

ARTICLE

Women's political empowerment moderates socio-economic drivers of child poverty: Evidence from EU nations

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Abstract

This study explores the moderating role of women's political empowerment in addressing child poverty across European Union (EU) countries, using macro-panel data from 27 EU countries between 2006 and 2023. The study investigates how key socio-economic factors – such as unemployment and government expenditure as mitigating factors – interact with women's political empowerment in affecting child poverty. The findings show that the political empowerment of women mitigates the negative effects of high unemployment and enhances the impact of public spending. However, no significant moderating effect was observed for early school leaving and income inequality. The study highlights the importance of women's political participation in shaping inclusive policies for child welfare, especially in contexts of high unemployment or limited public spending. By empowering women politically, policymakers can foster environments that better target child poverty through tailored interventions and improved social policies, offering valuable insights for breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

Keywords: child poverty; women's political empowerment; European Union; multidimensional poverty; policy intervention

Introduction

Child poverty is a complex and persistent issue that extends beyond financial hardship. It includes social, educational, and relational deprivation, all of which contribute to children's experiences of exclusion (Abdu and Delamonica, 2018; Bessell, 2022). As highlighted by existing research, child poverty has long-lasting consequences, affecting physical, psychological, and social development well into adulthood (Font and Maguire-Jack, 2020; Breheny, 2023). Addressing child poverty is essential, not only for improving children's immediate well-being but also for breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty transmission (Schutter et al., 2023). As Toczydlowska et al. (2016) emphasise, childhood is a unique period of human development and a critical stage in preparing future generations to be healthy, socially engaged, productive, and happy.

Child poverty is also a pressing global issue. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2023), children under 18 years of age account for more than half of the global poor, with 27.7% of children in 110 countries living in poverty, compared to 13.4% of adults (p. 9). Despite high living standards in many European Union (EU) countries, child poverty remains a pressing issue. Recent statistics indicate that around 19.4% of children in the EU are at risk of poverty, highlighting the urgent need for effective policies and interventions. Addressing child poverty has become a crucial political

objective in developed regions like the EU (Diris et al., 2017). Strategy explicitly prioritises child poverty reduction as a fundamental goal for achieving inclusive economic growth (Barcena-Martín et al., 2017). As economic, social, and political landscapes continue to evolve, so too must the strategies for addressing child poverty evolve.

One potential approach to addressing child poverty is through the political empowerment of women, and recent research highlights this as a critical role. Beyond increasing representation in parliaments and governments, political empowerment enables women to shape policies, advocate for children's well-being, and secure family support resources (Sundström et al., 2017). When women hold political positions, they are more likely to promote inclusive social policies (Chatterjee et al., 2018), advocate for children, and advance policies that reduce gender inequalities (Kellard et al., 2024). These efforts contribute to improving family economic conditions and enhancing children's living standards (Cornwall, 2018). Empirical evidence from Besnier's (2023) study supports this link, and the authors note that greater female representation improves child health outcomes worldwide. Similarly, Quamruzzaman and Lange (2016) reported a connection between a higher degree of female representation, lower infant mortality, and better nutrition. These studies suggest that women's political empowerment is a key factor in shaping child welfare policies and enhancing children's overall well-being.

Despite growing research on women's political empowerment, several knowledge gaps remain, particularly regarding its direct relationship with child poverty, even though studies by Besnier (2023) and Quamruzzaman and Lange (2016) do underscore the positive link between women's political representation and child health outcomes. Moreover, much of the existing literature focuses on the broader relationship between women's empowerment and poverty – rather than child poverty – and primarily in developing countries. However, children are at a vulnerable stage of development in their lifespan. A large body of literature shows that the multidimensional nature of child poverty, its long-term impact on individual development, and its dependence on family and social resources make it significantly different from adult poverty (Roelen, 2017; Abdu and Delamonica, 2018; Font and Maguire-Jack, 2020; Bessell, 2022). In addition, in developed countries – particularly within the EU, where complex social welfare systems and relatively high living standards exist – the interaction between women's empowerment and child poverty may follow different mechanisms. Examining this relationship in developed nations will expand the scope and applicability of current research, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how women's political empowerment influences child poverty in different socio-economic contexts.

Research on how women's political empowerment moderates multidimensional poverty remains limited. While Abdu and Delamonica (2018) highlight the multidimensional aspects of child poverty – such as health, education, and social relationships – to our knowledge, there is little exploration of how women's empowerment influences these dimensions through policy interventions. Further research is needed to fill this knowledge gap. Furthermore, the mechanisms by which women's empowerment indirectly affects child poverty are not well understood. Although Koomson et al. (2024) and Cornwall (2018), for example, suggest that women's empowerment can improve children's welfare by shaping social policies, research often overlooks socio-economic factors like unemployment, income inequality, and government spending. A more comprehensive investigation is required to better understand these dynamics.

In this sense, this study seeks to explore the moderating role of women's political empowerment in mitigating child poverty, with a focus on EU countries. By investigating the relationship between child poverty, political empowerment, and factors such as unemployment, early school leaving, income inequality, and government expenditure, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how women's political participation influences child welfare outcomes. In addition, this study emphasises the significance of multidimensional approaches to poverty alleviation. The central hypothesis of this research is that women's political empowerment moderates the impact of some socio-economic factors on child poverty. Using panel data from 27 EU countries between 2006 and 2023, this study provides evidence on the extent to which women's political empowerment can help reduce child poverty.

Theoretical framework

The multidimensional nature of child poverty

Child poverty is a complex and multidimensional issue that extends beyond financial hardship (Tekdemir and Yilmaz, 2024). A narrow focus on income insufficiency fails to fully capture children's actual living conditions, as poverty is shaped by a range of socio-economic and structural factors (Carraro and Ferrone, 2023). In response, several multidimensional poverty frameworks have been developed, including the basic needs approach, social exclusion methods, and the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). These frameworks go beyond monetary measures to incorporate key dimensions such as health, education, housing, access to information and services, participation, and social inclusion. By considering these factors, the frameworks provide a more comprehensive understanding of child well-being (Roelen, 2017; Abdu and Delamonica, 2018; Beers et al., 2021; Carraro and Ferrone, 2023; Koomson et al., 2024; Tekdemir and Yilmaz, 2024). Bessell (2022) redefines child poverty based on children's perceptions, categorising it into material poverty, opportunity poverty, and relational poverty. This approach highlights how material deprivation and non-material forms of poverty are deeply intertwined, together shaping and reinforcing children's experiences of hardship.

Beyond individual deprivation, child poverty is also rooted in broader structural inequalities, including family characteristics, social disparities, and policy frameworks. Tekdemir and Yilmaz (2024) identify key determinants, such as the Gini coefficient, per capita income, female employment, household size, and property ownership, highlighting the intersection of socio-economic status and family structure in resource distribution. Brady (2019) points out that flawed social policies and entrenched inequalities perpetuate poverty by restricting the access of poor families to essential resources and social support, thereby limiting children's opportunities for upward mobility. From a distributional perspective, Diris et al. (2017) conceptualise child poverty as both a reflection of income disparities among children and their relative economic position in society. Social inequality not only exacerbates financial hardship but also contributes to children's psychological and social vulnerability. Chzhen et al. (2016) and Barcena-Martín et al. (2017) emphasise the role of national welfare systems, educational opportunities, and cultural contexts in shaping child poverty outcomes. Featherstone et al. (2019) link social inequality to child abuse and neglect, arguing that inadequate or absent policies further compound children's vulnerabilities.

Multidimensional poverty varies across countries and regions, reflecting the diverse socio-economic contexts. Dawson (2015), in a cross-country study of the EU, found that children in economically disadvantaged households are not necessarily deprived in non-monetary dimensions. Conversely, children in higher-income households may still experience deprivation in other areas. This finding aligns with the study by Main and Bradshaw (2012) on child poverty in the United Kingdom. Further, Chzhen et al. (2016) demonstrated that children across EU countries experience deprivation in multiple dimensions, including housing, access to information, and development opportunities. These findings are consistent with those of Barcena-Martín et al. (2017). Meanwhile, Chzhen et al. (2016) highlighted that the highest rates of material deprivation within the EU are concentrated in the most recent accession countries, a trend that has been well documented in the literature. Beyond the EU, patterns of child deprivation differ based on national development levels. Sánchez et al. (2024) observe that in developed countries, children are more likely to experience psychological rather than material deprivation. In contrast, there is no consistent pattern emerging in developing countries, where the nature of child deprivation varies significantly depending on local socio-economic and institutional conditions.

Child poverty profoundly affects individual development, with lasting consequences across physical, psychological, social, and educational aspects that often extend into adulthood (Font and Maguire-Jack, 2020). Beyond lowering children's current quality of life, it perpetuates the cycle of poverty due to a lack of educational resources, social capital, and economic support, thereby contributing to its intergenerational transmission (Schutter et al., 2023). In addition, child poverty has far-reaching implications for families and society as a whole. Impoverished children are more prone to, and at greater risk of experiencing, family abuse and neglect (Font and Maguire-Jack, 2020). They are also facing heightened

vulnerabilities to mental health disorders, educational disadvantages, and employment challenges later in life (Breheny, 2023).

Reducing child poverty requires a comprehensive, multidimensional policy approach that addresses both structural inequalities and resource distribution. Direct economic support is crucial. Tekdemir and Yilmaz (2024) recommend strategies such as social income programmes, tax policies, and child benefit payments to enhance family income and provide additional financial stability. However, those authors emphasise that financial aid alone is insufficient to fully address child poverty. Beyond direct financial support, investments in early childhood development – particularly in education and health services – are critical in mitigating long-term poverty effects and breaking cycles of intergenerational transmission (Beers et al., 2021; Saitadze and Lalayants, 2021). Koomson et al. (2024) further highlight the importance of financial inclusion in alleviating multidimensional poverty, arguing that access to financial services not only strengthens household economic resilience but also enhances children's well-being through improved education and healthcare opportunities. Similarly, Bornukova et al. (2024) and Thévenon et al. (2018) demonstrate that strong tax and social welfare systems effectively reduce child poverty through income redistribution, further narrowing socio-economic inequality.

However, the effectiveness of social welfare interventions is not uniform. Bárcena-Martín et al. (2023) highlight that while welfare systems can help alleviate child poverty, their impact varies depending on both policy design and children's prior experiences of poverty. Moreover, the mode of welfare provision plays a crucial role. Nygård et al. (2019) found that in-kind welfare spending was more effective than direct cash transfers in curbing child poverty, even after controlling for factors such as unemployment, family structure, general living standards, and welfare agency configuration. As Bessell (2022) notes, child poverty involves not only economic issues but also the deprivation of social participation, inadequate healthcare, and restricted educational opportunities. These findings collectively indicate that a holistic policy approach – combining economic, social, and developmental interventions – is essential for tackling child poverty effectively. Therefore, policies must be comprehensive, multidimensional, and tailored to ensure sustained support for children's well-being and long-term development.

Women's political empowerment as a potential moderator of child poverty

Women's empowerment is a multidimensional, complex, and highly context-dependent construct (Anderson, 2022; Gawel et al., 2024). It is broadly understood as a process of shifting power dynamics, enabling women to gain independence and agency (Persson et al., 2022). Empowerment is inherently tied to the concept of power – both as a means of exerting control over assets and resources and as a process of changing power relations to gain greater control, choice, and self-esteem (Persson et al., 2022; Adhikari et al., 2023). Empowerment encompasses different dimensions of power, including the power to control, the power to act, and the power to resist external control (Wolf et al., 2015). These dimensions highlight empowerment not only as an outcome but also as an ongoing process that interacts with broader economic, social, and political structures.

Female empowerment is highly context-specific, shaped by multiple social, economic, and cultural factors (Toufique, 2016). These influences give rise to different dimensions of freedom of choice, such as women's political, economic, academic, social, and psychological empowerment (Al-Qahtani et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2022; Mahato et al., 2022). Political empowerment, in particular, reflects women's ability to participate in and influence political decision-making processes within society (Lewellyn and Muller-Kahle, 2020; Dahlum et al., 2022). While commonly measured through political participation, political empowerment also encompasses women's political awareness, capacity for political engagement, and an understanding of political rights and responsibilities (Chatterjee et al., 2018).

The increasing representation of women in politics has been linked to shifts in policy priorities and more inclusive social policies. Cornwall (2018) highlights that empowering women politically and economically can improve family economic conditions and enhance children's living conditions through more inclusive social policies. Research has shown that female political representation contributes to the

expansion of welfare policies, particularly in areas concerning childcare, education, and social protection (Bratton and Ray, 2002; Hessami and da Fonseca, 2020). Specifically, in developing countries, increased female political representation has led to improved public service provision in education and health (Hessami and da Fonseca, 2020). In developed countries, while spending patterns may not change significantly, female politicians influence policy deliberations and decision-making, often leading to greater investment in public childcare and social welfare programmes (Hessami and da Fonseca, 2020). Furthermore, higher female representation in government has been found to reduce corruption and rent-seeking behaviours, leading to improved institutional quality (Hessami and da Fonseca, 2020).

Given the link between women's political representation and policy outcomes, it is reasonable to consider women's political empowerment as a potential moderator in child poverty reduction. The substantive representation of women in politics – their ability to influence policy beyond mere numerical presence – has been associated with policy decisions that prioritise child welfare, family support, and poverty alleviation (Celis, 2009; Wängnerud, 2009). Women politicians often focus on social policies that address the needs of children and families, including policies related to early childhood education, parental leave, and family benefits (Bratton and Ray, 2002; Rozanova and Mikheev, 2020). Despite the well-documented positive impact of female political representation on social policy, women remain under-represented in political leadership, and their increasing participation reflects broader institutional improvements within countries (Alexander et al., 2016; Awoa Awoa et al., 2022). While female participation has increased, it is often concentrated in specific policy areas, such as childcare, family policy, and social welfare, rather than in broader economic and political decision-making (Rozanova and Mikheev, 2020). However, even within these traditional domains, women's involvement in policymaking strengthens institutional responsiveness to child welfare concerns, potentially leading to stronger interventions against child poverty.

Building on this discussion, this study investigates whether women's political empowerment moderates the relationship between socio-economic factors and child poverty outcomes. Greater political empowerment of women is expected to heighten attention to child welfare issues in policymaking. This, in turn, can shape policies aimed at reducing child poverty – one of the most competent indicators of inadequate welfare systems. By examining this potential moderating effect, we seek to provide new insights into the intersection of gender, politics, and social policy, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of how political representation shapes efforts to reduce child poverty.

Research methodology

Research questions

Based on the theoretical framework described above, we pose two research questions. Research Question 1 (RQ1) asks: What is the impact of factors on children at risk of poverty in EU countries? In answering RQ1, we investigate four factors – early school leaving, unemployment, income inequalities, and government expenditure – by comparing their directions of effect and strength. We classify early school leaving, unemployment, and income inequality as risk factors, while government expenditure is considered to be a mitigating factor. Second, in Research Question 2 (RQ2), we ask whether women's political empowerment moderates the impact of these factors on the risk of poverty among children. We aim to verify the moderating effect of women's political empowerment on risk factors and the mitigating factor, determining whether the moderation is statistically significant and whether it strengthens or weakens the influence of these factors.

Data, context, and method

To answer our research questions (RQ1 and RQ2), we adopt the perspective of EU countries. According to the MPI, which includes health, education, and standard of living (Alkire et al., 2023), the European region and the Central Asian region are among the least poor regions in the world. However, poverty and

its reduction remain significant concerns, even for the most developed countries (Hassan et al., 2023). Data from Eurostat, the statistical office of the EU, show that in 2023, 19.4% of children living in the EU were at risk of poverty.¹ On the one hand, we agree that poverty could be experienced differently in a developed country than in a developing country. On the other hand, the insights from EU countries can be beneficial in understanding the factors affecting child poverty risk.

Our research is based on publicly available data published by Eurostat for all 27 EU countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, and Sweden. We collected annual data from 2006 to 2023. Thus, we use the macro-panel data for 27 countries and a period of 18 years. Details on the variables and descriptive statistics of raw data are presented in Table 1.

As a dependent variable, we accepted the share of children at risk of poverty, defined as those children who are living in households with disposable income below the poverty risk threshold. On average, from 2006 to 2023, 19.17% of children in the 27 EU countries were at risk of poverty, with a minimum share of 9.1% and a maximum share of 39.3%.

Women’s political empowerment is operationalised as the share of seats held by women in national parliaments and governments across EU countries. Despite gender quota policies, women held an average of 27% of seats in parliaments and governments from 2006 to 2023, with the share varying between 8.7% (minimum) and 49.6% (maximum) across countries and years.

Table 1. List of variables, their operationalisation, and descriptive statistics of raw data for years 2006–2023

Variable	Explanation	Mean	Standard deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Dependent variable					
CRP	Children at risk of poverty, measured as the share of children (0–17 years of age) living in a household with an equivalised disposable income below the risk-of-poverty threshold	19.17	5.81	9.10	39.30
Moderating variable					
WPE	Women’s political empowerment, measured as seats held by women in national parliaments and governments (in %)	26.68	10.18	8.70	49.60
Independent variables					
EL	Early leavers from education, measured as the share of the population aged 18–24 years with lower secondary education who were not involved in any education or training during the four weeks.	10.39	5.53	2.00	38.50
UE	Unemployment rate, measured as the share of the total, aged 20–64 years	7.90	4.23	2.00	27.30
Gini	The Gini index, measured as the relationship of cumulative shares of the population arranged according to the level of equivalised disposable income, to the cumulative share of the equivalised total disposable income received by them.	29.71	3.91	20.90	40.80
GE	Government expenditure: total general government expenditure as the share of GDP (in %)	45.44	6.96	20.70	64.90

¹https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tepsr_spi110__custom_12600695/default/table?lang=en, access: 17.08.2024.

As independent variables, we included three risk factors and one mitigating factor. The first risk factor considered is the early leavers from education, which shows the share of the population aged 18–24 years who are not engaged in any form of education. The data show that, from 2006 to 2023, on average, 10.39% of young people left the education system, with values ranging from a minimum of 5.53% to a maximum of 38.5%.

The second risk factor was the unemployment rate in the population group aged 20–64 years. The average unemployment rate was 7.9%, with a minimum of 2.0% and a maximum of 27.3%.

The third risk factor considered was the Gini index, which measures income inequality. The average Gini index for EU countries from 2006 to 2023 was 29.7, with values ranging from a minimum of 20.9 to a maximum of 40.8.

We also investigated one mitigating factor: government expenditures, measured as the share of government expenditure in gross domestic product (GDP). This reflects the level of public spending as a result of the redistribution mechanism. On average, from 2006 to 2023, government spending in the EU was around 45% of GDP, with values ranging from a minimum of 20.7% to a maximum of 64.9% across countries and years.

To linearise the relationships among variables and to mitigate the risk of heteroscedasticity, we converted the initial macro-panel data into natural logarithms. The model estimations are based on Equation (1):

$$\ln \text{CRP}_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \ln \text{IV}_{it} + \beta_2 \ln \text{WPE}_{it} + \beta_3 \ln \text{WPE} * \ln \text{IV}_{it} + v_{it} \quad (1)$$

Where:

$\ln \text{CRP}_{it}$: share of children at risk of poverty as the dependent variable converted into natural logarithms in period t and in country i ,

$\ln \text{IV}_{it}$: independent variables in period t and in country i converted into natural logarithms, successively as $\ln \text{EL}_{it}$, $\ln \text{UE}_{it}$, $\ln \text{Gini}_{it}$, and $\ln \text{GE}_{it}$,

$\ln \text{WPE}_{it}$: moderating variable of women's political empowerment in period t and in country i converted into natural logarithms,

$\ln \text{WPE}_{it} \times \ln \text{IV}_{it}$: the effect of women's political empowerment as a moderator of the independent variables, successively as $\ln \text{EL}_{it}$, $\ln \text{UE}_{it}$, $\ln \text{Gini}_{it}$, and $\ln \text{GE}_{it}$,

$\beta_0 \dots \beta_3$: vectors,

i : the EU countries (1, 2, ..., 27),

t : years (2006, 2007, ..., 2023),

v_{it} : total random error, consisting of a purely random part ε_{it} and individual effect u_i , which refers to the specific i unit of the panel ($v_{it} = \varepsilon_{it} + u_i$).

We conducted the Breusch–Pagan and Hausman tests to determine the appropriate method for model estimations, comparing panel regression with fixed or random effects. These methods are commonly used in studies of gender inequalities and in analyses based on cross-country and cross-year panel data (Guliyev, 2023).

Research results

Following the described procedure, we estimated models to examine the factors shaping child poverty (see Table 2). Model 1 is the reference model, showing the basic impact of four factors on child poverty without considering the moderating effect of women's political empowerment. The results confirm that the share of early leavers from education, unemployment, and income inequalities (as measured by the Gini index) are all statistically significant risk factors. Increases in these factors raise the share of children at risk of poverty, with income inequalities having the strongest impact and early leavers from education having the weakest. Government expenditure, as a statistically significant mitigating factor, shows that higher public spending reduces child poverty.

Table 2. Results of models' estimations with share of children at risk of poverty (lnCRP) as a dependent variable

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Constant	0.197 (0.413)	0.325 (0.420)	0.520 (0.525)	−0.488 (0.485)	0.232 (1.624)	5.954** (1.731)
Independent variables						
lnEL	0.051** (0.019)	0.038 (0.021)	−0.034 (0.117)	0.046* (0.021)	0.038 (0.021)	0.038 (0.021)
lnUE	0.185*** (0.016)	0.178*** (0.016)	0.177*** (0.017)	0.596*** (0.129)	0.178*** (0.016)	0.177*** (0.016)
lnGini	0.801*** (0.104)	0.804*** (0.104)	0.793*** (0.105)	0.808*** (0.103)	0.831 (0.478)	0.794*** (0.103)
lnGE	−0.125* (0.060)	−0.112 (0.060)	−0.110 (0.060)	−0.122* (0.060)	−0.111 (0.060)	−1.586** (0.445)
Interactions						
lnWPE		−0.045 (0.028)	−0.097 (0.088)	0.217* (0.085)	−0.013 (0.512)	−1.791** (0.523)
lnWPE × lnEL			0.023 (0.037)			
lnWPE × lnUE				−0.133** (0.041)		
lnWPE × lnGini					−0.009 (0.152)	
lnWPE × lnGE						0.460** (0.137)
Fit statistics						
Breusch–Pagan test	$\chi^2(1) = 2212.26$ $p = 0$	$\chi^2(1) = 2144.29$ $p = 0$	$\chi^2(1) = 2071.53$ $p = 0$	$\chi^2(1) = 2052.73$ $p = 0$	$\chi^2(1) = 2144.94$ $p = 0$	$\chi^2(1) = 2167.88$ $p = 0$
Hausman test	$\chi^2(4) = 3.63$ $p = 0.46$	$\chi^2(5) = 4.32$ $p = 0.50$	$\chi^2(6) = 6.01$ $p = 0.42$	$\chi^2(6) = 7.13$ $p = 0.31$	$\chi^2(6) = 4.19$ $p = 0.65$	$\chi^2(6) = 4.61$ $p = 0.59$
Effects	Random	Random	Random	Random	Random	Random
Number of countries	27	27	27	27	27	27
Number of observations	481	481	481	481	481	481
“Between” variance	0.042	0.041	0.041	0.041	0.044	0.043
“Within” variance	0.011	0.011	0.011	0.011	0.011	0.011
Within R^2	0.346	0.349	0.350	0.366	0.349	0.365
Between R^2	0.551	0.570	0.564	0.543	0.569	0.569
Overall R^2	0.508	0.523	0.518	0.503	0.522	0.522

Note: Standard errors in brackets; *** $p < 0.0001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$.

In Model 2, women's political empowerment is included as a potential factor shaping child poverty. The result of the model estimation shows that women's political empowerment is a mitigating factor, and an increase in women's political participation is linked to a reduction in child poverty, although this effect is not statistically significant.

Models 3–6 examine the interacting effect of women's political empowerment. The results of Models 3 and 5 show that women's political empowerment does not moderate the impact of early leaving from education or income inequalities on child poverty, as the interaction terms for these factors are statistically insignificant.

We determined the moderating role of women's political empowerment on the impact of unemployment (Model 4) and the impact of government expenditure (Model 6) on child poverty. In both models, the parameters of interactions are statistically significant. The interaction effect of women's political empowerment and unemployment is negative, which means that women's political empowerment reduces the positive impact of unemployment on child poverty. To visualise the interaction effect between women's political empowerment (lnWPE) and unemployment (lnUE) on the share of children at risk of poverty (lnCRP), Figure 1 was prepared based on Model 4. Predictive values for the share of lnCRP were calculated for two values of women's political empowerment, measured as the mean natural logarithm of the share of seats held by women in national parliaments and governments (3.20), plus and minus its standard deviation (0.42). These values represent low (2.78) and high (3.62) levels of women's political empowerment. Then, the minimum and maximum values for the natural logarithms of unemployment (0.69 and 3.31, respectively) were accepted to estimate the predicted values for children at risk of poverty.

The second moderating effect identified in our estimations is the lnWPE and lnGE in shaping child poverty (Figure 2). While public spending is a factor that mitigates child poverty, women's political empowerment interacts positively with this impact, thereby reducing the mitigating effect. Similar to Figure 1, Plot 2 visualises the lnWPE and lnGE in shaping the lnCRP, based on Model 6. Predictive values as an lnCRP were calculated for two values of women's political empowerment: the value of 2.78 represents the low level of women's political empowerment (the mean of the natural logarithm of share of seats held by women in national parliaments and governments minus its standard deviation), while the value of 3.62 represents its high level (mean plus its standard deviation). Then, the minimum (3.03)

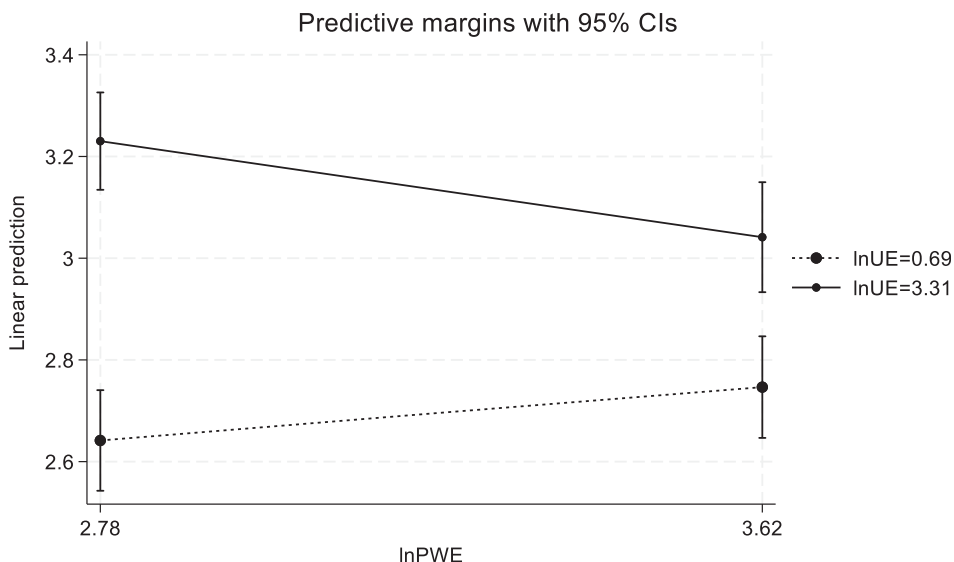


Figure 1. Predictive values of children at risk of poverty (in ln) based on Model 4.

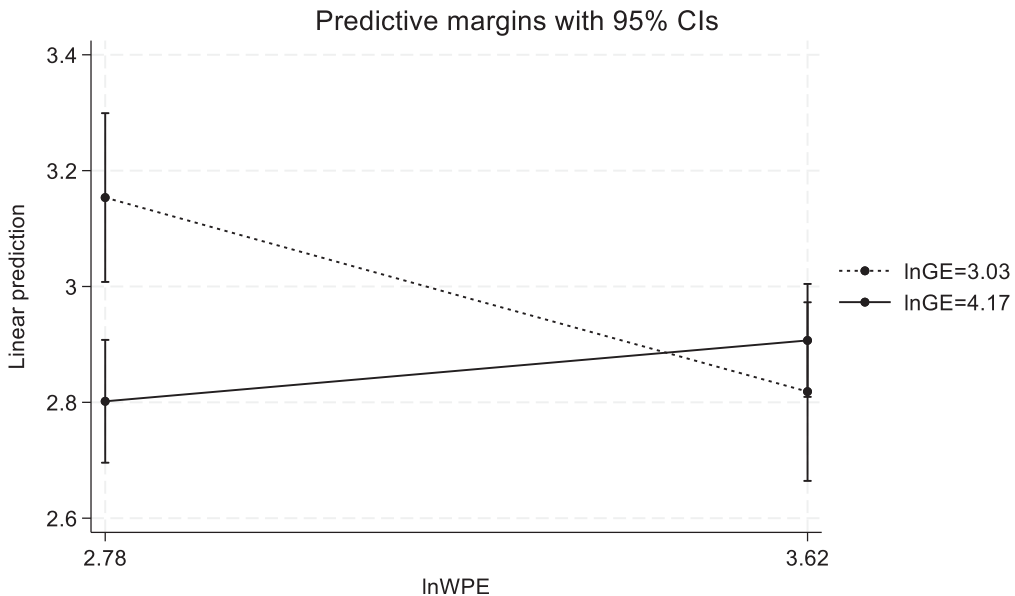


Figure 2. Predictive values of children at risk of poverty (in ln) based on Model 6.

and maximum (4.17) values of the natural logarithm of government expenditure were used to estimate the predicted values of child poverty.

In summary, women's political empowerment moderates the share of children at risk of poverty, particularly in contexts of high unemployment and low government expenditure. However, when unemployment is low and government spending is high, these factors contribute to reducing child poverty independently, without the moderating effect of women's political empowerment.

Discussion

The causes of child poverty are so varied and interrelated that we cannot create and then use any particular algorithm to eradicate it (Mihai et al., 2015). However, we can consider the elements that increase or decrease child poverty. This study aimed to explore the impact of multiple variables on the probability of child poverty in EU countries, with a particular focus on the moderating role of women's political empowerment in these relationships. The findings highlight the crucial role of women's political empowerment in combating child poverty.

The analysis addressing (RQ1) identifies four key factors – early school dropout, unemployment, income inequality, and government expenditure – as significant contributors in shaping the risk of child poverty. Education is recognised as a crucial pathway for economic mobility and social inclusion, playing a vital role in reducing the risk of poverty and potentially preventing future generations from falling into deeper poverty (Mihai et al., 2015; Hofmarcher, 2021). Early dropout from education leads to missing the opportunity to acquire the necessary skills and qualifications for stable and well-paying employment. This education gap increases the likelihood that, in adulthood, these individuals will encounter limited employment opportunities and lower income potential, which can significantly affect personal economic outcomes and overall family well-being. This issue is especially severe in low-income households, where every member's potential financial contribution to the family income is crucial. Beyond this, the “dropout discourse” often links early school leaving to various adverse outcomes, including urban poverty, poor health prospects, long-term dependence on public assistance, single parenthood (particularly among

women), political and social challenges, and juvenile delinquency. Notably, these factors are also closely associated with both school dropout and child poverty.

This study also found that higher unemployment rates are linked to an increased proportion of children living in poverty. When stable employment is lacking, especially regarding parental unemployment, the entire family suffers. There is often a direct correlation between parents' employment status and the family's financial stability, which affects children's immediate living conditions, including access to adequate nutrition, housing, and healthcare. Furthermore, it has long-term implications for children's development and well-being. This finding corroborates the findings of Chzhen (2017), which emphasise that the risk of child poverty is significantly elevated in countries with higher rates of unemployment among the working-age population. This is, in part, due to the substantial impact of the EU on family incomes through the labour market during the Great Recession.

In addition, income inequality, as measured by the Gini index, significantly affects child poverty. Greater income inequality is associated with a higher proportion of children living in poverty, highlighting disparities in the distribution of societal resources. This imbalance restricts access to essential resources for children from the poorest families, hindering their development. For example, unequal wealth distribution may limit access to fundamental services, such as education, healthcare, and social security, for children in low-income households. These limitations can have long-lasting effects on children's health, education, and future economic opportunities. This aligns with the work of Toczyłowska et al. (2016), which found that in most European countries, children face a higher risk of poverty and material deprivation than the general population as income inequality increases.

In contrast, government expenditure acts as a protective factor against child poverty. The result indicates that higher government spending is associated with a lower risk of child poverty. This aligns with findings by Barcena-Martín et al. (2017) and Chzhen (2017), who suggest that social spending significantly contributes to reducing child poverty, particularly in households with low work intensity and larger families. Even after controlling for household-level factors and other macro-level characteristics – such as unemployment, affluence, and the overall level of generosity in the welfare state – social expenditures have been demonstrated to protect families and children from poverty. Moreover, in-kind welfare expenditures have proven more effective than cash transfers in curbing child poverty (Nygård et al., 2019). This underscores the importance of how government funds are allocated and whether they effectively target the most vulnerable children. Prioritising and optimising government spending in areas that directly benefit children and families – such as child welfare, subsidised childcare, educational support programmes, healthcare, and family services – are crucial factors for reducing child poverty.

Child poverty is a multifaceted issue, with factors such as early school dropout, unemployment, income inequality, and government expenditure often being deeply interrelated. To illustrate this, early school dropout can lead to higher unemployment rates in adulthood, which, in turn, can exacerbate income inequality. Inadequate government spending on social services may fail to address these interconnected problems, thus increasing children's vulnerability to the adverse effects of poverty and perpetuating the cycle of poverty. As De Witte et al. (2013) noted, individuals who drop out of school are more likely to experience long-term unemployment and prolonged reliance on public assistance. This highlights the necessity for effective policy interventions that adopt a multidimensional approach to these interrelated factors. By addressing early school dropout, unemployment, and income inequality, and by optimising government expenditure on social services, policymakers can create an environment that supports children's well-being and development, ultimately reducing child poverty in EU countries.

A key finding of RQ2 is that women's political empowerment can moderate child poverty in specific contexts, particularly by mitigating the adverse effects of high unemployment rates. This finding can be explained by the role of women in policymaking. Previous research highlights that women's political empowerment is inextricably linked to the outcomes for women, children, and society as a whole (Alexander et al., 2016; Sundström et al., 2017). Women who hold more seats in political power often prioritise policies related to families and children, such as childcare, education, and health (Swiss et al., 2012; Homan, 2017). This focus reflects traditional gender roles, where women are typically more involved in family matters and child-rearing, making them more sensitive to policy needs in these areas

(Kellard et al., 2024). Political empowerment enables women to actively shape the legislative process and advocate for more inclusive social policies. For instance, women may support inclusive employment policies that promote flexible working hours, parental support, and gender-equal employment opportunities (Besnier, 2023). These initiatives help more parents, particularly mothers, enter the labour market, secure stable incomes, and reduce the risk of child poverty. Furthermore, women's political empowerment contributes to the development of a more comprehensive social security system, offering support for the unemployed through benefits, job training, and employment services. These measures help alleviate the economic burden of unemployment while facilitating a faster return to the labour market. In turn, this reduces the likelihood of children falling into poverty (Francis East and Roll, 2015).

Another key finding of this research is the positive lnWPE and lnGE in reducing child poverty. When women's political empowerment is higher, government spending becomes more effective in alleviating child poverty. Empowered female politicians are more likely to prioritise the efficient allocation of public expenditures, ensuring that financial resources are directed towards critical sectors such as education, healthcare, and social services. This enhances the overall utility of government spending (Chzhen, 2017). In practice, female politicians may advocate for increased investment in the domains of welfare programmes that directly benefit children, including healthcare, childcare subsidies, family allowances, parental leave, and early education (Quamruzzaman and Lange, 2016; Homan, 2017). These policies not only improve children's current quality of life and strengthen their families' economic stability, but they also help break the cycle of poverty by improving children's education, future employability, and health outcomes (Mihai et al., 2015; Besnier, 2023; Kellard et al., 2024). By optimising the allocation of public resources, these measures enhance the efficacy of government spending, leading to a more substantial reduction in child poverty.

In fact, this empowerment extends beyond policy formulation, driving broader social and cultural transformations that further enhance child well-being and reduce the risk of poverty (Sundström et al., 2017). As women assume greater roles in politics, traditional societal perceptions of gender roles may evolve, influencing resource distribution within families and fostering a stronger focus on child welfare. The existing literature suggests that increased female representation in politics can shift societal attitudes towards family roles, promote greater gender equality, and encourage greater male involvement in childcare (Shohel et al., 2021). This shift helps reduce the caregiving burden on women, enabling a better work–family balance, improving the overall household economic stability, and ultimately lowering child poverty rates. Moreover, politically empowered women often prioritise the effective implementation of policies. They tend to focus on execution details, establish monitoring mechanisms, and adjust policies based on real-world outcomes. This emphasis on accountability and adaptability enhances the efficient use of public resources, ensuring that support reaches the individuals who are most in need. As a result, interventions aimed at reducing child poverty become more targeted and effective, leading to more substantial poverty alleviation (Quamruzzaman and Lange, 2016; Homan, 2017).

However, the lack of a significant impact of women's political empowerment on early education dropout rates and income inequality, in alleviating child poverty, can be attributed to the complexity and deep-rooted structural nature of these issues. Early education dropout is often tied to broader social inequalities, such as family economic status, parental education levels, and access to community resources (Broussard et al., 2012). Similarly, income inequality stems from labour market structures, the relationship between capital and labour, and the globalised economic system, encompassing wage disparities, unequal employment opportunities, and the concentration of wealth and capital (Francis East and Roll, 2015). Although women's political empowerment can promote more inclusive social policies, its effects on education and income distribution are typically indirect, and may take longer to materialise (Sundström et al., 2017).

Furthermore, social and cultural norms, along with existing institutional frameworks, can constrain the implementation of such policies, limiting the potential impact of women's political participation (Adnan and Amri, 2021). If existing systems and policies do not prioritise educational reform and income redistribution, the effectiveness of women's political empowerment might be restricted (Sharma, 2020). Moreover, successful policy implementation depends on various support mechanisms, including

sufficient financial resources, administrative capacity, and public backing, which may not be fully realised in the short term (Broussard et al., 2012). Therefore, while women's political empowerment is a critical factor, it is unlikely to directly address these entrenched issues in the short term. This suggests that significantly reducing early school dropout rates and income inequality requires complementary economic and social reforms to effectively alleviate child poverty (Kellard et al., 2024).

Policy implications

While this study does not establish causal relationships, its findings still offer valuable insights for policymakers seeking to reduce child poverty in the EU. Given the moderating role of women's political empowerment in shaping child welfare policies, enhancing women's representation in decision-making may help strengthen the effectiveness of these policies. First, fostering gender-inclusive political representation may contribute to more comprehensive and targeted child welfare policies and improve public spending efficiency. Governments may consider measures such as gender quotas, leadership training, and financial incentives to ensure some women actually hold key policymaking roles. Second, considering the relationship between unemployment and child poverty identified in this study, policies that support women's participation in the labour market could serve as a complementary approach. Finally, while women's political empowerment plays a significant moderating role in certain socio-economic contexts, its impact on structural issues like income inequality and early school dropout, remains limited. This suggests that political empowerment alone may not directly address these deeply rooted challenges and should be accompanied by broader systemic reforms, including educational improvements and wage equity policies.

Limitations and further research

While this study identifies the significant impact of women's political empowerment on reducing child poverty, it is essential to acknowledge the inherent limitations of the research. First, it is noteworthy that the research in question focuses on EU countries, and further exploration is required to ascertain the applicability of its findings to other regions. Second, while the use of publicly available macro-panel data enhances statistical robustness, it limits insights into micro-level dynamics. Future studies could incorporate qualitative methods to better understand how women's political empowerment translates into policy impacts on child poverty.

Third, establishing a causal relationship between women's empowerment and child poverty remains a challenging endeavour. Further research could build on the existing evidence base by exploring how women's political empowerment functions within different social structures and its specific impact on child poverty. This would help uncover micro-social processes and power dynamics that cannot be fully captured through quantitative research. In addition, future studies could explore the interplay between women's political empowerment and other social factors, such as educational attainment, economic development, and socio-cultural norms, to develop a more comprehensive theoretical framework. Finally, investigating the practical implementation of policies aimed at empowering women politically – and their impact on child well-being and poverty reduction – would be highly beneficial. Such research could assess key aspects of policy execution, including resource allocation, monitoring mechanisms, and policy adjustments, to ensure their effectiveness.

Conclusion

This study emphasises the necessity of considering the various factors that contribute to child poverty and the role of women's political empowerment as a moderating factor. The resolution of issues such as early school dropout, unemployment, and income inequality, in combination with the optimisation of government expenditure on social services, can facilitate the creation of a more supportive environment

for children's well-being. The empowerment of women in the political sphere is of paramount importance, not only for achieving gender equality but also for ensuring broader social justice and reducing child poverty. The empowerment of women contributes to the formulation of more inclusive social policies, improves the economic conditions of families, and promotes positive social and cultural changes. Ultimately, this provides comprehensive support for children and reduces their risk of poverty. As Sundström et al. (2017) have previously observed, the empowerment of women in the political sphere represents a pivotal process in the advancement of social development. This process has been demonstrated to exert a considerable influence on the reduction of child poverty and the promotion of overall social welfare.

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