Chapter 3

Working Women's Digital Inclusion (Exclusion) During the COVID–19 Pandemic and Beyond:
A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 crisis provides a novel perspective for studying a pre-existing issue of the gender digital divide. This chapter examines the literature on women's digital economic participation during the pandemic. A systematic literature review (SLR) of 20 peer-reviewed papers from various social sciences, encompassing the COVID-19 period of 2019 to early 2022, was conducted. The discussions surrounding the impact on women's migration to work from home are extended across the three key levels from which digital inequalities emerge: (1) digital accessibility, (2) digital literacy, and (3) family role. The prevailing narrative in the reviewed publications revolves around women's unpaid care labor during the pandemic, the primary cause of the remunerated time decrease and productivity. Overall, the findings suggest that digital inequality is embedded in societal structural inequalities; thus, it is crucial not to let the overemphasis on digital accelerations leave behind the deep-seated challenges of women's digital inclusion amidst diverse roles.

INTRODUCTION

Even before the pandemic, businesses were looking at technology as a helpful means of engaging with customers, allowing some workplace flexibility and a way to introduce automation and faster processes. The spread of the novel coronavirus and the shutdown of in-person meetings for non-essential businesses accelerated these adaptations. Technology has become an increasingly important part of the workforce. When Covid-19 hit, it compelled social changes all around the world. Governments banned large gatherings of people, restricted in-person business operations, and encouraged people to work from home. In response, businesses and schools began to look for ways to continue their operations remotely, thanks to the Internet.

Many firms' migration to digital operations required both a customer-facing and a behind-the-scenes function. Because of the inability to congregate in groups, many professional organizations have to devise new methods for individuals to interact, cooperate, and accomplish jobs while working far from one another. At the same time, clients have shown a desire to obtain services with little to no human touch, pushing for remote or at least contact-limited operations from a customer-facing perspective. How organizations might embrace digital transformation and which portions of these changes are likely to last depends on exploring what is available and what needs to be done.

The COVID-19 outbreak has underlined that the digital revolution that is in progress does not provide the same opportunities for every individual equally and, therefore, creates social inequalities (Bartikowski et al., 2018). The gender gap is no exception, and research shows that lockdowns are strongly impacting women, who, on the whole, are more vulnerable to the effects of a crisis (Rodríguez-Rivero et al., 2020). There are dangers to moving too quickly, and we must continue to investigate and address current barriers as well as new challenges that women encounter in order for them to participate in the digital future. At the same time, the pandemic has shown that the danger of failing to act quickly enough is higher than ever: inclusion cannot wait. This is the purpose of this book chapter, to gather what Covid-19 exposes about working women's digital participation.

The early 1990s' definition of the digital divide concept, which generally refers to a binary division between people who have and do not have access to computers and the Internet (Dewan and Riggins, 2005), has emerged to the levels and new forms of digital inequality, such as type of internet access, algorithmic awareness, and data inequalities (Lythreatis et al., 2022). In the 21st century, women want equal opportunities as men, and the foremost challenge is how to balance work and home. Gender bias, unequal pay, mental and physical harassment, and insufficient leave are some key issues for working women. A woman's hardship at any stage of her life is always difficult to categorize because she is the only entity in the world going

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