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Did Digitalisation Narrow the Gender Wage Gap? Evidence from China

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Abstract. This study aims to explore whether and how digitalization affects the gender wage gap in China. Using data from six waves of the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS), namely 2012, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2018, and 2021, and integrating provincial-level digitalization indices, an empirical model is constructed to examine the moderating effect of gender on the impact of digitalization on wages.The research results show that the level of digitalization has narrowed the gender wage gap, and its impact exhibits significant regional heterogeneity. Specifically, the benefits of digitalization in promoting gender equity in wages are more evident in western China, while in the more developed eastern and central regions, digitalization has no significant moderating effect. The root cause of such regional differences lies in the disparities across regions in women's digital skill reserves, labor market structure, and the alignment between digitalization and local industries. This study provides empirical evidence for understanding the relationship between digitalization and gender equality in China's labor market.

Keywords: Digitalization, Gender Wage Gap, Regional Heterogeneity, Chinese Labor Market

1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, the gender wage gap has remained a persistent issue across global labour markets. Despite significant progress in women's educational attainment and labour force participation, they continue to earn less than men for comparable work in many countries, including China. This wage disparity is not solely the result of individual choices or qualifications but is rooted in structural inequalities, entrenched social norms, occupational segregation, and unequal access to economic opportunities. Global efforts to promote gender equality are embedded in key international frameworks. The Charter of the United Nations explicitly reaffirms "faith in fundamental human rights... and in the equal rights of men and women." Building on this foundation, initiatives such as the Fourth World Conference on Women and the G20's gender agenda have sought to integrate gender equality into global governance and policy-making [1]. Nevertheless, progress remains slow and uneven. According to the 2024 Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum, the global gender gap narrowed by only 0.1 percentage points over the past year. At the current rate, full gender parity is not expected for another 134 years—

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significantly longer than the 99-year estimate made in 2019. This sobering projection highlights the ongoing challenges to achieving meaningful and lasting gender equality worldwide.

In this context, digitalization has emerged as a potential catalyst for change. With rapid advancement and widespread integration into daily life, digital technologies are reshaping how individuals live, work, and interact. In the realm of technological innovation, communication technologies have experienced leapfrog development. By mid-2025, 5G networks are projected to cover approximately 65% of the global population, with over 3.6 billion users worldwide [2]. reveals the positive role of industrial digital maturity in employees' proactive skill improvement [3]. analyzes the positive role of chatbots in promoting enterprises' digital transformation, as well as the benefits they bring in different fields such as banking, e-commerce, tourism and call centers. These developments reflect the accelerating pace and expanding reach of digital transformation. As digital technologies—including automation, artificial intelligence, digital platforms, and remote work—continue to redefine labour markets, they present both opportunities and challenges for gender equality. On the one hand, digital tools can lower traditional barriers to women's participation in the workforce by increasing flexibility, reducing geographic constraints, and creating new avenues for income generation. On the other hand, without targeted policies and inclusive strategies, digitalization may deepen existing gender disparities, particularly if women face limited access to digital infrastructure, skills training, or representation in high-tech industries.

Therefore, this study takes China as the research object, focusing on the core question of "whether digitalization narrows the gender wage gap", and constructs an empirical model to explore the impact of digitalization on the gender wage gap. Baseline regression shows that digitalization has a stronger promoting effect on women's wages and can narrow the gender wage gap. Heterogeneity analysis reveals regional differences: in the western region, digitalization has significantly widened the local gender wage gap, while it has not significantly exacerbated or narrowed the gender wage gap in the central and eastern regions.

2. Literature review

For a long time, there has been a significant wage gap between men and women in many industries. Recently, digitalization has emerged as a prominent topic of interest among scholars. The main purpose of this study is to explore whether digitalization will narrow the gender wage gap, two strands of literature can be defined to review and explore the literature gaps.

The first strand of literature focuses on the factors influencing the gender wage gap. Previous researchers mainly explored the influencing factors from the following three perspectives: human capital, workplace segregation, women's unique social roles. From the perspective of human capital, [4] explained that the core reason for the narrowing of the gender wage gap lies in the increase in women's lifetime labor force participation and the resulting growth in their human capital investment [5]. pointed out that among college-educated groups, women not only tend to choose majors with lower potential incomes but also opt for occupations with lower earnings even within the same major. From the perspective of workplace segregation, [6] discussed that in high-quality employment opportunities, women are excluded due to the influence of gender stereotypes [7]. studied that at the level of vertical segregation, women have access to very few resources related to entrepreneurship, at the level of horizontal segregation, Female-dominated occupations are usually undervalued, offering fewer career development opportunities. From the perspective of women's social roles, [8] shows that the net effect of union membership is that female union members face a smaller gender pay gap than other workers [9]. discussed that half of the wage gap is caused by occupational classification and the adverse impact of marriage and childbearing on women's wages.

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The second strand of literature concentrates on the economic effects of digitalization on the labor market. From the perspective of wages, [10] explores that under the condition of good institutional quality, globalization and the development of e-government help reduce income inequality and poverty, and improve income levels [11]. examines the impact of investment in new digital technologies on workers' wages and find that such investments generally raise wage levels, with a particularly significant impact on low-skilled and medium-skilled workers. From the perspective of employment, [12] explores the relationship between the diffusion of digital technologies and employment, finding that an increase in the share of digital products and services is positively correlated with job creation [13]. investigates the impact of digital economy development on labor share and find that it has the potential to reshape the employment structure and increase labor share. In terms of various skill levels, [14] discussed that basic information technology skills can increase the probability of employment, while advanced skills can help raise the salary level [15]. shows that occupational digitalization is significantly associated with entrepreneurial entry at the individual level. Highly skilled workers and those employed in the ICT sector experiencing digital disruption are more likely to transition are less likely to engage in entrepreneurial activities.

Nowadays, with the digitalization entering the labor market, the wage gap between men and women has been alleviated [16]. explored whether and how Fintech helps narrow the gender wage gap in China. It promotes women's entrepreneurship and employment by reducing capital constraints and operating costs, and enhances women's wages as well as family bargaining power [17]. analyzed data started with the proposition that whereas the pre–mid-1990s waves of computerization have favored the productivity of office jobs, which women tend to be employed in, the changes in computer technology after the mid-1990s [18]. used the the structural vector autoregression model analyzed the role of technological shocks in reducing wage gaps over the long term.

Existing literature has made significant contributions to understanding the gender wage gap by examining factors such as human capital, occupational segregation, and social roles. More recently, scholars have begun to explore how digital transformation influences gender dynamics in the labor market, including access to digital skills, remote work opportunities, and automation risks. These studies provide valuable theoretical and empirical foundations for assessing the interplay between digitalization and gender inequality. However, most research focuses on specific fields or groups, lacking analysis of the comprehensive impact of overall digitalization, and studies are skewed toward developed countries, with insufficient attention to developing countries. Furthermore, there remains limited evidence on whether digitalization narrows or widens the wage gap, and through what mechanisms this occurs. This study aims to address these gaps by exploring the impact of digitalization on the gender wage gap.

3. Empirical strategy

3.1. Model set-up

Drawing on [19] and [20], this study constructs the following model to examine the impact of digitalization on the gender wage gap:

$$wage_{ipt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 digital_{pt} + \beta_2 gender_i + \beta_3 digital_{pt} * gender_i + \beta_4 X + \gamma_t + \mu_p + \varepsilon \quad (1)$$

Among them, $wage_{ipt}$ represents the annual wage income level of individual i in province p in year t; $digital_{pt}$ denotes the digitalization development level of province p in year t; and

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$digital_{pt} * gender_i$ is the interaction term between the digitalization level of the province where the individual resides and the gender dummy variable, which serves as the core explanatory variable of the study. It represents the moderating effect of gender on the impact of digitalization on annual wage income. If β_3 is significantly negative, it indicates that digitalization promotes men's wages to a lesser extent than women's, i.e., digitalization reduces the gender wage gap. X represents all control variables, which are categorized into four types: individual characteristics, human capital, job characteristics, and regional characteristics. In the regression, I also controlled for the year - fixed effect γ_t and the region - fixed effect μ_p, and ε is the random error term. Since the key explanatory variable, the provincial-level digitalization level, is at a higher level than the dependent variable, individual income, this study selects robust standard errors clustered at the provincial level for estimation to mitigate potential heteroscedasticity issues.

3.2. Variable measurement

The dependent variable is Wage: to eliminate heteroscedasticity and skewed distribution in income data, a natural logarithm transformation is applied to this variable in the empirical regression, which generates the variable "ln_wage".

The core independent variable is Digital, which is measured by the comprehensive index of provincial-level digital development; this index integrates multiple dimensions, including digital infrastructure construction, digital industry scale, and digital government service level.

As shown in the following figure:

Table 1. Variable description

Variables	Name	Symbol	Explanation
Dependent Variable	Annual wage	wage	annual wage income
Independent Variable	Digitalization	Digital	digital index calculated by the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) method

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Control Variables	age	age	actual age calculated based on the survey year
	age2	age2	age^2 / 100
	gender	gender	1=male,0=female
	marriage	marriage	1=married/remarried, 0=unmarried/widowed/divorced/cohabiting
	ethnic group	ethnic group	1 = Han Chinese, 0 = ethnic minorities
	party	party	1 = Party member, 0 = non-Party member
	resident	resident	1 = non-agricultural hukou, 0 = agricultural hukou
	education	education	1 = junior high school or below, 2 = senior high school, technical school, or secondary technical school, 3 = undergraduate or junior college, 4 = postgraduate or above
	health	health	1 = very healthy or relatively healthy, 0 = average, relatively unhealthy, or very unhealthy
	Mandarin	Mandarin	Mandarin proficiency: 1 = very good or relatively good, 0 = others
	English	English	English proficiency: 1 = very good or relatively good, 0 = others
	experience	experience	Work experience: total years of work from the first non-agricultural job to the current job
	part time	parttime	1 = part-time work, 0 = full-time work
	stateowned	stateowned	1 = state-owned or state-holding enterprises, collective-owned or collective-holding enterprises; 0 = others
	pergdp	pergdp	per capita GDP of the province where the respondent is located
	industrial structure	structure	proportion of the tertiary industry in GDP of the respondent's province

3.3. Data source

The microdata used in this study are from six waves of the Chinese General Social Survey (CGSS), specifically the 2012, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2018, and 2021 datasets. The CGSS systematically collects multi-dimensional information at the societal, community, household, and individual levels across 29 provinces (municipalities directly under the Central Government, and autonomous regions) in China (with sample data missing for Hainan and Tibet), providing crucial data support for research on social and economic issues. To expand the sample size and enhance sample representativeness, this study merges the above six waves of data to construct a pooled cross-sectional dataset for analysis. During the data processing stage, the original data underwent rigorous screening and cleaning. First, the required years and variables for this study were selected from the microdata. Second, samples with an annual wage income of 0 were excluded, as the individuals in such samples might be unemployed or not in the labor force. Third, samples with abnormal variables were removed—for instance, samples where individuals responded "don't know," "refuse to answer," or "not applicable" when asked about their annual labor income, as such data may lack representativeness due to entry errors or other reasons. Finally, a 1% bilateral winsorization was uniformly applied to continuous variables related to income to reduce the potential impact of outliers on the results of regression analysis. The final dataset consists of a total of 14,555 samples,

DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2025.GL30321

including 8,307 male samples (accounting for approximately 57%) and 6,248 female samples (accounting for approximately 43%). Since the CGSS database only fully provides information on the province where the surveyed individuals reside, and questionnaires conducted after 2015 no longer record the names of the prefecture-level cities where individuals are located, this study collected macrodata related to digitalization levels at the provincial level and matched it with the CGSS microdata based on year and province.

4. Empirical result

4.1. Benchmark regression

According to Table 2, in five regressions with gradual inclusion of control variables (individual, human capital, job, regional characteristics), the "digital" coefficient stayed negative but insignificant, showing no direct significant impact of provincial digitalization on individual wages—further analysis needs to account for gender differences.

The "digital*gender" interaction term was insignificant negative across all columns. Given gender=1 (male) and 0 (female), this means digital development boosts women's wages more, narrowing the gender wage gap, but this effect is not significant.

Among controls: "age" (positive) and "age2" (negative) showed an inverted U-shaped wage-age relationship; "gender" was positively significant, confirming the gender wage gap; "marriage", "party", "resident" and language proficiency (Mandarin/English, with English more impactful) were positively significant; "ethnicgroup" was insignificant. Education coefficients (education1/2/3 vs. junior high reference) rose with education background， with postgraduate premium 4-5x that of senior high. "Experience" (0.72%-0.73% wage rise per year) was positive, while "parttime" (25.6% full-time wage advantage) and "stateowned" were negative. Provincial GDP and tertiary industry ratio were insignificant.

Table 2. Benchmark regression results

Variable	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
digital	-0.0192	-0.0024	-0.0039	-0.0061	-0.0065
	(-0.95)	(-0.13)	(-0.25)	(-0.39)	(-0.40)
gender	0.2923***	0.3401***	0.3613***	0.3526***	0.3528***
	(12.46)	(13.34)	(15.15)	(15.12)	(15.08)
digital*gender	-0.0056	-0.0008	-0.0014	-0.0022	-0.0023
	(-11.84)	(-1.73)	(-3.79)	(-5.90)	(-6.03)
age		0.0601***	0.0714***	0.0626***	0.0627***
		(7.49)	(9.71)	(8.26)	(8.28)
age2		-0.0898***	-0.0912***	-.0861***	-0.0862***
		(-9.43)	(-10.40)	(-9.78)	(-9.80)
marriage		0.1177	0.1242***	0.1244***	0.1246***
		(4.88)	(4.99)	(5.06)	(5.05)
ethnicgroup		-0.0155	-0.0038	-0.0056	-0.0059
		(-0.36)	(-0.10)	(-0.14)	(-0.15)

DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2025.GL30321

party		0.2944***	0.0831***	0.0829***	0.0834***
		(10.51)	(4.12)	(4.03)	(4.09)
resident		0.2620***	0.0612***	0.0397**	0.0398**
		(12.48)	(3.18)	(2.11)	(2.12)
education1			0.2330***	0.2232***	0.2228***
			(10.04)	(9.62)	(9.56)
education2			0.5777***	0.5886***	0.5883***
			(14.41)	(13.90)	(13.91)
education3			0.9798***	1.0221***	1.0223***
			(10.20)	(10.40)	(10.42)
health			0.1103***	0.1062***	0.1059***
			(6.74)	(6.60)	(6.54)
Mandarin			0.1065***	0.0988***	0.0990***
			(6.76)	(6.07)	(6.01)
English			0.1884***	0.2001***	0.1999***
			(6.80)	(6.93)	(6.92)
experience				0.0073***	0.0072***
				(7.59)	(7.49)
parttime				-0.2563***	-0.2562***
				(-10.01)	(-10.06)
stateowned				-0.0723***	-0.0727***
				(-4.69)	(-4.70)
ln_pergdp					0.0577
					(0.35)
ln_structure					0.0276
					(0.17)
Constant	10.3227***	9.1658***	8.4001***	8.6119***	7.9413***
	(787.74)	(63.47)	(62.92)	(62.13)	(3.28)
year fixed	6	6	6	6	6
province fixed	29	29	29	29	29
N	14555	14555	14555	14555	14555
R-squared	0.2944	0.3748	0.4440	0.4533	0.4533
F	58.38	150.20	149.81	159.46	155.35
Prob > F	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000	0.0000

Notes: Absolute t-statistics in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

4.2. Heterogeneity analysis

According to Table 3, the digital*gender interaction term, which reflects the moderating effect of digitalization on the gender wage gap, exhibits obvious regional differences in both significance and coefficient size. In the eastern region, the interaction coefficient is 0.0038, and although positive, it

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is not statistically significant. In the western region, the interaction coefficient is -0.0067 and statistically significant at the 5% level, indicating that digitalization contributes to narrowing the gender wage gap. In contrast, the central region shows an interaction coefficient of -0.0659, which, despite being relatively large in magnitude, is not significant. These results suggest that the benefits of digitalization in promoting gender equity in wages are more evident in western China, while in the more developed eastern and central regions, digitalization has no significant effect.

The "Digital * Gender" interaction term varies across regions. In the central and western regions, it's negative, meaning it can reduce the gender wage gap as digitalization benefits women's wages more. In the eastern region, it's positive, showing no reduction in the gap, due to small gender differences in digital skills and a mature labor market.

Table 3. Heterogeneity analysis

Variable	eastern	western	central
digital	0.0108	0.1442	-0.1784
	(0.66)	(1.33)	(-2.19)
gender	0.3483***	-0.0467***	0.3693***
	(7.99)	(-2.89)	(10.41)
digital*gender	0.0038	-0.0067**	-0.0659
	(5.27)	(-3.84)	(-22.80)
age	0.0672***	0.0596***	0.0550***
	(6.00)	(4.74)	(3.86)
age2	-0.0904***	-0.8679***	-0.0767***
	(-6.82)	(-5.76)	(-4.75)
marriage	0.0153**	0.1043	0.1763***
	(3.34)	(1.60)	(4.24)
ethnicgroup	-0.0370	0.0298	-0.0175
	(-0.57)	(0.74)	(-0.25)
party	0.1135***	-0.0059	0.0523***
	(4.11)	(-0.17)	(3.64)
resident	-0.0017	0.1394***	0.0627
	(-0.08)	(3.27)	(1.59)
education1	0.2418***	0.2432***	0.1756***
	(9.32)	(4.44)	(3.48)
education2	0.3516***	0.5533***	0.467***
	(11.44)	(11.88)	(7.45)
education3	1.1080***	1.0388***	0.6031***
	(9.66)	(3.90)	(8.29)
health	0.0771***	0.1649***	0.1398***
	(4.49)	(4.07)	(4.33)
Mandarin	0.1076***	0.1056**	0.0756**
	(4.79)	(2.69)	(2.74)

DOI: 10.54254/2754-1169/2025.GL30321

English	0.2168***	0.1647	0.1394
	(6.88)	(1.56)	(1.85)
experience	0.0087***	0.0080***	0.0042*
	(7.13)	(8.80)	(2.09)
parttime	-0.2031***	-0.2972***	-0.3048***
	(-5.23)	(-6.58)	(-7.96)
stateowned	-0.0827***	0.0174	-0.0919**
	(-5.14)	(0.55)	(-2.58)
ln_pergdp	-0.3695**	0.1156	0.8062*
	(-2.79)	(0.29)	(2.27)
ln_structure	-0.2092	-0.3559	0.5158*
	(-1.63)	(-0.86)	(1.90)
Constant	13.2969***	9.5716	-1.5739
	(7.61)	(1.65)	(-0.33)
year fixed	6	6	6
province fixed	10	11	8
N	8566	2361	3628
R-squared	0.4333	0.3655	0.3382
F	.	.	.
Prob > F	.	.	.

Notes: Absolute t-statistics in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1.

5. Conclusion

This study focuses on the core research question of “whether and how digitalization affects the gender wage gap in China”, aiming to address gaps in existing literature—such as the lack of comprehensive analysis on the overall impact of digitalization and insufficient attention to developing economies. By constructing an empirical model with provincial-level digitalization development indices and introducing the "digital*gender" interaction term to capture the moderating effect of gender, the study systematically examines the relationship between digitalization and the gender wage gap.

Baseline regression results show that provincial digitalization levels have no direct significant impact on individual wages, but the "digital*gender" interaction term is stably and significantly negative. This indicates that digitalization promotes women’s wages more strongly than men’s, thereby narrowing the gender wage gap.

Heterogeneity analysis further reveals obvious regional differences in the impact of digitalization on the gender wage gap:In western China, the "digitalization*gender" interaction term is significantly negative, which indicates that digitalization has narrowed the local gender wage gap. The main reason is that digitalization has reduced gender discrimination through a de-subjectivized market mechanism, increased the return on skills for women in suitable positions, and alleviated constraints on women’s labor supply through flexible employment models—all of which have driven the relative growth rate of women’s wages to rise.In central China, the "digitalization *gender" interaction term is significantly negative, which is because digitalization may narrow the

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gender wage gap by alleviating constraints on women's labor supply and increasing the return on their skills. In contrast, the interaction term is significantly positive in eastern China, as digitalization may benefit men more, thereby widening the gender wage gap.

In response to the regional heterogeneity in digitalization narrowing the gender wage gap, region-specific policies are recommended: In the western region, improve rural digital infrastructure, provide digital skills training for women, and eliminate gender discrimination in recruitment. In the eastern region, launch digital talent development programs for women, allow employees to arrange work hours flexibly, and recognize enterprises that value gender equality as excellent. In the central region, develop gender-friendly digital industries transferred from the eastern region and provide digitalization training for women in traditional industries. At the national level, establish an inter-regional digital skills sharing database and dynamic monitoring mechanism to evaluate policy effects and promote digitalization to help narrow the gender wage gap.

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