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Gender-Sensitive Education Delivery under India's National Education Policy 2020: A Systematic Review of Vision, Implementation Strategies, and Challenges

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Abstract

Gender equity in education is a critical component of India's pursuit of sustainable and inclusive development, yet persistent disparities continue to affect girls' and women's access, participation, and educational outcomes. India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant reform initiative that explicitly recognizes gender as a cross-cutting concern and aligns national education priorities with global commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals. This paper undertakes a systematic review to examine how NEP 2020 conceptualizes gender-sensitive education delivery, the policy instruments proposed to address gender disparities, and the key challenges shaping implementation across Indian states. Drawing on peer-reviewed studies, policy documents, and institutional reports published between 2020 and 2024, the review adopts a thematic analytical approach to assess gender gaps in access, curriculum and pedagogy, teacher training, and digital inclusion. The findings indicate that although NEP 2020 articulates a progressive and equity-oriented vision, substantial gaps persist between policy intent and implementation due to variations in governance capacity, financing, socio-cultural norms, and digital infrastructure. The paper identifies key literature gaps and advances stakeholder-specific policy recommendations, situating gender-equitable education as central to the vision of a Viksit Bharat by 2047.

Keywords: Gender-sensitive education; National Education Policy 2020; Sustainable development; Gender equality; Education policy implementation

Introduction:

Sustainable development in contemporary India is increasingly understood as a multidimensional process that integrates economic growth, social inclusion, and human capital formation. Within this framework, education occupies a central role as both a driver of development and a mechanism for reducing persistent structural inequalities. Gender inequality in education remains a critical concern despite significant progress in enrolment and literacy, particularly in relation to access, retention, learning outcomes, and transitions to higher education and employment. Addressing these disparities is essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 5 (gender equality), and to realizing the broader national vision of a *Viksit Bharat* by 2047 (United Nations, 2015; World Bank, 2020).

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a comprehensive reform agenda aimed at transforming the education system to make it more inclusive, flexible, and responsive to socio-economic realities. The policy explicitly acknowledges gender as a cross-cutting issue and proposes targeted interventions such as the Gender Inclusion Fund, universal access to early childhood education, curricular reforms, and improved school infrastructure to support girls' participation and retention (Government of India, 2020). By emphasizing equity, holistic development, and knowledge integration across disciplines, NEP 2020 aligns closely with the principles of sustainable development and positions education as a foundational pillar for inclusive national progress.

However, the translation of policy vision into effective gender-sensitive education delivery presents significant implementation challenges. Variations across states in administrative capacity, financing,

socio-cultural norms, and digital infrastructure continue to shape uneven outcomes. Issues such as early marriage, gendered care responsibilities, safety concerns, and the digital divide disproportionately affect girls and young women, limiting the transformative potential of policy reforms (UNESCO, 2021). In this context, a systematic review of NEP 2020's gender-related provisions, implementation strategies, and emerging challenges is both timely and necessary. Such an analysis contributes to the discourse on sustainable development and knowledge integration by assessing how education policy can effectively advance gender equity as India moves towards its long-term development goals.

Objectives of the article:

The primary objective of this study is to systematically examine how India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 conceptualizes and integrates gender sensitivity within education delivery in alignment with the broader agenda of sustainable development. By situating NEP 2020 within national and global commitments to gender equality, the study seeks to assess the extent to which the policy's vision and principles correspond with the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 5 (gender equality) (United Nations, 2015).

The study further aims to critically analyze key policy instruments and implementation strategies proposed under NEP 2020 to address gender disparities across different stages of education, including early childhood education, curricular and pedagogical reforms, infrastructure development, and digital education initiatives (Government of India, 2020). Additionally, it seeks to identify and synthesize major implementation challenges across Indian states—such as socio-cultural barriers, administrative and fiscal constraints, and digital divides—and to derive policy-relevant insights that contribute to knowledge integration and inform future reforms for advancing gender-equitable and inclusive education (UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2020).

Review Methodology

This study adopts a systematic review methodology to examine the gender-sensitive dimensions of education delivery under India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The review follows a structured and transparent approach to identify, select, and analyze relevant literature addressing policy vision, implementation strategies, and challenges related to gender equity in education. Academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar were searched to identify peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, and institutional publications published between 2020 and 2024. In addition, official policy documents and reports issued by the

Government of India, UNESCO, and the World Bank were included to capture policy intent and implementation perspectives.

The search strategy employed keywords including “National Education Policy 2020,” “gender equality in education,” “gender-sensitive education,” “education policy implementation,” and “India,” used in various combinations. Inclusion criteria comprised studies focusing on gender-related educational outcomes, policy analysis, or implementation experiences within the Indian context. Exclusion criteria included non-English publications, opinion pieces lacking empirical or analytical grounding, and studies not directly linked to education policy.

Selected studies were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to policy objectives, implementation mechanisms, and structural challenges. This systematic approach ensures analytical rigor and supports a comprehensive assessment of NEP 2020's potential and limitations in advancing gender-equitable and sustainable educational development.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is grounded in the intersection of sustainable development theory, gender and education perspectives, and policy implementation analysis. Education is conceptualized as a key instrument of human capital formation and social transformation, enabling individuals to expand capabilities, exercise agency, and participate meaningfully in economic and civic life. From a sustainable development standpoint, gender equity in education is not merely an outcome but a prerequisite for inclusive and long-term development, aligning with the capability approach which emphasizes substantive freedoms and opportunities rather than formal access alone (Sen, 1999; United Nations, 2015).

Within this framework, gender-sensitive education delivery is understood as a multidimensional construct encompassing access, participation, learning outcomes, institutional support, and post-education transitions. Gender disparities are shaped by structural, socio-cultural, and economic factors that operate across the educational lifecycle, including early childhood, schooling, higher education, and skill development. These disparities are further mediated by intersecting factors such as region, caste, class, and digital access, resulting in differentiated educational experiences for girls and women across India (UNESCO, 2021).

The National Education Policy 2020 functions as the central policy variable in this framework. It is conceptualized as both a normative vision document and an operational policy instrument that seeks to embed gender

equity through targeted mechanisms such as the Gender Inclusion Fund, universalization of early childhood care and education, curricular reforms, infrastructural provisioning, and technology-enabled learning (Government of India, 2020). The effectiveness of these provisions is contingent upon implementation processes, including governance capacity, fiscal commitment, institutional coordination, and state-level adaptability.

Implementation outcomes form a critical mediating layer within the framework. Variations in administrative efficiency, resource allocation, and socio-cultural contexts influence how policy measures translate into practice, thereby shaping educational outcomes for girls and women. Persistent challenges such as early marriage, unpaid care responsibilities, safety concerns, and the digital divide act as constraining forces that limit the transformative potential of policy interventions (World Bank, 2020).

By integrating these elements, the conceptual framework positions gender-sensitive education delivery under NEP 2020 as a dynamic process influenced by policy design, implementation contexts, and structural constraints. This framework guides the systematic review by enabling an analytical linkage between policy intent, implementation strategies, and observed challenges, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of education's role in advancing sustainable development and the vision of a *Viksit Bharat* by 2047.

Thematic Review of Literature

a) Gender Gaps in Access to Education and NEP 2020 Provisions

The persistence of gender disparities in access to education remains a central concern in the Indian context, despite near parity in primary enrolment. Empirical evidence indicates that gender gaps widen significantly at the secondary and higher education levels, particularly in rural areas and among socio-economically disadvantaged groups (Census of India, 2011; Government of India, 2018). NEP 2020 explicitly acknowledges these disparities and emphasizes universal access across all levels of education, with targeted attention to girls belonging to socio-economically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) (Government of India, 2020, Section 6).

While several studies recognize the positive impact of demand-side interventions such as scholarships, bicycles, and hostels in improving girls' enrolment and retention (Muralidharan & Prakash, 2017), others argue that these measures have limited effectiveness in the absence of supportive institutional and social environments (Unterhalter et al., 2014). The literature converges on the view that access must be understood not only in physical terms but also in relation to safety, mobility, and household decision-making power.

NEP 2020's proposal for a Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) seeks to address these multidimensional barriers; however, existing studies note a lack of clarity regarding operational mechanisms, funding adequacy, and monitoring indicators, raising questions about its long-term impact on access outcomes.

b) Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Gender Representation under NEP 2020

Curriculum and pedagogy constitute critical yet often overlooked dimensions of gender-sensitive education delivery. Research consistently demonstrates that curricular content in India continues to reflect gender biases through stereotypical representations and the marginalization of women's contributions in academic disciplines (NCERT, 2019; Subrahmanian, 2005). NEP 2020 underscores the need for curricular reform to promote equity, inclusion, and respect for diversity, advocating a shift towards competency-based and experiential learning (Government of India, 2020, Sections 4 and 5).

Despite this normative emphasis, the literature reveals a significant gap between curricular intent and classroom practice. While gender-responsive curricula have been shown to foster more egalitarian attitudes among students in controlled interventions (Leach et al., 2014), large-scale evaluations indicate uneven adoption across states and school systems. Scholars caution that without sustained pedagogical support and teacher engagement, curricular reforms risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative (Tilak, 2018). This suggests that NEP 2020's curricular vision must be complemented by systemic changes in instructional practices to meaningfully challenge entrenched gender norms.

c) Teacher Training, Professional Development, and Gender Sensitivity

Teacher education and professional development emerge as pivotal mediating factors in translating policy goals into classroom realities. A substantial body of research highlights the influence of teachers' beliefs, expectations, and interaction patterns on gendered learning outcomes, particularly in subjects such as mathematics and science (Sadker & Zittleman, 2009). NEP 2020 places strong emphasis on continuous professional development (CPD) and holistic teacher preparation, recognizing teachers as central agents of change (Government of India, 2020, Section 5.15).

However, existing studies reveal that gender sensitivity remains inadequately institutionalized within teacher education curricula. Gender-related content is often treated as peripheral rather than integral to pedagogical training (Tilak & Kumari, 2021). This disconnect suggests that NEP 2020's emphasis on teacher empowerment

may fall short unless gender equity is explicitly embedded within pre-service and in-service training frameworks. The literature thus points to a structural gap between policy aspirations and the institutional design of teacher education systems.

d) Digital Divide, Technology, and Gender Equity in Education

The increasing reliance on digital education has amplified concerns regarding gendered access to technology. Data from national and global sources consistently indicate that women and girls face significant disadvantages in terms of device ownership, internet access, and digital literacy (GSMA, 2020; World Bank, 2021). NEP 2020 advocates the integration of technology to enhance access and learning outcomes, particularly through digital platforms and open educational resources (Government of India, 2020, Section 23).

The literature presents divergent assessments of digital education's impact on gender equity. While some studies highlight the potential of technology to bridge access gaps in remote areas (Trucano, 2016), others document the exacerbation of inequalities during the COVID-19 pandemic, with girls experiencing disproportionate learning losses due to increased domestic responsibilities and limited digital access (Azim Premji Foundation, 2021). These findings suggest that NEP 2020's digital initiatives require gender-responsive design and complementary support mechanisms to prevent the reinforcement of existing disparities.

Summary Synthesis of the Literature and Literature Gap

Collectively, the literature reveals broad consensus on the centrality of gender equity in education as a prerequisite for sustainable development. While NEP 2020 provides a comprehensive and progressive policy vision aligned with global best practices, existing studies consistently highlight gaps between policy articulation and implementation. Gender disparities persist across access, pedagogy, teacher preparedness, and digital inclusion, shaped by intersecting socio-economic and institutional factors. The synthesis suggests that gender-sensitive education delivery requires not only targeted interventions but also systemic transformation across governance structures, institutional capacities, and socio-cultural norms. Despite the growing body of research on gender and education in India, several critical gaps remain. First, there is a lack of systematic reviews that comprehensively assess NEP 2020's gender-sensitive provisions across multiple dimensions, including access, pedagogy, teacher training, and digital education. Second, existing studies tend to examine policy intent or isolated implementation outcomes in silos, offering limited integration

between policy design, execution, and contextual constraints. Third, there is insufficient state-level comparative analysis capturing inter-regional variations in the implementation of NEP 2020's gender-related measures. Finally, the literature offers limited engagement with the concept of knowledge integration as a framework for understanding how education policy can simultaneously advance gender equity and sustainable development. Addressing these gaps through a systematic review can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of NEP 2020's potential and limitations in advancing gender-sensitive education delivery in India.

Policy Interventions, Governance, and Outcomes

Policy analyses generally view NEP 2020 as a progressive framework aligned with global commitments to inclusive and sustainable development (United Nations, 2015; World Bank, 2020). The policy's emphasis on equity, decentralization, and outcome-based monitoring reflects an intent to address long-standing systemic inequities. However, empirical evaluations underscore significant inter-state variation in implementation capacity, financing, and governance effectiveness (NITI Aayog, 2021).

Scholars argue that the absence of robust gender-disaggregated data systems and accountability mechanisms limits the ability to assess policy outcomes effectively (Unterhalter, 2017). This raises concerns about the extent to which NEP 2020's gender-sensitive provisions can translate into measurable improvements in educational outcomes without sustained institutional commitment and monitoring.

Policy Recommendations

Strengthening gender-sensitive education delivery under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 requires coordinated, multi-level interventions that address gaps between policy intent and implementation. At the national level, the operationalization of gender-focused provisions such as the Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) should be reinforced through clearly defined allocation criteria, measurable outcome indicators, and transparent reporting mechanisms. Integrating gender-responsive budgeting into education financing can further ensure that commitments to equity are reflected in fiscal priorities and monitored through gender-disaggregated data systems (Government of India, 2020; UN Women, 2018).

State governments play a critical role in contextualizing NEP 2020's gender objectives. Developing state-specific gender action plans aligned with local socio-economic realities can enhance implementation effectiveness. Strengthened inter-departmental coordination—

particularly among education, health, and women and child development departments—can address intersecting barriers such as early marriage, nutrition, and unpaid care responsibilities that disproportionately affect girls' educational trajectories (Muralidharan & Prakash, 2017; NITI Aayog, 2021).

Curriculum and pedagogical reform bodies must move beyond symbolic inclusion by systematically reviewing textbooks and learning materials to eliminate gender stereotypes and ensure balanced representation. Embedding gender sensitivity as a core curricular competency, supported by assessment reforms, can foster more inclusive learning environments and challenge entrenched norms that limit girls' participation and aspirations (Subrahmanian, 2005; UNESCO, 2021).

Teacher education institutions are central to translating policy goals into classroom practice. Institutionalizing gender sensitivity within pre-service and in-service teacher training, supported by experiential learning and reflective pedagogical approaches, can address unconscious biases and improve gender-equitable learning outcomes. Linking professional development in gender-responsive teaching to career progression may further incentivize sustained engagement among educators (Sadker & Zittleman, 2009; Tilak & Kumari, 2021).

Digital education initiatives under NEP 2020 require a gender-responsive design to prevent the reinforcement of existing inequalities. Policy measures should prioritize device access, digital literacy, and connectivity for girls from disadvantaged households, while addressing online safety and exclusion risks. Evidence suggests that without such safeguards, technology-driven solutions may exacerbate rather than reduce gender gaps (GSMA, 2020; World Bank, 2021).

Community-level engagement remains essential for addressing socio-cultural constraints. Strengthening the role of school management committees, civil society organizations, and local leaders can promote supportive norms around girls' education, delay early marriage, and redistribute care responsibilities. Such participatory approaches enhance accountability and sustain educational participation during adolescence (Unterhalter, 2017).

Finally, robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks grounded in gender-disaggregated indicators and qualitative insights are necessary to support knowledge integration and evidence-informed policymaking. Aligning evaluation mechanisms with NEP objectives and Sustainable Development Goals can facilitate adaptive learning and ensure that gender-sensitive education delivery contributes meaningfully to inclusive and

sustainable development in India (United Nations, 2015).

Conclusion

This review has examined the gender-sensitive dimensions of education delivery under India's National Education Policy 2020 within the broader framework of sustainable development and knowledge integration. The synthesis of existing literature reveals that while NEP 2020 articulates a progressive and equity-oriented vision, gender disparities persist across access, curriculum and pedagogy, teacher preparedness, and digital inclusion. These disparities are shaped by intersecting socio-economic, institutional, and cultural factors that mediate the translation of policy intent into practice. The analysis underscores that improvements in enrolment alone are insufficient; meaningful gender equity in education requires sustained attention to learning environments, institutional capacities, and governance mechanisms.

The review further highlights that the effectiveness of NEP 2020's gender-responsive provisions depends critically on coordinated implementation across national, state, and local levels, supported by robust monitoring and gender-disaggregated evidence. Addressing identified gaps through context-sensitive policy interventions, strengthened teacher education, inclusive digital strategies, and community engagement can enhance the transformative potential of education in advancing gender equity. As India progresses towards the vision of a *Viksit Bharat* by 2047, embedding gender sensitivity within education systems remains central to achieving inclusive and sustainable development, reinforcing education's role as both a social equalizer and a catalyst for long-term national progress.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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