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**Impact of Online Learning on Children and Parents from Economically Disadvantaged Families during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Sri Lanka  
(With Special Reference to Eladaluwa Grama Niladhari Division in Badulla District)**

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**ABSTRACT**

Online learning is one of the most widely utilized teaching and learning techniques in the world, but in developing nations like Sri Lanka, where even blended learning was not an option; its emergency adaptation to the traditional educational system has not proven to be a workable solution to the prolonged closure of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the immediate transition from traditional education to online learning in the Sri Lankan educational context has given rise to a number of issues at the macro level, and children and families from economically disadvantaged families are dealing with their worst experiences as a result of educational inequality that has resulted from online learning. The research problem of this research was how the impact of online learning on economically disadvantaged families and children is during the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka. The research objectives were to identify the impact of online learning on economically disadvantaged families, to identify the impact of online learning on children from economically disadvantaged, and to examine factors that influenced to arise of educational inequality in Sri Lanka. According to qualitative research methodology and phenomenological method, the semi-structured interview was used as the data-collecting technique of this research. The research sample was selected through the purposive sampling method and the data collected from 15 of the Samruddhi beneficiary families in the Eladaluwa Grama Niladhari division was analyzed using the thematic analysis method. Research reveals that online learning negatively affected both parents and children from economically disadvantaged families. Accordingly, having to provide devices, and internet facilities for their children's education, becoming debtors, having to spend the most time on their children's safety as children have to go to friend's houses or other places where internet connections are available to attend online classes, and mental distress that

developed due to spending high cost for online education or inability to provide facilities for their children to online learning are the major negative impacts on parents from economically disadvantaged families. And, children have to face negative impacts such as lack of educational participation, Lack of motivation for education, Collapse of education, or leaving school education. The positive impacts of online learning on children that were identified are exposure to technology and increasing social integration between low-class and middle-class children. However, the factors that influenced to increase in negative impacts on children and parents were geographical heterogeneity, economical marginalization, lack of education, Lack of technological knowledge, and lack of institutional support.

**Keywords – Online learning, economically disadvantaged families, blended learning method, and Samruddhi beneficiary families**

## **Introduction**

Distance learning, which is the umbrella term for all learning that doesn't happen in a traditional classroom or on-site, includes online learning as one type. However, online learning, often known as e-learning, is a type of learning that is entirely conducted online utilizing the internet. The use of the internet and other cutting-edge technical tools in student-centered instruction has prospered from a number of recent new technologies by sharing, transferring, and extending knowledge (Hancock, 2002). The functions in every aspect of society were severely crippled due to the spread of COVID-19 (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). As a feasible solution to this, most countries in the world were inclined to transform the online learning method that maintains the social distance that is needed to reduce COVID-19. Online learning is normally used as a teaching method in some countries in the world prior to this pandemic, it becomes famous not only in Sri Lanka but also in most countries in the world after the spreading of COVID-19 and the closure of schools. Most countries around the world have paid special attention to online learning using digital platforms due to the COVID-19 restrictions (United Nations, 2020). Nevertheless, it can be identified issues related to this system since the difficulty of adopting new methods and other factors. When considering the situation in Sri Lanka in this regard, teachers, students, and parents have been able to get digital experience through that. However, the use of online learning systems in the country such as Sri Lanka where there are many disparities based on various reasons has created huge issues. Economic background and level of technological knowledge are significant among them. Accordingly, the research problem is how the impact of online learning on economically disadvantaged families and children is during the COVID-19 pandemic in Sri Lanka.

## **Research Methodology**

The qualitative research methodology and phenomenological method were utilized in this study. The data collecting technique was in-depth interviews. As a result, data for the study was obtained from parents via telephone call interviews, and 15 household members from low-income families in the Elladaluwa GN division of Badulla made up the research sample. These individuals were selected using the purposive sampling approach and the thematic analysis method was utilized to analyze the data.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Online learning, which replaced conventional learning in Sri Lanka during the COVID-19 Pandemic, has had substantial positive and negative impacts on parents and children from economically disadvantaged families.

### ***Impact of online learning on parents from economically disadvantaged families***

Given their high responsibility as guardians to provide education for their children, parents from economically disadvantaged families undoubtedly have suffered greatly as a result of online learning. According to the research findings, parents had more negative than positive experiences when exposing their children to online learning.

### ***Becoming debtors due to obtaining loans to provide online learning facilities for children***

Due to the necessity of providing technical assistance, such as the devices and internet facilities required for online learning, parents from economically challenged families have turned into debtors. Each family in this sample was struggling financially, and those who did not have permanent jobs received a monthly salary. The majority of the population worked in occupations that paid a daily salary as well as livelihoods tied to agriculture and cultivation. Due to economic marginalization, these families were Sumruddhi beneficiaries who experienced severe rural poverty. However, those are the families that do not have the ability to fulfill even their basic needs with their monthly income. Online learning had become an additional and unaffordable cost for parents from such economically disadvantaged families who had to struggle with adopting the new education method that was introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, these parents have a tendency to obtain high-interest loans to support their children's education, which leads to them becoming debtors. Although they could provide devices by taking loans, the issue was the inability to provide regular internet facilities needed for online learning. However, economically disadvantaged families have been terribly exploited by obtaining loans and have fallen into extreme poverty as a result of the lack of reconciling access to accept such modernized methods in the capitalistic society. It appears that economic inequality

directly affects educational inequality and social inequality is maintained as a result of educational inequality, preventing intergenerational mobility among the poor  
***Decreasing in productivity in farming***

The majority of families' livelihoods in this sample were based on agriculture. Accordingly, farming was the main livelihood and they cultivated crops such as green beans, peas, and corn as well as vegetable crops such as eggplant and green chilies. If a bountiful harvest is needed to be obtained, proper maintenance and applying fertilizers are required. The profit they receive from their harvest causes to ensure their survival as well as the maintenance of their livelihood. However, online learning had increased the additional cost for them and the money that is needed to be allocated for buying seeds and fertilizers has been used for providing facilities for online education. As a result, decreasing in productivity has been hit by parents from these families. The alarming situation this, infants, and children in these families have fallen victim to malnutrition.

***Lack of children's support parents received from children prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic***

Prior to the introduction of online learning, there was a strong connection between parents and children in economically disadvantaged rural families, and children used to assist their families with farming and cultivation after school. Economic cooperation was impacted by the division of labor that existed in the rural family institution. The kids indirectly helped the parents' way of life. Parents were able to complete everyday tasks effectively as a result. However, the research data reveal that online learning has refrained the assistance of children for their parents. The reasons for that were spending the whole day at home, or spending time with pals while pretending to be enrolled in online lessons, lack of motivation due to spending time in vain, mental distress, as well as addiction to smartphones. Prior to COVID-19, children in these families carried out a variety of household and familial tasks, including caring for younger siblings and helping with farming and housework. However, the lack of their assistance has resulted in increased parental responsibilities during the pandemic.

***Having to allocate the working time for their children's safety***

The safety of the children in these rural families was impacted by online learning in a number of different ways. The absence of internet access is the main problem in Sri Lanka's remote regions. The primary challenge facing the children in this village is that the internet doesn't work since of signal problems. They connect to the internet via mobile data as they lack the financial stability to purchase reliable internet connection tools such as Wi-Fi routers. They must as a result locate the places such as treetops, rocky plains, and mountaintops where an internet connection is available. There are so many animal attacks in this area. On the other hand, the

majority of children travel to the houses of children who have online learning tools to attend classes there. Children are not only at risk of being victims, but such gatherings also have a detrimental effect on their health and safety during this pandemic. Due to this circumstance, parents need to devote more time to ensuring the safety of their children, devoting this time that could be spent working to earn money. Since they must ensure the safety of their children who travel to isolated locations to attend online classes, some wage-earning parents in this sample abandoned part of their daily income ways. The parent's financial situation has suffered as a result of having to provide for the protection of the children.

### ***Mental distress***

Every parent in this sample was experiencing mental distress as a result of financial difficulties, which makes it difficult for them to offer their children online learning opportunities. COVID-19 had a significant negative impact on Sri Lanka's economy, causing economically disadvantaged communities to experience income reductions. However, as a result of switching from traditional to online learning, these communities now face additional costs as a result of their declining income. Reduced income has a direct effect on the mental health of those who are suffering from financial hardships.

### ***Women becoming income earners***

The rural woman plays a crucial role as a housewife who supports his husband's farming or cultivation. An ideal rural woman is a person who is independent economically and depends on her husband within the patriarchal framework. However, crippling the income and emergency shifting to online learning that should be allocated high cost has encouraged some rural women to generate income for the family. Although this developed women's economic empowerment in rural society a positive impact, changing the role of the rural housewife has created various issues such as loss of the family relationship, the distance between the mother and mother, and disruption of household activities.

## **Impact of online learning on children from economically disadvantaged families**

### ***Disruption of education***

Due to a lack of internet facilities and devices, some children's education in these households has been disrupted. The incapacity of their parents to offer online learning facilities has resulted in a lack of motivation for education and, eventually, its collapse. In Sri Lanka, growing educational inequality is mostly due to online learning. Children from economically disadvantaged families now have less access to education opportunities due to the immediate shift from traditional education to online

learning. Adopting online learning techniques in a nation with limited technology development has created a multitude of problems for Sri Lankan students from all socioeconomic classes, and those who are economically challenged have been left out of the system. Accordingly, absence of access to online schooling during the COVID-19 Pandemic, the education of children from low-income families has been seriously undermined. Education is a tool of intergenerational mobility that enables these marginalized children to reach their achieved social status. However, it appears that the disruption of impoverished children's education as a result of online education promotes capitalism, which further oppresses the lower class.

### ***Irregularity of education***

Even if some children had abandoned attending online school, the majority of children were still learning online despite the challenges caused by economic marginalization. Children from economically disadvantaged families did, however, engage in irregular online learning. Some children took online classes using smartphones owned by children from middle-class families, and because these children couldn't properly attend these classes, it caused irregularities in impoverished children's education. Children from these households tended to use low-end, low-quality smartphones. Therefore, their main problems with taking online classes on their phones were a slow internet connection and poor internet connection. While attending online classes, these children periodically had to cope with technological issues like phone support issues, signal issues, and internet outages. These factors consequently contributed to the irregularity of education.

### ***Exposure to the modern technology***

As a result of poverty and push factors in the remote area where they were living, these children were unable to exposure to modern technology. On the other hand, their village which has been isolated from the modern world followed traditional technologies and did not open the door to modern technology. Not only children but also parents had not used smartphones or the internet prior to the pandemic. On the other hand, using smartphones and interesting internet-based teaching methodologies made it possible to become exposed to modern technologies through online learning. As a result, children who were previously unaware of modern technology or even smartphones now have experience utilizing the internet, logging meetings on Google Hangouts or Zoom, and interacting with others on online platforms.

### ***Developing the relationship with middle-class children***

Due to the lack of access and facilities to online learning, the majority of children from economically disadvantaged families used to visit the homes of children who have smartphones to attend online classes. Those who have such facilities were the children in middle-class families. Although integration does not occur between

heterogeneous classes, a relationship has built up between low-class and middle-class children through online learning. However, for children from low-income households, this is not a viable alternative, although it is feasible in the given situation rather than doing nothing.

## **Factors that influenced to arise of educational inequality in Sri Lanka**

Education inequality in Sri Lanka is influenced by a number of important factors that can be identified.

### ***Poverty***

Education is impacted by poverty in a variety of ways, both directly and indirectly. On the other hand, extreme child poverty can be led to an inter-generational poverty circle (Nanayakkara, 2020). These two factors might be viewed as being interrelated because education assists to eradicate poverty and poverty reduces opportunities for education. The key to overcoming poverty is having access to high-quality education. However, the issue is that in developing countries like Sri Lanka, poverty has led to educational inequity. Although prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, high schools, schools with limited facilities urban-rural schools all displayed educational inequity. Children from upper-class families have the opportunity to attend high schools with facilities, whereas children from lower-class families must attend schools with poor facilities. Even though there has been an educational disparity in Sri Lanka ever since formal education was established, its tragic nature became vividly apparent through online learning. Modern technology-integrated education has become something commercialized and supports capitalism.

### ***Development disparities***

The differences in development between urban and rural areas have a direct impact on educational disparity. The ability to quantify progress in both urban and rural areas is crucial. The gap in educational opportunities between Sri Lanka's urban and rural areas can be seen in the push and pull factors of low educational facilities in rural areas and excellent educational facilities in metropolitan areas. Poverty and rurality are key contributors to educational inequalities (Sarma et. al, 2018). In Sri Lanka, the majority of development initiatives are concentrated in urban settings, leaving rural communities out. Urban schools have excellent amenities, but rural schools lack even basic infrastructure. The lack of necessary physical and human resources causes daily disruptions in rural schools.

## Conclusion

Online education has influenced children and parents from economically disadvantaged families in a variety of ways. When analyzing the impact of online education on parents, it is important to take into account that they are becoming debtors as a result of taking out loans to provide their children with online learning facilities, decreasing farming productivity, not receiving any support from their children prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic, having to divide their time between work and their children's safety, mental distress, and women becoming wage earners, while its effects on children are disruption of education and irregular school attendance. According to research findings, it can be concluded that negative impact of online learning on both parents and children from economically disadvantaged families than its positive impacts. And also poverty and development disparities can be concluded as leading factors to the rise in educational inequality. Finally, if it is necessary to lessen the adverse effects of online learning on parents and children from economically disadvantaged homes, educational programs should be launched to strengthen economically disadvantaged children and improve rural areas with limited facilities.

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