

## CHAPTER 7

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### CONTEMPORARY LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITIES: A NARRATIVE REVIEW

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*The idea of equity and equality are of prime importance to ensure inclusive society for all the children. The SDG – 4 ‘Quality Education’ ensures inclusive and equitable opportunities for lifelong learning. The constitution of India also ensures Equality in Opportunities to all. The Government has undertaken many plans and policies to ensure Equality. Even though the admissions at various institutions have the equality approach still the fact cannot be underestimated that the history, background of the people is different for everyone and it significantly impacts their present conditions too. Equal opportunities not just consist the gender differences but also the multiculturalism, anti-racism, trans-gender, socio-economic disadvantaged. For this the educational institutions that primarily consist learning environment at School and Parents that create learning environment home are essentially important to enhance the self- efficacy, self-esteem, achievement and ensure holistic development of the students. The institutions also need to address the emotional and social needs of the students as there are students from diverse background being more vulnerable to gaps. The issue of digital divide came into broad light due to Pandemic. For this, various organizations and stakeholder need to come together and reframe economic, education and digitization polices. Following reviews throw light on the issues, challenges and measures taken by different organizations.*

**Keywords** – Equality, Inclusive, Learning Environment, Fair, Pandemic, SDG - 4

#### **1. INTRODUCTION** –

India’s School system is world’s second largest school system after China. The best learning environment for the students is said to be when it is fair and positive for all students at home or at school. India’s education has made significant progress since Independence. The goals of education are being set up pertaining to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). The SDG – 4 aims at ‘Quality Education.’ India aims to eliminate the gender disparities in education, ensuring equal accessibility to all levels of education and a holistic system of inclusive education by 2030. The slow but somewhat steady progress in the growth was abruptly ended due to pandemic. Shutting down of educational institutions seemed to be the only solution in order to avoid the spread of the virus. But the prolonged closure has led to negative impacts on the students and it has widened the gap of inequalities which was already there before the pandemic.

Challenges in education system were already there but the pandemic has intensified the problem. We cannot quantify everything and the feeling which is there in the heart of students due to this isolation, some are not even able to identify it. Everyone was made to adapt to new normal but the transition was not so smooth for everyone. Other than the generalized impact of pandemic on students, there has been impacts such as rise in inequalities related to opportunities, digital divide, self – efficacy etc.

As per the Education Minister, 15 crore children are presently out of education system. the National Right to Education forum's policy, 10 million girls are at risk of dropping out. The financial crisis has put many students towards labor instead of rejoining the school. The burden of household work also increased on the girls. It became really difficult for them to continue their studies. More priority towards accessibility to devices was given to male children as compared to females. A survey also revealed that 64% of girls said that the boys have higher accessibility to internet, whereas 33.6% didn't have the access to devices. The teaching of male child is prioritized. A large proportion of girls' dropout in higher class who had earlier enrolled for the primary education. An NGO in Mathura (India) also reported exceptionally more calls regarding incident of child marriage during pandemic

Studies have suggested that closure of schools has led to raise in vulnerability of unprivileged children as they are deprived of education. Affordability for the devices was also one of the biggest issues that the stakeholders have faced. All these issues have decreased the scope of equality in education for children in India.

## **2.1 BACKGROUND OF CONTEMPORARY LEARNING ENVIRONMENT:**

According to (Machado) for the learners of 21<sup>st</sup> century, the role of technology is very crucial. The learning environment is not limited to a physical space only but an integration of technology, multiple modes comprising modern elements such as time, space, people and technology. Skills and training to the teachers is being given in order to develop competencies whereas the students are also adapting on how to use technology for learning. As per Z. (2013) the approach of teacher centered education has been shifted to student centered with real life application and integration of technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The students' role in the modern learning environment has been shifted to discoverer, collaborator, an active participant, highly motivated, in learning process. Krishnaprabu (2019) it is the active role of the educators and teachers to create a learning environment that is favourable for modern learners' need. A complete framework requires to be made that comprise of all the requirements and needs of modern learners. As per article in WISHART, the learners and the teachers create contemporary learning environment in accordance with the need of modern learners. With the help of portable devices, students are given online access which adds to personalised learning experience. Parents are also involved in the learning process. According to NSW website (2021) Effective teaching practice comprise of integration of many teaching styles and practices. It consists of activities such as assessing students' need, talent, evaluation of impact, feedback. Modern

education and learning aim at raising children to use critical and creative thinking for acting in difficult situation.

According to Teacher Boards Learning difficulty is problem of many students. Oxford learning found out that 70% of the children faced problem in focusing and doing a task. The classroom needs to be redefined using modern tools to make learners' needs met. Proper cushioned seating arrangements should be made. Modern equipment that gives comfort to the students should be used. Other than infrastructure, online tools and equipment must be used. The classrooms must be bright and combined with outdoors. the contemporary teaching method is activity and learner centered. The teacher acts as a facilitator where they plan activities for students. The class is enriched with experience using resource, collaborating learning, flipped classroom, self- learning, gamification. Such activities help in cognitive skills, affective skills. The 21<sup>st</sup> century learning integrates technology, engagement of students, interaction, collaboration, active learning and primary constructor of the knowledge

The tools of learning are such that supports the learner through exploration of ideas, deep and powerful learning. The learning is such that enables and engages the learners of contemporary world with the help of reflection, high order thinking skills, creativity, in depth understanding about themselves and world.

## **2.2 BACKGROUND OF INEQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITIES:**

Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) proclaims that “everyone has the right to education”, that “education shall be free, at least in the elementary or fundamental stages” and that “education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality...”. According to an article by Drishti (2021) Inequality in India is formed due to variation in consumption, income and wealth of the people. High level of inequalities in opportunities is also being noticed in India. Studies suggest that children who are from the disadvantaged sections, have less chance to progress and move to higher level. The pandemic has widened the educational inequalities due to labor market conditions, income inequalities. The lockdown has also increased the learning gaps among the students. The younger children, girls were deprived from the access to digital devices. Maclean (2003) Several International Conventions state that equality in opportunities means a condition where everyone has fair and equal access to educational opportunities regardless of background, race, gender, religion. There should be equal grounds of selection and people should get the access to all these regardless of discrimination.

Inequality may arise due to different factors or situations. Inequality, poverty and unemployment are interrelated. In fact it is a vicious cycle. According to a report, India is on second rank in terms of inequality. India is among 10 richest countries of the world on the other side, average Indian is relatively poor as compared to other countries. These inequalities are being reflected in the education sector also. Educational inequality arises because of unequal distribution of resources among the children. The children may face such due to less or denied access to resources. There may be historical, disadvantaged or oppressed reasons. These inequalities arise in the form of regional, sex, social stratification, family income, occupation. It is not necessary that those who have been put into the school are learning. A study has suggested that students

from richest 20% of society are seventeen times more likely to be studying law than those from poorest 20%. Less girls get admission into English schools as compared to boys and also more females opt for humanities than males in India. Taneja (2020) India already face several inequalities. Education seemed to be an equalizer but due to inequalities in the society the aims of education are not achieved properly. Segregation in the education leads to inequality and exclusion. There are legal provisions that helps to reduce the inequality and ensure fair access to all resources. Teachers are sensitized regarding the issue and Government also take steps to enhance, plan, monitor, evaluate that helps to ensure equity. In India, the new National Education Policy and SDG 4 share the goal of universal quality education. Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan is aimed at achieving universal quality education for all adults. The targets of SDG 4 aims at ensuring all students complete free, equitable and quality education, proper development, easy access, affordable education, skill development, removing gender disparities, providing effective learning environment,

As cited in the article on NSHSS (2021) The concept of equity and equality might sound same yet they have different implication in education system. When the children are brought to school despite pf socio - economic disparities or any from other diverse systems, it is termed as equality whereas in equity the individual differences are being taken care. Equality is about sameness whereas equity is about fairness. When we focus on the weakness of the student, giving personalized instructions and necessary interventions as per need it is called equity. According to Mason (2019), the condition of mere equal opportunity is not enough. There are social and economic circumstances such as background of the people, their location, financial conditions, culture that has significant impact on their future prospects. The people born into higher economic class will have more access to resources as compared to other. The differentiation is made in the terms of ‘social – construct’; race, gender, sex, different abilities, age, class, religion or educational achievement. Care should be taken from displaying content related to sexism, negative images, stereotyping. Such as for example “boys are better at...”, ‘policeman’ or ‘good girl’. Research shows that boys receive more criticism and praise than girls. Institutions must refrain from activities such as taunting, bullying. Example of high ambitions must be set before students.

According to Maclean (2003) Equal Opportunity means everyone has a fair and equal access to a good equality of education despite of any other differences. Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) proclaims that “everyone has the right to education”, that “education shall be free, at least in the elementary or fundamental stages” and that “education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality...”. According to Litow (2022) The education system needs to Maintain diversity, equity and inclusion at all levels. Institutions have also initiated diversity training policies to train various stakeholders. Alber (2017) found that participation of females in primary class was more than the females in secondary class. Authors also found that there was unintended gender-bias in the class. Male- dominant curricular is prevalent in the schools. Disparities are also seen in pay scale despite of same profession and job. UNICEF stated that barriers to girls’ education are poverty, child- marriage, gender-based violence, sanitation facilities, lack of health education, safety. Male education is prioritized in case of poor families.

### **2.3 DIGITAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND UNEQUAL OPPORTUNITIES:**

Kim (2018) the idea of digital learning is inclusion. These aims provide opportunities to all but not too few. The cost of education and acquiring infrastructure is costly and is not affordable by all. This does not ensure accessibility to all students. The quality gap in online education is a matter of concern. Suleiman (2020) the usage of internet is not limited to classroom only. But online education has its threats and challenges. Literacy has been an issue for the students. The teachers and students need to possess basic computer literacy. There has been a lack of personal interaction between students and teachers. There has been lack of intrinsic drive-in case of discipline. There has been lack of awareness and consciousness among the parents. Lack of Wi-Fi connectivity, limited access to devices are also problems.

The online class leaves the learner at their own pace. The students have to manage themselves, their tasks and work. One important issue during pandemic *was* the threat of transmitting virus. The intensity of the impact could vary but most of the issues are present in some form or the other in the life of students.

According to Sahni (2020) In India , Pandemic has impacted life of as many as 320 million students. The aspect of ‘digital divide’ in India was ignored along with gender and class divides. The 2017-18 National Sample Survey reported only 23.8% of household with Internet access. The data showed only 23.8% percent of rural household with internet access as compared to 42% in urban areas. The data also showed higher number of male users than females. According to Khan Z., Equality is needed to ensure Egalitarian society that is needed for Nation’s development. Many problems give rise to inequality in India such as difference, gender disparities, regional imbalances, physiological Imbalances, socio – economic classes. In order to overcome this; constitution provisions, debarring restrictions on admission in educational institutions, scholarships, special treatment for S.C., S.T., OBC, special education, residential schools have been initiated. The recent studies as per India Today (2021) have suggested that due to gender based digital divide and pandemic, as many as 10 million girls in India could drop out. Those from unprivileged background facing economic crisis, used the Limited resources for the education of male child only. many girls had a gap in the studies on the notion that they will continue once the things get normal.

Sonawane (2020) the burden of household chores, domestic reasons were prominent reason given by girls for discontinuing their education. The families facing economic hardships, reconsider the education for girls. One of reasons could be that the secondary education is not free as primary education. Bright future of girls is judged with their marriage. So parents think that safety is ensured with the help of marriage and this is done by pulling them out of school. Alasuutari (2020) Due to pandemic, students with disabilities or diverse/special needs are sidelined. Phenomenon like poverty, gender, ethnicity, age, disability can result in discrimination and exclusion. In order to keep all students and communities safe; educational content is being shared in local and minority languages, using sign language, captions, audio and graphics. As per the article published in OECD (2020) many things in students’ life got affected due to Pandemic such as lack of social life and support, belongingness, self – worth. Various groups such as low – income group, single

parent families, immigrant, refugee, ethnic groups, special educational needs. Other than physical learning students are being deprived of other facilities such as social, emotional support, school meals, guidance. As per the article in World Economic Forum (2020), due to various disparities, the transition from offline to online was not favorable for many children. Inequalities have risen due to socio – economic conditions, digital divide, gender stereotype etc. Specialized Policies must be built in order to bridge the gap of digital divide and to move the country towards attainment of sustainable development Goal. As per an article namely “Years Don’t wait for them” (2021) throw the light on the need of reframing policies to tackle the issue of inequality. It’s not limited to bringing the students back but also to bridge the level of learning which was created during pandemic. Students had to travel so long to find good internet connectivity. The students were being deprived of Government facilities, lack of learning environment at home. Acosta (2020) stated that girls are facing obstacles like health crisis, dropping out, early marriage and pregnancies and doing other breadwinning activities for the survival. Girls reported either less confidence in computer skills or less access to devices. Whereas boys faced the challenge of being pushed into labours or other dangerous activities for financial needs.

#### **2.4 STEPS TO ENSURE EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES –**

According to Murphy (2021) as per the report of OECD, students were left behind due to lack of support factors, environment at home, digital divide. For this OECD gave various recommendations and suggestions for schools, universities and Govt. These organizations work together to create an online learning environment. In order to ensure equality, more access to digital learning is given. The teaching is aided with the help of technology. Students are being given proper training, skill development courses in order to end ‘digital divide’. Archer (2020) due to pandemic, Students with sound financial background were able to continue their studies but there were as many as 1.5 billion children who had to temporarily drop the school. Children were pushed to child labor. Girls face challenges related to early pregnancies, early marriages. UNESCO’s call of action laid down such steps aiming pandemic as an instrument of equality and inclusion. Actions were suggested to enable the countries to double their spending on education, health, other services. For this OECD also suggested policies such as providing equitable and inclusive access to digital learning resources and favorable learning environment. Fostering partnerships of Government and other educational institutions. Distribution of free electronic devices and learning material. Increasing parental engagement. Facilitating guidance, counselling and developing social competencies. Kollmayer (2020) suggested that occupational awareness and gender typed motivation is influenced by the teachers. In their study they found out that teachers who were given special training program ‘REFLECT’ showed significant increase in knowledge about gender differences, promoted students’ autonomy, increase in self – efficacy belief of teachers to shape the students’ thinking.

As per article by Pearson (2020) Gender roles are everywhere that unintentionally stereotypes minds of the children how ideal ‘boy’ and ‘girl’ look like. Gender – normative behavior is being set up like girls playing with only dolls, boys buying cricket or other sports kit. The interaction with peers and teachers plays an

important role in shaping the beliefs and the self – image. UNICEF also works in the favor of promoting girls' education by establishing partnerships with volunteers, institutions and Government to remove barriers. It tackles discriminatory gender roles, supports the Government, sharing data to frame policies, regular teacher training and developing their skills, removing stereotype from the learning materials, addressing issues relating to menstrual hygiene, young girls.

Wolohan Sean (2016) digital divide has been a major issue in the case of online learning. Most of the people below poverty line do not have access to high-speed internet. Though this is a factor which is not in the control of teachers but still the teachers can take initiatives that can mitigate the loss. The teachers need to do complete research regarding the access of students to digital devices and internet. The teachers need to be thoughtful about creating lessons, such tasks must be designed that can be done with slow internet through mobile phones. Students should be gradually made familiar with the online tools and how to use them. Maintaining rapport with the parents is also required so that a conducive environment is created at home.

## **2.5 SUGGESTIONS –**

People from local places should volunteer to identify children from vulnerable group and ensuring their return. Down to top approach could be used to monitor the presence of children in the schools. Parents should be encouraged to send their wards to the schools. Possible assistance should also be given. The needs of the students such as academic, emotional, special, psychological must be taken care of. Specialized guidance and counselling must be provided. Ensuring extra classes for the students with to decrease learning gaps. Adequate training to the students and teachers so that the online learning can be undertaken in future smoothly. Setting out real life examples in front of students with which males and females so that they are inspired.

## **3. CONCLUSION –**

The pandemic has disrupted the learning and development for both boys and girls as they face their own challenges. Research at local, state, national and global level is being going on to identify the problems in order to frame policies aiming at solution. These changes require will and participation of all the stakeholders. Many countries are responding positively to adapt the change but many nations lag behind it. There are several problems being faced by students where the equality is compromised so all the stakeholders have to take initiative in order to overcome these barriers and ensuring fair access to education for all students.

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