

How is ICT worsening the inequality in education?

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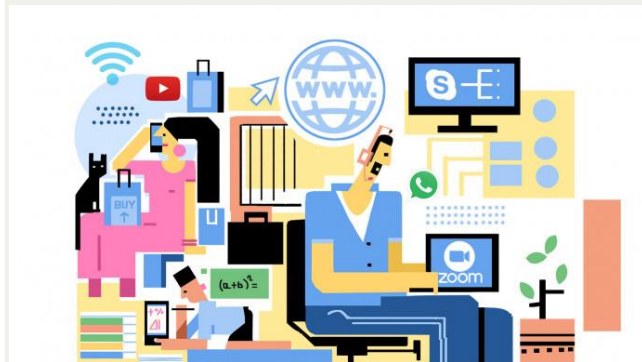


Technology is making lives better for everyone in many ways, but it is also responsible for worsening existing inequalities, for example, between rich and poor, men and women, and rural and urban people. In a 2020 UN report, relentless, exponential technological progress of our times has been identified as one of the four critical factors in widening the economic inequality in recent decades and in future, especially in developed countries. Now, COVID-19 has ruthlessly laid bare the uncomfortable reality of technology-induced inequality in developing countries like Bangladesh as well. Education during the pandemic is a disquieting case in point.

Of all types of technologies, information and communication technology (ICT) is playing the most transformative role in the world. Many view it as the 'touch stone' for curing all our ills. ICT has indeed opened a wide window of opportunity in education. For anyone with basic education, a cheap smartphone and a decent internet connection offer an unlimited opportunity to learn anything under the sun. At least, ideally. Blessed by internet, students can take classes offered by the best teachers who are based anywhere, and even earn degrees from most respected international universities through platforms like Edx.org, mostly for free or at a miniscule fraction of the costs in the traditional system. This seems to be great news for young people in poorer families, who cannot

afford quality education in the traditional institution-based system; the educational institutes that poorer students attend also tend to be of lower quality. Indeed, many young people are using the internet to educate themselves and transforming their lives, despite their challenging circumstances. But unfortunately, they are an exception, not the norm.

To be able to use ICT for educational and productive purposes, certain other conditions need to be met. The most obvious one is the access to technology. Not surprisingly, ICT access is closely related to the income and wealth of a household, even though the cost of ICT has come down substantially in recent years. Still, even in developed countries like the USA, school closure during COVID-19 created a public outcry because many low-income families did not have reliable access to computer and internet that their children could use to attend online classes. A study conducted by BIGD among more than 4,000 school children in rural and slum areas in Bangladesh found that almost 40% children did not have access to a television, even in a neighbor's house, and 70% did not have access to the internet.



Right after school closure due to COVID-19, the government of Bangladesh decided to broadcast classes for primary and high-school students on the national television. Keeping aside the question of the quality of these television classes, at least 40% children from disadvantaged communities, who still comprise the majority of our population, were automatically excluded because they did not have access. On the other hand, most elite schools offered online classes and students in these schools come from well-off families with adequate ICT access. The situation was quite similar in case of higher education. Many college and university students coming from lower income brackets and remote areas could not afford the required technology for taking online classes. On the other hand, students from higher income brackets could not only attend online classes, but also use the internet to learn more. To make matters worse, often a single device is shared by multiple members of a low-income family or even

by multiple families, which further limits the effective access to a device for students in these families.

When they have access, most young people organically develop ICT skills. Thus, ICT exposure in early years has a deep impact on their confidence and skills of using ICT to their advantage in their adult life. Children with disadvantaged backgrounds are already performing worse in education than the children with better socioeconomic backgrounds for many reasons. Inequality in access to ICT is only going to make it worse.

But, even if poorer children have access to technology, can they use it as effectively as the richer children? Most likely not. Eminent Harvard Professor of Public Policy, Robert Putnam, describes "Compared to their poorer counterparts, young people from upper-class backgrounds are more likely to use the Internet for jobs, education, political and social engagement, health and news gathering, and less likely for entertainment and recreation." The reverse is true for poorer children. It is not because the poor are lazy and stupid, it is because in wealthier households, parents are more likely to be educated are better aware of the pros and cons of letting a child have a smartphone or a computer; they know what is available online and are more invested to make sure that their children use it well. Poorer parents are also likely to have lower education and be less aware of the power of technology. BIGD research found that Thirty percent of the rural mobile phone users in Bangladesh cannot even read a message on their phone, let alone do any other activity; and this rate goes up with increasing level of poverty. It must be true in cities as well, even if to a lesser degree. How can we expect these parents to use technology for their children's education?

During the height of the pandemic, most of the parents of wealthier children worked from home. Consequently, these children were more likely to be exposed to all types of educational and cognitive development contents online by their parents, on top of attending the distant classes offered by the government or schools. On the other hand, many poorer children were simply deprived of their regular classes because they did not have access to television or internet. Even when had an access, they probably remained clueless about how to harness its power to learn and grow because their parents could not afford to stay home, had other pressing worries, or did not know how to guide the children. This is a general pattern—even during normal times, richer children have a better chance of using technology for education because of parental awareness and better guidance. COVID-19 has only revealed this sad reality in its starkest form.

For sure, COVID-19 is disrupting the learning for all children. But, powered by technology, the richer children can at least hope to close in. And, the poorer children are drifting further apart, partly because of all the reasons why they are poor, but also because of the technological inequality, the new reality of their generation.

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