

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 as a Stimulus to Women's Participation in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Education is a significant factor for fostering the social and economic development of a country. In a highly populated country like India, women represented a significant proportion of the country's population. So, women's higher education is necessary for the country's overall progress. Previously, due to cultural, financial and social barriers such as poverty, early marriage, family responsibilities, safety and security, distance issues, etc., women's participation was extremely limited in higher educational institutions. Various education commissions and committees have taken various measures to increase women's participation in higher education. Although enrollment has risen, inequality remains for the women who belong to rural households and disadvantaged communities. The National Education Policy (NEP)2020 is a significant step taken towards promoting gender equality and women's inclusion in higher education in India by focusing on the inadequacies of the existing education system. This paper aims to analyse how the NEP-2020 serves as a stimulus for women's participation in higher education and tries to identify some limitations of this policy in this regard.

Keywords: Women's participation, higher education, National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, inclusion, equality

Female participation in higher education is one of the important dimensions of gender equality and economic growth. The patriarchal society in India has been a barrier to women's participation in higher education. However, women's participation in higher education has increased tremendously across different parts of the world. Even in some countries, female enrolment exceeds male enrolment at the undergraduate level (World Bank, 2021). But the gender inequalities continue to persist in various forms in higher education. Women still stay behind in science and technology (Cheryan *et al.* 2017). In postgraduate and doctoral levels, the women's participation significantly falls (Leemann, Dubach & Boes, 2010). Those from low- income households, economic obstacles negatively affect their participation (Unterhalter *et al.* 2014). To eradicate the inequalities, educational policies play

a crucial role by prioritising financial assistance and taking measures to promote equity. This paper analyses the steps taken in the National Educational Policy 2020 to promote women's participation in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Chanana, K (2007), higher education simulates gender inequality if problems related to women's participation are not properly addressed by policy intervention. It is proven that women's participation is low in technical and professional fields. A study done by Tilak, J.B.G (2015), found

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that women from marginalised communities and rural areas are still facing barriers to higher education. Though female enrollment increases, it is unevenly distributed across different classes, castes, and religions. Structural inequalities related to the labour market and caste cannot be abolished without appropriate policy intervention; policy implementation can create a link between education and social welfare (Velaskar,2016). According to a study done by Agrawal, P. (2018), Female students and female faculty members are facing sexual assault in higher education institutions. But the victims are afraid to take legal action due to fear of vengeance. This study noted that legal acts available in this regard need to address these issues to ensure safety in higher educational institutions. Shetty and Salin (2019) have said that socioeconomic status and gender discrimination negatively affect women's participation in higher education. Women represent a remarkable proportion of human capital in India, but the potentiality remain unused due to these barriers. According to Kingdom, G. (2020), higher education significantly uplifts female labour force participation and their role in decision-making, but discrimination in the labour market still exists. To bring equity, policy intervention is necessary. According to Chakrabarti, A., Sen (2020), in higher educational institutions, the governance structures are male-dominated, which creates barriers to female academic upliftment. So, institutional reforms should be in such a way that remove barriers to women's participation in decision -making role. It is proven that over time, the gender-parity index, educational attainment and enrolment have improved, but inequalities remain at various levels of education, castes and disciplines (Pandit, 2025). According to Nethravathi & Chotai (2025), for upliftment in women's economic status and participation in decision-making, higher education plays a crucial role. This study showed that although enrollment increased, the economic limitations and safety issues are barriers to women's participation.

WOMEN AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

Pre-independence period

Due to the socio-economic structure, women's participation in higher education was extremely

limited in the pre-independence period. At that time, patriarchal society discouraged women from pursuing higher education because there was a belief that education could harm gender roles in society. The dominance of the purdah system and child marriage were there at that time. To start women's education, the work of some social activists like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Savitribai Phule, Pandita Ramabai, etc were significant.

Bethun College(1879) was the first women's college in India, which was started in Kolkata. But at that time, the access was limited to women belong from higher caste and urban areas.

Post-independence period

After independence, women's education was the targeted agenda for developing the country. The Indian Constitution also focused on gender equality. After this, the women's educational attainment has slowly increased in higher educational institutions. Article 14 ensures equality by giving equal rights to women for education. Article 15(3) provides the states with the power to start women-centric provisions like educational schemes, scholarships, reservations, etc. The important educational reforms were done through Article 21A, which mandates free and compulsory education for all between the ages of 6 and 14 years. This article recognises education as a fundamental right for all.

INDIAN EDUCATION COMMISSIONS AND WOMEN'S EDUCATION

University education commission or Radhakrishnan commission (1948-49)

The university education commission focused on equal opportunity. This commission acknowledged that irrespective of gender, caste, or religion education system should include all. It focused on the expansion of the higher education institutions for women, encouraged co-education and women to study professional subjects, focused on campus safety, women's hostels, scholarships for women, etc.

Mudaliar Commission (1952-53)

The Mudaliar Commission, also known as the Secondary Education Commission, focused on financial assistance, vocational education, and hostel

facilities for girls. This commission also focused on increasing secondary schools for girls. It promoted equal access and suitable facilities for girls in secondary level of education.

Kothari Commission (1964-66)

The Kothari Commission focused exclusively on gender gaps and noted that, for economic and social development, women's education is crucial. This commission mandates equality in educational opportunities. It stated that women's education is fundamental for national progress. Besides focusing on the expansion of higher education institutions for girls, financial assistance, etc., it also encouraged women to participate in leadership roles.

GOVERNMENT POLICIES BEFORE NEP-2020 AND WOMEN'S EDUCATION

National Policy on Education, 1968

This is the first education policy in India. It focused on the fact that everyone, irrespective of caste, religion and gender, should have access to education. It also suggested measures to uplift women's attainment in higher education. It focused on establishing higher education institutions for women, encouraged co-education, and provided schemes and scholarships for women.

Education policy, 1986

This is the second education policy in India. It is widely considered that women's participation in higher education can have a profoundly positive influence on society. This policy focused on gender equality and providing scholarships and hostels for females to uplift women's participation, concentrated educational access, and alleviate gender gaps in enrollment. It also promoted women's empowerment.

NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY, 2020

The main fundamental pillars of NEP-2020 are equity, access, affordability, quality and accountability. The goal of this policy is the same as Sustainable Development Goal 4, which aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030.

NEP-2020 and women

The main targets of the National Education Policy 2020 are the distribution of equitable, inclusive and quality education for all, irrespective of caste, religion and gender. According to this policy, women's higher education is an integral part of economic and social development. This policy focused on removing the barriers of women's education related to the economy, accessibility and safety. This policy ensures the accessibility of education for women belonging to the backward castes, communities and rural areas. This policy emphasises the student-centric approach so that they can continue their education according to their interest and abilities.

NEP-2020 targets to uplift Gross Enrolment Ratio from 26% to 50% in higher education by 2035. In order to improve the accessibility for women, this policy suggests that higher education institutions should possess supportive and safe infrastructure, such as gender specific toilets and childcare areas, and there should be strict policies for women's safety and discrimination.

To prevent gender stereotypes, NEP-2020 suggests gender-specific curricula, which act as a stimulator to women's attainment in various fields such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics. This policy also concentrates on distance learning for the women who face safety and distance-related barriers to continue their studies. It focused on the reduction of dropout rates in higher education and financial support for female students specifically belong from marginalized communities. NEP-2020 also aims to enhance women's participation in leadership roles in various fields in higher education to remove the gender specific inequity in decision-making.

In order to empower women, this policy tries to create a bridge between education and employment by strengthening skill development strategies, vocational education and enforcing employment opportunities for women so that they can participate in the labour market. Steps taken in NEP-2020 for encouraging women's participation in higher education are as follows:-

(i) NEP-2020 and accessibility

The primary purpose of NEP-2020 is equity and

access to higher education for all, in which the inclusion of women from different backgrounds and geographical areas is crucial. This policy pointed out the fact that girls are dropping out in post schooling period due to economic and social reasons such as poverty, distance from colleges, domestic work, family responsibilities and child marriage, etc. So, NEP-2020 focused on the establishment of colleges and universities in underserved areas, emphasizing distance learning and online education, providing financial assistance such as scholarships, low-cost education, etc., to girls for preventing dropout due to financial constraints.

(ii) Multidisciplinary education system

Previously, women were lagging in subjects related to science and technology, and their participation was only limited to the humanities. The NEP-2020 starts a system termed as multidisciplinary education system in which students can take a combination of subjects from various disciplines such as science, arts and commerce. Students can take subjects according to their interests and satisfaction, which helps females to continue their active engagement in studies, and this indirectly prevents dropout. Multidisciplinary education system helps in women's empowerment and allows them to choose their career paths from diverse options according to their choice and interest.

(iii) Gender inclusion fund

The gender inclusion fund is the major decision taken in NEP-2020 for women's inclusion in the education system. These funds provide subsidised education for women by expanding women's hostels, providing digital devices to women, and bicycles for transportation. It focused on the women who belong to marginalised groups, such as women from rural underserved areas, low income families, etc. It addresses the issue of transportation barriers, safety and poverty. This fund aims to build safe infrastructure for girls, such as hostels, sanitation facilities, and safety equipment in higher education institutions. It aims to provide equity in higher education and reduce gender inequality.

(iv) Online education system

NEP-2020 emphasize online education system by which anyone can access education from anywhere,

and women from rural areas can continue their studies from home, so that they don't have to drop out of the system due to distance, safety, and family duties or other responsibilities. Digital learning includes women from underserved areas and those who cannot travel to cities for higher studies. Through the online education system, students can reduce transport and accommodation costs for higher studies. This policy encourages online education infrastructure in institutions and the inclusion of learning resources. Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing (DIKSHA) and Study Webs of Active-Learning for Young Aspiring Minds (SWAYAM) provide online education and study resources for free. These platforms also help to access various global educational resources.

(v) Financial support

This policy focuses on providing financial support to women to enhance their participation in higher education by providing various scholarship facilities in undergraduate level, postgraduate level and in research, such as post-matric scholarship, single-girl child scholarship, Progati scholarships for girls, All India Council of Technical Education (AICTE) fellowships, UGC fellowships, etc. To prevent dropout due to financial constraints and encourage enrolment in higher studies, it ensures financial aid for females who belong to rural areas and economically disadvantaged groups. It stimulates funds for women's research thorough involvement of the National Research Foundation. This policy also starts the National Scholarship Portal (NSP), by which anyone can find and apply for the eligible scholarships for themselves.

(vi) Enhancing the women's participation in STEM

NEP-2020 focuses on women's participation in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM). Previously, women's participation was extremely low in these fields. This policy stimulates their participation by ensuring women's fellowships for research in science and technology, encouraging scientists' programs for female students, coding learning programmes for girls, encouraging women-led projects, stimulating both online and offline learning modes, encouraging women mentorship programs in STEM fields, and

focusing on the women-supportive institutional activities on campus. These steps focus on women's empowerment through science and technology.

(vii) Security and safety infrastructure

Safety is one of the important concerns for female participation in higher education. Due to safety issues, many women situated in rural, underserved areas are not willing to continue their higher studies. To enhance safety infrastructure, NEP-2020 enhances transport facilities for girls, ensures separate women's toilets, child-care facilities, security cameras, Grievance redressal cells, hostels for girls and Women Development cells, strengthens the anti-harassment policies, and ensures safety in field survey and research labs, etc.

(viii) Encouraging women in research

NEP-2020 stimulates women's participation in the M.Phil and Ph.D programme. This policy emphasises the fellowship for women researchers, providing innovation grants, etc. This will lead to enhanced women's participation in research and development in science and the humanities. The National Research Foundation (NRF), proposed by NEP-2020, provides funding for high-quality research in various disciplines, which supports equal opportunity for all. It also ensures the flexibility in re-entering after career gaps in research.

(ix) Multiple entry and exit system

NEP-2020 starts multiple entry and exit system, through which any woman who left their studies before due to marriage, family responsibilities, financial constraints, etc., without harming their academic progress, can re-enter college later. This system helps in reducing dropouts in higher education specially for women. In this system, in undergraduate programs, anyone leave after one year of study will get a certificate, then, in the same way, those who leave after two years, three years, and four years will get a diploma, bachelor's degree and bachelor's degree with research certificate, respectively. This system supports lifelong learning according to convenience.

LIMITATIONS OF NEP-2020

Despite the various steps taken in NEP-2020 to encourage women's participation in higher

education, some loopholes still exist in the policy, which are as follows:-

NEP-2020 focuses on inclusive education for all, irrespective of caste, religion, and gender, etc. The implementation of the targeted procedures depends on both the central and state governments. But it is a fact that many state governments are facing economic and administrative barriers to follow the process. In rural areas, patriarchal society restricts women from pursuing their higher education (Sardar and Paria, 2023). In rural areas, parents want to invest in their sons but not in their daughters. Due to marriage and family responsibilities female cannot continue their higher studies. NEP-2020 does not consider these cultural and social barriers. Without micro-level intervention, these problems cannot be removed.

A study by Sarder and Paria (2023) found that Indian women are less likely to have personal mobile phones or laptops, or they are jointly used by the family. During the pandemic, education was served online only. So, during that time, many women had to discontinue their studies due to a lack of technical devices. NEP-2020 neglect the importance of inclusion of digital devices for women. Women from rural areas are not permitted to continue their studies due to the lack of safety and harassment issues in co-educational colleges and universities (Paihar *et al.* 2022). Though NEP-2020 focused on women's safety, the specified gender sensorial policies are missing.

NEP-2020 does not specifically take the initiative to uplift women's participation in leadership roles. Women who belong to SC, ST and OBC and are from rural areas are still excluded from the system due to cultural beliefs, language barriers and economic constraints. NEP-2020 fails to fill this gap directly.

CONCLUSION

NEP-2020 acts as a stimulus to women's participation in higher education. It tries to remove the barriers to women's participation by modifying the existing education system. It provides some mechanism that tries to foster equity, access, flexibility, quality, skill development, digital learning and research. Due to financial and cultural barriers such as early marriages, family responsibilities, patriarchy, etc., women cannot continue their higher studies. NEP-

2020 addresses these issues by taking remarkable initiatives such as a multidisciplinary education system, Gender Inclusion Fund, online education system, and enhanced women's participation in STEM subjects, as well as scholarships for higher education. The policy also ensures the women's safety and security in higher education, building women's hostels, providing transport facilities, etc. Though the various initiatives, this policy also has some limitations, as the gap between formulation and implementation exists.

The policy implementation depends on both the state and central government participation. The road between formulation and implementation is very complex. This policy pays attention to online education. But, indeed, many women do not have digital devices in rural areas. Without digital inclusion, women's online education is not achievable. In rural areas, parents want to invest in their sons only and neglect their daughters. Without the progressive mindset, only policy cannot enhance their participation. Local government should take initiatives for changing this mindset towards educating their daughters.

Moreover, NEP (2020) takes remarkable steps to empower women, and it has the power to enhance women's participation in higher education. But without the social and cultural awareness, irrespective of all religion, caste, and gender, the objectives of this policy will not be achieved. To make a gender-equal society, policy implementation should be taken care of by both the state and the central government, as well as educational institutions.

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