

Automation has the potential to improve gender equality at work

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

If predictions are right, automation will transform work as we know it. But it's difficult to know exactly which – and how many – jobs will be affected. Although there is a huge debate over just these questions, one area frequently overlooked is how automation will affect the prospect of gender equality.

Right now, there are considerable differences in pay, employment levels, and the types of activities that men and women perform in the workplace. As women are often expected to take more responsibility for care at home, there are fewer job opportunities. This is because the current job market lacks the flexibility needed by women who are expected to juggle caring and working responsibilities. These biases will lead to a future of [work](#) that remains unequal. Where bias goes in, bias comes out.

But this doesn't have to be the case. Male and female roles and identities are constructed – not fixed – and so the future distribution of work is not fixed either. If jobs get scarcer while productivity increases, we need to ask how the rewards are going to be shared and we need to rethink the structures of employment and the forms of work before it's too late. Here are some alternatives for shaping a more gender equal society.

Less working time

[While studies](#) paint a fairly dismal picture of a world where there is less demand for workers, they don't consider working time. If automation increases productivity, the average working week could be radically reduced, creating more free time for all. Of course, if we are to enjoy increased leisure time, we still need to earn a decent wage. So any reduction in working hours shouldn't mean a reduction in salary.

Given that part-time and low-paid workers are [predominantly female](#) a reduced working week with a decent salary could enable a more equal distribution of wage work. Rather than revert to the norm of men earning a family wage while women care for family members, more free time for both women and men could create the conditions necessary for a more equal sharing of care.

Equalise unpaid labour

A woman's position in the labour market is inextricably linked to the home. In the UK, 42% of carers are men and [58% are women](#). If we are able to reduce the working week, thanks to advances in automation, then we could support more innovative approaches towards domestic and care arrangements.

New forms of flexible working that are no longer subject to the whim of employers but give workers control over hours, remote working, breaks and time off could help equalise household roles so that women and men can share earning and caring.

If men and women became equal participants in domestic and work roles this would challenge expectations about who is responsible for paid and unpaid labour. Women would no longer be perceived as primary carers and low earners.

We must begin valuing care work

If automation increases productivity and creates more wealth, while reducing the number of jobs, we'll need to find some way of redistributing that wealth in a way that benefits society. One constructive approach would be to more highly reward those undervalued jobs, such as care work, that are crucial for our society.

At the moment, the jobs that are profitable for capital, such as working in finance, gain high status while care work remains sidelined. All the while, many western countries face demographic time bombs. We're in dire need of more care workers to look after the growing number of elderly people. But our social, economic and political system is structured in a way that doesn't value care work properly.

[Women dominate the care sector](#). So when we recognise that some forms of work should be fairly rewarded for their social value, rather than an ability to generate profit, gender equity will be improved.

Technology can also improve the care industry through new innovations. Assistive technologies, such as the [therapeutic robot seal](#), which is used to help care those with dementia, have the potential to address some of the challenges of the care sector. But this requires substantial investment in technology rather than defaulting to the norm of zero-hours contracts and low-cost labour. Instead of investing only the bare minimum in care, the government needs to direct wealth created through automation towards the care sector. This includes socially and financially recognising the value care workers better and investing more heavily in technological solutions that can help the care sector.

End gender segregation at work

If job losses affect lower-skilled workers, who often tend to be women, we need to focus on upskilling and retraining. A more inclusive and ambitious education system could open up possibilities for those pursuing a career change or needing second chances.

Challenging gender segregation at work also requires a radical reorientation of STEM (science, technology, engineering, and medicine) occupations, given the growing demand for technical knowledge and skills. In the UK, levels of female employment in the IT industry are decreasing and women make up only [17% of the workforce](#).

Various government initiatives have failed to make the STEM industry more gender equal. This is because they are based on the assumption that increasing female participation will miraculously transform the industry – an "add women and stir" approach. "[Brotopia](#)" and frat house culture, particularly in Silicon Valley companies means that those women who

are employed in high-tech firms tend to vote with their feet, with [more leaving than are being recruited](#).

Reports that [Uber have just paid \\$10m](#) to settle a class action concerning discrimination suggest that much work needs to be done to tackle discriminatory work practices. If the sector is to become more inclusive, a radical reorientation of working culture is needed. The absence of [women](#) workers is particularly problematic if they have practically no voice in the development of major technological innovations that might transform our future.

Although much of the discussion on automation focuses on dystopian outcomes, this is far from certain. Debating the future of work can actually provide us an opportunity to map out a more equal society.

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