



## Digital Divide in the COVID-19 Context: A Case of Nepal

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Nepal is a culturally and geographically diverse nation. This diversity is the identity of Nepal. However, along with diversity, there exist differences among the people, particularly from marginalised and vulnerable groups accessing the fundamental rights guaranteed by the constitution of Nepal. The digital divide, for instance, is one of the recent challenges confronted with the outbreak of COVID-19 in communities that have low income, reside in rural areas, and have no access to Information, Communication, and Technology (ICT), perpetuating inequality among the people. The Gender Digital Divide is also explicitly observed during the pandemic, which resulted in unequal education and work opportunities.

The COVID-19 has put the brakes on people's mobility across the world. The Government of Nepal also issued a nationwide lockdown from 24th March 2019 for more than six months prohibiting domestic and international travel, closures of the border, schools, and other non-essential services. According to UNESCO (2020), more than 8 million school students in Nepal are affected by school closures. The nationwide lockdown disrupted learning and formal education. Moreover, the children from low-income, marginalised, and underprivileged families, who already had limited educational opportunities, were affected the most. Although the government of Nepal endorsed guidelines for continuing learning through the online platform during school closure, children from low-income families and those who live in rural areas were mostly unable to access such alternative education opportunities. These students who lacked necessary physical facilities were left behind and were disconnected from

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the formal learning opportunities. This digital divide among the students of rural and urban areas perpetuated the unequal access to education, basically on the part of the students who remained aloof from the online platforms.

With COVID-19 breakdown, ICT stood in people's day-to-day lives, including education. As per a recent study, 27 % of the students among the surveyed population were using the internet for their study in Nepal (United Nations Children Fund, 2021). However, most of the students who mostly reside in the rural setting and from underprivileged groups remained out of reach of education through the internet. The four-fifths of the population living in rural Nepal have challenges accessing internet services (Pandey & Regmi, 2020). The National ICT Policy 2015 envisions building the foundational groundwork for Digital Nepal (Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, 2015), and the pandemic situation of COVID-19 enforced its execution shortly.

The global pandemic exhibited the inequalities in access and participation of the students. The television and radios were alternatively used to reach out to the students, especially in rural areas and families with no internet access. The education from the radio initiative may have been good; however, it's completely one-way – students could not take part actively. Where internet-based virtual classes were managed, students could clarify their doubts with the teacher through a two-way communication channel. Similarly, the teachers, especially in community schools of Nepal, were less prepared to facilitate the students through the online platform. This has resulted in a less effective class (Gautam & Gautam, 2021). The Open and Distance Learning (ODL)-based higher education opportunities were offered by some universities such as Kathmandu University, Online and Distance Education Centre of Tribhuvan University, Nepal Open University etc. However, it was delivered only to a limited number of students. The students living in urban areas with better access to digital equipment and the internet benefited more than their rural peers.

The divide is seen across gender, too. A report revealed that boys are 1.5 times more likely to own a phone than girls in low and middle-income countries and 1.8 times more likely to own a smartphone that can access the internet (Asian and Pacific Training Centre for Information and Communication Technology, 2020). Having own gadget was privileged during the pandemic. During the lockdown, when physical

meetings were not possible, the virtual meetings took place extensively like never before. Many students, teachers, employers and employees who possessed gadgets learned to use the apps such as zoom and google meet. Most of the meetings, classes, training, and webinars were conducted online. However, this new platform in Nepal was not equally used across gender. Men were likely to get better opportunities to portray themselves as experts or trainers as they possessed personal gadgets and better social networks.

The pandemic led to significant cuts in jobs and income of working class men and women, pushing them to the edge of vulnerability (Parajuli et al., 2020). Moreover, it has added workload on the part of women as the workplace shifted to the homes from offices. A study carried out by Kolakshyapati et al. (2021) collected responses from 317 women from 29 districts of all seven provinces of Nepal and revealed that the majority of the women (80%) reported increasing working hours, from one hour to four hours during the lockdown. Women as mothers had to take care of their children's online classes and assignments in addition to the regular work of their office. Furthermore, if there were limited resources, women were the first to share their resources such as laptops or mobile to their children. The result was women had diminished performance in their profession.

In this regard, the nationwide lockdown due to COVID-19 has affected men and women differently with their access to the ICT. Unlike men, women lost their job since they mostly were involved in informal sectors such as vendors, small businesses, which are less likely to run-on virtual mode. In this sense, women lost their job comparatively higher in contrast to males. The situation forced women to depend on their male partners at home, exacerbating the existing income inequalities. To reduce the digital divide and ensure access to ICT, there needs an inclusive strategic mechanism. The government's subsidy plans in education to access the ICT seems beneficial for the underprivileged group.

Furthermore, in many cases, women have been the most affected group by the pandemic. In this sense, targeted programmes are necessary to protect their fundamental rights. Education is a vehicle to reduce gender discrimination in society. The surging digital divide among underprivileged groups, particularly women, seems to be one of the major roadblocks in the current situation of Nepal. For this, access to

digital space will empower women in many ways, including access to education and solidarity to address the issues of exclusion and reduce the digital divide.

Here, we come to the understanding that the COVID-19 outbreak has been a game changer in the use of ICT across the globe. Nepal is no exception to this reality. The COVID-19 has replaced in-person human activity with virtual. It has created both opportunities to explore new space for privileged people with access to ICT and constraints for underprivileged groups who cannot harness the significance of ICT in their livelihood and the teaching-learning process. The digital divide, particularly in the education sector, will be a serious issue with the endorsed government's guidelines and policies as they emphasise the procedures of ICT integration irrespective of the big divide among the people. Hence, the guidelines for education in the pandemic period should focus on using technological devices in the classroom and deal with the access of resources scientifically incorporating the right approach and transforming knowledge, ensuring education for all.

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