Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Decent Work: Implications for Sustainable Development Goal 8

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming labor markets, raising fundamental questions about the feasibility of achieving Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8) that is decent work for all. This study conducts a systematic literature review, guided by PRISMA 2020, and a qualitative content analysis of 32 peer-reviewed articles & authoritative institutional reports published 2015-2025. The analysis synthesizes how AI affects employment structures, job quality, skills, inequality, governance, and development outcomes. The findings reveal a structurally indecisive relationship. Though AI enhances productivity and generates high-skill employment, it intensifies job divergence, erodes autonomy via algorithmic management, and exacerbates wage and opportunity inequalities, mainly in hazardous & informal labour market segments. Alignment with SDG 8 is therefore conditional on institutional strength, labor regulation, and inclusive reskilling systems. The study identifies critical research gaps, including limited Global South evidence, weak integration of SDG indicators, and insufficient worker-centered and longitudinal analyses. By reframing AI as a socially embedded rather than technologically deterministic force, this review contributes to theory and policy by clarifying the conditions under which AI can advance so called decent work. This paper concludes with directions for future research, and governance strategies to align AI adoption with sustainable and inclusive labor outcomes.

Key Words: Artificial Intelligence, Decent Work, Future of Work, Goal 8, Sustainable Development

Introduction

Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8) of the United Nations - 2030 Agenda articulates a global commitment to *"promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all"* (UN, 2015 as cited in Küfeoğlu, 2022). Decent work encompasses not only quantitative aspects of employment like job creation and labor force participation, but also qualitative dimensions including job

security, fair salaries, rights of workers, safe working conditions, opportunities for skills development, and the protection of vulnerable groups. On one hand, despite the significant progress in some regions, global labor markets continue to face with persistent informality, youth unemployment, gender inequities, and uneven job quality across sectors and nations. Indeed, it indicates persistent challenges to the realization of SDG 8 (Küfeoğlu, 2022; IJSAT, 2025).

To ensure conceptual clarity, this study adopts the International Labour Organization (ILO) framework of decent work, which encompasses four core pillars: (1) productive employment and income opportunities, (2) rights at work, (3) social protection, and (4) social dialogue (ILO, 2019). Beyond employment quantity, decent work reflects qualitative dimensions: job security, autonomy, dignity, fair remuneration, and safe working conditions. In this study, these dimensions are operationalized as evaluative criteria to assess how AI-driven transformations align with or diverge from SDG 8 targets, thereby enabling a more consistent and structured interpretation of the reviewed literature.

On the other hand, emergence and rapid diffusion of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies add a complex dimension to the SDG 8 agenda. AI systems ranging from machine learning algorithms and robotics to generative AI tools are being increasingly deployed across industries, reshaping how work is organized, performed, and valued today. Proponents argue that AI has the potential to accelerate productivity & economic growth, and create new types of work by augmenting human capabilities and enabling innovative business models (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017; Davenport & Ronanki, 2018; IJSAT, 2025). Macro-level analyses suggest that AI-enabled digital services could significantly expand trade opportunities and national production, mainly in sectors like healthcare, education, and Information and Communication Technology (ICT) services (WTO, 2024). In theory, such productivity gains could contribute to higher wages and broader economic inclusion, if the benefits are distributed equitably and accompanied by appropriate skills development and policy frameworks (Manyika et al., 2017; Küfeoğlu, 2022).

In this study, Artificial Intelligence (AI) is defined as *"computational systems capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence, including learning, reasoning, prediction, and decision-making"* (OECD, 2023). The term AI is used as an umbrella construct encompassing related concepts such as automation, machine learning, and algorithmic management. While automation refers broadly to the substitution of human labor with machines in routine tasks, algorithmic management specifically denotes the use of data-driven algorithms to allocate, monitor, and control work processes. This distinction ensures conceptual consistency while acknowledging the interconnected nature of these technologies in shaping contemporary labor markets.

The empirical evidence highlights significant tensions between AI adoption and the realization of decent work. For example, research from China shows that advanced AI technologies can suppress demand for low-skilled labor, exacerbating inequalities and hindering equitable employment growth in the absence of effective upskilling and inclusive policies (Zhao et al., 2025). Up to date research studies further reveal that, AI integration may weaken traditional employer-employee psychological contracts that

potentially reduce job engagement and trust which are considered as the key dimensions of work quality central to SDG 8. As a result, a weaken psychological contract fosters more transactional work relationships (Bal et al., 2021). Broader global assessments caution that labor market effects of AI are unevenly distributed, with risks of skyrocketing inequality, especially if developing countries lag in digital infrastructure (Frey & Osborne, 2017; World Bank, 2019), policy readiness, and worker reskilling efforts (IJSER, 2023; WTO, 2024). Taken together, these findings illustrate that AI's impact on decent work is multidimensional and context-dependent, encompassing both opportunities for economic growth and risks of exacerbating labor market disparities.

The extant literature on AI and the future of work is extensive, yet its linkage to SDG 8 objectives has not been systematically synthesized adequately. Many studies focus on technical and economic effects of AI like automation risks, skill polarization, and productivity gains, without explicitly situating these outcomes within the normative framework of decent work & sustainable development. There is a notable absence of comprehensive reviews that integrate multidisciplinary evidence on how AI technologies affect core targets of SDG 8, including equitable employment, labor rights, job quality, and inclusive growth. Furthermore, research gaps persist in understanding the institutional conditions, policy interventions, and workforce transitions that might mediate effects of AI on decent work across different economic contexts.

Having considered the modern contextual requirements, therefore this paper presents a systematic literature review of empirical and conceptual research at the intersection of AI and SDG 8. Through rigorous screening and a content analysis of key themes, this study aims to clarify how AI influences decent work outcomes globally, identify prevailing theoretical and methodological approaches, and highlight critical research gaps. By synthesizing current knowledge, this review contributes to a more nuanced understanding of whether and under what conditions decent work for all can be achieved in an era defined by rapid technological transformation.

Objectives of the Study

The following four objectives are established to be achieved in this systematic review.

i. To synthesize existing research on the impact of AI adoption on employment, job quality, and work conditions aligned with SDG 8.
ii. To map dominant themes, frameworks, and methods used in the literature on AI and decent work.
iii. To assess the alignment and/or divergence between AI-driven labor market changes and SDG 8 targets.
iv. To identify existing research gaps, and propose directions for future investigations to support policy and practical interventions.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in multiple means as it provides a timely and systematic synthesis of fragmented evidence on how AI is reshaping employment and work quality in relation to SDG 8, thereby addressing a critical gap in both development and management research. As stated in this paper, though existing research has extensively examined

technical capabilities and economic efficiency of AI, very less attention has been given to its implications for decent work within a globally recognized sustainable development framework.

Moreover, by integrating a systematic literature review with content analysis, this study offers a comprehensive and structured understanding of the multidimensional impacts of AI across sectors and contexts, enabling scholars to move beyond polarized narratives of *'job creation versus job destruction'*. The findings of this study would be mostly valuable for policymakers, development practitioners, and organizational leaders by clarifying under what conditions AI can support or undermine SDG 8 targets, thereby informing evidence-based labor policies, workforce reskilling strategies, and AI governance mechanisms. Further, by identifying theoretical, methodological, and contextual gaps in existing studies, this research sets a clear agenda for future multidisciplinary inquiries, contributing to more inclusive, ethical, and sustainable approaches to managing work and employment in the AI era.

Methodology

Review Design

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) design, supplemented by a qualitative content analysis, to synthesize existing knowledge on the relationship between AI and decent work within the framework of Sustainable Development Goal 8. The review process was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) standards, that provides a transparent and replicable framework for identifying, screening, and synthesizing scholarly evidence (Page et al., 2021). The PRISMA approach was selected to minimize selection bias, enhance methodological rigor, and ensure clarity in documenting the review process, that is important given the multidisciplinary nature of AI and labor market research.

Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature search was conducted across major academic databases to capture peer-reviewed journal articles and high-quality institutional reports relevant to AI and decent work. The searched databases included: Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and IEEE Xplore. Google Scholar also included for supplementary coverage. In addition, reports from authoritative international organizations *(ILO, OECD, World Bank, UN agencies)* were included to capture policy-oriented and macro-level analyses relevant to SDG 8 (as recommended by ILO, 2019; OECD, 2023).

The search was conducted for publications between 2015 and 2025, aligning with the launch of the UN 2030 Agenda and the accelerated diffusion of AI technologies in the workplace (UN, 2015; Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017). Only publications in English were considered due to resource constraints, that is a common practice in systematic reviews (Snyder, 2019).

Search Terms

Search terms were developed iteratively by combining three key conceptual domains: *'Artificial Intelligence', 'Decent Work / Employment Quality', and 'SDG 8 / Sustainable*

Development'. Boolean operators ("AND", "OR") were used to ensure comprehensive coverage. Key search terms include:

> ("artificial intelligence" OR "AI" OR "automation" OR "algorithmic management" OR "machine learning") AND
>
> ("decent work" OR "job quality" OR "employment conditions" OR "labor standards" OR "workplace well-being") AND
>
> ("SDG 8" OR "sustainable development goal 8" OR "economic growth" OR "decent work for all")

This search strategy was adopted to capture both explicitly SDG-framed studies, and broader labor-focused research with clear relevance to decent work outcomes (as recommended by Küfeoğlu, 2022; OECD, 2023).

Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria

Table 1 summarizes the inclusion & exclusion criteria applied during the screening and eligibility phases, in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines.

Table 1. Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Topic relevance	Studies explicitly examining artificial intelligence, automation, algorithmic management, or machine learning in relation to work, employment, or labor markets	Studies focusing purely on technical, engineering, or computational aspects of AI without employment or labor implications
Conceptual focus	Research addressing decent work dimensions, like job quality, employment conditions, labor rights, worker well-being, productivity, or inclusive economic growth relevant to SDG 8	Studies discussing digitalization or technology without clear linkage to decent work, employment quality, or SDG 8
Type of publication	Peer-reviewed journal articles and high-quality reports from reputable international organizations *(ILO, OECD, World Bank, UN agencies)*	Opinion pieces, editorials, blog posts, conference abstracts, theses, or non-scholarly sources
Time frame	Between 2015 and 2025, corresponding to the post-2030 Agenda period, and rapid AI diffusion	Studies published prior to 2015
Language	Publications in English	Publications other than English
Methodological quality	Empirical studies, systematic reviews, or robust conceptual/theoretical papers with clear methodology and analytical rigor	Studies with unclear methods, weak analytical grounding, or insufficient transparency
Accessibility	Full-text availability	Full text not accessible

Source: Author, 2026

Study Selection Process

As mentioned in this paper, the current study selection process followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, comprising *identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion* stages (Page et al., 2021). During the identification phase, the process yielded 412 records in total. After removing 86 duplicate records, 326 unique records remained for further assessment. In the screening phase, titles and abstracts of the 326 records were reviewed against the predefined inclusion & exclusion criteria. At this stage, 238 records were excluded due to lack of relevance to artificial intelligence in employment contexts, exclusive focus on technical or engineering aspects of AI, or insufficient linkage to decent work or SDG 8 dimensions. As a result, 88 records were retained for full-text assessment.

During the eligibility phase, the full texts of the 88 records were evaluated in detail. Of these, 56 records were excluded for reasons including: absence of explicit discussion on employment quality or work conditions (n = 21), insufficient methodological transparency or analytical rigor (n = 15), lack of clear relevance to AI-driven labor transformations (n = 12), and non-availability of full text (n = 8). Finally, a sample of 32 records comprise of peer-reviewed journal articles, and relevant institutional reports were eligible, and included in the qualitative synthesis & content analysis. Figure 1 depicts the PRISMA-flow diagram.

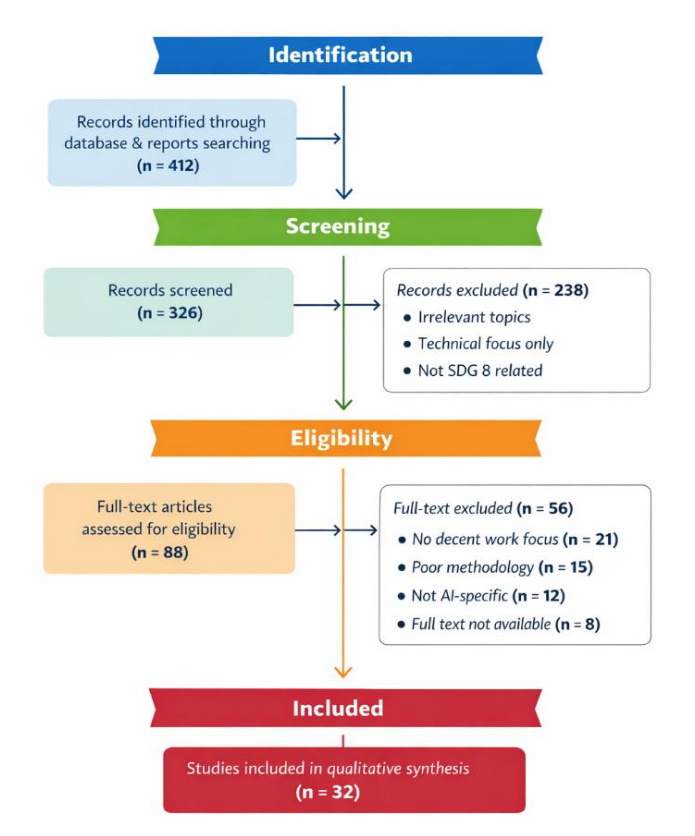
The final sample of 32 studies is considered methodologically adequate for qualitative synthesis, as systematic literature reviews prioritizing depth and thematic saturation often rely on smaller, rigorously screened samples (Snyder, 2019). The included studies represent a balanced mix of empirical research and authoritative institutional reports across multiple geographical contexts and sectors, ensuring both analytical richness and policy relevance. Furthermore, thematic saturation was achieved, as no substantially new themes emerged during the final stages of content analysis, indicating sufficient coverage of the phenomenon under investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Data Extraction and Analysis

A structured data extraction protocol was used to record key characteristics of each study, including publication year, geographical focus, sector, research design, theoretical framework, and key findings related to AI and decent work. As recommended by Mayring (2014), extracted data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which enables systematic identification of recurring themes, patterns, and conceptual categories across diverse records.

The content analysis followed a hybrid inductive–deductive approach. Deductive coding was informed by SDG 8 dimensions while inductive coding allowed new themes to emerge from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This approach is mainly suited to interdisciplinary research where predefined frameworks must be balanced with emergent insights (Snyder, 2019).

Figure 1. PRISMA-flow Diagram



Source: Author, 2026

Results and Discussion

The analysis yielded six interrelated major themes: (1) employment restructuring, (2) job quality & working conditions, (3) skills & human capital transformation, (4) inequality & inclusion, (5) algorithmic management & labor governance, and (6) macroeconomic growth & development outcomes. Together, these themes capture how AI reshapes both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of work and economic growth. Table 2 presents analytical themes with identified key issues.

Table 2. Analytical Themes & Key Issues

Themes	Key Issues Identified	Sources
Employment restructuring	Job displacement, task re-composition, job creation in high-skill roles	Acemoglu and Restrepo (2020); Zhao et al. (2025)
Job quality & conditions	Algorithmic management, surveillance, autonomy, precarity	Wood et al. (2019); Bal et al. (2021)
Skills & human capital	Skill polarization, reskilling, unequal access to training	Küfeoğlu (2022); OECD (2023)
Inequality & inclusion	Wage gaps, occupational polarization, Global South vulnerabilities	ILO (2019); WTO (2024)

Governance & regulation	Labor standards, algorithmic transparency, worker protections	Möhlmann and Zalmanson (2017); OECD (2023)
Growth & development	Productivity gains vs. decent work deficits	Brynjolfsson and McAfee (2017); Küfeoğlu (2022)

Source: Author, 2026

Employment Restructuring

Across the literature evidence, AI is consistently portrayed as a force of structural employment transformation rather than a unidirectional driver of job loss or job creation. A majority of empirical studies report that AI substitutes for routine, codifiable tasks in clerical, manufacturing, and service occupations (Frey & Osborne, 2017; Bessen, 2019), thereby reducing demand for low- and medium-skilled labor (Autor et al., 2003; Zhao et al., 2025). However, displacement is rarely absolute; instead, work is reconfigured through task re-composition, where human labor is partially replaced, augmented, or redeployed (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017). Several studies document job growth in AI-complementary roles like data analytics, AI governance, and system maintenance suggesting that AI also generates new forms of employment, mostly in knowledge-intensive industries (OECD, 2023; WTO, 2024).

However, the literature emphasizes that these new employment opportunities are highly skill-selective, producing occupational polarization than broad-based job creation (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2020; Zhao et al., 2025). From a decent work perspective, this uneven restructuring raises concerns about whether employment growth alone satisfies normative commitment of SDG 8 to productive employment for all (UN, 2015; Küfeoğlu, 2022). Thus, while AI contributes to economic dynamism, its employment effects are socially stratified, and contingent on institutional and educational capacities (Manyika et al., 2017; Autor, 2019).

Job Quality, Working Conditions, and Worker Well-Being

The reviewed studies place strong emphasis on the quality of work under AI-enabled systems. A dominant theme is the expansion of algorithmic management, mainly in platform-based and digitally mediated work, where algorithms allocate tasks, monitor performance, and determine remuneration (Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017; Bal et al., 2021). Multiple qualitative and survey-based studies show that such systems reduce worker autonomy, intensify labor, and increase perceptions of surveillance, which in turn create stress, insecurity, and diminished organizational trust (Wood et al., 2019; Bal et al., 2021). These outcomes directly conflict with the emphasis of SDG 8 on safe, secure, and dignified working conditions (ILO, 2019).

In opposition, in high-skill and professional contexts, AI is frequently associated with task augmentation, reducing cognitive load, automating repetitive components, and enabling more complex or creative work (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017; OECD, 2023). Such augmentation could enhance productivity and job satisfaction (De Stefano, 2016; Vallas & Schor, 2020), but such pluses are unevenly distributed and often inaccessible to workers in precarious or informal employment (Küfeoğlu, 2022). Overall, the current content analysis reveals that AI simultaneously improves efficiency while eroding employment

security and autonomy, which in turn produces a fundamental tension between technological efficiency and decent work aspirations.

Skills Transformation and Human Capital Demands

The extant literature exhibits strong convergence around the theme of skill transformation. Most studies argue that AI accelerates demand for advanced cognitive, analytical, and digital skills while reducing the relative value of routine competencies (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2020; OECD, 2023). Reskilling and lifelong learning are widely proposed as mechanisms for aligning AI adoption with SDG 8 aspirations (ILO, 2019; WTO, 2024). However, a critical strand of research emphasizes that access to training is uneven, often favoring already advantaged workers and large firms (Küfeoğlu, 2022; Zhao et al., 2025). As a result, skill-based transitions might inadvertently reinforce labor market segmentation than promoting inclusive growth.

From a human capital perspective, the literature presents a conditional model. AI can support decent work only when embedded within inclusive education systems, publicly supported reskilling initiatives, and employer commitments to workforce development (OECD, 2023). Without these enabling conditions, AI adoption risks intensifying structural unemployment and undermining SDG 8 aspirations regarding decent work for all.

However, the assumption that reskilling is a universally feasible solution warrants critical reconsideration. Behavioral and psychological research indicates that employees often resist skill transitions due to factors such as fear of failure, uncertainty about future roles, perceived loss of competence, and ego defensiveness (Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005; Opatha, 2021). Adjustment difficulties and anxiety associated with technological change may further limit participation in reskilling initiatives, particularly among older or low-skilled workers. Consequently, the effectiveness of reskilling policies depends not only on access and availability but also on addressing human resistance through supportive organizational climates, psychological safety, and change management interventions.

Inequality, Inclusion, and Distributional Effects

A general finding across the reviewed studies is that AI has regressive distributional consequences in the absence of corrective policy. Wage inequality, employment polarization, and geographic concentration of high-value digital work are repeatedly documented (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2020; WTO, 2024). Several studies emphasize that women, low-skilled workers, and employees in informal or platform-based sectors are disproportionately exposed to job insecurity and algorithmic control (Wood et al., 2019; ILO, 2019). Moreover, cross-national analyses show that developing countries face compounded risks due to weaker labor institutions, limited digital infrastructure, and lower access to advanced skills training (Eurofound, 2018; Küfeoğlu, 2022; WTO, 2024). These findings challenge growth-centric interpretations of SDG 8 by demonstrating that economic expansion driven by AI does not automatically yield inclusive labor outcomes.

Governance, Regulation, and Labor Institutions

Governance emerges as a critical mediating variable shaping AI related labor outcomes. Institutional analyses consistently show that countries with strong labor protections, collective bargaining systems, and active labor market policies are better positioned to

translate AI-driven productivity gains into decent work outcomes (ILO, 2019; OECD, 2023). Conversely, weak regulatory environments allow algorithmic management practices to erode worker rights through opaque decision-making, unilateral performance evaluation, and the reclassification of employees as independent contractors (Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017; Wood et al., 2019).

A growing body of research studies calls for AI-specific labor governance, including transparency requirements for algorithmic systems (Floridi et al., 2018; European Commission, 2020), worker participation in technology deployment, and impact assessments of automated decision-making on employment conditions (OECD, 2023). However, empirical evaluations of such regulatory interventions remain limited, indicating a critical gap between normative policy recommendations and evidence-based governance models.

Macroeconomic Growth and Sustainable Development

Ultimately, at the macro level, most of the reviewed studies affirm that AI can enhance productivity, innovation, and economic growth, aligning with growth-oriented aspirations of SDG 8 (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017; WTO, 2024). Yet, the literature simultaneously cautions that growth metrics alone obscure the deterioration of employment quality & labor security (Schwab, 2016; Manyika et al., 2017). Several institutional reports have argued that without redistributive mechanisms, AI-driven growth might coexist with rising underemployment and job precariousness (ILO, 2019; Küfeoğlu, 2022). Thus, the relationship between AI and SDG 8 is best characterized as conditionally synergistic. Accordingly, growth gains are evident, but decent work outcomes depend on complementary institutional arrangements. Table 3 depicts the alignment of identified effects with SDG 8 dimensions.

Table 3. Alignment of Identified Effects with SDG 8 Dimensions

SDG 8 Dimension	Evidence of Alignment	Evidence of Tension
Economic growth & productivity	AI-driven efficiency and innovation (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017; WTO, 2024)	Growth decoupled from job security and equity (ILO, 2019)
Full employment	Creation of high-skill digital roles (OECD, 2023)	Displacement of routine and low-skill jobs (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2020)
Decent working conditions	Task augmentation in professional roles	Precarity, surveillance, loss of autonomy (Bal et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2019)
Inclusive growth	Potential through digital services expansion	Wage polarization and Global South exclusion (Küfeoğlu, 2022; WTO, 2024)

Source: Author, 2026

Research Gaps and Future Research Directions

Table 4 presents the research gaps identified through the content analysis, aligned with SDG 8 and the study objectives.

Table 4. Research Gaps Identified

Gap Area	Description of the Gap	Evidence from the Literature	Implications for SDG 8
Geographical concentration	Empirical studies are heavily skewed toward developed economies, with limited coverage of developing and emerging countries	Most large-scale analyses focus on OECD contexts; developing regions are discussed mainly in conceptual or policy reports (Küfeoğlu, 2022; WTO, 2024)	Limits understanding of how AI affects vulnerable labor markets, informality, and employment equity critical to '*decent work for all*'
Limited worker-centric perspectives	Few studies directly examine worker experiences of dignity, autonomy, technostress, or psychological well-being under AI-mediated work	Research emphasizes organizational performance or labor market outcomes rather than lived experiences (Bal et al., 2021)	Undermines SDG 8-qualitative dimensions of decent work
Lack of longitudinal evidence	Predominant reliance on cross-sectional or short-term data limits understanding of long-term employment paths and career sustainability	Most displacement and productivity studies use static datasets (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2020)	Restricts insight into whether AI enables sustainable employment over time or reinforces long-term precarity
Weak operationalization of SDG 8	Few studies explicitly integrate SDG 8 indicators (e.g., job quality, labor rights, inclusive growth) into analytical frameworks	SDG references are often descriptive rather than embedded in empirical models (Küfeoğlu, 2022)	Limits the ability to assess AI's actual contribution to sustainable development outcomes
Insufficient evaluation of governance mechanisms	Limited empirical analysis of how labor regulations, unions, and AI	Existing studies call for regulation but rarely test policy	Hinders evidence-based policymaking to ensure AI adoption

	governance frameworks mediate impact of AI on work	interventions (OECD, 2023)	aligns with '*decent work standards*'
Underexplored informal and platform work	Informal employment and gig/platform work are discussed but rarely analyzed systematically	Platform work is often cited as precarious but lacks comprehensive sectoral analysis (Wood et al., 2019)	Neglects large segments of the workforce most at risk of falling outside decent work protections
Gender and intersectional dimensions	Gender, age, and socioeconomic differences are rarely analyzed in depth	Inequality is acknowledged, but disaggregated analyses are scarce (ILO, 2019; WTO, 2024)	Obscures how AI may differentially affect vulnerable groups, contrary to inclusivity principle of SDG 8

Source: Author, 2026

Table 5 outlines priority directions for future research studies, linking identified gaps presented in table 04, to methodological approaches and their relevance to achieving SDG 8 in the context of AI-driven labor transformation.

From a theoretical standpoint, the results extend skill-biased technological change theory by demonstrating that AI reshapes not only occupational structures but also the quality and meaning of work. Further, it reinforces polarization in autonomy, security, and well-being (Autor et al., 2003; Bal et al., 2021). The prevalence of algorithmic management documented in the review further substantiates labor process theory, revealing how digital technologies reconstitute managerial control and intensify surveillance in ways that weaken worker agency (Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017; Wood et al., 2019). Moreover, institutional theory is strongly supported by the evidence that labor market outcomes vary significantly across regulatory contexts, with stronger labor protections and active employment policies mitigating the negative effects of AI adoption (ILO, 2019; OECD, 2023). Collectively, these insights reposition SDG 8 as not merely an economic objective but a normative governance challenge, requiring alignment between technological innovation and social regulation.

Table 5. Future Research Directions

Research Priority Area	Recommended Future Research Direction	Suggested Methodological Approaches	Expected Contribution to SDG 8
Geographical diversification	Conduct empirical studies in developing and emerging economies, mainly in informal labor markets and SMEs	Comparative cross-country studies; field surveys; case studies	Enhances understanding of AI's impact on vulnerable labor markets and supports inclusive *'decent work for all'*
Worker-centered analysis	Examine worker experiences of autonomy, dignity, technostress, well-being, and job satisfaction under AI-mediated work	Qualitative interviews; ethnography; mixed-methods designs	Strengthens the qualitative dimensions of decent work (safety, dignity, and work quality)
Longitudinal effects	Analyze long-term labor market transitions, career mobility, and employment stability in AI-adopting sectors	Panel data analysis; longitudinal surveys; cohort studies	Assesses whether AI contributes to sustainable employment over time
SDG-integrated measurement	Explicitly embed SDG 8 indicators *(job quality, labor rights, inclusiveness)* into empirical and analytical models	Indicator-based modeling; SDG-aligned evaluation frameworks	Enables direct assessment of AI's contribution to sustainable development targets
Governance and regulation	Investigate the effectiveness of AI governance systems, legislations as moderators	Policy evaluation; institutional analysis; regulatory impact studies	Supports evidence-based policymaking to align AI with decent work standards
Informal and platform work	Conduct sector-specific studies on gig, platform, and informal employment under algorithmic management	Sectoral case studies; platform data analysis; worker surveys	Addresses precarious work conditions in high-risk employment segments
Gender and intersectionality	Analyze gendered, age-based, and socioeconomic inequalities in AI-driven labor transformations	Disaggregated quantitative analysis; intersectional qualitative research	Promotes inclusive growth and equitable access to decent work opportunities

Source: Author, 2026

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weaken worker agency (Möhlmann & Zalmanson, 2017; Wood et al., 2019). Moreover, institutional theory is strongly supported by the evidence that labor market outcomes vary significantly across regulatory contexts, with stronger labor protections and active employment policies mitigating the negative effects of AI adoption (ILO, 2019; OECD, 2023). Collectively, these insights reposition SDG 8 as not merely an economic objective but a normative governance challenge, requiring alignment between technological innovation and social regulation.

Conclusion

This study was designed to examine whether the aspirations of decent work for all stipulated in SDG 8 could be realized in the contemporary AI era. Drawing on a systematic literature review and qualitative content analysis of 32 scholarly and institutional sources, the findings demonstrate that relationship of AI with decent work is fundamentally indecisive and institutionally contingent. While AI contributes demonstrably to productivity growth, innovation, and the creation of high-skill employment, it simultaneously intensifies job polarization, undermines employment security, and reconfigures labor relations through algorithmic management. These outcomes reveal a persistent tension between economic efficiency and the qualitative dimensions of work: dignity, autonomy, fairness, and security, that lie at the core of SDG 8. Thus, the findings challenge deterministic narratives that portray AI as either an inevitable threat or an automatic enabler of decent work, instead emphasizing that developmental consequences of AI depend on how it is developed, regulated, and embedded within labor markets.

Implications

The findings of this review carry important implications. The findings underscore that productivity growth alone is insufficient as an indicator of progress of success toward SDG 8 (World Economic Forum, 2020; OECD, 2023). Policymakers must explicitly integrate job quality indicators covering employment security, autonomy, and labor rights into national AI strategies and digital transformation agendas (Küfeoğlu, 2022; WTO, 2024). Further, the documented risks of algorithmic management emphasize the urgent need for AI-specific labor governance, including transparency requirements, worker participation in technology deployment, and protections against impervious automated decision-making (OECD, 2023).

While reskilling and lifelong learning are widely promoted as solutions, the evidence indicates that access to such opportunities is uneven and often excludes vulnerable workers, necessitating public investment and employer accountability in workforce transitions (ILO, 2019). Similarly, from a global perspective, the concentration of AI benefits in advanced economies raises concerns about deepening inequalities, suggesting that international cooperation on digital infrastructure, skills development, and ethical AI governance, that is essential for realizing the *'for all' dimension of decent work* (WTO, 2024).

Limitations of the Study

Despite the contributions, this study has four main limitations. First, as a secondary synthesis, the analysis is constrained by the scope and quality of existing research, which

is heavily skewed toward developed economies and formal labor markets, limiting generalizability to developing and informal contexts. Second, although a rigorous PRISMA-guided process was followed, the reliance on the publications in English might have excluded relevant regional studies, and policy documents. Third, the qualitative content analysis, while well-suited for capturing conceptual and thematic patterns, does not allow for causal inference or statistical estimation of labor market effects of AI. Fourth, the limited number of longitudinal studies in the reviewed literature restricts the ability to assess long-term employment lines and the sustainability of AI-driven work arrangements.

Directions for Future Studies

Having considered the identified limitations, several directions for future research appear. There is a pressing need for empirical studies in developing and emerging economies (Eurofound, 2018; World Bank, 2019), mainly in informal, platform-based, and micro & small-enterprise contexts where decent work deficits are most acute. Future research should also adopt worker-centered and mixed-methods approaches to capture lived experience of dignity, technostress, autonomy, and well-being under AI-mediated work arrangements. Longitudinal designs are essential to examine how AI reshapes careers, skills, and employment stability over time. Moreover, scholars should explicitly integrate SDG 8 indicators into analytical frameworks to strengthen the connection between AI research and sustainable development evaluation. Finally, it is suggested to give a greater attention to institutional and regulatory experimentation, including the empirical assessment of AI governance models, labor law reforms, and collective bargaining mechanisms that seek to align technological innovation with decent work standards.

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