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Abstract

The latest version of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, in the last three decades, is the most comprehensive reorientation of India's education system, and gender equity has a prominent and structural place in this vision, as opposed to earlier policy statements that addressed girls' education primarily as an access issue. Using the policy text, the National Curriculum Framework processes that followed it, and recent administrative data from the UDISE+ and the AISHE, this paper traces the extent to which NEP 2020 has acted as an agent of change for gender transformation, especially in terms of curricular reforms and gender sensitization measures, and whether it has led to measurable shifts in enrolment, retention, and parity indices. Using policy text, the National Curriculum Frameworks that followed it, and recent administrative data from the UDISE+ and the AISHE, the paper tracks quantitative changes in enrolment, retention, and parity indices alongside qualitative changes imagined in textbooks, pedagogy, and teacher training. The analysis finds four levers by which the policy works: the Gender Inclusion Fund, structural provisions such as Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas and Special Education Zones, curricular and textbook reform through revised National Curriculum Frameworks, and gender-sensitization training for teachers and administrators. The paper argues that while enrolment-side indicators show encouraging convergence toward parity at the elementary stage, transformation at the level of curricular content, classroom practice, and subject-stream choice remains uneven and only partially institutionalized. Persistent gaps at the secondary and higher-secondary stages, regional disparities, and limited attention to transgender and non-binary learners temper the transformative claims made for the policy. The paper concludes with recommendations for strengthening the implementation architecture so that curricular reform translates into durable change in gendered attitudes and outcomes.

Keywords: NEP 2020, gender transformation, curricular reform, gender sensitization, gender inclusion fund, Indian education policy, gender parity index

1. Introduction

Education has long been recognized in India as both a right and an instrument of social transformation, yet the Indian schooling and higher education system has historically reproduced rather than dismantled gendered hierarchies. Colonial-era schooling, the Kothari Commission (1964–66), the National Policy on Education of 1986, and its 1992 revision each acknowledged the gender gap in enrolment and literacy, but the policy response was largely confined to access-widening schemes rather than a rethinking of curricular content or classroom culture. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, approved by the Union Cabinet in July 2020 and developed on the recommendations of the Kasturirangan Committee, departs from this pattern by naming gender as one of several cross-cutting priorities that must inform every structural and pedagogical decision in the new education architecture.

The policy's ambition is unusually broad: it seeks not merely to enrol more girls but to alter what is taught, how it is taught, and by whom, so that classrooms cease to be sites where gender stereotypes are quietly reinforced. This paper asks whether NEP 2020 can reasonably be described as a catalyst for gender transformation, or whether its provisions remain, in practice, an extension of earlier access-oriented interventions. To answer this question, the paper separates the analysis into two connected strands. The first strand examines the structural and financial provisions of the policy — the Gender Inclusion Fund, Special Education Zones, and residential schooling schemes — that address the material barriers to girls' participation. The second strand, which is the primary focus of this paper, examines curricular reform and gender sensitization: revisions to the National Curriculum Framework, textbook content, teacher preparation, and the treatment of transgender and non-binary learners within the policy's inclusion agenda.

Section 2 situates NEP 2020 within the historical trajectory of gender and education policy in India. Section 3 outlines the specific provisions of NEP 2020 that bear on gender equity. Section 4 analyses curricular reform and gender sensitization measures in detail. Section 5 presents empirical trends in enrolment and parity drawing on recent administrative data, supported by figures. Section 6 discusses persistent challenges and gaps, and Section 7 offers recommendations before the paper concludes.

2. Historical Context of Gender and Education Policy in India

Despite this framework, female literacy continued to trail male literacy through successive censuses, and the gap widened further at the secondary and tertiary stages, where dropout among girls accelerated due to early marriage, domestic responsibilities, safety concerns, and the absence of nearby secondary schools.

Programmatic responses such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, the Rashtriya Madhyamik Shiksha Abhiyan, and Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs) improved access at the margins, and the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao campaign, launched in 2015, drew national attention to skewed sex ratios and the undervaluation of the girl child. However, as Subrahmanya (2019) observed in an assessment of pre-NEP interventions, these schemes largely addressed enrolment and infrastructure without engaging with the gendered assumptions embedded in curricula, textbooks, and teacher attitudes — an omission that limited their capacity to shift long-run social

norms. It is precisely this gap that NEP 2020 attempts to close by treating gender not as a target population requiring welfare provisions, but as a lens through which the entire architecture of school and higher education must be redesigned.

3. NEP 2020: Structural Provisions for Gender Equity

NEP 2020 identifies women and transgender individuals among the Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) whose educational participation requires targeted support, and it commits to treating gender as a cross-cutting priority across the school and higher education continuum. Four provisions are central to this commitment.

3.1 The Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF)

The Fund is intended to finance context-specific interventions — safe transport, sanitary facilities, bicycles, and scholarships — in regions and communities where girls face the steepest barriers to schooling. Administrative reporting under Samagra Shiksha indicates that the GIF has supported several million girls through scholarships and transport assistance since its rollout, with particular emphasis on Educationally Backward Blocks.

3.2 Structural Access: KGBVs, Samagra Shiksha, and Special Education Zones

NEP 2020 builds on the pre-existing network of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas, residential schools. The policy also proposes Special Education Zones for regions with a high concentration of educationally disadvantaged populations, and Targeted Scholarships administered through a single-window system to reduce the transaction costs of accessing welfare support.

3.3 Restructured Schooling and Higher Education Targets

The 10+2 structure has been replaced by a 5+3+3+4 model with the aim of, among other things, building the basic literacy and numeracy skills to the stages at which the pattern of gendered dropout tends to take place. Gender parity treated as an integral part of, rather than in addition to, these targets.

NEP 2020 GENDER-RESPONSIVE POLICY LAYERS

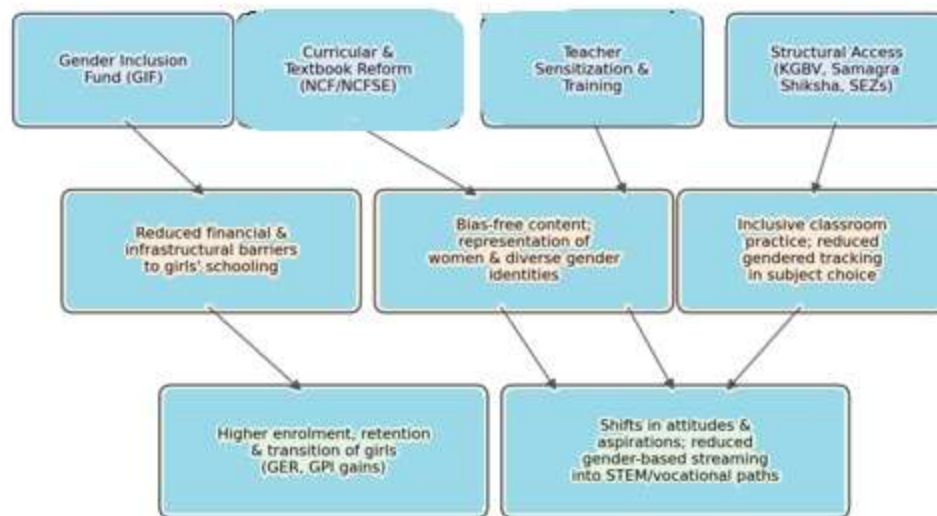


Figure 3. Conceptual framework linking NEP 2020 provisions to gender-transformative outcomes.

4. Curricular Reforms and Gender Sensitization

The distinguishing feature of NEP 2020, relative to earlier policy instruments, is its explicit attention to the content and delivery of education rather than only its distribution. This section analyses four dimensions of curricular reform and gender sensitization envisaged under the policy.

4.1 Revision of the National Curriculum Framework

The principle that curricula and pedagogy must be responsive to the diverse demands of all learners, it contains girls and transgender students. The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE 2023), developed under this mandate, incorporates explicit references to gender-responsive pedagogy, representation of women's contributions across subjects, and the removal of stereotyped depictions from textbook narratives, illustrations, and word problems. Mathur and Sharma (2020), reviewing the early NEP text, cautioned that the policy's own language continued to lean on a binary framing of gender even while gesturing toward inclusion of transgender learners, a tension that curriculum developers have had to negotiate in translating policy intent into textbook practice.

4.2 Textbook Reform and Content Audits

The National level educational agencies following the NEP 2020 undertook reviews of textbook content across subjects to identify and revise material that reinforced occupational stereotyping, unequal domestic role depictions, or the invisibility of women in scientific and historical narratives. Language textbooks were revised to include a broader range of female protagonists and authors, while science and mathematics textbooks were reviewed for gender-neutral framing of word problems and illustrations. These changes are incremental rather than wholesale, and their consistency varies across state boards, since school education in India operates under a concurrent list with considerable state-level autonomy over textbook adoption. Independent content analysis lends some caution to claims of rapid progress: Košir and Lakshminarayanan (2022), applying feminist critical discourse analysis to visual material in Indian social science textbooks, found that images continued to depict men and women in structurally unequal roles, with little space given to feminist activism or to critical reflection on gender norms, suggesting that reform of written text has outpaced reform of visual content.

4.3 Teacher Preparation and Gender Sensitization Training

NEP 2020 places considerable emphasis on the quality and orientation of teacher futuristic B.Ed. programme and the establishment of multidisciplinary training institutions by 2030. Gender sensitization is positioned as a component of this reformed teacher education, on the premise that curricular reform on paper cannot alter classroom experience unless teachers are equipped to recognize and interrupt their own biases in calling on students, assigning classroom responsibilities, and guiding subject choice. Verma and Chowdhary (2020), in their review of women's empowerment research in India, note that teacher attitudes remain one of the more resistant sites of gender bias, since pre-service training has historically treated gender as a peripheral, rather than integrated, theme.

4.4 Inclusion of Transgender Learners

NEP 2020 is the first major Indian education policy to name transgender students explicitly as a group requiring targeted support, extending the Gender Inclusion Fund and related provisions to this population. UDISE+ data collected since 2019–20 has, for the first time, disaggregated enrolment figures to capture transgender students, a data infrastructure change that is itself a form of institutional gender sensitization. However, the paper by Jha et al. (2020), examining public discourse around the policy, found that references to transgender inclusion in the policy text remained comparatively brief relative to its treatment of girls' education, suggesting that operational guidance for schools on supporting transgender learners has lagged behind the policy's stated intent.

5. Empirical Trends: Enrolment, Parity, and Retention

Administrative data collected after the launch of NEP 2020 allow a preliminary, if partial, assessment of its effects on gender outcomes. According to the Ministry of Education's UDISE+ 2021–22 report, more than 12.29 crore girls were enrolled in school education from the previous year, and the Gender Parity Index (GPI) of the Gross Enrolment Ratio stood at or above 1.0 at every level of school education. The Ministry itself described as a favourable outcome for girls' participation. Figure 1 presents the Gender Parity Index across school education stages using these national UDISE+ 2021–22 figures.

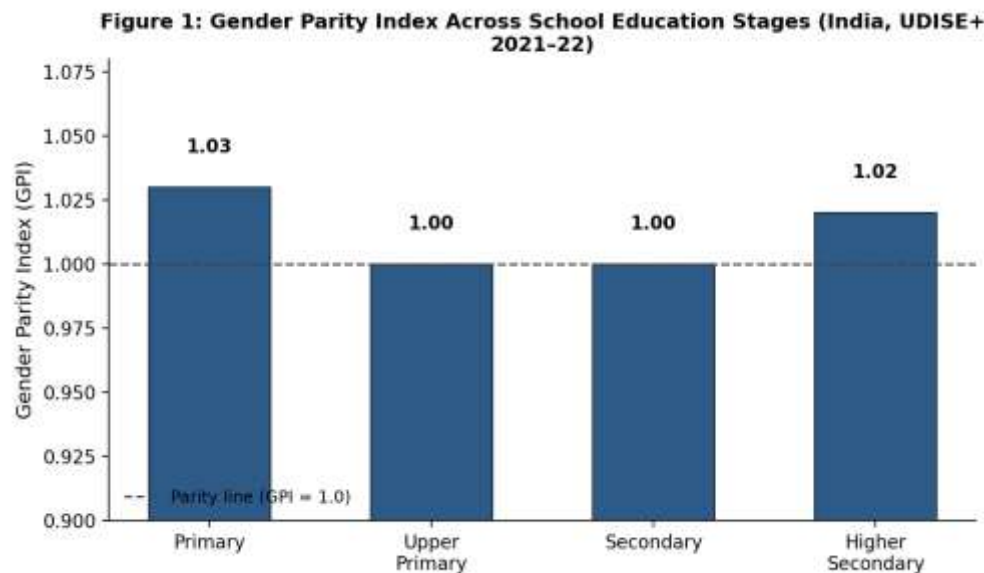


Figure 1. Gender Parity Index across school education stages, India, UDISE+ 2021–22. A GPI above 1.0 indicates higher relative enrolment of girls; below 1.0 indicates a shortfall.

The pattern in Figure 1 is instructive: parity is comfortably achieved at the primary stage (GPI 1.03) and again widens slightly at the higher-secondary stage (GPI 1.02), while the upper-primary and secondary stages sit almost exactly at parity (GPI 1.00). Even though the national aggregate does not fall below parity at any stage in 2021–22, this headline achievement conceals a well-documented pattern in Indian education — that gendered attrition intensifies not at school entry but at the transition points where domestic responsibilities, safety concerns, early marriage, and

the absence of nearby secondary schools begin to weigh more heavily on girls' continued participation than on boys', a dynamic visible once state-level and social-category data are examined rather than the national average alone.

A second indicator of NEP-era progress is the secondary-level dropout rate for girls, which declined from 18.4 percent in 2017–18 to 13.7 percent in 2020–21, according to figures compiled from Ministry of Education reporting under Samagra Shiksha. Figure 2 presents this decline.

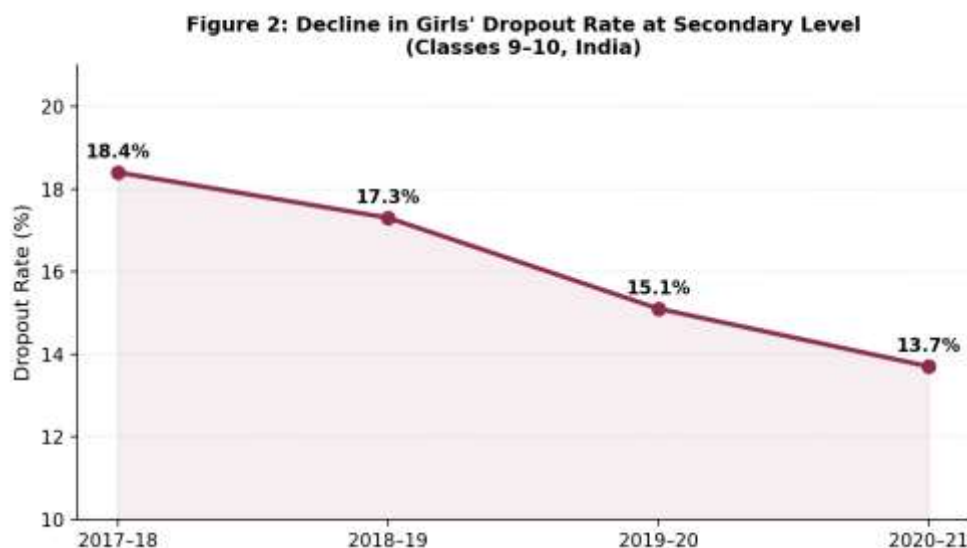


Figure 2. Decline in girls' dropout rate at the secondary level (Classes 9–10), India, 2017–18 to 2020–21.

At the higher education stage, the AISHE 2019–20 recorded a female Gross Enrolment Ratio of 27.3 percent, marginally exceeding the male GER of 26.9 percent, alongside an 18 percent rise in female GER in higher education between 2015–16 and 2019–2020. This national figure, however, conceals substantial state-level variation: female GER in higher education has historically remained considerably lower in different north states of the country, particularly among Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe populations, than in southern states of the country and Jain (2021), analysing implementation challenges under NEP 2020, argue that this regional unevenness reflects the limits of a centrally articulated policy vision operating through a federal implementation structure in which state capacity and political priority vary considerably.

6. Persistent Challenges and Gaps

Despite the encouraging enrolment-side indicators discussed above, several gaps temper the claim that NEP 2020 has achieved gender transformation in a substantive sense.

First, curricular and textbook reform, while underway, is neither uniform across states nor complete within the central curriculum itself. Because school curricula in India fall substantially within state jurisdiction, the pace and depth of gender-responsive revision to textbooks depends heavily on individual SCERT bodies, many of which have not undertaken systematic content audits comparable to those initiated at the national level.

Second, teacher sensitization remains constrained by capacity. Female representation among rural teachers remains well below fifty percent in several states, which affects both role modelling for

girl students and the day-to-day comfort of girls in reporting concerns at school. Pre-service gender sensitization modules, even where introduced, compete with an already dense teacher-education curriculum, limiting the depth of engagement possible within existing training durations.

Third, the sharpest attrition of girls occurs precisely at the secondary-to-higher-secondary transition, where the policy's structural provisions — KGBVs, scholarships, transport support — are less densely available than at the elementary stage. The gap between elementary and higher-secondary Net Enrolment Ratios remains substantial nationally, and this gap is wider still for girls from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe backgrounds, indicating that caste and gender disadvantage compound rather than operate independently.

Fourth, gender disadvantage compounds with regional and socio-economic disadvantage well before children reach the school-going stage that NEP 2020's curricular reforms primarily target. Choudhury, Joshi, and Kumar (2023), examining household survey evidence on pre-primary education access in India, found pronounced regional and socio-economic inequality in early childhood care and education participation, the very foundation on which NEP 2020's 5+3+3+4 structure and its foundational literacy goals are built. Where access to quality early childhood education is itself unevenly distributed by region and household wealth, the gender-responsive curricular reforms envisaged for later stages inherit an uneven starting point rather than a level playing field.

Fifth, the operational guidance available to schools for supporting transgender and gender-nonconforming students remains thin relative to the policy's stated commitment, and data systems, while improved, still capture this population imperfectly, limiting the precision with which progress can be monitored.

7. Recommendations

Building on the analysis above, the paper offers the following recommendations for strengthening the gender-transformative potential of NEP 2020.

- Institutionalize periodic, state-level gender content audits of textbooks, with published reporting, so that curricular reform is not confined to centrally produced material.
- Extend gender sensitization training beyond a single pre-service module into continuous, in-service professional development, with classroom observation components rather than only workshop-based delivery.
- Prioritize Gender Inclusion Fund resources toward the secondary-to-higher-secondary transition, where attrition is greatest, rather than concentrating support at the elementary stage where parity is largely achieved.
- Develop explicit, school-level operational guidelines for supporting transgender and gender-nonconforming students, translating the policy's stated inclusion commitment into administrative practice.
- Strengthen convergence between school-level curricular reform and higher-education and labour-market interventions, since gendered outcomes in schooling are shaped in part by the incentives families perceive beyond the school gate.

8. Conclusion

NEP 2020 represents a genuine departure from earlier Indian education policy in treating gender as a cross-cutting concern that must be addressed through curricular content and teacher preparation, and not solely through access-widening welfare schemes. The evidence assembled in this paper suggests real, measurable progress on enrolment-side indicators, particularly at the elementary stage, alongside a documented decline in girls' secondary dropout rates in the years following the policy's introduction. At the same time, the transformation the policy envisions at the level of curricular content, classroom culture, and gendered subject-stream choice remains only partially realized, constrained by federal implementation variation, teacher-capacity limits, and the persistence of attrition at the secondary-to-higher-secondary transition. NEP 2020 is therefore best understood not as a completed transformation but as a catalyst whose eventual impact on gender equity in Indian education will depend on the consistency, depth, and reach of the curricular and sensitization measures still being implemented across states.

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