

How social norms are increasing the digital divide between genders

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Would you, as a parent, want your daughter to fall behind your son? Have her potentials remain unfulfilled? Most probably not. Yet, this is the case for many adolescent girls in Bangladesh, whose parents—often unwittingly and in compliance with the traditional gender norms—handicap their potentials by preventing them from developing fundamental digital skills needed for today's age.

With the advent of modern technologies, digital skills have become increasingly essential for not only realising one's economic and productive potentials but also for efficiently navigating through everyday life. Young people organically develop fundamental digital skills when they have access to a digital device and the Internet; early access has a huge influence on digital familiarity and proficiency in later life. But digital access is unequal and the gender gap in access is significant. This gap starts

early and sustains with age. This phenomenon is likely to exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities between men and women.

Whilst over a quarter of rural boys in Bangladesh aged 14-16 years reported using a smartphone, just eight percent of girls did, according to a recent BIGD survey. This increases to 46 percent for boys and 26 percent for girls aged 17-20 years. Similar gaps were found in the use of the Internet.

However, the quantitative measures of gender inequity in digital access do not capture the process of how this initial inequity is created by the gender difference in the negotiation power and how the same difference creates further inequities in actual access and, over time, real outcomes. For this, we need to understand how the existing gender norms come into play in the digital space and create new forms of gender inequity. In another qualitative study with adolescents in class VII, BIGD researchers explored this aspect in-depth; the key insight of the study is discussed here.

As expected, the gender divide in digital access is not visible in high-income families; both boys and girls have their own smartphones and round-the-clock Internet access. Very few boys and girls from rural and low-income urban areas, on the other hand, own a smartphone or have Internet access. Most low-income or rural families have one common mobile phone, or at best two, which the adolescents can share.

Both boys and girls in rural and low-income urban areas are usually allowed to use a shared device for a limited time, often monitored by an adult. But this is where the similarity between adolescent boys and girls ends and disparity begins. Frequently adolescents seize the opportunity to use the device when they are not supposed to. "Snatched time" is a concept that the researchers have developed to describe the ways adolescents maximise their use of the shared device. Gender divide is common in the allowable use, but starkest in the case of snatched time, which plays an important role in their digital skill development.

Boys ingeniously use a variety of social norms to elongate the snatched time they have on the shared phone. Whenever an adolescent boy gets his hands on a shared mobile phone, he simply goes out and disappears for as long as he wants; in the words of an urban boy: "Whenever I get bored studying, I go out [with the mobile phone]. It doesn't matter if it is 8 in the evening or 12 in the morning. My mother knows..." Parents,

especially mothers, tend to be forgiving of this type of behaviour by their sons; according to a mother: "Suppose my son tells me that he is going out for some time. Then he can use mobile; we won't say anything, right? We can't make the boys stay at home." This privilege of boys to simply go out with mobiles allows them to "snatch" more time than girls who are usually not allowed to go outside. Girls are acutely aware of this sad reality; a rural girl said, "Boys can go outside giving lame excuses.... But girls can't do that." Because of their mobility, boys can also buy mobile data when they need to. But girls are limited to the mobile data bought by their parents and siblings.

Unlike adolescent girls, adolescent boys have an active social life, thanks to the same privileges they get as boys. They spend time outside daily with friends. Their social network allows them to buy mobile data jointly for one phone and watch videos, play games, or listen to music together.

Their mobility also allows them to use free Wi-Fi, which is becoming increasingly available. "We use Wi-Fi most of the time," said a boy. "In our friend circle, there is a competition about how many Wi-Fi networks we can connect to." Many boys, from both rural and urban areas, also talked about hacking Wi-Fi passwords and how simple it is to do so. In contrast, access to Wi-Fi for adolescent girls in both rural and low-income urban areas is highly restricted, as most do not have it at home and neither can they hang out in public spaces.

Adolescent boys also use a variety of negotiation tactics to carve out their time and freedom to use the internet. The study found that many boys control the password of their mother's mobile phone, which allows them to access the phone at their disposal, and their indulgent mothers oblige. Because the boys are deemed precious, sometimes they even manage to persuade their parents to buy them a mobile phone of their own.

Thus, adolescent girls, compared to boys, are in a disadvantageous position in becoming familiar with and develop necessary skills in digital technology; in our time, it is a significant disadvantage for anyone.

Behind this phenomena are the deep-rooted social norms and attitudes towards men and women, and by extension, boy and girls. Parents are generally more indulgent towards boys and stern towards girls. Boys are allowed to move outside freely but the mobility of girls is strictly prohibited. Parents expect more obedience from girls, who are

more likely to accept decisions by parents, for example, not buying them a mobile phone, rather than negotiating for it like boys do, the study found.

Parents were also found to be worried about their daughters having romantic relationships. A girl describes: "My mother keeps her phone locked... She says that access to mobile phone derails the girls." There is a strong emotion among many parents about unmarried girls using a mobile phone, in the word of a parent: "No, I won't give her. If anyone has to give her a phone, it will be her husband, not me." Parents generally do not share the same fear for their sons.

These findings are perhaps not surprising. It is well-known that in our country, boys have more freedom than girls, and, especially in low-income and rural areas, mobility of girls is the most restricted. The fear of girls getting into a romantic relationship outside marriage and the resultant restriction in their mobile phone use is also perhaps a common knowledge. But everyone must realise that these practices are prohibiting the girls from exploring and realising their potentials in education and employment. In the 21st century, these practices are also creating a stark digital divide among boys and girls, which, as technology continues to advance, is likely to widen the gender gap in our country. Parents of girls must realise the importance of digital skills in the lives of their children, both girls and boys.

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