Education, Empowerment, and Exploitation: An Empirical Analysis of the Effects of Gender Disparities and Digital Inclusion on Child Labor and Trafficking

Adnan Sheikh
Lecturer at School of Management Sciences, University: Institute of Management Sciences Peshawar
Email: adnan.sheikh@imsciences.edu.pk

Rooh Ul Amin (Correspondence Author)
PhD in International Relation, Qurtuba University of Information Science and Technology
Email: roohulamin98@gmail.com

Abstract
Child labor and child trafficking remain serious problems to sustainable development, especially in those areas that are highly structurally unequal and access to educational and technological facilities. Although earlier studies have mostly known about the economic factors of poverty, and the state of the labor market, relatively little focus has been given to the joint effect of gender inequalities in education and digital accessibility in making children susceptible to exploitative work practices. The paper is an empirical investigation of the impacts of female education, gender inequality, and digital inclusion on the results of child labor and trafficking based on a cross-country panel dataset of 2005-2022. The analysis uses the fixed effect and generalized method of moment's estimators to study the direct and interaction impacts of gender differences as well as technological access in child exploitation indicators. The empirical results show that an increase in educational attainment of women is strongly linked to child labor participation decreases whereas the gender inequality increases the vulnerability of children to exploitative labor activities. Besides this, the phenomenon of digital inclusion also shows the mitigating effect as it minimizes the negative influence of gender differences on the outcomes of child labor, which implies that the better technological access is provided, the higher the level of education and information access. These findings confirm theoretical approaches based on human capital theory and the capability approach that emphasize the multidimensionality of vulnerability that is determined by social and technological inequalities. The research is an addition to the body of literature because it incorporates gender-based educational inequalities and digital inclusions in a single empirical model of child exploitation risks analysis. Policy wise, the results have highlighted the relevance of concerted efforts, which encourage both gendered education and equal opportunities in the growth of digital infrastructure to actually stem child labor and trafficking in the developing economies.

1 Introduction

Child labor and child trafficking are still one of the most entrenched forms of structural inequality and social vulnerability in the developing and transitional economies. In spite of important international adoptions regarding sustainable development goals (SDGs), namely SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), and SDG 8.7 (eradication of child labor and human trafficking), every year, millions of children all over the world remain uneducated and vulnerable to exploitative work methods (Congdon Fors, 2024). International Labour Organization estimates that more than 160 million children worldwide are victims of child labor with a high concentration in the low and middle income countries where social economic inequalities and institutional barriers have restricted accessibility to education and protective systems. It is in the wider framework of this context that gender inequalities in educational levels and access to digital technologies have become important structural factors that define how children are exposed to exploitative environments, specifically in those areas that are economically marginalized and lack sufficient technological development (Iivari, Kinnula, Molin-Juustila, & Kuure, 2018).

It has been acknowledged that education is a key tool to human capital advancement and social mobility. Access to education, however, is not evenly distributed or social in nature (Haidir & Setyari, 2023). Systemic gender inequalities in most contexts deny females access to formal schooling because of socio-cultural values, financial reasons, and biased institutionalism (Omojemite, 2024). The same inequalities do not only restrict the performance of girls but also put the girls in a cycle of poverty and vulnerability which can be passed down to the next generation (Chant, 2016). There has been empirical evidence to indicate that lack of female education is linked to a high dependence of households on child labor to survive especially in those environments where accessibility to education is limited by the effect of gender. As a result, the fact that gender inequalities in education are indirectly related to the normalization of exploitative labor practices can enhance the lack of other resources to develop and engage in the economy (Kabeer, 2021).

At the same time, the fast growth of digital technologies has brought a new layer of inequality that can be generally defined as the digital divide. Although digital inclusion could be a tool to expand education access, economic inclusion, and social empowerment, digital access and technological literacy gaps tend to support the socioeconomic inequalities that exist. Specifically, the disparity in access to internet services and digital infrastructure can further intensify gender-based educational disparities, which further exposes children to the labor exploitation and trafficking systems. Online discrimination has the potential to limit access to online learning environments, career training resources, and opportunities to access information channels needed to make well-informed decisions and reduce risks (Panda & Kaur, 2024). Consequently, children who live in digitally marginalized households can be exposed to exploitative labor markets more, as they do not have much knowledge about educational and job options.

Theoretically, gender inequality, education level, and digital access can interrelate through the prism of human capital theory and capability approach framework. The

Human capital theory is based on the premise that education investment increases productivity and income earning ability hence decreasing the need to utilize exploitative labor methods (Wang & Cheng, 2024). Likewise, the capability approach stresses the significance of institutional and technological opportunities in increasing the freedoms of individuals to achieve socially desirable life results. In this context, unequal female education, and access to digital devices can limit the formation of the capability and this leads to higher susceptibility to forced labor relations and trafficking systems. These conceptual reasons explain why it is essential to look at structural factors of child exploitation outside the standard economic variables like income or labor market (Zewdie, Berlie, & Mersha, 2024).

Though there is an increasing body of empirical evidence that has explored the determinants of child labor and trafficking, the available literature has mainly addressed macroeconomic factors, including poverty levels, economic development, and labor market characteristics. The integrated effect of gender inequalities and digital inclusion as multi-dimensional factors influencing child exploitation has received relatively little attention (Davies, 2026). Additionally, the previous studies tend to consider educational attainment and technological access as independent variables with no consideration of effects of their interaction in the vulnerability to exploitative practices. This theoretical shortcoming in the methodology limits the explanatory capacity of current models because it ignores structural interdependency among social inequality and technological marginalization.

Moreover, cross country, comparative analysis using gender based educational disparities alongside digital access indicators are relatively few in development economics literature (Drabowicz, 2014). A lack of rigorous empirical research exploring these interconnects represents a deep research gap, especially in light of the emergence of the digital economies where the technological access is increasingly becoming the mediating factor on educational and employment market outcomes. It is vital to fill this gap to formulate policy interventions that will reduce social inequality and technological exclusion as the cause of child exploitation.

It is within this context that the current study will attempt to investigate empirically the impacts of gender differences and digital inclusion on child labor and trafficking performance based on cross-national data. In particular, the paper examines the question of whether the differences in the educational levels and access to the internet by women play a major role in determining whether children are involved in exploitative employment practices. This study aims to provide a more holistic explanation of how educational access and risks of child exploitation are related, by including the digital inclusion as a complementary structural determinant, on top of gender inequality. The research questions used in the study are 1) What is the extent to which gender gaps in education determine the outcomes of child labor and trafficking? 2) Does gender inequality have a negative impact on child exploitation and does digital inclusion alleviate the negative consequences of this phenomenon? 3) What is the impact of differences in technological access on female education and child labor involvement in countries?

This study is empirical in nature in terms of methods as it uses a quantitative approach that involves the use of panel data to enable the researcher to capture cross-sectional and temporal variations in gender disparities, digital inclusion, and child labor indicators. The choice of a research design is explained by the necessity to control the unobserved heterogeneity between countries and to analyze the dynamic processes between structural and technological variables with time. Panel econometric methods enable a stronger estimation of causal relationship since they take into consideration institutional traits specific to a country that could control entry into education and participation in the labor market. This study is supposed to yield two-fold contributions. Theoretically, the research builds on the previous literature and incorporates the differences in educational access between men and women with online access through a single empirical model to analyze the results of child exploitation. In practice, the results can be used to implement policy responses to curb child labor and trafficking by showing the relevance of educational and technological systems that are inclusive. The focus on the interplay between social disparity and digital marginalization makes the study add to a more detailed perspective on vulnerability processes in modern labor markets.

The rest of this paper will be structured as follows. Section 2 presents a review of any empirical and theoretical literature that is relevant to gender inequality, digital inclusion, and child exploitation. Section 3 explains the methodological framework used and data sources used in the analysis. Section 4 includes the empirical findings and covers the implications of these findings on policies. Lastly, the 5th section will be a conclusion and research recommendations to be done in the future.

2. Literature Review

The continuation of child labor and trafficking into the fields of developing and transitional economies has presented a wide range of scholarship in the larger contexts of development economics, social policy and the human capital theory (Woolcock, 1998). Available literature has persistently highlighted structural factors that lead to child exploitation such as poverty, institutional instability, informality of the labor market and lack of access to education. Nevertheless, according to recent theoretical and empirical developments, exploitative forms of labor are not only the product of economic deprivation but they are also deeply entrenched in more widespread networks of gender inequality and technological exclusion (Mezzadri, 2023). As a result, a unified analytical approach that can address both the inequality in access to education and access to digital devices has become more topical in explaining modern trends in child labor and trafficking.

In theoretical terms, the correlation between the educational level and child labor is usually viewed through the prism of human capital theory which considers the investment in education as the increase in productivity and future income earning opportunity, consequently making child labor less necessary (Cockburn, 2001). Homes having more access to formal education have higher chances to view schooling as an alternative channel of co-opetition to socioeconomic mobility, which results in less use of children in informal labor markets (Zheng, 2025). On the other hand, the lack of

educational opportunities due to financial, institutional or social cultural constraints may prompt households to put higher priority on short-term income netting at the expense of human capital accumulation in the long run, which may result in a higher propensity towards child labor involvement (Mussa, Mirzabaev, Admassie, Nshakira-Rukundo, & von Braun, 2019). Although this theoretical framework offers a background to explain why schooling is negatively correlated to child labor, it often takes the assumption that the access to education is evenly distributed within both gender groups. Nonetheless, empirical studies have shown that gender differences in educational achievement are a fundamental structural factor that affects child lab our relations. In most of the low-income situations, girls are disproportionately disadvantaged by the social norms, their roles at home, and discriminatory distribution of resources in the homes (Keleher & Franklin, 2008). Those inequalities do not only restrict personal education performance, but also support larger trends in economic vulnerability that can be the indirect contributors to exploitative labor practices (Washburn, Diener, Curtis, & Wright, 2022). Studies reviewing the household decision making processes show that low female education levels have been linked to increased child labor participation especially in such settings where there is low state investment in schooling infrastructure (Kazianga & Makamu, 2017). This association implies that gender disparities in education could increase the vulnerability to exploitation through the limitation of access to other sources of livelihoods.

Although, there is increasing awareness of how gender inequality affects education achievement, the available empirical models tend to consider gender gaps as constant demographic factors as opposed to dynamic structural factors that affect labor market participation. These methods fail to recognize the possibility of diminishing educational inequality based on gender combined with other types of social exclusion such as access to the technological resources. Differences in digital inclusion have become a supplementary factor in human capital development as digital technologies continue to become a key mediator of the access to educational materials, vocational training, and job prospects (Golovina, Anoshina, Markov, Melnikov, & Zaborovskaya, 2021). Digital inclusions have been understood as extending beyond the possession of the physical access to internet infrastructure and includes the presence of digital literacy skills and technological support systems that would allow meaningful engagement in the information economy.

Growing body of research on digital inclusion is emphasizing its ability to improve the level of learning through access to online platforms of learning, and remote training programs and information networks that enable acquisition of skills (Kulal, Dinesh, Abhishek, & Anchan, 2024). Nonetheless, the unequal access to digital resources can potentially exacerbate gender inequalities already in place by limiting access to technology by those marginalized groups. Specifically, when there is a cost factor (poor economy in rural areas or female gender) or cultural (gender) or technological illiteracy, women and girls will be left with no access to digital infrastructure in these cases (Debbarma & Chinnadurai, 2023). This disenfranchisement may widen education gaps because it restricts access to other learning experiences and labor, making one more susceptible to exploitative forms of work. There are quite few empirical studies which

examine the connection between digital inclusion and child labor, especially in the cross-country comparative context (Packard & Montenegro, 2017). Although a few of the studies have investigated the effect of information and communication technologies on labor market outcomes, few of them have explicitly tested the interaction between disparities in digital access and gender inequality in the determination of the children who participate in exploitative labor arrangements (Wang & Cheng, 2024). The current studies are inclined to consider overall indicators of technology penetration without considering the disparities in the access of demographic groups. This has caused the potential moderating nature of digital inclusion in reducing the negative impact of gender differences on child labor outcomes to be understudied.

Moreover, the traditional focus of the literature on child trafficking has been on the institutional and legal factors, including regulatory frameworks, enforcement capacity, and migration policies (Mehra & Sharif, 2024). These factors, though indeed contributing to a change in the dynamics of trafficking, give little background on the socioeconomic vulnerabilities that children are susceptible to exploitation in the first place. Recent theoretical developments propose that trafficking networks tend to further take advantage of educational access and technological knowledge by focusing on households with a small exposure to formal information circuitry. Digital exclusion in this scenario might limit awareness of essential information about labor rights, educational access and migration risks, which leads to recruitment by exploitative labor markets (Czaja & Urbaniec, 2019). Methodologically, the previous studies have been majorly based on cross-sectional studies which only seek to establish fixed relationships between socioeconomic indicators and the child labor outcomes. Although the approaches provide useful descriptive information, they do not usually provide enough detail to answer the question of dynamic interactions between structural inequality and technological access across time (Lainjo, 2020). The panel data approaches offer a better analytical tool to reflect the changes over time in the educational achievement, gender inequality, and digital inclusion thus allowing a better evaluation of the synergies between them on mortifying child exploitation. However, empirical research that uses panel econometric designs to examine these interlinkages is still relatively few especially in the context of developing economies where data is scarce.

Besides, variable measurement and conceptual definition inconsistencies are also a big problem to comparative analysis (Hug, 2013). As an example, the level of education is commonly defined in terms of the aggregate rates of enrollment, which fail to capture gender-based differences, and digital inclusion is commonly defined in terms of rates of national-level internet penetration, which hides intra-country inequalities. Such limitations to the methodology can be deemed as causes of inconsistency in the overall empirical evidence on the association between the access to technology and the entry into the labor force. To overcome such discrepancies, it is necessary to develop combined models that will integrate gender-disaggregated educational indicators and digital connection measures (Bosco et al., 2017).

The other weakness of current literature is that it is not highly involved in the theoretical frameworks that explain vulnerability as a multidimensional phenomenon developed

through the overlap of various types of social exclusion. Theorists in the capability approach believe that lack of access to education and technology can limit people in their pursuit of socially desirable goals thus making them more vulnerable to exploitative labor policies. In this context, gender inequality and digital exclusion are not only the attributes that correlate with child labor but structural constraints of capability formation, which can support intergenerational poverty and exploitation (Dixit & Banday, 2022). It is against this backdrop that the current research aims to provide a continuation of the current body of research by incorporating the concept of gender-based educational inequalities and digital inclusion into one comprehensive empirical model to examine the outcome measures of child labor and trafficking. Through the analysis of the relationship among these variables over time and among different countries, the study will contribute a more astute view of the processes in which social inequality is coupled with technological marginalization (Arnold, 1995). This line of approach leads to continued discussions about the importance of education and access to digital technologies in the development of labor market vulnerabilities and provides policy-relevant information about interventions that will help decrease child exploitation (Gunnes, Thaulow, Kaspersen, Jensen, & Ose, 2025).

On the whole, the literature reviewed highlights the necessity to shift toward multi-dimensional models that put into consideration the interaction between gender inequality, access to education, and technological inclusion. Although previous research has emphasized the personal impact of these variables on the dynamics of child labor, little has been done to discuss the combined impact of these variables regarding the empirical development literature. The given research paper is going to fill this gap by means of a panel data design to examine the degree to which the differences in female education and digital inclusion have a combined effect on child labor and trafficking outcomes and, therefore, add to a more profound perspective on the processes of vulnerability in modern socioeconomic contexts.

Methodology
3.1 Research Design
This research paper follows a quantitative research design in the form of a cross-country panel data study to identify the empirical relationship between gender differences, digital inclusion, and child exploitation outcomes, in the form of child labor and child trafficking pointers. The choice of a panel data structure can be explained by its ability to reflect cross-sectional and time changes in socioeconomic factors across national borders, hence enabling a more detailed study of structural factors that affect child labor dynamics. In contrast to cross-sectional models, which can offer a static estimate of variables at one moment in time, panel data methods can be used to examine dynamic interactions between explanatory variables, and it can also be used to control country-specific heterogeneity that is unknown (Ardıç, 2006). This methodological strategy suits best the study of the impact of gender inequality and technological access since they change over time and can have varying effects in different countries. Moreover, panel econometric designs permit the manipulation of time-invariant institutional attributes like the quality of governance, cultural values, and policy regimes that can

have an effect on education levels and the involvement of the labor market. The research design adopted maximizes the internal validity of empirical estimates in the study by including the individual country effects and temporal trends, hence minimizing the risk of the omitted variable bias.

The secondary data utilizes the internationally acknowledged databases, such as the World Bank World Development Indicators (WDI), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the International Labor Organization (ILO) in the empirical analysis. These sources of data are country-level indicators of educational attainment, gender inequality, digital access, and child labor outcomes in a standard format.

The research design is an imbalanced panel design with a chosen sample of developing and emerging economies between the years 2005 and 2022. The sampling plan will be informed by data availability of all the variables of interest in the given period. The countries where the key indicators were not observed were not considered, as it was necessary to be able to estimate the missing data in a certain and consistent manner, and to make the results of the empirical study robust. The measurement of a variable will be categorized as the value of the objective to be pursued in the program implementation. The definition and the measurement of a variable will be defined as the amount of the objective that will be pursued through the program implementation. The following variables are used in the study in order to operationalize the conceptual constructs that the research objectives are based on:

➢ Dependent Variable (CL): Child Labor Rate (% of children aged 5 17 years old working or in the economy), which was derived in SDG activity number 8.7.1 of ILO.

➢ Independent Variables: Female Education (FE): The female secondary school education rate (percentage), which is the educational attainment of gender. Gender Inequality (GI): Gender Inequality Index (GII), which measures inequalities in reproductive health, empowerment and labor market participation. Digital Inclusion (DI): Percentage of those individuals who use the internet as a proxy of technological access.

➢ Control Variables (CV): To control possible confounding factors, the model has control variables that include: The level of economic development level in terms of GDP per capita. Urbanization rate. Population growth rate. All the variables are natural logarithmized to eliminate heteroscedasticity and allow interpretation of estimated coefficients as elasticities.

3.2 Model Specification

In order to empirically examine the association between gender differences, digital inclusion, and child labor outcomes, the investigation identifies the following baseline panel regression model:

$$CL_{it} = \alpha + \beta_1 FE_{it} + \beta_2 GI_{it} + \beta_3 DI_{it} + \beta_4 CV_{it} + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \epsilon_{it}$$

Where:

CL_{it} denote the child labor rate in a country (i) at time (t), while FE_{it} shows the female education, GI_{it} represent the gender inequality, DI_{it} used for digital inclusion, while,

CV_{it} denotes the vector control variables, μ_i used for unobserved country-specific effects and λ_t capture time-specific effects and ϵ_{it} represents the error term.

To examine the moderating role of digital inclusion in the relationship between gender inequality and child labor, the following interaction model is also estimated:

$$CL_{it} = a + \beta_1 FE_{it} + \beta_2 GI_{it} + \beta_3 DI_{it} + \beta_4(GI_{it} \times DI_{it}) + \beta_5 CV_{it} + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{it}$$

The interaction term GI_{it}, DI_{it} captures the extent to which digital inclusion mitigates or amplifies the impact of gender inequality on child labor participation.

3.3 Estimation Technique

The empirical estimation is done by Fixed Effects (FE) and Random Effects (RE) models to explain the unobserved heterogeneity between countries. By comparing the consistency and efficiency of the FE and RE estimators, Hausman specification test is used to identify the most suitable method of estimation (Zeeshan, Han, Rehman, Ullah, & Afridi, 2021). Besides, heteroscedasticity, serial correlation, and cross-sectional dependence diagnostic tests are conducted to make sure that the regression outcomes can be reliable. The study also uses Generalized Method of Moments (GMM) estimator to check the robustness of the results to deal with possible endogeneity and dynamic panel bias as previous study inline (Zeeshan, Han, Rehman, Ullah, & Alam Afridi, 2021). The GMM method addresses the reverse causation and omitted explanatory variables bias using the lagged values of explanatory variables as internal instruments.

3.4 Checks of Validity and Robustness.

To determine the strength and reproducibility of the findings of the empirical research, the research performs the following diagnostic tests: Panel unit root tests (Levin Lin Chu, Im Pesaran Shin), Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) Multicollinearity determination, Serial correlation test (Wooldridge test), Heteroscedasticity test (Breusch Pagan test) and Cross-sectional dependence test (Pesaran CD test). Classical regression assumptions are vulnerable to violation and in such cases, the robust standard errors are used to rectify the problem. Altogether, the chosen methodological approach allows the study to be consistent in terms of research aims and the empirical approach to employing the gender gap in educational achievement and digital access through a dynamic panel design. The combination of several estimation methods and diagnostic tools boosts the validity and the applicability of the research to the population and offers a clear and transparent replicable procedure of analysis.

4 Results & Discussion

The table 1 gives the summary of descriptive statistics of the variables employed in the empirical analysis. The findings show that there is a huge cross-country difference in the education levels of females, gender inequality, and digital inclusion levels of sampled economies. The average of child elaboration rate indicates that oppressive labor activities are still high in the developing areas regardless of the current policy interventions. On the same note, the standard deviation of internet use is relatively high

and that indicates the differences in digital access across nations, which can determine the level of educational empowerment and the vulnerability of the labor market.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Child Labor (CL)	14.32	6.51	3.20	34.10
Female Education(FE)	62.45	18.76	21.50	98.20
Gender Inequality(GI)	0.43	0.14	0.09	0.71
Digital Inclusion(DI)	52.61	22.87	8.50	92.40
GDP per capita	7.18	1.09	5.01	9.43
Urbanization	54.92	15.30	19.20	87.60

4.1 Correlation Analysis

Table 2 presents the pairwise correlation coefficients of the study variables. Girl education and internet connectivity show a negative correlation with child labor, meaning that as the educational attainment and internet connectivity increase, the exploitative labor is reduced. Conversely, child labor outcomes are positively related to gender inequality and this indicates that structural inequality in empowerment can increase the risk of exploitation.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix

Variables	CL	FE	GI	DI
CL	1.000			
FE	-0.540	1.000		
GI	0.470	-0.620	1.000	
DI	-0.490	0.590	-0.510	1.000

4.2 Panel Regression Results

Table 3 shows the estimates of the baseline panel regression. According to Hausman test, the model to be chosen was the fixed effects model, as it suggested the existence of country-specific heterogeneity.

Table 3: Panel Regression Results

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
Female Education (FE)	-0.284	0.072	-3.94	0.000***
Gender Inequality(GI)	0.517	0.214	2.41	0.016**
Digital Inclusion(DI)	-0.193	0.081	-2.38	0.018**
GDP per capita	-0.121	0.069	-1.75	0.082*

Urbanization	-0.096	0.058	-1.64	0.103
Constant	1.721	0.511	3.36	0.001

Note: ***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.10

4.3 Moderating Effect of Digital Inclusion

In order to test the moderating effect of digital inclusion on the relationship between gender inequality and child labor participation, the interaction term between gender inequality and internet access was added into the model.

Table 4: Interaction Effect Model

Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
Female Education (FE)	-0.251	0.084	-2.98	0.003**
Gender Inequality (GI)	0.604	0.256	2.36	0.019**
Digital Inclusion (DI)	-0.172	0.093	-1.85	0.066*
GI × DI	-0.143	0.061	-2.34	0.020**
GDP per capita	-0.109	0.073	-1.49	0.137
Urbanization	-0.088	0.062	-1.42	0.157
Constant	1.605	0.492	3.26	0.002

4.4 Findings & Discussion

The results of the empirical research thoroughly substantiate the hypothesis that the positive changes in the level of female educational achievement have a considerable positive effect on the reduction of children involvement in the exploitative forms of work. The coefficient between female education and the negative and statistically significant value indicates that an improved education to girls would lead to the reduction of the use of child labor as a means of survival in the family. This finding can be explained by the assumptions of human capital theory that focuses on how education impacts on the increase of income potential in the future and the minimization of intergenerational poverty traps. Child labor participation shows a positive and strong relationship between Gender inequality, which implies that structural differences in empowerment can be more vulnerable to exploitation. This result supports the previous empirical researchers that associate educational disadvantages based on gender with an increased tendency towards informal labor participation among children. With access to schooling and jobs restricted to women, gender inequality can indirectly continue to sustain dependence on child labor incomes at the household level. In the case of child labor, digital inclusion as a metric of internet use is negatively correlated with the outcomes of child labor, which underscores the protective effect of technological

accessibility in enabling educational access and sharing of information (Bhowmik & Ailawalia, 2025). The association between the variables of gender inequality and digital inclusion is also negative and statistically significant, which indicates that the higher the internet penetration, the less negative influence gender gaps have on the involvement in child labor. This softening influence favors capability-based theoretical forms that theorize that technological resources can increase the capacity of people to seek socially desirable results and minimize contact with exploitative labor markets. Policymaking wise, these results indicate the need to combine gender sensitive educational reforms with the development of digital infrastructure to mitigate the impact of multidimensional factors that drive child exploitation. The strategies focused on the simple rise in school attendance might be not quite enough in the environment with the low technological availability and the existing gender gaps. Rather, coordinated efforts to improve educational achievements, as well as internet access, are bound to deliver more efficient results in mitigating the threat of child labor and trafficking. Generally, the findings are relevant to the continuing discussions on structural factors of child exploitation since they indicate that gender inequality and digital inclusion have a combined effect on the vulnerability of the labor market. The connection between the empirical data and the theoretical background of human capital and capability development makes the study give a deeper insight into the processes that involve the development of social and technological inequalities to influence the nature of child labor.

5. Conclusion

This paper proposed the empirical examination of the impact of gender differences and digital inclusion to child labor and trafficking outcomes in a cross-country panel data design. The study aimed to give a more in-depth insight into the structural factors that predetermine the susceptibility of children to employment in exploitative conditions by combining the data on female educational attainment, gender inequality, and access to technology into a single analytical framework. The empirical evidence is consistent and shows that the positive change in female education relates to a marked decrease in the involvement in child labor, which highlights the protective impact of gender-inclusive educational opportunities in eliminating the exploitative consequences. On the other hand, greater gender inequality was identified to increase the situation of child labor, indicating that empowerment and resource allocation differences can be indirectly related to the use of child labor in the household as an adaptive response to economic constraints.

Moreover, the findings point out the importance of digital inclusion as a complementary structural factor having an impact on children being at risk of exploitation. Increased access to internet services was linked to a reduced child labor influence, indicating that the technological connections played the role of improving the educational activity and access to information. More to the point, the dynamics of interaction between gender inequality and digital inclusion imply that access to technology can alleviate the negative impacts of the disparity between the genders, by increasing the possibility of skill acquisition and awareness of employment rights. These results are consistent with

theoretical insights that are based on the human capital theory and capability approach, as both support the notion of education and technological resources in promoting individual agency and minimizing exposure to exploitative labor market.

The works of this research are theoretical and practical. Theoretically, the study complements the current body of development literature by empirically relating gender based differences in education to digital inclusion as a cause of child labor and trafficking. The study has gone beyond the traditional economic measures of vulnerability, and the multidimensional approach of vulnerability is a significant interaction between social inequality and technological exclusion as decisive factors in exploitative labor participation. The policy implications of the findings are that the development of policy interventions targeting to mitigate child labor and trafficking must take an interdisciplinary approach whereby the interventions also tackle gender inequalities in education and inequalities in digital access. Improving the education level of women alone can be inadequate when technological constraints still restrict access to information, training and jobs.

Along with such contributions, there are several limitations that have to be admitted. First, the research is based on country-level measures that are not always sufficient to measure intra-country differences in educational access and digital connectivity. This type of aggregation can mask localized inequalities that determine the susceptibility of children to exploitation. Second, there are poor access to reliable data on child trafficking on the international level, which means that child labor indicators should be used as a proxy measure of exploitative outcomes. Lastly, even though panel econometric methods are helpful to construct strong estimates of the time-related relationships, it is not possible to exclude the possibility of measurement error of the gender inequality and digital inclusion indicators.

The research can be improved in the future by using micro-level household data to investigate the interplay between gender disparities and technological access in more specific socioeconomic situations. Empirical studies that have included region-specific measures of digital literacy and education quality could also make the empirical models more powerful. Also, qualitative studies on institutional and cultural factors contributing to digital division can give useful information about the processes which connect the issue of gender inequality to predatory labor patterns.

To sum up, it can be concluded that the results of this research highlight the need to implement multidimensional policy measures that combine gender-sensitive education reforms with digital infrastructure development in the attempts to minimize child labor and trafficking. Through its focus on how education, empowerment, and technological inclusion are interconnected, the research study also adds to the subtler picture of vulnerability dynamics and the evidence-based intervention proposals to achieve equitable and sustainable development results.

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