment to create what one article calls a "reshaping the cultural vocabulary of dissent" (Ibid, 2025). The Indonesian case illustrates how such symbols can become powerful protest tools precisely because they are culturally ambiguous, making them harder for authorities to suppress. Beyond symbols, research by Andini and Akhni (2021) found that popular culture such as K-pop fan culture also influences youth participation in Southeast Asia. K-pop culture in Indonesia and Thailand has fostered transnational solidarity and political action among youth, providing them with the digital skills needed to engage in action on real-life issues in the era of media convergence.

These examples fit with the AEA framework's fourth element, which posits that transnational solidarity builds on shared entertainment cultures rather than formal organisations. This stems not only from the "information density" enabled by AI algorithmic mechanisms, but also from its "emotional density." Whether activists adopting pirate flags from Japanese manga as protest symbols or Indonesian K-pop fans engaging in digital solidarity actions with international fans, these movements leverage the emotional drive of global fan communities. By disseminating content through algorithmically curated platforms, they strengthen cross-border connections. Emotional resonance and entertainment value have become catalysts for contemporary digital activism in Southeast Asia, transcending rational persuasion and audience mobilisation. Political issues are repackaged as entertainment content, employing humour, satire, and sensory appeal to spark sharing and action among netizens across Southeast Asia and globally. This blurs the boundaries between audiences and activists across different nations and regions. Southeast Asian citizens resynthesize, share, or interact with AI-Powered political content—practices collectively forming a fragmented yet highly contagious form of political participation that tangentially elevates digital political participation among Southeast Asian citizens. These cases demonstrate that AI-Powered entertainment-oriented activism can operate transnationally within cultural spaces where the boundaries between fans or cultural audiences and dissidents are blurred, creating an inclusive rather than confrontational avenue for expressing discontent.

Conclusion

This study proposes an AI-Powered entertainment-oriented activism (AEA) framework to elucidate how artificial intelligence, entertainment culture, and digital participation converge to reshape digital activism in Southeast Asia. Using Indonesia as a case study, it addresses two core issues: whether existing theories adequately account for this transformation, and how AI technologies and entertainment mechanisms specifically influence digital activism. Empirical analysis confirms that AEA's four interrelated pillars, AI algorithmic governance and resistance, decentralised resource mobilisation through micro-influencers, culturally performative expressions shaped by algorithmic aesthetics, and transnational solidarity grounded in entertainment culture, collectively capture the evolving dynamics of political participation within an AI-Powered environment.

Evidence from Indonesia corroborates each component of this framework. The duality of state-led algorithmic control and citizen algorithmic resistance validates AEA's first dimension, revealing activism as an adaptive negotiation within the digital infrastructure of power. The rise of micro-influencers demonstrates that agency in the AI era is decentralised, peer-driven, and algorithmically

sustained, thereby reconfiguring resource mobilisation beyond formal organisational frameworks. The performative aesthetics manifested through humour, parody, and AI-created visuals underscore a trend towards increasingly emotionalised and expressive participation, transforming dissent into an algorithmic game. Finally, transnational fan communities and pop-cultural resources demonstrate how entertainment-oriented activism transcends borders, generating shared protest affective symbols.

The findings substantiate the research hypothesis, confirming that AI-Powered activism constitutes not a straightforward extension of earlier digital engagement models, but rather an innovative mobilisation paradigm. It emerges from algorithmic feedback loops rather than structural opportunities, from emotional resonance rather than ideological cohesion, and from participatory creativity rather than institutional coordination. These dynamics necessitate a shift from rationalist models of collective action towards an understanding of activism that is affective, performative, and technologically mediated.

Concurrently, the Indonesian case reveals structural and ethical limitations of AEA. Algorithmic hierarchies exacerbate inequalities in visibility and influence, while entertainment-oriented participation risks devolving into symbolic or fragmentary expression. Reliance on AI-Powered content introduces novel forms of opacity, bias, and manipulation, necessitating dual critical reflection on the political economy of digital infrastructure and digital activism. These limitations suggest that AI-Powered entertainment-oriented activism should be situated within broader discourses on digital capitalism, platform governance, and the affective public sphere.

By elucidating how AI reshapes the logics of mobilisation, affect, and communication, this study advances academic discourse in social policy and development in three respects. First, it reconceptualises activism as a socio-technical phenomenon where agents are constrained by algorithmic design and entertainment functions. Second, it demonstrates that in semi-authoritarian regimes like Indonesia, AI-Powered entertainment content can function both as a vehicle for dissent and a mechanism of control—highlighting the policy implications of digital governance and digital literacy. Third, it constructs a theoretical integration model linking media studies, political sociology, and development studies, providing a framework for analysing emerging forms of participation in the Global South.

In summary, the AEA framework offers a timely and illuminating perspective for understanding the transformation of digital activism under conditions of AI algorithmic mediation and cultural convergence. Future research may extend this work through comparative analyses of Southeast Asian contexts, quantitative examinations of algorithmic trends, and deeper explorations of how AI-Powered content interacts with governance, identity formation, and civic agency within evolving media ecosystems.

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The Route Back Home? The Challenges of Migrant Reintegration Policies in Ecuador

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Abstract

The increasing number of Ecuadorian migrants forcibly deported from the United States presents a pressing challenge to Ecuador's social protection system. This article compares the current return plan called "Ecuador es tu Hogar" (Ecuador is your home) developed by Daniel Noboa's liberal government, with the past reintegration program "Bienvenid@s a Casa" (Welcome Home) designed during the regime of former left-wing president Rafael Correa. The objective of this study is to determine the characteristics that two distinct ideological regimes considered in their response to returnees and their reintegration. Through the Most Similar Systems Design methodology, the research sought to identify the variables that impacted the execution of these policies, as well as the influence that the ideological framework had on their construction. As such, the study demonstrates that the current reintegration policies are affected by independent variables like the profile of the returnees, the investment available, and the role of migrants in development that shaped each government. The main findings consider that reintegration policies focusing only on economic aid fall short under complex social environments and lack long-term political vision. Based on this, the study intends to contribute to the overall discourse surrounding the intersection of migration and social policy, particularly relevant through the current context of deportations and protection challenges, while arguing for a shift toward a rights-based, inclusive approach to reintegration, supported by evaluation mechanisms, intersectoral collaboration, and investment in social protection systems.

Keywords: Reintegration, Migration, Return migration, Social protection, Daniel Noboa, Rafael Correa, Deportations, Ecuador.

Introduction

The forced return of thousands of Ecuadorian migrants from the United States poses a major challenge to Ecuador's social protection system. With over 32,000 deportation orders this year (Primicias, 2025), the country faces an urgent need for reintegration strategies that prevent economic marginalization and social exclusion. The current situation presents both a puzzle and an opportunity—while reintegration requires significant state coordination, it also provides policymakers with an opportunity to test and refine mechanisms for registering, supporting, and economically integrating returnees. Yet, this is not the first time the country has implemented a reintegration response as part of its migration policy. In 2008, during Rafael Correa's left-wing regime, the "Bienvenid@s a Casa" (Welcome Home) was developed to encourage migrants abroad, particularly in Spain, Italy and the United States, to return to Ecuador.

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In this case, the migratory policy in Ecuador has seen past and current reintegration efforts in very different contexts. During the late 90s, migration increased as a response to the economic and social crisis that swept Ecuadorian families. As a result, more than one million people left the country and moved abroad between 1998 and 2003 (United Nations Fund for Population Activities, 2008). However, thousands of these Ecuadorians returned to the country with the direct help of the "Bienvenidos a Casa" Plan launched in 2008. The program had the primary mission of fostering a "voluntary, respectful and sustainable return" aiming for "ability recuperation" as seen in the National Plan of Human Development for Migration 2007- 2010.

Afterwards, the economic situation in the country saw another massive downturn following COVID-19, which led to the most recent exodus from the country. Data shows the impact to the Ecuadorian economy as poverty levels went from 25.5% to 33% nationwide (National Institute of Statistics and Census, 2025). Moreover, adequate employment decreased from 38.3% in 2019 to 32.5% in 2021, while unemployment increased to 5.2% in 2021 (National Institute of Statistics and Census, 2024). These changes have led to higher intentions to move abroad. According to a survey of the International Organization for Migration (2024), 1.2 million Ecuadorians aim to migrate to another country, with a higher preference for the US. These shifts in human mobility trends are also seen in the increase of entrances and encounters of nationals at the US border. Records from the Center for Engagement and Advocacy in the Americas (2024) show that from 2021 to 2023, the number of Ecuadorians attempting to cross the Darién Gap went from 387 to 57,250, while the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) reported 24,060 encounters with Ecuadorians at the U.S. Southwest Land Border in 2022, and eventually 122,072 in 2024. Additionally, the economic crisis is aggravated by the escalating violence in the country, where homicide rates have gone from 5.8 per 100,000 people in 2017 to 25.9 in 2022, setting a vulnerable context for returning while also increasing the desire to leave.

It's in this context that Trump's deportation policies pose a challenge to Ecuador's protection system, now managed by neoliberal president Daniel Noboa. Due to the return of vulnerable individuals, the plan "Ecuador es tu Hogar" (Ecuador is your Home) has been implemented to offer economic support to the deportees. Thus, considering these immigration waves, the study will have the objective of exploring the limitations of reintegration mechanisms in the country and in consequence, how different governments have not been able to create an ideal environment for settling back despite their efforts. The research will employ the Most Similar System Design (MSSD) to analyze the implemented responses. For this, three key explanatory variables are used: political ideology, the profile of returnees, and the social investment environment of the country during the reintegration programs. Therefore, the questions guiding this study will be: how different ideological governments have approached return migration, what implications has it had

for the interaction of social policy in migratory programs, and what are the factors limiting the sustainable wellbeing of the returnees. Additionally, this will lead to recommendations for the improvement of reintegration policies based on evaluation and evidence-based mechanisms.

Literature Review

In 1989, Gøsta Esping-Andersen highlighted T. H. Marshall's (1950) idea that one of the key elements for studying the welfare state is social citizenship, which in turn generates social rights. This aspect of welfarism will be particularly evident in universal or social democratic systems, as they attempt to address the well-being of their entire population through an "institutionalized commitment" to this goal (p. 20). Consequently, citizenship is linked with social welfare as an attribute that guarantees that a person can "participate fully and with dignity in the life of her or his society" due to the services acquired through social institutions (King & Waldron, 1988).

As society has advanced, the considerations of citizenship have shifted the debate over migration and social protection. In the 1970s, scholars conducted studies on the links between these two topics, focusing on the impact of migrant workers on welfarism, acknowledging that their arrival posed additional demands—such as housing, education, and healthcare—on the receiving countries' welfare systems (Castlles, 1975; Jones, 1977). Due to the new debates, authors have also focused on how welfare states perceive and categorize migrants, leading to deservingness perspectives. Bommes & Geddes (2000) conceived welfare states as "political filters" that process migrants' status and legal rights, creating different results over social participation. Per this perspective, welfare states could implement an unequal view of migrants through their labeling, reliance on policy discourse and the interests of the receiving country.

Additionally, migration could not only be considered a consequence of the limits in social protection, but also a trigger of additional changes and demands affecting both the receiving and sending countries (Faist, Bilecen, et al., 2015). Through this lens, the variability of the needs is key to understanding the type of response. Sabates-Wheeler and Waite (2003) state that "social protection concerns can emerge at all stages of a migration process as different vulnerabilities characterize the 'deciding migrant', the 'mobile migrant', the 'arrived migrant', the 'returned migrant' and the migrant's family that may remain at home". This will impact the type of program, the period of durability, and due to the timing of implementation, will influence the impact of the response. Moreover, the nature of the issue could have different stakeholders participating in the policy design or implementation, such as governmental and non-governmental institutions (Federico, 1973).

Nonetheless, it would be logical to accept the idea that those who return to their countries after migrating will maintain what Gøsta Esping-Andersen referred to as social citizenship. Yet, their situation may still fall under means-tested, deservingness, a higher dependency on family nets, given their absence from their countries during their migratory process (Kuschminder, 2017). In this way, the nature of migration will impact the design and specificities of the response while challenging the effective applicability of the idea of social citizenship.

Pivoting to return migration, King (1986) points out that initial research projects on this topic originated from the return of migrant workers in the US to their homelands, British return from Australia and Canada, and migrants returning to the West Indies from Great Britain. King offers a base concept for this category of human mobility, defining it as the event when people "return to their country or region of origin after a significant period abroad or in another region" (1986). This shares similarities to the definition made by Gmelch (1980), who described it as "the movement of emigrants back to their homelands to resettle". Interestingly, King decided to differentiate this from his concept of "repatriation," as this is when the return is forced on them by authorities, or when it is a consequence of personal crises or natural disasters. This distinction is key to studying how the concept of return migration has transformed over the years.

Further evidence of the change in the study of return migration is the typologies initially considered. One of these was developed by Francesco Cerase (1967), who considers return as "a possibility" during the process of migration. The author would describe two initial types of returnees: the migrant who wishes to return home due to economic achievements, and the migrants who will return to their countries at a very old age. This typology would be extended in 1974 to: return of failure (due to barriers for integration and disappointment in the new environment), return of conservatism (when the migrant returns due to the successful plans to improve their economic conditions), return of retirement (given their aging, they plan to return to their home countries) and return of innovation (the immigrant sees return as an opportunity to improve their homeland due to their new gained skills and

values). Gmelch (1980) would transform this to: returnees who intended temporary migration, returnees who intended temporary migration but were forced to return, and returnees who intended permanent migration but chose to return. Consequently, typologies on their own would show a voluntary and forced dichotomy in return decisions that could eventually impact the design and implementation of policies.

For the specific case of return policies, at the beginning of the millennium, academics considered that their framework for development was "still at infancy" (Arowolo, 2000). As time has gone by, scholars have been prompted to approach return migration as a key component of development policies in a globalized world. One basic consideration in how to approach the development of return policies is the "ambiguity" that characterizes the returning process. Stefansson (2004) explained that this arises in the longing that diaspora communities experience in their desire to return, and their confrontation with new challenges upon their reintegration due to "social distance between returnees and stayees", unemployment, and legal burdens to access their homeland. Batistella (2018) also aimed to depart from treating this as a "homogeneous phenomenon," given the various types, temporalities, and reasons for return. Given the complexity, the study of return and its policies is now associated with a successful reintegration.

Currently, this is evidenced both in the research field and in international development policy. The United Nations Network on Migration defines return as the "various ways that non-nationals—whether independently, with assistance, or by force—return or are returned to their country of origin or another country to which they have previous ties" (2021). For them, it is intended that programs aim for the development of an environment where "personal safety, economic empowerment, inclusion and social cohesion" exist. This would eventually entail aspects like access to social protection, financial services, health care, and employment, among other elements. From migration scholars, return is also seen as a pathway to development and sustainability. Van Houte & Davids (2008) consider that any sustainable return will lead to a person having a sense of belonging in their return community through "an economic dimension, a social network, and a psychosocial dimension that are interrelated and reinforce each other". Thus, for the authors, return, under voluntary conditions, is seen as a sign that the states have matured, considering pre and post-conflict circumstances and differences.

This introduces a special condition in successful returning and reintegration policies that Cassarino (2004) first approached as the structural approach to return migration. For him, returnees would consider investing their capacities, new knowledge, and experiences in their countries, impacting their homeland's economy, power structures and traditions, sharing the innovative aspect of the last Cerase's typology of return (1974). However, any positive outcome of the policies and overall reintegration process would depend on the context and environment in the return country, particularly in its political, social, and economic factors. Considering these requirements, Kuschminder's (2017) definition of return is useful to the upcoming analysis. The author would first consider that return migration would consist of a two-way transformation that would cover both the migrant and their society of return, as these two elements are not the same as they were during the first migratory event. In this sense, reintegration has also been defined by the author as the process in which returnees receive the support of their community that is sustained by "equal civil, social, political, human, and cultural rights" (2017). Considering this, successful reintegration relies on the existence of a welcoming and empowering environment that exists in a stable and rights-based society.

Previous studies on reintegration plans in Ecuador have produced valuable insights on return migration. Firstly, research from Schurr & Stolz (2010) focused on the gender implications of coming back to the country during the implementation of the *Bienvenid@s a Casa* plan, while Boccagni & Lagomarsino (2011) conducted a comparative analysis of this plan and the Assisted Voluntary Return program implemented by Spain to aid unemployed migrants during the 2008 financial crisis. Both

papers considered that returning will create new challenges for migrants, considering the emotional, economic, and cultural shocks they may face during their reassimilation. Additionally, the authors suggest that most migrants share a desire to return; however, this decision, made under voluntary circumstances, heavily depends on their perception of whether their homeland offers better conditions than the ones they departed from originally, as well as the ones they are leaving behind in their receiving countries.

Finally, integral frameworks have been developed to approach the complexity of return. Hagan and Wassink (2020) proposed two categories of analysis for this issue. The first being the economic sociology of return, which explores returns as a "voluntary response" to economic changes and shifts, either in the sending or receiving country. Here, Cassarino's (2004) preparedness would also add valuable consideration that under voluntary conditions, the decision to return would come from the migrants' feelings and readiness to return. On the other hand, the authors also describe their political sociology of return to complement this framework by acknowledging that return is also driven by legal systems rejecting and evicting migrants from their destination countries, forcing them to come back. Given the resemblance of this framework to the Ecuador cases, the present research aims to offer new insights into social policies developed under conditions where return was instigated by the sending country as well as what happens when return is forced due to deportations, in order to contribute to past literature.

Contrasting Returning and Reintegration Programs in Ecuador

Bienvenid@s a Casa (Welcome Home)

At the beginning of Ecuador's previous government, led by Rafael Correa's, the National Development Plan 2007–2010 was established, with the first objective being to "promote equality, cohesion and social and territorial integration." To achieve this, the plan aimed to strengthen social protection systems, with one of the target groups being migrants and their families. Consequently, in 2008, the Plan "*Bienvenid@s a Casa*" was implemented with three main pillars as action plans. Firstly, the "*Vínculos*" Program tried to create spaces for "participation and communication" between emigrants and their families and communities as part of their goal to facilitate reinsertion and reconnection with the country.

In the economic pillar, the program implemented various productive and financial incentives such as the "*El Cucayo*" Productive Incentive Fund, which offered technical advice and the provision of seed capital, of up to $50.000 for business start-ups. Additionally, they also reached agreements with public banks to facilitate credits for migrants and developed migrant banking services. Finally, as an incentive to ease the complications of moving back and finding job opportunities, the then government created a physical support program called "*Volver a Casa*" (Going back home). Through this program, Ecuadorians were able to access benefits and pathways to reduce their economic and legal burdens. Per this pillar, migrants would be exempt from taxes when bringing their goods back to Ecuador, receive bonuses to acquire or build their houses, and would be able to participate in competitive examinations to become teachers or doctors in the country. This wing of the program also aimed to provide attention to forced returnees by offering assistance that included financing travel costs to Ecuador, reception upon arrival, or monetary aid to cover basic needs during the initial months after return.

"Ecuador es tu Hogar" (Ecuador is your home)

The National Development Plan 2025 – 2029 developed by the Daniel Noboa's government aims to guarantee the stability of public institutions. For this goal, one of the main policies is to implement and execute programs of integration, social inclusion, and capacity strengthening of

Ecuadorian migrants based on international cooperation. However, the program "*Ecuador es tu hogar*" was created and launched in January 2025, with the sole focus of supporting the deportees from the United States affected by Donald Trump's government.

In this plan, the actions can be divided into economic support, social development, and legal aid. For those who were deported, the government established the delivery of a cash transfer of $470 per person for three months. The monetary assistance plan set out in the eligibility requirements that the recipients must be 18 years of age or older, must have been forcibly returned from the United States, must have no serious criminal record, must be listed in the official registry of returnees, and must not qualify for regular cash transfer programs administered by the Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion (MIES). This plan exists in the legal frame of Ecuador's Organic Law of Human Mobility, which recognizes, in Article 25, the rights of returnees, including economic and social inclusion, recognition and validation of studies completed abroad, educational access, professional training, access to the financial system, and inclusion in entrepreneurship programs. However, two conditions must be met to qualify for these benefits: (1) having lived abroad for more than two years and returning either voluntarily or forcibly, or (2) being in a situation of vulnerability as determined by the human mobility authority or Ecuadorian diplomatic missions and consular offices, by the law and its regulations. This would pose a legal interference for those who left the country in recent years, which is possible based on the increase in migration in Ecuador during the most recent migratory wave.

Moreover, for social development, the plan aimed to deliver scholarships and traineeships for the returnees, while for legal aid, the offices of the Ministry of International Relations and Human Mobility would aid Ecuadorians. This strategy would consist of free consultations to obtain information to manage their revised migratory status, as well as for reintegration into the country. Finally, the government would open spaces for deportees to contact their families once they arrive in Ecuador.

Table 1 Typologies of Priorities in Return Plans

Priorities	"Bienvenid@s a Casa"	"Ecuador es tu Hogar"
Economic Support Offered to Returnees	Credits for start-ups (from $15.000 up to $50.000) and banking services. For forced returnees, financial support can be provided for return flights and after arrival.	$470 to be provided for three months per returnee.
Aid for Reintegration	Housing aid, as well as tax, to bring back goods.	Legal aid is provided in offices abroad.
Communication and Integration	Community offices abroad. Recognition of studies for teachers and doctors.	Scholarships and traineeships for Ecuadorians. Communication centers at arrival points.

Source: SENAMI (2007), Primicias (2025).

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a comparative qualitative research design, specifically applying the Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) methodology. The MSSD approach will aim to select "objects of research systems that are as similar as possible" with the exception of the phenomena's intended to be explored (Anckar, 2008). In this case, the control variables are shared within the objects of study, while the differences will be seen as "explanatory variables" (Przeworksi & Teune, 1970). Generally, this methodology is mostly applied in the analysis between countries, policy overview can be done within a nation as seen in Li et al., (2019), and Hong & Zhou (2025). The design allows for the comparison of

two reintegration policies in Ecuador: The Plan *"Bienvenid@s a Casa"* under Rafael Correa's past left-wing government and *"Ecuador es tu Hogar"* under Daniel Noboa's current liberal administration. By analyzing policies developed under distinct ideological regimes, the study seeks to identify the independent variables that shaped their construction and implementation.

Data Sources

The research relies on secondary sources including official government documents, policy papers, program descriptions, academic literature, and reports from international organizations. Additional sources include media reports, civil society publications, and statistical data on deportation and reintegration trends in Ecuador. The timeframe considered covers the periods of policy design and execution from the Correa administration (2007–2017) to the Noboa government (2023–present).

Selection Criteria

Documents and materials were included if they directly addressed the reintegration of Ecuadorian returnees and were produced within the timeframe of each government's policy's implementation. Sources were excluded if they only broadly referred to migration without focusing on reintegration or lacked verifiable evidence. In total, two major reintegration programs were selected for comparison: (1) *Plan Bienvenid@s a Casa* and (2) *Ecuador es tu Hogar*. Supporting documents were further screened to capture details on policy objectives, target populations, funding mechanisms, and institutional actors involved.

Data Extraction & Analysis

The analysis focused on extracting information related to:

1. Policy objectives and framing.
2. Target groups and profiles of returnees.
3. Financial resources and investment mechanisms.
4. Institutional arrangements and intersectoral coordination.
5. Underlying ideological frameworks of each administration.

The extracted data were then comparatively analyzed using the MSSD approach to identify how differences in ideology and contextual variables influenced policy design and outcomes. Themes emerging from the analysis were organized under three dimensions seen in the independent variables: (1) the role of migrants in development, (2) the investment and support provided for reintegration, and (3) the rights-based versus instrumental approach to policy framing.

Comparative Analysis

Control Variables

Per the objectives determined by the research, three control variables have been determined for the study to set the similarities surrounding the policies:

1. Location: The policies were implemented in Ecuador under a democratically elected government.
2. Group targeted by policies: Ecuadorian migrants returning to the country.
3. Relation to the National Development Plan (NDP): Both programs are justified by an emphasis on protection for Ecuadorian migrants in the National Development Plans of each government.

Independent Variables

Social investment: State funds committed to migrants' social protection policies and programs based on national development plans.

Profile of returnees: Specific characteristics of the migrants targeted by the return programs.

Ideology of Government: Values and interests of the governments during the development and implementation of plans.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable in this study is the level of protection for the migrants returning to Ecuador given the independent conditions.

Finding and Discussion

Social investment

Ecuador in the early 2000s faced continuous moments of economic and political crises, which led to four different governments in less than eight years. Yet, in 2007, the country began a path toward political stability that would last for a decade. Rafael Correa and his project, *Revolución Ciudadana* (Citizen Revolution), proposed a set of institutional changes based on an inclusive social policy that could guarantee fundamental rights and opportunities, which would eventually be developed into the concept of *Buen Vivir*. The impact and investment made during this period also benefited from the favorable economic conditions produced by the commodities boom (Nabernegg, 2024). Consequently, from 2006 to 2016, social spending doubled, going from 4.3 percent of Ecuador's GDP to 8.6 percent (Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2017). Referred to as an" exceptional case" in the region, the improvement in indicators of poverty and investment are in response to policy choices and reforms that allowed the government to increase its spending in areas like education, health, and housing (Flechtner and Middelanis, 2024). For the case of investment in the migrant population, information available showcases that more than $4 million was designated to the "Brienvenid@s a Casa" program per year. Both the return plan and the institution that oversaw its operationalization, the National Secretariat for Migrants (SENAMI), lasted until 2013 (Herrera, 2022).

On the other hand, Daniel Noboa's government has encountered economic complications. After completing his first two-year term, results indicated a decrease in investment in public services, such as health (down by 8% from 2023 to 2024) and education (down by 0.25%) (Luna, 2025). Yet, in May 2025, the president started a full-term government with a development plan that aimed to "strengthen and prioritize social protection policies". In this regard, the government presented its National Budget proposal with plans to expand its cash-based assistance funds from $ 1,548.5 million in 2024 to $ 1,909.6 million in 2025 for the implementation of social protection programs (Primicias, 2025). Two important considerations are established in the 2025 State budget proposal, where USD 6.77 million will be directed to implement and strengthen human mobility services, with $642,805.82 specifically dedicated to migrants' social protection in the program "*Ecuador es tu Hogar*" (Ministry of Economy and Finances, 2025). Yet, this general increase is a result of the creation of multiple temporary programs that will deliver cash-based transfers to diverse groups and not to the development of integrated social protection systems. It's worth noting that many of these plans were created and announced during the presidential campaign period at the beginning of 2025. Additionally, the execution of the overall budget could face limitations due to an estimated deficit of USD 5.443 million, which could also limit the creation of social investment projects (Primicias, 2025). In this sense, the investment in return projects is widely different between the two plans.

Profile of the returnees

While the group targeted by the policies is returnees, each cohort is different. The *"Bienvenid@s a Casa"* aimed to foster the voluntary return of Ecuadorians through facilitation mechanisms as well as economic reintegration. In this sense, the targeted nationals were characterized and described by their contributory role to the Ecuadorian economy through their remittances, creating a desired profile of citizens who "had certain economic capacity" (Herrera, Moncayo & Escobar, 2012). Yet, for the population facing forced return or vulnerability conditions like health problems, the assistance provided was not a priority as such for the program, considering its principal actions. Based on this, the plan was part of a migratory policy that aimed to build support nets based on political and economic links as part of their social protection (Herrera, 2021). Considering the focus of the plan, it would be more aligned with the economic sociology of return as posed in the theoretical framework, and not necessarily an integral plan as initially proposed. Nevertheless, official information points out that until 2011, 14.623 Ecuadorians returned to the country through direct help of the program (Herrera, Moncayo & Escobar, 2012). It is worth noting that the plan was launched during the 2008 global crisis. As this crisis began to impact migrants, the number of applicants for the program began to increase (Schurr & Stolz, 2010). This could also signal that while the aimed profile was leaning more towards Ecuadorians with a certain economic sustainability, the program could have benefited those facing employment hardships during the economic downturn.

Regarding plan evaluation, the structure of the program did not offer a quantitative target for how many Ecuadorians they planned to reach with the activities, thus limiting the analysis of whether the plan achieved its initial goals. Nonetheless, when considering the migration balance of nationals over the years after the program launch, the overall rate began to move towards increasingly positive values in comparison to the years prior. As seen in the table, from 2009 until 2013, the number of Ecuadorians returning to the country exceeded those leaving. Yet, this could also be in consequence of the idea that the beneficiaries of the plan were also facing critical conditions after the 2008 shock and eventually opted to return to their homes. Overall, this opens the consideration that the moderate success of Correa's plan also relied on the internal economic conditions of the country, while being boosted by the global context.

Table 2 Migration Balance of Ecuadorians After 2006

Year	Entries	Exits	Migration Balance
2003	485,971	613,106	-0.96
2004	528,912	603,319	-0.55
2005	597,038	663,601	-0.49
2006	674,267	733,459	-0.42
2007	757,892	800,869	-0.30
2008	767,469	817,981	-0.35
2009	820,292	813,637	0.05
2010	893,408	898,885	-0.04
2011	1,027,543	1,022,451	0.03
2012	1,025,310	1,022,205	0.02
2013	1,143,116	1,137,875	0.03
2014	1,269,675	1,278,336	-0.05
2015	1,374,893	1,398,167	-0.14
2016	1,493,768	1,550,898	-0.35

Year	Entries	Exits	Migration Balance
2017	1,506,290	1,547,312	-0.25
2018	1,475,655	1,497,680	-0.13
2019	1,513,513	1,544,708	-0.18
2020	509,599	508,095	0.01
2021	786,215	867,973	-0.46
2022	1,243,713	1,357,644	-0.63
2023	1,591,448	1,712,731	-0.66

Note. The calculation of the migratory balance is a result of (Ecuadorian Entries – Ecuadorian Exits) / Total Ecuadorian Population of that year * 100.
Source: National Institute of Statistic and Census (2025).

On the contrary, the "*Ecuador es tu Hogar"* plan seeks to assist Ecuadorians older than 18 years old who have been forcibly returned from the United States, have no serious criminal record, are listed in the official registry of returnees, and must not qualify for regular cash transfer programs administered by the Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion (MIES). As a result, the profile being targeted points to a vulnerable population who will eventually face uncertainties due to the time coverage (three months) set for the program. Additionally, this profile signals regulatory fragmentation, and could trigger conflict between programs. Since the MIES administers multiple cash-based assistance programs based on socioeconomic parameters determined by Ecuador's National Social Registry, several Ecuadorians could face exclusion where the existing programs and the new one would enter into competition and prevent integration into the protection system. Here, returnees may face a difficult decision: opting out of long-term social protection schemes to qualify for temporary, higher-value aid. In addition, since the program is only focused on those who have returned from the USA, it leaves ambiguity for general plans to aid forced returnees from other countries. For the time being, 620 people are registered as beneficiaries (Primicias, 2025). Considering the data in Table 2 and the encounters in the U.S border mentioned in the Introduction, this number could increase given the amount of Ecuadorians that migrated after COVID-19.

Ideology of Government

Finally, the implications of ideology in the development of each plan need to be analyzed. During his first presidential campaign, Correa focused many of his proposals on the recognition of the migrant community, one of these being the creation of the National Secretary of the Migrant (SENAMI). This signaled his emphasis on building an agenda of "collective action" where migrants were now part of the National Development Plan 2007 – 2011. Even more evident, the recognition of the migrant community was also a pathway to creating the narrative of migration "as a consequence of neoliberalism," according to his possession speech in 2007. After his decade in power, many studies have recognized the *"Revolución Ciudadana"* (Citizen Revolution) as an example of left-wing populism (De la Torre, 2014; Mazzolini, 2021; Ellner, 2012). Based on this variable, the investment in social protection and projects like *"Bienvenid@s a Casa"* will also be determined by its role in reshaping the Ecuadorian society, looking into vulnerable groups and attending to their needs while blaming their issues on actors like the United States and the "elites" as seen in the speech. Additionally, nationalistic goals have also been pointed out through the development of this plan. Boccagni & Lagomarsino (2011) have signaled that under the discursive rhetoric on national improvement and pride, the government intends to enhance its credibility and loyalty from migrants who were eventually named "the fifth region" of Ecuador.

On the contrary, Daniel Noboa represents a shift to right-wing presidencies in the country after more than a decade under the *"Revolución Ciudadana*". Characterized by reductions in their public spending, opening markets, looking for international investment, elimination of subsidies, and reduction of public offices, the government has turned into more conservative management of the State (Rosas, 2024). As a candidate, the president offered proposals for future returnees, like "programs of voluntary assisted return, and labor and social reinsertion". However, other than the plan established for deportees coming from the US, there has been little progress in the development of the once-proposed policies. Importantly, recent negotiations made by the government of the United States have been successful in leaving Ecuadorians out of the priority list for deportations for the time being. Per this perspective, the current policies are responding to the political sociology of return and will be more of a reactionary policy rather than a structured and sustainable plan overall.

Through the variables selected, it is observed that migration policies for returnees in Ecuador have been shaped by the government plans, economic context, and political ideology, which in turn would also affect the level of involvement that migrants would have in national development or their level of protection in return plans. As seen, the plans were built towards different goals, one being economic reintegration, while the second was characterized by an emergency response. Yet, both can be studied through the lens of returning policies, given their non-homogeneous nature.

Therefore, the dependent variable of the level of protection has been different in both plans. While the *"Bienvenid@s a Casa"* aimed for a higher level of protection and was able to moderately achieve it through higher investment and better-structured actions, the "Ecuador es tu Hogar" would eventually offer temporary protection in a highly volatile environment due to the economic and social crisis. However, the policies fall short in their coverage for the targeted groups. Per the profiles of the returnees, deservingness and means-tested traits will determine the approach of the policies and the government's investment in them. Whether by their economic capacities or vulnerabilities, resulting in exclusionary criteria, each program will eventually weigh other aspects over social citizenship. In this sense, the political filters mentioned in the literature review will not only affect migrants in the receiving country, but also citizens returning to their origin point.

The two programs offer the opportunity to briefly explore the typology of different types of aid that returnees could need based on the context and profile. Whether by economic support, communication, legal assistance, and reinsertion mechanisms, the policies could fall into more than one, as seen by the analysis. Yet, even as the typologies can be applied to both, their execution can drastically change depending on whether the return was a voluntary decision or a forced one, and in turn, they will also influence their economic or institutional approach, seen in the sociology of return. As a final result, the dimensions of analysis obtained serve as an integrated framework for the study of return plans, as seen in Table 2. This comparison highlights important differences shaped by ideological orientation, target groups, available resources, and institutional arrangements.

Consequently, Correa's *Plan Bienvenid@s a Casa* reflected a rights-based and developmental approach, positioning the migrant community as a fifth region of the country who could actively contribute to the national development and nationalistic sentiment. The program offered tax exemptions, credit opportunities, and housing support, led by significant state investment and coordination through institutions like SENAMI. As such, its interest was largely on voluntary returnees from Europe and the US, many of whom had savings or skills to reinvest in Ecuador. However, sustainability weakened over time due to the eventual economic downturn and institutional restructuring in the following government term.

By contrast, Noboa's *Ecuador es tu Hogar* responds primarily to the increasing deportations from the United States, with a more limited support model developed as a response to the crisis. Resources are narrower, with emphasis on economic temporary aid and information services rather than material or sustainable reintegration assistance. The target group consists mainly of forced returnees, who face greater vulnerability and lack of financial stability. Institutional coordination is weaker compared to the Correa era, and mechanisms for long-term evaluation or sustainability are not yet well developed.

Table 3 Comparative Matrix of Reintegration Policies in Ecuador

Dimension	Plan Bienvenid@s a Casa (Rafael Correa, 2007–2017)	Ecuador es tu Hogar (Daniel Noboa, 2023–present)
Policy Objectives	Promote voluntary return and reintegration of Ecuadorians abroad, framed within national development goals.	Address increasing forced deportations, manage return flows, and facilitate short-term reintegration.
Target Group	Voluntary returnees from Spain, US, Italy, etc. (migrant population from the 2000's with economic capacities); migrants facing economic hardships due to 2008 crisis.	Primarily deportees from the United States (forced return).
Ideological Framework	Left-wing, rights-based, developmental state; migrants seen as contributors to national development and identity.	Created under neoliberal, market-oriented conditions, with a lack of policies concerning and including migrants.
Financial Resources & Incentives	Significant state investment; tax exemptions for goods, access to credit, training, and housing support.	Limited budget allocation; focused on information services, limited social protection, and reintegration aid.
Institutional Arrangements	Strong role of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, SENAMI (National Secretariat for Migrants), and intersectoral collaboration.	Managed by the Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion and Ministry of International Relations and Human Mobility; weaker inter-agency coordination.
Returnee Profile	Mostly voluntary returnees, middle-income, with skills and remittances; some chose to invest in Ecuador.	Forced returnees, often with precarious conditions, lack of savings, and vulnerable social status.
Approach to Migrants in Development	Migrants are framed as "the fifth region," central to national development.	Migrants are considered as individuals needing reintegration, with less emphasis on development linkages.
Evaluation & Sustainability	Initial strong institutional support, but limited long-term sustainability, led to SENAMI's closure.	Program still emerging; lack of robust evaluation mechanisms; sustainability uncertain.

Source: Author's elaboration

Overall, the table demonstrates that while both programs aimed to facilitate reintegration, they diverged significantly in objectives, ideological framing, investment, and inclusiveness, with current policies offering a more limited safety net compared to earlier efforts.

Conclusion

To summarize, Ecuador's response to the return of thousands of migrants has represented a significant policy milestone, and challenge. The transition from a more structured and seemingly long-term plan now contrasts with a temporary relief response to forced returnees. Yet, both the *"Bienvenid@s a Casa"* and the *"Ecuador es tu Hogar"* offer valuable learnings on how to approach reintegration strategies and what aspects will impact their development and sustainable success. As social protection mechanisms, both plans filtered their responses through an economic sustainability lens. Whether as economic credits and financial support to return, or in limited monetary transfers, both plans explored policy actions that would eventually provide economic relief, or even economic agency, to the returnees. However, the long-term vision of both plans were limited in demonstrating additional measures for sustainability regarding employment, psychological support, family reunification, social inclusion, and a bigger focus on housing.

Additionally, independent variables shed some light on what might determine the weight of social protection on reintegration and returning mechanisms. The funds available for investment, the overall ideology and objectives of the government, and the profile of the returnees will shape how the "non-homogeneity" aspect of returning is regarded during the creation and execution of the plans. Here, a valuable recommendation will focus on aiming for effective reintegration, in the same way that social policy does, through the consideration of the diverse needs that could arise in the targeted groups.

In the current Ecuadorian context, the national deficit and loss of humanitarian aid resources will also pose constraints that could weaken the state's response. This could support the idea that in unstable societies, the addition of needs from returnees could put more pressure on an already weak social system. However, this situation should also be recognized as an opportunity to improve existing legislation and social protection mechanisms in an adverse context. As the security and economic crisis constitute key challenges for Ecuador, the response provided to returnees must be developed through a lens of no-harm policy, vulnerability studies, and recognition of strengths. Given this reality, reintegration policies must acknowledge that the structural conditions necessary to improve returnees' quality of life may be lacking, potentially pushing them to remigrate despite the risks involved.

Overall, the protection of returnees has not been properly achieved by either government considering that, while development plans did mention Ecuadorian migrants as development participants, the policies fell short in complementary services. Moreover, at a base level, positive impacts should be strived for through improving existing social protection mechanisms and non-discriminatory measures, leveraging data for better program design, and ensuring continuous evaluation. As such, implementing any reintegration model should truly support returnees in rebuilding their lives while fostering opportunities and safety nationally as part of an integrated strategy, and not as an isolated one or one solely focused on economic opportunities. Finally, any policy regarding returnees should be built through the recognition of the social issues that led to human mobility and be intentional towards creating opportunities, agency and reducing inequalities, while also acknowledging social protection as a right. Further research could consider whether the success of reintegration policies could represent a final phase of the migration process due to a permanent settlement in the original countries, or explore how existing social protection mechanisms like cash grants can be better adapted to target returnees, particularly those in vulnerable conditions.

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Responsible Consumption and SDG 12: A Comparative Policy and Case Study Analysis

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Abstract

The paper repositions Sustainable Development Goal 12, Responsible Consumption and Production, as a central social policy concern, extending beyond its dominant treatment as an environmental or economic objective. The study draws on sustainable welfare theory, the capability approach, and international policy frameworks. It uses secondary analysis of global and national reports, supported by illustrative cases from the European Union, Canada, India, and South Korea, to develop a conceptual and policy framework that embeds SDG 12 within welfare systems. The study finds that welfare systems remain locked in a growth-first paradigm, creating a structural disconnect with SDG 12: overconsumption in affluent groups and under-consumption in marginalized groups generate inequities that current systems fail to address. Subsidies and transfers frequently reinforce unsustainable practices, while innovations such as South Korea's RFID-enabled food waste system and Canada's integration of Indigenous reconciliation illustrate how ecological responsibility can be embedded into welfare. The analysis highlights a pressing need for a systemic shift toward "responsible welfare systems" that align welfare with ecological sustainability and social justice. The paper advances sustainable welfare scholarship by introducing the concept of "responsible welfare systems," reframing SDG 12 as a social policy imperative and offering new directions for theory and practice.

Keywords: SDG 12, Responsible consumption and production, Social policy, Sustainable welfare, Circular economy, Capability approach, Welfare systems, Sustainability transitions

Introduction

Sustainable Development Goal 12 (SDG 12) is a cornerstone of the global sustainability agenda, seeking to ensure responsible consumption and production patterns. It addresses the environmental, economic, and social challenges of the Anthropocene, an era marked by resource depletion and ecological disruption (Brinkmann, 2021). Closely interconnected with other goals, such as climate action (SDG 13), affordable and clean energy (SDG 7), and sustainable cities (SDG 11), SDG 12 plays a central role in advancing broader sustainability objectives (Raman et al., 2024). Achieving this goal requires robust legal frameworks and international cooperation, yet current trade and investment regimes often privilege economic liberalization over environmental and social concerns (Mitkidis & Sefcikova, 2021; Partiti & Arcuri, 2021). The European Union's adoption of circular economy principles demonstrates the transformative potential of SDG 12, though persistent challenges remain, particularly in addressing transboundary impacts (Amos & Lydgate, 2020). Higher education institutions also contribute by acting as laboratories for sustainable practices, advancing research, and

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strengthening community engagement (Martínez-Acosta et al., 2023). Still, progress is constrained by systemic barriers such as asymmetric information between producers and consumers, which calls for greater cooperation among economic actors. The success depends on aligning global, national, and corporate reporting metrics to ensure accountability and enable shifts toward sustainable consumption and production (Milutinović & Malinić, 2024).

While scholarship and policy initiatives often emphasize environmental and economic dimensions, there is increasing recognition of the need to integrate welfare and social policy perspectives. Environmental and economic measures that fail to account for social outcomes risk undermining policy effectiveness, as shown in analyses of parking policies that call for explicit attention to welfare implications (Russo et al., 2019). Concepts such as transformative resilience and just transitions highlight the capacity of welfare states to mediate socio-ecological adaptation, though this relationship remains underdeveloped in the literature (Neuhuber, 2025). Recent initiatives like the European Green Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy reflect efforts to incorporate redistribution and citizen participation into eco-social frameworks, but systematic evaluation of these dimensions is still lacking (Cotta, 2024).

The relationship between welfare regimes and environmental sustainability remains a relatively unexplored frontier. Existing debates on sustainable welfare emphasize the need to move beyond growth-dependent models of social security and to incorporate social compensation mechanisms for climate policies (Chatradhi, 2025). Evidence from performance evaluation frameworks suggests that balanced attention to environmental, economic, and social dimensions enhances outcomes, whereas prioritizing one can undermine the others (Niu et al., 2024). The emerging eco-welfare paradigm seeks to integrate environmental sustainability with social rights, directly challenging the growth imperative (De Vidovich, 2024). The research on welfare under no-growth conditions indicates the need for governance models that combine redistribution with environmental policy and address inequality (Paliwal et al., 2024). Although links between climate change and social policy are beginning to be recognized, further research is needed on degrowth pathways and the financial sustainability of welfare states during ecological transitions.

While the relationship between welfare systems and sustainability has been explored in debates on *sustainable welfare* and *eco-social policy*, much of the literature has centered on issues such as climate mitigation, green taxation, or energy transitions (Hirvilammi & Koch, 2020; Chatradhi 2025; Partiti & Arcuri, 2021). Far less attention has been given to SDG 12: Responsible Consumption and Production, which emphasizes reducing waste, promoting circular economies, and fostering sustainable lifestyles. SDG 12 also raises questions about how welfare systems shape patterns of consumption and production. For instance, subsidies and transfers may at times perpetuate unsustainable practices, but they could equally be redesigned to support more sustainable choices. For example, housing subsidies may unintentionally promote resource-intensive urban sprawl, while unemployment benefits linked to green job training can actively contribute to sustainability transitions. The gap points to an urgent need for integrating ecological responsibility into welfare design, ensuring that social protection mechanisms not only redistribute wealth but also align with planetary boundaries and intergenerational equity.

Research Objectives

1. To examine how current welfare systems address (or fail to address) issues of responsible consumption and production under SDG 12.
2. To analyze selected international policy examples that demonstrate efforts to integrate sustainability principles into social policy.
3. To propose a conceptual framework for "responsible welfare systems" that links social protection with ecological responsibility and equity.

The study makes three key contributions to the fields of social policy and sustainable development. First, it extends sustainable welfare theory by explicitly linking *responsible consumption and production* (SDG 12) with welfare design, thereby moving beyond traditional redistributive approaches to include ecological responsibility and intergenerational equity. It advances social policy debates by proposing the concept of "responsible welfare systems," which reframe welfare not only as a mechanism of social protection but also as a driver of sustainability transitions. Third, at a practical level, the study contributes to policy discussions by identifying international examples of innovative practices and distilling them into actionable recommendations that align welfare outcomes with sustainability objectives.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

SDG 12: Global Framing and Gaps

The United Nations frames Sustainable Development Goal 12 (SDG 12) as central to advancing sustainable consumption and production, emphasizing efficiency, decoupling growth from environmental degradation, and doing *"more with less"* (Sylvester, 2024). While this framing provides a unifying vision, scholars argue that its formulation reflects a production and design-centered perspective shaped by business interests, privileging technological fixes and regulatory frameworks that remain business-friendly (Gasper et al., 2019). The orientation has led to targets and indicators that are less ambitious than earlier transformative visions of sustainable consumption and production, raising questions about whether SDG 12 embodies the systemic change it proclaims (Partiti & Arcuri, 2021).
A further tension lies in the legal underpinnings of SDG 12. While its targets require robust legal frameworks to guide implementation, these are often overshadowed by international trade and investment regimes that prioritize liberalization over ecological and social concerns (Kateřina & Adriana, 2023).

The circular economy, widely invoked under SDG 12, illustrates both the promise and limitations of the UN's framing. On the one hand, it promotes resource recirculation and waste minimization in industries such as textiles (Gabriel & Luque, 2020; Taranov, 2022). On the other, critics point out that its application often remains technocratic and sector-specific, failing to address the deeper behavioral and systemic shifts required for sustainable production and consumption (Broderick & Usher, 2024). Some regional frameworks, such as the Yangtze River Delta model, demonstrate that integrated assessment tools can capture these complexities (Zhong et al., 2024), yet such approaches remain the exception rather than the rule. The framing of SDG 12 establishes an essential global agenda but reflects persistent compromises: it emphasizes production efficiency over sufficiency, reporting over regulation, and technological solutions over socio-political transformation. Scholars therefore highlight the need to strengthen its targets and indicators, align its legal framework with social and environmental priorities, and move beyond a business-oriented narrative if SDG 12 is to drive genuinely transformative change (Chatradhi, 2024; Partiti & Arcuri, 2021).

Sustainable Welfare Theory

Sustainable welfare theory seeks to reconcile social protection with ecological limits, aiming to meet human needs within planetary boundaries while moving away from growth-dependent models of welfare (Bao, 2022). The urgency of this paradigm shift is highlighted by the limited success of countries in decoupling economic growth from resource use and greenhouse gas emissions at rates sufficient to meet climate targets (Lee et al., 2023). Scholars argue that welfare states must therefore be reconfigured to become resilient to economic fluctuations and environmentally sustainable, prioritizing wellbeing and sufficiency rather than expansion (Büchs, 2021). Eco-social policies, that simultaneously pursue social and ecological objectives, are seen as essential for advancing sustainable welfare, though their emergence is highly contingent on political and institutional contexts (Mandelli, 2023). Proposals range from universal basic income and services to eco-social insurance schemes that link welfare entitlements to ecological objectives (Bohnenberger, 2023). In the Global South, localized approaches emphasizing subsidiarity, self-governance, and community participation appear most effective in aligning welfare outcomes with sustainability (Tobing-David et al., 2024).

Recent research further reinforces the relevance of integrating welfare and environmental frameworks. A study by Nordbrandt et al. (2024) shows that broader social insurance coverage significantly increases public support for carbon taxes in Europe, demonstrating that welfare institutions can actively enable climate policy legitimacy rather than merely buffer negative impacts. Likewise, Hasanaj (2023) provides empirical evidence of a global shift toward eco-welfare state models and refines theoretical interpretations of how welfare and sustainability are increasingly interlinked across national systems.

At the theoretical level, sustainable welfare builds on the eco-welfare concept, which reframes welfare systems as active agents in socio-ecological transformation rather than passive compensatory mechanisms (Bailey, 2015; Koch, 2022). Different strategies have been proposed, such as ecological modernization, Green New Deal frameworks, and post-growth approaches, each offering distinct ways to balance social equity with ecological imperatives. Yet, as critics note, many of these approaches remain aspirational, with limited evidence on their feasibility within existing welfare regimes (Hu et al., 2025).

Degrowth-focused scholarship highlights similar concerns. Kongshøj (2023) argues that transitioning to post-growth welfare models requires restructuring financing mechanisms, reducing system dependence on continuous GDP expansion, and addressing the political legitimacy challenges of more radical reforms. Related work also examines options such as universal basic income and socio-ecological public services to support welfare without requiring material growth (Theuer & Hopp, 2019).

Despite conceptual advances, research has yet to fully resolve how welfare systems can be practically transformed into eco-social states, or how trade-offs between sufficiency, equity, and political feasibility should be managed. Current evidence shows that support for eco-social policies varies across welfare regimes and socio-demographic groups (Hirvilammi & Koch, 2020), raising questions about the political sustainability of post-growth welfare models. The sustainable welfare theory contributes a powerful vision of welfare systems that create a *"safe and just operating space"* (Ensor & Hoddy, 2021), but its operationalization requires deeper empirical grounding and institutional innovation.

The Capability Approach

The Capability Approach (CA), developed by Sen and Nussbaum, evaluates well-being by individuals' real opportunities to achieve what they value, rather than GDP or material resources (Paliwal & Chatradhi, 2025; Robeyns, 2010). It offers a multidimensional lens for justice, inclusiveness,

and agency across policy design, social arrangements, and SDGs (Comim et al., 2024). Challenges include measurement difficulties, individualistic focus, and limited engagement with structural inequalities (Przybylinski & Sidortsov, 2023). Nonetheless, CA informs climate adaptation by identifying vulnerable groups, enhancing resilience, and supporting lifelong learning beyond economic contributions (Wasito, 2023). In the context of responsible consumption, CA highlights the interplay of personal motivation, societal influence, and policy. Individual agency drives choices in networks like the Galician Conscious and Responsible Consumption Network (Lema-Blanco et al., 2023), while collective frameworks, such as food citizenship, link consumption with political participation and sustainability (Bindi & Belliggiano, 2023; Parvatiyar & Sheth, 2023). Education and policy can further reinforce these choices without constraining personal freedom (Simões, 2013).

The CA also emphasizes well-being beyond material wealth. Social relationships, autonomy, and community engagement shape life satisfaction more than income alone (Frey, 2018). Alternative measures, Ecological Economics, Quality of Life indices, WELLBY, and Bhutan's Gross National Happiness, capture these multidimensional aspects, integrating ecological, social, and subjective factors (Panbangred, 2023; Cooper et al., 2023). Social determinants, including fairness, generosity, and positive connections, are crucial for sustainable well-being and inform welfare policy design (Barrington-Leigh et al., 2019; Helliwell & Helliwell, 2019). These perspectives align with degrowth literature that calls for shifting societal definitions of well-being away from material accumulation toward needs-based and eudaimonic conceptions of human flourishing (Kongshøj, 2023), reinforcing CA's compatibility with post-growth welfare models. The CA approach offers a human-centered, multidimensional framework linking freedom, justice, and well-being, making it especially relevant for analyzing welfare systems that aim to promote responsible consumption and ecological sustainability within social policy frameworks.

Towards Responsible Welfare Systems

SDG 12, focusing on responsible consumption and production, aims to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation, advancing sustainable development in line with welfare economics principles (Amos & Lydgate, 2020). Its core objective,, achieving more with fewer resources, emphasizes reducing ecological pressures while enhancing quality of life, aligning with foundational welfare goals (Castellano et al., 2024). Integrating SDG 12 into welfare systems, however, requires a coherent theoretical synthesis. The proposed Responsible Welfare Systems (RWS) framework brings together three strands: SDG 12, Sustainable Welfare Theory, and the Capability Approach, each offering a distinct analytical perspective.

SDG 12 provides the macro-level mandate for transitioning economies toward responsible consumption and production through global targets emphasizing ecological sustainability. Sustainable Welfare Theory complements this by highlighting the institutional role of welfare states, advocating for redesigning taxation, redistribution, and support structures to avoid reinforcing environmentally harmful, growth-dependent models. The Capability Approach adds a human development lens, evaluating welfare in terms of individuals' real freedoms and opportunities to lead meaningful lives, thereby emphasizing sufficiency, equity, and agency over material expansion.

The RWS model positions SDG 12 as the "direction of travel," Sustainable Welfare Theory as the "institutional mechanism," and the Capability Approach as the "evaluation and justice framework." Together, they provide a coherent foundation for analyzing how welfare systems can promote ecological responsibility while safeguarding human well-being. This synthesis also clarifies why current welfare structures face trade-offs: policies encouraging sustainable practices may constrain

short-term benefits or challenge established political expectations (Neve & Sachs, 2020). RWS reframes these tensions as design challenges, emphasizing transparent governance, equitable redistribution, and investment in capabilities rather than consumption.

A systems-oriented approach is essential, recognizing synergies among interconnected SDGs, particularly SDG 12, SDG 7 (clean energy), and SDG 13 (climate action), to support inclusive wealth accumulation and long-term welfare outcomes (Barbier & Burgess, 2017; Raman et al., 2024; Sugiawan et al., 2023). Effective implementation also requires multilevel governance, reconciling environmental imperatives with social welfare objectives to enhance policy legitimacy and delivery (Amos & Lydgate, 2020). Regional welfare frameworks increasingly see welfare not merely as an outcome of development but as a catalyst for it (Shlyapina & Tretyakova, 2025). By articulating the conceptual linkage between SDG 12 (policy goals), Sustainable Welfare Theory (institutional pathways), and the Capability Approach (human well-being evaluation), the RWS model establishes a robust theoretical basis for aligning redistributive mechanisms with ecological sustainability and intergenerational equity.

Research Design and Methodology

Research Design

The study adopts a qualitative comparative policy analysis. The focus is on analysing welfare systems, policy documents, and institutional strategies to understand how social policy and sustainability intersect. By combining conceptual analysis with illustrative case studies, the study seeks to develop a forward-looking theoretical and policy framework for what may be termed *"responsible welfare systems."* Conceptual analysis here refers to a structured examination of secondary sources to identify patterns, thematic linkages, and institutional approaches rather than numerical measurement. It draws on both the content and framing of policy and sustainability documents, considering how different organizations (e.g., UN, WB, national governments) prioritize welfare and environmental objectives.

Data Sources

The study relies exclusively on secondary data drawn from credible international and national sources, appropriate for its conceptual and comparative focus (Young & Ryu, 2000; Yanow, 2007). It includes global and national sources selected to reflect both welfare- and sustainability-oriented mandates.

Global datasets include United Nations SDG Progress Reports (2016–2024), UNEP publications on SDG 12 (2017, 2021, 2022, 2024), OECD sustainability metrics (2020), and World Bank SDG 12 sustainability reports (2018, 2022). The UN datasets and UNEP reports adopt a normative, goal-oriented framing emphasizing SDG targets, alignment with international norms, and social inclusion aspects, whereas World Bank reports adopt a development-centric framing, emphasizing economic efficiency, poverty reduction, and country-level implementation trade-offs.

National datasets include EU Circular Economy Action Plan (2020–2025), Canada Federal Sustainable Development Strategy (2022–2024), India Waste-to-Wealth Mission & Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (2024–2025), and South Korea food waste reduction & recycling policy reports (2017–2025). These were selected to illustrate diverse welfare and sustainability trajectories and enable cross-case comparisons of policy integration and social outcomes.

Table 1 Summary of Secondary Sources

Level	Source	Years	Focus
Global datasets	UN SDG Progress Reports	2016–2024	Global tracking of SDG progress
	UNEP SDG 12 Publications	2017, 2021, 2022, 2024	Sustainable consumption & production
	OECD Sustainability Report	2020	Policy and economic sustainability metrics
	World Bank SDG 12 Sustainability Reports	2018, 2022	Development-focused sustainability analysis
National datasets	EU *Circular Economy Action Plan* + supporting reports	2020–2025	Circular economy, waste management
	Canada *Federal Sustainable Development Strategy*	2022–2024	National SDG implementation framework
	India *Waste-to-Wealth Mission* & *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan*	2024–2025	Waste management, urban policy
	South Korea food waste reduction & recycling policy reports	2017–2025	Waste innovation and recycling

To illustrate diverse welfare and sustainability trajectories, the study purposely selected four cases: the European Union, Canada, India, and South Korea. These cases were chosen to capture variation across levels of economic development, governance structures, and welfare models (Weimer & Vining, 2017; Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). The European Union represents advanced welfare systems that are pioneers in circular economy legislation; Canada offers the example of a high-income welfare state with evolving sustainability initiatives; India illustrates the tensions between rapid development and sustainability imperatives in an emerging economy; and South Korea demonstrates a technologically advanced welfare state with innovative approaches to waste management. The theoretical sampling does not aim for statistical generalization but instead allows for a nuanced understanding of how different welfare contexts engage with SDG 12.

Data Analysis

The analysis employed a thematic document analysis of policy texts, sustainability strategies, and related literature (Rihoux & Lobe, 2009). Initially, all policy texts and reports were read in full to gain a comprehensive understanding of the content and context. Relevant excerpts related to SDG 12 and social policy were then highlighted and coded using a combination of deductive codes (pre-defined categories such as policy integration, welfare outcomes, sustainability trade-offs) and inductive codes that emerged directly from the data, capturing context-specific nuances (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Codes were iteratively reviewed to consolidate overlaps, ensuring consistency and reliability. Themes were then grouped into conceptual categories illustrating how welfare systems either reinforce unsustainable practices or promote responsible consumption and production. This step explicitly connects policies to welfare system characteristics without merely describing initiatives, enabling analytical insights into governance capacity, inclusion, and trade-offs. The approach ensured analytical rigor by combining cross-case comparisons with critical interpretation of institutional framing, rather than merely cataloguing initiatives (Proudfoot, 2022; Sylvester, 2024). Reflexivity was maintained by interrogating aspirational narratives against implementation realities. The study ensured

reliability and validity through the careful selection and systematic analysis of secondary data. Only authoritative sources, such as UN agencies, OECD, World Bank, and official government policy documents were included (Weimer & Vining, 2017), supplemented by peer-reviewed literature to triangulate theoretical and policy insights. Thematic document analysis combined deductive coding, based on pre-identified themes of welfare integration and sustainability trade-offs, with inductive coding that allowed new categories to emerge (Olabode et al., 2018). This approach balanced consistency with sensitivity to context. Cross-case comparisons emphasized patterns and contrasts rather than causal claims, reducing the risk of overgeneralization (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). Reflexivity was maintained by critically interrogating the aspirational framing of official documents against implementation realities.

Limitations

As a conceptual and document-based study, the analysis is limited by reliance on secondary data and official policy reporting, which may emphasize aspirations rather than outcomes. However, this approach remains appropriate for the paper's aim of developing a theoretical and policy framework, and it provides a foundation for future empirical studies that can assess the lived impacts of responsible consumption and production policies on welfare systems.

Findings and Analysis

Foundational Disconnect: Why Welfare Systems Struggle with SDG 12

The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2024 shows that only 17% of SDG targets are on track globally, with nearly half showing minimal or moderate progress and over a third stalled or regressing. Setbacks are driven by systemic shocks, pandemics, conflicts, geopolitical tensions, and climate emergencies, creating a policy dilemma: urgent social protection needs often overshadow long-term sustainability priorities. Persistent unsustainable consumption exacerbates this issue. The global economy remains only 8.6% circular, and even welfare-strong regions like the EU exceed global average material footprints, highlighting a fundamental tension between traditional growth models and ecological limits.

Traditional welfare states, designed to address industrial-era social risks through production, consumption, and redistribution, now contribute directly to ecological degradation, threatening future well-being. The OECD Environmental Outlook to 2050 warns that a quadrupling of global GDP by 2050 could increase greenhouse gas emissions by 50% and create severe water shortages for 3.9 billion people. A world economy four times larger would still rely on fossil fuels for 85% of energy, demonstrating that growth-focused welfare systems externalize environmental costs, undermining long-term citizen welfare. 21st-century welfare systems face unprecedented risks: climate-induced food and water insecurity, increased disease burdens, and climate migration. Environmental injustice compounds these risks, as high-consumption populations in the Global North impose ecological and social costs on marginalized groups, exemplified by e-waste management. SDG 12 thus represents both an environmental and social justice imperative, linking responsible consumption with global equity.

International Policy Case Studies

1. The European Union

The European Union's approach to SDG 12 is a comprehensive, top-down legislative framework stemming from the European Green Deal. The Circular Economy Action Plan (CEAP, European Commission, 2020, 2025), adopted in March 2020, is a cornerstone of this strategy.4 Its goal is to *"make sustainable products the norm"* by addressing the entire life cycle of products, from how

they are designed to how waste is prevented and resources are reused. This a fundamental shift from simply managing waste at the end-of-life stage to re-engineering the entire economic system. Key legislative measures include the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESPR) and the Right-to-Repair Directive (European Environment Agency, 2023), both effective from 2024. These initiatives aim to transform market dynamics and empower consumers, aligning consumption with ecological goals (UNEP, 2017; 2021; 2022). The *"Right to Repair"* directive directly challenges the linear "*take-make-dispose"* model by extending product lifespans. By empowering consumers with better information at the point of sale and providing legally enforceable rights to repair goods, the EU is attempting to change market dynamics and producer behavior. It is a top-down, systemic strategy to influence consumption without necessarily altering consumer purchasing power or lifestyle choices in the short term. The administrative and regulatory capacity to combine these ecological interventions with social protections is provided by the EU's high-income, institutionalized welfare system. Policies that demonstrate how environmental goals are integrated into more general social objectives include eco-conditional subsidies, sustainable public procurement, and inclusive green job initiatives. These initiatives boost economic possibilities, labour inclusion, equity, and sustainability outcomes by focusing on the full product lifetime and encouraging public participation.

Table 2 Comparative Case Overview

Region	Primary Policy Mechanism	Key Instruments	Focus Area	Technology Role	Social/Equity Linkage
EU	Legislative/Regulatory	Circular Economy Action Plan, Right to Repair Directive	Full product life cycle	Enabler for design, tracking, information	Consumer empowerment, inclusive green jobs
South Korea	Incentive-based/Technological	Weight-Based Food Waste Fee, Pay-as-you-throw	Food waste reduction, recycling	RFID tracking and billing	Behavioral change, cultural shift
India	Campaign/Governance	Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Waste-to-Wealth Mission	Urban/rural sanitation	Specialized excavators	Livelihood creation, citizen dignity
Canada	Decentralized/Framework-based	Federal Sustainable Development Strategy	Cross-cutting sustainability	Data management, fleet electrification	Indigenous reconciliation, social inclusion

2. South Korea

South Korea is widely considered a global leader in waste management. Over the past three decades, the nation has achieved a food waste recycling rate that has risen from a minimal 2% to an astonishing 97-98%. The remarkable success is not due to a single policy but is the synergistic effect of a policy evolution that linked economic incentives, technological innovation, and public education. The country's Weight-Based Food Waste Fee (WBFWF) system and "pay-as-you-throw" principle are supported by advanced RFID technologies, which track household waste and calculate fees accurately (Choi & Hong, 2019; UNDP Seoul Policy Centre, 2017). The core of this model is the *"pay-as-you-*

throw" principle, which provides a direct economic incentive for citizens to reduce the amount of waste they generate. The system is made precise and fair through the use of technology, such as RFID-equipped smart bins, that tracks and bills households based on the weight of their disposed food waste. The approach proved highly effective. Initial concerns about illegal dumping were largely overcome, and the system resulted in a significant reduction in overall waste generation and a massive spike in recycling. The success stems from a self-reinforcing system of behavioral change. The economic incentive created a strong motivation for citizens to reduce waste (Bassi & Guidolin, 2021). The RFID technology made this system transparent and reliable, building public trust. The revenue generated from the fees helped fund the recycling infrastructure, which then transformed the waste into valuable products like biogas, fertilizer, and animal feed, effectively closing the waste loop. The design of these programs leverages municipal capacity to connect environmental outcomes with social participation. By aligning household incentives with public service delivery, the policies create a self-reinforcing cycle of ecological and social benefits, supporting behavioral change, trust in local governance, and community engagement. These outcomes demonstrate how robust municipal services in a technologically advanced welfare state can integrate sustainability with everyday social welfare, ensuring that environmental programs also contribute to citizen well-being and equitable participation.

3. India

India's Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) and the "Waste-to-Wealth" Mission represent a massive, government-led effort to tackle sanitation and waste management on a national scale. The mission, which has received strong political sponsorship, aims to make "sanitation and hygiene" an intrinsic part of citizens' values". Significant progress has been made, with solid and liquid waste management systems established in hundreds of thousands of villages, and a competitive tool known as the "*Swachh Survekshan"* awards used to drive performance and peer learning among cities. However, a critical analysis of the program reveals a significant challenge: achieving genuine, sustained outcomes versus simply meeting measurable output targets (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2024, 2025).

The mission has been criticized for its "target-driven approach" which prioritized toilet construction and diverted funds from solid waste management. The data indicates that, in the haste to meet construction targets, underlying systemic issues were not addressed, such as a lack of focus on behavioral change at the grassroots level and the use of inappropriate containment systems in flood-prone areas. The shift toward initiatives like the "*Swachh City Partnership*[2]*"* to mentor underperforming cities suggests a recognition of this problem. These initiatives show how welfare interventions in emerging economies combine infrastructure provision with behavioral change and citizen engagement. The programs not only improve physical sanitation but also generate livelihoods through emerging green jobs and community participation. While challenges remain in integrating sustainability criteria fully into social transfers, these policies demonstrate the potential of adaptive welfare strategies to address ecological, economic, and social needs simultaneously, reflecting the evolving nature of India's welfare state in linking social protection and environmental sustainability.

4. Canada

Canada's Federal Sustainable Development Strategy (FSDS) provides a framework for multi-level governance, with the federal government outlining goals while relying on provincial and local governments to drive implementation. The approach is notable for its explicit integration of social

[2] Swachh Shehar Jodi ("Clean City Pair") is a national mentorship program launched in September 2025 by India's Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs under the Swachh Bharat Mission-Urban. It pairs 72 top-performing (mentor) cities, chosen based on Swachh Survekshan cleanliness rankings, with 200 lower-ranked (mentee) cities. During a 100-day pilot, mentor-mentee pairs create joint action plans to improve waste management, sanitation governance, citizen engagement, and visible cleanliness.

justice concerns, particularly its commitment to *"reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples"* and its focus on reducing inequality. Key initiatives related to SDG 12 include a national Zero Plastic Waste strategy and targets for zero-emission vehicles (Environment and Climate Change Canada, 2022; Government of Canada, 2024). The FSDS's explicit inclusion of Indigenous reconciliation is a unique aspect of its framework. It suggests a recognition that environmental degradation disproportionately affects marginalized groups and that long-term sustainability requires addressing historical inequities (Raman et al., 2024). However, the decentralized approach can also lead to policy gaps. Despite the significant impact of household consumption, SDG 12 is noted as "*one of the least funded goals in Canada,"* receiving only a fraction of foundational funding compared to other areas. Indicating that while a decentralized framework can empower local action and integrate complex social goals, it may also lack the centralized mandate and funding to drive transformative change on a national scale (UNEP, 2024; World Bank, 2022).

Table 3 Comparative Analysis of SDG 12 Integration

Region	Welfare System Characteristics	SDG 12 Integration	Key Strengths	Key Gaps
European Union	Advanced welfare states, high-income, strong governance	Circular economy frameworks, eco-conditional subsidies, sustainability reporting	Comprehensive policy frameworks, institutionalized circular economy	High consumption levels; transboundary impacts often overlooked; gaps in social equity outcomes
Canada	High-income, decentralized federal system	Integration of sustainability criteria in federal programs; green job initiatives	Innovative public procurement; citizen engagement	Limited coverage in social transfers; inconsistent monitoring of SDG 12 in welfare programs
India	Emerging economy, diverse welfare interventions	Waste-to-Wealth, Swachh Bharat programs; urban sanitation focus	Community participation; emerging green jobs	Short-term relief focus; limited inclusion of sustainability criteria in social transfers; inequities in access
South Korea	Technologically advanced welfare state	Food waste reduction policies, municipal recycling initiatives	Strong local governance; technology-enabled solutions	Inequality in access to sustainable consumption options; welfare programs not fully eco-conditional

Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Technology and Innovation as Policy Enablers

The analysis reveals that technology and innovation function as critical enablers in aligning welfare objectives with ecological goals. Across the regions, technological solutions, ranging from South Korea's RFID-equipped smart bins to India's specialized amphibious excavators, demonstrate how innovation can bridge gaps between policy intent and citizen behavior. These interventions highlight that technology is not merely a tool for operational efficiency; it actively shapes participation, accountability, and equity outcomes. By enabling transparent monitoring and incentivizing pro-

environmental behavior, technology transforms traditional welfare mechanisms into instruments capable of simultaneously delivering social protection and ecological impact.

Theme 2: Behavioral Transformation versus Top-Down Mandates

A second theme emphasizes the importance of behavioral transformation over top-down mandates. The EU's legislative approach exemplifies systemic regulation aimed at reshaping market dynamics at the macro level, yet its success in achieving sustainability outcomes is tempered by persistent overconsumption patterns. In contrast, South Korea's incentive-based model illustrates the effectiveness of creating conditions where sustainable behavior aligns with personal and cultural motivations. India's experience reinforces the limitations of infrastructure-heavy, output-focused interventions: despite high levels of investment and political commitment, the absence of strong behavioral engagement at the grassroots level constrained long-term impact. This indicates that welfare systems must be designed to integrate social norms and cultural incentives, making sustainable choices the path of least resistance.

Theme 3: Linking Ecology and Equity

A recurring finding is that sustainability and social equity are inseparable in the design of responsible welfare systems. High-consumption populations, predominantly in high-income countries, often diverge the ecological costs of their behavior onto marginalized communities both domestically and globally, as evident in the increasing e-waste exported from the Global North to regions with limited waste management infrastructure. Canada's Federal Sustainable Development Strategy demonstrates a deliberate integration of social justice, explicitly linking environmental policies with Indigenous reconciliation and the protection of vulnerable populations. The localized programs in India and South Korea show that welfare interventions can provide both ecological benefits and social inclusion when designed thoughtfully. The analysis highlights that without explicitly incorporating equity considerations, welfare systems risk perpetuating environmental injustice and undermining the social legitimacy of sustainability policies, emphasizing that ecological responsibility must be operationalized alongside measures of fairness and inclusivity.

Theme 4: Policy Gaps in Current Welfare Models

Despite notable innovations, the analysis identifies persistent gaps in the alignment of welfare systems with SDG 12 objectives. Existing subsidies and social transfers frequently incentivize environmentally harmful behaviors; for instance, fertilizer subsidies (specifically for Urea) and state-level free electricity for irrigation have driven soil degradation and severe groundwater depletion (Gulati & Juneja, 2022), while India's Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) subsidizes fossil-fuel-based LPG consumption rather than incentivizing renewable cooking alternatives (Aggarwal et al., 2022). Furthermore, many programs remain focused on short-term relief without embedding sustainability criteria: the Public Distribution System (PDS) ensures food security but entrenches a preference for water-intensive rice and wheat over climate-resilient millets (Pingali et al., 2019); India's Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) addresses housing poverty using high-carbon materials without mandatory green building codes (Khosla & Sheth, 2018); and the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) has historically prioritized rapid toilet construction for immediate sanitation needs over long-term, sustainable wastewater management mechanisms (Hueso & Bell, 2013). The EU and Canada illustrate how monitoring and reporting mechanisms can support policy coherence, but challenges remain in consistently linking welfare provision to responsible consumption outcomes. In South Korea, local successes in food waste reduction are not consistently mirrored in broader social welfare measures, demonstrating the difficulty of scaling effective innovations across systemic structures. These gaps underline the systemic disconnect between traditional welfare objectives and contemporary ecological

imperatives, signalling the need for integrated policies that consider environmental, social, and economic dimensions simultaneously.

Theme 5: Innovations Linking SDG 12 and Welfare

The study highlights several practical approaches where social welfare and ecological sustainability intersect successfully. Circular economy policies in the EU create inclusive green jobs, aligning social and environmental objectives while fostering economic opportunity. Canada's federal programs leverage sustainable public procurement to encourage local sourcing and reduce environmental impacts, simultaneously promoting social benefits. In emerging economies, community-driven initiatives such as Repair Café Bengaluru / the Repair Café Collective India (organized by a network of volunteers offering repair workshops) and the Korean Packaging Recycling Cooperatives (industry-based cooperatives that help municipalities meet recycling targets) illustrate how localized innovations can integrate social inclusion with environmental goals. While high-income countries benefit from robust institutional support and monitoring capacity, emerging economies demonstrate the potential of adaptable, context-specific interventions, despite the persistent challenge of scaling these innovations. These findings suggest that embedding sustainability principles into the design, funding, and governance of welfare programs can provide a roadmap for developing responsible welfare systems that deliver ecological and social co-benefits.

A Conceptual Framework for "Responsible Welfare Systems"

The limitations of the traditional, growth-centric welfare state underscore the need for a fundamental conceptual shift. Scholars increasingly advocate moving beyond conventional social policy toward an **"ecosocial"** framework, which seeks to reconcile human well-being with ecological sustainability. At its core, this approach emphasizes the decoupling of welfare outcomes from economic expansion, while simultaneously addressing the emergent risks posed by climate change, resource scarcity, and environmental degradation, challenges that conventional welfare systems are ill-equipped to confront. Rather than reacting to the historical social vulnerabilities of industrialization, such as poverty and unemployment, this paradigm adopts a proactive stance, anticipating and mitigating the intertwined social and ecological crises of the twenty-first century. Achieving this not only requires incremental adjustments but a system-wide transformation of prevailing economic and policy models, embedding sustainability, equity, and resilience as central objectives of social protection.

Core Principles of a Responsible Welfare System

Drawing on the analysis, a "Responsible Welfare System" must be built on the following core principles:

1. Equity: The system must address both social and environmental equity. The principle encompasses the need for "recognition, redistribution, and parity of participation" to address issues of injustice and ensure fair burdens and benefits. Canada's explicit link to Indigenous reconciliation is an example of how this can be operationalized.

2. Ecological Responsibility: Grounded in the principle of "Eco-Prosumption," meaning both production and consumption must be socially and environmentally responsible. It requires a move toward circularity and away from the linear economic model. The EU's "Right to Repair" is a perfect policy mechanism for this principle, as it extends product lifespans and empowers consumers.

3. Resilience and Safety: The system must build resilience to "new risks" like climate shocks, food insecurity, and resource depletion. It means moving beyond traditional social safety nets to include climate adaptation and resource security. India's efforts to create waste management systems in villages, for example, contribute to this principle by improving public health and safety.

4. Behavioral Transformation: Policy must be designed to foster a cultural shift, as seen in South Korea's success. This involves leveraging incentives and technology to change consumption patterns and align individual self-interest behaviours with collective sustainability goals.

5. Multi-level and Multi-Stakeholder Governance: Acknowledging that action must occur at local, national, and international levels, involving governments, businesses, and civil society, as seen in the Canadian and EU examples.

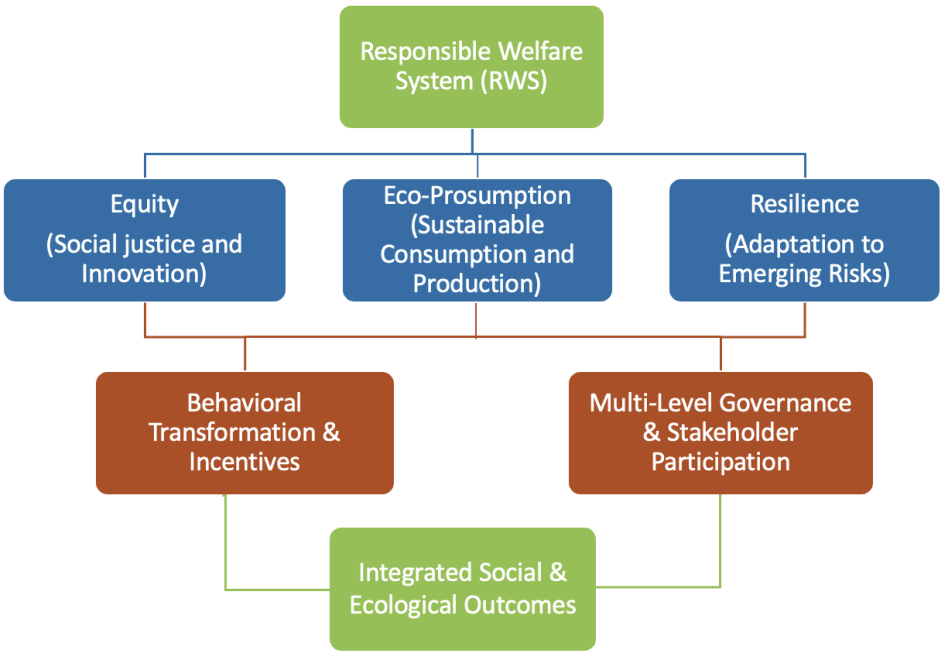
Table 4 Core Principles

Principle	Social Dimension	Ecological Dimension	Policy Examples
Equity	Protects vulnerable groups, ensures parity of participation	Fair resource access, environmental burden distribution	Canada's Indigenous reconciliation; India's sanitation worker programs
Eco-Prosumption	Informs consumer choice, extends product lifespans	Promotes circular economy, reduces waste	EU Right to Repair; South Korea pay-as-you-throw
Resilience	Protects against climate shocks, ensures food/water security	Prevents resource depletion	India's rural waste management initiatives
Behavioral Transformation	Incentivizes responsible consumption	Reduces ecological footprint	South Korea WBFWF system
Multi-Level Governance	Involves local, national, international actors	Enables coherent ecological interventions	EU CEAP, Canada FSDS

The Linkage Model: Interdependence of Social Protection and Ecological Sustainability

A central insight from the thematic and comparative analysis is that social protection and ecological sustainability are mutually reinforcing rather than competing objectives. Social programs can bolster ecological goals by enabling just transitions for workers in carbon-intensive sectors, supporting education and skill development for green jobs, and funding inclusive green infrastructure. Conversely, ecological policies can generate social benefits by creating livelihoods through circular economy initiatives, reducing environmental hazards, and enhancing community well-being. The integration of social and ecological objectives ensures that welfare systems are both sustainable and socially just, avoiding the pitfalls of traditional models that offset environmental costs onto marginalized populations.

Figure 1 Linkage Model



The Responsible Welfare Systems framework can be operationalized through several key mechanisms:

- **Eco-conditional social transfers:** Welfare benefits and subsidies can be linked to environmentally responsible practices, incentivizing sustainable consumption.
- **Integration of SDG 12 indicators in monitoring:** Welfare systems should track ecological and social outcomes concurrently, ensuring policies are aligned with long-term sustainability goals.
- **Inclusive green jobs and community initiatives:** Public investments in circular economy programs, repair cafés, and recycling cooperatives can simultaneously address unemployment, social inclusion, and environmental objectives.
- **Multi-level governance and stakeholder participation:** Coordinated action across government, private sector, and civil society ensures accountability, responsiveness, and scalability of responsible welfare programs.

Theoretical and Policy Implications

Theoretical Implications

The findings of the study contribute to the advancement of sustainable welfare theory by extending it toward the concept of *"responsible welfare systems."* Traditional welfare frameworks have largely emphasized redistribution and poverty alleviation, often within a growth-first paradigm. However, the case studies and cross-cutting analysis highlight the need to reframe welfare as a multidimensional construct that simultaneously addresses social equity, ecological responsibility, and long-term sustainability. It requires integrating the Capability Approach with intergenerational justice, emphasizing not only what individuals can achieve today but also the preservation of environmental and social assets for future generations.

The evidence shows the importance of behavioral dimensions in welfare outcomes. Incentive structures, cultural norms, and social expectations significantly shape the effectiveness of welfare

interventions, suggesting that theoretical models must incorporate insights from behavioral economics. The study highlights the centrality of multi-level governance, as responsible welfare systems operate across local, national, and global scales, demanding institutional coordination and policy coherence. Technology emerges as a critical mediator of welfare capabilities, demonstrating that innovations in monitoring, feedback, and service delivery can enhance both social equity and ecological outcomes. Incorporating these insights theoretically expands welfare frameworks beyond conventional metrics, positioning them as dynamic systems capable of responding to complex socio-ecological challenges.

Policy Implications

The findings suggest that welfare programs can be designed to include eco-conditional transfers, linking subsidies and social benefits to environmentally responsible behaviors, thereby incentivizing sustainable consumption and production. Aligning welfare policies with green jobs and skills development programs can simultaneously address social protection and promote inclusive, low-carbon livelihoods, enhancing resilience and long-term economic security. Integrating SDG 12 indicators into welfare monitoring and evaluation frameworks allows policymakers to track both ecological and social outcomes, facilitating evidence-based adjustments and adaptive governance. Drawing on the thematic analysis of case studies and policy documents, the study demonstrates how welfare systems in diverse contexts, such as the EU, Canada, India, and South Korea, have experimented with linking social programs to environmental objectives, thereby providing concrete examples of eco-social integration. Achieving policy coherence across social protection, economic development, and environmental sustainability ensures that interventions are mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory, reducing trade-offs between short-term relief and long-term ecological goals. Welfare systems should prioritize resilience-oriented design, incorporating measures for climate adaptation, disaster preparedness, and resource security to safeguard vulnerable populations. Leveraging participatory mechanisms and technological innovations, such as real-time data systems and citizen engagement platforms, can enhance transparency, improve policy targeting, and foster behavioral shifts toward sustainability. The welfare systems can be reimagined to integrate ecological responsibility, moving beyond conventional social protection toward frameworks that support both human well-being and environmental sustainability.

Conclusion

The study has examined how welfare systems can be reimagined to integrate ecological responsibility, advancing the concept of a responsible welfare system that simultaneously addresses social protection, sustainability, and equity. The analysis demonstrates the persistent tension between traditional growth-oriented welfare models and the imperatives of sustainable development under SDG 12. The findings highlight several critical insights. Technological innovation emerges as a key enabler, facilitating transparency, efficiency, and behavior change. Cultural and behavioral shifts remain central to achieving lasting impact, illustrating that policy effectiveness goes beyond infrastructure or regulation. Equally important, social welfare must explicitly account for ecological justice, ensuring fairness and inclusivity while avoiding the externalization of environmental costs onto vulnerable populations. Data limitations and the lack of integrated monitoring systems continue to constrain policy design, emphasizing the need for comprehensive frameworks that track both social and environmental outcomes in real time. The proposed linkage model provides a conceptual foundation for harmonizing social protection with ecological sustainability, offering a pathway to transform welfare systems beyond incremental reforms.

The study also identifies several avenues for future research. Empirical studies could evaluate the effectiveness of eco-conditional social transfers and other responsible welfare interventions across different socio-economic contexts. Research could examine the sustained behavioral and ecological impacts of integrated welfare-sustainability initiatives, particularly in emerging economies. Further investigation into the role of digital tools and technological systems in enabling adaptive, real-time governance could strengthen policy design. Comparative research on the intersection of welfare, sustainability, and intergenerational equity would refine theoretical frameworks and policy recommendations. A participatory approach involving communities, policymakers, and private stakeholders could illuminate practical strategies for implementing context-sensitive and scalable responsible welfare models.

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Reimagining Gender Justice at Workplace: The Case for Period Leave Policy in India

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Abstract

Gender justice for working women calls for recognition and supportive mechanisms anchored in their menstrual health needs. However, there is a lack of policy initiatives to accommodate the diverse bodily needs of working women during menstruation, who strive to perform their obligations. This study aims to outline Indian employers' perspectives on menstrual health and period leave policy. The paper highlights a pertinent gender justice issue in the workplace which is not adequately addressed by the labour laws in India.

The study adopts a qualitative approach to understand organisational perspectives on period leave policies in India. This cross-sectional exploratory study was conducted with 102 sample units, and the research locale is India. Content analysis and descriptive statistics were used to summarise and draw generalisations from the data. Additionally, a chi-square test was performed using SPSS 20 to examine associations between categorical variables.

The findings reveal that while organisations acknowledge the psychological and physiological impacts of menstruation, negative societal attitudes continue to hinder the adequate integration of period leave into employee welfare approaches. Although period leave policies are seen as beneficial—enhancing women-friendly workplace, enabling women to manage menstrual discomfort, improving performance, and fostering workplace inclusivity—resistant views persist. These include concerns of potential misuse of leave and perceived imbalance to gender equality. The paper presents important implications for labour laws concerning the menstrual health of women employees.

Keywords: Period leave, Menstrual health, Gender equality at workplace, Breaking menstrual taboos

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Introduction

Women have historically encountered significant challenges in their pursuit of equality in both personal and professional spheres. Their deference to male perspectives within social and economic contexts has consistently undermined their bargaining power in both private and public spheres. Women have traditionally been steered away from remunerative employment, in alignment with societal expectations of their roles as caregivers and homemakers, while remaining subordinate to men. This is evident from the reports on the female labour force participation rate (FLPR), which reveals that fewer women, in comparison to men, are participating in the labour force (Ali et al., 2023). In 2017, it was recorded at 23%, approximately one-third of men's participation. According to the Press and Information Bureau (PIB), this figure increased to 37% in 2024, indicating a modest improvement in FLPR (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2023).

The Global Gender Gap Index reveals a concerning depiction of the global gender gap score, indicating only a slight improvement of 0.01% in 2023, reaching 68.5 in 2024 (Pal et al., 2024). The Gender Gap Index evaluates the progress of nations in bridging the gender gap across sectors such as employment, education, political empowerment, and economic participation. No country has yet achieved complete closure of the gender gap, raising significant questions for nations where women have been accorded equal civil rights for a prolonged period of time. India ranks 128th out of 146 countries, positioned fifth among its South Asian neighbours, following Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan (Pal et al., 2024). Menstrual health is pivotal to women's empowerment and development and must be prioritised within specific policy areas, given its multi-sectoral implications.

Global context of Period Leave Policies

Women in South Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa contribute to less than one-third of total work participation compared to their counterparts in Sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia. Indian women are primarily engaged in non-SNA (System of National Accounts) and extended SNA duties (Verick & Chaudhary, 2014) which is not accounted as having any economic worth. Achieving equal representation of women in labor force participation is feasible only when they can engage in decent work that aligns with their strengths and abilities. Women's participation in the labor market can potentially be improved by addressing challenges posed by various factors, such as the availability of suitable work, working conditions, wage parity, employment security, gender discrimination in the workplace, and recognising their menstrual health needs. It is apparent that employed women often neglect their own well-being in their efforts to address challenges, with the aim of maintaining their positions within the formal economy.

Countries such as Japan and Indonesia implemented menstrual leave policies as early as the 1940s, while South Korea, Taiwan, and Zambia adopted similar measures in 2001, 2013, and 2015, respectively (Agarwal, 2024). Asian countries are significantly ahead of their Western counterparts, where period leave policies were only introduced in 2024 in Spain, as a result of protests from various sectors, including labor organisations such as UGT (Unión General de Trabajadores), which expressed concerns that such policies might restrict employment opportunities for women (Feed, 2023). In India, Bihar is the first state which offered menstrual leave to working women in the government sector starting in 1992, the Orissa government announced similar leaves for women in both the government and private sectors in 2024 and the Kerala government extended menstrual leave to all females in universities and institutions as of 2023. These measures are significant initiatives which need to be replicated across the entire country. In light of these significant steps, this study aims to assess the

organisational environment through the following research questions-1. What do organisations in India understand about the menstrual health needs of women employees? 2. What initiatives are currently led by the organisation for improving the menstrual health of women employees? 3. What are the probable benefits and challenges that organisations anticipate in implementing period leave policy? The broader purpose of the research is to provide policymakers with insights into organisational preparedness for introducing this welfare measure, considering the perceived advantages and limitations. The results are expected to support the practical and effective implementation of period leave as an employee welfare initiative, rooted in a gender justice approach.

MHHM for gender justice for working women

The onset of menstruation is accompanied by feelings of fear, confusion, and insecurity. Menstruation is fundamentally a biological process; the National Cancer Institute defines it as "the normal monthly shedding of blood and tissue from the lining of the uterus (womb) when pregnancy does not occur. During menstruation, menstrual blood and tissue flow from the uterus through the cervix and pass out of the body through the vagina. Menstruation usually occurs approximately every 28 days (except during pregnancy) and lasts 3 to 5 days, but this can vary from person to person. It normally starts during puberty and ends at menopause. Also called menses and menstrual period" (*NCI Dictionary of Cancer Terms*, n.d.). While this definition is significant from a physiological health perspective, it does not embrace the other two dimensions - psychological and social. Menstruation signifies the onset of puberty in females and indicates that the body is physiologically capable of childbearing. Menstrual health is defined as 'a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in relation to the menstrual cycle. This definition is applicable to all menstruators, including those with disabilities' (Hennegan et al., 2020).

Menstrual health and hygiene management (MHHM) encompasses the availability of hygienic menstrual tools, infrastructure such as washrooms with water and cleaning facilities, knowledge of healthy practices, and medical care for specific menstrual health needs. MHHM is vital for women of all age groups; however, a selective approach has been applied to it. Adolescent girls have been prioritised in MHHM through efforts to ensure their ongoing access to education, health, and hygiene. In contrast, the menstrual health of adult women receives insufficient attention from the state and development agencies, which prioritise sexual and reproductive health, as opposed to menstrual health. This fragmented application by policymakers and agencies further marginalises menstrual health issues of women, and ostracizes those that may not fall within these categories. According to UNFPA (2022), the discrimination and exclusion faced by women during menstruation constitutes a critical human rights concern, as it jeopardizes women's rights through exclusion, shame, stigma, and deprivation. The taboos and stigma associated with menstruation hinder women from fully enjoying universal human rights, compelling them to compromise their rights to life, health, dignity, work, and equality. The inalienable and interdependent nature of human rights implies that the violation of one right can adversely affect others. The act of overlooking the important aspects related to MHHM significantly impacts the quality of life for women across all age groups. Period poverty directly affects menstruating women's experiences, particularly in terms of pain and hygiene management (UNFPA, 2022). Additionally, menstrual hygiene practices are crucial in preventing menstrual and gynaecological morbidities (Parasuraman & Das, 2022). Menstrual health has a multi-sectorial impact on women, intersecting with sectors such as health, education, and employment.

Menstrual Health and SDG

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, and 13 are directly relevant to menstruation. Promoting menstrual health to enhance women's overall health and well-being is central to SDG 3, while the issue of girls discontinuing education due to menstruation can be effectively addressed through SDG 4. Menstruation, as a gender issue, often leads to discrimination and inequality, contrary to the objectives of SDG 5; thus, societal taboos and discriminatory practices must be addressed to foster gender equality. Working women face impediments in exercising their right to health due to an unsupportive social environment, leading them to neglect their menstrual needs and endure pain and discomfort in order to meaningfully contribute to society. Additionally, menstrual health and hygiene are largely contingent upon the availability of water and sanitation facilities, making SDG 6 a crucial determinant of menstrual health. The availability of sanitary products and private spaces for their use is integral to menstrual health. Period poverty presents a significant barrier to accessing menstrual hygiene management materials, exacerbating health-related complications. Working women face substantial challenges during menstruation due to the lack of sanitation facilities, which undermines their right to health and decent work as outlined in SDG 8. SDG 13 should be applied in the context of menstruation to ensure the safe and sustainable disposal of menstrual waste materials. In India, approximately 1 billion sanitary pads are used by 64% of the 336 million menstruating women. These menstrual pads pose a hazard to the environment, as the super absorbent polymer may take 500-800 years to decompose (*Menstrual Hygiene*, n.d.). Therefore, SDG 13 must address the environmental threat posed by modern menstrual management techniques and failures. The SDGs aim for global development on equitable terms and should be examined from a gender perspective overall and menstrual justice in particular, as women's lives are significantly influenced by their menstrual health experiences.

Menstrual Health of working women and policy gap

Existing labour laws are notably silent on the issue of menstrual health, reflecting a broader institutional neglect. Consequently, employed women are often compelled to disregard their physiological needs during menstruation, conceal their discomfort, and suppress any visible signs of menstrual distress in professional environments. This lack of recognition not only undermines their well-being but also perpetuates a culture of silence and stigma surrounding menstrual cycles in the place of work. Women’s experiences are marred by taboo, secrecy, and injustice, rendering them disadvantaged in both personal and professional ecosystems.

Menstrual health selectively garnered the attention of policymakers, resulting in interventions targeted at adolescents within school and community settings. However, this focus has not extended to working women, whose menstrual health needs remain largely unaddressed (Anand et al., 2018). Empirical evidence underscores the urgency of this issue. In a study conducted in central Uganda, involving 435 menstruating women, it was reported that 19.3% routinely missed work due to menstruation, 15.1% missed work during their most recent menstrual cycle, and 40.6% indicated that they would not hesitate in scheduling work on days falling outside of their menstrual cycle, if given the choice. Pain and fatigue emerged as the most prevalent symptoms, while 43% of those who failed to attend work cited inadequate menstrual management facilities at the workplace as the primary barrier (Hennegan et al., 2022). These findings highlight the pressing need for workplace policies that integrate menstrual health considerations as a vital component of gender-inclusive employment practices. This framing compels women to internalise the belief that menstrual pain is a personal, low-priority concern

- one that must be endured silently and independently. Ironically, the feminist movement's foundational struggle for equality, autonomy, and rights did not anticipate that women would one day need to assert their physiological differences in order to demand equitable treatment. While certain reproductive functions of the female body—such as childbirth—have received recognition through provisions like paid maternity leave, yet menstrual health remains an unrecognised concern even in the policies concerning labour welfare. The World Bank Group (2022) commends paid maternity leave for enabling women to balance professional and familial responsibilities, it also acknowledges that similar institutional support for menstruation-related discomfort is conspicuously lacking (World Bank Group, 2022).

Menstrual Health and Workplace Impacts

The physiological pain associated with menstruation is comparable in intensity to labour pain, as evidenced by empirical research. In a study conducted by Grandi et al. (2012) involving 408 women, the objective was to assess the extent to which menstrual pain interferes with social and academic activities. Using a visual analog scale (VAS), the study found that 67.4% of participants experienced pain onset after menarche, and 50.7% reported pain during menstrual flow. Pain duration varied, with 49.8% experiencing it for one day and 38.5% for two days. Additionally, 83.7% reported associated symptoms such as depression, headache, nausea, vomiting, acne, and loss of appetite. The impact on daily functioning was also significant - 47.8% reported diminished academic performance, 44.6% noted impaired social engagement, and 37.9% experienced absenteeism. Chalada (2025) advocates for the availability of menstrual products at the workplace and catagorizes it as a workplace policy concern. In her study conducted across Australia, she noted that non-availability of menstrual products in the workplace creates a distressful experience when women do not have the menstrual hygiene material when they need it. Lack of menstrual products adds to their worries and lowers their concentration. The provision of menstrual health facilities is essential to ensuring that women can engage fully in their personal and economic roles, especially during menstruation. The absence of discourse surrounding menstrual health in the professional setting fundamentally contradicts the ethos of women's empowerment. When women are neither encouraged nor expected to articulate their physical and psychological challenges related to menstruation, their agency within the workplace is compromised. Organisational environments have largely failed to acknowledge the spectrum of discomfort experienced by menstruating employees - ranging from physical symptoms such as headaches, abdominal pain, nausea, and fatigue to psychological effects including mood fluctuations, depression, and anxiety.

Although existing literature frequently discusses the menstrual needs of working women, it offers limited insight into how labour policies reinforce gender essentialism. Such gaps perpetuate stereotypes about "women-specific" roles and can restrict women's participation in occupations that demand physical or mental strength, due to perceived inadequacy. It is equally important that menstrual leave policies are designed in ways that prevent the reinforcement of stigma against women. Without such safeguards, these policies may continue to label women negatively for their normal, biological processes, which counters the principles of gender justice in the workplace.

Theoretical Framework

Wollstonecraft's Dilemma

Wollstonecraft highlighted the dual hardship that working women encounter in the name of equality. She sees this situation as a dilemma balancing whether women should argue for their biological and social differences or ignore them to mitigate the risk of being stereotyped as weaker and less capable than men. This results in working women continuing to endure the pain and fatigue, while balancing the social and emotional setbacks to avoid the label of being 'unfit' and 'incapable' in professional settings. This aspect is ingrained in the patriarchal setup of the organisations which conveniently ignore the menstrual health needs of women employees (Maker, 2022). This is relegated as a tactic for providing undue benefits which can create discrimination against women in being considered for jobs. A gender justice framework resolves this dilemma by urging us to move beyond the binary of equality of women in the workplace and stereotyping women as weak owing to their distinct bodily functions.

Feminist jurisprudence

Feminist jurisprudence examines the legal theories through a critical lens to assess gender biases ingrained in the law, acting against the ethos of gender justice. It questions the normative nature of patriarchy which has been inherited in the laws (Burchard, n.d.). A close look into employee welfare policies and existing employee welfare mechanisms only appears to validate the piecemeal approach to menstrual health of working women. This indicates that the patriarchal notion has permeated the workplace where women have consistently been disadvantaged due to a lack of gender-sensitive legal framework.

Capability approach

As per Sen's capability approach (Sen, 1993), freedom, liberties, choice and agency are at the core of development. The absence of choice and freedom limits people's ability to benefit from the process of development. The attainments of people are determined by the twin constructs of development - functionality and capability. The former refers to activities that people perform in the direction of their well-being, whereas the latter is the ability that enables them to perform in the direction of their well-being, in personal and social situations. Thus, the functionality depends on capability (Pyles, 2008). The same concept is extended to women by Nussbaum (2000) who argues for their agency in development, as their capabilities are largely limited by the challenges they encounter due to marginalisation. The professional choices that women make in the workplace are influenced by their bodily functions. In situations when workplaces lack the sensitivity to validate the bodily needs of women during life events such as menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth, it leads to detrimental effects on the developmental outcomes for women. Workplace inequality may be exacerbated when the same measure is applied to the performance of men and women without giving regard to the bio-psycho-social aspect and potential disadvantages of women employees.

The theoretical underpinning clearly indicates that workplace and legal mechanisms are not devoid of patriarchal normativism. A critical lens is crucial to analyse gender inclusivity in the workplace alongside corresponding labour laws. Women still lack the agency to demand recognition for menstrual justice, a subset of gender justice, for fear of being labelled as incapable and incompetent; thus, Wollstonecraft's dilemma is impacting the freedom of women to voice their concerns. Women's functionality is dependent on their bodily functions and disregarding their specific needs severely

impacts their capability to perform in the workplace. Gender justice for working women essentially requires constructive efforts from all quarters - policy, legal mechanisms and execution.

Research Objectives

This research is designed around the following key objectives:

1. To undertake exploration of the perspective of the organisations towards menstrual health of working women.
2. To learn about initiatives taken by organisations towards improving the menstrual health of women employees.
3. To understand the challenges and benefits in implementing period leave policy in organisations.

Subject and Methods

Research design

The research design is cross-sectional and exploratory in nature. The data was collected from three different cohorts comprising representatives from organisations working in government, private and NGO sectors. This exploratory research aims to gain a deeper understanding of the organisational perspective and the practices undertaken by them to improve menstrual health of women employees, while acknowledging the benefits and challenges associated with period leave policy. It also lays the foundation for future meaningful research on the subject.

Research Approach

It is a qualitative study which is conducted with the members of the organisations, working in the capacity of employer or their representative (human resource management/head of department/section). The survey is undertaken using a web-based electronic survey tool designed through Google forms and distributed through online platforms such as email and WhatsApp. The tool was widely circulated to organisations working in India.

Study population

The study population comprises organisations working in India in government, private and NGO sectors. The study area is India.

Sampling technique

The non-probability convenience sampling technique is used in this study to collect data from the respondents who represent organisations working in India. This approach was appropriate for several reasons. First, the study required access to individuals who were directly involved in organisational operations, policy implementation, or HR practices - groups that are not easily accessible through probability techniques. Convenience sampling enabled the researcher to reach these respondents efficiently, particularly when formal sampling frames were unavailable or incomplete. A total of 102 responses were collected in the study. Since the study population consists of three cohorts, each cohort was allotted 34 sample units.

Tool Pre-Testing: The tool was pre-tested with a smaller population (10 respondents) to ensure that the questions are structured, unambiguous and clear.

Data Collection Methods

The survey is undertaken using a web-based electronic survey designed through Google Forms and distributed through online platforms, particularly email and WhatsApp to those respondents who had access to digital platforms. The responses to open-ended questions were coded into categorical variables. The open-ended questions collected information related to the perspective of the respondents. The questionnaire has three sections, out of which demographic information of the respondent and organisations are sought in section one, and information regarding perspective and interventions towards menstrual and period leave policies is collected in section two. Section three recorded the perceived benefits and challenges associated with period leave policy. The validity of the instrument was conducted through respondent validation to ensure the findings are relatable to them. The study population was educated through clear instructions provided in the questionnaire. Coding of data was done through an inductive process of developing codes from the responses, developing a codebook for categorisation of data; the researchers developed the coding rules, and all the responses were coded likewise. The researchers also ensured inter-coder reliability by independently coding and refining through discussion.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the questions pertaining to demographic profile was done using descriptive statistics in section one, through MS Excel. The analysis of sections two and three of the questionnaire was done using the content analysis method, in which the open-ended questions were first organised into themes to render the raw data appear more meaningful. The identified themes were quantified using frequency to gain a clearer insight from the data. The responses were also analysed using chi-square tests performed through IBM SPSS software (version 20). Since the data consisted of categorical variables derived from the coding scheme and the analysis relied on frequency counts, the chi-square test was appropriate. This allowed the study to assess whether observed variations in thematic patterns were statistically significant rather than due to random variation, thereby adding quantitative rigour to the content-analysis findings. For this, the open-ended questions were converted into categorical variables, and association between variables was analysed using chi square test with 95% confidence level and 1 degree of freedom. The results were interpreted by comparing the p-values with the critical value.

Ethical consideration: The study is about exploring the organisational perspective and initiatives towards menstrual health and period leave, primarily utilising information which is generic and available in the public domain. Hence, ethical clearance was not deemed necessary for this research.

Results

Profile of research participants

Table 1 Profile of Research participants

		Frequency	Percentage
Age of organisational representative			
1.	20-30	28	27.5
2.	30-40	34	33.3

		Frequency	Percentage
3.	40-50	29	**28.4**
4.	50-60	10	9.8
5	60-70	1	1.0
	Total	102	100.0
Sex of organisational representative			
1.	Female	70	**68.6**
2.	Male	32	31.4
3.	Others	0	0
	Total	102	100.0
Type of Organisation			
1.	Government sector	34	33.3
2.	Corporate sector	34	33.3
3.	Non-government Organisation	34	33.3
	Total	102	100.0
Designation of organisational representative			
1.	Employer or their representative	63	62
2.	HR head/ manager/ executive	13	13
3.	Head of department/section	26	25
	Total	102	100

As per the data presented in Table 1, the majority of research participants (62%) were either employers or their representatives, followed by Head of department/section (25%) and HR head/manager/executive (13%). A majority of participants were female (68.6%) and belonged to the age category of 40-50 years (28.4%). A total sample of 102 organisations were included in the study, and they were clustered in 3 groups of equal size of 34 units per cohort- Government sector, private sector, and non-government organisation (33.3% each).

Organisational perspective regarding Physiological symptoms and Psychosocial impact of Menstruation

The study answers the first research question what do organisations understand about menstrual health needs of women employees in India. The data reveals that the most prevalent psychosocial symptoms perceived to be associated with menstruation are mood swings (76%), irritability (73%), and

anxiety (48%), as reported by organisations across all three sectors. In terms of physiological symptoms, menstrual pains (79%), bodily pain and low energy levels (75% each), bodily discomfort (73%), heavy menstrual flow (62%), and pre-menstrual syndrome (44%) were reported.

A comparative analysis of the three sectors indicates that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) demonstrate a greater awareness of both the physiological and psychosocial impact of menstruation, compared to the organisations in corporate and government sectors. Conversely, government sector organisations exhibit a relative lack of understanding of the psychosocial and physiological effects of menstruation on the female body. Thus it can be inferred that the NGO sector is sensitive towards menstrual health needs, whereas policies in corporate and government sectors are rooted in feminist jurisprudence and are enforcing patriarchal normativism.

Notably, 11% of government sector organisations and 5.9% of corporate sector organisations denounce the presence of any physiological symptoms attributable to the menstrual cycle. The study also highlights the significant role of negative social attitudes in exacerbating menstrual – relate distress, which includes secrecy (56%), taboo (51%), stigma (42%), prejudice (30%), and notion of untouchability (17%). This finding supports the Wollstonecraft's dilemma that working women are not able to voice their physical discomfort during period days and practice normative behaviour due to the negative social attitude towards menstruation. Many women hesitate to advocate for menstrual accommodations out of fear that doing so may jeopardise their professional standing or reinforce perceptions of weakness. This internal conflict reflects a broader societal failure to reconcile women's physiological realities with the ideals of workplace empowerment. The feminist movement's emphasis on equality and autonomy must evolve to include recognition of difference—not as a liability, but as a basis for inclusive policy.

Association between psychosocial problems and societal attitudes

An association between various psychosocial symptoms and the negative societal attitudes towards menstruation is observed in the study. This association is found to be significant and is reported with a 95% confidence level; the p-value is less than the significance level (.05). Hence, an association has been observed between shame and taboo ($x^2 = 6.281$, $p = 0.012$), mood swings and secrecy ($x^2 = 5.953$, $p=.015$), females being considered weak and stigma around menstruation ($x^2 = 7.731$, $p=.005$), embarrassment and taboo ($x^2 = 5.524$, $p=.019$) and embarrassment and secrecy ($x^2 = 7.761$, $p=.005$).

The association between psychosocial problems and societal attitudes indicates the presence of negative societal attitudes towards menstruation across organisations included in the study. This results in psychosocial symptoms and menstrual-related distress. Menstruation is considered a taboo, which leads to the feeling of shame and embarrassment. Stereotyping women by implying that they undergo mood swings during periods forces women to maintain secrecy, thereby causing them embarrassment. This significant association between psychosocial symptoms and societal attitudes calls for the need of addressing the same through education and awareness programmes aimed at promoting a more positive and supportive environment for individuals experiencing menstruation. Sen's and Nussbaum's capability approach also supports that negative societal attitudes towards menstruation should be regarded as an act detrimental to human development, and one that impacts women's functionality. Their real freedoms - to work, participate, decide, and be respected - are restricted by negative societal attitudes while diminishing the opportunities for women.

Table 2 Initiatives for Promotion of Menstrual Health of female employees in Organisations

Initiatives for promotion of health of female employees	Type of Organisation							
	Government sector		Corporate sector		NGO sector		Total	
	N=27	%	N=13	%	N =26	%	N=66	%
Medical camp	9	40.9%	4	18.2%	9	40.9%	22	47
Medical consultation	4	28.6%	2	14.3%	8	57.1%	14	30
Awareness Sessions	17	44.7%	6	15.8%	15	39.5%	38	82
SN dispenser	14	41.2%	6	17.6%	14	41.2%	34	71
SN Incinerator	7	50.0%	2	14.3%	5	35.7%	14	26
Period leave	0	11.1%	0	11.1%	3	77.8%	3	3
Separate restrooms	5	27.8%	4	22.2%	9	50.0%	18	33
Flexible work hours	4	25.0%	4	25.0%	8	50.0%	16	33
Counselling	6	37.5%	3	18.8%	7	43.8%	16	33
Total responses	74		36		91			

The study examines the initiatives implemented by the organisations for promoting the menstrual health of women employees. It is noticed that only 79% of organisations in the government sector, 76% of organisations in the NGO sector and 38% of organisations in the corporate sector undertake various, intentional initiatives for the promotion of menstrual health of employees. A majority (82%) of organisations, across all sectors, conduct awareness campaigns which provide generalised information about health issues; installation of sanitary napkin dispensers is the second most prevalent initiative (71%), medical camps (47%) and other facilities such as separate restrooms, flexible work hours, and health counselling services (33% each) are also provided. Though health programmes offer generalised coverage, the provision of sanitary dispensers, incinerators, separate restrooms, flexible working hours help to manage menstrual health and hygiene. Sectorial variations are also depicted as the corporate sector (N=13) lags behind the NGO (N=27) and government sector (N=26) in promoting the health and menstrual health of women employees. Notably, period leave is not a priority area, with only 3% of NGOs providing this benefit. Neither the government nor the corporate sectors provide period leave, highlighting a significant gap in supporting the well-being of working women.

Organisational perspective towards benefits and challenges associated with menstrual health policy

The implementation of a menstrual health policy is perceived to yield numerous benefits, outweighing the anticipated challenges, thus answering the research question about the probable benefits and challenges that organisations anticipate in implementing period leave policy. The benefits of such a policy include the creation of women-friendly workplace (67%), management of menstrual

discomfort (66%), improvement in work performance (47%), fostering of inclusive work environments (45%), reduction of stigma associated with menstruation (32%), and increased employment opportunities for women (31%). Conversely, the challenges associated with implementing a menstrual health policy include concerns regarding potential misuse of leave (34.9%), negative impact on job prospects (25.9%), reduced productivity (10.8%), financial losses to the organisation (10.8%), potential antagonism to gender equality (10.2%), and perceived discrimination against men (8.4%). The analysis reveals that organisations are aware of the potential benefits of period leave policy but at the same time, there are ongoing deterrents such as misuse of leave and potential negative consequences on the recruitment of women. These findings highlight an important concern for policy makers. There is a need for careful consideration of both the benefits and challenges; however, evidently, perceived benefits outnumber the perceived challenges of having a period leave policy at the organisational level. This finding indicates that the organisations are not averse to period leave policy but their apprehensions require valid solutions, through the medium structured organisational as well as government-led labour welfare policies.

Discussion

The study provides valuable insight into the organisational perspective on menstrual health, highlighting the need for a more comprehensive approach to supporting the empowerment of women employees. The prevalence of psychological symptoms such as mood swings, irritability, and anxiety, as well as physiological symptoms such as menstrual pains and bodily discomfort, underscores the importance of promoting menstrual health in the workplace. The study establishes a significant association between psychological symptoms and negative societal attitudes and highlights the need for education and awareness programmes aimed at promoting a more positive and supportive environment for individuals experiencing menstruation. Societal attitudes, such as shame, taboo, and stigma are inherited by the organisations in India. They serve as barriers in recognising and addressing menstrual-related distress in the workplace. The study's examination of initiatives implemented by organisations to promote menstrual health reveals that while awareness camps and sanitary napkin dispensers are common, period leave is not considered a valid employee welfare measure. This finding is concerning, given the potential benefits of period leave in supporting women's health and well-being, as well as enhancing their productivity. The lack of period leave policies in most organisations highlights a lack of commitment to making the workplace inclusive by recognising the menstrual distress that working women have been concealing due to shame, taboo, embarrassment and secrecy.

The perceived benefits and challenges of implementing a menstrual health policy underscore the need for organisations to carefully consider the potential impact on the health of women employees and enhanced productivity. By prioritising menstrual health, organisations can facilitate an inclusive work environment that promotes the overall well-being and productivity of women employees. A strong association between 'menstrual leave policy and more women taking up employment' predicts that it will facilitate more women in taking up jobs due to the possibility of managing menstrual discomfort, which otherwise acts as barriers to employment. It is also opined that the period leave policy will improve the work performance of women, while also making the workplace more inclusive and dispelling stigma around menstruation.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for labour law reforms, organisational policy design, and ongoing debates surrounding gender-inclusive workplaces in India. The results demonstrate a statistically significant relationship between psychosocial challenges and negative

societal attitudes. Menstrual health must be recognised as a legitimate labour welfare concern. Policymakers may consider integrating menstrual health into occupational health and safety frameworks, similar to maternity benefits or health and wellness provisions. Policies should outline guidelines about the inclusion of menstrual health in gender-sensitisation mandates under labour codes to reduce stigma and foster supportive organisational cultures.

In summary, the findings of this study resonate with a long-standing tension in feminist theory - Wollstonecraft's dilemma—which highlights the challenge of advocating for women's rights without reinforcing the very gender differences that have historically been used to justify women's subordination. Complementing this, Sen's and Nussbaum's capability approach builds the normative foundation for treating menstrual health as a matter of *freedom, dignity, and human development*. The capability approach emphasises expanding women's real opportunities to function, such as work without distress, to participate without stigma, and to exercise agency over their bodies. Here, feminist jurisprudence provides a valuable analytical lens, arguing that formal equality is insufficient if it ignores the structural and embodied realities of women's lived experiences. Feminist legal theory thus supports policies that acknowledge gender-specific needs while guarding against paternalistic framing that may entrench stereotypes. The theoretical underpinnings support the findings that the distinct bodily needs of women should be recognized by inclusive policies, which will lead to the envisaged stage of women empowerment in the 21st century.

Conclusion

Despite growing discourse on gender inclusivity, menstrual health and period leave policies remain marginal concerns within India's employment frameworks. While many organisations demonstrate a basic understanding of the physiological and psychosocial dimensions of menstruation, this awareness has not translated into actionable policies. The persistence of stigma surrounding menstruation continues to shape workplace culture, contributing to silence, discomfort, and exclusion, and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes. This study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on gender, labour policy, and workplace inclusivity by offering empirical insight into organisational perspectives on menstrual health in India. The association between menstrual stigma and psychological distress is well-documented in this paper. Working women in India continue with societal expectations that menstruation needs to be concealed, due to concerns that it could invite shame, anxiety, embarrassment and isolation. In professional settings, this manifests as a reluctance to disclose menstrual discomfort or request accommodations, even when such needs are legitimate. By formally recognising menstrual health as a legitimate concern, menstrual policies can empower women to manage their discomfort without fear of stigma or professional repercussions. The perceived benefits extend beyond physical relief; they include enhanced psychological well-being, increased confidence, and a stronger sense of belonging in the workplace. Period leave can serve as a catalyst for broader cultural change, normalising conversations around menstruation and fostering empathy within organisational structures. Critics of period leave policies often cite concerns about potential misuse and the risk of reinforcing gender stereotypes. These concerns, while valid, must be addressed through thoughtful policy design and responsible implementation. Clear guidelines, transparent reporting mechanisms, and educational initiatives can mitigate the risk of misuse. Moreover, framing period leave not as a privilege but as a health-based right, aligns it with existing welfare measures such as sick leave or maternity leave. Rather than undermining gender equality, such policies affirm the principle of equity

- recognising that equal treatment sometimes requires differentiated support. The policy relevance of this research lies in its clear evidence that organisations acknowledge menstrual health challenges but have not been able to infuse this awareness into comprehensive and inclusive policy measures. The findings reveal not only challenges but also promising opportunities. Many organisations have already initiated steps - such as awareness sessions, and menstrual hygiene facilities - which reflect a shift towards their preparedness for more inclusive practices. These emerging initiatives demonstrate a growing organisational willingness to engage with menstrual health as a legitimate workplace concern. This readiness offers a constructive foundation for deeper, more comprehensive policy interventions, suggesting that organisations are not reluctant but are instead navigating how best to integrate menstrual health within existing operational structures. Achieving genuine workplace equity requires reformatory measures that acknowledge the specific physical and psychological needs of women. Period leave policies should be integrated into broader menstrual health management frameworks, including access to sanitation facilities, flexible work arrangements, and awareness campaigns. Institutions that prioritise menstrual health signal a commitment to holistic employee welfare and gender-responsive governance.

The implementation of period leave policies in India is not merely a welfare initiative - it is a structural imperative. By dismantling stigma, validating women's experiences, and fostering inclusive work environments, such policies represent a critical step toward realising the full promise of workplace equality. While the employment of women is often heralded as a cornerstone of empowerment, this narrative frequently overlooks the gender-specific health needs that accompany menstruation. The emphasis placed on menstrual health and hygiene management (MHHM) in promoting school attendance among adolescent girls must be extended to the workplace in India. A similar framework is essential to ensure that women can fulfil their economic roles with dignity, embracing their bodies and autonomy over their bodily functions, without having to obscure the distinctness in shame and embarrassment. Gender inclusiveness at the workplace must unapologetically encompass period leave provisions. Overall, the study demonstrates that advancing menstrual health in the workplace is integral to achieving gender justice, enhancing women's capabilities, and building inclusive organisational cultures. By grounding policy and practice in both empirical evidence and feminist theoretical insights, India can move toward labour policies that recognise women not as exceptions to standard norms but as equal participants with distinct needs deserving dignity, support, and structural accommodation.

Limitation of the study

The study is conducted using an electronic based questionnaire. An electronic survey in a qualitative study may lack the possibility of deeper probing and gaining insights from respondents. However, since the population was widely scattered and undefined, an online survey was realised to be the best possible method to reach the target population. The target population was employed and educated and hence the instructions mentioned in the questionnaire could be comprehended with ease.

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