Social Protection in Shaping Labor Migration Decisions among Youth in South Asia: A Bibliometric Analysis

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Abstract

Background: Labor markets in developing countries often face structural challenges, including limited opportunities, informality, and rising inequalities, that push many young people to migrate in search of better livelihoods. As social protection systems evolve, they increasingly shape migration decisions by reducing risks, supporting mobility, and influencing how youth respond to labor market constraints.

Purpose: In South Asia, labor potential exceeds fragile market structures, nudging migration. The study aims to consolidate fragmented research across labor, migration, and social policy, providing an integrated understanding of how welfare mechanisms influence migration decisions and labor mobility.

Design/methodology/approach: A bibliometric analysis was done using the Scopus database (1991–2024), following the PRISMA framework for systematic selection of studies. Initially, there were 556 records; only 254 peer-reviewed articles met the inclusion criteria. Using the VOS viewer and the bibiloshiny package in R, co-authorship networks, keyword co-occurrence, and citation structures were mapped to identify intellectual patterns and thematic evolution.

Findings: The bibliometric analysis shows a shift from theoretical debates on globalization and market flexibility to applied studies on migration, informality, and social protection. The collaboration pattern is fragmented but gradually expanding, signaling potential for stronger global and interdisciplinary engagement. Post-2022 research, shaped by the COVID-19 crisis, emphasizes inequality, resilience, and marginalized labor, redefining social protection as a proactive and adaptive mechanism for inclusive labor systems.

Conclusion: Social protection emerges as both stabilizing and enabling, shaping migration through risk minimization and behavioral incentives. The field is maturing toward an integrated labor–migration framework, though regional and conceptual gaps persist.

Keywords: Labor migration, social protection, Youth employment, Bibliometric analysis, South Asia.

1. Introduction

Labor, defined as the physical and mental effort exerted by individuals to produce goods and services, is fundamental to economic development and social transformation (Friedmann, 1978; Morita, 2005; Aghion et al., 1999; Sunkad, 2022). However, in many developing countries, labor markets are characterized by structural deficiencies, informality, and limited opportunities for upward mobility, which particularly disadvantage young entrants (Furlong, 2006; Rosenzweig, 1988; Awad, 2025). South Asia exemplifies this paradox: while demographic trends yield a large, youthful labor force, the region struggles to absorb it productively (Fields, 1975; Kumar & Balu, 2023). These challenges are exacerbated by global disruptions, including the COVID-19 pandemic, automation, and climate shocks, which have destabilized already fragile labor markets and deepened existing inequalities (Walter, 2020; Diallo et al., 2025). For many youths facing restricted domestic opportunities, labor migration becomes not merely a choice but a strategic necessity to pursue livelihood security and personal advancement (Sundari, 2005; McDowell & Haan, 1997; Adger et al., 2014).

Migration, in this context, serves as both an economic and social response to persistent labor market failures. Young people, especially those from lower-income households, often migrate internally or internationally to overcome the structural limitations of their home economies (Malmusi et al., 2010; Kovacheva & Hristozova, 2019). Although remittances sent home are widely celebrated for alleviating poverty and stimulating local economies (Thieme & Wyss, 2005), the decision to migrate is complex and mediated by multiple layers of influence, including household dynamics, social norms, access to information, and institutional support (Adger et al., 2014). Crucially, migration involves risk: separation from family, uncertainty in job markets abroad, and limited access to social and legal protections in destination countries. As such, the decision to migrate, particularly for youth, hinges not only on the expectation of economic gain but also on the availability of mechanisms to mitigate risk and ensure resilience.

The concept of social security is conceived as a combination of public and private interventions aimed at preventing poverty and mitigating vulnerability. Social protection has evolved in both form and function. Beyond providing a safety net, it is increasingly recognized as a tool for enabling labor market participation and shaping economic behavior (Razavi, 2022; Holzmann & Jørgensen,2001). Empirical studies underscore this expanded role. For instance, Bhorat and Köhler (2025) demonstrate that South Africa's Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant has a positive influence on job search and business initiation efforts among the unemployed. Ardington et al. (2009, 2016) similarly demonstrate that old-age pensions can facilitate youth migration by alleviating liquidity constraints and promoting household stability. These findings highlight that social protection can play a proactive role in enhancing labor mobility by reducing the costs and risks associated with migration.

Academic discourse at the intersection of labor, migration, and social protection has expanded significantly over the past few decades, yet it remains fragmented across disciplines and geographical areas. Studies have examined diverse issues from health insurance and pensions (Cuadros-Meñaca, 2020) to gender-responsive program design (Perera et al., 2022) and the informal insurance effects of remittances (Mendola, 2017). Despite their contributions, the field lacks a comprehensive understanding of how social protection influences migration decisions, particularly among young people in developing countries. The diversity of approaches has made it challenging to track the evolution of scholarly thinking or to pinpoint dominant research themes and areas of need. This conceptual and methodological fragmentation underscores the need for a systematic mapping of the literature.
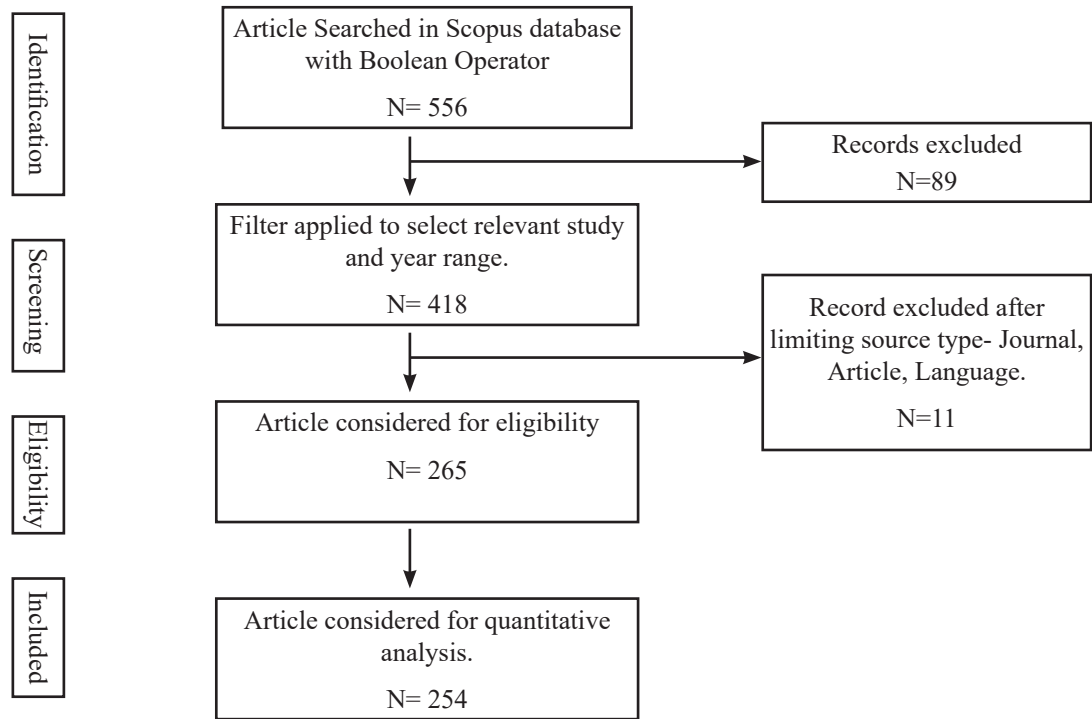
To address this gap, the present study undertakes a bibliometric analysis of academic work published between 1991 and 2024, with the aim of uncovering patterns in how the relationship between social protection and youth labor migration has been explored. Drawing on the Scopus database and guided by PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Pritchard, 1969), the analysis employs techniques such as co-authorship networks, keyword co-occurrence mapping,

and citation analysis. This approach enables a structured overview of intellectual developments, thematic concentrations, and collaborative networks within the field. By illuminating these patterns, the study not only contributes to a more integrated understanding of the social protection migration nexus but also provides a foundation for future research and policy engagement, particularly in South Asia, where youth migration and welfare systems intersect with pressing developmental challenges.

2. Research Methods

For rigorous selection of literature for this bibliometric analysis, we followed the PRISMA framework (see Fig. 1). The initial search was conducted in the Scopus database using a Boolean query that combined relevant keywords related to labor markets and social protection. In the first step, we used the Boolean operator as "labor market" OR "employment" OR "informal sector" OR "job security" OR "wage employment" OR "social protection" OR "social safety net" OR "social security" OR "cash transfer" OR "public works program" OR "social insurance" OR "labor market program" OR "south Asia". This search yielded a total of 556 records during the identification phase. In the subsequent screening phase, filters were applied to narrow the results to the relevant thematic scope and publication year range between 1991 to 2024, reducing the number of records to 418. At this stage, 89 records were excluded due to thematic irrelevance, duplication, or falling outside the defined period. During the eligibility assessment, 265 articles were further evaluated for quality and relevance. To maintain methodological consistency and focus, additional criteria were applied: only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English were retained. This resulted in the exclusion of 11 additional records. Ultimately, 254 articles met all inclusion criteria and were considered for the final bibliometric analysis. The selection process is visually represented through a PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1), which outlines each phase of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion. For the bibliometric analysis, we use Vos Viewer to create specific visuals for keyword and citation visualization.

Fig1: PRISMA flow diagram

Source: Author's visualization

3. Results

The results section presents a detailed analysis of the current landscape in social security and labor, based on a comprehensive bibliometric analysis. This section incorporates key findings from the data, which includes local citation analysis, global citation analysis, emerging themes, and co-citation analysis. We present a general description of the data in Table 1.

Table 1: Data description

Description	Results
MAIN INFORMATION ABOUT DATA	
Timespan	1991:2024
Sources (Journals, Books, etc)	185
Documents	254
Annual Growth Rate %	2.12
Document Average Age	7.3
Average citations per doc	15.85
References	10575
DOCUMENT CONTENTS	
Keywords Plus (ID)	585
Author's Keywords (DE)	786
AUTHORS	
Authors	572
Authors of single-authored docs	93
AUTHORS COLLABORATION	
Single-authored docs	95
Co-Authors per Doc	2.32
International co-authorships %	23.23
DOCUMENT TYPES	
Article	237
Review	17

(Source: Author's calculation)

The bibliometric dataset analyzed in this study incorporates the period from 1991 to 2024 and includes 254 documents published across 185 distinct sources, primarily academic journals. Over this timeframe, the domain has exhibited a modest annual growth rate of 2.12%, suggesting that scholarly engagement with the intersection of labor markets and social protection has expanded gradually rather than explosively. The average age of publications in the dataset is 7.3 years, indicating that much of the research is relatively recent and that several contemporary issues in the field remain underexplored.

In terms of academic influence, the documents have received an average of 15.85 citations per publication, with a cumulative reference count exceeding 10,500. This reflects a moderate but meaningful impact across scholarly platforms. The thematic breadth of the field is evident in the use of 585 Keywords Plus (ID) and 786 Author Keywords (DE), underscoring a wide array of conceptual frameworks, methodological approaches, and disciplinary intersections.

The dataset also reveals valuable insights into authorship and collaboration patterns. A total of 572 unique authors contributed to the literature, with 93 of them producing single-authored papers. In total, 95 documents were single-authored, while the average number of co-authors per document was 2.32, indicating a balanced mix of individual and collaborative research efforts. Notably, 23.23% of the publications involved international co-authorship, reflecting a growing trend toward cross-border collaboration in addressing global labor and social protection challenges.

In terms of document type, the corpus is dominated by original research articles (237), with a smaller subset of review papers (17). This suggests that the field remains heavily oriented toward empirical and case-based investigations, while systematic reviews and theoretical syntheses are still in the process of emerging.
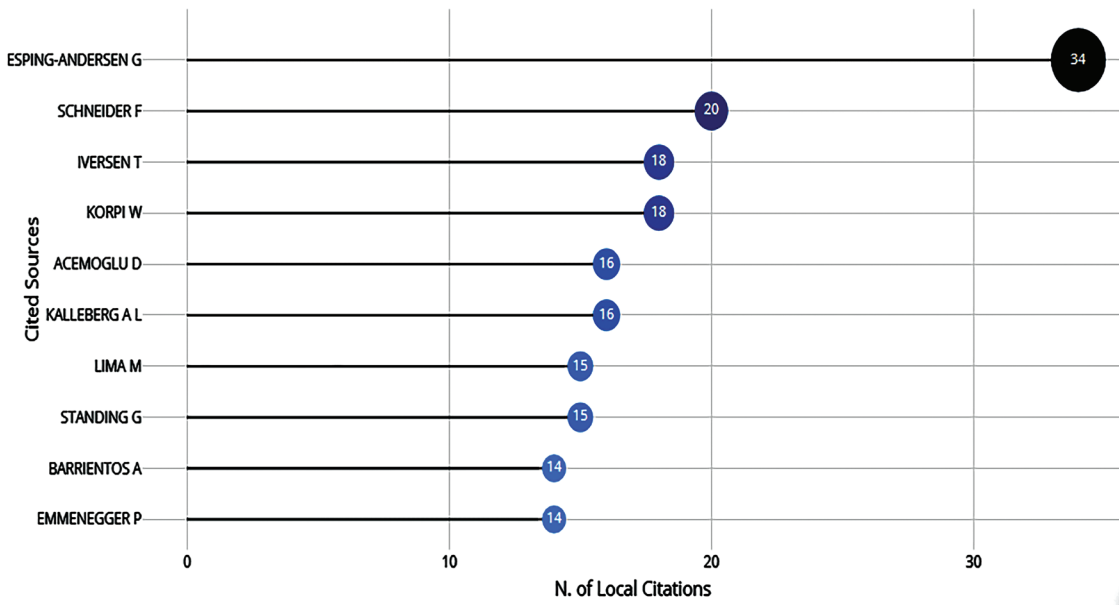
Local Cited Author

Local citation refers to the number of times a document has been cited by other articles within the same bibliometric collection (Diodato & Gellatly,2013). This metric, calculated by the Bibliometric tool based on internal referencing among the included documents, helps identify the most influential works within a specific research domain.

Esping-Andersen emerges as the most influential scholar, with 34 local citations. He is followed by Schneider F., who has received 20 local citations, and both Iversen T. and Korpi W., with 15 citations each (see figure 2). Other notable contributors with high local citation counts include Acemoglu and Kalleberg, each with 16 citations, while Lima and Standing have 15 citations each. Barrientos and Emmenegger also appear among the top scholars, with 14 citations each. These citation patterns reflect the central role these authors play in shaping the scholarly discourse within this thematic field.

In social protection and labor market studies, Esping-Andersen leads with 34 local citations, followed by Schneider, Iversen, Korpi, Acemoglu, and others. These patterns show a strong reliance on a few foundational scholars, indicating their central role in shaping the field. However, this also suggests a possible concentration of influence that might limit the visibility of emerging voices and perspectives.
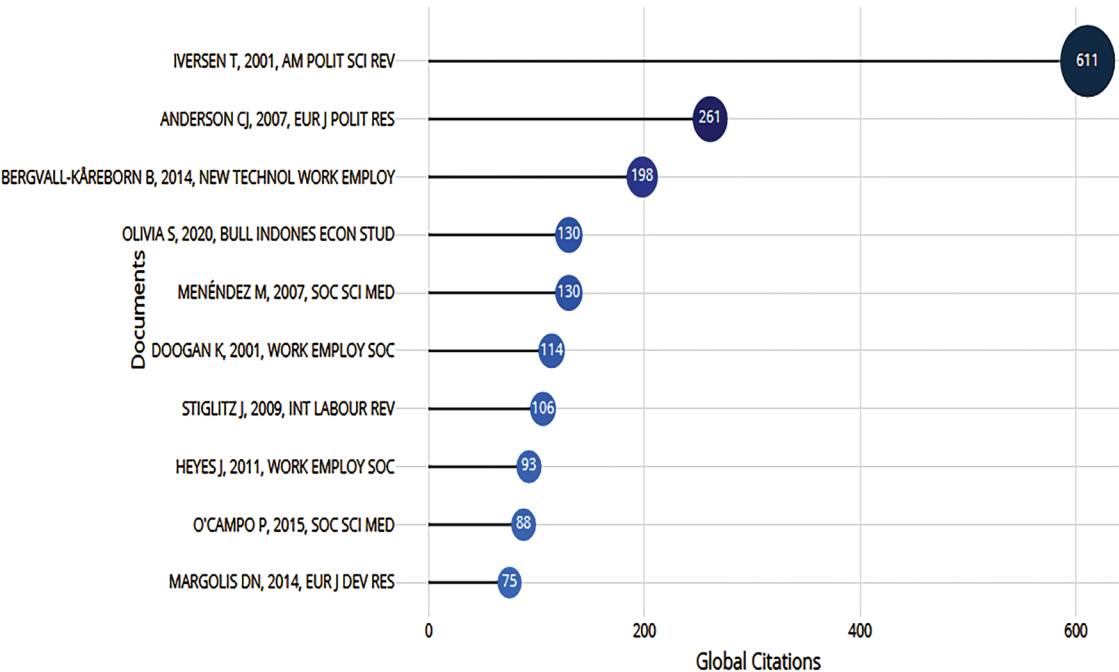
Figure 2: Local cited authors

(Source: Author's computation using Scopus database)

Global Cited Author

Global citation refers to the total number of citations a document has received from all publications indexed in the source database, regardless of whether those publications are part of the specific collection being analyzed (Diodato & Gellatly,2013). In the present analysis, the study by Iversen (2001) stands out as the most globally cited work, with 611 citations. This is followed by contributions from Esping-Andersen with 261 citations, and Bergvall, with 198 citations. Additionally, the works of Olma and Menéndez have each received 130 global citations, indicating their relevance in the wider scholarly community (See figure 3).
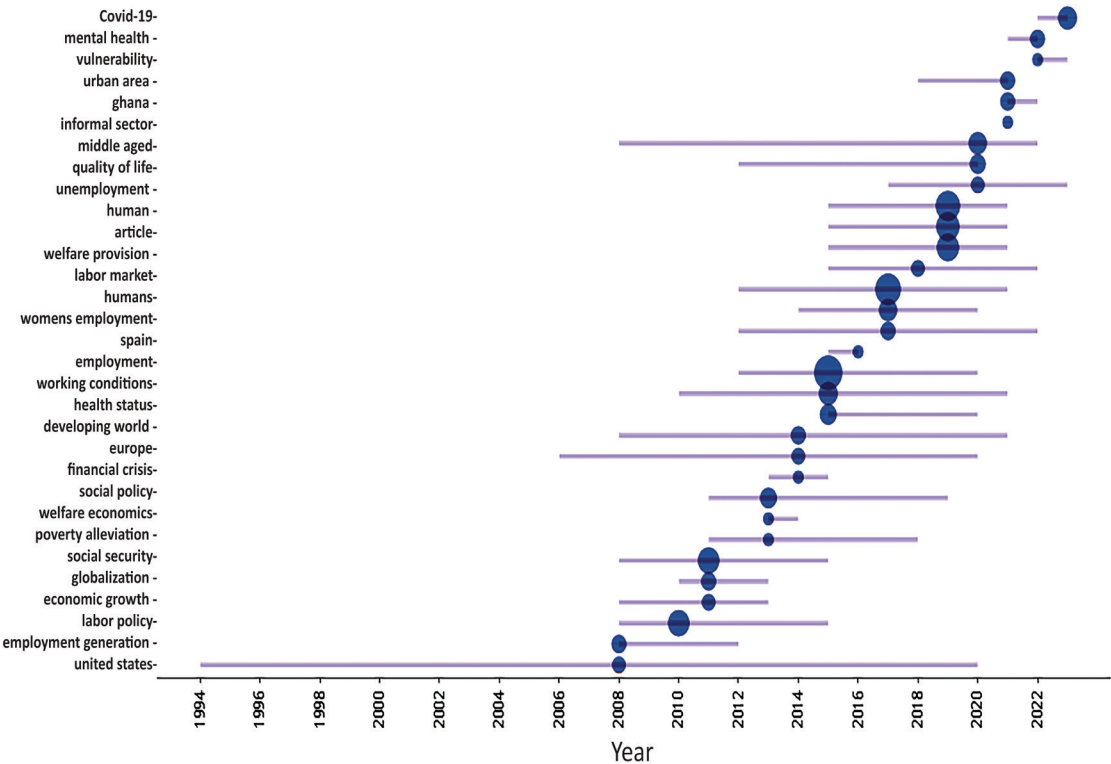
Figure 3 Global cited author

Source: Authors' computation using Scopus database.

Despite the existence of these highly cited studies, the broader body of literature connecting labor and social security appears to remain underexplored, particularly in the context of developing countries (Overbye, 2005). This is especially true for the South Asian region, where challenges related to employment, informality, and social protection continue to persist. The relatively limited global attention to these themes highlights the need for research that addresses the unique socioeconomic dynamics of these regions and contributes to more inclusive policy discussions at the international level.

Trending Topic Analysis

Trending topic analysis identifies emerging themes or areas of growing scholarly interest within a specific field (Diodato & Gellatly, 2013). Examining the frequency and temporal patterns of keywords, titles, or abstracts highlights shifts in research focus over time, enabling researchers to align with current trends and anticipate future directions.

An overview of the trending research topics illustrates how scholarly focus has shifted across different periods in response to global and regional developments. Notably, topics related to COVID-19 gained significant attention in recent years, reflecting the pandemic's wide-ranging impact on labor markets and social protection systems. In 2022, issues such as mental health and country-specific studies, particularly in India, emerged as prominent areas of research.
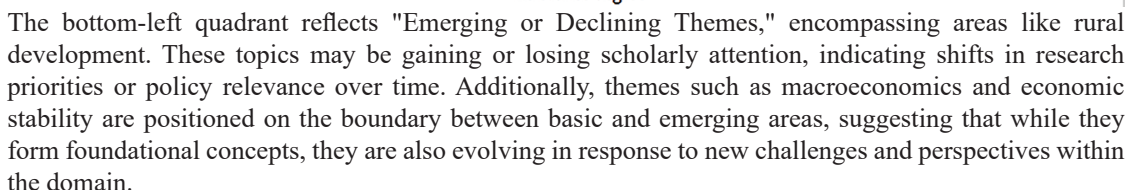
Source: Authors' computation from Scopus data

Between 2020 and 2022, there was a notable interest in topics related to vulnerability, urban areas, informal employment, and studies focused on Ghana. These themes suggest a growing concern with the structural and regional disparities exposed during and after the pandemic. In contrast, the period from 2018 to 2020 saw heightened academic engagement with subjects such as unemployment, women's employment, and the broader labor market. Overall, the figure summarizes the evolution of key research themes in the field from 1994 to 2024, highlighting how scholarly attention has responded to shifting socio-economic contexts.

Thematic Map Analysis

Thematic mapping clusters related keywords or terms based on their co-occurrence and relevance. Thematic maps are used to visually represent the conceptual structure and development of research themes within a field (Diodato & Gellatly,2013). This tool helps identify core, emerging, and peripheral themes, thereby enhancing understanding of intellectual and thematic evolution over time. The thematic map categorizes research on social protection and the labor market into four distinct quadrants based on their level of development and relevance. The top-right quadrant, labeled "Motor Themes," includes well-established and highly relevant topics such as unemployment, employment, labor markets, and labor policies (see Figure 5). These themes are both conceptually developed and central to the broader field of study, indicating their sustained academic interest and policy importance.

In contrast, the top-left quadrant represents "Niche Themes," which are well-developed but of narrower interest. These include specialized topics such as those related to agricultural workers and wage issues. While these areas are deeply explored, they often lack interdisciplinary connectivity and are frequently confined to specific subfields or contexts.

Figure 5: Thematic Map analysis

The bottom-left quadrant reflects "Emerging or Declining Themes," encompassing areas like rural development. These topics may be gaining or losing scholarly attention, indicating shifts in research priorities or policy relevance over time. Additionally, themes such as macroeconomics and economic stability are positioned on the boundary between basic and emerging areas, suggesting that while they form foundational concepts, they are also evolving in response to new challenges and perspectives within the domain.

Source: Authors' computation from Scopus data

Co-occurrence of keywords

Co-occurrence of keywords refers to the simultaneous appearance of two or more terms within the same document or a group of documents (Diodato & Gellatly, 2013). This method examines the relationships between concepts, revealing how frequently and closely topics are linked within the literature. This approach contributes to mapping the intellectual landscape of a research field, allowing for the identification of thematic clusters and underlying research patterns.

Figure 6: Co-occurrence of keywords

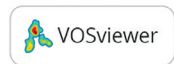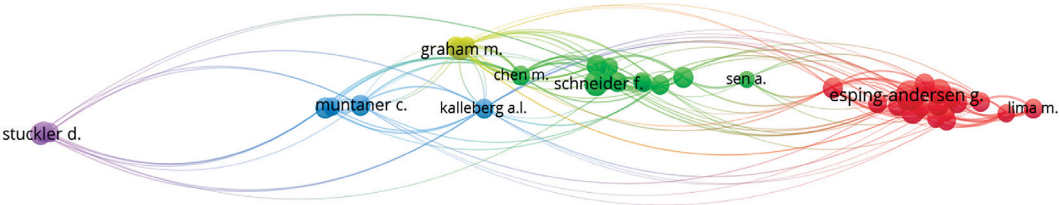Source: Authors' computation using Vosviewer

The analysis of keyword co-occurrence helps us understand how research on social protection has changed over time (see Figure 6). From a total of 786 keywords found in the literature, only 49 appeared at least three times and were included in the analysis. In 2014, keywords such as globalization, development, welfare, and flexibility were closely linked to social protection. Between 2016 and 2020, the focus shifted to keywords like labor market, employment, unemployment, social security, social policy, skills, poverty, and informal development. From 2022 onwards, new keywords such as COVID-19, domestic workers, income distribution, and pandemic emerged, illustrating how recent global events have influenced the research. These changes in keywords show that the field of social protection is expanding and connecting to different topics. At the same time, there are still new areas, such as labor movements and employment opportunities, that require further attention in future research.

Co-citation Network

Co-citation analysis is used to analyze how often two documents are cited together in subsequent publications. In bibliometric analysis, co-citation networks are used to uncover the intellectual structure of a research field by identifying groups of works that are frequently cited (Diodato & Gellatly,2013). This method traces the development of scholarly influence, highlights foundational literature, and reveals connections between research communities over time.

Figure 7: Co-citation Network Analysis

Source: Authors' computation using Vosviewer

Total link strength represents a quantitative indicator of the intensity of connections between items in the network, such as authors, keywords, or countries, based on their frequency of co-occurrence (see Figure 7). A higher total link strength value indicates a stronger relationship and greater proximity between items in the visual map (Van Eck et al., 2010). The size of each node in the network reflects the number of citations or occurrences associated with a particular author.

Notably, Esping-Andersen emerges as the most influential scholar in this network, with the highest total link strength of 231 and 35 co-citations, indicating his central role in shaping the discourse on social protection. Iversen also stands out as a key contributor, with a total link strength of 210 and 25 citations. These values suggest their frequent co-citation with other influential authors, highlighting their scholarly prominence and conceptual contributions to the field.

Table 2 presents the top ten authors with the highest total link strength in the domain of social protection. This information helps to identify the core contributors whose works have significantly influenced the development of academic literature in this area. Such mapping offers valuable insight into the intellectual structure of the field and helps trace the evolution of key theoretical frameworks over time.

Table 2: Total link strength

Author	Citations	Total link strength
Espling-Andersen, G.	35	231
Iversen, T.	25	210
Palier, B.	25	192
Schneider, F.	24	191
Graham, M.	20	185
Stuckler, D.	20	184
Mckee, M.	19	171
Devereux, S.	18	159
Korpi, W.	18	156
Muntaner, C.	18	154

Source: Authors' calculation from Scopus database.

4. Discussion

The bibliometric analysis of research at the intersection of labor markets and social protection demonstrates a field that has evolved considerably in response to shifting socioeconomic conditions. Early work, particularly around 2014, concentrated on globalization, welfare reforms, and labor market flexibility. These themes align with earlier studies that emphasize the effects of market liberalization and structural adjustment on employment systems (Autor, 2014). In contrast, findings from this analysis indicate that from 2016 onward, scholarly attention shifted toward more applied and context-specific issues such as migration, unemployment, informal labor, skills development, and social security. Similar trends have been reported in recent reviews highlighting a growing emphasis on inclusive labor policies and the integration of social protection within development frameworks (ILO, 2020). Unlike early debates that were largely theoretical, the current literature, consistent with our results, demonstrates a strong applied focus on income security and vulnerability reduction among precarious workers.

The co-authorship and institutional network patterns further reveal a field that is expanding in scope yet remains fragmented. While consistent contributions from select scholars and institutions resemble patterns observed in other bibliometric studies on social policy (Bowen, 2020), the relatively weak global collaboration identified here contrasts with findings in adjacent domains, such as migration or poverty research, where cross-regional networks are more developed. This divergence suggests that research on labor markets and social protection has not yet fully capitalized on interdisciplinary and cross-border collaboration, despite the inherently global nature of issues such as labor migration and informal employment. Our analysis, therefore, reinforces calls in the literature for stronger South–South and South–North cooperation to enhance comparative understanding and methodological diversity.

Keyword co-occurrence patterns provide additional evidence of thematic expansion, particularly after 2020. The emergence of terms such as "COVID-19," "pandemic," "domestic workers," and "income distribution" signifies the reorientation of research agendas in response to global shocks. This pattern is consistent with studies documenting how the pandemic triggered renewed academic interest in structural inequality, social protection coverage gaps, and the vulnerability of informal and migrant workers (Gentilini et al., 2022; Sumner et al., 2020). However, the prominence of "domestic workers" and other marginalized labor groups in our analysis suggests a comparatively stronger shift toward micro-level labor precarity than documented in some broader social policy reviews that remained focused on national systems. This indicates a deepening of the analytical lens, which prioritizes worker-specific vulnerabilities and the intersectional dimensions of risk.

Overall, the results highlight several implications for research and policy. First, the convergence of labor market and social protection scholarship underscores the urgency of designing systems that can respond to rising global uncertainties and labor market disruptions. This aligns with international evidence emphasizing the importance of adaptive, shock-responsive protection mechanisms (Bowen et al., 2020). Second, consistent with studies highlighting persistent structural vulnerabilities, particularly within informal labor markets, our findings underscore the need for policies that extend beyond short-term relief and address entrenched inequalities associated with informality, migration, and gender. Finally, the observed expansion of research themes and methodological diversification indicates an opportunity for scholars to further challenge traditional paradigms by embracing interdisciplinary and multi-scalar approaches, as recommended in recent comparative labor literature.

In sum, the evolution documented through this bibliometric assessment reflects a broader shift in global labor policy debates: social protection is increasingly conceptualized not merely as a safety net but as a foundational element of inclusive and resilient labor systems. The comparative insights from this study position it within a growing body of work that seeks to integrate labor economics, social policy, and development perspectives in order to inform more equitable and future-oriented policy design.

5. Conclusion

This bibliometric analysis provides a structured overview of research in social protection and labor, identifying prominent scholars, growing themes, and citation trends. Foundational contributions by Esping-Andersen, Iversen, and others have shaped the domain, while thematic maps show that employment, labor policies, and unemployment are core themes. At the same time, niche and emerging areas, such as the informal sector, rural labor, and labor migration, remain underexplored. Thematic and citation patterns also indicate shifting priorities over time, with recent interest focusing on COVID-19, mental health, and vulnerable labor groups, particularly in urban and developing contexts.

Importantly, the need for bibliometric studies in developing nations is pressing. Such analyses help to identify knowledge gaps and research priorities in regions where labor mobility and social protection intersect closely. In South Asia, the mobility of young men in search of employment is often influenced by their household's access to social transfers (Mizik et al., 2025). Social protection not only minimizes vulnerability but can also enable proactive livelihood strategies such as labor migration. Despite this, the literature on transfer earnings, labor decisions, and migration dynamics in the context of developing economies is limited. As global labor migration expands and social security systems struggle to cope with consumption shocks, studies in this domain are crucial for policymakers, researchers, and institutions in addressing local challenges through evidence-based research agendas.

Looking ahead, future research should extend beyond bibliometric mapping to analytically assess how emerging social protection architectures influence labor behavior in developing contexts. Nepal's ongoing shift toward a contribution-based social protection system presents a critical and timely research frontier. Empirical studies are needed to evaluate how contributory schemes affect migration intentions among youth, modify household risk-management strategies, and potentially reduce long-term reliance on foreign labor markets. Further inquiry should also investigate the interaction between contribution-based programs and structural features of the Nepali labor market, including widespread informality, gendered migration patterns, and exposure to climate-induced vulnerabilities. As Nepal seeks to build a more financially sustainable and inclusive protection framework, rigorous evidence is essential to ensure that policy design aligns with labor market realities and enhances social security outcomes for diverse population groups.

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