

# Women Education in India - A Critical Review in Light of NEP 2020

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## Abstract:

Women education in India has long been recognised as central to social justice, gender equality, economic development and human rights. Over decades India has witnessed substantial improvements in female literacy, enrolment and educational access yet serious disparities - gender-based, socio-economic, regional and institutional - persist. The NEP 2020 adopted by the Indian government, offers a renewed, holistic vision of education reform with explicit provisions meant to foster equitable, inclusive and gender-sensitive education. This review paper examines the status of women education in India against the backdrop of NEP 2020: its policy provisions, potential impact, persisting challenges and future directions. By drawing on recent literature and data, it evaluates how NEP 2020 could deepen gains for girls and women, as well as what gaps remain and how they might be addressed.

**Keywords:** Women education, gender equity, NEP 2020, policy review

## INTRODUCTION

Education is universally regarded as a fundamental human right and a key driver for individual and societal development. In the Indian context - given its large population, social inequalities and historical marginalisation of women promoting women education has long been a central ambition of reformers, policymakers and civil society. Educating girls and women is not merely a matter of individual welfare; it has broader implications: for family health, economic growth, social equity, intergenerational transmission of opportunity and gender justice. However, while India has made significant strides in improving female literacy and access to schooling, structural inequalities continue to impede full gender parity. Disadvantaged socio-economic groups, rural populations, marginalised communities and girls from certain regions still face disproportionate barriers. Quality of education, retention (especially at secondary and higher levels), safe and supportive infrastructure and socio-cultural norms remain serious concerns. The adoption of NEP 2020 marks a potentially transformative moment. Designed as a comprehensive overhaul of India's education architecture from early childhood through higher education. NEP 2020 embeds within it stronger commitments to equity, inclusion, flexibility and holistic development. As such, it holds promise for significantly improving women educational outcomes.

This paper undertakes a qualitative review of women education in India, with a focus on the role of NEP 2020. It examines historical trajectories, current status, challenges, specific provisions of NEP 2020 relevant for gender equity, early evidence of impact and remaining gaps culminating in a discussion and recommendations for the way ahead.

## BACKGROUND: HISTORICAL CONTEXT & PROGRESS OF WOMEN EDUCATION IN INDIA

Historically, women in India faced extensive social, cultural and economic barriers to education. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms, beliefs around gender roles, early marriage, prioritisation of boys' education and limited infrastructure especially in rural areas, all contributed to very low female literacy and school enrolment rates. Over decades, reform movements, social activists and post-independence governments sought to expand access. Gradually, such efforts bore fruit: female literacy rose, more girls began attending school and higher education institutions started opening to women. Enrolment at various levels - primary, secondary and tertiary witnessed steady growth. By the late 20th and early 21st century, India had made noteworthy gains in

narrowing the gender gap in education. Yet, the gap remained particularly at secondary and higher levels, among socio-economically disadvantaged communities, rural areas and marginalised groups. Issues such as dropout rates (especially among adolescent girls), limited access to safe schooling infrastructure, cultural biases, economic constraints and lack of opportunities for vocational or higher education continued to hamper progress.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

Education is essential for empowering women and creating a more equal society. It helps women challenge discrimination, break stereotypes and access better opportunities in all areas of life. Educated women contribute to economic growth by joining the workforce and increasing family income. They are also more aware of health, nutrition and childcare, which improves the well-being of their families. Education enables mothers to support their children's learning, helping break the cycle of poverty. It also reduces early marriage and exploitation by building confidence and awareness. Beyond this, educated women actively participate in social and political life, leading to positive social change. Overall, education not only improves individual lives but also strengthens families, communities and the nation as a whole.

### **LITERATURE REVIEWS**

Some literature reviews provide a comprehensive view of the challenges and opportunities associated with women education in the context of NEP 2020, which are-

Kumar (2021) examined on "Digital literacy and women's education: Evaluating the impact of NEP 2020." The study shows that while NEP 2020 encourages digital learning, women education is still affected by unequal access to technology. Many girls, especially from poor and rural backgrounds, lack devices, internet and proper infrastructure which limits their learning opportunities and widens the gender gap in education.

Sharma (2020) studied "Socio-cultural barriers to women's education: Implications for NEP 2020." The study shows that despite NEP 2020's progressive goals, socio-cultural barriers like early marriage, traditional norms and gender stereotypes still prevent many girls especially in rural areas from continuing education. It highlights that policy alone is not enough and stresses the need for community awareness and social change to support women education.

Bhattacharya (2022) investigated on "Vocational education and women's empowerment: The potential of NEP 2020." The study highlights that NEP 2020's focus on vocational education can improve women job opportunities, especially in non-traditional fields. Although still underused, skill-based training can equip women with practical knowledge helping them enter the workforce and achieve greater economic independence.

Verma (2021) focused on "Gender-sensitive infrastructure and its impact on gender-sensitive infrastructure in advancing women's education under the NEP 2020". The study shows that lack of proper sanitation, separate toilets and safe hostel facilities leads many girls to drop out of school. By improving these basic facilities NEP 2020 aims to create a safer and more supportive environment helping increase girls' participation and reduce dropout rates.

Jameela (2023) explored on "The National Educational Policy 2020 and women rights in India". The study explores how NEP 2020 connects with women rights, noting progress but also ongoing issues like inequality and limited access to education. It highlights the policy's potential to drive change through inclusive education and empowerment while stressing the need for strong monitoring, community involvement and clear goals for real impact.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THIS REVIEW**

The core objectives of this review are:

- I. To provide an overview of the current status of women education in India, including enrolment, retention, and gender disparities across levels.
- II. To critically examine the provisions of National Education Policy 2020 that aim to foster equitable, inclusive and gender-sensitive education.

- III. To analyse early evidence and scholarly assessments of how National Education Policy 2020 may influence women education and employability.
- IV. To identify persisting barriers and structural challenges that continue to hinder full gender parity in education, despite policy reforms.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper's primary goal is to draw attention to the women education that National Education Policy 2020 suggests. The secondary data used in this study was gathered from a variety of sources, including books, journals, articles, websites and more. Here, an analytical method based on a review of the literature is used.

## **NEP 2020: KEY PROVISIONS RELEVANT FOR WOMEN EDUCATION**

The National Education Policy 2020 brings major changes to India's education system, focusing on fairness, inclusion, flexibility, and overall development. Many of its key provisions are especially important for improving women's education and reducing gender gaps.

- Inclusive education for all: NEP 2020 focuses on making education fair and accessible, especially for disadvantaged groups like women and girls, through financial support and special initiatives to improve access and quality.
- Flexible learning options: The policy allows flexible study paths, including multiple entry and exit points and skill-based learning, making it easier for girls to continue or return to education while managing other responsibilities.
- Skill development and equal opportunities: By combining academic and vocational learning, NEP 2020 helps girls gain practical skills and explore different career paths, while promoting gender-sensitive teaching.
- Safe and supportive environments: The policy aims to improve facilities like hostels, transport, and safe campuses, along with counselling and support systems, so girls can study comfortably and continue their education.
- Digital and lifelong learning opportunities: With a focus on online learning and adult education, NEP 2020 opens doors for women who had to leave studies earlier, helping them continue learning and build new skills later in life.

## **EARLY EVIDENCE & SCHOLARLY ASSESSMENT OF NEP 2020'S IMPACT ON WOMEN EDUCATION**

Since the introduction of NEP 2020, early studies and reports have started looking at how it may affect girls' education, job opportunities and gender balance in higher education. Some key findings and observations are discussed below-

- Better higher education and job opportunities: NEP 2020 can help improve girls' access to higher education and jobs. Support like flexible courses, safety measures, career guidance and special funds for inclusion can reduce barriers especially for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds. Skill-based learning also helps women gain practical knowledge and become more employable.
- Lower dropouts and more inclusion: Girls' participation in higher education has increased significantly showing better access. With improved facilities, support and incentives, the policy aims to reduce dropout rates and create a safer and more inclusive learning environment for girls.
- Vocational education and new opportunities: NEP 2020 introduces skill-based learning at the school level, giving girls more flexible options. This can help them gain practical skills, find jobs and enter fields where women are usually underrepresented.
- Ongoing challenges: Even though NEP 2020 is promising, it may not fully solve all problems related to women education due to existing social and practical barriers.
- Implementation issues: Proper execution of policies needs enough funding, strong management and regular monitoring. Weak infrastructure or poor use of resources can slow down progress.
- Social and cultural barriers: Deep-rooted beliefs about gender roles, early marriage, safety concerns and family responsibilities still limit girls' education. Many families may hesitate to send girls for higher studies or training, especially far from home.

- Digital divide: While online learning can help, many girls especially in rural or poor areas - lack access to devices, internet and digital skills which creates inequality.
- Lack of proper data and tracking: Without clear data on enrolment, dropouts and outcomes it becomes difficult to measure progress and fix problems effectively.
- Barriers in vocational education: Although skill-based education is encouraged, unclear pathways and social restrictions may still limit girls' participation and future opportunities.

## **DISCUSSION - SYNTHESIS, IMPLICATIONS AND STRATEGIC REFLECTIONS**

National Education Policy 2020 offers a major opportunity to advance women education through inclusive funding, flexible learning, vocational training and gender-sensitive reforms. Its success depends on strong implementation, funding, capacity building, societal support, bridging the digital divide and robust monitoring.

Below are some strategic reflections and implications:

- State-level commitment and local action: Effective implementation of NEP 2020 depends on strong support from state governments through proper funding, administrative will and locally relevant strategies. Involving communities and civil society helps address socio-cultural barriers and better support girls' education.
- Gender-sensitive education environments: Schools and colleges need to create inclusive spaces through gender-sensitive teaching, counselling, safety measures and grievance systems. Increasing the presence of female teachers and leaders can make institutions more supportive and empowering for girls.
- Vocational education with flexibility and access: Skill-based education for girls should offer clear career pathways, credit transfers and links to jobs. Flexible options like local training, apprenticeships and online learning can make participation easier, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Bridging the digital divide: To make digital learning effective girls need access to affordable internet, devices, electricity and digital skills along with content in local languages. Community centres, libraries and school labs can provide safe and accessible learning spaces.
- Data and accountability for progress: Regular monitoring using reliable, gender-disaggregated data is essential to track enrolment, retention, learning outcomes and employment. Transparency and involvement of independent bodies can strengthen accountability and improve policies.
- Promoting social change: Lasting impact requires engaging families and communities to challenge traditional norms. Awareness programs and strong female role models can encourage positive attitudes toward women education and empowerment.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the review and discussion, several key steps can help improve women's education in India and ensure that the gender equality goals of NEP 2020 are effectively achieved.

- Strengthen state-level implementation: State governments need to actively translate NEP 2020 into action through gender-responsive plans, dedicated funding (including the Gender Inclusion Fund) and regular monitoring to ensure real progress.
- Improve infrastructure and safety: Investing in basic facilities like clean toilets, sanitation, hostels and safe transport is essential. Creating secure, gender-sensitive spaces in schools and colleges helps girls feel comfortable and supported.
- Expand vocational and skill opportunities: Education should go beyond academics by offering vocational training with clear pathways to jobs, credit transfers and local employment opportunities, especially for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- Promote women educators and leaders: Increasing the number of female teachers, mentors and leaders in education can create a more inclusive environment. Supporting women's participation in higher education and leadership roles is equally important.
- Close the digital gap: Ensuring access to devices, internet connectivity and digital skills training for girls is crucial. Community-based digital centres and content in regional languages can make learning more accessible.

- Enhance monitoring and transparency: Strong data systems that track progress across gender, caste and socio-economic groups are needed. Regular evaluations and involvement of independent bodies can improve accountability and policy effectiveness.
- Encourage community engagement and awareness: Changing mindsets requires working with families and communities through awareness campaigns, mentorship and positive role models to challenge stereotypes around girls' education.
- Support research and evidence-based policy: Continuous research on women education and its outcomes can guide better decision-making and help refine policies to make them more effective and inclusive.

## CONCLUSION

Women education in India has improved over the years but many inequalities still remain. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 provides a strong and inclusive framework to advance girls and women education through measures like the Gender Inclusion Fund, flexible learning pathways, skill development and better infrastructure. However, the success of this policy depends on proper implementation and support from the government, institutions and society. To truly achieve gender equality, social progress and national development India must ensure that every woman has access to quality and equitable education.

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