

Women's Empowerment and Education: The NEP 2020 Perspective

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Abstract-- Many individuals in our country are unaware of the positive impact that a female child's right to an education will have on people's lives. People from all socioeconomic backgrounds think that paying for a girl child's education is a waste of money, which is a tragic situation. The fact that they are willing to challenge the cost of their daughter's dowry or bridal expenses rather than funding her education is even more disappointing. It is critical that society honors and acknowledges the importance of education for girls. By 2035, the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in higher education is expected to have nearly doubled from 26.3% in 2018 to 50%, according to the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

The NEP also emphasizes education for all, equity and inclusivity, and creating plans to empower women via education. It is encouraging to see that 2.07 crore women, or 48% of the total enrollment, were enrolled in higher education in 2021–2022. Compared to 1.88 crore in 2019–20, this is an increase. Since 2017–18, women have benefited from a higher education gender ratio (GER). The GER for women in 2020–21 was 27.9, little higher than the GER for males (26.7). In light of this, this essay addresses the position of women in Indian higher education.

Keywords-- Higher education, Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups, Gross Enrollment Ratio, Gender Ratio.

I. INTRODUCTION

India is expected to have the world's highest working-age population by 2030, yet finding general stream students economically viable job possibilities is a significant obstacle. Enhancing students' employability requires educational support and a new viewpoint. The NEP-2020 states that all educational institutions should progressively incorporate vocational education programs into their regular curriculum. Furthermore, all bachelor's degree programs including the four-year multidisciplinary bachelor's programs are expected to provide vocational courses to participating students, according to NEP-2020.

II. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the role of women's access to higher education in reducing socio-economic inequalities and promoting sustainable national development.

2. To analyze the provisions of NEP-2020 aimed at enhancing equity and inclusion for women, particularly those belonging to Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs).
3. To identify the major barriers faced by women in accessing and completing higher education, including social, cultural, financial, and institutional challenges.
4. To propose recommendations for ensuring universal and equitable access to quality higher education for women, aligned with the goals of NEP-2020.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study is based on secondary sources viz. Government reports, internet sources, etc.

IV. DISCUSSIONS

Access to education, irrespective of gender, is essential for students to achieve their learning goals and for any nation to progress sustainably. For women, in particular, access to high-quality postsecondary education opens doors to opportunities that help them break cycles of inequality and disadvantage. Higher education enables women to enhance their skills, secure better livelihoods, participate confidently in decision-making, and contribute meaningfully to social and economic development.

Recognizing this, the NEP-2020 places strong emphasis on ensuring **equitable access to quality education** for all learners, especially those from Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). Within this framework, women and girls who often face layered barriers such as social norms, financial constraints, early marriage, and safety concerns are a key priority.

From a women's education perspective, NEP-2020:

- Seeks to eliminate gender gaps in enrollment, retention, and completion at the higher education level.
- Promotes targeted support systems, including scholarships, hostels, transportation, and mentorship programs, to address socio-cultural and economic barriers faced by women.



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- Encourages flexible learning pathways, such as online and open distance learning, which particularly benefit women who balance education with work or family responsibilities.
- Supports women's participation in STEM, research, entrepreneurship, and leadership, creating pathways for them to excel in fields where they have been historically underrepresented.

- Emphasises safe and inclusive campus environments, enabling women to pursue their education without fear or discrimination.

Thus, by ensuring equitable access to high-quality higher education, the NEP-2020 not only empowers women individually but also strengthens families, communities, and the nation as a whole. Women's education becomes a transformative force that advances social justice, promotes gender equality, and fosters long-term sustainable development.

V. WOMEN EDUCATION IN INDIA

Literacy Rates in India

(Comparison of male and female literacy rates since 1951)

Year	Total	Male	Female	Differential
1951	18.33	27.16	8.86	18.30
1961	28.30	40.40	15.35	25.05
1971	34.45	45.95	21.97	23.98
1981	43.57	56.38	29.76	26.62
1991	52.21	64.13	39.29	24.84
2001	65.38	75.85	54.16	21.69
2011	72.98	80.9	64.63	16.27
2021	74.04	82.14	65.46	16.68

Educated women can play an important role in the development of the country, and the economic growth of the country will significantly improve after educating women, especially in developing countries like India where the literacy rates of women are far less than men. The lack of proper resources is the main reason for the imbalances in literacy rates.

Education is not limited to just knowledge from books but can also be obtained through practical experiences outside of the classroom.

- To acquire systematic knowledge
- To boost our self-confidence
- To improve professional and personal development

- To grow into a magnificent citizen in society with a solid education
- To make wise choices of decisions throughout our life
- To increase Human Resources
- To become economic independent

By 2030, India will claim the largest working-age population in the world, however securing economically viable employment opportunities for general stream students is a major challenge.

VI. OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION UNDER NEP-2020

1. Enhanced Access to Quality Higher Education

NEP-2020 emphasizes universal access, ensuring that women including those from rural, tribal, and low-income backgrounds can enroll in top-quality institutions. Expansion of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), increased GER targets, and establishment of new multidisciplinary universities create more seats and opportunities for women to pursue diverse programmes.

2. Increased Participation Through Financial Support

The policy promotes financial assistance such as:

- Scholarships for women from SEDGs
- Fee waivers
- Support for hostel facilities

This helps remove economic barriers, making higher education more accessible and reducing dropout rates among women.

3. Flexible Learning Pathways

The introduction of flexible, multiple-entry multiple-exit systems (ME-ME) and the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) enables women to:

- Pause and resume education
- Balance family responsibilities and learning
- Choose learning at their own pace

Online and open-distance learning modes also expand access for women unable to attend full-time, campus-based programs.

4. Opportunities in STEM, Research, and Innovation

NEP-2020 promotes women's participation in:

- STEM sectors
- Research and innovation ecosystems
- Incubation centers and start-up support systems

Special mentorship, bridge courses, and outreach programs encourage women to enter fields where they are historically underrepresented.

5. Development of Employable Skills

Women benefit from the policy's emphasis on:

- Vocational education
- Digital literacy and emerging technologies
- Entrepreneurship training
- Soft skills and communication skills

These improve women's employability and support their entry into the formal workforce.

6. Safe and Inclusive Learning Environments

NEP-2020 mandates:

- Gender-sensitive infrastructure
- Secure hostels and campuses
- Strong anti-harassment mechanisms

Such measures provide women with safe spaces that encourage continuity in education.

7. Leadership and Governance Roles

More opportunities are created for women to assume:

- Academic leadership positions
- Administrative responsibilities
- Participation in institutional decision-making

This helps build a pipeline of women leaders in academia and beyond.

8. Promotion of Women's Entrepreneurship

Women can access:

- Start-up ecosystems within universities
- Incubation centers
- Innovation labs
- Financial and mentorship support

This promotes economic independence and encourages women to establish enterprises.

9. Lifelong Learning Opportunities

The policy promotes continuous learning through:

- Short-term certification programs
- Modular courses
- Professional development offerings

These support career transitions, upskilling, and long-term professional growth for women.

10. Social Empowerment and Increased Agency

Higher education creates opportunities for women to:

- Participate actively in civic spaces
- Engage in community leadership
- Make informed decisions regarding their health, finances, and careers

This leads to overall empowerment and contributes to gender equality in society.

VII. CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN IN HIGHER EDUCATION

1. Socio-Cultural Barriers

Deep-rooted social norms and gender stereotypes continue to influence educational choices for girls and women.

- Early marriage
- Preference for boys' education
- Restrictive family expectations

These factors limit women's ability to pursue and complete higher education.

2. Economic Constraints

Many women, especially those from SEDGs, face financial challenges such as:

- Inability to afford tuition fees
- Lack of resources for books, transport, and digital tools
- Economic pressure to join the workforce early

These constraints lead to lower enrollment and higher dropout rates.

3. Limited Mobility and Safety Concerns

Safety issues, especially in rural and semi-urban areas, discourage families from sending young women to distant colleges.

Challenges include:

- Unsafe public transport
- Lack of secure hostels
- Incidents of harassment

This restricts women's access to good institutions.

4. Digital Divide

NEP-2020 promotes online and blended learning, but:

- Limited access to smartphones or laptops
- Poor internet connectivity

- Low digital literacy among women Create significant barriers to participation in digital education platforms.

5. Underrepresentation in STEM and Research

Despite policy emphasis, women's representation in STEM courses, research, and innovation remains low due to:

- Lack of role models
- Gender bias in subject choices
- Limited encouragement from families and schools

This restricts women's participation in high-demand, high-paying fields.

6. Institutional Bias and Gender Insensitivity

Some higher education institutions still lack:

- Gender-sensitive policies
- Adequate grievance redressal mechanisms
- Female faculty mentors
- Gender-inclusive infrastructure

These create an unwelcoming environment that affects women's academic participation and retention.

7. Balancing Academic and Domestic Responsibilities

Women often carry a disproportionate burden of household work and caregiving, making it difficult to:

- Attend regular classes
- Participate in campus activities
- Pursue research or internships

This limits their academic and career advancement.

8. Limited Awareness of NEP-2020 Schemes

Many women, families, and institutions are unaware of the targeted support and opportunities provided under NEP-2020, such as:

- Scholarships
- Flexible learning pathways
- Vocational and digital skill programs

This reduces the effectiveness of policy implementation.

9. Inadequate Infrastructure and Facilities

In many colleges, women still face challenges such as:

- Insufficient sanitation facilities
- Lack of childcare services

- Limited safe transportation
- Absence of women's common rooms

These hinder a conducive and comfortable learning environment.

10. Gender Gap in Academic Leadership

Women are still underrepresented in academic governance and leadership positions. Structural barriers and unconscious bias reduce opportunities for women to:

- Become principals, deans, or administrators
- Influence institutional decision-making

This impacts overall gender sensitivity in institutional policies.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Access to quality higher education plays a transformative role in empowering women, promoting social justice, and advancing national development. The NEP-2020, with its strong focus on equity and inclusion, offers significant opportunities for expanding women's participation in higher education. Through provisions such as flexible learning pathways, financial support, safe campus environments, and enhanced access to STEM and vocational fields, the policy aims to dismantle long-standing barriers and create a more inclusive academic ecosystem for women. However create a more inclusive academic ecosystem for women.

Regardless of these promising reforms, women continue to face several challenges rooted in socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, digital divides, safety concerns, and limited institutional support.

These challenges hinder their ability to fully benefit from the opportunities that NEP-2020 envisions. Addressing these gaps requires coordinated efforts from government bodies, educational institutions, families, and communities to ensure that the policy's goals translate into real progress on the ground.

Strengthening awareness, improving infrastructure, fostering gender-sensitive practices, and promoting leadership among women are essential steps toward achieving true equity in higher education. When women gain meaningful access to higher education, they not only uplift themselves but also contribute to the advancement of families, communities, and the nation as a whole. Thus, ensuring equitable access to quality higher education for women is not only a policy priority but also a critical investment in India's sustainable and inclusive future.

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