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Digitisation and women in the workforce: Exploring the impact of the gig economy on female ‘participation’ and ‘status’ in the labour market

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A b s t r a c t

This paper explores labour market issues from the perspectives of digitisation and gendered disadvantages experienced by women therein. From viewpoints underpinned within these concepts, the emergence of new forms of work as an outcome of rapid advancements in technology is accentuated. This is considering how the digitisation of the labour market is evident within the gig or sharing economy, and the new forms of work created, which negate traditional employment models. Shortfalls are underlined when considering the lack of universally formal, codified regulations in light of these trends, the potential for automation as outcomes of digitisation, and the existence of exploitative practices through some dishonest manifestations of this emerging labour market structure. Hence, the potential for improving the status and participation of women in the labour market is stressed. Whilst the need for more active roles for women within the architecture of this new model of work is fundamental.

[K e y w o r d s]: Gender, Gig economy, Labour market, Technology, digitisation

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, highlighting significant issues in the workforce particularly in the context of gender equity and female participation in the labour market, are ongoing trends in the digitalisation, and automation of workplace activities brought about by technological advancement (Piasna & Drahokoupil, 2017). Of interest, is the influence these developments have on women in the workforce. With the legal concept of being an employee deeply rooted in the pre-internet era; the advent of the digital era has changed employment relationships, significantly leading to levels of legal uncertainty (Gabel & Mansfield, 2003; Todoli-Signes, 2017).

However, limited attempts have been made to specifically accentuate the effect of the value attached to digitalisation in the workplace, the creation of new opportunities as a result of automation, and dependence on technology at work today, on gender (OECD, 2017; Dery & MacCormick, 2012).

Resulting from a technological transformation of business organisations, new companies established on a *'sharing or on-demand'* economy and focused on connecting individual service providers with customers have emerged (Todoli-Signes, 2017: 1). Thus, highlighting an *'escape from employment law'*, and leading to workers with *'self-employed'* classifications and a business model called the *'gig economy'* or offline crowd-work (Baylos Grau, 2000: 44; Brescia, 2016).

This paper aims to explore the impact of digital technologies and the gig economy on, the participation of women at work, gender pay inequality, and career progression for women. This is particularly considering, the desire for a better work-life balance, the value placed on workplace flexibility, and the possibility of jobs accommodating the personal lives of women in work (Armour, 2005; Adebisi, 2017). The rest of this paper will underline the importance of this study, whilst examining perspectives in the existing literature on the broad characteristics of the increasing digitisation of work and the gig economy, and how they impact labour market opportunities for women.

Rationale for the study

In an examination of the title of this paper as to the perceived issues surrounding the impact of new forms of work on women in the workplace (OECD, 2017), key concepts and developments attached to these emerging trends will be explored. They include; the complexities of lower job quality, flexible working, the context of gender egalitarianism, and ever-changing gender norms (Charles & Grusky, 2004; Estevez-Abe, 2005; Goldin, 2014).

In addition, this paper would also address the role played by case law precedents, ever-changing legislative provisions, and technological advancements, in supporting the participation of women at work; through digital labour platforms, and the expansion of self-employment outside a regulated employment relationship (Drahokoupil & Fabo, 2016). However, potential limitations associated with these developments would also be underlined in this research particularly in the context of gender perception, gender segregation (Piasna & Drahokoupil, 2017), and how they influence gender inequalities relating to women.

Overview of digital technologies and the gig Economy

In an assessment of the emerging trends in the world of work today, it is critical to identify contextual frameworks on the origins of, the gig or on-demand economy, described by Finkin (2016: 1) with modern information technology as the *'midwife'*. Therefore, the need to understand the direct changes made by the digitisation of workplace processes to; existing gendered occupational structures, categories, and forms of employment, may not be overlooked (Arntz et al., 2016; Autor, 2015; Rubery & Piasna, 2016; Rubery & Wilkinson, 1981).

Encompassing critical aspects of human capital management and the law, the advancement of technology has become a central part of economic activities across the globe today. Often characterised by 'invisibility', intimate, early, and enduring interactions with digital technologies has created a generation of individuals within and beyond the workplace, with distinctively different qualifications, behaviours, attitudes, and expectations (Tapscott, 2008; Duffy & Schwartz, 2017). Therefore, leading to general outcomes of data management, creation, capture, and replication in digital forms, a culture of connectivity, and concepts of the *'digital'* workplace,

'*digital*' employees, and '*digital*' natives, in a period classed as the '*digital*' age (Meister & Willyerd, 2010; Prensky, 2001: 1).

General arguments exist for the value added by digital technologies to the world of work today particularly in terms of increased flexibility, the development of global business models, and the organisation of work. Considering the ever-increasing employment precariousness and the dangers related to the blurred boundary between work and non-work, the advancement of technology helps promote changes in work practices such as growing flexibility in the place and timing of work (Piasna & Drahokoupil, 2017). For instance, the matching of clients with workers, to perform the smallest tasks in one-off transactions through digital labour platforms (Drahokoupil & Fabo, 2016). This working arrangement due to its flexible nature also creates opportunities for achieving increased labour market participation for marginalised groups including women (OECD, 2017).

Representing a central characteristic for the impact of digitisation and technological change is the creation of new opportunities at work particularly considering the resulting shifts in career patterns, timing and place of work, occupational structures, and employment relationships (Piasna & Drahokoupil, 2017). Of critical consideration for this article is the emergence of platform or on-demand working in the 'sharing' or 'gig' economy.

Although there is no universally agreed definition for the gig economy, Rauch & Schleicher (2015) and Barzilay & Ben-David (2017) characterise it as the segmentation of production, and disaggregation of consumption via online platforms. In practice, informal, fragmented, and loose, task forms of labour have been amplified around the world, particularly with micro-labour now largely evident on a macro-scale. Therefore, leading to academics claiming a paradigmatic shift in the way we work is being witnessed (Lobel, 2016).

A position illustrated further by Todoli-Signes (2017), with the emergence of new forms of work predominantly carried out by employees, to an indefinite number of people in form of an open call; matching clients (demand) with workers (supply) (Howe, 2006).

Influence of digital technologies and the gig economy on women in the labour market

The departure from the model of a year-round, full-time employment relationship remains an essential feature of the sharing economy and digitalisation; and is historically conducted by women (Fudge & Owens, 2006; Kessler-Harris, 2003). Furthermore, the substantial degree of inclusiveness, anonymity, and flexibility associated with digital and platform working demonstrates a link to gender-based benefits for those with gendered family responsibilities (Schoenbaum, 2016; Williams, 2000; Cahn, 2000). Consequently, with existent disadvantages in the workplace (women more likely to work part-time for lower pay), female employment may improve in the digital economy as they represent a more attractive source of labour (Piasna & Drahokoupil, 2017; Perrons & Plomien, 2013; Annesley & Gains, 2013). This position is confirmed by OECD (2017), as the digital economy enables women to combine caring responsibilities with paid work, and with automation replacing less-skilled jobs women also gain advantages as they outperform their male counterparts in education.

However, the degree of impact is also mixed with arguments accentuating that the dishonest use of digital work arrangements, considering the structural employment transformation in Europe. Thus, indicating the benefits of flexible working may be offset by lower job quality, and lower pay (OECD, 2017). Firstly, this is demonstrated due to the connection between the inability to secure adequately paid employment and flexible working (Leschke & Jepsen, 2011). Secondly, when demands placed on employees are inconsistent with resources at the workers' disposal, employee well-being and job quality suffers (OECD, 2014).

In addition to flexibility, the sharing economy has been celebrated as a job creator and a liberating option for those unable to attain stable employment (Singer, 2014). Accordingly, female status and participation in the labour market is significantly improved by the gig economy due to potential anonymity associated with online working; which would offset barriers, bias, and discrimination still faced by women in the workforce today (Barzilay & Ben-David, 2017). Furthermore, the significant degree of flexibility associated with the sharing economy allows freedom for workers in setting their own work schedules (Carboni, 2016). A feature that is essentially beneficial in

labour market participation for working caregivers who remain predominantly women (Abrams, 1989; Barzilay, 2016).

A position underlined further with ‘gig’ or ‘sharing’ companies aiming to attract women on these precise principles, marketing themselves as empowering women by creating provisions for the flexibility they require in balancing gendered responsibilities, work, and family (Mattson, 2016). In terms of status, the benefits of digital working through the gig economy are also highlighted by the horizontal rather than hierarchical structure of online working (Barzilay & Ben-David, 2017). Accordingly, this promotes the opportunity for women to easily negotiate improved labour market status like equal or improved pay, and promotion. With the potential for anonymity preserved online in terms of gender blindness, the income generated by an online task and position to deliver the service, would not be affected by the gender of the worker (Rhode, 2014).

Limitations exist in various aspects of the task content of jobs, discrimination, pay, and occupational structures associated with digitisation and platform working in the gig economy. With ever-growing digitalisation, the risk of online services being automated is in congruence with the task content of jobs (Arntz et al., 2016; Autor, 2015). Therefore, although no systematic international comparative evidence exists between gender and the potential for tasks being automated; ever-increasing competition for online taskers in current tasking work models, encourages lower bidding rates, pressure to lower one’s price, which may generate exploitative workplace practices (Schultz, 2009; Finkin, 2016; Stone, 2012).

Accordingly, Keister & Lewandowski’s (2017) analysis highlights that the online expansion of automated tasks in the sharing economy portrays a distinct gendered group of workers performing routine work. Particularly, matching vulnerable job categories identified in high-income countries, service workers mainly include women with low education earning low wages (Acemoglu & Autor, 2011; Goos et al., 2014). In terms of occupational structures, discrimination and pay, working in the sharing economy requires significantly less investment in employees by employers, fewer opportunities for workers to establish relationships with employers; providing fewer benefits and a dearth of protection against discrimination compared to long-term, full-time employment models (Schultz, 2009). A position confirmed by Garrie (2012) as although

organisations can block and monitor digital employee communications to track productivity and protect trade secrets; sexual harassment and discrimination conducts at work is increasing through digital channels of communication (Garrity v John Hancock, 2002).

In addressing these limitations, previous studies underline the importance of emphasis on inclusion with external organisations, the balance in bargaining power, and a focus on regulations, aligned with digitalisation and the gig economy. Inclusion beyond a set of direct instructions but with an external organisation helps improve task regulation, business practices, and interdependence between employers and workers (Rodriguez-Pinero, 1992; Montoya Meglar, 1998). In this regard, the unbalanced bargaining power between workers and employers in the gig economy is also addressed particularly through legislative provisions that support the economically weaker party (the worker). Therefore, creating little or no differences in terms of the correlation between a gig economy worker and the legal concept of an employee (Rodriguez-Pinero, 1999, Davidov, 2002; Davidov, 2005; Davidov, 2016). Thus, in relation to gender, the sustainability of juggling work and family, improved work performance and remuneration for an on-call female worker in the sharing economy become achievable.

Conclusion

This paper provides an insight into the interaction between digitisation, evident through new forms of work within a sharing economy and how this impacts on labour market activities for women (Barzilay & Ben-David, 2017; Piasna & Drahokoupil, 2017). Consequently, highlighting benefits reflected through flexible working and the reduction of bias, and shortfalls through exploitative work practices and job automation as an outcome of digitisation (OECD, 2017; Autor, 2015; Leschke & Jepsen, 2011). Therefore, in alleviating the gendered disadvantages in the labour market, the significance of work platforms in the gig economy should be accentuated. In addressing limitations, a broader societal approach must be embraced. Similarly, encouraging women to take active roles in designing these platforms, with subjectivity essential to a reflection of experiences and outcomes that will be beneficial to women within this employment context, and as a result, the labour market generally.

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