

THE GENDER DIGITAL DIVIDE IMPACTING MIGRANT WOMEN

Policy brief



**Group 5 – Debate on the Future of Europe
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ASIAGO Leila (CoE)
GEORGIADOU Nectaria (CoE)
ORUDZHOVA Mariia (IEE-ULB)
PENGO Francesca (IEE-ULB)
RUTA Alessia (IEE-ULB)

FINDINGS

The **digital divide** refers to the gap between individuals and communities in terms of access to, use of, and ability to benefit from digital technologies. According to the European Commission, this divide includes disparities in **connectivity**, access to **digital equipment**, **digital skills**, and access to **digital public services**, particularly among vulnerable groups such as women, older people, and migrants (*European Commission, Digital Decade Policy Programme 2030*). Moreover, the OECD characterizes the digital divide as “a multi-dimensional phenomenon” involving not only physical access to ICTs, but also differences in skills, patterns of usage, and the capacity to convert digital access into economic and social opportunities (*OECD, 2021*).

In the context of migrants, the digital divide is compounded by intersecting forms of structural disadvantage, including gender inequality, socioeconomic marginalization and language barriers. These limitations affect migrants’ access to education, employment, healthcare, civic participation, and essential services, all of which are increasingly digitized. In today's digital age, these services and opportunities are becoming increasingly digitized, underscoring the need for effective solutions to address the challenges faced by migrants. Bridging this gap is therefore central to realizing both the EU's digital inclusion goals and its commitments outlined in policies such as the European Pillar of Social Rights and the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025.

The issue of the gender digital divide as it pertains to migrant women remains significantly underrepresented in mainstream policy discourse. This issue is often overlooked in public discussions about digital literacy, gender equality, and in migration policy, resulting in a critical gap in both research and intervention.

From a human rights perspective, this situation constitutes multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. Migrant women – particularly those from older generations such as babyboomers and Gen-X – often face a combination of disadvantages due to the combined effects of gender, migration status, socioeconomic background, and age. These barriers include limited digital literacy, lack of access to affordable digital tools, language barriers, and minimal exposure to structured training opportunities.

FINDINGS

This exclusion gives rise to three principal areas of risks:

1. **Social and emotional wellbeing**, as staying connected to their transnational family life requires them to have adequate means of communication to facilitate stable contact with their families in their respective home countries. This connection is essential for emotional support, caregiving coordination, and cultural continuity. The inability to access or effectively use digital tools for this purpose can contribute to social isolation and emotional distress.
2. **Civic and social inclusion in the new country**, as digital tools are instrumental in learning from other migrants' experiences, gaining information regarding bureaucratic procedures in their host countries, and navigating said bureaucratic procedures with immigration authorities. Information on residence permits, healthcare access, legal rights, and public services is often only available online. Digital exclusion limits women's autonomy and hinders their integration into the host societies.
3. **Labour market access and fair employment**, considering a number of migrant women from these generations are active in domestic care work, a sector marked by informality and frequently lacking standard remuneration benefits and rights. Digital skills are essential not only for securing employment and understanding labour rights but also for accessing job platforms and negotiating fair terms

Despite the relevance of this issue, current EU initiatives often fail to capture the scope of the problem by gender, age and migrant status. The European Commission's **Digital Economy and Society Index** (DESI), while tracking general digital competencies, does not disaggregate data by migration background or gender. Likewise, the **EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021–2027** mentions digital skills in general terms but lacks specific provisions for migrant women.

In its annual Gender Equality Index reports, the **European Institute for Gender Equality** (EIGE) has highlighted gendered patterns in ICT access, yet few reports have addressed how these intersect with migration. The **Eurobarometer on Digital Skills** (2021) also shows marked disparities between women and men, but offers limited insight into vulnerable subpopulations such as older migrant women.

Additionally, in the **European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) strategic plan for 2023–2028**, while there exist provisions of the digital challenges that appear within the field of migration, there exist no specific provisions or mention of the digital gender divide that exist among migrant women, emphasizing the lack of research that persists within this particular field.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Promote comprehensive, cross-border research and data collection to improve visibility of the issue. There is lack of a comparative, European-wide data assessing how digital exclusion impacts migrant women and girls across different age groups, countries and regions. Targeted investment by governments and organizations in comprehensive, transnational research is essential. These efforts would enable evidence-based policy design and facilitate the development of more effective, inclusive integration strategies from an intersectional perspective.

2. Integrate mandatory digital skills training into core inclusion policies. While existing policy frameworks incorporate ICT training, it is often optional or insufficiently tailored to the needs of migrant women. Conversely, structured, needs-based digital training should be made a mandatory part of inclusion programs, making digital literacy a foundational component of inclusion policies. Migrant women who lack the skills required to access essential services such as banking, healthcare, employment, and public administration must be provided with targeted support to acquire them. The overarching aim should be to empower migrant women and girls not merely to integrate but to actively participate and flourish within their host societies.

3. Ensure financial support to facilitate digital access. Digital inclusion cannot be achieved without addressing the economic barriers many migrant women face in accessing necessary tools and connectivity. Therefore, a **European Digital Access Fund** should be established to subsidize the cost of items such as SIM cards, internet subscriptions, and devices for low-income migrant women and girls. Moreover, public spaces such as libraries, community centres, and schools should offer free access to computers, laptops and tablets to those in need.

4. Invest substantially in community-based and peer-led education. Community-driven education initiatives are vital to building trust and ensuring reach. Spaces such as cultural centers, women's shelters, and religious institutions should be leveraged as safe, inclusive environments for delivering digital education. Peer-led programs, especially those that engage younger migrants in teaching older generations, should be promoted and funded as effective, culturally sensitive models of knowledge transfer.

5. Protect beneficiaries' data and privacy. The collection, storage, and use of personal data within digital education programs must adhere strictly to data protection standards. Only information essential to program delivery should be collected, and under no circumstances should data be used for purposes beyond the stated objectives of the educational initiative. Ensuring data privacy is key to maintaining the trust and safety of program participants and protect their rights.

6. Combat online discrimination, harassment and hate speech. Migrant women and girls are disproportionately exposed to discrimination on the basis of both their gender and their migratory background in digital environments. Addressing this requires robust regulatory frameworks, the enforcement of anti-discrimination laws online, and the establishment of accessible and effective reporting mechanisms. Safe and inclusive digital spaces are a prerequisite for meaningful participation in digital society and must be actively safeguarded.

In final analysis, digital access is a prerequisite for full participation in contemporary society. Failing to address the gender digital divide among migrant women undermines efforts toward social cohesion, gender equality, and inclusive digital transformation. Targeted, intersectional policy interventions are urgently needed to ensure no one is left behind in Europe's digital future.

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