



Addressing the inequalities created for Black, Minority Ethnic (BME) women by the digitalisation of employment in Scotland

Key findings

- BME women are more at-risk of being excluded from digital employment and so more intensive employability support needs to be available to them
- Digital literacy programs in Scotland need to be more inclusive by addressing the cultural barriers that hinder access to ICTs for BME women
- State employment agencies in Scotland must reform policies regarding who can access employability support

Executive summary

This policy brief outlines the barriers that emerged for Black, Minority Ethnic (BME) women due to the digitalisation of employment. Through an empirical study conducted by Amina with 275 participants, it was found that BME women in Scotland are likely to be excluded from digital employment due to the multiple forms of inequality they face, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalisation. Based on these findings, this policy brief recommends that culturally-sensitive digital support skills workshops be implemented in community centres and individual support be provided

for BME women seeking employment. The findings also reveal the need for state employment agencies to be reformed.

Context

Employment in Scotland is increasingly becoming digitalised, transforming recruitment practices, norms of employment and professional relationships. Since 2019, the number of people working from home increased by 204% in Scotland compared to 56% in Northern Ireland; a trend which is likely to persist in the future¹. Although this created opportunities for many, the digitalisation of employment also created barriers for certain groups in Scotland, excluding them from the Scottish labour market. Indeed, research has shown that the digitalisation of employment reinforced gender², class³, and racial inequalities⁴ in employment, widening relative inequalities in Scotland. Specifically, BME women in Scotland are more likely to see their opportunities constrained by the digitalisation of employment as they are already facing discrimination and inequalities in the British labour market⁵.

Yet, there is no research that focuses on how BME women have been impacted by the digitalisation of employment. Consequently, existing policies to mitigate the inequalities created by digitalisation do not account for the unique forms of marginalisation BME women experience when trying to access online work. For example, the Scottish government has promised to ‘bring the most vulnerable with us’⁶ in the wave of digitalisation by increasing broadband access and delivering upskilling opportunities, yet a significant digital divide persists between racial minorities or lower socio-economic groups and the rest of the population⁷. This shows that policymakers must develop a better understanding of the effects of digitalisation on vulnerable groups to fully close the digital divide and ensure access to digital employment to the population of Scotland.

Research conducted

Therefore, a study was conducted to address this research gap with the objective of assessing how the digitalisation of employment impacted BME women in Scotland. A mixed method approach consisting of interviews, focus groups and surveys was adopted for this study to ensure that the voices of BME women are justly reflected in the research. Additionally, data was collected over the period May 2020- June 2022 to capture the evolution of the impacts of digitalisation on BME women, as policies addressing the digital divide in Scotland have evolved in the past two years. In total, 275 BME women from across Scotland took part in this research.

Findings: barriers created by the digitalisation of employment

Using the theoretical lens of intersectionality, it was found that BME women in Scotland are more likely to be excluded from online work. This is because barriers to digital employment experienced by most people in Scotland, such as difficulty working from home or accessing ICTs, were exacerbated for BME women by the intersection of multiple inequalities, such as gender discrimination, socio-economic inequalities, and language barriers. Additionally, BME women's marginalisation from digital employment was aggravated by processes of exclusion present in state employment agencies. The following section will therefore outline the main barriers faced by BME women in Scotland due to the digitalisation of employment.

Access to ICTs

An important barrier to accessing work for BME women identified during the research was accessing information and communications technologies (ICTs). This is already recognised by previous policies aiming to bridge the digital divide in Scotland. However, the study revealed that access to ICTs does not only encompass physical access and digital skills, but also the cultural capital- the cultural and cognitive habits that translate into social resources⁸- needed to navigate digital platforms. As such, BME women are more likely to face barriers when accessing ICTs.

Physical access and digital skills

Many BME women in Scotland lack physical access to ICTs or the skills to navigate them and are therefore unable to take part in online work. According to a survey conducted by Amina⁹, 4% of their clients do not have access to digital tools. This is especially salient for BME women with caring responsibilities as they prioritise buying ICTs for their families rather than themselves¹⁰. Several participants also shared that they lacked the digital skills to seek employment online due to a break or a lack of prior participation in the labour market. BME women are therefore at risk of losing the

'race between skills and technology'¹¹ as ICT use requires constant upskilling, affecting their employment opportunities. Consequently, BME women are facing financial precarity: the Amina helpline received 321 calls concerning financial difficulties between 2020-2021, compared to 156 in 2018-2019¹². In contrast, general findings reveal that 73% of households in the UK saw their income unchanged or increased in 2020¹³. This shows that the digital employment disproportionately affected BME women, increasing their vulnerability to financial precarity.

Computer anxiety

In addition to facing physical and skills barriers when accessing ICTs, BME women have been shown to experience 'computer anxiety' or 'feelings of discomfort, stress or anxiety that people experience when responding to computers'¹⁴ when using digital employment platforms. This is because digital platforms are designed to fit specific cultural norms. For example, actions like physical cues or lip-reading cannot take place in digital spaces, thus penalising women with disabilities or limited English skills. These findings correlate with Mohd Yusof and Zakaria's study on how communication in online spaces is designed to

fit Western norms, meaning that digital platforms are inherently exclusionary¹⁵. Hence, computer anxiety is more likely to be experienced by BME women as online platforms are not designed to fit their cultural norms or language ability, excluding them from digital employment.

Language barriers

Language barriers often dissuade BME women from pursuing employment opportunities. 'Language' in this context not only refers to the English language, but also the language of Scottish employment. Amina clients, for example, expressed the value of a recent workshop conducted to discuss tones and language adequate for workplaces.

Language barriers have shown to decrease BME women's confidence when applying to employment opportunities as they associate their lack of linguistic abilities with a lack of skills¹⁶. In turn, this barrier was enhanced by the digitalisation of employment, as the computer anxiety and unease in online spaces intersected with the stress of not having adequate language skills and employers' racialised bias regarding non-British candidates' language skills and digital literacy¹⁷. For example, one interviewee disclosed that she was offered a high-skilled job on LinkedIn but declined it because she was not confident in her English skills¹⁸.

Unfamiliarity with the language of the Scottish job market was also identified as an important barrier to employment for BME women who immigrated to the UK. For example, an interviewee shared *'I don't know what language to use for the cover letter'*, illustrating how her unfamiliarity with the language of the job market prevented her from applying despite having the right skills and experience. This employment language barrier is especially salient for online applications, as

shown by the fact that most Amina's employability clients do not know what websites they can access to seek employment¹⁹.

Due to this dual language barrier, many BME women require an extensive, one-to-one support to fill out job applications and guide them through the employment process. Policymakers should therefore increase their effort to design employment support that addresses the multiple language barriers experienced by BME women in the UK.

Exclusionary policies in public employment bodies

Exclusionary policies in public employment institutions and Scottish employment practices create additional barriers for BME women accessing online work. The devaluing of non-UK-based degree or experience, the exclusion of asylum seekers from employment training and the intrusive data policies of certain institutions exacerbates BME women's marginalisation from digital employment.

Lack of recognition of degrees

The polarisation of employment in favour of high-skilled, white-collar workers caused by the digitalisation of employment²⁰ particularly affected BME women in Scotland due to the lack of recognition of non-UK degrees or work experience in Scottish employment structures. As many BME women in Scotland were educated or worked abroad, they are unable to access high-skilled jobs despite having the right qualifications, excluding them from the opportunities of the digital employment. One of the interviewees, for example, shared that her employment in her home country was a 'really nice job', but *'I don't think I can get the same opportunity [here] because they are not accepting my degree'*.

Intrusive data policies

Many research participants expressed that they struggle to access online employability support due to the intrusive data policies of state employment agencies. The computer anxiety experienced by many BME women due to the cultural bias of online spaces is exacerbated by these data policies. For example, a state employment agency practitioner shared that she has to gather extensive data on the mental and physical health of her clients, which they were often reluctant to share²¹. Additionally, the difficulty to access private spaces in the home due to socio-economic disadvantage and gendered discrimination enhances the reluctance of BME women to share private data online: according to a UK central government study, overcrowding is more common in BME households, making BME women more vulnerable to intrusive data collection by state employment agencies²². This shows that employability structures in Scotland are not

designed to fit the intersecting inequalities and unique barriers BME women face when accessing digital employment.

Lack of access to training

BME women's opportunities to develop their employability skills online is hindered by exclusionary policies of employment institutions in Scotland. As training is becoming more accessible following the digitalisation of employment, many BME women who do not have the right to work in the UK aim to use ICTs to develop their skills through online courses. However, employment centres only allow people with the right to work in the UK to take part in employability events and benefit from the digitalisation of employment training. Consequently, many of Amina's clients do not have access to online courses because of their socio-political status, creating an additional barrier to accessing employment and excluding them from the benefits of digitalisation.

Case study

In 2020, Jamila closed her small business due to the financial impact of the COVID-19 lockdown. Two years later, she is feeling ready to find employment again as she no longer has caring responsibilities. As an ex-business owner with no professional qualifications, has no choice but to seek a low-skilled job. However, she is seeking an administrative role, and so she decides to upskill herself by pursuing a short qualification.

Due to the digitalisation of training and employment, the courses available to her are only accessible online. But Jamila is anxious to apply online because she is unfamiliar with the use of ICTs: she knows how to receive emails but is unsure how to respond to them, so she cannot apply. She therefore decides to call the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) as they provide digital skills support. Her interlocutor informs her that digital training sessions are available but that she can only register by sending an email.

In the end, Jamila was unable to access the training she needed to develop her skills, and so decided to pursue a lower-skilled and lower-paid employment. This meant that she is less likely to develop her digital skills through her job and is further entrenched in a cycle of poverty.

Recommendations

➤ Ensuring access to ICTs through digital support skills within community centres

Policies such as increasing broadband coverage and the *Connecting Scotland programme* have been implemented to address the digital divide in Scotland. However, these policies are not sufficient because they do not account for the socio-cultural barriers that prevent access to ICTs. Culturally sensitive workshops must therefore be implemented to develop the digital skills of BME women without generating computer anxiety. These should take place in community centres as they act as safe spaces and employ people who are aware of the cultural barriers that hinder access to ICTs.

In the short term, this policy will ensure that BME women can use digital tools to apply for jobs and work online, acting as an immediate solution to socio-economic inequalities. In the long term, providing culturally sensitive digital support will allow policymakers to identify where improvements can be made to create inclusive digital spaces, ultimately closing the digital divide in Scotland.

➤ Address language barriers by offering one-to-one employability support

As BME women face complex and intersecting barriers when accessing online work, individual employability support needs to be available. To deliver this service, training should be accessible to employability workers to ensure that they address the intersecting barriers BME women may be experiencing. For example, they should offer support for women who are facing the intersection of language barriers and a lack of confidence in their skills. By providing individual and culturally sensitive support, BME women will have the opportunity to develop their understanding of the Scottish job market and ultimately become autonomous in applying for employment online.

However, this policy recommendation can only be efficient if long-term and accessible programs are implemented. Indeed, if funding only allows employability programs to run for a few weeks, BME women will not have the opportunity to develop their skills and confidence. Additionally, funding for employability workshops continues to be Imajoritarily available for women on benefits, therefore excluding the majority of BME women. Consequently, many BME women must rely on under-funded voluntary organisations to access employability support. This is especially problematic and requires urgent reform as many BME women are seeking employment due to the increased cost of living.

➤ Reform state employment agencies to increase inclusivity

This study revealed that state employment agencies have practices that exclude BME women from accessing digital employment and employability training. Therefore, policies should be put in place to remove these barriers. Firstly, policymakers should encourage employers to recognise non-UK based work experience and should put in place accessible and straightforward processes to convert

non-UK degrees. Secondly, employability training should be accessible to all regardless of immigration or socio-economic status to allow BME women without the right to work in the UK to upskill themselves. Finally, state employment agencies need to review what data is needed to access employability to ensure online work is safe and inclusive.

¹ Office for National Statistics (2022) 'Homeworking in the UK – regional patterns: 2019 to 2022', 11 July 2022. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/homeworkingintheukregionalpatterns/2019to2022> [accessed 11 August 2022].

² Solutions for Youth Employment (2018) *Digital Jobs for Youth: Young Women in the Digital Economy*. Washington, DC: World Bank Group.

³ Mandl, I. (2021) *The Digital Age: Implications of Automation, Digitalisation and Platforms for Work and Employment: Challenges and Prospects in the EU Series*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

⁴ Scottish Government (2020) *Coronavirus (COVID-19): impact on equality (research)*. Edinburgh: Scottish Government Research and Analysis. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/the-impacts-of-covid-19-on-equality-in-scotland/>.

⁵ Tariq, M. and Syed, J. (2018) 'An intersectional perspective on Muslim women's issues and experiences in employment', *Gender Work Organisation*, 25(5), pp. 495-513.

⁶ Scottish Government (2021) *A changing nation: how Scotland will thrive in a digital world*. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/a-changing-nation-how-scotland-will-thrive-in-a-digital-world/pages/foreword/>.

⁷ Office of National Statistics (2019) *Exploring the UK's digital divide*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/articles/exploringtheuksdigitaldivide/2019-03-04>.

⁸ Emmison, M. and Frow, J. (1998) 'Information technology as cultural capital', *Australian University Review*, 1(1998), pp. 41-45.

⁹ Amina (2020) *Combined Responses - COVID19 survey*, May 2020. Glasgow: Amina.

¹⁰ Staff Z. (2022) 'Research project: Understanding the impact of digital employment on BME women', *Interview conducted by Morere, P.*, 20 May 2022. Online.

¹¹ World Bank (2016) *World Development Report 2016: Digital Dividends*. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2016> [accessed 05 May 2022].

¹² Amina (2021) *Poverty at the Intersection of Race and Gender Inequalities: BME Women in Scotland*. Glasgow: Amina.

¹³ Bank of England (2020) *How has Covid-19 affected the finances of UK households?*. Available at <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/bank-overground/2020/how-has-covid-19-affected-the-finances-of-uk-households> [accessed 27 June 2022].

¹⁴ Cooper, J. and Weaver, K.D. (2003) *Gender and Computers, Understanding the Digital Divide*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers.

¹⁵ Mohd Yusof, S.A. and Zakaria, N. (2007) 'Islamic Perspective: Virtual Worlds as a Western-Centric Technology', *The DATA BASE for Advances in Information Systems*, 38(4), pp. 100-103.

¹⁶ Staff U. (2022) 'Research project: Understanding the impact of digital employment on BME women', *Interview conducted by Morere, P.*, 18 May 2022. Online.

¹⁷ Lissitsa, S. and Chachashvili-Bolotin, S. (2019) 'The effect of digital variables on perceived employability in an ethnic minority and the hegemonic group', *Israel Affairs*, 25(6), pp. 1082-1104.

¹⁸ Client L. (2022) 'Research project: Understanding the impact of digital employment on BME women', *Interview conducted by Morere, P.*, 25 June 2022. Online.

¹⁹ Staff M. (2022) 'Research project: Understanding the impact of digital employment on BME women', *Interview conducted by Morere, P.*, 01 June 2022. Online.

²⁰ Mandl, I. (2021) *The Digital Age: Implications of Automation, Digitalisation and Platforms for Work and Employment: Challenges and Prospects in the EU Series*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

²¹ Practitioner H. (2022) 'Research project: Understanding the impact of digital employment on BME women', *Interview conducted by Morere, P.*, 16 June 2022. Online.

²² UK Government (2020) 'Overcrowded Households', *Ethnicity Facts and Figures*, 9 September 2020. Available at: [https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/housing/housing-conditions/overcrowded-households/latest#:~:text=Summary%20of%20Overcrowded%20households%20By%20ethnicity%20Summary&text=avoid%20undesirable%20sharing\),the%20households%20with%20the%20highest%20rates%20of%20overcrowding%20were%20in.White%20British%20households%20were%20overcrowded](https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/housing/housing-conditions/overcrowded-households/latest#:~:text=Summary%20of%20Overcrowded%20households%20By%20ethnicity%20Summary&text=avoid%20undesirable%20sharing),the%20households%20with%20the%20highest%20rates%20of%20overcrowding%20were%20in.White%20British%20households%20were%20overcrowded) [accessed 8 September 2022].