

Education: Weakening Connectivity and Growing Inequalities

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Governments have implemented different policies to address the health crisis generated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Among them, the partial or total closure of schools has been widespread in most parts of the world. Extending over time, the situation has transformed into one of remote-learning. Differences in access to internet connectivity and electronic devices have created a new knot of inequality affecting women and girls disproportionately.

The right to education has become more limited for children living in precarious socioeconomic environments, in territorial areas with low or poor connectivity (such as in rural areas and vulnerable neighbourhoods). Also, children in households with scarce devices often have to share a single device among siblings in order to connect to classes, access educational materials, or do online homework.

According to UNESCO, half of the children left out of classrooms by the lockdown do not have access to a household computer and 43% have no internet at home. Lack of access to digitally based distance learning is larger in low-income countries: in sub-Saharan Africa, 89% of learners do not have access to household computers and 82% lack internet access.^[1] Within countries, disparities are marked by income level. According to CEPAL-UNESCO, in Latin America, while between 70% and 80% of

students in richer households have a laptop, this percentage drops to between 10% and 20% for children in poorer households.[2] Besides connectivity and access to devices, ICT skills are crucial for remote learning. The pandemic has exposed gender inequality in access to ICT training. In a recent study of 8 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, UNICEF found that girls face greater disadvantages in acquiring ICT skills, whether in school or at home. For example, in Ghana, 16% of adolescent boys possess ICT skills compared to only 7% of adolescent girls.[3] A gender divide in accessing electronic devices at home also explains girls being left behind digitally. In more than half of the countries analysed in the Africa study, adolescent boys use computers and the internet more frequently than girls. Gender norms that limit girls' use of digital technologies may contribute to this gap as well as the unequal distribution of care work, which limits the time girls may use to learn and use ICT.

In this context, a large number of children, especially girls, have become excluded from the educational process, losing all connection with school, which in these environments works not only as a space for training but also as a form of social support. For example, schools are often the site for some forms of meals and access to other supportive adults. Instead, online education has increased the demands on parents and fundamentally on mothers, who largely assume the responsibility of supporting their children's schooling. The combination of telework and education at home is proving intolerable for many women who see their working time (both paid and unpaid) increase, and who are also part of the dispute over ICT devices and internet connection.

In most countries of the Global South and often as a consequence of processes of adjustment and privatisation, schools' infrastructure has become increasingly precarious. This makes it very difficult for schools to develop distance education schemes, given the lack of proper technology and digital platforms. Inequality has also become evident in the situation of teachers, which is a highly feminised sector. The precarisation of education also reflects in teachers' working conditions and decreasing salaries. Teachers face the same problems of connectivity and access to devices as their students. In the case of Venezuela, for example, official figures indicate that more than half of the population has no internet access in most states of the country.[4] In that context, some teachers have resorted to mobile phones as a way of reaching their students. However, by the end of 2019 only 40% of Venezuelans had active mobile phone lines.[5] More specifically, a study among a group of publicly funded schools shows that at least 42% of teachers lack mobile phones.[6]

Class and territorial inequalities in terms of education coverage and quality of education are also deepening. There has been more support for remote learning in urban areas (compared to rural ones). This support is also observable in schools that are managed privately (as compared to public ones) and for children living in middle to high-income households.

Public policy responses to this dimension of the pandemic have been uneven and generally insufficient. According to CEPAL-UNESCO, based on a systematization carried out by the Information System on Educational Trends in Latin America (SITEAL), out of a total of 18 countries in Latin America, 11 have provided online training courses for virtual teaching, 9 have provided teachers with web resources and only 2 have arranged for the distribution of digital devices to them. Improvement in connectivity and access to devices for students has been even scarcer. For example, in the city of Buenos Aires, Argentina, where the local government estimated that 6,000 students have lost all contact with school, the policy response has been to hold classes in public open spaces instead of distributing devices and improving and cheapening connectivity.

The pandemic has shown that Internet access has become a basic need and an essential right. When we think about how to build a different reality in a post-pandemic future, public investment by governments to guarantee connectivity and access to devices for all is an essential element to avoid increasing and deepening gender-based and broader social inequality.

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[1] <https://en.unesco.org/news/startling-digital-divides-distance-learning-emerge>

[2] Cepal-Unesco (2020) “La educación en tiempos de pandemia de Covid-19”. Santiago: Cepal-Unesco.

[3] <https://blogs.unicef.org/evidence-for-action/covid-19-and-education-the-digital-gender-divide-among-adolescents-in-sub-saharan-africa/>

[4] <https://venezuelanalysis.com/analysis/14854>

[5] <http://www.conatel.gob.ve/informe-cifras-del-sector-cuarto-trimestre-2019/>

[6] <https://cronica.uno/maestros-al-telefono-es-la-campana-de-fe-y-alegria-para-dotar-las-escuelas-de-celulares/>

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