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**Economic Inequality & Unemployment: Its Effects on Social Mobility Across Nations**

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**Abstract**

This study examines the intricate relationship between economic inequality, unemployment, and social mobility across nations, highlighting how disparities in income, wealth, and opportunities intersect with labor market challenges to shape individuals' life chances. Economic inequality manifests through uneven access to resources, while unemployment restricts livelihoods, both of which significantly hinder upward mobility and reinforce intergenerational cycles of disadvantage. The research draws on comparative global trends, theoretical perspectives, and empirical evidence to analyze how structural factors such as education, cultural norms, technological change, and regional disparities contribute to persistent inequalities. Case studies from both developed and developing countries illustrate how some nations achieve higher levels of mobility through redistributive policies and inclusive labor markets, while others remain trapped in inequality-driven stagnation. By emphasizing the policy implications for inclusive growth, welfare systems, and sustainable development, the study underscores the urgent need to address these challenges to build more equitable and socially mobile societies.

**Keywords:-** Economic Inequality, Unemployment, Social Mobility, Education, Welfare Policies, Sustainable Development

**Introduction**

Economic inequality and unemployment are two of the most persistent challenges confronting nations worldwide, and together they exert a profound influence on social mobility, shaping opportunities for individuals and entire communities. Economic inequality, reflected in disparities of income, wealth, and access to resources, creates barriers that prevent equitable participation in social and economic life, while unemployment—particularly structural and youth unemployment—restricts individuals' ability to build sustainable livelihoods. Across

nations, these factors are deeply interlinked: societies with high levels of inequality often experience limited mobility, where birth circumstances largely determine one's life chances, whereas nations with stronger redistributive systems and inclusive labor markets tend to foster upward mobility. Historical trajectories, such as colonial legacies and industrial transformations, have widened these divides, and contemporary forces such as globalization, automation, and technological disruption continue to polarize labor markets, benefiting highly skilled workers while marginalizing low-skilled ones. Inequality and unemployment are not merely economic processes but also socio-political trends that form patterns of education, health, democratic male/female participation, and even democratic stability. An example includes the inaccessible quality education and training of people which leads to further disadvantages, and unemployment based on sex, age, and disadvantaged groups one another and adds to the structural inequalities. It is possible to see dramatic differences on a comparative basis: whereas Nordic states show how welfare systems and active labor policy promote mobility, economies such as the United States point to how inequality and polarization of jobs deepen class relations. Meanwhile, rapid growth and poor work opportunities in countries of Africa, South Asia and Latin America have the added complication of high levels of unemployment combined with pervasive inequality, constrained social development, and a source of migration pressures and social unrest. The importance of this matter is evidenced by the worldwide efforts like the UN Sustainable Development Goals, that emphasize good working opportunities (SDG 8), lower inequality (SDG 10), and peace, justice, and effective institutions (SDG 16). The relationship between inequality, unemployment and mobility is thus quite important to policymakers because it provides insight into the necessity to pursue inclusive growth strategies, make reforms in the educational sector, labor market innovations, and social protection that could help in disrupting the generations of disadvantage. Finally, dealing with these two issues are the key to the development of the more equal societies where merit, rather than inheritance, makes an impact on the destiny of a particular individual.

### **Background of the Study**

The critical issues of inequality or disparities in the economy and unemployment in developed and developing countries have become vital factors in the organization of societies and determine the level of social mobility that people may enjoy. Increased inequality in income and wealth gaps, as well as ongoing problems with unemployment (most notably among younger populations and those economically disadvantaged) have further exacerbated social centrifugal forces and undermined the prospect of equality of opportunity. Massive wealth has

been accumulated, and simultaneously the polarization of employment between high- skilled workers and moments of securitization or exclusion of low- skilled workers, is axiomatic in the historic processes of industrialization, globalization, and technological change. Negative educational, medical and labor market opportunities in many areas have sustained disadvantages in poverty cycles and have reduced intergenerational mobility. This is evidenced in the growing frequency of these issues in the global discourse on policy, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which have drawn attention to the necessity to develop strategies to deal with such challenges because economic development is only one threat that inequality and unemployment pose; social stability, democratic participation, and equitable development between countries are also highly susceptible.

### **Definitions of Economic Inequality, Unemployment, and Social Mobility**

Economic inequality, unemployment and social mobility are interconnected concepts which became a basis of determining differences within and among the societies. Economic inequality is an uneven distribution of resources, opportunities, wealth, and income amongst members of a society or between groups of a society. Most commonly economic inequality is measured using the gini coefficient, the ratio of income medians across the quintiles, or wealth concentration at the upper percentiles in the distribution. It takes a variety of forms-including income inequality, which measures the gap in wages or capital income; wealth inequality, which measures inequality of ownership of assets; and opportunity inequality, whereby access to quality education, health and jobs become limited to a select few. Unemployment on the contrary is a state whereby people actively attempting to get work fail to secure the job and thus is an indicator of labor market inefficiencies. Economists generally classify unemployment by terminologies consisting of frictional (transient, transitional employment), structural (due to skill-job mismatch), cyclical (related to economic slumps), and seasonal (as a result of variability in demand in certain sectors). On top of the economic effects, unemployment has been linked to social exclusion, poverty and psychological stresses further enforcing the cycle of marginalization. The third of these pillars, social mobility, describes the flow of individuals or populations within a social structure, commonly over generations in income, occupation or education. It includes upward mobility, whereby people have a better socio-economic status than their parents, and also downward mobility, whereby there is decreasing standard of living across the two or more generations. Social mobility can be taken as a proxy measure of equality of opportunity in a society: high mobility implies that talent and effort can override initial disadvantage, and low mobility implies that structural obstacles-

entrenched inequality and unemployment- hamper progress. The three notions are internalized together because economic inequality by itself can curtail the access of people to education and employment market resulting in increased unemployment, whereas economic inequality and unemployment have the same impact in hindering social mobility as they trap people into patterns of disadvantage. Therefore, the operationalization and the explanation of these terms is vital not only as a measure of academic clarity but also as the source of policy-related knowledge to motivate individuals to comprehend the fundamental causes of social and economic divisions with countries.

### **Types of Economic Inequality**

- **Income Inequality**

Income inequality refers to the uneven distribution of earnings among individuals or households, often measured by wages, salaries, and returns from investments. It arises when a small proportion of society captures a disproportionately large share of national income, while the majority earn significantly less. Factors such as differences in education, skills, access to high-paying jobs, technological advancements, and globalization contribute to widening income gaps. Countries with limited redistributive policies often experience sharp income disparities, leading to reduced purchasing power for the lower classes and restricted social mobility.

- **Wealth Inequality**

Wealth inequality, though closely related to income inequality, is distinct in that it measures the disparities in asset ownership—such as property, savings, stocks, and inheritances—rather than just earnings. Wealth tends to be more unequally distributed than income because it accumulates over generations, enabling wealthy families to maintain or expand their advantages. For example, intergenerational transfers like inheritance, real estate, or business ownership create significant disparities between rich and poor. This type of inequality is particularly problematic as it perpetuates long-term socio-economic divides, making it difficult for individuals from lower-income backgrounds to access opportunities for advancement.

- **Regional Disparities**

Regional disparities are inequalities which occur among various geographical regions within a country or among countries. These inequalities can be as a result of unequal economic growth, industrial cluster, distribution of infrastructure or failure to reach policy. An example is that, urban centers usually draw investment, education and work opportunities and the rural or

underdeveloped areas are left behind leaving deep differences in the living standards. At the international level, the division in the form of the North-South gap is evident because developed nations are characterized by higher incomes and enhanced welfare regimes than developing countries. These regional disparities tend to facilitate migration, political violence, and lack of access which further perpetuates national/ global inequity.

Conclusively, income inequality, wealth inequality and regional inequalities belong to a defined system of economic inequality that necessitates the structure of chances and wealth available in societies. Whereas income inequality captures inter-temporal disparities in earnings, wealth inequality highlights inter-temporal structural imbalances, and geographical disparities draw the picture of the unevenness in development. They complete each other as one can see that inequality is multi layered and pervasive, its effect on unemployment, social mobility and thus the general socio-economic wellbeing is immense.

### **Causes of Economic Inequality**

The economic inequality, is a multi-dimensional challenge that is credited to a combination of structural institutional and socio- economic factors that lead to an interaction of forces that evolve over time giving rise to a disparity in weathers and income, distribution and opportunities both across the societies. Among the major factors, the discrepancy in access to education and skills development is the one that predestines employability and earning potential: the greater the education and skills a person has, the better and better-paid the job and the better, higher position in the life experience; the lesser the education and skill, the poor and low in the sphere of earnings and informal economy the person remains. The widening gap has also been exacerbated by technological change, which has accompanied a shift towards globalization, whereby automation and digitalization favour more skills with increased benefits to highly skilled workers and relegating low-skilled labour, and global trade flows tend to favour those economies with a concentration of capital as opposed to those with a concentration of labour. The characteristics and policies of labor markets, too, play a role, as the undermining of job security and the dominance of informal employment with declining trade- Union representation in most countries has resulted in the stagnation of wages of most workers at the same time as executive compensation and share owner returns are increasing. Intergenerational wealth transfer in the form of inheritance reproduces the structural inequalities so that structure of advantage/disadvantage is perpetuated across generations within families, thus limiting social mobility. It is especially the case regarding taxation and redistributive policies: in places with neither progressive taxation nor social safety nets, inequality is likely to proceed

unchecked, as is the common experience in neoliberal economies. Inequality is further enhanced by the regional imbalances in development where the urban center is the areas with most investment expenditures, developed infrastructure, and opportunity provision, whereas the rural or underdeveloped areas are not served. Economic differences are increased through discrimination and social stratification in gender, race, caste and ethnicity because such groups lacked equitable access to employment, credit facilities, and land ownership. Inequality is even heightened by macroeconomic cycles and patterns of unemployment because economic slowdowns hit vulnerable groups, which have no savings or safety nets disproportionately. Last, inequality is embedded in political and institutional dynamics of corruption, policy-making by the elite communities and unequal representation in the governing process of policy formulation which tend to be geared towards serving the interests of powerful groups. Therefore the origins of economic inequality are not narrowed down to market processes only but are rooted in historical, cultural and institutional settings thus is a long trenchant issue that defines the course of social mobility and indeed development of all countries.

### **Literature Review**

**Burdett, K., et al (2003).** Its association of crime, inequality and unemployment is commonly recognised as a crucial socio-economic concern that undercuts stability and progress in nations. Economic inequality at high levels leads to social and social-psychological inequality such as relative deprivation whereby, the poor feel they are deprived of an opportunity available to the rich and this may contribute to both frustration and resentment being the sources of crime. Unemployment, especially among the young people and marginalized populations, diminishes the available legitimate channels of money-making thus motivating some of the young people into illegal activity as a survival mechanism or they as a desperate way of self-assertion. According to empirical studies, the greater the wealth inequality and the unemployment rates in a society, the greater the levels of crime; violence and social unrests involving property crimes. Also, crime adds up to inequality as it creates a disorderly community, discourages investments, and reduce access to education and employment. Therefore, not only is inequality reduction and creation of sustainable jobs important to allow economic growth but also in preventing crime and ensuring cohesion.

**Galbraith, J. K. (2009).** Galbraith (2009), in his article on Inequality, Unemployment and Growth: New Measures of Old Controversies, criticizes the past methods or the methods of study on inequality since his major consideration is the methodologies of measurement of equality within societies. He states that these traditional models fail to capture the interaction

between inequality, unemployment and economic growth properly due to which there is incomplete policy implication. Galbraith adds that he focuses on the point that inequality is not an incidental process of growth, but it is institutionally connected to the condition of work in the labor market where the increase of joblessness puts pressure on income inequality. Based on facts, he establishes that the elevation of unemployment increases inequality in that the extent of unequal distribution of income is broadened due to reduced bargaining power of the labor among other reasons. Further, he points at political and institutional aspects of these problems and indicates that policy decisions have a potent impact on the extent of equality and the level of employment. Solid contributions to his work include the re-conceptualization of inequality discussions as inclusion of the unemployment and growth patterns at the center of the discussions.

In their study, Helpman, Itskhoki, and Redding (2010) analyze the interaction between inequality and unemployment in the globalization world and pay special attention to the role of trade integration and international competition that influence the labor market results. Their model describes how globalization of the economy is the cause of both increasing inequality in wages as well as unemployment (especially in the advanced economies facing international low-wage competition). They claim that globalization increases skill differentiation where there is a disproportionate gain through new opportunities among skilled workers and there is a loss of jobs and a downward pressure on wages on unskilled workers. This paper establishes that labor market friction like search costs and recruitment complications increase the effects of global shocks leading to not only greater inequality but also unemployment. Notably, the authors point out the importance of policy responses, which, in this case, includes education, training, and labor market reforms that play a central role in moderating such impacts. These results provide theoretical explanations as to why globalization is not generating equitable outcomes, but has favored certain facets of the society and locked others out hence fueling inequality and unemployment.

**Castells-Quintana, D., & Royuela, V. (2012).** Role of Income Inequality and Urbanisation, discusses how inequality and urbanisation have a two-fold impact on the correlation between unemployment and growth. On the basis of long-term panel data about cross-regional data they posit that it is impossible to view unemployment without looking at inequality because the distribution of income defines how societies will bear the effects of unemployment. In their analysis, they determine that increased inequality further contributes to adverse effects of unemployment on growth by weakening demand, making investment less appealing, and

creating social dis-order. Urbanization as a mediating factor is also mentioned by them since although cities are associated with increased possibilities to grow, they may also contribute to an increase in unemployment pressure in case of inequality and thus to urban poverty and exclusion. The authors in their conclusion concur that healthy urban policies and such redistributive policies are necessary to make sure that economic growth is transformed into widespread employment and mobility and cannot be leveraged as a driver of inequality and unemployment cycles.

**Cysne (2009)** in *On the Positive Correlation Between Income Inequality and Unemployment* proves that the interconnection between the unemployment and inequality are mutually supportive, i.e. those societies with greater income inequality will have greater unemployment. He constructs a theoretical model where the inequality decreases the aggregate demand of goods and services and hence discourages the creation of jobs and this inevitably creates structural unemployment. At the same time, unemployment contributes to inequality in that it decreases wages, dilutes the bargaining power of labor and the underprivileged get a raw deal of it. This happens to be a two-way street as one may initiate the other thanks to other conditions becoming the source of the latter and vice versa a vicious cycle in which neither inequality nor unemployment will foster any long-term growth. In her research study, Cysne also highlights importance of institutional arrangement and policy frameworks claiming that effective redistributive mechanisms and inclusive labor market policies are imperative to disrupt such a cycle. His results give great credence to integrated policy solutions that tackle inequality and unemployment together as opposed to them being treated as two individual issues in the economy.

### **The Relationship Between Inequality and Populist Movements Across Nations**

The economic inequality has been directly conjoined to the populist rise in the countries and with the exacerbation through inequality in wealth reinforces huge trends in the continuation of the inequality in income and opportunities, which causes widespread disappointment and drains the credibility of long term political and economic establishment organizations. Economic disparity leaves the masses without a connected feeling or a belonging, especially the working class, younger generation, and the marginalized sector of the population who do not have a sense of belonging in the contemporary forces of globalization, automation, and neoliberal global economic changes. Such dissatisfaction is rich territory to populist heroic leaders who offer to represent the voices of the supposedly common people against the supposed elites, frequently not only packaging inequality as an economic issue, but also a moral



and political failure by the elites in society. Populist waves that pressure established parties on issues of equality have been linked with rising inequality in the advanced economies as exemplified in the United States, with the lure of such leaders to regain lost jobs due to outsourcing demands or immigration and, in Europe, where economic uncertainty has spawned nationalist and antipathy toward immigration. Populist politics can be a reaction in developing countries to the deep-seated tendencies of elite control, corruption, and inability of governments to lower poverty and to generate comprehensive growth through pledges of distribution, subsidies and protectionist rules. Whereas populist forces have at times pursued redistributive welfare, and an extension of social protections to tackle inequality, in other cases, economic anger fueled by austerity politics has driven politics that have been exclusionary and have intensified polarization, as opposed to eradicating structural problems. Notably, populist policies fuelled by inequality can erode democratic institutions, as populist leaders will become likely to amass power and water down checks and balances in the name of acting on behalf of the will of the people. Cross-national evidence points to a strong connection between societies with inequality that is high and long-standing and risk of political volatility and populist mobilization as elements of an economic frustration connect with other cultural anxieties and identity-politics. Therefore, the connection between populism and inequality highlights a vicious cycle: since inequality acts as a factor promoting populism, populist authorities can temporarily address despair, but the decline of inequality in the latter frequently does not address the underlying causes, which perpetuates inequality and instability. The solution to this dynamic is twofold that is, it must be accompanied by economic reforms that lower inequality and institutional reforms to increase democratic accountability and rebuild confidence in inclusive governance.

### **Methodology**

The study uses the research design of a comparative cross-national study to examine the correlation between the economic inequality issue- unemployment and social mobility in various regions and income groupings. International organisations were recognised as a reliable source of historical secondary data used in the study; these include World Bank, International Labour Organization (ILO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Economic Forum Global Social Mobility Index. Such crucial indicators/metrics are the Gini coefficient/index that measures inequality, the national unemployment rate, the Human Development Index (HDI) position, and social mobility rates. The paper involves both the descriptive and inferential

approach to statistical analysis: the descriptive analysis has been used to draw attention to the cross-country dynamics and regional differences, whereas the correlation analysis has been implemented in order to analyze the direction and the degree of the relation between the inequality, unemployment, and mobility. There is also the incorporation of comparative case analysis to put findings into perspective by citing examples of advanced economies, emerging markets, and developing countries. By choosing a mixed-method variation, it has been possible to increase the degree of interpretation because quantitative data will be complemented by qualitative views contained in policy reports and the available literature. The approach will keep the Miso research to determine not only statistical relationships but also understand how inequality, unemployment and social mobility are stratified through framework and institutional arrangements on a global scale.

## Results and Discussion

**Table 1: Cross-National Comparison of Inequality, Unemployment, and Social Mobility**

Country	Gini Index (Inequality)	Unemployment Rate (%)	Global Social Mobility Rank (WEF)	HDI Rank	Notes
United States	0.41	5.2	27	21	High inequality, moderate mobility
Sweden	0.28	6.4	1	7	Low inequality, high mobility
India	0.37	7.5	76	134	Rising inequality, youth job crisis
Brazil	0.53	9.1	60	89	Persistent inequality, regional gaps
South Africa	0.63	32.0	77	109	Highest inequality, severe joblessness

Table 1 puts into relief the opposite trends of inequality and unemployment and social mobility in the chosen countries and presents the way in which these processes influence the developmental outcome. With a Gini index level of 0.41 and low unemployment the United States demonstrates moderate levels of social mobility yet has a problem with perpetual income

concentration. Sweden shows that low inequality (0.28) and good welfare policy would attract the best ranking in global mobility even though it has slightly higher unemployment. India is characterized by increased inequality (0.37) and moderate unemployment (7.5%), although, the low mobility rank (76) and poor HDI rank (134) unveil the problems of the youth unemployment and non-equal access to education. The condition of Brazil with a high Gini index (0.53) and a high unemployment of 9.1% is characterized by chronic inequality and regional imbalance that diminishes mobility. The most extreme example is that of South Africa with the highest degree of inequality (0.63) and concerning unemployment (32 per cent) in the world, leading to one of the lowest mobility scores. All these comparisons illustrate the close negative connection between inequality and social mobility between countries.

**Table 2: Correlation Between Inequality, Unemployment, and Social Mobility**

Indicator Relationship	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Significance (p-value)
Inequality (Gini Index) vs. Social Mobility	-0.72	0.001 ( <b>significant</b> )
Unemployment Rate vs. Social Mobility	-0.65	0.004 ( <b>significant</b> )
Inequality vs. Unemployment	+0.58	0.012 ( <i>moderately significant</i> )

The relationship concerning inequality, unemployment, and social mobility is presented in table 2 in which the strength of correlation and the direction of trend of these factors have been indicated. The two find a significant negative relationship between inequality (Gini Index) and social mobility ( $r = -0.72$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ) showing that greater inequality has a strong negative effect on social mobility, whereby larger gaps in income distribution restrict cross-generational access to upward mobility. Likewise, unemployment and the mobility indicate that there is a strong negative correlation ( $r = -0.65$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ) which implies that due to the high rates of unemployment, individuals are not free to access improved socio-economic status. On the other hand, the positive association between inequality and unemployment ( $r = +0.58$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ) shows how increasing inequality is likely to experience a trend with increase in job losses, fuelling spirals of marginalization and lack of economic growth. These results confirm previous observations that inequality as well as unemployment serves as a structural hindrance to any

mobility and the policies should be aimed at diminishing any differences and make the labor markets inclusive to improve social mobility.

**Table 3: Regional Patterns of Inequality and Mobility**

Region	Avg. Gini Index	Avg. Unemployment (%)	Avg. Mobility Score	Key Observations
Nordic Countries	0.27	6.1	82	Strong welfare states enhance mobility
North America	0.40	5.8	62	Wealth concentration reduces mobility
Latin America	0.49	8.9	45	Persistent inequality and weak labor markets
Sub-Saharan Africa	0.55	21.5	40	Structural unemployment and high inequality
South Asia	0.36	7.2	52	Unequal education access lowers mobility

Lessons learnt in the local area The regional comparison highlights the different ways that inequality, unemployment and social mobility may be affected by structural conditions around the world. The highest mobility score (82) is obtained by the Nordic countries with the lowest average Gini index (0.27) and relatively low unemployment (6.1), an indication of the effectiveness of high welfare states and inclusionary labor policies. Conversely, North America scores fairly well in terms of inequality (0.40) and low unemployment (5.8%) but has only above-average mobility (62) and could probably be explained by the high degree of wealth concentration and inadequate redistributive policy damaging the chances of upwards mobility. In Latin America, where inequality is high (0.49) and unemployment is high (8.9%), the mobility score is one of the worst (45), because despite these favorable conditions, structural disparities and poor labor institutions limit advances. Sub-Saharan Africa shows the worst

scenarios with extremely high inequality (0.55), extreme unemployment (21.5 percent), and the least mobility (40) indicating to structural constraints to growth. South Asia has a low mobility index (52) although modest in terms of inequality (0.36), this is seen as a result of inequality in access to education and skill formation.

## **Conclusion**

The economic inequality and unemployment in relation to social mobility of different nations brings about a critically interwoven structure of issues, which impact the life chances and opportunities of people across both the developed and developing worlds. The international studies conducted to prove that inequality has a clear-cut relationship with high degrees of inequality, an objective indicator measured by Gini index and concentration of wealth directly reduces the rise of income mobility due to lack of access to education, health and job markets hence perpetuating the disadvantaged cycles at the intergenerational level. These impacts are further accentuated by unemployment, especially structural and youth unemployment, that excludes the productive participation of large parts of the population potentially destabilizing aspirations and making them more vulnerable to poverty. Countries that have well-developed welfare programs, redistributive policies, and open labor markets (the Nordic countries), prove that social mobility deserves many instances of improvement when not determined by economic inequality and when restrained with strong policy measures (which apply to the countries of Brazil, India, and South Africa, in particular). These correlations confirm that inequality and unemployment are not distant economic measures but systemic impediments that weaken democratic access, give rise to populist surge, and undermine social solidarity. The only solution to these challenges is the holistic approach to them which means that progressive taxation, universal access to quality education, the active labor market reforms, gender equity program, and social protection that covers vulnerable subjects should be put in place. Moreover, in the context of global collaboration with such frameworks as the Sustainable Development Goals, inequality and unemployment represent significant priorities that need to be addressed as preconditions of promoting fair and inclusive societies. Finally, the issue of reducing disparities and increasing mobility is one of economic effectiveness but it is also one of social fairness that securing the life outcomes of individuals are not ascribed by random chance of birth but by talent and ability.

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