

# How social norms are increasing the digital divide between genders

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**W**OULD you, as a parent, want your daughter to fall behind your son? Have her potentials remain unfulfilled? Most probably not. Yet, this is the case for many adolescent girls in Bangladesh, whose parents—often unwittingly and in compliance with the traditional gender norms—handicap their potentials by preventing them from developing fundamental digital skills needed for today's age.

With the advent of modern technologies, digital skills have become increasingly essential for not only realising one's economic and productive potentials but also for efficiently navigating through everyday life. Young people organically develop fundamental digital skills when they have access to a digital device and the Internet; early access has a huge influence on digital familiarity and proficiency in later life. But digital access is unequal and the gender gap in access is significant. This gap starts early and sustains with age. This phenomenon is likely to exacerbate socioeconomic inequalities between men and women.

Whilst over a quarter of rural boys in Bangladesh aged 14-16 years reported using a smartphone, just eight percent of girls did, according to a recent BIGD survey. This increases to 46 percent for boys and 26 percent for girls aged 17-20 years. Similar gaps were found in the use of the Internet.

However, the quantitative measures of gender inequity in digital access do not capture the process of how this initial inequity is created by the gender difference in the negotiation power and how the same difference creates further inequities in actual access and, over time, real outcomes. For this, we need to understand how the existing gender norms come into play in the digital space and create new forms of



gender inequity. In another qualitative study with adolescents in class VII, BIGD researchers explored this aspect in-depth; the key insight of the study is discussed here.

As expected, the gender divide in digital access is not visible in high-income families; both boys and girls have their own smartphones and round-the-clock Internet access. Very few boys and girls from rural and low-income urban areas, on the other hand, own a smartphone or have Internet access. Most low-income or rural families have one common mobile phone, or at best two, which the adolescents can share.

Both boys and girls in rural and low-income urban areas are usually allowed to use a shared device for a limited time, often monitored by an adult. But this is where the similarity between adolescent boys and girls ends and disparity begins. Frequently adolescents seize the opportunity to use the device when they are not supposed to. "Snatched time" is a concept that the researchers have developed to describe the ways

adolescents maximise their use of the shared device. Gender divide is common in the allowable use, but starkest in the case of snatched time, which plays an important role in their digital skill development.

Boys ingeniously use a variety of social norms to elongate the snatched time they have on the shared phone. Whenever an adolescent boy gets his hands on a shared mobile phone, he simply goes out and disappears for as long as he wants; in the words of an urban boy: "Whenever I get bored studying, I go out [with the mobile phone]. It doesn't matter if it is 8 in the evening or 12 in the morning. My mother knows..." Parents, especially mothers, tend to be forgiving of this type of behaviour by their sons; according to a mother: "Suppose my son tells me that he is going out for some time. Then he can use mobile; we won't say anything, right? We can't make the boys stay at home." This privilege of boys to simply go out with mobiles allows them to "snatch" more time than girls who

are usually not allowed to go outside. Girls are acutely aware of this sad reality; a rural girl said, "Boys can go outside giving lame excuses... But girls can't do that." Because of their mobility, boys can also buy mobile data when they need to. But girls are limited to the mobile data bought by their parents and siblings.

Unlike adolescent girls, adolescent boys have an active social life, thanks to the same privileges they get as boys. They spend time outside daily with friends. Their social network allows them to buy mobile data jointly for one phone and watch videos, play games, or listen to music together.

Their mobility also allows them to use free Wi-Fi, which is becoming increasingly available. "We use Wi-Fi most of the time," said a boy. "In our friend circle, there is a competition about how many Wi-Fi networks we can connect to." Many boys, from both rural and urban areas, also talked about hacking Wi-Fi passwords and how simple it is to do so. In contrast, access to Wi-Fi for adolescent girls in both rural and low-income urban areas is highly restricted, as most do not have it at home and neither can they hang out in public spaces.

Adolescent boys also use a variety of negotiation tactics to carve out their time and freedom to use the internet. The study found that many boys control the password of their mother's mobile phone, which allows them to access the phone at their disposal, and their indulgent mothers oblige. Because the boys are deemed precious, sometimes they even manage to persuade their parents to buy them a mobile phone of their own.

Thus, adolescent girls, compared to boys, are in a disadvantageous position in becoming familiar with and develop necessary skills in digital technology; in our time, it is a significant disadvantage for anyone.

Behind this phenomena are the deep-rooted social norms and attitudes towards men and women, and by extension, boy and girls. Parents are generally more indulgent towards boys and stern towards girls. Boys are allowed to move outside freely but the mobility of girls is strictly prohibited. Parents expect more obedience from girls, who are more likely to accept decisions by parents, for example, not buying them a mobile phone, rather than negotiating for it like boys do, the study found.

Parents were also found to be worried about their daughters having romantic relationships. A girl describes: "My mother keeps her phone locked... She says that access to mobile phone derails the girls." There is a strong emotion among many parents about unmarried girls using a mobile phone, in the word of a parent: "No, I won't give her. If anyone has to give her a phone, it will be her husband, not me." Parents generally do not share the same fear for their sons.

These findings are perhaps not surprising. It is well-known that in our country, boys have more freedom than girls, and, especially in low-income and rural areas, mobility of girls is the most restricted. The fear of girls getting into a romantic relationship outside marriage and the resultant restriction in their mobile phone use is also perhaps a common knowledge. But everyone must realise that these practices are prohibiting the girls from exploring and realising their potentials in education and employment. In the 21st century, these practices are also creating a stark digital divide among boys and girls, which, as technology continues to advance, is likely to widen the gender gap in our country. Parents of girls must realise the importance of digital skills in the lives of their children, both girls and boys.

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## PROJECT SYNDICATE

# How Biden can restore multilateralism unilaterally



**T**HERE is so much to celebrate with the new year. The arrival of safe, effective Covid-19 vaccines means that there is light at the end of the pandemic tunnel (though the next few months will be horrific).

Equally important, America's mendacious, incompetent, mean-spirited president will be replaced by his polar opposite: a man of decency, honesty, and professionalism.

But we should harbour no illusions about what President-elect Joe Biden will face in office. There will be deep scars left from the Trump presidency, and from a pandemic that the outgoing administration did so little to fight. The economic trauma will not heal overnight, and without comprehensive assistance at this critical time of need—including support for cash-strapped state and local governments—the pain will be prolonged.

America's long-term allies, of course, will welcome the return of a world where the United States stands up for democracy and human rights, and cooperates internationally to address global problems like pandemics and climate change. But, again, it would be foolish to pretend that the world has not changed fundamentally. The US, after all, has shown itself to be an untrustworthy ally.

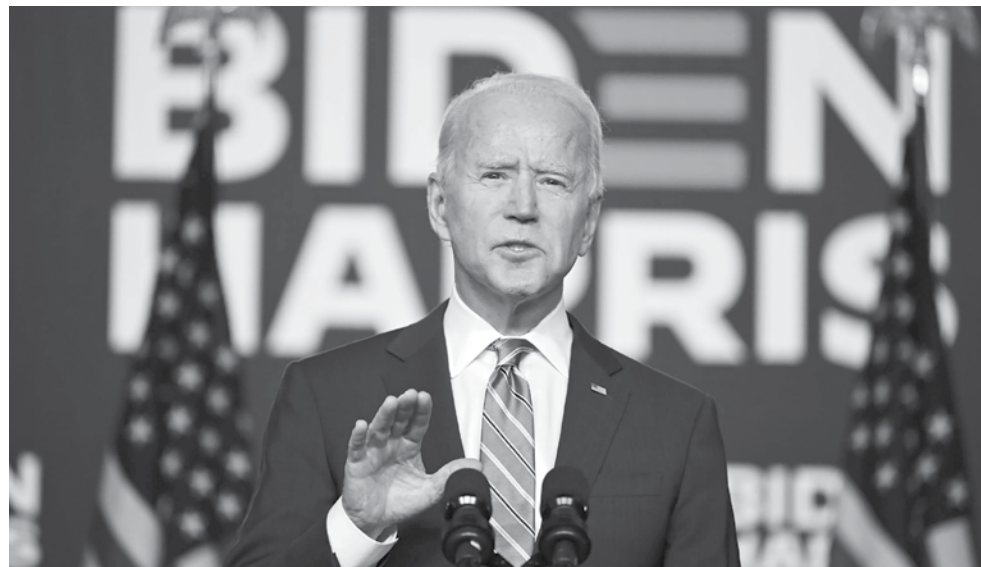
True, the US Constitution and those of its 50 states survived and protected American democracy from the worst of Trump's malign impulses. But the fact that 74 million Americans voted for another four years of his grotesque misrule leaves a chill. What might the next election bring? Why should others trust a country that might repudiate everything

it stands for just four years from now? The world needs more than Trump's narrow transactional approach; so does the US. The only way forward is through true multilateralism, in which American exceptionalism is genuinely subordinated to common interests and values, international institutions, and a form of rule of law from which the US is not exempt. This would represent a major shift for the US, from a position of longstanding hegemony to one built on partnerships.

Such an approach would not be unprecedented. After World War II, the US found that ceding some influence to international organisations like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund was actually in its own interests. The problem is that America didn't go far enough. While John Maynard Keynes wisely called for the creation of a global currency—an idea later manifested in the IMF's Special Drawing Rights (SDRs)—the US demanded veto power at the IMF, and didn't vest the Fund with as much power as it should have.

In any case, much of what Biden will be able to do in office depends on the outcomes of run-off elections for Georgia's two US Senate seats on January 5. But even without a willing partner in the Senate, the president has enormous sway over international affairs. There is plenty that Biden will be able to do on his own, starting immediately.

One obvious priority will be the post-pandemic recovery, which will not be strong anywhere until it's strong everywhere. We cannot count on China to play as pronounced a role in driving global demand this time around as it did in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Moreover, developing and emerging economies lack the resources for the massive stimulus programmes that the US and Europe have provided to their economies. What is needed, as IMF Managing



President-Elect Joe Biden speaks at the Chase Center in Wilmington, Delaware, on Wednesday

Director Kristalina Georgieva has pointed out, is a massive issuance of SDRs. Some USD 500 billion of this global "money" could be issued overnight if only the US Secretary of the Treasury would approve.

Whereas the Trump administration has been blocking an SDR issuance, Biden could give it the green light, while also endorsing existing congressional proposals to expand the size of the issuance substantially. The US could then join the other wealthy countries that have already agreed to donate or lend their allocation to countries in need.

The Biden administration can also help lead the push for sovereign-debt restructuring. Several developing countries and emerging markets are already facing debt crises, and many more may soon follow. If there was ever a time when the US had an interest in global

debt restructuring, it is now. For the past four years, the Trump administration has denied basic science and flouted the rule of law. Restoring Enlightenment norms is thus another top priority. International rule of law, no less than science, is as important to the US's own prosperity as it is to the functioning of the global economy.

On trade, the World Trade Organization offers a foundation upon which to rebuild. As of now, the WTO order is shaped too much by power politics and neoliberal ideology; but that can change. There is a growing consensus in support of Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala's candidacy to serve as the next director-general of the WTO. A distinguished former Nigerian finance minister and former vice-president of the World Bank, Okonjo-

Iweala's appointment has been held up only by the Trump administration.

No trade system can function without a method of adjudicating disputes. By refusing to approve any new judges to the WTO's dispute-settlement mechanism to succeed those whose terms have expired, the Trump administration has left the institution inoperative and paralysed. Nonetheless, while Trump has done everything he can to undermine international institutions and the rule of law, he also has unwittingly opened the door for improving US trade policy.

For example, the Trump administration's renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement with Mexico and Canada largely did away with the investment provisions that had become among the most noxious aspects of international economic relations. And now, Trump's Trade Representative, Robert Lighthizer, is using the time he has left in office to call for "anti-dumping" sanctions against countries that give their companies an advantage by ignoring global environmental standards. Considering that I included a similar proposal in my 2006 book, *Making Globalization Work*, there now seem to be ample grounds for a new bipartisan consensus on trade.

Most of the actions I have described do not require congressional action and can be carried out in Biden's first days in office. Pursuing them would go a long way toward reaffirming America's commitment to multilateralism and putting the disaster of the past four years behind us.

Joseph E Stiglitz, a Nobel laureate in economics and University Professor at Columbia University, is Chief Economist at the Roosevelt Institute and a former senior vice president and chief economist of the World Bank. His most recent book is *People, Power, and Profits: Progressive Capitalism for an Age of Discontent* (Penguin, 2020). Copyright: Project Syndicate, 2020. www.project-syndicate.org (Exclusive to The Daily Star)

**QUOTABLE Quote**

**LUCRETIA MOTT**  
(1793-1880)  
American social reformer.

*Any great change must expect opposition, because it shakes the very foundation of privilege.*

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**

- 1 Swine
- 5 Half of a 1960s rock group
- 10 Media icon from Chicago
- 12 Get up
- 13 Heat setting
- 14 Red Square name
- 15 Conclude
- 16 Item under the three
- 18 Take offence at
- 20 Knight's title
- 21 Prez's underling
- 23 Some amount of
- 24 Stocking parts
- 26 Easy gait
- 28 Chop off
- 29 Exchange
- 31 Lode material
- 32 Give one's OK
- 36 Agree
- 39 Swear
- 40 Big name in auto racing
- 41 Select group
- 43 Ranch animal
- 44 Critic, at times
- 45 Warty hoppers
- 46 Shocked sound

**DOWN**

- 1 Bart's dad
- 2 Speculate
- 3 June honorees
- 4 Frodo's friend
- 5 Washed out
- 6 God of war
- 7 Pitch cousin
- 8 Ridiculus
- 9 Gate tender
- 11 Cool quality
- 17 Numbered hwy.
- 19 December 24, e.g.
- 22 Wall cover
- 24 Raptors' home
- 25 Mariner's place
- 27 Goddess of plenty
- 28 Crop pest
- 30 Pale
- 33 Musical set in Argentina
- 34 Staff symbols
- 35 Annoying fellow
- 37 Future flower
- 38 Goes astray
- 42 Drop behind

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**WEDNESDAY'S ANSWERS**

T	E	M	P	O	S	U	S	E
A	R	O	U	S	E	M	A	G
C	R	E	C	H	E	L	I	O
K	A	N	S	A	N			
H	A	N	S	P	U	T	T	S
I	W	O	W	H	A	T	N	O
T	A	R	H	E	R	I	D	O
M	I	T	T	E	N	S	C	A
E	T	H	E	R	S	K	Y	E
P	E	E	W	E	E			
R	O	O	M	E	X	I	S	T
M	I	L	E	T	I	N	S	E
S	L	E	D	S	T	E	E	L

**BEETLE BAILEY** BY MORT WALKER

**BABY BLUES** BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT