

# Gendered Inequalities of Access: Online Classes in the Times of the Pandemic

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## Abstract

The paper aims to examine how online education in Kerala — in its shift necessitated by the Pandemic— amplifies rather than mitigates existing inequalities for female students from low or middle income groups, already hindered by entrenched patriarchal social norms, which see educational qualifications also as a means for bolstering marital prospects, perhaps more than for gainful employment — a fact attested by the much discussed paradox of the gap between high female literacy and low female employment ratio in Kerala. In the unique context of Kerala which prioritises education, the transition to virtual mode was welcomed as a timely intervention against uncertainties ushered in by the Covid-19 lockdown. Arguments were also raised against over-optimizing the ‘borderless’ reach of online education, expected to level social, cultural, and economic fallouts for students in general, and for girl students in particular, confined as they were in domestic quarantines with relatively unequal access to educational resources and technological tools, and already imbricated by caste, class, community, spatial and geographical inequalities. Based on sample surveys and feedback from students about the efficacy of online classes, the paper analyses the deprivation of social interactions and the neutral spaces on college campuses, which impacts the mental and physical health of students from middle- and lower-income BPL and AAY category who tellingly opt for physical classrooms, indicating the fact that domestic space-classrooms are enabling only for students from families with economic and social capital. The paper critiques the egalitarian claims of online education and the supposed lack of gender and social biases of technology.

*Keywords:* Online teaching, mental health, patriarchy, campus socialisation, caste, class, gender biases and gaps, geography, digital divide.

Since May 2020, the public sphere in Kerala, the southernmost state in India, with developmental indices often on par with the best in the world, has been rife with discussions on education, which is a key marker that distinguishes the demographic profile of its inhabitants, given that it is the most literate in state in India. Poised on a shift to a virtual mode of teaching, initiated full scale in the month of June 2020 in colleges, followed by schools, the discussions at that point were focussed mainly on the limitations, concerns and possibilities of online education. Since May 09, the academic community in Kerala has written numerous e-articles challenging online education. Meena T. Pillai, K. V. Manoj, A. K. Abdul Hakim, Amruth G. Kumar, T.T Sreekumar, Dilip Raj, K.T Dinesh, V. Abdul Latif, and Damodar Prasad, among others, have addressed the various divisions that online classes can create in the student community, both within and outside the

academic spheres, even as some of them also acknowledged a necessary and timely shift to blended learning (<https://truecopythink.media>). The subjects ranged from Digital Literacy, Digital Capital, Digital Divide, Digital Inequality, Digital Access, Digital Justice, invasive digital surveillance that limit and self-censorship in critical thinking, privacy issues etc (Pillai 12th May 2020). Marginalised students, gender specific restrictions, cultural sensitivity, internet access, gaps in communication, lack of contemporaneity, and limitations at home were focussed upon (Kumar 9th May 2020). Concerns centred largely on the renege role of education getting restricted to the acquisition of knowledge, possible rifts in teacher-student interactions, unequal access to resources and tools, emotional fallouts when social spaces of campuses shrink to virtual classrooms within domestic confines, and the impact on personality development when learners are deprived of real-time peer interactions.

In Kerala, the government was proactive in promoting online education, and the Department of Higher Education (DCE) directed classes to be initiated in all Govt./ Aided/ Unaided Colleges, rescheduling working hours from 8.30 am to 1.30 pm, with effect from 1 June (GO Sa.U (kai).199/2020/u.vi.va dated 28.05.2020). The DCE limited live classes to two hours per day, to counter digital fatigue and data consumption. The academic community adapted quickly to using various digital platforms like Google Meet, Google Classroom, Zoom, Moodle, and You-Tube channels as mainstays of online classes. Recorded audio, video, supplementary notes and e-content material were used to engage non-live hours, and student-teacher interactions shifted to WhatsApp, Telegram, Mail etc. As per the recommended schedule, digitally mediated interactions and class-hours average between 2 to 4 hours, besides the mandated 2 hours live classes. June began with a massive survey to collect information about the availability of digital tools for students, as well as ICT infrastructure in colleges, before full scale classes could begin.

The present paper is an analysis of a feedback survey conducted in KMM Govt. Women's College, Kannur, where the authors teach. The paper aims to examine the social, cultural, and economic fallouts for girl students — already imbricated by caste, class, community, spatial and geographical inequalities — and confined to domestic quarantines by the pandemic, with relatively unequal access to educational resources and technological tools. The survey sought a feedback on the access and efficacy of online education, using a Google Form containing 39 questions, distributed among 530 students of (eight) UG and (two) sections. 499 students responded (with slight variations in the number who responded to all the 39 questions). 93.2 % of the respondents were UG students and 6.8% were PG students. 34 of the 36 PG students, and 465 of the UG students recorded their responses. Of the 495 who registered their religion, 68.5% were Hindus, 26.3% Muslims and 5.1% Christians. Student responses on 'physical versus virtual classrooms,' as well as elaborations sought on 'other issues, if any,' has necessitated us to interpret them in conjunction with the patriarchal family set up in Kerala.

### **1.1. Social and Economic Hierarchy**

The socio-economic status of the students demonstrates how unequal access to educational resources and technological tools are intersected by caste, community, and class divides, accentuating gendered inequalities within already unequal hierarchies. The ration cards issued to households by the state government, for targeted distribution of subsidized food grain from the Public Distribution System (under the National Food Security Act) and social security benefits based on family income of the card owner, was

used to ascertain the socio economic status of the students who fall in one of the three categories— the socially and economically backward sections of Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY), and those Below Poverty Line (BPL), as distinct from those Above Poverty Line (APL).

What has to be noted here is that the socio-economic factors determining APL category are not infallible, as anomalies persist, as anomalies are often reported. Hence, many APL families are middle class. This division indicates that digital equality and parity in resource sharing cannot be achieved easily by any higher education institution in the government sector, in a multi-stakeholder economy where socio-economic demarcations need not be fool proof. As long as high speed broadband coverage varies from urban to rural, and better digital tools with a high capacity for technology absorption etc., cannot be ensured for the less-privileged categories, digital learning can only accentuate inequalities in the uptake, adoption, and outcome of transformative technologies, and further increase existing disparities in income, opportunity and widen development gaps. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) report on “Technology and Inequality” cautions that though the “potential of technologies to reduce inequality in opportunities is vast”, it is “not automatic”, and it “largely depends on the capabilities of the poor to access and use technologies and solutions that respond to their needs,” as technology and digital divides can accelerate “inequality of outcome; inequality of opportunities; and inequality of impact” (ESCAP 2018, 63).

## 1.2. Social Structure and Status

The survey indicates that the apparent inequality in socio-cultural capital is not solely dependent on the economic status of the students. Although the public sphere in Kerala seldom acknowledges caste factor to be as relevant as class factor in the social structure, caste capital founded on a complex network of relations among castes and sub-castes still retains the potential to affect social realities.

Out of the 495 who registered their caste, 63.6% belongs to OBC (Other Backward Community) category. Communal backwardness interferes, in many cases, with regard to interactions in society and acquisition of social capital. About 3% of girls are from the socially deprived ST (Scheduled Tribe) category and 11% from the SC (Scheduled Caste), 5.9% to the OEC (Other Eligible Community), and 15.8% form the General (upper caste/class) categories. The data analysis shows that caste identity and inequalities will continue to widen the divisions further fostered by digital education as caste hierarchy still persists in the social sphere, underwritten into every aspect of life. Social distances legitimised by caste-divides are likely to influence digital distances as well. In an academic community already impacted by caste, community and economic disparities, digital equality can only be a deferred dream. Those who are privileged by social and cultural capital will be the frontrunners in the digital world as well, with easy access to digital devices, faster networks, and optimum use of online resources. T.T. Sreekumar points out that digital access, is not an issue of technological access, but one of caste-class-gender inequalities (Sreekumar, 26th May 2020). In that sense, online education does not alleviate existing inequalities, but augments and enhances them. Digital inequities will be systematised by the presence of privileged learners who are prioritised by social capital and familial support. Early worries in Kerala’s public sphere were mostly about the Pandemic forcing the students into a virtual education system ill prepared to educate students with substantially limited access to digital tools and resources: “The vast majority of students

in our public institutions do not have the technical know-how or the socio-economic capital to overcome this inequality. It is estimated that only 30% of our students will have access to the latest technology” (Meena T. Pillai, 12th May 2020). At school level, it was bridged to a large extent when the existing IT infrastructure, and ‘Victors’, the official TV channel of the Education department were employed to streamline the airing of centralized video classes through TV. Local bodies of governance and NGO’s ensured that access to TV would be provided in the nearest accessible public facilities in neighbourhood schools and local libraries. Despite these affirmative measures, anxieties about being left behind, for lack digital access, did claim the lives of a few students in Kerala.

Another common concern was about gendered inequalities of access, even as Kerala was gearing up for online education. Unlike in other states (when even central institutes like the University of Hyderabad was forced to put online classes on hold, as its students from various parts of India had connectivity issues), Kerala quickly ensured that the pandemic did not bring education to a complete halt, and once the national lockdown was lifted, the remaining terminal examinations at school and university levels were conducted, observing Covid protocols. Considering the fact that Kerala may not fare better than the other states when it comes to gender parity, educationists cautioned that the pedagogical shift to digital education in Kerala may not be equitably enabling for both female and male students since, a sizeable section of the parent community in Kerala is reluctant to provide digital access to girls: “Now in a normal, traditional family, even if there is a personal computer, will the girl in the house have access to it when she needs it? In one of the most abortive societies in the world, we cannot argue so firmly about whether girls can get computers in India” (Amruth G. Kumar, 9 May 2020). Anxieties that girls will be excluded from digital classrooms due to gender inequalities were raised by Meena T. Pillai as well. Device-Internet access is one of the basic building blocks of online education. Accessibility is seldom a technical issue but determined by caste-religion-ethnicity-gender, prevalent social values, and cultural as well as economic capital. Therefore, digital access is not something that can be easily achieved by students who face socio-economic marginalization and gender disparities problematised further by the caste-religion-ethnicity nexus: “In India, less than 50 per cent of students use their own digital device for study purposes” (Kumar, 9 May 2020). The impact of the Pandemic on gender asymmetries is an increasing concern being discussed world over, as evident from the words of Antonio Guterres, the Secretary-General to the United Nations, who pointed out in his speech delivered on 31 August 2020, that the “millennia of patriarchy have resulted in a male-dominated world with a male-dominated culture which damages everyone – women, men, girls & boys”, and while “the pandemic had turned the world “upside down” the “social and economic impact on women and girls” have been “disproportionate and devastating,” deepening existing inequalities, especially impacting gender asymmetries and women’s rights (Moore, 9 September 2020). Our survey responses show that the pandemic mandated domestic quarantines have impacted girl students in various ways, except for being deprived of education as the government and civil society in Kerala facilitated a timely shift to digital pedagogy.

The disproportionate gap between the female work participation rates (WPR) and high female literacy rate, has been much discussed as an indicator of Kerala’s deeply entrenched notions of patriarchy which sees educational attainments of women primarily as a means to augment their conjugal prospects rather than for gainful employment. As per the NSSO 75<sup>th</sup> round, Kerala’s female literacy rate remains the highest in India and has only risen further (95.2 %), though women still lag behind men in terms of computer literacy

and basic internet knowledge. A reason could stem from the fact that digital tools and access for girls are still subject to parental control in Kerala homes. The 68th Round of NSSO (2011-12), projects the wide gap between male and female Labour Participation Rates (LPRs) (principal and subsidiary status). While the State average is 40.3%, female LPR (per 100 persons) in Kerala is 24.8% and 57.8% for male. Consequently, the difference between male and female LPR in Kerala is very high. The gender gap in levels of employment and economic participation is also brought out by the female work participation rates (WPR) and while the male WPRs in urban areas show a mild upward trend or constancy, there is a declining trend in female WPRs; that Kerala women have a higher participation rate in urban areas vis-a-vis all India is also seen (the above figures are based on the *Economic Review* 2019).

Despite the initial reservations about online learning and its gender outcomes, our survey conducted after two months of regular online classes, indicates that learners in Kerala have largely surmounted the issue of access to digital tools, thanks to an educated public and affirmative action from the authorities. The 498 responses to the question about access to devices, indicated that 97.2% had access to some digital device. 2.8 % still struggle with device inadequacy (See figure 5). Of the 97.2 % with device-access, 325 own smartphones. 184 use smartphones shared by family members. Eleven have their own laptops. 14 use home laptops and 6 use home desktops.

As our personal telephonic follow-up with the 2.8% of girls with no digital access revealed they are from the poorest families or deprived classes and castes and are often located in places with poor internet signals. Many of them suffer from various disabilities (physical as well as socio-economic). The lack of agency in voicing concerns related to their inabilities was evident from the fact that the 'comment/remark' options given in the forms were left blank. Evidently, the forms were filled up by family members for the eleven differently abled students, who were unable to write about their specific issues. In a society aiming for egalitarian education, this 2.8 excluded remains a matter of concern.

Of the 14 students who do not own a digital device, 10 belong to the financially secure APL category, and it is interesting to see that wealth need not bridge device disability. Of the girls who do not own any device, 3 were from the BPL category, one from AAY category, and one of them hails from an orphanage. 9 of them use devices shared by family members, and 4 of them have siblings enrolled in professional courses, who enjoy priority in using the device, especially if they are boys. Tellingly, only 3 of the 9 were able to attend regularly. 7 out of eleven reported device inadequacy or inconvenience as a reason for not being able to attend class. 3 cited poor internet signal and one indicated other unspecified inability. 7 of them are Muslims, 4 Hindus and 3 Christians. It can be seen that all the twelve students were denied possession of learning materials due to religious/ gender restrictions. The disciplined life of girls is still a prioritised social norm, where a large percentage of parents go by the common consensus that mobile phones and cyber world would mislead girls. Hence, the girls are excluded from the right to have basic tools for education and exert control over their own instruction.

Academic debates initiated prior to and in the initial days of online classes, had mainly addressed inequalities in access to digital devices. It is reassuring to note that, by the third month of online study, 97.2 % of girls were able to access devices thanks to the involvement of governmental agencies and positive interventions by local bodies, NGOs, political parties, student organizations, service organizations and volunteers. The Kerala Free Laptop Scheme launched by the Government of Kerala in 2011 has already provided

laptops to 37,88,528 girls. SC, ST and OBC sections were prioritised when laptops were granted on merit basis to 36,000 girls who completed higher secondary education. The government is actively pursuing this project in the context of the online school year (DCE). The 'Vidyasree' scheme of the Kudumbasree Department (overseeing the 2,90,886 'Kudumbasree' neighbourhood-group units), in association with KSFE (Kerala State Financial Corporation), aims to provide laptops to 5.12 lakh students (*Mathrubhumi*, 18 August 2020). The specifications are set by the Department of Education, and the cost is to be limited to be less than Rs. 15,000/- payable in 30-month instalments. Members will get a laptop after paying the first three months (Rs. 1500). As 75% of the Kudumbasree members in Kerala hail from poor families, this will be of great benefit to students who are currently experiencing device disabilities.

## 2. Connectivity and Data Access

The survey included four main questions related to Internet access, connectivity, signal access, and data packages. Out of 498 respondents, 99 % have internet connectivity, while one percent reported lack of internet connection. 89.2 % use mobile data pack, while 8.6% also have WiFi connection and 1.2 % have broadband accounts. Five students, without internet connection and device access, face acute digital inequality. To attend the mandated two hours of daily live class and access supplementary audio/video lessons, 51 percentage of the 498 surveyed reported needing 500 MB to 1 GB a day. 28.7 % reported less than 500 MB, and 14.7 % cited 1GB to 1.5 GB.

65.7 % of students reported spending Rs 200 to Rs 300 per month on data packages. 65 of them are unable to attend class regularly. 18 % said less than Rs 200 was enough (of these, twenty are unable to attend class regularly). 8.9 % reported spending between Rs 300 and Rs 400 (of which four do not attend class regularly). 3 out of 19 students who need more than Rs.500 /- were unable to attend class regularly.

To sum up, only 46.8 percent of 498 students have easy access to the Internet, and signal access is blocked at 53.3 %.

## 3. Location and Geography as Digital Inhibitors

Kerala's unique climate and geography of flat lands interspersed with hills and valleys, often hamper the effective adoption of the existing internet system, impacted by many factors, including power outages, and inadequate electrical connectivity reported by 0.8 of the 494 respondents living in hilly areas ( 21.2% of the 476 live in hilly, inland areas). Apart from these geographical specificities, the location of residence also affects digital education and smooth signal access, as 84.4% (of the 487 respondents) live in rural panchayats, and only 6.8% and 9.2% respectively are from municipal or Corporation areas.

## 4. Real vs Virtual Classrooms

The telling comments in the survey were related to the problems of domestic space acting as proxy classroom, as its fallouts directly affect girls in particular. It is instructive that even after two months of largely accessible and seamless online classes, 92.4% of the 498 respondents overwhelmingly supported real-time classroom learning. Only 10.4% preferred the online mode, for reasons ranging from physical distancing and travel restrictions contextualised by the Pandemic. A few cited personal circumstances ("It is convenient for me because I am a mother"). Many students welcome online learning

because it eliminates travel difficulties specific to women. Some found it liberating, with “no fear of teachers” and “can message Sir to resolve doubts.” In the “interactive...cool atmosphere,” “I can Choose suitable condition for attending class.”

What is noteworthy is that almost half of those who welcome online study are from the middle classes slotted in APL category, who are able to transform the home environment into the formality of the physical classroom, emphasising deep-seated economic and social divides in digital education.

### **5. Health Problems**

Though the long hours of digital classes impact the health of students in general, it seems to be a matter of particular concern among girl students, as the survey responses show. The majority of girls have documented ailments that they have experienced in the two months of digital education. Even when the basic problem that students face remains signal and device access, they also mention many social, physical, and mental health and wellness problems.

The Survey results show that most students suffer headaches and eye strain, with the situation aggravated for those with existing vision problems, as well as hearing problems caused by persistent use of earphones/ headphones: “Continuous watching on mobile phone damage our eyes and health problems like headache. Online classes cause strain to our eyes;” “Prolonged use of mobile phone is causing eye pain and headache;” “We are suffering from headache, eye pain, eye irritation;” “I have problem of migraine. So, always face headache and eye problems after online classes;” to “Lots of strain to eyes and sometimes it leads to severe headache with vomiting sensation.”

### **6. Increase in Socio-Economic Disparities**

The socio-economic inequalities play a strong role in defining digital education, as caste-religion-race-gender and locational inequalities remain pathways to digital inequality. Existing online education has to be inclusive enough to accommodate students who experience a ‘data charging expense’ of Rs 200 per month: “Sometimes I have no money to access GRP packs;” “Poor device;” “Sharing internet with my sibling;” “I use my sisters phone and sometimes I couldn’t attend the class or submit notes.” They regret that they can no longer access “computer lab facilities” on campus; “Now we need python programmes in our mobile phone. It is bit difficult for students who have only smartphone”. Many agree the “Online classes don’t have a suitable atmosphere for learning. We get interrupted by many factors like not connection message, and call during sessions, fine etc. And not accessible for all. Students without phone with less internet connectivity and using parents phone have to struggle.”

For learners who have to share devices among family members, or own only devices with poor storage capacity, monthly data recharge pose an added difficulty. When students share parents’ phones, incoming calls cause great inconvenience as classes are interrupted. Students also face situations in which they have to give up classes for the sake of their male siblings as male dominance still prevails in the social consciousness of Kerala. The girls who are from families that frown upon unsupervised access to digital devices experience difficulties of various dimensions. Evidently, digital pedagogy exerts tremendous psychological pressure on students who are forced to confront the digital and socio-economic inequalities that exist amongst them, which may have escaped them on the campus. The homogeneity implied in grouping them as ‘girl students’ for the sake

of convenience is subverted by manifest class differences and lack of technical privileges, which accelerate tiered inequalities specific to online mode, the efficacy of which depends on seamless connectivity, device adequacy, and digital resourcefulness. This accentuation of divides may not affect them so much in a physical classroom where resources are more or less shared, and hence the majority prefer the 'real mode' of education.

### 7. Domestic Spaces as Classrooms

Homes in Kerala had to transition suddenly into formal classrooms. While some found it easy, many home environments could not accommodate the classroom. The psychological impact of such unconverted homes on students cannot be overlooked. Digital inequality is caused by the digital skills and privileges that a section of students acquires in a supportive domestic environment (Dilip Raj, 15 May 2020). Concerns that the "Home becomes the fount of inequality in education and a butcher's land" (Kumar, 9 May 2020), are unequivocally supported by the students who agree that they lack a learning atmosphere at home. Subject to patriarchal controls from within and without, female members seldom enjoy the same gender equality as the male members in the nuclear family, and it applies to digital access as well. When housework and assistive care extended to the sick and siblings at home are relegated to girls, attending classes becomes secondary. Students with educated and employed parents, and family environments which provide cultural capital and digital literacy, seldom face these problems. Students who have their own digital learning tools, personal rooms and home environments that facilitate them to devote uninterrupted time to their studies welcome online learning, albeit not completely. The confidence of the miniscule of learners who said that they "can choose suitable atmosphere and condition for attending class," is absent in the majority: "So many students haven't a good atmosphere for attending classes from home;" "House can never provide us a suitable learning and understanding atmosphere;" "I did not feel that we are in classroom." The "Chances to get distracted due to external factors are high," and "get interrupted by many factors." "Sometimes we face a lot of problems;" including "Housework;" "Disturbance of family" and "family members;" and "Noise from surroundings." "As we are hearing classes from our houses we get disturbed by many voices;" and "Noise in home by children makes me disturbance." The informal interactions within domestic spaces, during their class hours not only impact the concentration of the students, but also coerce girl students in particular be cautious about the environment all the time, causing psychological pressures and constant concern that family members may invade their digital classroom at any time.

The survey results show that the tendency to hand over housework and family care to girls, even if they are students, is still prevalent as a product of systematic gender inequalities, legitimized within the domestic structure of middle or lower middle class families, from which most of our respondents hail. Given that our students in this part of northern Kerala, are from socially, economically and educationally backward communities, in general, many students drop out from the educational system, at an average rate of 1 to 5, from the first year of enrolment in UG programs in Arts. Our Attendance Registers of last five years attest to the fact that our UG programs begin with an average student strength of 36-38, and by the end of the program in the third year, we have a dropout rate of 5%. The reason often is marriage and if they continue to attend classes after marriage, they may drop out later because of early pregnancy. The mean marital age for girls in Kerala decreasing in rural areas has to be read in conjunction with the above dropout rates.



### 8. Marginalized and Differently abled Students

The biggest question facing online education is how to integrate the already marginalised, mentally and physically challenged students into the mainstream, problematised by digital distance and limited accessibility that jeopardize their participation. The fact that they even dropped out of the survey is an evident indicator of how far they are being pushed out of the digital ambit. At least 11 physically and mentally challenged students are currently required to be part of the online education in the college. None of them took part in the survey, except one who was helped by her sister to fill the form, albeit in a sketchy manner, which was not helpful in addressing her learning issues.

### 9. Emotional and Psychological Conflicts

The survey responses reveal that digital education also greatly affects the mental wellbeing of students. The silences and ambiguities inherent in their brief responses indicate that online education is pushing them through many indefinable crises. Comments cite, "Lots of confusions," loneliness, boredom, attention deficit, emotional distance, mental discomfort, and stress.

Students bemoan the precipitous deprivation of the social life and the emotional bonding on the campus. Unable to adapt fully to the isolation of online mode that engender various identity crises, they report being tired and bored with the virtual spaces that separate them from one another: "Online classes are quite stressful being seated before a digital screen." The shortcomings of virtual classroom are highlighted in comparison with the lovingly nicknamed 'Campus Classroom.' Online experiences are accused of eroding their right to traditional interactions between peers, and teachers and students. Most students see online learning as an inert and passive enterprise that can only temporarily replace physical classrooms. They report experiencing the digital classroom as wanting, without direct peer interactions and relationships, exchange of views, touches, discussions, the daily give and takes, celebrations, political interactions, extra-curricular activities and other collective formations that make campus life meaningful and empowering — leading them to emotional orphanhood.

### Conclusions

The survey suggests that, though the digital access to devices and connectivity have been largely bridged by Kerala's near total mobile penetration, the digital divide is still pronounced enough to exclude and marginalise, as access to technology and digital spaces are also implicated by caste-class-community-gender equations. The survey reiterates that in the unique context of Kerala which prioritizes education has ensured digital device and access for students, though the degrees and forms of access may vary. It also emphasizes that online teaching can only supplement real-time physical classrooms and, at best, usher in blended learning. The physical and psychological ailments, emotional insecurities, boredom and attention deficits, domestic disengagements and family conflicts that threaten online classes, lack of digital literacy, asymmetry in technical capital, and even locational and spatial limitations all underscore existing inequalities that are replicated in virtual classroom as well, and more so, for female students. The degree of gendered asymmetry can be read into the comments which are restrained in the pithy responses like 'housework' or 'home care of sick' emphasize that the house cannot be a substitute classroom. In the patriarchally-normated, rural, nuclear households of lower

or middle classes, from which majority of our students hail, marriage remains the final, and often, sole destination for girls. Where boys are privileged as future breadwinners, it would not be an overreading to see that educational prioritisation will take a second seat for girls, and earlier marriages (which have increased during the Covid lockdown) and attendant issues may lead to more girls dropping out of the system. In a domestic economy founded on free women's labour, the 24 hour presence of girl-students at home puts more pressure on them to extend increased participation in domestic chores and care-work, unlike in pre-pandemic times when physical escape to campus was possible. As patriarchy is still a basic reality in Kerala families, families take advantage of the opportunity to have girls in home classes as part of a strong practice of training girls for pre-marital home care. "Women's economic productivity", regarded as a "a critical factor" in women's empowerment is overlooked in low-income families, which depend on the women's "contribution to household resources" which "increases with the poverty status of the household" (Mahapatra, 2002). The fact remains that means of economically productive participation was restricted even for local self-help initiatives such as the Kudumbasree, which had made marked and well documented improvements in the socio-economic condition of women of low-income families during the Covid-19 period. During the lockdown, the girls also faced near total deprivation of the opportunity to venture out, while boys could make an occasional foray outside, as evident from the many videos during the early months of the lockdown, when the Police cracked down on boys and men who had sneaked out into public places and playgrounds.

The egalitarian imaginings and aims of universal access to education are threatened by the digital divide that augment marginalization of the 2-3 percent of respondents who have no access to online classes and are disabled by various socio-economic disparities that further affect their physical and mental health. While the students with financial capital and familial support welcome online teaching, even they rue the lack of peer interactions and socialisations on the campus. The AAY and BPL students, as well as the differently abled students, feel deprived of economic and affirmative social measures and institutionalised care when scholarships and financial aid are temporally suspended. The fact that 92.4 % of the 498 students surveyed, do not support virtual classrooms, indicate that the transition of gendered domestic spaces into virtual classrooms fails to provide a salubrious learning atmosphere for the girl students who are unable to avoid the deeply entrenched patriarchal constraints within the family structures, by escaping to the relative freedom of real campuses, as a temporary reprieve from increased domestic chores and pressures that fall upon them because of their confinement. The domestication of the girls, led inexorably towards an idealized conjugal future, is amplified by the domestic confinement that the pandemic has necessitated. The domestic space has always been recognized as the playground of gendered differences and various insidious patriarchal oppressions, unrecognized or rendered invisible. The oft discussed gap between the high female literacy rate and low female work participation ratio in Kerala seem amplified, faced with the dangers of possible reversals in bridging the economic and employment gap for women, as employment avenues even in the informal sectors are expected to shrink further. How gender inequalities are accentuated by our shift to digitally enabled pedagogy that erase the separation between the domestic and public spheres for women, can only be revealed by in-depth studies addressing the issue.

If a postscript can be appended to this article, now that the students of final UG and all PG semesters are back on campuses since 4<sup>th</sup> January 2021, after 7 months of online classes, their near full attendance and enthusiastic preference for offline classes can only

corroborate the conclusions stated above. Given the possibility of a spike in the spread of new Covid-19 infections that assemblages and travel could entail, the Higher Education department in Kerala had left it to the students to opt for online or offline mode. As it was not mandatory for students to attend physical classes, the faculty members were instructed to offer online option as well by live streaming the on-campus classes for those unable to attend. The evident preference that the students continue to demonstrate for real time attendance, braving not only Covid risks but acute daily transportation difficulties at this point, is a fitting validation of the findings of this article, as it amply underscores their resolve to break free of the manifold deprivations and pressures of domestic quarantines that were forced upon them by exclusive online education.

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