

# Empowering Women through Education: A Study of India's New Education Policy (NEP 2020)

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## ABSTRACT

Since time immemorial, education has been found to contribute towards the cause of promoting gender equality and women empowerment. As a country with centuries of history of given social hierarchies and patriarchal customs that curtailed women with access to education, National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a milestone in reforms that seek to instigate inclusivity, equity, and empowerment. This scholarly research paper reviews the relationship between women empowerment and education in the form of a critical analysis of NEP 2020. It evaluates the role of the provisions in the policy, gender inclusion fund, skill development, digital literacy, and flexible learning paths in addressing the long-existing gender gaps in the country and the empowerment of women to be involved in all sectors of national development.

The research article puts the education of women into the conceptual and historical context by not only tracking the evolution of education movements as early as in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but also more recently into the policy interventions. It argues, based on theoretical constructs such as those of Amartya Sen in his Capability Approach, the Human capital theory and feminist arguments, that education is not a source of economic development but a process of expanding the freedom, agency and leadership capacity of women. However, the socio-cultural resistance and economic constraint, shortage of infrastructure and digital disparity are encounters that challenge the implementation of the NEP 2020 vision. This paper posits that convertible policy intention into actual results requires successful implementation, local involvement, and institutional responsiveness. Ultimately, NEP 2020 proves to be a progressive policy of educating women, an idea of transforming learning into a right and an agent of change, and national development.

**Keywords-**Women Empowerment, Education, NEP 2020, Gender Equality, Capability Approach, Inclusive Education

## INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, education has been regarded as one of the pillars of the social progress and human development (UNESCO, 2020). It is not merely an instrument of attaining knowledge but is a revolutionary process in which individual possibility and group development is ascertained. Even when viewed as gender equality, education holds a dominant role of enabling women to claim their rights and be active in decision making and contribute a significant role in the development of the country (Kabeer, 1999; Sen, 1999). The policy transformations have played a central role in shaping the relationships between genders and promoting inclusion-based development in India, where the social and economic distinction was traditionally limiting the accessibility of education by women (Tilak, 2021). A National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, in which the whole emphasis is made on equity, inclusion, and empowerment, is one of such reforms and a historic moment in the history of education in India, where women are in the center of the process (Government of India, 2020).

The empowerment of women through education has been a strong issue coming out strongly in the discourse on developmental goals of India since independence. The Indian Constitution also grants non-discrimination before the law (Article 14) and is indicative against gender-based discrimination (Article 15) (Government of India, 1950). Education has been seen to be the most appropriate instrument in the direction of these constitutional ideals (Bhat & Joshi, 2022). The policies that were adopted on gaining independence such as the National Policy

on Education (1968, 1986 and 1992 revision) formed the basis of the rise in access and quality of education (Chakraborty, 2019). Still, even though the rates of female literacy increased by an astounding degree, since 8.9 percent in 1951 to nearly 70 percent in 2021, the inequality remains significant, especially with rural and marginalized communities (National Statistical Office [NSO], 2021). The impact of the social norms, economic factor, and structural disparity is still the underrepresentation of the role of women in higher education, technicality, and leadership (Bhat and Joshi, 2022; UNESCO, 2020).

The NEP 2020 development took shape at the time when the Indian educational system was facing the challenges related to the outdated curricula, rote learning, inability to be employed, and inequality (Kumar, 2021). This policy is a comprehensive vision of transforming India into a knowledge society, which was introduced more than three decades ago (Government of India, 2020). It is grounded on the overall development, learning adaptability, digital access, and gender and socio-economic equality (MHRD, 2020). In women, NEP 2020 provides them with new opportunities to be empowered through the training skills, digital literacy, professional training, and leaders (NCERT, 2021). The policy will eliminate barriers to women educational attainment and professional growth through the propagation of a gender-recognized curriculum and the development of a Gender Inclusion Fund, and it will also motivate women to enroll in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) (Government of India, 2020). The issue of women empowerment and education has been analyzed by scholars and policymakers (Kabeer, 1999; Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011). Education will help to prepare women to make more informed decisions, it will raise their socio-economic status, and it will cause a more complete social change (World Bank, 2018). Empowered women will allocate more resources to healthcare and education services of their families, which will lead to an empowerment and development cycle (UNESCO, 2020). Capability Approach created by Amartya Sen is of the opinion that education accelerates human liberty by broadening capabilities of individuals and this is where the NEP 2020 objectives were founded (Sen, 1999). In the same vein, the feminist theorists view education as an instrument to challenge the patriarchal systems, and also to promote gender justice (Kumar, 2021). In this type of system, such aspects of NEP 2020 as gender sensitivity can be considered a policy change, yet a socio-cultural change is even greater (Tilak, 2021).

The significance of education as the empowerment pillar of women is justified by the fact that India is bound to the international systems such as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) particularly Goal 4 (Quality Education) and Goal 5 (Gender Equality) (United Nations, 2015). These objectives are quite in line with NEP 2020 as it targets to provide inclusive and equitable education to everyone (UNESCO, 2020). The policy envisions a system of education that will empower the learners to be responsible citizens and solve the access, affordability and equality problems (Government of India, 2020). The introduction of a new regulation, such as the flexible learning pathways, adult literacy, and creating skills in women, is a positive step, and the attainment of the gender-just society vision (Bhat and Joshi, 2022). However, even though NEP 2020 offers a good theoretical framework in women empowerment, one of the remaining problems is how the policy can be translated into a practice. Strong patriarchal principles, economic disparities, and digital disparities and insufficiency in infrastructure are also barriers to the success of these initiatives (Tilak, 2021; World Bank, 2018). Still, there are rather numerous rural women experiencing such challenges as early marriage, the lack of transport topics, and discriminatory attitude towards them in schools and places of work (Chakraborty, 2019). These obstacles warrant the need to design not only inclusive policies but to make them effective through community involvement and institutional and institutional accountability, and through certain interventions (NCERT, 2021). More so, the aspect of empowerment issue must be considered as a multidimensional process. It is not only economic self-reliance but also enhancement of self-esteem, social status as well as decision making power (Kabeer, 1999). Women also have the power to become agents of this process because they can be given skills, knowledge and confidence to be capable of breaking the gender norms and being able to participate fully in the sphere of the society (Nussbaum, 2011). NEP 2020 empowers women with the tools of working in a rapidly changing world which allows them to take charge of their personal and professional lives since it encourages critical thinking, creativity, and lifelong learning (MHRD, 2020).

Women education is a developmental requirement as well as a social justice in a society such as India, a multicultural society (Sen, 1999). Strong women are very instrumental in the process of developing families, society and the country at large. On one occasion Jawaharlal Nehru said that one can analyze what is going on a country by looking at what is happening with the women (Nehru, as cited in Bhat and Joshi, 2022). NEP 2020

acknowledges this fact and is aimed at eliminating gender gaps by providing an equal opportunity (Government of India, 2020). Its inclusivity, multidisciplinary learning and use of technology involve a transformation of the outdated and unchanging systems into a more flexible and inclusive learning model (Kumar, 2021). This policy recognizes the reality that empowerment of women is not just a morally correct action to undertake but also a national development investment (UNESCO, 2020). Therefore, this research paper aims to answer the interrelation between education and women empowerment as regards NEP 2020 in India. It examines how the policy brings back the intent of education as a transformative force and an aspect to gender equality. It is upon this theoretical perspectives and policy analysis that the paper has been founded to reveal the potential of NEP 2020 in contributing to the enhancement of women education, capacity building and redressing the existing issues. It attempts to pay the conceptual tribute on how education can be utilized both the process and end of empowering women so that they may be able to realize their potential and contribute to the creation of a just and progressive society.

### **Conceptual and Historical Context of Women's Education and Empowerment:**

Women empowerment is a multidimensional analysis that suggests the opportunity to expand the options of women to make the strategic choices of life and investigate the domination of the personal, social and economic conditions in the world (Kabeer, 1999). It means freedom of thought, possibility of involvement and taking part in the decision making at any level. It has been acknowledged that education is the most significant tool of social change that empowers women as they provide them with confidence, awareness, and skills that allow them to become self-reliant and equal (UNESCO, 2015). It is in the process of education that women can achieve an intellectual ability to question the old tradition, toil and even contribute to the overall development of the society. Empowerment then is not a future endeavor but a change process that would culminate to gender justice and inclusive development (Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender, 2002).

Other theoretical approaches have been applied to the concept of empowerment. The feminist theory relates the meaning of destroying the patriarchal system that holds the agency and independence of women (hooks, 2000). It considers education as a way of raising awareness and in the process, women would be capable of breaking the chain of command and even demand independence (Freire, 1972). On this concept, Amartya Sen developed the Capability Approach, which rests on this notion and holds that the development should be measured in terms of capabilities of individuals and true freedom they can have depending on the type of life they cherish (Sen, 1999). It is in this perspective that education expands the opportunities of women in addition to improving their social and economic freedom. On the same note, the Human Capital Theory is used to clarify the fact that investment in education of women results in high productivity, health, and increased family welfare (Becker, 1993). The combination of these perceptions is reason enough to conclude that education is not only at the core of individual empowerment of women but also in nation building (Nussbaum, 2000).

The Indian education has also changed very much in terms of the number of women. The primitive India respected the women and they were able to attend learning institutions like gurukuls. The examples of such women in the philosophical discourse of the Vedic period are Gargi and Maitreyi who represent the intellectual aspect of women (Chakrabarti, 2017). Nevertheless, social forces like purdah, child marriage and caste did not give women enough chances to be educated and limited and confined them to the house during the medieval age (Sharma, 2013). Education of women was virtually or literally wiped out and this represented the general degrading of the social status.

Included with these came the challenges that opportunities of the colonial period brought. The female education began with the British missionaries and the Indian social reformers and included Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jyotiba Phule and Savitribai Phule (Desai and Thakkar, 2001). Girls schools were introduced in the middle of the nineteenth century, and it proved to be a turning point. The reformers understood that without women education, the evils existing in the society were impossible to be eradicated and the attainment of the moral progress were unattainable (Chaudhuri, 2005). However, it remained as the right of the city elites and the gender prejudices remained to be a rather powerful reality. The education of women became the national priority during the independence of India in 1947. Equal rights were ensured under the Indian Constitution (1950) (Government of India, 1950) and Kothari Commission (1964/66) maintained that education

helped to bring social equality (Ministry of Education, 1966). The National Policy on Education, which opened an opening to education was instated in 1968 and later with plans specifically directed to girls like free text books, mid-day meals and hostels (Government of India, 1986, 1992). These initiatives propounded huge impact on women literacy although disparity in enrolment, retention and quality were still pronounced particularly in rural and poor societies (Nair, 2009).

This also led to the early twenty first century when education has changed as a result of globalization and technology advancement. Equality and education that were universal was also guaranteed by the government through the education of girls and women, including Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2001) and Beti Bachao, beti Padhao (2015) (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2015). Nevertheless, the problem of dropout rate, security, digital divide, and choice of vocation opportunities is so tenacious that it was impossible to introduce a more decisive and all-encompassing framework. This situation led to the creation of New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 according to which education has been redefined as flexible, holistic, and equitable (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Such a historical and conceptual development of the woman education in India brings about a twist but also a tremendous change in the process of exclusion and marginalization into the process of recognizing and inclusion. All the phases are the refraction of the cultural, political and economical influences on the role of women in the society. Education has been turned into a right to a select few people to a constitutional right and an instrument of empowerment (Tilak, 2020). This process cannot however be exhaustive without the long term endeavors to make access, quality and outcome equal (Nussbaum, 2011).

### **Overview of the New Education Policy (NEP 2020):**

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a new landmark in the history of Indian education as it is the first multi-dimensional policy framework to be presented in the country in over 30 years (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020). It was adopted by the Union Cabinet, July 29, 2020, replacing the National Policy on Education (1986), and has a 21 st century visionary agenda. According to the concept of creating a fair and successful knowledge society, NEP 2020 is postulated to make education more holistic, flexible, multidisciplinary, and inclusive and based on the needs of the fast-evolving world (MoE, 2020; Tilak, 2021). It focuses on forming creative and critical minds that will be capable of being involved in nation-building without depriving all people regardless of gender, region, and socio-economic status of equal opportunities to a good education (Singh and Purohit, 2021).

The key values of NEP 2020 are predetermined by access, equity, quality, affordability, accountability, and determined by the constitutional vision of equality and justice (Government of India, 1950). One of its main components is the learner-centered one that substitutes rote memorization with experience-based, inquiry-based, and competency-based learning (MoE, 2020; Kumar and Dash, 2021). The policy embraces 5+3+3+4 curriculum structure which illustrates the levels of child developmental cognitive levels namely foundational, preparatory, middle and secondary levels as an alternative to the conventional 10+2 system. On the school level, NEP 2020 proposes the changes that would lead to inclusion and low dropout rates in particular girls and vulnerable populations (MoE, 2020; Reddy, 2021). It highlights the necessity of access to education at the level of secondary education and introduces vocational education since Grade 6 to build functional skills and employability (Srivastava, 2022). It is also recommended that there should be gender-sensitive learning opportunities, high-protective school environments, and learning opportunities that enable no child to be left behind (UNESCO, 2021). Notably, the policy suggests establishing a Gender Inclusion Fund, a particular program that will allow distributing resources to the education of girls and transgender students, particularly in disadvantaged socio-economically deprived regions (MoE, 2020; Gupta, 2022).

In tertiary education, NEP 2020 results in the transformation of the whole system in the area of flexibility, interdisciplinarity, and innovation. It is an interdisciplinary approach which involves creating gigantic institutions of higher education with large resources and integrating higher education and research (Tilak, 2020). One of the major innovations is the introduction of a four-year undergraduate degree with a number of exit options, the creation of an Academic Bank of Credits (ABC), and the promotion of online and open learning

(MoE, 2020). The policy aids women to join higher education by developing access to scholarships, expanding residential amenities, and gender balance of leadership and faculty (Kumar, 2021). Moreover, it is concerned with research and innovation, creating the National Research Foundation (NRF) that will fund and coordinate disciplinary research, such as gender studies and women development (MoE, 2020; Rao, 2021).

Digital education is another potential that NEP 2020 has recognised as the strong equaliser. The policy proposes developing the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF) which will stimulate the use of digital tools in the realm of teaching and learning and administration (MoE, 2020; Sharma, 2022). To the women and most especially those in rural and remote areas, this online attention is providing them with the never before opportunities to receive education beyond the traditional classroom. Online courses, blended learning as well as the distance education programs have previously excluded women in the education system but now women are able to enter the system once again and enhance their skills (Bhattacharya, 2021).

The main aspect of NEP 2020 is the fact that it is in conformity with international systems, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 4 and SDG 5), which imply the existence of inclusive and equitable quality education and gender equality (United Nations, 2015; UNESCO, 2020). The policy emphasizes on the fact that education is the powerhouse to empowerment and sustainable development. It imagines the change of the education system in India to be input and quantity-based to outcome based, quality based, and developments towards humans (Tilak, 2021). Gender equality is not a peripheral part of this vision but is used as a guide to it (Gupta and Sinha, 2021).

Furthermore, the policy is aimed at the professional development of the teachers since the key to the quality of education. It suggests a life long learning, merit-based career progression, and gender pedagogy (Reddy, 2021). The founding of teacher education universities, and leadership programmes among women teachers demonstrates that the policy has the interests of building the capacity and improving inclusion at any point (MoE, 2020).

Overall, NEP 2020 is a fresh start in the Indian educational philosophy, and it is the philosophy that perceives education as the best instrument of achieving social change and empowerment (Tilak, 2020). It integrates the conservative Indian culture with the existing pedagogical practices that also render the learning grounded and futuristic (Kumar and Dash, 2021). The prioritization of gender inclusion, skills development, need to be digitally literate, and lifelong learning serve as the basis of empowering women with an education. It again proves the fact that opportunity can and should be linked to the power, which is only possible when education becomes the mediator between the former and the latter (MoE, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

### **Advancing Women's Education and Empowerment in the Light of NEP 2020:**

Education is not a new concept as one of the strongest instruments of women empowerment and gender equality in the society (UNESCO, 2015). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 supports this revolutionary vision and makes education semi-annual to break the intergenerational cycle of inequality and allow women to play an active role in social, economic, and political life (Government of India, 2020). It argues that female empowerment should not only be the focus on literacy or educational attainment, but also the focus on self-expression and agency, confidence, leadership, and critical thinking, which enables women to make informed decisions (Kumar and Sharma, 2021). The non-discriminatory nature of the policy provides globally access to quality education and as such, it corrects gender disparities that are rife throughout the schooling levels. Not only does education as envisaged by NEP 2020 equip women with employable knowledge, it also instills self-esteem, independence as well as social awareness, which will enable women to play a significant role in national development (National Education Policy, 2020). Particular attention is paid to early childhood care and education (ECCE), which is particularly vital among girls because of establishing an initial literacy and numeracy base and avoiding the early dropout caused by the lack of learning and understanding of social limitations (NITI Aayog, 2021).

Gender inclusion is among the most progressive aspects of NEP 2020, which is based on structural and policy-level interventions. The purpose of the Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) introduction is to eradicate the structural

dysfunctions that limit girls in their access to education, especially in Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and economically disadvantaged groups (Ministry of Education, 2020). This fund will provide equal access by enhancing infrastructure, offering scholarships, and offering safe and inclusive learning environments. The policy also supports the creation of Gender Sensitization Cells at schools and colleges to support awareness, safety, and inclusivity (Singh, 2021). They are aimed at fighting stereotypes and providing an environment of respect and equality, and a flexible entry and exit policy in the higher education sector especially helps women, who cannot pursue their careers because of marriage and family issues (Government of India, 2020).

The other vital element of empowerment in NEP 2020 is the incorporation of vocational education and skill development in formal education. Starting in Grade 6, vocational subjects are introduced to students to enhance practical skills and make them more employable (Ministry of Education, 2020). To the women, particularly in rural and underserved areas, this reform brings opportunities of economic independence and self-employment. Innovation, confidence, and leadership can be further developed in women owing to the emphasis on entrepreneurship education (Kapur and Mehta, 2022). At the same time, the focus of the policy on digital learning and technology-based education with the help of such initiatives as the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF) opens up versatile opportunities to women who cannot afford to attend traditional institutions (National Education Policy, 2020). Open and distance learning programs enable women to receive higher education or remodel themselves and still devote time to their families or social obligations (Chaudhary, 2021).

At the tertiary level, NEP 2020 sees a multidisciplinary, inclusive and research-based academic space that encourages women to be involved in innovation and leadership (Government of India, 2020). The establishment of the National Research Foundation (NRF) opens up more possibilities of women scholars to undertake advanced research studies in various fields, such as gender studies, education, and social development (Kapur and Mehta, 2022). The policy also emphasizes the balance between the genders in faculty recruitment and institutional governance as well as mentorship programs of future women academicians and administrators (Ministry of Education, 2020). NEP 2020 aims to equip women with creativity, partnership, and leadership qualities to assume active roles in governance, science, entrepreneurship, and technology and thereby support Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) (United Nations, 2015) goals across the globe.

Actions In a nutshell, NEP 2020 does not consider women empowerment as an incidental development but rather, it entrenches it as one of the fundamental tenets of its teaching philosophy. The policy allows women to go beyond the socio-cultural limits and restructure their positions in society by providing them with inclusive and flexible learning opportunities, skill integration, and digital access (Kumar and Sharma, 2021). Besides, NEP 2020 directly leads to national development, as well as social change, by increasing women access to education and job opportunities. Strong women are agents of transformation who propagate health, literacy and civic engagement in their societies. Therefore, the policy restates that education is not only the process of knowledge transfer but a dynamic power source of equality, empowerment, and sustainable development (Government of India, 2020; UNESCO, 2015).

### **Education as a Catalyst for Women's Empowerment**

Education can be identified as one of the most significant motivating forces of social change, and in the example of women empowerment, it is unmatched (UNESCO, 2015). Not only does it enhance the capacity of a person but also it alters the attitudes and social arrangements which are still being suffered by gender inequality (Kabeer, 1999). India has been hindered by traditional patriarchal beliefs, ignorance and socio-economic aspects in empowering women (Bhattacharya, 2018). However, education is the column on which women will be conscious, assertive and self-reliant to break such limits. National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognizes this transformative force of learning and hopes to achieve a system that enables women to have an equal access, critical thinking and lifelong learning opportunities (Government of India, 2020).

Through education, women are able to possess the intellectual and emotional capabilities which they require to break the traditional gender roles and reclaim their own place in family and society (Sen, 1999). An educated woman not only leads to her own self-growth but she also influences her family, society and nation positively. The education would make her open her world and enforce her knowledge of her rights and belief in her

capability to be in the society and political life (Kumar & Sharma, 2021). As it is always determined, the education of women is highly associated with better health and fewer born children and higher education acquisition of their children, and this has intergenerational benefits (World Bank, 2018). That is why education is not only a means of acquiring skills, but transforms women to the change agents and leadres (UNESCO, 2015).

The NEP 2020 supports this vision as it dwells on inclusive and equitable education as the agent of social change (Government of India, 2020). It is a comprehensive system which integrates both the academic education with ethics, values and life skills to end up with confident and self-reliant women. The policy also authorizes women to access various academic and professional prospects and break the common occupational segregation by encouraging multidisciplinary and dynamic learning (NITI Aayog, 2021). In addition, its focus on vocational education, digital literacy, and entrepreneurship establishes a good foundation of women in the economic independence that is among the most critical empowerment agendas (Kapur and Mehta, 2022).

The other significant part of education as a source of empowerment is that it could lead to the psychological and social emancipation. This is because when women gain educational levels, they will be more capable of resisting discrimination and protecting their rights and they will make decisions in the society and at home (Chaudhary, 2021). Empowerment of the self-worth and identity aspects are built in the main pillars of empowerment through education and gender sensitivity and respect are cultivated through education since childhood (Nussbaum, 2011). The emphasis on gender-inclusive and value-oriented education offered by the NEP 2020 gives the possibility to establish the environment where the equality and mutual respect will be actively exercised and the girls and boys will be benefited (Government of India, 2020). It is a plan that empowers women, and at the same time redefines the approach of men towards shared responsibility in gender justice implementation.

Also, women and leadership/innovation avenues are mediated by education. The NEP 2020 favors the contribution of women in research and higher education and leadership through mentoring, awarding of scholarships and institutional change (Ministry of Education, 2020). Top female leaders can act as role models in times to come and contribute to the creation of the inclusive and gender-sensitive policies (Kumar & Sharma, 2021). The effects of this kind of ripple does not stop at an individual level of empowerment and growth but are also the solutions to changing the society and this is why education is a very important aspect of sustainable development.

Digital era has made education a more empowering tool that has no geographical and cultural limits. Online supported programs as well as distance learning are designed under NEP 2020 in accordance to provide flexibility to women who are constrained by household responsibilities or social constraints (Chaudhary, 2021). In its turn, digitization proves to be a successful form of empowerment, in that it gives women the tools to be engaged in the global knowledge economy and having the capacity to participate in the modern socio-political discourse (UNESCO, 2020).

Education is not only instrument of empowerment, but also a process through which women can be enabled to achieve their full human potential (Sen, 1999). It instills the agency, perseverance and self reliance qualities that are needed to negotiate and reform the social realities (Kabeer, 1999). The NEP 2020 is designed to ensure that all women, regardless of their background, can receive and enjoy the quality education due to its inclusive and holistic structure (Government of India, 2020). Through this means, it transforms education to a means of empowerment and a goal in itself, a change agent which enables and transforms the society towards equality and justice. Lastly, education as imagined by NEP 2020 turns into the agent that will allow the women to become the engines of the change and transform it into the long-term, equal, and transformative one (NITI Aayog, 2021; UNESCO, 2015).

### **Capacity Building and Skill Development**

Skills development and capacity building is the most critical part of women empowerment in the modern knowledge economy. Whereas awareness and empowerment are based on education, it is through the development of working skills and abilities that women can exercise their potential to the fullest and they can be able to actively participate in the social and economic life (Kabeer, 2012). This dynamic relationship is

recognized by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and is intended to decrease the connectivity divide within education and employability using skill-building across education levels (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020). The policy acknowledges that women should be empowered beyond the educational sector to a certain extent of preparing them with the skills they need to be able to contend with the emerging globalized economy, technological advancements, and the development of the local market (UNESCO, 2021).

The vision of NEP 2020 is a paradigm shift in the Indian education system and the concept of holistic, multidisciplinary, and skill-based approach. It also facilitates the implementation of the vocational education at the school level, as early as Grade 6, such that the students particularly girls would have an insight into different trades, crafts, and professions (MoE, 2020). The concept behind this introduction to the skills is to shatter the implicit gender barriers in the sector of work and to emulate girls to experience into domains that once saw males dominate e.g. in science, technology, engineering and entrepreneurship (NITI Aayog, 2021). By combining the classroom education with the real life, the policy promotes the experiential learning that develops problem-solving and creativity and adaptability as the crucial skills to women participation in the formal and informal economies (World Bank, 2022).

One of the biggest obstacles to women empowerment in India over the decades has been the low access to skill training and workplaces. In rural areas, women remain in unskilled and poorly paid positions due to their being not exposed to it, lack mobility, or financial freedom (Agarwal, 2018). NEP 2020 is addressing these concerns by promoting the idea of local-community-based education and vocational trainings, which, in most cases, are organized with the collaboration of local industries and non-government organizations (MoE, 2020). The rural and marginalized women particularly need these programs since they are offered literacy and they also undergo practical training so that they can become independent and economic members of the society (Bandyopadhyay and Subrahmanian, 2019). The entrepreneurship education also provides a focus of the said policy that involves women in the development of own businesses and even as participants in the economy not as employees alone but as innovators and leaders (NITI Aayog, 2021).

The capacity building concept contained in NEP 2020 is not restricted to any of the technical or vocational training. It entails extended delivery of intellectual, emotional and social capacity of the human potential. The policy enhances education in life skills that incorporates communication skills, financial literacy, digital literacy, critical thinking and leadership training (MoE, 2020). These are skills which can allow women to overcome social and professional challenges with courage. One such instance is that currently digital literacy is a necessity in post-pandemic society as most of the learning process, work, and business will be carried out online (UNESCO, 2021). NEP 2020 provides women with a chance to have access to learning materials and to acquire marketable skills, access to international knowledge networks, provided by the (MoE, 2020) in the form of the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF) and digital skills upgrading programs. This access implies that women can narrow the digital divide even in rural areas and be part of the knowledge society (World Bank, 2022).

Another area capacity building is connected with is professional development of women teachers and leaders. The focus of NEP 2020 will be on continuous training of teachers and leadership development courses, hence, the female teachers must have the same chances of promotion as the male ones (MoE, 2020). The empowerment of women teachers is amplified numerous times because they are role models and mentors of young girls and prompt them to proceed with the educational process and attain professionalism (Bandyopadhyay & Subrahmanian, 2019). The general ecosystem of women empowerment can be reinforced with education, organized training of women to enhance their pedagogical and administrative skills by establishing Teacher Education Universities and leadership academies (NITI Aayog, 2021).

In addition, social impacts of capacity building through education do not only limit to economic empowerment. It assists women to be empowered in the decision making process, governance, and development of the community (Kabeer, 2012). The policy ensures that women acquire the required confidence and competency to engage in civic life, advance equality and introduce revolution to the social life due to the value-based and inclusive education (UNESCO, 2021). The contrast is that educated and skilled women may be in a better place to influence the policy of their citizens, challenge the discriminatory practices, and spearhead the movements

towards change (Agarwal, 2018). Thus, the further evolution of the skill according to NEP 2020 will not be only the path to the livelihood but also to the active citizenship and leadership in the society.

In brief, the NEP 2020 takes into consideration capacity building and skill development as a lifelong process and young and professional as well as social capabilities of women. It puts emphasis on education not in the sense of academic performance but in the empowering in the literal meaning of the term as empowering to be independent, to be confident and active in attempting to develop the nation (MoE, 2020). By connecting the skills acquisition programs to the general aims of equality and inclusion, the policy opens the way to the new generation of women, who are not only well-educated but also empowered, creative, and strong. Lastly, capacity building and skill development is no longer a policy action, but a change strategy that has the potential to transform education into a reality of empowerment and progress.

### **Challenges in Realizing Women Empowerment through NEP 2020**

Although the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a revolutionary step to changing the Indian educational system and empowering the women, the realization of the goals is stifled by multidimensional issues. Even though the vision is progressive, the policy-to-practice translation is full of the need to resolve the issues of structural, social, and institutional barriers, which continue to stand on the way of women education development (Bandyopadhyay and Subrahmanian, 2019). These problems are multifaceted encompassing socio-cultural assumptions and monetary constraints to the infrastructural deficiencies and policy holes. In order to evaluate the level of successful application of NEP 2020 as a tool to empower women within the Indian environment, one must have a theoretical understanding of these issues (Kabeer, 2012).

The systemic socio-cultural limitations against access to education by girls and women are among the major barriers. Such a practice as patriarchy is still more common in some parts of India, where it is preferable to educate boys over girls (Agarwal, 2018). Early marriage, household obligations, and gender roles and expectations are some of the factors that lead to high female dropout rates, especially in high school and higher education (UNESCO, 2021). Although NEP 2020 is concerned with universal access and gender inclusion, the change in perceptions which cannot be achieved through the assistance of policy alone will become a significant factor to focus on the effectiveness of such initiatives (MoE, 2020). Cultural opposition, safety concerns, and the overall poor role models of females still make many families discourage their daughters to pursue higher education or professional training (World Bank, 2022).

The stutter of economic constraint is also a significant issue that prevents women empowerment by education. Lack of access to quality education particularly in disadvantaged and rural societies has been a major inhibitor to the poor people (Bandyopadhyay & Subrahmanian, 2019). Even though the education is not paid in reality, indirect expenses such as transportation, textbooks, uniforms, and internet connectivity might be unaffordable to many families (NITI Aayog, 2021). Even though NEP 2020 proposes to introduce the following mechanisms: scholarships, financial support, and the Gender Inclusion Fund, the significant problem is the implementation and equal distribution (MoE, 2020). Economic inequalities are also aggravated by regional ones because in rural and tribal areas, there is often an insufficiency of educational infrastructures and resources (UNESCO, 2021). Thus, the overlapping of the economic vulnerability and gender continues to exist, and the educational opportunity gap between women is continued to exist (Kabeer, 2012).

The other significant problem is associated with the infrastructural and institutional deficit. The majority of schools and colleges, especially in the rural regions lack minimum facilities to include safe sanitation system, transportation, and safe learning environments, which are essential in ensuring that the female students attend school and stay in school regularly (Agarwal, 2018). Girls are also disadvantaged on accessibility to education considering that there is scarcity of qualified teachers particularly women in the rural areas (Bandyopadhyay and Subrahmanian, 2019). NEP 2020 suggests infrastructure development and teacher-training initiatives, but very little has been implemented so far (MoE, 2020). The overall lack of effective monitoring procedures and the communication between the central and state government often results in the fragmented involvement that cannot produce long-term outcomes (World Bank, 2022).

The emergence of technological inequality has become a novel challenge to women empowerment in the digital era. One of the aspects that are highlighted in NEP 2020 is the digital education since it is one of the key elements of the contemporary learning process, and yet, the digital divide is enormous because of the severe digital divide (UNESCO, 2021). Many women and girls, particularly in the rural area, lack access to digital devices and the internet and technology skills (NITI Aayog, 2021). Practicing this exclusion, they cannot access the benefits of online education, work training, and online programs in entrepreneurship (World Bank, 2022). Moreover, the society confines women to access technology, and such differences are aggravated by the fact that they cannot participate in the digital economy that NEP 2020 promises them (Kabeer, 2012).

There is also a challenge to policy implementation that is manifested in governance issues, coordination issues, and accountability issues. The Indian education system is enormous and diverse meaning that it possesses multiple levels of governments at state and region (MoE, 2020). Though the NEP 2020 has extremely high goals, absence of proper implementation structures and adequate budgetary allocations can pull it back (NITI Aayog, 2021). Education policies favoring women education are likely to struggle when it comes to shifting the discourse into measurable outcomes (UNESCO, 2021). Additionally, the outcomes of the gender inclusion initiatives lack data, and it makes it harder to estimate the progress or address the gaps (World Bank, 2022). The success of NEP 2020 is not purely policy making but proper monitoring systems, transparency, and collaboration between the stakeholders in all levels (Agarwal, 2018).

The other issue has been the existing gender disparity in both employment and management. Even with a higher education, women are discriminated against in the labor market and career advancement in most cases (Kabeer, 2012). The concept of stereotypical beliefs in the capacity of women and work-life balance continues to restrict the advancement of their careers (Bandyopadhyay and Subrahmanian, 2019). This disconnect may be bridged through the assistance of NEP 2020 as the skill development and entrepreneurship, but also society- and institution-wide changes must be implemented so as to ensure that women can transform the outcomes of their educational achievements into the real empowerment (MoE, 2020).

In essence, this means that without a curriculum reform, it is impossible to apply NEP 2020 as an empowerment tool of women, yet it requires a change in the social system and institutional systems (UNESCO, 2021). The vision of the policy would be realized with the help of gender bias, equal resource allocation, teacher capacity, and elimination of the digital divide (World Bank, 2022). Moreover, this should be evaluated repeatedly, and the community and awareness should be engaged to ensure that the fruits of NEP 2020 are to be enjoyed by all women irrespective of her social or financial background (Agarwal, 2018). Only then, once such tussles have been sorted out in totality can education be made the engine of women empowerment as the policy desires it to be. Thus, the policy development road to implementation is complex, but it could provide a stronger and more just India in case followed with a commitment, inclusiveness, and perseverance (MoE, 2020).

## CONCLUSION

New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a progressive and radical policy that reformulates the objective of education by empowering women and developing an equitable society. It takes into consideration that education is not a fair method of knowledge acquisition, but a dynamism that enables empowering women at a holism level by developing a sense of awareness, confidence and self-reliance (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2020). NEP 2020 guarantees that education is aligned with the general gender equality, social justice, and sustainable national development because of its inclusivity, flexible, and multidisciplinary learning (UNESCO, 2021). It is a giant stride towards transforming the face of education in India by seeking to respond to the evolving needs of women and break the structural obstacles that have in the past reduced the speed at which women have improved (Kabeer, 2012).

Women transformation is best caused by education, which will enable them to contribute equally to the economic, social, and political life (Agarwal, 2018). NEP 2020 takes into account this fact and offers equal access to education of all levels, beginning with early childhood, followed by higher education, and the inclusion of skills training, digital literacy and vocational training into the curriculum (MoE, 2020). These initiatives not only make women more employable but also prepare them to counter the realities of the modern world economy

(World Bank, 2022). In addition, the policy attempts to establish parity between the genders through the establishment of Gender Inclusion Fund and the provision of safe, inclusive, and supportive learning conditions, since the gap between the genders is not limited to the regions and communities (MoE, 2020). The focus on the value and experiential education also helps develop responsible and empathetic citizens, which forms the society, which believes in equality and understanding each other (UNESCO, 2021).

However, the success of NEP 2020 as an instrument that actually empower women will highly depend on the manner it is implemented, not to mention the extent to which it will be employed in addressing the social, cultural, and economic constraints that continue to plague the progress of women in the country (Bandyopadhyay & Subrahmanian, 2019). A single policy cannot fix the issues that plague early marriage, poverty, unavailability of technology, and even patriarchal attitudes. They require a long-term community engagement, popularization and political will (Kabeer, 2012). The government agencies, schools, non-governmental organizations, and the local communities are expected to work together to realize the potential of NEP 2020 (World Bank, 2022). In addition, the emphasis on the ongoing review and evidence-based decision making in the policy should be improved to establish accountability and transparency in achieving the goals of gender equity (NITI Aayog, 2021).

Education will be inclusive and transformative, i.e., the empowerment of women in India in the future will be determined by the possibility (UNESCO, 2021). NEP 2020 states that women ought not only to be empowered to earn livelihoods but also capable of critical thinking and ethical action and become confident leaders (MoE, 2020). It has to bring up a generation of women who will be able to change something and break the stereotypes and result in the creation of the nation and the world (Agarwal, 2018). After the women are empowered and educated, they do not just transform themselves but also their families and communities and the entire country (Kabeer, 2012). Thus, female education is not a mere social necessity, but also an investment in development in India (World Bank, 2022).

Lastly, NEP 2020 gives a far-off projection of increasing gender equality through education (MoE, 2020). Its skills-building vision, inclusiveness, and life-long learning can transform the lives of women and may restore the notion of empowerment that can be felt in the 21st century (UNESCO, 2021). Nevertheless, its actual triumph will be evaluated based on how much of its principles can be implemented and to which the society will ascribe to the idea of education as both a right and not a privilege (Bandyopadhyay & Subrahmanian, 2019). The education of women is a moral and developmental requirement and NEP 2020 provides a gleaming future as to attain desired vision of an India wherein every woman is educated, empowered and prepared to work with dignity, self-confidence and direction (MoE, 2020).

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