

Evolution of Education Policy in India: A Critical Analysis with Special Reference to Gender and Higher Education

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Abstract

Education has been a central instrument of nation-building and social transformation in India. Since independence, the Indian state has introduced a series of education policies aimed at expanding access, improving quality, and promoting equity across diverse social groups. This paper critically examines the evolution of India's National Education Policies—1968, 1986 (with the Programme of Action, 1992), and 2020—with a particular focus on their objectives, structural reforms, and implications for women's participation in higher education. Using a historical policy analysis approach, the study highlights the progressive shift from access-oriented frameworks to inclusion-driven and transformative educational reforms. The paper argues that while earlier policies laid foundational principles of equality, the National Education Policy 2020 represents the most comprehensive and systemic attempt to address gender disparities, interdisciplinarity, research orientation, and global competitiveness in Indian education.

I. Introduction

Education is universally acknowledged as a critical determinant of human development, economic growth, and democratic citizenship. In India, education has historically functioned as a transformative force, shaping social structures and national consciousness from the Vedic period to the modern era. As the country with the world's largest student population, India faces the dual challenge of expanding educational access while maintaining quality and equity (Sheikh, 2017; Sharma, 2019).

Since independence, the Government of India has periodically revised its education policy framework to respond to changing socio-economic needs. These policies reflect evolving priorities—from universal access and national integration to inclusion, employability, research, and global alignment. This paper analyses the major National Education Policies (NEPs) of India and evaluates their impact on women's participation in education, particularly higher education.

II. Methodology

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The study adopts a **qualitative historical and policy analysis approach**, drawing on government policy documents, scholarly literature, and secondary sources. The analysis focuses on three landmark policies—NEP 1968, NEP 1986 (and PoA 1992), and NEP 2020—examining their objectives, implementation strategies, and gender-related provisions.

III. National Education Policy 1968: Laying the Foundation

The National Education Policy of 1968, based on the recommendations of the Kothari Commission (1964–66), was India’s first comprehensive attempt to articulate a unified national vision for education. The policy emphasised that “the destiny of India is being shaped in her classrooms,” highlighting education’s role in nation-building (Editorial, 2021). NEP 1968 stressed free and compulsory education for children up to 14 years in line with Article 45 of the Constitution. It promoted equality of educational opportunity irrespective of caste, class, religion, or gender, with special support for disadvantaged groups through scholarships and free learning materials (National Policy of Education, 1968). The policy introduced the three-language formula and standardised the 10+2+3 educational structure, which remains influential today. In higher education, it emphasised quality control, research orientation, and the cautious establishment of new universities.

At a time when the nation was striving to overcome illiteracy, social inequality, and regional disparities, the 1968 policy laid the groundwork for building a cohesive, inclusive, and quality-driven education system. It emphasised the nation’s commitment to a unified educational structure, stressing the principles of equality, national integration, modernisation, and the spread of education to all sections of society, including women. The NEP 1968 also represented a significant moment in India’s educational history because it was the first to recognise the importance of gender equality in education – not just as a social justice issue, but as a prerequisite for national development.

IV. Key Provisions of the National Education Policy - 1968

The NEP 1968’s provisions were built around the Kothari Commission Report’s overarching theme: “Education and National Development.” It sought to align the education system with the development goals of the nation. The key provisions included the following:

1. National Goals and Values

The policy aimed to foster the growth of a national identity based on secularism, democracy, and social justice. It sought to infuse the education system with a sense of national unity and promote the values of scientific temper, cultural heritage, and moral integrity. Education was seen as the key instrument for achieving these ideals.

2. Equalisation of Educational Opportunities

The NEP 1968 strongly advocated the principle that every individual, irrespective of caste, creed, sex, or region, must have equal access to education. The policy emphasised

that the “stratification of society must not be perpetuated through education.” To this end, it called for special efforts to extend educational opportunities to underprivileged groups, such as the Scheduled Castes (SCs), the Scheduled Tribes (STs), and particularly girls from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds.

3. Free and Compulsory Education

One of the most significant commitments under this policy was the aim of providing free and compulsory education for all children up to the age of 14. This stemmed from Article 45 of the Indian Constitution, which directs the state to ensure that all children receive elementary education. The NEP 1968 reiterated this constitutional mandate and highlighted the importance of universal schooling as a foundation for equality and development.

4. Three-Language Formula

A major linguistic provision of the policy was the implementation of the three-language formula, intended to promote linguistic integration and national cohesion. It prescribed:

1. The regional language or mother tongue is the medium of instruction at the school level.
2. Hindi, as the national language, is to promote unity.
3. English as a link language and for international communication.

This approach aimed to balance local identity with national and global engagement through multilingual competence.

5. Emphasis on Science and Technology

Recognising the need for modernisation, the policy emphasised that science and technology should form the core of the national education system. It recommended introducing scientific education and research facilities across all levels of learning to accelerate national progress.

6. Teacher Quality and Training

The policy underscored the crucial role of teachers in national development, describing teachers as the “most important single factor in the entire educational reconstruction.” It recommended:

- a. The improvement of teacher training programs,
- b. Better salaries and service conditions, and
- c. The recognition of teachers’ social status. This focus aimed to make teaching a respected and well-supported profession.

7. Curriculum Reform

NEP 1968 called for the modernisation of curricula to make education more relevant to the needs of society and the economy. It advocated for inclusion of moral, vocational,

and physical education, along with greater emphasis on environmental awareness and social responsibility.

8. Expansion of Higher Education

The policy encouraged the growth of higher education to meet national developmental needs. It recommended selective expansion, emphasising quality rather than quantity, and promoting research and innovation in universities.

9. Education for National Integration

The policy viewed education as a tool for strengthening national integration, emphasising tolerance and respect for India's diverse traditions and cultures. It promoted the idea of education as a unifying force in the multicultural fabric of the country.

Although the implementation of the NEP 1968 varied across states, it created an enduring framework for Indian education. Its directives on universal access, teacher quality, equal opportunity, and women's education inspired successive policy reforms, including the National Policy on Education 1986 and later, the NEP 2020.

The NEP 1968 was visionary in recognising that education serves both as an agent of social change and as a means of ensuring gender justice. While the policy did not achieve full gender equality in practice, it institutionalised the commitment to women's education as a national priority – a principle that continues to guide India's educational planning.

The National Education Policy of 1968 was a landmark milestone in India's educational journey. It provided a comprehensive framework for promoting national unity, modernisation, and equality of access. Most significantly, it established women's education as a cornerstone of social and economic progress.

By linking education with the ideals of democracy, equality, and justice, the 1968 policy set the moral and institutional foundations for empowering all citizens—especially women—through learning. Its legacy endures, reminding us that the true strength of a nation lies in the universal, inclusive, and equitable education of its people.

V. National Education Policy 1986 and Programme of Action 1992

The National Education Policy 1986 marked a significant shift toward equity and inclusion, seeking to reduce disparities across social groups. Education was conceptualised as a unique investment in both present and future development (Government of India, 1986). The policy proposed a National System of Education, reaffirming the 10+2+3 structure and introducing a national curricular framework. Major initiatives included Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), Operation Blackboard, expansion of Navodaya Vidyalayas, vocational education at the +2 level,

and the growth of open and distance learning through IGNOU (Kumar, 2024). The Programme of Action (PoA) 1992 operationalised NEP 1986 by emphasising universal primary education, vocational training, teacher education, decentralised governance, and increased public expenditure on education (Swargiary, 2023).

NEP 1986 explicitly recognised education as a tool for women's empowerment. Programs such as Mahila Samakhya sought to enhance literacy, leadership, and social awareness among rural women (Bhattacharyya, 2021). The PoA 1992 further strengthened gender inclusion through women's hostels, scholarships, curriculum reforms, and the Women's Component Plan mandating resource allocation for women's education (Downes, 2017).

Despite these initiatives, implementation challenges, limited funding, and persistent socio-cultural barriers restricted the policy's effectiveness in expanding women's participation in higher education and technical fields (Sharma, 2019).

VI. Key Provisions of National Education Policy - 1986

The National Education Policy 1986 was formulated to remove disparities in education and ensure equal educational opportunity to all, particularly marginalised groups. Its key provisions included:

1. Universalisation of Elementary Education

The National Education Policy (NEP) of 1986 prioritised the universalisation of elementary education across India. It aimed to ensure that all children had access to schooling, were enrolled at the appropriate age, and remained in school until they completed the elementary stage. The policy particularly focused on removing disparities by addressing the educational needs of disadvantaged groups such as girls, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and minorities. It promoted equal opportunities, improved infrastructure, and special support programs to reduce dropout rates and enhance educational quality, thereby strengthening the foundation for inclusive and equitable education for every child in the nation.

2. Equalisation of Educational Opportunities

The policy acknowledged that simply providing access to schools is not enough to ensure true equality in education. It stressed that genuine equalisation of educational opportunities requires targeted support for those who have historically been marginalised. Special emphasis was placed on introducing compensatory measures for socially and economically disadvantaged groups, including financial assistance, scholarships, remedial coaching, and improved infrastructure in underserved areas. The aim was to reduce disparities caused by poverty, social discrimination, and regional imbalance.

3. Focus on Adult Education

The policy placed strong emphasis on adult education, recognising it as essential for social and economic progress. Particular attention was given to improving literacy among women, as high levels of female illiteracy were viewed as a serious barrier to national development. Educating adult women was seen not only as a matter of equality but also as a means to improve family welfare, health, and community participation. Special programs, flexible learning opportunities, and community-based initiatives were encouraged to reach those who had missed formal schooling. By promoting adult literacy, especially among women, the policy aimed to foster empowerment, productivity, and overall national growth.

4. Vocationalization of Education

This initiative under the National Education Policy - 1986 emphasised expanding vocational and technical training to make education more employment-oriented. It aimed to equip students with practical skills that would prepare them for specific trades and professions, thereby reducing dependence on traditional academic pathways. Special focus was placed on improving employability for women, encouraging their participation in skill-based programs that could lead to financial self-reliance. By aligning education with labour market needs, the policy sought to bridge the gap between schooling and work. Ultimately, it promoted economic independence, productivity, and inclusive national development through skill-oriented learning.

5. Quality and Relevance of Education

The policy highlighted the importance of improving both the quality and relevance of education to meet the country's evolving needs. It emphasised comprehensive curriculum reform to ensure that learning content remained updated, meaningful, and aligned with social and economic realities. Strengthening teacher education was considered essential for enhancing classroom effectiveness and professional competence. The policy also promoted value-based education to cultivate ethical awareness, social responsibility, and national integration among students.

VII. Key Provisions of Programme of Action - 1992

The Programme of Action (POA) 1992 was introduced to operationalise and strengthen the objectives of the National Policy on Education, incorporating lessons learned from earlier implementation and responding to emerging national priorities. It aimed to translate policy goals into concrete strategies, with a strong focus on decentralisation, equity, and quality improvement.

A major thrust of POA 1992 was **decentralised planning and implementation**. It emphasised greater involvement of local communities in educational decision-making, encouraging participation from women's groups, local self-government bodies, and non-governmental organisations. This approach sought to make education more responsive to local needs and to promote a sense of shared responsibility in improving access and quality, particularly for marginalised sections of society.

Another important priority was the **strengthening of elementary education**. The Programme of Action placed renewed emphasis on improving school infrastructure, ensuring adequate teacher availability, and enhancing learning outcomes. Special attention was given to regions with low female literacy rates and high dropout levels. Efforts were directed toward expanding school facilities, providing essential teaching-learning materials, and creating supportive environments that would encourage enrolment and retention, especially for girls. By addressing structural gaps and resource shortages, POA 1992 aimed to lay a stronger foundation for universal elementary education.

Teacher training and gender sensitisation formed a central component of the Programme of Action. Recognising the pivotal role of teachers in shaping classroom experiences, POA 1992 stressed the need for comprehensive teacher education programs that promote gender-sensitive and inclusive practices. Teachers were to be equipped not only with subject knowledge and pedagogical skills but also with an understanding of social equity and diversity. Gender sensitisation initiatives were designed to eliminate biases and stereotypes within classrooms, ensuring that girls received equal encouragement and opportunities to participate and excel.

The Programme of Action also **expanded adult and continuing education initiatives**, with a pronounced focus on women's literacy. Acknowledging that adult illiteracy, particularly among women, hindered national development and social empowerment, POA 1992 strengthened literacy campaigns and community-based learning programs. These initiatives extended beyond basic reading and writing skills to include life skills education, awareness about health and nutrition, and knowledge of legal rights. By linking literacy with practical knowledge and empowerment, the program sought to enhance women's confidence, decision-making capacity, and participation in community life.

Finally, POA 1992 underscored the **importance of systematic monitoring and evaluation** to ensure accountability and measurable progress. It emphasised the need to track gender-based disparities in enrolment, retention, and academic achievement. Regular assessment mechanisms were proposed to identify gaps and guide corrective interventions. By establishing clearer benchmarks and data-driven review processes, the Programme of Action aimed to make educational reforms more effective and responsive. Overall, POA 1992 represented a significant step toward translating policy intentions into actionable strategies, with a sustained commitment to equity, quality, and inclusive development in education.

The NEP 1986 and POA 1992 together marked a paradigm shift in India's approach to women's education. They moved beyond access to focus on empowerment, equity, and social transformation. The policies laid the foundation for later initiatives such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya, and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao. By recognising education as a tool for women's empowerment and social change, these policies contributed significantly to reducing gender disparities and advancing women's status in Indian society. However, challenges remained in terms of implementation,

regional disparities, socio-cultural resistance, and quality of education. While enrollment of girls improved significantly, issues of dropout, safety, and transition to higher education persisted. Despite implementation challenges, their vision continues to influence contemporary educational reforms and gender-inclusive policies.

VIII. National Education Policy 2020: A Transformative Framework

The National Education Policy 2020 represents a paradigm shift in India's education system, replacing NEP 1986 and aligning educational reforms with global standards while retaining indigenous knowledge systems (Sahu & Behera, 2022).

1. Core Principles and Pedagogical Reforms

NEP 2020 emphasises holistic development, multidisciplinary education, conceptual learning, critical thinking, and flexibility. The introduction of the 5+3+3+4 curricular structure reflects a learner-centric and developmentally appropriate approach (Mittal et al., 2024).

2. Higher Education Reforms

Major reforms include a four-year multidisciplinary undergraduate program with multiple exit options, the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), and the establishment of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) as a single regulatory body. The policy aims to increase the Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education to 50% by 2035 (Pallathadka et al., 2021). The creation of Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs) and the National Research Foundation (NRF) underscores the policy's strong research and innovation orientation.

3. Gender Inclusion and Equity

NEP 2020 adopts a comprehensive inclusion framework targeting Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). The introduction of the Gender Inclusion Fund, Special Education Zones, and targeted STEM mentorship programs marks a decisive step toward improving women's participation in higher education and employment (Mittal et al., 2024).

4. Implementation Framework and Governance

NEP 2020 adopts a "light but tight" regulatory approach, aiming to reduce bureaucratic complexity while strengthening accountability. The implementation framework is shared between the central and state governments, recognising education as a concurrent subject under the Indian Constitution. The Ministry of Education (MoE) acts as the nodal authority, supported by bodies such as the Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE).

In higher education, implementation revolves around the proposed Higher Education Commission of India (HECI), which integrates regulation, accreditation, funding, and academic standards under four verticals. This structural reform is intended to improve

transparency, autonomy, and quality across institutions. For gender equity, governance mechanisms emphasise data-driven monitoring, targeted funding, and inclusive institutional practices.

However, implementation across states has been uneven, reflecting differences in administrative capacity, financial resources, and political commitment. This unevenness has direct implications for gender-focused initiatives, especially in states with historically low female higher education participation.

5. Expansion and Restructuring of Higher Education

A central goal of NEP 2020 is to raise the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education to 50% by 2035, including vocational education. This expansion is closely linked to gender inclusion, as increased institutional capacity and flexible learning pathways can improve women's access to higher education.

6. Multidisciplinary and Flexible Learning

The introduction of a four-year multidisciplinary undergraduate degree with multiple exit options represents a major structural reform. Students may exit after one year with a certificate, two years with a diploma, three years with a bachelor's degree, or four years with a research-oriented degree.

From a gender perspective, this flexibility is significant. Women who face interruptions due to marriage, caregiving responsibilities, or socio-cultural constraints can re-enter education without losing accumulated credits. The Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) further supports this flexibility by enabling credit transfer and lifelong learning.

7. Institutional Consolidation and Access

NEP 2020 promotes the consolidation of small, fragmented colleges into large multidisciplinary institutions. While this aims to enhance quality, it raises concerns regarding accessibility for women in rural and remote areas. Without adequate transport, hostels, and safety measures, institutional consolidation may inadvertently reduce access for women students.

IX. Gender Perspective in all the National Education Policies

While NEP 1968 acknowledged the importance of girls' education and adult literacy for women, it largely focused on access rather than participation in higher education or STEM fields. The absence of targeted financial support and structural interventions limited its impact on women's higher education outcomes (Phogat, 2023). Thus, the gender dimension of the National Education Policy (1968) represented an early recognition of the barriers that women faced in accessing education. Though not as explicit or detailed, it laid the foundation for gender equality in education by identifying female education as a priority area within national development.

At that time, India's female literacy rate was extremely low. The NEP 1968 explicitly acknowledged the wide gender gap and the cultural, economic, and social factors that inhibited girls' education. It recognised that women's exclusion from education was

detrimental not only to their personal development but to the nation's socio-economic progress. The policy highlighted that the progress of women's education is indispensable to achieving gender justice and full participation in nation-building.

To address the gender disparities, NEP 1968 called for special initiatives to encourage the education of girls, particularly in rural and disadvantaged communities. These included:

- Setting up more schools for girls, especially at the elementary and secondary levels.
- Providing incentives such as scholarships, free books, and uniforms to reduce the economic burden on families.
- Recruiting more female teachers to make school environments more welcoming for girl students.
- Offering hostel facilities for girls from remote and rural areas.

These interventions were intended to remove obstacles to girls' enrolment and retention in schools.

The policy viewed education not merely as a means of literacy but as an instrument for social transformation. It underscored that educated women contribute meaningfully to economic development, family welfare, and social progress. By investing in women's education, the nation could harness a powerful agent of change, capable of breaking cycles of poverty and discrimination. While NEP 1968 did not use the modern terminology of "gender-sensitive curriculum," it did emphasise the need to design curricula that reflect equal roles for men and women in society. It encouraged teaching materials that dispel stereotypes and present women as active participants in national life.

The policy also recommended the inclusion of women in vocational and technical training, breaking traditional barriers that restricted women to certain occupations. This early recognition marked a shift toward promoting economic independence and employability among women.

For the first time under the National Education Policy 1986, women's education was treated not merely as a welfare issue but as a critical development concern. The policy clearly stated that education would be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. It emphasised empowering women through education to challenge social discrimination and inequality. NEP 1986 called for the elimination of gender stereotypes in textbooks, curricula, and teaching practices. It advocated the portrayal of women as equal contributors to social and economic life. Special incentives such as scholarships, free textbooks, uniforms, and mid-day meals were recommended to enhance girls' enrollment and reduce dropout rates. Recognising the constraints faced by women and girls, especially in rural areas, the policy promoted non-formal and flexible learning opportunities. NEP 1986 emphasised that women should not only be

beneficiaries of education but also active participants in educational planning and implementation.

The POA 1992 significantly strengthened the gender agenda introduced in NEP 1986 by adopting a more targeted and implementation-oriented approach. Girls' education was declared a national priority, with time-bound targets to reduce gender gaps at all levels of education. Initiatives such as Mahila Samakhyas were expanded under POA 1992. These programs focused on empowering rural women through education, collective action, and awareness of rights. The POA reinforced the need to review curricula to remove patriarchal biases and to include content promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

Hostels for girls, especially from SC/ST and minority communities, and support for working women and adolescent girls were emphasised. The POA viewed education not only as literacy acquisition but as a means to enhance women's decision-making power, economic participation, and social status.

Using this background, NEP 2020 explicitly identifies gender as a core dimension of equity. It recognises that women's educational disadvantage is not uniform but intersects with caste, class, region, disability, and minority status. One of the most significant implementation tools is the Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF). The fund is designed to support states and institutions in removing socio-economic and infrastructural barriers faced by girls and women. The effective implementation of the GIF depends on transparent allocation, monitoring mechanisms, and coordination between central and state governments. While some states have begun aligning existing schemes with NEP priorities, comprehensive utilisation of the fund remains uneven. Key focus areas to use GIF include:

- Construction of women's hostels and sanitation facilities
- Provision of bicycles, transport, and digital devices
- Conditional cash transfers and scholarships
- Community engagement to reduce dropout rates

NEP 2020 extends gender inclusion beyond binary categories by explicitly recognising Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), including SC, ST, OBC, minority women, transgender persons, and women with disabilities. Special Education Zones (SEZs) are proposed to concentrate resources in regions with historically low female participation in education.

Despite rising enrolment in higher education, women remain underrepresented in **STEM disciplines**, research careers, and technical leadership. NEP 2020 addresses this gap through multiple strategies like career counselling and mentorship programs for girls, curriculum reform to eliminate gender stereotypes, scholarships and fellowships for women in STEM, flexible research timelines and part-time doctoral options.

The introduction of research components at the undergraduate level is particularly relevant for women, as early exposure to research can improve retention in academic

and scientific careers. However, effective implementation requires gender-sensitive mentoring, institutional support, and safe research environments.

Gender disparity in higher education is not limited to students; it extends to faculty representation and leadership roles. NEP 2020 emphasises merit-based, transparent recruitment, continuous professional development, and supportive work environments. The policy acknowledges the need to increase women's representation in academic leadership, provide leadership training for women faculty, ensure safe, harassment-free campuses, and enable work–life balance through flexible policies. However, structural biases, limited childcare facilities, and unequal domestic responsibilities continue to restrict women's career progression in higher education institutions.

The expansion of digital and online education under NEP 2020 gained urgency during the COVID-19 pandemic. Online learning, MOOCs, and digital repositories have the potential to democratise access to higher education for women, particularly those constrained by mobility or caregiving responsibilities. At the same time, the digital gender divide poses a major implementation challenge. Women from rural and low-income households often lack access to devices, internet connectivity, and digital literacy. NEP 2020 recognises this challenge and calls for targeted interventions, but bridging the divide requires sustained public investment and community-level engagement.

The trajectory of women's education policy in India reveals a gradual progression from access (NEP 1968) to equity (NEP 1986/1992) and finally to empowerment and systemic inclusion (NEP 2020). While early policies lacked targeted mechanisms, recent reforms address structural, financial, and socio-cultural barriers through integrated strategies.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks one of the most ambitious reform initiatives in the history of India's education system. Replacing the National Policy on Education of 1986, NEP 2020 seeks to address long-standing structural rigidities, inequities, and quality concerns while aligning Indian education with global knowledge economies. Unlike previous policies that primarily focused on access and expansion, NEP 2020 adopts a holistic, learner-centric, and multidisciplinary approach, emphasising flexibility, inclusion, research, and employability.

A defining feature of NEP 2020 is its explicit commitment to equity and gender inclusion, particularly in higher education. Despite substantial progress in women's enrolment over the past decades, gender disparities persist in areas such as STEM education, research participation, leadership positions, and workforce outcomes. The implementation of NEP 2020 thus assumes critical importance in determining whether policy intent can translate into measurable improvements for women in higher education. It analyses policy mechanisms, institutional changes, early implementation trends, and persistent challenges affecting women's participation and empowerment.

X. Challenges in the Implementation of NEP 2020: Gender and Higher Education

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 articulates a bold and transformative vision for reforming India's higher education system, with equity, inclusion, and gender justice positioned as core objectives. The policy introduces innovative mechanisms such as multidisciplinary education, flexible learning pathways, digital integration, and targeted interventions like the Gender Inclusion Fund. However, translating this progressive framework into practice has proven to be complex and uneven. The implementation of NEP 2020, particularly with respect to gender and higher education, faces multiple structural, financial, administrative, and socio-cultural challenges. These constraints continue to shape women's access to, participation in, and outcomes from higher education in India.

One of the most significant challenges in implementing NEP 2020 is the persistent issue of financial constraints. The policy reiterates the long-standing recommendation of allocating 6 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to education, recognising that sustained investment is essential for quality enhancement and inclusive growth. However, this target has not yet been fully achieved, resulting in resource limitations that disproportionately affect gender-focused initiatives in higher education. Programs aimed at improving women's enrolment, retention, and safety—such as scholarships, hostels, childcare facilities, digital access, and mentorship schemes—require substantial and sustained funding. In the absence of adequate financial commitment, institutions often struggle to prioritise gender equity alongside other pressing needs such as infrastructure development, faculty recruitment, and research expansion.

The shortfall in public funding also constrains the effective operationalisation of the Gender Inclusion Fund, a key instrument envisioned under NEP 2020 to address gender-based disparities. Without sufficient financial backing, the scope of interventions supported by the fund remains limited, and its potential to bring about systemic change is undermined. Moreover, underfunding exacerbates inequalities between public and private institutions, as well-resourced private universities are better positioned to implement gender-sensitive programs. In contrast, many public institutions—especially those in rural and backward regions—remain dependent on limited state support. As a result, gender equity outcomes in higher education continue to be uneven across regions and institutional types.

Another major challenge arises from uneven state capacity and variations in administrative efficiency across India's federal structure. Education is a concurrent subject, and the successful implementation of NEP 2020 depends heavily on coordination between the central and state governments. However, disparities in governance capacity, political commitment, and institutional readiness across states significantly affect the uniform adoption of policy reforms. Some states have proactively aligned their higher education frameworks with NEP 2020, introducing reforms in curriculum design, teacher training, and digital infrastructure. Others, however, face challenges related to bureaucratic inertia, limited financial resources, and competing political priorities, which delay or dilute implementation.

These variations have important implications for gender equity in higher education. States with stronger administrative systems and a history of investment in women's education are better able to implement targeted interventions such as scholarships for women, gender-sensitive infrastructure, and safety mechanisms on campuses. In contrast, states with weaker institutional capacity often struggle to address basic access and quality issues, leaving little room for focused gender initiatives. This unevenness reinforces regional disparities in women's higher education participation, particularly affecting students from marginalised communities in economically backward states.

Socio-cultural barriers constitute another deeply entrenched challenge in the implementation of NEP 2020's gender objectives. Despite policy commitments to inclusion and empowerment, women's educational trajectories in India continue to be shaped by patriarchal norms and social expectations. Early marriage remains a significant factor contributing to female dropout rates at the secondary and tertiary levels, especially in rural and socio-economically disadvantaged communities. Cultural norms that prioritise domestic responsibilities and caregiving roles for women often limit their ability to pursue higher education or engage fully in academic life.

Safety concerns also play a critical role in shaping women's access to higher education. Issues such as unsafe transportation, lack of secure hostels, harassment on campuses, and inadequate grievance redressal mechanisms discourage families from allowing women to pursue education away from home. Although NEP 2020 emphasises safe and inclusive learning environments, the actual implementation of safety protocols and support systems varies widely across institutions. In many cases, the absence of gender-sensitive infrastructure and institutional accountability mechanisms undermines women's sense of security and belonging in higher education spaces.

Unpaid care work further compounds these challenges, particularly for women from low-income households. Women students are often expected to balance academic responsibilities with domestic chores, sibling care, and family obligations, leaving them with limited time and energy for studies. This burden intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the shift to online learning exposed and deepened gender inequalities in access to time, space, and digital resources. While NEP 2020 advocates flexible learning options and digital education, without complementary social support systems, these measures risk reproducing existing gender hierarchies rather than dismantling them.

A critical institutional challenge in the implementation of NEP 2020 is the lack of comprehensive monitoring mechanisms and gender-disaggregated data in higher education. Effective policy implementation requires robust data systems that can track progress, identify gaps, and inform corrective action. However, the absence of consistent and reliable gender-disaggregated data on enrolment, retention, completion rates, academic performance, leadership representation, and employment outcomes limits the ability of policymakers and institutions to assess the impact of NEP 2020 on women's higher education.



The lack of intersectional data further complicates this issue. Women's educational experiences are shaped by multiple, overlapping identities such as caste, class, region, disability, and religion. Without data that captures these intersecting dimensions, policies risk adopting a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to address the specific barriers faced by marginalised groups of women. For example, while overall female enrolment in higher education may show improvement, women from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, minority communities, or rural areas may continue to face exclusion. The absence of disaggregated data obscures these disparities and limits the scope for targeted interventions.

Institutional monitoring and evaluation mechanisms also remain weak in many higher education institutions. Accreditation and quality assurance processes often prioritise academic performance and infrastructure development over equity and inclusion indicators. As a result, gender equity goals are not always integrated into institutional planning, performance evaluation, or accountability frameworks. This gap reduces the incentive for institutions to adopt proactive and sustained gender-sensitive practices.

In addition to these structural challenges, capacity constraints among faculty and administrators pose obstacles to effective implementation. The success of NEP 2020's gender-inclusive vision depends on the ability of educators and institutional leaders to adopt gender-sensitive pedagogy, curriculum design, and governance practices. However, limited training opportunities and lack of awareness about gender issues in higher education restrict meaningful engagement with these reforms. Without systematic capacity-building initiatives, policy directives risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative.

While NEP 2020 offers a comprehensive and forward-looking framework for promoting gender equity in higher education, its implementation is constrained by a range of interconnected challenges. Financial limitations, uneven state capacity, deeply rooted socio-cultural norms, and gaps in monitoring and data systems collectively hinder the realisation of the policy's transformative potential. Addressing these challenges requires not only increased investment and administrative coordination but also sustained efforts to challenge patriarchal norms, strengthen institutional capacity, and build robust evidence-based policy frameworks. Without confronting these structural barriers, the promise of NEP 2020 to create an inclusive and equitable higher education system for women in India may remain only partially fulfilled.

XI. Way Forward: Advancing Gender Equity in Higher Education under NEP 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a transformative vision for India's higher education system, with gender equity positioned as a central pillar of inclusive development. While the policy outlines progressive frameworks such as the Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF), flexible learning pathways, and institutional reforms, the effective realisation of these goals depends largely on sustained implementation, monitoring, and collaboration. Moving forward, a multi-dimensional strategy is



required to translate policy intent into tangible outcomes for women and gender-diverse learners in higher education.

A critical step in advancing gender equity under NEP 2020 is the strengthening of the Gender Inclusion Fund through robust governance and accountability mechanisms. Although the GIF has been conceptualised as a dedicated financial instrument to address gender-based disparities in access, retention, and completion of education, its impact will remain limited without transparent allocation procedures and measurable outcome indicators. Clear guidelines are necessary to ensure that funds are equitably distributed across states and institutions, particularly those serving socially and economically disadvantaged regions. Regular audits, public disclosure of expenditures, and outcome-based evaluation frameworks should be institutionalised to track progress. Furthermore, state governments and higher education institutions (HEIs) must be mandated to develop gender-responsive budgeting plans aligned with GIF objectives, ensuring that investments in infrastructure, scholarships, safety measures, and digital access directly benefit women students and faculty.

Another essential area for future progress lies in the expansion of gender-disaggregated data collection and research within higher education. Reliable data is foundational for evidence-based policy-making and effective intervention design. At present, the limited availability of disaggregated data on enrolment, retention, dropout rates, academic performance, leadership representation, and employment outcomes restricts a comprehensive understanding of gender disparities. NEP 2020 must be supported by a national data ecosystem that systematically captures intersectional indicators, including caste, class, region, disability, and gender identity. Such data would enable policymakers and institutions to identify structural barriers faced by different groups of women and gender-diverse learners. In addition, promoting academic research on gender and higher education through dedicated grants and research centres would deepen insights into policy effectiveness and foster innovative, context-specific solutions.

Enhancing institutional autonomy, while ensuring social accountability, is another crucial dimension of the way forward. NEP 2020 advocates greater academic, administrative, and financial autonomy for higher education institutions to foster innovation and excellence. However, autonomy must be balanced with accountability to social equity goals, particularly gender inclusion. Institutions should be required to integrate gender equity indicators into their institutional development plans, accreditation processes, and performance evaluations. Governing bodies must include adequate representation of women and gender experts to ensure inclusive decision-making. Autonomy should empower institutions to design flexible curricula, mentorship programs, and support services tailored to women's needs. At the same time, accountability mechanisms should ensure that such freedoms are not exercised at the cost of inclusivity and fairness.

The integration of gender studies and feminist perspectives across disciplines is vital for fostering an inclusive academic culture and challenging entrenched patriarchal norms.



Rather than confining gender studies to isolated departments or elective courses, NEP 2020 provides an opportunity to mainstream gender-sensitive pedagogy across the curriculum. Disciplines such as science, technology, engineering, medicine, law, economics, and management must incorporate feminist epistemologies and gender analysis to highlight women's contributions and address systemic biases. Faculty development programs should be designed to equip educators with the tools to adopt gender-inclusive teaching methods and assessment practices. Such curricular integration not only enhances academic inclusivity but also cultivates critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and social responsibility among students of all genders.

Equally important is the encouragement of partnerships between government agencies, civil society organisations, and higher education institutions to advance gender equity goals. Collaborative governance models can bridge gaps between policy formulation and grassroots realities. Civil society organisations with expertise in gender advocacy, community engagement, and social mobilisation can play a pivotal role in designing outreach programs, mentorship initiatives, and awareness campaigns for women's higher education. Partnerships with industry can also create pathways for internships, skill development, and employment opportunities for women graduates, particularly in STEM and emerging technology sectors. Such multi-stakeholder collaborations enhance resource mobilisation, innovation, and sustainability of gender-focused interventions.

In addition to structural reforms, addressing socio-cultural barriers remains central to the successful implementation of NEP 2020's gender objectives. Deep-rooted norms related to early marriage, unpaid care work, safety concerns, and mobility restrictions continue to limit women's participation in higher education, especially in rural and marginalised communities. Institutions must adopt holistic support systems, including on-campus childcare facilities, flexible learning schedules, digital learning options, and comprehensive safety policies. Awareness programs targeting families and communities can help shift perceptions about women's education and employment. By recognising education as a shared societal responsibility, NEP 2020 can foster an enabling environment that supports women's aspirations.

Digital inclusion also constitutes a key component of the way forward. While NEP 2020 emphasises the use of technology to expand access to higher education, the digital gender divide poses significant challenges. Women from economically weaker sections often face limited access to devices, internet connectivity, and digital literacy. Targeted investments in digital infrastructure, subsidised access to technology, and gender-sensitive digital literacy programs are essential to ensure that online and blended learning models do not exacerbate existing inequalities. Digital platforms should also be designed to be inclusive, safe, and accessible for women and gender-diverse learners.

Leadership development and representation of women in higher education governance and academia must be prioritised as part of long-term gender equity strategies. Despite increased enrolment of women in higher education, their representation in senior academic, administrative, and policy-making roles remains disproportionately low.

NEP 2020 implementation frameworks should include leadership training programs, mentorship networks, and transparent promotion policies to support women's career advancement. Encouraging women's leadership not only enhances institutional diversity but also contributes to more equitable and inclusive policy outcomes.

Finally, continuous monitoring, evaluation, and policy review are essential to ensure that gender equity goals under NEP 2020 remain responsive to evolving challenges. Periodic impact assessments, stakeholder consultations, and independent evaluations should be institutionalised to assess progress and identify gaps. Feedback from students, faculty, and administrators—particularly women and marginalised groups—should inform policy refinements. By adopting an adaptive and evidence-driven approach, NEP 2020 can evolve as a living policy framework that effectively addresses gender disparities in higher education.

The way forward for NEP 2020 in achieving gender equity in higher education lies in moving beyond policy declarations toward sustained, coordinated, and accountable action. Strengthening financial mechanisms, generating robust data, balancing autonomy with accountability, mainstreaming gender perspectives, and fostering collaborative partnerships are central to this process. When combined with socio-cultural transformation and digital inclusion, these measures can ensure that higher education becomes a powerful instrument of empowerment, equality, and national development for women and gender-diverse learners in India.

XII. Conclusion

The evolution of India's education policies reflects changing national priorities and socio-economic realities. Each policy phase contributed incrementally to expanding access and improving quality; however, NEP 2020 represents the most comprehensive and transformative framework to date. By integrating flexibility, interdisciplinarity, research orientation, and gender inclusion, the policy positions education as a central driver of sustainable development and social justice. Sustained political commitment, adequate funding, and effective implementation will be crucial for translating policy vision into measurable outcomes.

The National Education Policy 2020 represents a transformative opportunity to reshape India's higher education system through inclusivity, flexibility, and innovation. Its emphasis on gender equity reflects a mature understanding of education as a tool for social justice and sustainable development. While the policy framework is progressive, its success ultimately depends on effective implementation, adequate funding, and sustained political commitment.

If implemented earnestly, NEP 2020 has the potential to significantly enhance women's participation in higher education, reduce structural inequalities, and create a more equitable knowledge society. However, bridging the gap between policy vision and ground realities remains the central challenge for India's education reforms in the coming decade.

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