Pandemic and Online Pedagogy: An Exploratory Study of Impact of Gender on Teaching-Learning Process

Tripti Bassi
Associate Professor, Department of Elementary Education
Lady Shri Ram College for Women, University of Delhi, Delhi
Email: triptibassi@lsr.edu.in

Abstract

The covid-19 public health pandemic posed a big challenge to the continuance of school and college education. To shift from classrooms to distant online pedagogy was a challenging enterprise in the absence of digital infrastructures and adequate time available to gain expertise in ICT. Studies on online learning during the pandemic have explored the aspects of socio-educational factors in access, efficiency issues, satisfaction, problems faced by students and teachers etc. The present paper explores the aspect of Gender qua its impact on the online teaching-learning process through an exploratory qualitative study in the light of online pedagogical experiences of final year student-teachers of an elementary teacher education degree programme in a Delhi University college while they transacted various subjects to school children in the online mode during their mandatory school internship, as well as their own lived experiences shared while doing a course with the author, combined with the author's own observations. The study brings out that girls had a disadvantageous experience in the shift to online pedagogy. Existing gender disparities got accentuated in times of technological-pedagogical transition wherein boys had greater access and claims than girls. The loss of physical classrooms also adversely impacted various aspects of the lives of girls.

Keywords: gender, covid-19, online pedagogy, social interaction, voicing, gender socialisation, multitasking, gendered behaviour

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic not only shook public health systems and economies across the world but also brought unforeseen challenges in the field of education. The sudden closure of schools and educational institutions ruptured the normal academic calendar and compelled governments and private institutions to push the online education system to everyone's doorsteps. However, it neglected an important aspect which is whether students have access to the digital infrastructure that is computer, tablet and smartphone including access to internet (Bheemeshwar et al. 2020). Lack of attention to the accessibility factor has led to gaps in the education of economically weaker and marginalised sections, especially girls. Accessibility is not just economic but mediated by socio-structural factors in which gender is an important determinant. Gender equality, the Sustainable Development Goal 5, which focuses on empowering girls, seeks to redress existing disparities. In the words of Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary General, "there is no tool for development more effective than the education of girls". This paper is an attempt to explore and examine how not just economic factors but also the institutions of patriarchy and gender mediate with the access and utilization of technological resources creating several barriers to learning. The exploration has been done through the lived and

direct experiences of student-teachers of a teacher education programme and their observations while teaching young learners during the internship in a pandemic year, along with the author's observations while supervising their internship teaching, and during online teaching the course of Gender and Schooling to these student-teachers. The societal structures enmeshed with patriarchy cause disadvantage to girls in gaining access to online education and deepen gender disparities, this study underlines.

Rationale and Scope

Digital mode of education and online teaching-learning has been in use by several Universities and institutions offering courses mainly in distance mode. What was new during this period was the complete switch-over of the universal classroom teaching-learning to the digital platform due to a public health compulsion, which was not backed up by infrastructural as well as socio-cultural and economic enabling structures and environments. This shift to online pedagogy has come up for study by researchers on several aspects such as the effectiveness of teaching-learning, student attention, perception and acceptance of technology, satisfaction, preparedness, attitude, challenges faced by educators and students, eLearning readiness of faculty in higher education, online teaching experiences and strategies, implications for interaction and collaborative learning, awareness and utilisation of social networking etc. This body of research literature mostly covers aspects of interface with technology without going deep into the socio-cultural and economic structures and processes that interfere in the access to and utilisation of online pedagogy. A reason for this could be that majority of these studies are quantitative in nature having gathered their data through survey questionnaires on Google platforms and have an inherent limitation in not being able to bring out the larger social dynamics, i.e., caste, class and gender etc. that mediate between the education system and its recipients. Socio-cultural realities which affect and are affected by technology can be captured through qualitative Social Science methods, i.e., observation, narration, experience-sharing, case study, interview, discussion etc. which can serve as guide towards the underlying factors and dynamics at play. The present study tries to explore the gender dynamics and its impact on the teaching-learning process when there was a switch over from traditional classrooms to online classrooms across all stages- schools and colleges.

Methodology

This paper is based on an exploratory study employing qualitative research methodology and techniques. The study sample comprises 52 students of the final year Bachelor of Elementary Education programme (B.El.Ed.) in a Delhi University college. It uses as data their experiences narrated during the transaction of the 'gender and schooling' course by the author. The author used a direct observation method also to make some observations while transacting the course. They are referred to as 'student-teachers' because they are 4th year students who have to teach school children (class I to VIII) during their internship (practical teaching) course. Non-participant observation by the author was another method of data collection while supervising the online classroom teaching by these student-teachers, along with a few interviews taken for greater elaboration. The study uses ethnographic narrations to delve into deeper aspects. Convenience sampling is used to collect some qualitative data such that the better articulated ethnographic narratives find mention in the paper to better

explain the context and situations. The names of all respondents have been anonymised adhering to the norms of research ethics.

The paper carries the experiences of student-teachers derived while transacting school subjects to primary-level children between August 2020 to February 2021 in some government schools and some run by voluntary organisations. The final year students have to be associated with schools as interns between the months of August to February for 17 weeks to do teaching and share other responsibilities. Of these, one week is spent in classroom observation and getting to know the school culture. In the next 11 subsequent weeks, the teaching of English/Hindi, Maths and EVS take place in primary class's I-V. In the last five weeks, the student-teachers teach English, Maths and Social Studies to upper primary classes (VI-VIII). Due to the Covid-19 restrictions, the school internship in 2020 and 2021 had to be carried out in online mode. Student-teachers engaged with school students on various platforms as per the school norms such as Zoom, Google Meet or Microsoft teams. Student groups and continuous interaction are maintained on WhatsApp video calling, Google Classroom or Wise App as per the school's requirements. The author has in the past several years visited internship schools for supervision where student-teachers taught as interns. Due to the shift to online mode, the supervision also was done in online mode, leading to certain direct non-participant observations by the author reflected in the present research.

Research Questions

The study tries to ascertain the following aspects, which are interlinked and overlapping:

- Does technology create new barriers to equality in the teaching-learning process?

- When technology becomes a 'critical resource' for learning (meaning, to education possible only through Information Communication Technology) who lays greater claims over it?

- Whether gender differentials become pronounced in the course of online teaching, unlike offline teaching?

- Whether online pedagogy accentuates gender deprivations within the home set-up?

- How does gender issue affect learning in the online pedagogy system?

- How does online pedagogy compare with classroom pedagogy in reinforcing or overcoming gender barriers?

Background: Review of Literature

Before the Covid-19 pandemic struck, efforts to enhance the state of girls' education had begun to reap benefits in India. The female literacy rate grew from about 9 per cent in 1947 when India became independent to 70.3 per cent in 2017-2018 according to the National Statistical Office (NSO) Survey. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) of girls in primary school which increased from 61 per cent in 1970 to 115 per cent in 2015 is much higher than male GER (Sarkar 2021). However, the Covid-19 pandemic has reportedly reduced the 70 years' worth of growth (Rodriguez 2020).

As much as the Covid-19 pandemic has pushed the economy back, it has also reversed much of these gains made in the state of girls' education. The Right to Education (RTE) policy brief estimates that due to the pandemic around 10 million secondary school

girls in India could drop out of school. This could subject them to the risk of early marriage, early pregnancy, poverty, trafficking and violence (RTE 2021), recognizing that education is the most effective way of empowering girls to not suffer patriarchal predicaments. Indicators also reveal the existence of inequality in multi-dimensional ways. In 2021-22 academic sessions, according to the data submitted to the Haryana Education Department by private schools, only about 1.7 million students had enrolled against nearly 3 million, the year before. Similarly, in Andhra Pradesh in the academic year 2020-21, more than 60,253 students seem to have dropped out of the system, with a large proportion of dropouts being girls (Sarkar 2021).

To ensure access to online education, students first of all require access to smartphones, broadband and wireless internet connections. However, whether all strata of society would be able to afford these remains a question. Only around 27 per cent of the Indian population has smartphones. In 2019, E-market Edu suggested that nearly 35 per cent of the population utilises internet services through smartphones in India, exhibiting remarkable digital exclusion in our country. Between rural and urban areas, such a divide is further aggravated. Only 21 per cent of the population in rural areas have internet connectivity compared to 61 per cent in urban areas. The World Bank report highlights that 1.063 billion people in India lack access to online media (Lenka 2020). The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2021 noted the fact that although the availability of smartphones has increased from 36.5 per cent in 2018 to 67.6 per cent in 2021, it does not translate into access for children. More than 26 per cent of enrolled children had no access to it (ASER 2021).

In India, the gender gap in mobile internet users is 50 per cent. Thus, 21

per cent of women and 42 per cent of men use mobile internet (GSMA 2020). Similarly, more boys than girls have access to digital infrastructures such as mobile phones, internet services, radio, and media. Since girls have much lower access to technology, therefore digital schooling further disengages girls from education and broadens the educational inequalities among learners In India, the poorest girls and especially those residing in rural areas have much lesser access to technology than boys. Studies suggest that only 33 per cent of women, unlike 67 per cent of men, have access to internet. In rural India, gender disparity is stark since 72 per cent of men while only 28 per cent of women have internet access. In addition, mostly intra-household allocation of information and technology (ICT) resources is mostly gender-biased hindering the capacity of girls to access home-schooling resources in times of the Covid (Kundu and Sonawane 2020:9).

There is a growing body of literature in academic journals on digital education, its benefits and various facets. During covid-19, several new research publications have appeared because online teaching became a mass phenomenon. The results of these studies are diverse and each had its limitation of having been carried out over the digital platform and were mostly survey questionnaire dependent. A majority of these were on the advantages and disadvantages of online learning- student attention, materials used, modes of study etc. (Pandey and Kiran 2021), the acceptance level of online learning by students (Srivastava and Dave 2021), challenges of online learning like access, connectivity, distraction, technophobia, misuse/online abuse (Harini and Verghese 2021) etc. However, the gender aspect has not been stressed. Among the relevant ones for the instant

study, a study by Malhi et al. (2022) on perspectives on learning outcomes show that from the perspectives of teachers that only 11.8 per cent of teachers felt that online teaching led to superior learning vis a vis face-to-face learning while about 50 per cent opined that it led to inferior learning. Toor and Singh (2022) in their study on socio-educational and family factors affecting internet usage in higher education have observed that there is no significance of gender in terms of internet usage of internet. However, there are other studies on gender as a significant factor in internet usage and purpose (Bimber 2000). Moreover, Toor and Singh's study brings out that maternal education is a significant factor in determining their ward's internet usage- the higher the educational level of the mother, the higher is the probability of the student to be in a high internet use group. This could mean that the education of women actually breaks the barriers of tradition and leads to empowerment that transmits to future generations and greater gender equality. Some other relevant studies have been cited later in this paper for the purpose of building contextual clarity and strengthening the research findings.

The National Policy on Education 2020 emphasizes that the use of technology for online and digital education should adequately address concerns of equity. It recommends that Pre-service teacher education should prepare teachers for suitable training and development to be effective online educators, if and when required (NPE 2020: 58-59).

Challenges of Home Setting: College Girls

This section contains the accounts of the student-teachers as students themselves in the college as well as the author's own direct observation while teaching the gender and schooling course to them. Their experiences in

engaging with young learners are quite insightful as are their own experiences of struggling with their own education amidst domestic responsibilities and care giving roles, coupled with lack of mobility and freedom.

Multitasking

The author's own experience of teaching in an all-girls' college reveals that due to various pressures at home and outside, girls are compelled to compromise on their educational goals to fulfil their familial roles. To illustrate, many students stated the following:

> 'I remain engaged in household tasks all the time', 'While the classes are going on online on Google Meet, I simultaneously keep washing utensils or cooking food or helping in other works', 'If we stay home, we have to do homework' (Classroom Discussions).

Most of the student-teachers expressed difficulty in attending classes on their mobile phones for a longer duration. One issue of course was that eye-related stress arose in many cases. Laptops or bigger size computers were not available in many homes. But it also surfaced that wherever these were available, in most cases (16 out of 22), the boys at home (their brothers) used those devices while the girls had to manage with mobile phones, causing the eye-related stress. Interestingly, many girls stated that they used mobile phones because it was handy to be kept alongside in the kitchen or wherever they worked while simultaneously attending class. None of the girls reported that their brothers engaged in multitasking while learning as they had to (Classroom Discussions). The availability and choice of the device to attend the online class points to a gendered notion of entitlement as well as labour: boys have more entitlements over better technology resources while girls have to bear an additional burden

of domestic work in the process of online learning. A study by Khan et al. (2021) shows that distractions are an issue for student engagement with online classes, in that they get diverted due to the desire to open social media sites, check messages etc. They observe that in their study sample, in tiny overcrowded households, the difficulty of having just one ICT device which is shared among siblings is leading to gender inequities as parents preferred boys' education more instead of girls' education.

Limits to Free Expression

In online classes, a common feature noticed was the reluctance of the girls to freely express their thoughts. Many of them lacked their own personal space since their families resided in tiny settings. They would remain silent when any question was asked and refused to speak out for fear of being overheard by their family members. They appeared more comfortable writing down their experiences in the chat box of Google Meet. Lack of free space at home to share their ideas and family restrictions in freely expressing themselves came out quite vividly in many instances (Classroom Discussions). As the one below by Shobha would illustrate:

> I feel hesitant to talk because everybody at home listens and says why do you discuss such issues in class? Family matters are private matters. That's why I like to write in the chat box rather than speak (Shobha, Classroom Discussions)

The online class could not provide the girls with a break from their patriarchal home set ups, something the offline classes in college could, being separate from the home and offering the girls a space of relief and liberty. The loss of the de facto classroom was also a loss of their social sphere where they would spend time and share with their peers, giving voice to their feelings and thoughts freely. This points to a phenomenon that online pedagogy in the home environment could reinforce a *culture of silence* among girls while offline classrooms in the colleges gave them a scope for voicing. It is to remember that historically the shift from homeschooling within the four walls of the household to the public schools in public space was a watershed in the status of women's education and empowerment in that it not only broke the societal restrictions on the movement of girls outside their homes and taboos on their education but also marked the freedom of girls and women to venture out, meet their peers and take part in the outer world as boys did. To voice out sufferings, share and care are crucial in overcoming gender barriers.

Gender Impact of Economic Stress

The massive loss of jobs and livelihoods due to the pandemic-induced lockdown has had an impact on the lives of girls. Because of job loss, salary cuts and reduced pay packages of their parents due to COVID running the household turned out to be quite a tough proposition. Many student-teachers reported that they have had to supplement their family income by giving tuition which formed a major chunk of their daily routine, along with domestic chores. These college students shared that they had to multitask alongside online classes. They not only engaged in domestic chores while taking classes but also gave tuition to supplement the family income. Student-teacher Reeta stated:

> "My father lost his job and it became difficult to manage household expenditure; we had to contribute in whatever ways possible. What I could have done was to give tuition and earn. My brother didn't do any job because nothing was available"

(Reeta, Classroom Discussions)

Although part-time jobs helped the family in overcoming economic distress, they also brought about undue stress and anxiety, creating difficulties in managing their regular studies (Classroom Discussions). There was a phenomenal rise in paid private tuition during the pandemic (from less than 30 per cent in 2018 to 40 per cent in 2021). The increase happened highest among the less advantaged - among 'low' parental education category children, tuition taking rose by 12.6 per cent compared to 7.2 per cent in the 'high' education category (ASER 2021). Such paid tuition work is what these student-teachers mostly avail to supplement their family income.

Although it is an economic impact of the pandemic and not of online education per se, the point here is that economic stress is borne by poorer sections and within them, the girls and women have to sacrifice or compromise their education. The access of girls to online pedagogy and utilisation thereof is also got shaped by larger socio-economic processes. Many girls had to sacrifice their studies to earn or supplement the family income to support families.

> My father's salary was reduced to half of what it was earlier and I have two siblings also. In order to run the household, I started giving tuition along with my college online classes and school internship classes to supplement the family income and assist my father in running the household. It was a difficult time for our family (Neetu, student-teacher, Interview).

The economic impact of the pandemic was more severe on the working class and the deprived and marginalised sections of society. Online pedagogy should be situated in the larger socio-economic dynamics and within that the gender dynamics to understand who got deprived and who could access and how much.

Unmuting Gender Issues: Situation of School Girls

Low Attendance of Girls in Online Classes

During the online School Internship Programme, the foremost issue observed was the lack of availability of digital devices for the primary class students to access online classes. Student-teachers reported low attendance of girls in the online classes. The attendance of most of the girls depended on the availability of digital devices and also that it did not clash with their brothers' classes. Secondly, it was due to their preoccupation with household tasks. Even little girls were found to be looking after their younger siblings and feeding them when their mother was busy at home. The student-teachers often expressed their hard struggle to ensure the participation of girl students. It was difficult to sustain their interest and keep them motivated amidst numerous calls to run short errands. Moreover, their access to digital devices remained limited since their brothers usually had an upper hand in using gadgets. To ensure their attendance, they would call them up telephonically before the class began. In a particular case, a girl student missed many classes because at the time of her class, often her parents would be out of home for some work and she did not have any device to join her online class. Consequently, a lag in learning becomes evident, underlining the adverse impact of the pandemic on learning. This has also been highlighted in the Annual Status of Education Report 2021 (Editorial, EPW 2021).

Routinisation of Domestic Realm

Several studies on gender disparities

reveal that boys enjoy more entitlements than girls within the family in terms of nutrition, education, expenditure and access to gadgets, not to mention the property in de facto terms (Dreze and Sen 2002). The participation of girls in online classes usually remained low because they lacked both the resources and the entitlements to join these classes, as seen above. An instance from student-teacher Rama's class II would reveal it vividly.

> Around 3 pm, before I was about to call Hamza (a 7-year-old student of Class-II) to take her online class, she rang me up to inform me that she would not be able to attend the class as she was expected to feed her younger brother. Hamza was often busy in child-rearing and took care of her siblings. Hamza did not know if Delhi is a part of India but she accurately knew the time it takes to warm the milk such that it is not too hot or cold to give to her little brother (Rama, Classroom Discussions).

Families generally rely on the labour of girls for various domestic chores. As Sunderi, student-teacher of class V stated:

> 10-yr old Preeti in my class finished household tasks like washing utensils and clothes and helping her mother in the kitchen and then only sat down to attend her online class. Even in between the class she attended to calls for domestic tasks (Sunderi, Interview).

Similarly, student-teacher Vidya reported that an eight-year-old girl, Sirisha, a student of Class-III, was unable to focus on her studies.

> After Sirisha washed the dishes, she took a pan bigger than her little fingers to cook rice. She was unable to hold the pan with just one hand since she had inflicted

a wound on the other hand while cutting vegetables. Afterwards, she woke up her siblings and baked chapatis for them (Vidya, Classroom Discussions).

Student-teacher Shraddha also reported that most girl children in her class (class IV) only responded over audio and kept their videos switched off so that they could attend to routine domestic chores in the meanwhile.

The student-teachers identified the following reasons for low attendance of girls: engagement in domestic tasks, family responsibilities, low accountability towards girls' education and lack of access to equipment/devices to take online classes, among others. Families also usually delegate the task of looking after the younger and older family members to girls (Classroom discussions).

Taken for Granted Status

The marginal status of girls in households is the main determinant of their low educational status (Wazir (ed.) 2000). In an incident, it was learnt that a class IV girl student Tanya's family wanted a boy child and vowed to shave their daughter's hair if blessed with a son. When her brother was born, Tanya's head was shaved off. As a result, she refused to show herself in class, feeling conscious of her tonsured look and being sad about losing her hair. Such instances underline the taken-for-granted status of girls within the family which impacts their lives and educational contexts.

Gender Socialization

Silence is a major aspect of their gender socialisation and is taught early to girls. Girls learn to express their thoughts in socially acceptable ways and avoid mannerisms and behaviour that might result in their negative representation

of the image. To illustrate, during a role-play activity in a student-teacher's class during the internship, wherein learners had to play the role of vegetable sellers, the girls chose male names and identities and dressed up like males with moustaches and beards highlighting as if only males play such professional roles which is not congruent with reality because vegetable vending is also done majorly by women. Similarly, during another activity, the student-teachers asked the learners to share their future goals. A girl wanted to be a dancer while another one wanted to be a singer. On the other hand, boys either wanted to be doctors or pilots or IAS officers. Boys appeared to be more aware of their future goals as compared to girls they also seem to possess more sense of entitlement than girls (Classroom Discussions). Gender socialisation nurtures girls and boys in quite stereotyped roles (Dube 1988)

Girls often tend to internalise that their brother's academic engagement is more significant and remunerative than their own. They start considering their brothers superior to them in many ways. This is a consequence of their gender socialisation at home and community. As student-teacher Pushpa, teaching in class VIII narrated:

> Mala (class VIII) always left her class 15-20 minutes early as her brother had to attend his class. She said that she has to ensure the timely participation of her brother in the online class since both of them shared a mobile phone (Pushpa, Classroom Discussions)

Thus, Mala missed crucial time to engage in the teaching-learning process and compromised her own education to an extent.

The focus that existed in offline classes seemed to be missing in online classes. Students have by now learnt how to multi-task at home and during classes they usually are also busy finishing other household chores or family engagements. A student-teacher found out that a girl student had to assist her parents in the family shop while attending her classes. On the other hand, her brothers only attended their classes and were not involved in any other household activity. Thus, gender bias in participation in learning was clearly evident in online pedagogy. This aspect of the gender burden of family labour has already been discussed in the context of college girls as well.

Gendered Behaviours in Online Classes

Gender socialization begins early in life and we can see its role in the realisation of femininity among girls and masculinity among boys. The pandemic has reinforced such divides whereby girls have become more reclusive while boys continue to be more outgoing and vociferous. Online education has pushed children back to the screens, making them more acquainted with various applications like Zoom, Google Meet and WhatsApp. However, more boys than girls now possess their own phones or other gadgets. As a Class-V student Mini stated:

> I have to borrow a phone from my mother/father to attend classes while my brother always has easy access to the phone. Father says he won't buy phones for every child and asks me to adjust till the regular school resumes (Mini, Direct Observation)

Both boys and girls were quite conscious of their screen images. They wanted to look smart and presentable. Girls especially appeared more conscious of their looks and only with some reluctance agreed to keep the video on (Classroom discussions). Student-teachers had to devote the initial time of the class to ensure the attendance

and participation of the learners. As student-teacher Sita observes:

> I have to repeatedly request students to switch on their cameras. Some, especially girls, are quite hesitant to do so (Sita, Classroom Discussions).

Online education is a novel means of communication facilitating learning during pandemics and epidemics. The virtual world made itself real for children and they learnt to cope with adversities and pursue education. However, diversions and distractions have also surfaced adversely impacting the goals of education. These patterns of distractions also exhibit gendered characteristics. Often, boys were seen engaging in games based on video games and play stations which are app-based while girls engaged in discussing household routines (Observation of internship classes). Most boys usually have both resources and space to manoeuvre as per their interests and hobbies. Girls usually have little interest or time to include such games as part of their daily routines. These are rooted in the early process of gender socialization. During the supervision of student-teachers, often more boys than girls were observed changing their screen backgrounds and trying to apply different images on the screen in the online class (Direct Observation; Classroom Discussions). This adventurism with digital gadgets by boys has to do with issues of socialisation and masculine behaviour, access and a sense of carefreeness which boys tend to adopt early in life, while girls remain behind.

Online Classes and Degrees of Unfreedom

Social interaction has a significant impact on successful e-learning as it promotes learning engagement (Carini et al. 2006). Sher (2009) observes that student-instructor interaction and student-student interaction play an important role in ensuring student learning and satisfaction. As per Song et al. (2004) the online courses do not succeed in giving scope for social group formation among students. A study by Mutluri and Kumar (2022) reveals that there is very little student-student interaction in online classes. In their study 46.5 per cent of the respondents reported that there is 'very less interaction' a significant 33.1 per cent of the respondents mentioned that there was no interaction at all. Similarly, Verma and Verma (2022) in their study on the transition from traditional to online pedagogy report that lack of interaction is the second biggest challenge faced by educators and students, following internet/network issues.

In offline classroom discussions during the 4th year 'Gender and Schooling' course for student-teachers, sharing of personal experiences and reflections on events, places and people form important aspects of classroom pedagogy for understanding concepts. However, in online classes, students frequently abstained from sharing their thoughts, ideas and beliefs or feelings with the class. They were conscious of the presence of their family members around them who perhaps would not appreciate their ideas or expressions. In this sense, the online class could not succeed in creating a "classroom" as much as the liberating environment that the classroom offers to girls. As a limited solution, the chat box in Google meet came to be of help in putting forth and expressing their critical ideas related to gender and sexuality (Classroom Observation). As student-teacher Tara stated:

> I enjoyed coming to the class because it was a relief from the home environment and neighbourhood. I used to sit and read in the College library where I could have time

and focus. Now with these online classes, we are virtually confined and education seems just reading and writing. I feel my personality development has been hampered by not being able to come to College (Tara, Classroom Discussions).

Though girls openly hesitate to admit this fact yet they express how they miss the space to delve deeper into educational theories and practices. Home somehow is unable to provide them with that space to expand their academic horizons or explore their underlying thoughts or to build networks of academic discourse (Classroom Discussions). In family situations, many students felt helpless and depressed because of the lockdown when they could not go outside. As student-teacher Laxmi shared, "I miss my friends and time out with them which made me feel happy and relaxed" (Interview). Such cathartic moments in physical interaction and social groups are necessary to ensure their state of calm, well-being, mental and emotional health.

Restrictions on Mobility

The mobility of girls usually gets restricted early in life due to sexuality-related aspects. The fear of bringing dishonour and shame to the family creates a burden on young girls early in life (Bhasin 1993). The lockdown again pushed girls to consider the four walls of their house as their destiny. During the pandemic, girls have further got stuck in the domestic space with little respite. The student-teachers themselves expressed their desire to explore the world outside and breathe fresh air.

> At home, my brother could go outside for short errands and feel the air outside. However, since I was required for domestic work, I could not venture out of the home on any pretext. Corona was not only for me but also for my brother yet

I remained indoors for months. I like coming to the College and being on my own. I enjoy being with my friends. All of it is so cathartic and relaxing. I missed it so much (Rama, Classroom Discussions).

With gradual opening up and relaxation of lockdown restrictions later, the male members of the family could relatively move freely while the female members were expected to avoid going outside since that mostly disturbed the household work (Classroom Discussions).

Conclusion

As discussed, the online system of education has created opportunities but also posed challenges. It has also contributed to gender-based inequality at home due to the lack of digital devices to log onto virtual classrooms and the expectation that they have to attend to household chores which preoccupy them, reducing their chances of finishing homework and preparing for their next class in advance. Access to technology is based on the availability of devices which as research has shown is difficult to ensure for most girls. The differential access to digital technology and devices, which are prerequisites of the online education system, has deepened the gender disparities among boys and girls in homes, taken away the freedoms enjoyed by girls in the school/ college classroom education system and pushed gender boundaries back to the disadvantage of girls. The new situation of online classes has thrown up new variables which cut across the domains of household, economy, family composition, gender divides and social situations.

Online education has widened the gendered spaces in the homes thereby restricting the freedom of girls. Their unequal access to learning is due to the gendered environment inside the

home. Online education has pushed the classroom to the homeroom. The mere fact of girls coming out of their homes and going to school or college used to mark a decisive break in the life of a girl for whom confinement was the norm. In the school space, girls could claim greater equality and freedom. Covid-19 has demonstrated that in crisis circumstances, mostly women would have to bear the burden of work and suffer neglect in other spheres which can empower them. For boys and girls, the availability and usability of online technology in education are not going to be equal given existing unequal power relations and gender discrimination at home. Household work, sibling care and pressure to earn a livelihood and bear the financial burden of the family in the wake of financial insecurities and hardships due to the loss of employment of the family breadwinner have posed numerous challenges for young girls.

The loss of the physical classroom setting and shift to online education due to the pandemic brings in fresh insights to understand the home as a reinforcer of gender inequality even when girls technically have access to education. Findings from the field underline the role of patriarchal structures in creating unequal access to learning. Experiences of student-teachers and reflections on their own lives can be immensely useful to form an understanding of gender dynamics within the family, society and educational realm.

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