social sciences

MDPI

Article

Migrant Women in the UK's Digital Economy: The Elimination of Labour Market Barriers in the Digital Labour Market

Miray Erinc Oztas

Independent Researcher, London SW1V 4AP, UK; mirayerinc@gmail.com

Abstract: This research paper delves into the complexities migrant women face within the UK labour market, with a specific focus on the digital economy's role as both a barrier and a conduit for employment opportunities. Migrant women in the UK encounter dual barriers to labour market entry: systemic challenges rooted in migration and gender biases, and the digital divide that exacerbates access and inclusion issues within the burgeoning digital economy. Through an exploratory descriptive analysis, this study explores how digitalism—defined as the integration of digital technologies into economic and societal practices—circumvents traditional labour market entry barriers such as languages barriers. By setting out the grounds for a potential hypothesis and further research in the era of AI, this paper underlines how through the implementation of AI tools, traditional barriers such as language barriers are eliminated in the digital labour market.

Keywords: female labour force participation; migrant's integration; digital labour market; barriers in the labour market; working mothers

check for updates

Citation: Erinc Oztas, Miray. 2024. Migrant Women in the UK's Digital Economy: The Elimination of Labour Market Barriers in the Digital Labour Market. *Social Sciences* 13: 494. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13090494

Academic Editors: Leila Simona Talani and Matilde Rosina

Received: 29 June 2024
Revised: 21 August 2024
Accepted: 22 August 2024
Published: 18 September 2024

Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

1. Introduction

It took 7 years for the internet to reach 100 million users, and 2.5 years for Instagram. While the pace of penetration reduces in length of time year by year, for the AI application ChatGPT, it has been faster than ever—it took only 2 months to reach the same number of users, proving how digitalisation has overtaken our lives at a fast pace. However, when considering these users, statistics show how, globally, 244 million more men are using the internet in 2023—this makes 70% of the male population vs 65% female users (International Telecommunication Union 2023), revealing a significant gap between genders in sourcing the advantages of technology.

Alongside discussions and efforts on how to increase the forever-low female labour force participation rates, the digitalisation of labour markets adds a new dimension to the analysis, creating space for potential improvement regarding the employment situation of women. By embedding digital technology into the discussion of labour markets, this research paper will examine the role of digitalisation in boosting female labour force participation and how it can offer marginalised women and groups access to employment opportunities and labour markets. This argument is commonly grounded in the belief that digital platforms offer women the flexibility to manage both work and household duties effectively. The initial studies so far contribute to the consensus that the platform economy will "increase women's participation in the labour markets and is framed as a panacea to poverty and inequality among women" (Anwar 2022).

The Gender Digital Divide and Empowerment

While reports reveal how gender inequalities in the labour market—participation, wages, and education in STEM areas—continue to persist, the use of digital technologies is gaining recognition as a tool for promoting socioeconomic development and empowering women economically globally (OECD 2017, 2018a). It is crucial to bridge the gender digital divide by providing at least mobile technologies and digital financial services to promote

gender equality and foster sustainable and inclusive economic growth. Additionally, prominent economic discussions suggest that bridging the digital gap could potentially boost women's participation in the workforce, ultimately improving their social and economic status (UN Women 2018). Various global institutions like the World Economic Forum (2022) and the World Bank (2021) echo the importance of narrowing the digital divide to tackle gender disparities. While addressing the gender digital gap is undeniably crucial, the key issue lies in determining who has access to digital resources and technologies, and how they empower women to pursue job opportunities and enhance their incomes, to combat enduring inequalities.

The willingness and seriousness of addressing the gender gap in digital employment markets is proven by the various actions taken on behalf of countries, stakeholders and institutions. In this respect, the U.S. Government has launched, in collaboration with G20 countries and partners, a programme called the Global Initiative on Women in the Digital Economy, with a serious budget over USD 515 million. Finland has allocated USD 87 million between 2021 and 2026 for initiatives that advance policies, advocacy, and programming to promote technology and innovation for gender equality, including the expansion of women's and girls' access to digital learning and skills; strengthening efforts to prevent and eliminate technology-facilitated gender-based violence; and improving the representativeness of digital data. Germany put aside roughly USD 60 million through to 2026 for several initiatives that contribute to closing the gender digital divide, including the incubation of women-led tech enterprises; expanding women's and girls' access to digital learning opportunities that address critical employment and educational skill gaps; and supporting digital economic transformation, with a focus on women entrepreneurs (USAID 2023).

The United Kingdom will allocate USD 9 million by 2025 to the GSMA Connected Women Programme to reduce the gender gap in mobile internet use and to support research and advocacy to improve women's access to digital technology.

There is also an aligned effort by the private sector, philanthropists, multilateral organisations, and civil society organisations. In that respect, Amazon Web Services, Inc., is providing up to USD 4.5 million of resources through its startup programmes—including technical resources and promotional credits—to support early-stage artificial intelligence startups, with a focus on women-led startups, across Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is providing, in addition to its commitment to the Women in the Digital Economy Fund, USD 40 million toward closing the digital gender divide in Africa and South Asia (USAID 2023). Evidently, there is a global effort and awareness about inequality in accessing the labour market. Digitalisation across the employment sector may be even regarded as an opportunity and a tool to minimise the persisting labour force participation gap between genders and groups.

2. Background

2.1. Impact of New Technologies on Women

The most compelling question in the realm of labour markets for the upcoming years will revolve undoubtedly around the question of how digitalisation and the transformation of labour markets will affect employment and employment structures. So far, analytical studies and expert opinions on one hand have predicted massive job losses, especially in the short term (Frey and Osborne 2017). Reports by the OECD and WEF predict an entirely new order in the professions, which will translate into the creation of new jobs and professions. Evaluations reveal that gender division in the digital labour market constitutes one of the main challenges so far (OECD 2018b). For instance, women seem to be more prone to be in vulnerable occupations due to gender inequalities in the labour market (von Dietrich and Garcia 2022).

While tracing why women experience disadvantages in the new-era labour market, namely the digital economy, answers often lead to the discourse of the digital divide between genders. The digital divide, or in other words, the technological gap between

genders, means the difference between the male and the female in accessing technology platforms. The fundamental argument is that women often have less access to technology. In turn, the female labour force often lags behind in the digital labour market. Without providing equal access to digital platforms, through the use of technology, women and girls will be held back from participating in today's increasingly digital world. Holding back women from the digital society will affect every aspect of their lives as a spillover effect, leading to even more exacerbation of existing inequalities. Considering that there exists already a gap in global labour force participation rates, tackling gender issues in the digital labour market urgently requires even more attention.

2.2. Digitalism and the Digital Economy—Does It Come with Advantages?

The term digital capitalism has been coined in relation to the expansion of the digital economy in the recent years. Digital capitalism refers to the accelerating changes that modern societies are currently facing (Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014; Schiller 2000; Pasquale 2015; Staab 2016).

As Nicholas Negroponte puts it, digitalism is the condition of living in a digital culture. There is no official definition of the term digital economy; however, the European Commission refers to the fact that digitalisation affects all businesses that sell goods via the internet and digital platforms that connect spare capacity and demand. Generally, it is well accepted that digital labour platforms offer tremendous potential to expand women's access to the labour market by offering flexible work opportunities. In fact, recent estimates suggest that over 163 million people worldwide secure income from paid work through digital labour platforms (Kässi et al. 2021), a five-fold increase over the last decade. Although participating in the platform economy brings a lot of advantages for women, female exclusions within digital labour research are evident across multiple studies. This study argues that despite the digital divide in genders, digitalism opens up doors and removes certain barriers for women to access the labour market. In fact, the expected motivations for women in general to participate in the digital labour market derive from motivations that used to be considered as barriers and penalties within women's previous employment, and thanks to the digital labour market, these barriers are removed. A very simple example would be flexibility in working hours. Further claims around the advantages that digital labour platforms offer women have centred on factors such as a greater personal autonomy over work hours, as well as workplace, and the greater flexibility of paid work around childcare, which in turn comes with increased financial independence.

2.3. Digitalism in the UK

New research from the CCIA Research Centre reveals how the United Kingdom boasts the most advanced digital economy in Europe, making it a leading destination for investments, startups, global tech companies, and businesses of all sizes. The study emphasises the significant impact of the UK tech industry on the national economy, showcasing its substantial contributions not only through direct employment in digital jobs but also in its supply chain and broader economic influence. It shows that the thriving digital economy in the UK sustains over 2.6 million jobs with an average salary of GBP 45,700 per year, surpassing the national average by 37%. Additionally, the report highlights that the UK's digital economy indirectly boosts the overall economy by GBP 113 billion through supporting businesses that utilise digital products and services. When someone is looking actively for a job, they are part of the labour market and hence count in the labour force participation rate. The labour force participation rate for women is currently just under 47%, whereas for men it is 72%. There is a difference of 25 percentage points, whereas in some areas this is up to 50%. The OECD employment and labour force participation rates currently stand at 70.1% and 73.8% in the third quarter of 2023. This is the highest level recorded since the start of the series in 2005 and 2008, respectively.

From an economic perspective, reducing gender gaps in labour force participation rates substantially boosts GDP (World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends for Women 2017).

It leads to an increase in the average annual growth of GDP. From a global perspective, the gender technology gap has a negative impact on countries' potential for economic growth and development. According to Plan International, an international organisation working on equality, if 600 million more women are connected to the internet in 3 years, this would translate to a rise in global GDP of between 13 and 18 billion US dollars.

Many countries will face a shrinking labour force in the coming years. This makes it particularly important for women to become an active part of the labour force. On a microlevel, women participating in the labour market mean additional income for families, and it even has a spillover effect on children's education, an increase in the welfare of families and on society, as well as the economy. Research by the ILO and Gallup worldwide in 2016 found that 70% of women prefer paid jobs instead of caring for their family or doing both. Interestingly, 68% of men agree. In other words, over 70% percent want to work, 68% of men agree, but under 48% are in paid jobs, which means an important loss of opportunity in socio-economic terms. The latest figures show how the male perception theory as a barrier to entry in the labour market is eliminated. In the classical theories of migration and the labour market, the traditional theories often discuss how migrant women and women in general are inhibited in accessing the labour market due to existing barriers. The main barriers are often stated as language barriers, financial barriers, network barriers and cultural and family-related barriers. This research is in particular interested in how these barriers act in the digital labour market among migrant women.

2.4. Migrant Women in the UK

The United Kingdom is a highly popular destination for migrants. Over several decades, the UK has been accepting a high yearly influx of migrants who come for work, to study, for family reunification, humanitarian relief or just for social reasons. In the census of 2021, the most common non-UK long-term migrant arrivals to England and Wales were from India, Romania and China. An increase in non-EU migrants can be observed in the following years, 2022 and 2023.

The majority of the rise in non-EU arrivals between 2019 and 2023 was through study and work pathways, and a growing trend of emigration may reduce net migration from 2024 onward. Projections suggest that the UK population could reach nearly 74 million by 2036, mainly driven by net migration. The Office for National Statistics anticipates a population increase of 6.6 million (9.9%) from 2021 to 2036, with women accounting for 48% of migrants. Approximately half of migrant mothers with young children are employed in OECD countries but face lower employment rates compared to native-born mothers. This discrepancy is most prominent in Belgium, France, Germany and Slovenia, where employment gaps exceed 30 percentage points. Conversely, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Chile and Costa Rica show the smallest gaps, not exceeding 10 percentage points. The labour participation of migrant mothers can be influenced by factors such as family formation soon after arrival, limited access to parental leave policies, and the lack of financial incentives or support in returning to work in elementary occupations, where they are often overrepresented.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Language Proficiency and Labour Market Performance

In the classical theories of migration, it is well accepted that English language proficiency significantly improves labour market outcomes for immigrants, including higher employment rates and earnings. Investment in language training programmes could have substantial economic benefits for immigrants and help reduce gender disparities in the labour market. Language barriers not only reduce the likelihood of employment but also confine women to lower-paid occupations and sectors with limited advancement opportunities. Policies that improve access to English language education for immigrant women could significantly enhance their labour market integration and economic well-being (e.g., Dustmann et al. 2003; Dávila and Mora 2000).

3.2. Childcare

Moreover, access to formal childcare services is positively associated with maternal employment, suggesting that reliable childcare options can facilitate mothers' entry or return to the labour market. The importance of childcare quality, and its potential impact on children's development, in turn influences parents' childcare choices and employment strategies. Adrangi and Jeszenszki (2024), for example, investigate the association between public spending on childcare and the labour force participation rates of both women and men, considering both full-time and part-time employment in Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. The results highlight that childcare, when combined with other family-friendly programs, turns into an effective policy approach for promoting male and female employment, especially in high-skilled positions (Adrangi and Jeszenszki 2024).

3.3. Networking

Strong social networks, particularly those with connections to the labour market, significantly enhance women's employment prospects and job quality after migration. Social networks are crucial for accessing information about job opportunities, especially for women who face cultural and institutional barriers in the labour market, making the network factor a highly valuable asset.

Greguletz et al. (2019) in their research show that women often have less powerful professional networks than men, and the reasons behind this are not well understood. A study of high-profile female leaders in large German corporations found that both external barriers, such as being excluded from influential networks, and internal barriers, like women's reluctance to leverage social connections, contribute to this disparity. Factors such as work–family conflict, homophily, moral considerations and gendered modesty play a role in hindering women from benefiting fully from networking. This study sheds light on the motivations behind women's networking behaviours and offers a comprehensive model that explains how structural and personal barriers contribute to gender inequality in the workplace (Greguletz et al. 2019).

3.4. Financial Access and Labour Market Participation

A larger gender gap in financial inclusion is associated with greater income inequality, underscoring the role of financial access in shaping economic outcomes. Enhancing women's access to financial services can contribute to reducing income inequality and promoting equitable economic growth. Roper and Scott (2009) find that women are around 7.4% more likely to experience financial barriers to business startups than men. Because perceptions of financial obstacles are interconnected with the decision to start a business, the heightened perception of financial barriers among women is significantly impacting their entrepreneurial choices. Nonetheless, being female also has an independent negative impact on the decision to start a business, separate from financial barriers. Therefore, in order to address these challenges, policy responses should address the demand side and focus on addressing the more negative perceptions of startup finance among potential female entrepreneurs (Roper and Scott 2009).

Firstly, this research underlines how migrant women face double barriers compared to native women. Hence, the term Double Disadvantage Rule for migrant women is introduced. This research further builds on the argument that thanks to digitalism, some of the barriers can be overcome more easily. On a theoretical level, this research will contribute to the literature on female labour force participation and migration issues in the labour market as part of globalisation by filling the gap on digitalism and barriers in entering the labour market. The main focus of this research paper is on the potential hypothesis that the digitalisation of the labour market will benefit the labour economy by reducing the digital gender divide.

4. Methodology

In setting out the foundation for future research and analysis, this article explores why the digital labour market in conjunction with women and employment, in particular migrant women, requires further attention and extensive study, as rapid digital innovation is modifying how labour markets are structured and shaping employment structures. This paper aims to gain initial insights and lay the foundation for a potential hypothesis by providing a preliminary descriptive exploration of three areas—digitalism, women and employment and language barriers—as part of a discussion of migrant women and the labour market. By exploring the current literature and secondary data such as interviews, in conjunction with the fast take-over of digitalism in the labour market and its barriers, the aim of this analysis is to generate new research questions and hypotheses for further investigation. The transformation of the labour market through digitalism is a recent event, especially when it comes to the use of AI. The intersection of digitalism, women and employment, as well as migration and labour market barriers, has not been studied yet. However, it is therefore important to do so, as digitalisation—in other words, the fourth industrial revolution—has serious consequences for the creation of jobs. If improvements are targeted on a macro-economic level, the labour force participation of women, as well as migrant women, needs a more detailed analysis and requires special attention. Especially, the role of AI and the benefits that come along with it will in particular change the way women are involved in the labour market. This research will provide the foundation for further research in the digital labour market in conjunction with women, and in particular women with a migration background who face barriers such as language barriers. Due to fast digitalisation across labour markets, employment structures are changing and require special attention. The inclusion of migrant women into the labour market is important as it has a positive spillover effect on socio-economic structures. The impact of AI and technological software among women has not been analysed sufficiently yet, as it is still emerging. Suggested research questions may revolve around the questions such as 'How does AI impact the labour market entry of migrant women' or 'How are traditional barriers such as language barriers across the labour market affected in the digital labour market'. Further research may moreover consider how male participation in the digital tech labour market can have a positive impact on women. Firstly, men may abandon their jobs and join their partners in their entrepreneurial undertaking. Secondly, a change in social–life balance may evolve if more men work in the digital labour market, as they may be more often present in the household.

5. Discussion

5.1. Overcoming Language Barriers—Elimination of the Traditional "Language" Barrier in the Digital Labour Market

The digitalisation of labour markets has shaped employment structures in unexpected ways. Many positions used to require very specific skills, such as content writing, translation and editing. Through the rise of technology, especially with the creation of AI, most of these tasks have become easier to accomplish. Additional helpful tools such as applications or software systems are nowadays common. This paper is not arguing that specific tasks have been entirely eliminated; however, language barriers can be addressed or may not pose a barrier anymore. Whereas across traditional labour markets, migrants, but above all migrant women, were pushed into precarious jobs, often due to a lack of skills, in the digital employment sector, face-to-face communication is often eliminated. Instead, written language dominates across jobs. With the rise of technology, online translation tools and applications have been introduced. The abundance of these online translation tools certainly proves their relevance and their efficacy. In an increasingly connected world, the number of AI-assisted translation applications is increasing. Clare Barclay, Microsoft UK Chief Operating Officer, stated in in an interview: "Language barriers have been a business topic for many decades, but what is it that's causing them to become such an important topic now? I think the reason is how quickly the world of business is changing: you've

got proliferation of social media tools, constant technological innovation, availability of information. And more communication in the old way of communicating is not going to help with that". Finding ways to overcome language barriers in the world of technology have become one of the trending themes in the last two decades, and a positive spillover effect can be observed across cultural realms (Wired 2024).

When exploring technological progress, automatic translation has long become a reality, addressing language barriers in a highly efficient way. For instance, Microsoft Teams has introduced voice call software that enables automatic real-time translation for over ten languages, as well as transcription and translation for 60 languages.

"Technologies like that can give you the ability to completely cross international barriers—and that, for an international company, or a company that's trying to do international expansion, is super exciting", says Barclay, Microsoft UK's Chief Operating Officer, in an interview (Wired 2024). To evaluate Barclay's point of view from a different perspective, not only is it important for international companies to cross international barriers. From a micro-perspective, individuals wanting to work in cross-cultural environments are freed from language barriers in a similar fashion and are able to benefit from technological process. Henceforth, digitalism presents a borderless labour market compared to some aspects of offline businesses or offline work environments. Before, language barriers were a major inhibitor to people being able to find solutions in other countries, and today, thanks to digitalism and technological progress, this hindrance is removed. The trend of technological progress, along with its application, can be easily projected onto programmes with migrant women and their effort to enter the labour market. Not only in the written language but also in speaking environments, seamless translation has become reality today. Conversation can take place via software for video chat and voice calls—people speaking different languages are growing increasingly simple to translate. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that the accuracy of these translation tools is relatively high. A 2021 study conducted by the UCLA Medical Centre found that Google Translate preserved the overall meaning for 82.5% of translations. In 2024, according to some studies. Google's translation accuracy reached 94%, stated as "sometimes, Google Translate's precision is shockingly good". According to Weglot, an online translation and SEO service provider, generally used in businesses, "results from our own study on the state of machine translation for website translation showed that 10 out of 14 translation editors were positively surprised by the quality of the translation they were shown. That means machine translation worked better than they expected" (Weglot 2024).

In fact, language software tools and applications enable the taking up of jobs across digital platforms, which individuals would not be able to keep up in a physical environment.

Moreover, digital employment opportunities enable one to pick candidates for employment independent of their nationalities.

Before the vast introduction of online jobs, native speakers were required for specific tasks. However, today, employers can accept offers from candidates without the required exact native language. A lot of small or medium-sized businesses today employ candidates through platforms. Platforms are open to everyone, and most of the time, the background of the applicant is unknown. Applicants are matched with the potential employer through a pool, and communication is often enabled through software tools, although this is mostly not very explicit. For instance, when talking to potential collaborations for online services, it may not always be explicit whether the client at the other end is making use of translation tools, especially when it comes to technical services. To underline this argument, Barclay states, "Technology—already now—allows me to speak to somebody in Asia with real-time automatic translation going on. But that doesn't mean that I understand all the cultural implications" (Wired 2024). "There's such an element of culture connected to language, that I still think that language skills will be important." Those differences can be overcome through an inclusive, collaborative workplace culture—aided by the right technology. Considering the cultural aspect, migrant women may be in a slightly advantageous position, as although language barriers exist, culturally, they have the chance

to be part of the culture of their destination country, although some time may be required in order to get to know the culture better and to understand cultural clues. Not only do these AI-assisted translators enhance business value, they also modify and improve the way employers communicate and delegate work. "Businesses are now able to easily communicate more effectively across cultures, regions, and ethnic groups" (Fastcompany 2024). According to Saikiran Chandha, founder and CEO of SciSpace, "Video conferencing platforms now use AI features such as automatic captioning to enhance the user experience. With auto-captions, teammates who speak different languages can better understand what is being said in the conversation". He further adds how his team incorporated an AI tool for its automatic note-taking and real-time speech-to-text capabilities. Moreover, it helped them to follow the conversation better, also ensuring that their team did not miss any important information. He backs up the argument, namely, that language barriers can be overcome across employment sectors, by adding that if your team is made up of people from different countries who may not all be proficient in English, this is a helpful solution you can consider (Fastcompany 2024).

Henceforth, it is highly important to understand these tools and be equipped with technological skills. In the literature on traditional employment markets and employees with migration backgrounds, language has always been discussed as one of the major barriers in entering the labour market. A lot of studies include discussions of how proficiency in the destination language can foster social interactions between immigrants and natives and therefore enable inclusion into destination societies (Chiswick and Miller 2003). Multiple studies underline the argument that migrants with confident language skills in their destination country have increased opportunities for better occupations and earnings (Chiswick and Miller 2003). From a broader and traditional point of view, it is significant to underline the fact that in most European countries, language skills are defined as national requirements and are defined by legislation in order to reside permanently or even for naturalisation. Consequently, it is of the utmost importance to understand how language skills operate in the labour market, especially when it comes to enhancing national policies in aiming to improve migrants' labour market integration. However, it is more important to understand how technological process is shaping the labour market and employment formation. Along with technological transformation, a multitude of business models have emerged. Especially, mothers have succeeded in making use of businesses. With online operations, mothers are able to catch up with success sometimes much faster than with offline businesses. New forms of marketing, such as content creation, have become of the utmost importance for startup businesses. For instance, whereas before, human translators would be required for such jobs, today, thanks to AI, online translations are not a challenge anymore. In her speech at the World Economic Forum's Annual meeting in Davos 2024, Reshma Saujani, founder of the Moms First campaign, which advocates affordable childcare, underlines how AI can empower women. Overall, AI tools may in fact enable more mothers to become part of the labour market.

5.2. Flexibility and Childcare Barriers

Oftentimes, flexibility is a major component to consider when it comes to employment nowadays. Since the emergence of technology advancement but especially social media, our perception of "work" and the "workplace" has changed immensely. Studies show how 9-5 jobs become less and less attractive, in fact how time-bounded office jobs that used to be the norm and came with a high prestige are not considered as such anymore. The COVID-19 era has substantially contributed to this perception. The idea of working during regular hours is shifting increasingly towards flexible time and place concepts. Major players in the tech scene foresaw this trend long before, offering their employers a result-based approach rather than time-based working styles. The idea of a more so-called work–life balance style of employment has penetrated also to the micro-level.

On the level of women with a migration background, flexibility is a key word when it comes to a preference towards a home office job rather than a conventional offline employment opportunity.

First and foremost, some studies have revealed that some groups of migrant families often tend to bear more children than native women. Flexibility is more of a concern for migrant women compared to their native peers. Consequently, these types of migrant women are bound to mother-related tasks more often. Online employment opportunities often offer jobs which are less time-bound or not completely time-flexible, based on a merit system. Online jobs can be stretched and be more flexible.

Flexibility is henceforth particularly important for working mothers. In fact, flexibility is a fuel for working mothers. It allows working mothers to have a greater control over their schedules and work plans, which in turn enables them to better balance their personal well-being, leading in turn to stress reduction and an overall spillover effect on their individual family members. Theoretically, but also in practice, childcare services are a central aspect of social policy strategies that transform changes in women's economic and social positioning (Bakker and Van Vliet 2022). The previous research agrees that expanding the provision of childcare services leads to higher female employment rates (Chevalier and Viitanen 2002). Some literature still discusses whether the supply of childcare actually has an impact on the individual's decision to become part of the labour market. In relation to these findings, discussions on the barriers in accessing labour markets often lead to results that lack of childcare is a main barrier. The role of the digital labour market may come here as a remedy. Based on their interviews, mothers with younger infants, especially, favour the digital labour market, as this will provide them with the flexibility they require when it comes to scheduling their on-demand mother duties in conjunction with earning money.

5.3. Networking in the Digital Labour Market

In the studies of migrant women and employment, a sound network is categorised as an enabler in accessing the labour market, whereas the lack of a network is accepted as a main barrier in entering the labour market. This is especially true for women with a migration background. Migrants often lack a pre-existing social environment and are therefore particularly vulnerable. Therefore, when they reach their new country and are surrounded by a completely different culture and socio-economic environment, they face a disadvantage, as they have fewer or no social connections compared to the locals. They have to build their social network from scratch. Accessing the local market without a base network is nearly impossible. As a getaway, migrant women generally heavily rely on support from outside, such as local organisations and social centres for migrants, where they can meet up with other likeminded women and share information as well as knowledge, which in turn can contribute to the growth of their businesses.

Across labour markets, a network is often seen as a form of social capital. The limitation or lack of these networks often lead to impediments in undertaking entrepreneurial activities. The absence of a more extensive network constitutes a hindrance among women entrepreneurs. Ager and Strang (2010) suggested that migrants' informal networks are effective in creating bonds; these networks grant safety, emotional stability and independence for refugees as well as migrants. Kloosterman (2010) in his study emphasises how networking aids in re-acquiring and reclaiming one's place in a new society. The role of networks as a confidence booster (Ozar 2005), amongst others, has been taken into consideration in this study. However, this time, it is being analysed within a slightly different concept than traditional networks, namely online networking. It is a fact that networking online can be a lot easier. An identity behind the computer can be a door opener sometimes, as opposed to a real-life identity. People cannot judge on personal criteria, and chances to close a deal increase. Prejudices may exist less. Also, it is easier to reach more people online. Online networks are virtually unlimited. Or, networking online in the digital economy may be easier, and one may be more willing to network. But most importantly, as a mum, the opportunity to go out is often missing. Connecting and finding likeminded people is in fact

much easier for me online and may come with less rejection, making online networking a true asset. To summarise, whereas networking has been a major barrier for migrant women, when it comes to digital employment, this barrier may well be removed or not considered as a barrier anymore, as potential prejudices are often eliminated. Hence, migrant women in particular can benefit from the digital labour market.

6. Conclusions

This preliminary research challenges the positioning of migrant women in the digital labour market in conjunction with the traditional argument as to how women face barriers in accessing employment opportunities. Whereas so far, the general theories of migration commonly argue that women in general, but migrant women in particular, face various forms of constraints in gaining access to labour markets, this study has explored the digital labour market, which is gaining increasing importance, as opposed to classical labour markets. Three main barriers, which are language barriers and networking, as well as financial limitations, can be taken into consideration for future extensive study in this field. Based on a preliminary analysis of descriptive data, the language barrier especially has the potential to be eliminated for consideration as a main barrier, as discussed in the traditional literature on migrants and access to the labour markets.

The language barrier may well be eliminated through the use of technology. Generally, so far, it is evident how adaptation to technological software and applications has shown how the digital market works as an environment free of language differences. The instant automation of online software in principle negates the classical argument of language being a barrier. This potential finding leads to a massive change of perception in the labour market and employment opportunities.

Moreover, the classical barrier 'networking' may also be taken for future consideration in research. Barriers in networking, in a similar fashion to the perception of languages as a barrier, are eliminated. Whereas in traditional labour markets, migrant women used to consider themselves in a disadvantaged position due to a lack of networks, the transformation of labour markets has decreased the significance of offline networking. In fact, migrant women find it more beneficial to communicate, liaise and bond through online networks. Henceforth, digital labour markets come with beneficial aspects in networking.

The core hypothesis of this research, namely that migrant women face double barriers, is to a great extent eliminated in the digital labour market. The discovery of the many benefits of digital labour markets may well contribute to the problem of the digital gender divide. Nevertheless, it is crucial to address this divide by giving women and girls opportunities to access and participate in online learning platforms, educational resources and digital skills training programs. The access to education acts as a door opener to diverse career paths, from STEM fields to entrepreneurship. Women will be enabled to challenge male-dominated sectors and pursue their aspirations without limitations.

Policy recommendations propose a blueprint for leveraging digitalism to enhance labour market accessibility for migrant women. These include targeted digital literacy and upskilling programs, inclusive policy frameworks that recognise and accommodate the qualifications and skills of migrant women, and the development of supportive networks that harness the potential of digital platforms for mentorship, networking and community building.

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on migration, gender and digitalisation by highlighting the specific experiences and needs of migrant women in the UK. It underscores the importance of adopting an intersectional approach in policymaking to address the digital divide and foster an inclusive digital economy that empowers migrant women as active participants in the labour market.

Funding: This research received no funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

Adrangi, Bahram, and Krisztian Jeszenszki. 2024. Publicly Subsidized Childcare and the Labor Force Participation Rates of Men and Women: Evidence From OECD. *The American Economist*, *in press*. [CrossRef]

Ager, Alison, and Alastair Strang. 2010. Refugee integration: Emerging trends and remaining agendas. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 23: 589–607.

Anwar, Mohammad Amir. 2022. Platforms of inequality: Gender dynamics of digital labour in Africa. *Gender and Development* 30: 747–64. [CrossRef]

Bakker, V., and Olaf Van Vliet. 2022. Social Investment, Employment and Policy and Institutional Complementarities: A Comparative Analaysis Across 26 OECD Countries. *Journal of Social Policy* 51: 728–50. [CrossRef]

Brynjolfsson, Erik, and Andrew McAfee. 2014. *The Second Machine Age: Wie die Nächste Digitale Revolution Unserer aller Leben Verändern Wird*. Kulmbach: Plassen.

Chevalier, Arnaud, and Tarja K. Viitanen. 2002. The causality between female labour force participation and the availability of childcare. *Applied Economics Letters* 9: 915–18. [CrossRef]

Chiswick, Barry R., and Paul W. Miller. 2003. The complementarity of language and other human capital: Immigrant earnings in Canada. *Economics of Education Review* 22: 469–80. [CrossRef]

Dávila, Alberto, and Marie T. Mora. 2000. English Skills, Earnings, and the Occupational Sorting of Mexican Americans along the U.S.-Mexico Border. *International Migration Review* 34: 133–57. [CrossRef]

Dustmann, Christian, Francesca Fabbri, Ian Preston, and Jonathan Wadsworth. 2003. *Labour Market Performance of Immigrants in the UK Labour Market*. (Home Office Online Report 05/03). London: Research Development and Statistics Directorate, Home Office.

Fastcompany. 2024. Available online: https://www.fastcompany.com/90897944/breaking-down-language-barriers-how-ai-is-enabling-global-collaboration (accessed on 16 September 2024).

Frey, Carl Benedikt, and Michael A. Osborne. 2017. The future of employment: How susceptible are jobs to computerisation? *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 114: 254–80. [CrossRef]

Greguletz, Elena, Marjo-Riitta Diehl, and Karin Kreutzer. 2019. Why women build less effective networks than men: The role of structural exclusion and personal hesitation. *Human Relations* 72: 1234–61. [CrossRef]

International Telecommunication Union. 2023. The Gender Digital Divide. January 8. Available online: https://www.itu.int/itu-d/reports/statistics/2023/10/10/ff23-the-gender-digital-divide/ (accessed on 17 December 2023).

Kässi, Otto, Vili Lehdonvirta, and Fabian Stephany. 2021. How many online workers are there in the world? A data-driven assessment. *Open Research Europe* 1: 53. [CrossRef]

Kloosterman, Robert C. 2010. Matching opportunities with resources: A framework for analysing (migrant) entrepreneurship from a mixed embeddedness perspective. *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development* 22: 25–45. [CrossRef]

OECD. 2017. Going Digital: The Future of Work for Women. In *Policy Brief on The Future of Work*. Paris: OECD. Available online: www.oecd.org/employment/Going-Digital-the-Future-of-Work-for-Women.pdf (accessed on 17 December 2023).

OECD. 2018a. *Bridging the Rural Digital Divide*. OECD Digital Economy Papers, No. 265. Paris: OECD Publishing.

OECD. 2018b. *Empowering Women in the Digital Age: Where Do We Stand*. Paris: OECD. Available online: www.oecd.org/going-digital/empowering-women-in-the-digital-age-brochure.pdf (accessed on 17 December 2023).

Ozar, Şemsa. 2005. *Women's Entrepreneurship in the GAP Region*. Ankara: GAP-GIDEM Publications.

Pasquale, Frank. 2015. *The Black Box Society: The Secret Algorithms That Control Money and Information*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press.

Roper, Stephen, and Jonathan M. Scott. 2009. Perceived Financial Barriers and the Start-up Decision: An Econometric Analysis of Gender Differences Using GEM Data. *International Small Business Journal* 27: 149–71. [CrossRef]

Schiller, Dan. 2000. *Digital Capitalism: Networking the Global Market System*. Cambridge and London: MIT.

Staab, Philipp. 2016. *Falsche Versprechen: Wachstum im digitalen Kapitalismus*. Hamburg: Hamburger Edition.

UN Women. 2018. Turning Promises into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Available online: www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/2/gender-equality-in-the-2030-agenda-for-sustainable-development-2018#view (accessed on 2 February 2024).

USAID. 2023. Digital Economy Initiative Fact Sheet. Available online: https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/2023-09/FINAL%20USAID%20Women%20in%20the%20Digital%20Economy%20Initiative%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf (accessed on 17 December 2023).

von Dietrich, Piscila, and Mariana Hansen Garcia. 2022. New challenges for women workers in Brazil facing the wave of Industry 4.0 technologies. *Gender & Development* 30: 459–76.

Weglot. 2024. Available online: https://www.weglot.com/blog/how-accurate-is-google-translate/ (accessed on 16 September 2024).

Wired. 2024. Available online: https://www.wired.com/sponsored/story/digital-technology-voice-recognition-communication-barriers/ (accessed on 17 December 2023).

World Bank. 2021. Individuals Using the Internet (% of the Population). Available online: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS (accessed on 3 February 2021).
World Economic Forum. 2022. Available online: https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/03/how-to-close-digital-gender-divide/ (accessed on 17 December 2023).
World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends for Women. 2017. Available online: https://www.ilo.org/research-and-publications/world-employment-and-social-outlook/world-employment-and-social-outlook-trends-women-2017 (accessed on 17 December 2023).

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.