Gender Equality Index 2020: Digitalisation and the future of work

9. Digitalisation and the future of work: a thematic focus

Recent decades have seen digitalisation transform socioeconomic and political realities. With the integration of digital technologies, the world of work has changed – creating both opportunities for and risks to gender equality.

However, academic, public and policy debates on the digital future of work have often adopted gender-neutral perspectives that fail to address the central role of digitalisation in transforming gender relations in positive and negative ways (Scheele, 2005).

The EU digital strategy 'Shaping Europe's digital future' presents a vision of digital transition that works for all, 'putting people first and opening new opportunities for business' (European Commission, 2020a). The EU gender equality strategy 2020–2025 observes that integration of a gender perspective in this area is essential to reach the goal of gender equality. While a number of positive policy developments can be noted, major challenges remain if gender equality in the digital world of work is to be achieved.

In 2019, EU countries committed to boosting the participation of women in digital and technology sectors through the Ministerial Declaration of Commitment on Women in Digital (WiD), with a strong focus on improving the representation of women in certain high-skilled, well-paid activities (notably STEM).

While systematic monitoring of progress achieved under the WiD declaration is envisaged, its coverage of gender equality issues linked to digitalisation is limited, often owing to lack of availability or poor quality of gender-disaggregated data (for additional suggestions for indicators to be monitored, see Annex 5).

Mainstreaming of gender equality into other aspects of digitalisation is not well developed. For example, policy literature has little to say about the implications of new platform work opportunities for gender equality (for an exception, see European Commission (2018f)).

The limited treatment of equality issues in digital policy contrasts with feminist scholars' long-standing interest in this topic. Since the 1970s, feminist research has criticised the gender biases of scientific thought as dominated by the perspectives and interests of Western middle-class white men (Harding, 1986, 1991; Keller and Longino, 1996). The gendered, racial and class-based division of labour was associated with the prevailing gender-blind technological practices (Cockburn and Ormrod, 1993).

The scope and understanding of the debate on gender and technology later expanded, with influential thinkers identifying the potential to transform bodies beyond biological boundaries and transcend gender inequalities through the use of digital technologies (Haraway, 1984, 1991; Wajcman, 2004, 2015). At the same time, however, a number of studies of digital discourse on race and gender showed the persistence of – and even the emergence of new forms of – racist and sexist stereotyping online (Nakamura, 2013).

Feminist research has also highlighted links between gender, technology and the labour market, focusing on the different ways in which technology has substituted or transformed the work of women and men. Various forms of gender segregation have been identified, including vertical, horizontal and contractual segregation (e.g. in part-time or temporary work) (Rubery and Fagan, 1993).

Further research has built on this evidence and analysed how new kinds of technology-enabled work, such as telework and platform work, have reproduced or changed dominant patterns of gender segregation and inequality (Freeman, 2010; Mirchandani, 2010; Overseas Development Institute, 2019).

This thematic focus takes stock (briefly) of the research on the positive and negative consequences of digitalisation for gender equality in the world of work, particularly those consequences that are not (fully) addressed in the EU policy framework. It shows that digitalisation of work is likely to have profound implications for future progress towards gender equality across all Index domains, especially work, money and knowledge. It concludes with several broad policy and research recommendations on promoting gender equality in the context of future digitalisation.

In addition, the chapter explores the gendered consequences of digitalisation for groups facing additional disadvantages, such as women with disabilities or women from migrant and ethnic backgrounds. It also reflects on variations in the impact of digitalisation across Member States. Finally, it explores how the COVID-19 crisis (ongoing at the time of writing) may affect the trends analysed here.

The scope of this analysis is limited by (1) data gaps – even basic gender-disaggregated data on some issues (e.g. platform work and the COVID-19 crisis) are often missing; and (2) the brief, exploratory nature of the chapter, which allows only limited attention to detail.

The thematic focus is structured in three sections. The first provides a gender perspective on the use and development of digital technologies, exploring how women and men use technologies, gendered patterns in the development of digital skills, and the composition of the workforce driving technological change. The second section looks at the implications of the digital transformation of the labour market for gender equality.

It analyses the prospects for women and men as new technologies replace or complement labour, increase work flexibility and enable new forms of work, such as platform work. The final section discusses three broad technological developments to illustrate how they might affect gender equality: the increasing use of AI algorithms, the emerging phenomenon of cyber-violence and the ways in which new technologies are transforming the world of care.