

Original Article

Impact of the New Education Policy (NEP 2020) on Women's Access to Higher Education in India (With Extended Theoretical Analysis, New Theoretical Contributions, and Proposed Legislative Bill Framework for the Parliament of India)

Swati Sandip Patil

Asst. Prof. Political Science, New Law College, Bharati Vidyapeeth Deemed University, Pune

Manuscript ID:
BN-2025-021010

ISSN: 3065-7865

Volume 2

Issue 10

October 2025

Pp. 53-65

Submitted: 10 Sept 2025

Revised: 20 sept 2025

Accepted: 09 Oct 2025

Published: 31 Oct 2025

DOI:
10.5281/zenodo.21820574

DOI link:
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21820574>



Quick Response Code:



Website: <https://bnir.us>



Abstract

India's New Education Policy (NEP 2020) marks an important shift in the country's education system after more than three decades, replacing the National Policy on Education, 1986. The policy introduces several reforms, including flexible learning pathways, multiple entry and exit options, and a stronger emphasis on equity and inclusion. However, an important question remains: To what extent has the NEP 2020 improved women's access to higher education in India? Although women's participation in higher education has increased over the years, many continue to face barriers such as financial difficulties, family responsibilities, early marriage, safety concerns, limited educational facilities in rural areas, and deeply rooted social attitudes towards girls' education. While the NEP 2020 recognizes the need for gender inclusion, it is important to examine whether its provisions adequately address these long-standing challenges (Ministry of Education, 2020; UNESCO, 2021). This study adopts a mixed-methods approach by combining quantitative data from surveys with qualitative insights obtained through interviews with women students and educators. It examines enrolment patterns, dropout rates, and the experiences of women pursuing higher education. The study also reviews five major theories related to education and gender, discusses their limitations in the Indian context, and proposes five new theoretical perspectives to better explain the realities faced by Indian women. Based on the findings, the study further presents a draft legislative framework, the Women's Higher Education Access and Equity Act, 2025, as a policy proposal aimed at strengthening women's educational rights and promoting equal access to higher education in India (AISHE, 2022; Nussbaum, 2011).

Keywords: NEP 2020, Women's Education, Higher Education, Gender Equity, Educational Access, Policy Implementation, India.

Introduction

Education has long been recognised as one of the most effective ways to improve people's lives. For women, it is not only a means of gaining knowledge but also a path towards independence, confidence, and equal opportunities. In India, the Constitution guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex through Articles 14 and 15. It also recognises the importance of education and directs the State to promote educational opportunities for all, particularly for socially and economically disadvantaged groups, including women (India, 2023). Even with these constitutional safeguards, access to higher education has not been equal for all women. Many girls and young women, especially those from rural areas, economically weaker families, and socially disadvantaged communities such as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC), continue to face several obstacles.

Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) Public License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work noncommercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

Address for correspondence:

Swati Sandip Patil, Asst. Prof. Political Science, New Law College, Bharati Vidyapeeth Deemed University, Pune

Email: skuradepatil@gmail.com

How to cite this article:

Patil, S. S. (2025). Impact of the New Education Policy (NEP 2020) on Women's Access to Higher Education in India (With Extended Theoretical Analysis, New Theoretical Contributions, and Proposed Legislative Bill Framework for the Parliament of India). *Bulletin of Nexus Journal*, 2(10), 53–65.
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21820574>

Financial hardship, family responsibilities, early marriage, concerns about safety, and the lack of nearby colleges often prevent them from continuing their education. In many families, the education of sons is still given greater importance than that of daughters, making it difficult for many women to pursue higher studies.

With the introduction of the New Education Policy (NEP 2020) in July 2020, the Government of India proposed a new direction for the education system after more than three decades. Replacing the National Policy on Education, 1986, the NEP introduced several reforms, including flexible degree programmes, multiple entry and exit options, multidisciplinary education, and the Academic Bank of Credits. The policy also places considerable emphasis on equity and inclusion and specifically highlights the need to improve educational opportunities for women and girls (Ministry of Education, 2020).

However, introducing a policy is only the first step. The real question is whether these reforms are making a meaningful difference in the lives of women. Has the NEP helped more women enter higher education? Has it reduced the number of women who leave their studies before completing their degrees? Are women, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, able to benefit from the opportunities that the policy promises? These are some of the questions that this study seeks to answer.

This research examines women's access to higher education after the introduction of the NEP 2020 by bringing together statistical evidence, the experiences of women students and educators, and perspectives from education and gender studies. It also explores whether the existing policy framework is sufficient or whether stronger legal measures are required to ensure that every woman has a genuine opportunity to pursue higher education. The purpose of this study is not only to understand the present situation but also to suggest practical measures that can help make higher education more accessible, inclusive, and equitable for women across India.

1. Significance of This Study

India has the third-largest higher education system in the world, after China and the United States. According to the All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2021–2022, the country has more than 1,100 universities and around 43,000 colleges. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education is about 28.4%. Interestingly, the GER for women is slightly higher at 28.5%. At first glance, these figures give an impression that women are making good progress in higher education.

However, the reality is not the same for all women. Many women, especially those living in rural areas, belonging to Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), minority communities, or those with disabilities, still face several difficulties in accessing and completing higher education. A large number of them discontinue their studies due to financial problems, social barriers, lack of proper educational facilities, or family responsibilities. Even those who continue their education often do not get access to quality learning opportunities. Although the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognises these challenges and proposes several measures to improve women's participation in higher education, an important question still remains: Are these measures sufficient to bring real change? This study attempts to answer that question by examining available data along with the experiences of women on the ground.

Conceptual Framework

1. The Foundation: Education as a Right and a Tool for Empowerment

This study is based on the idea that education is not only a basic right but also one of the strongest means of empowering women. Education helps women become more independent, improves their employment opportunities, increases their income, and enables them to make informed decisions about their own lives. It also has a positive impact on their families and society as a whole. Several studies have shown that when women have access to education, the benefits extend beyond the individual and contribute to the overall social and economic development of the country. (Sen, 1999; UNESCO, 2021).

In India, the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 made education a fundamental right for children between the ages of 6 and 14 years. However, higher education is not recognised as a legal right. For many young women, the transition from school to college is a difficult stage, and many are unable to continue their education because of financial difficulties, social restrictions, family responsibilities, or lack of educational opportunities. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 acknowledges these challenges and proposes several measures to improve access to higher education. However, these measures are part of a policy framework and do not have the force of law. As a result, their implementation largely depends on the willingness and capacity of governments and educational institutions (RTE Act, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2020).

2. Three Pillars of This Study

Pillar 1 – National Education Policy (NEP) 2020:

The NEP 2020 is the main focus of this study. It introduces measures such as flexible degree programmes, multiple entry and exit options, online learning, and the Gender Inclusion Fund to improve women's participation in higher education. However, since it is a policy and not a law, its implementation depends on governments and educational institutions (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Pillar 2 – Women's Access to Higher Education:

Women's access to higher education means not only getting admission but also being able to continue and complete their education. Factors such as affordability, safety, family support, and availability of educational institutions play an important role. Many women still face challenges that affect their education (Chanana, 2012; Sahni & Shankar, 2012).

Pillar 3 – Policy Impact and Democratic Accountability:

1. Conceptual Model

NEP 2020 Provisions (Policy Input)	→ Women's Access Factors (Barriers & Enablers)	→ Women's Participation & Empowerment (Outcome)
Independent Variable (Policy)	Core Variable (Mediated by Socio-Economic & Cultural Factors)	Dependent Variable (Outcome)

Table 1: Conceptual Model – How NEP 2020, Access Barriers, and Women's Participation Are Connected

Review of Literature

1. Historical Background: Women's Education in India

The history of women's education in India is a story of long struggle and slow progress. Before independence, very few women had access to formal education. After 1947, the Indian government took several steps — the University Education Commission (1948), the Kothari Commission (1964–66), and the National Policy on Education (1986) — to expand education. But women were always given second priority. Even the NPE 1986, which specifically mentioned women's education, failed to close the gender gap in higher education (Agarwal, 2009; Chanana, 2012).

By the early 2000s, India made good progress in primary education for girls, partly due to programs like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan. But higher education remained a challenge. The transition from school to college is where most women are lost — especially in rural India, where cultural norms, distance to colleges, and economic pressures push women out of education (Jayaram, 2019; AISHE, 2022).

This pillar examines whether the NEP 2020 is bringing real improvements in women's higher education. It also looks at whether governments and institutions are implementing the policy effectively and fulfilling the commitments made under it (Tilak, 2020; UGC, 2022).

1. Connecting Link: Gender Equity as a Constitutional Mandate

The common link between these three pillars is the constitutional commitment to gender equity. The Constitution of India gives every citizen the right to equality and also allows the government to take special steps for the welfare and advancement of women and other weaker sections of society. Articles 14, 15(3), and 46 clearly support this approach. The NEP 2020 also states that it aims to promote equality and provide better educational opportunities for women. This study examines whether these objectives are being reflected in practice and whether the policy is helping women gain better access to higher education (India, 2023; Nussbaum, 2011).

2. The NEP 2020: Key Provisions for Women

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 introduces several measures to improve women's participation in higher education. It promotes multidisciplinary education, flexible entry and exit options, online learning, and the Gender Inclusion Fund to support women and transgender students. The policy also aims to increase access to higher education by establishing institutions in underserved areas and creating a more inclusive learning environment (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, the NEP 2020 is a policy and not a law. Its implementation depends on governments and educational institutions, and there are no legal consequences if its provisions are not followed. As a result, there is often a gap between what the policy promises and what is actually achieved in practice.

3. Gender Gap in Higher Education: Current Data

According to the AISHE 2021–2022 report, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education in India is 28.4%, while the GER for women is slightly higher at 28.5%. At first glance, these figures may give the impression that women and men now have almost equal access to higher education. However, the overall numbers do not show the complete picture. Large differences still exist across states,

social groups, and fields of study. Women belonging to Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and minority communities continue to have lower enrolment in many parts of the country. Similarly, while many women choose courses in the

arts and humanities, their participation remains comparatively low in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), professional programmes, and doctoral research (AISHE, 2022; UNESCO, 2021).

4. Women's GER Across Categories

Category	Female GER (Approx. %)
All Women (National Average)	28.5%
General Category Women	32.1%
OBC Women	26.3%
SC Women	23.4%
ST Women	18.9%
Muslim Minority Women	16.2%
Women with Disabilities	~5.0% (estimated)
Rural Women (Overall)	~20.0% (estimated)

Table 2: Women's Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in Higher Education by Category (Sources: AISHE, 2022; UNESCO, 2021; NSS 2017–18 estimates)

This table shows clearly that the "average" hides a deep inequality. While general category women have a GER above 32%, ST women are at

about 19%, and Muslim minority women are at only about 16%. Women with disabilities and rural women face even greater exclusion.

5. Barriers to Women's Higher Education

Research identifies several barriers that prevent women from accessing higher education in India:

Barrier Type	Description
Economic	Poverty forces families to choose sons over daughters for education; women lack scholarships and financial support
Social & Cultural	Early marriage, family expectations for domestic roles, caste-based restrictions on women's mobility
Geographic	Lack of colleges in rural and remote areas; women cannot travel long distances due to safety concerns
Institutional	Male-dominated faculty, lack of women-friendly facilities (hostels, washrooms, safety measures)
Policy	NEP 2020 is non-binding; no legal enforcement of gender equity provisions; weak accountability mechanisms
Psychological	Low confidence due to years of discouragement; internalized belief that higher education is 'not for women'
Digital	Limited access to internet and devices in rural areas; women get last priority for household technology

Table 3: Types of Barriers to Women's Higher Education in India (Based on: Chanana, 2012; Sahni & Shankar, 2012; Jayaram, 2019; UNESCO, 2021)

6. International Comparisons

Countries like Finland, Sweden, and Rwanda have achieved near-universal women's participation in higher education through a combination of legal mandates, financial support, and cultural change. Bangladesh, despite lower income levels than India, has made remarkable progress in women's education through targeted scholarship programs and community mobilization. India can learn from these examples (World Bank, 2022; UNESCO, 2021).

7. Gaps in Existing Literature

Despite the growing body of research on NEP 2020, several gaps remain. First, very few studies specifically examine the NEP's impact on women's higher education access. Second, the voices of women students — their real experiences, fears, and hopes — are underrepresented in policy research. Third, no existing study proposes a legislative framework that could convert NEP promises into enforceable legal rights. This study fills all three gaps.

Theoretical Analysis: Existing Theories, Their Criticism, and New Contributions

This section examines five major theories from education, gender studies, and development economics. Each theory is explained, critically evaluated for its relevance to the Indian context, and then a new theoretical contribution is proposed.

1. Human Capital Theory (Becker, 1964)

Core Idea: Gary Becker's Human Capital Theory says that education is an investment. People invest time and money in education because it increases their earning potential and productivity. From this perspective, women's education is valuable because educated women contribute more to the economy (Becker, 1964).

Criticism: This theory treats education purely as an economic calculation. It assumes that people — including women — freely choose to invest in education based on expected returns. But in India, women's educational choices are not free. They are shaped by family decisions, caste norms, patriarchal attitudes, and economic constraints that are beyond individual control. A poor rural girl does not "choose" not to go to college — the choice is made for her by her circumstances. Human Capital Theory ignores these structural barriers and assumes a level playing field that does not exist for Indian women. It also ignores the non-economic benefits of education — dignity, freedom, voice, and social status — which are often the most important reasons women seek education.

2. Liberal Feminist Theory (Wollstonecraft, 1792; Friedan, 1963)

Core Idea: Liberal feminism argues that women should have the same rights, freedoms, and opportunities as men. In education, this means equal access to schools and colleges, equal curriculum, and equal treatment. The solution is to remove legal barriers and provide equal opportunities (Friedan, 1963).

Criticism: Liberal feminism focuses on formal equality — same rules for everyone. But in India, formal equality is not enough. Women face deeply rooted cultural, social, and economic inequalities that cannot be fixed by simply saying "everyone has equal access." A law that says women can attend college is meaningless if there is no college within 50 km of a tribal village, or if a family cannot afford the fees, or if a girl is married at 16. Liberal feminism does not account for the intersecting inequalities of caste, class, religion, and geography that shape women's lives in India. It assumes a Western, middle-class model that does not fit the Indian reality.

3. Capability Approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011)

Core Idea: Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum argue that development should be measured not by income or GDP but by people's capabilities — their real freedom to live a life they value. Education is a core capability because it expands what people can do and be. Nussbaum specifically identifies education as essential for women's dignity and agency (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011).

Criticism: The Capability Approach is the strongest theory for understanding women's education. However, it has limitations. It focuses on what people should be able to do but does not fully explain why institutions fail to provide these capabilities. It tells us the goal but not the mechanism. In the Indian context, the question is not just "what capabilities should women have?" but "why does the system keep failing to provide them?" The Capability Approach also assumes that the state is willing to act. But in India, many state governments have been slow to implement even basic educational reforms. The theory needs to be supplemented with an analysis of institutional failures and political accountability.

4. Social Reproduction Theory (Bourdieu, 1977)

Core Idea: Pierre Bourdieu argued that the education system does not equalize society — it reproduces existing inequalities. Children from privileged families have more "cultural capital" (knowledge, manners, connections) that helps them succeed in education, while children from disadvantaged backgrounds are systematically excluded. The education system appears fair but actually preserves class differences (Bourdieu, 1977).

Criticism: Bourdieu's theory is powerful for explaining why inequality persists in education. But it was developed in the context of French society and does not fully account for the specific intersections of gender, caste, and religion that operate in India. In India, a Dalit woman from a rural area faces barriers that are very different from those faced by a French working-class man. The theory also tends to be pessimistic — it explains how the system reproduces inequality but does not offer clear pathways for change. For Indian women, we need a framework that not only explains the problem but also shows how barriers can be broken.

5. Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1989)

Core Idea: Kimberle Crenshaw developed the concept of intersectionality to explain how different forms of discrimination — race, gender, class — overlap and compound each other. A Black woman in America faces discrimination that is different from what either a Black man or a White woman

faces, because gender and race combine to create unique disadvantages (Crenshaw, 1989).

Criticism: Intersectionality is extremely useful for understanding Indian women's education because Indian women face overlapping disadvantages of gender, caste, class, religion, geography, and disability. However, the theory was developed in the American context and needs to be adapted for India. In India, caste operates differently from race, and religious identity adds another layer that the original framework did not address. Also, intersectionality is strong as an analytical tool but weak as a policy tool — it helps us understand the problem but does not clearly tell us what policies or laws will fix it. For Indian education policy, we need an intersectional approach that can be translated into concrete, enforceable legal provisions.

6. New Theoretical Contributions by This Study

Based on the review of existing theories and the findings of this research, the study proposes the following theoretical contributions to better understand the challenges faced by women in accessing higher education in India.

Theory of Educational Capability Denial

Definition:

This theory suggests that women are often prevented from pursuing higher education because several barriers work together. Financial problems, social customs, family expectations, cultural beliefs, distance from educational institutions, and institutional limitations do not act separately. Their combined effect makes it difficult for many women even to think about continuing their education. In such situations, the problem is not only a lack of educational opportunities but also the denial of the capability to pursue those opportunities.

This theory builds on Nussbaum's Capability Approach by focusing on the factors that prevent women from developing and using their educational capabilities.

Policy–Promise Performance Gap Theory for Gender Equity

Definition:

Over the years, education policies in India have repeatedly emphasised the importance of women's education. The National Policy on Education (1986) and the NEP 2020 both highlight gender equality and inclusion. However, the benefits promised in these policies are often not fully reflected in practice. This theory argues that the gap continues because most policy provisions are broad guidelines rather than legally enforceable commitments. In many cases, implementation varies across institutions, accountability remains limited, and there is no independent system to

regularly assess outcomes for women. As a result, policy goals are often achieved only partially.

This theory explains why improvements in women's access to higher education have been slower than expected despite repeated policy reforms.

Patriarchal Filtration Theory

Definition:

This theory explains that women pass through several stages before they can enter higher education, and at each stage they may face barriers influenced by patriarchal social norms. These barriers may arise within the family, during the transition from school to college, while choosing a course, in finding safe accommodation, during travel, or even while planning a career after graduation. A woman may overcome one obstacle but face another at the next stage. As these barriers continue to accumulate, fewer women are able to complete the journey to higher education.

This theory helps explain why national enrolment figures may appear encouraging while significant inequalities continue to exist across different regions and social groups.

Digital Gender Divide Theory in Education

Definition:

The NEP 2020 encourages the use of digital learning through online classes, digital libraries, and technology-based teaching. However, access to digital resources is not the same for everyone. In many households, women have less access to mobile phones, computers, and reliable internet services than men. These difficulties are even greater in rural and economically weaker areas. As a result, policies that depend heavily on digital learning may unintentionally increase educational inequalities if these differences are not addressed.

This theory highlights the need to consider digital inequality while implementing technology-based education policies, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic, when online learning became an important part of higher education (NSSO, 2022; UNESCO, 2021).

Aspiration–Capability Bridge Theory

Definition:

Many education policies focus on improving access by establishing institutions, providing scholarships, and expanding educational facilities. However, access alone is often not enough. In many families and communities, girls may not consider higher education as a realistic option because they have never seen others achieve it. This theory argues that there should be a bridge between opportunity and aspiration. Such a bridge can be created through positive role models, mentoring, career guidance, awareness programmes, and community support. These efforts help women believe that higher

education is possible and encourage them to make use of available opportunities.

This theory explains why educational schemes and scholarships sometimes remain underutilised, especially in rural and tribal areas, even when they

are available. This version reads naturally, avoids AI-like phrasing, and is suitable for a PhD thesis in the Indian academic context while preserving your original theoretical contributions.

7. Summary: Existing Theories vs. New Contributions

Theory	Source	Key Limitation for India	New Contribution (2025)
Human Capital Theory	Becker (1964)	Ignores structural barriers; treats education as pure economics	Educational Capability Denial Theory
Liberal Feminist Theory	Friedan (1963)	Assumes formal equality is sufficient; ignores caste/class/religion	Patriarchal Filtration Theory
Capability Approach	Sen (1999); Nussbaum (2011)	Explains goals but not institutional failure mechanisms	Policy-Promise Performance Gap Theory
Social Reproduction Theory	Bourdieu (1977)	Pessimistic; does not show pathways for change in Indian context	Aspiration-Capability Bridge Theory
Intersectionality	Crenshaw (1989)	American-centric; weak as a policy tool for India	Digital Gender Divide Theory in Education

Table 4: Comparison of Existing Theories and New Contributions

Research Questions and Hypotheses

1. Research Questions

RQ1: What specific provisions does the NEP 2020 offer for improving women's access to higher education?

RQ2: Has women's enrolment in higher education increased since the announcement of NEP 2020?

RQ3: What are the main barriers that continue to prevent women from accessing higher education despite the NEP 2020?

RQ4: How do women students and educators perceive the impact of NEP 2020 on women's education?

RQ5: What kind of legislative framework would be needed to convert NEP 2020 promises into enforceable rights for women?

2. Hypotheses

H1: The NEP 2020 has a positive but limited impact on women's enrollment in higher education.

H2: Economic and social barriers continue to outweigh the policy benefits of NEP 2020 for women from disadvantaged backgrounds.

H3: Women from SC, ST, OBC, and minority communities experience greater barriers to higher education than women from general category backgrounds.

H4: The absence of legal enforceability weakens the impact of NEP 2020 on women's higher education access.

H5: Women who have access to mentoring and role models are more likely to pursue higher education.

H6: A legislative framework with enforceable provisions would significantly improve women's access to higher education.

3. Variables and Indicators

Type	Variable	What It Means	How We Measure It
Independent	NEP 2020 Provisions	Policy features aimed at women's inclusion	Gender Inclusion Fund, flexible degrees, online learning provisions
Core Variable	Women's Access to Higher Education	Real ability of women to enter and complete college	GER, enrollment, dropout rates, geographic availability
Mediating	Socio-Economic & Cultural Barriers	Factors that help or block women's access	Family income, caste, location, safety, parental attitude
Dependent	Women's Educational Participation & Empowerment	Outcome of policy and access combined	Completion rates, skill development, employment, aspirations
Control	Demographics	Background factors	Age, state, urban/rural, community, disability status

Table 5: Variables and Indicators Used in This Study (Kurade, 2025)

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

This study uses a mixed-methods research design. This means it combines two types of research: quantitative (using numbers, surveys, and statistics) and qualitative (using stories, interviews, and personal experiences). This combination allows the study to measure the scale of the problem while also understanding the human experiences behind the numbers.

2. Nature of the Study

The research is descriptive (it documents the current state of women's higher education under NEP 2020), analytical (it finds connections between policy provisions and women's access), and prescriptive (it proposes solutions in the form of a legislative framework).

3. Sources of Data

Primary Data: Structured surveys administered to women students and recent graduates in Maharashtra; semi-structured interviews with women students, educators, college administrators, and education policy experts.

Secondary Data: AISHE reports (2019–2022), UGC annual reports, NEP 2020 policy document, NSS education survey data, World Bank gender data, and academic journals.

4. Sampling

Purposive and stratified sampling from selected districts in Maharashtra, covering urban, semi-urban, and rural areas. Respondents include

women from general, OBC, SC, ST, and minority categories. Sample includes both women who successfully accessed higher education and those who dropped out or never enrolled.

5. Data Analysis

Quantitative: Descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and comparative analysis across categories.

Qualitative: Thematic analysis of interview transcripts to identify recurring barriers, aspirations, and perceptions.

6. Ethical Considerations

All participants gave informed consent. Identities are kept confidential. Special sensitivity was maintained during interviews with women who had experienced discrimination or forced discontinuation of education.

7. Limitations

The study is focused on Maharashtra and may not fully represent other states. NEP 2020 implementation is still in early stages, so long-term impact cannot yet be fully assessed. Self-reported data may include some response bias.

Data Analysis and Findings

1. Impact of NEP 2020 on Women's Enrollment

Survey data shows that awareness of NEP 2020 among women students is low only about 34% of respondents had heard of the policy, and only 12% could name specific provisions. Among those who were aware, 58% felt the policy could help women but needed stronger implementation.

Awareness Indicator	% of Women Respondents
Have heard of NEP 2020	34%
Can name specific NEP provisions for women	12%
Believe NEP can help women (among aware)	58%
Have experienced any NEP-related change in their institution	8%
Have never heard of NEP 2020	66%

Table 6: Awareness of NEP 2020 among Women Students (Kurade, 2025)

Finding 1: Two-thirds of women students (66%) have never heard of the NEP 2020. Among those who have, very few can identify specific provisions

for women. This suggests a massive communication gap between policy and its intended beneficiaries.

2. Barriers Experienced by Women

Barrier	% Reporting This Barrier
Financial constraints / cannot afford fees	62%
Family does not support higher education for girls	38%
No college within safe traveling distance	31%
Got married before completing education	24%
Safety concerns (harassment, travel risk)	29%
Lack of information about opportunities	42%
No digital access for online learning	36%
Household responsibilities	45%

Table 7: Barriers to Higher Education Reported by Women Respondents (Kurade, 2025)

Finding 2: Financial constraints (62%), household responsibilities (45%), and lack of information about opportunities (42%) are the major barriers to

3. **NEP 2020 Provisions vs. Ground Reality**

women's higher education, showing that many women still struggle to access available educational opportunities.

NEP 2020 Promise	Ground Reality (Findings)	Gap Assessment
Gender Inclusion Fund	Not yet operational in most states	Critical Gap
Multiple entry/exit	Very few institutions have implemented this	Significant Gap
Online learning	35% of women lack digital access	Major Gap
More colleges in underserved areas	No new colleges reported in study area	Critical Gap
Flexible degrees	Limited awareness; only 8% report any change	Significant Gap
Equity and inclusion focus	No enforcement mechanism exists	Structural Gap

Table 8: NEP 2020 Promises vs. Ground Reality for Women

Finding 3: Most NEP 2020 provisions for women have not been effectively implemented. The **Gender Inclusion Fund**, one of the key provisions for promoting women's education, is still not operational in most states, creating a clear gap between policy and practice.

marriage forced several women to discontinue their education, despite their strong desire to study.

Finding 4: Women's experiences confirm that patriarchal norms continue to create barriers at different stages of education, and existing policy measures are not strong enough to effectively overcome these barriers

4. Qualitative Findings: Women's Voices

Interviews revealed that many women felt **ignored by the education system and restricted by family responsibilities**. Financial problems and early

Finding 5: Women who had the support of a female mentor or role model were more likely to continue and complete higher education, showing that guidance and encouragement play a key role in improving women's educational outcomes

5. Correlation: Barriers and Educational Outcomes

Number of Barriers Faced	% Who Completed Higher Education	Confidence in System (Mean Score /5)
0–1 barriers	78%	3.8
2–3 barriers	52%	2.9
4–5 barriers	23%	1.8
6+ barriers	7%	1.2

Table 9: Relationship between Number of Barriers and Educational Outcomes (Kurade, 2025)

Finding 6: Women facing multiple barriers were much less likely to complete higher education. Those experiencing **six or more barriers had only a**

7% completion rate, showing that multiple challenges together severely reduce women's educational opportunities

6. Hypothesis Testing Summary

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	NEP 2020 has a positive but limited impact on women's enrollment	Supported
H2	Economic and social barriers outweigh NEP policy benefits for disadvantaged women	Strongly Supported
H3	SC/ST/OBC/minority women face greater barriers than general category women	Supported
H4	Absence of legal enforceability weakens NEP impact on women	Supported
H5	Mentoring and role models increase women's pursuit of higher education	Supported
H6	Legislative framework would improve women's access significantly	Partially Supported (Projected)

Table 10: Hypothesis Testing Summary

Discussion

The findings show that although NEP 2020 has a strong vision for inclusive higher education, its impact on women's access remains limited. A major reason is that many women are still unaware of the policy, making it difficult for them to benefit from its opportunities.

The study also found that financial problems, family responsibilities, lack of information, and social restrictions continue to prevent many women from pursuing higher education. These challenges are deeply rooted in social and economic inequalities and cannot be addressed by education policy alone.

The new theories developed in this study explain why many women continue to face barriers despite policy reforms. They show that patriarchal norms, multiple overlapping disadvantages, low aspirations, and the digital divide all reduce women's chances of entering and completing higher education.

Overall, the study concludes that the biggest challenge is the gap between policy promises and actual implementation. To achieve the goals of NEP 2020, stronger implementation, greater awareness, and legally enforceable measures are needed to ensure that every woman can access higher education.

Policy Recommendations and Proposed Legislative Bill Framework

Based on the findings, new theories, and gaps identified in this study, the following policy recommendations and legislative framework are proposed. These are written in a format that could serve as the basis for a Bill to be introduced in the Lok Sabha or Rajya Sabha of India.

1. Proposed Bill: The Women's Higher Education Access and Equity Act, 2025

(A framework for guaranteeing women's right to higher education, removing barriers, and ensuring accountability in the implementation of gender equity provisions under NEP 2020 and beyond)

Preamble: WHEREAS the Constitution of India, through Articles 14, 15(3), 21, and 46, guarantees equality, prohibits discrimination, and directs the State to promote educational interests of weaker sections including women; AND WHEREAS women in India continue to face systemic barriers to higher education despite multiple policy initiatives over seven decades; AND WHEREAS the New Education Policy 2020 acknowledges the need for gender equity but lacks enforceable legal mechanisms; NOW THEREFORE, the Parliament of India enacts this Act to guarantee women's access to higher education, remove structural barriers, and

create enforceable accountability for gender equity in the education system.

Part I: Right to Higher Education for Women

Section 1: Every woman in India shall have the right to access publicly funded higher education without discrimination on grounds of gender, caste, class, religion, disability, geography, or marital status.

Section 2: No woman shall be denied admission to any publicly funded institution of higher education solely on grounds of marriage, pregnancy, caregiving responsibilities, or age.

Section 3: The central and state governments shall ensure that at least one institution of higher education is accessible within 25 km of every habitation with a population of 10,000 or more.

Part II: Financial Guarantee for Women's Education

Section 4: A Women's Higher Education Fund shall be established at the national level with an initial corpus of Rs. 10,000 crore, replenished annually, to provide full or partial fee waivers, living stipends, and learning material support to women from economically weaker sections, SC, ST, OBC, minority, and disabled categories.

Section 5: All women from families with annual income below Rs. 5 lakh shall be entitled to complete fee waiver for undergraduate programs at any publicly funded institution.

Section 6: A monthly learning stipend of Rs. 3,000 shall be provided to women from rural areas and disadvantaged communities pursuing higher education, to cover transportation, materials, and incidental costs.

Part III: Gender Inclusion Fund Operationalization

Section 7: The Gender Inclusion Fund mentioned in NEP 2020 shall be operationalized within 12 months of this Act, with annual disbursement of not less than Rs. 2,000 crore to states, specifically for women's higher education infrastructure, safety, and support services.

Section 8: States shall submit annual utilization reports for Gender Inclusion Fund allocations, subject to independent audit.

Part IV: Digital Access and Online Education

Section 9: Every woman enrolled in higher education shall be entitled to a free or subsidized digital device (tablet or laptop) and internet connectivity for the duration of her program.

Section 10: Institutions offering online or blended learning must ensure that all digital platforms are accessible, safe, and include mechanisms to prevent online harassment.

Part V: Mentoring, Role Models, and Aspiration Building

Section 11: Every higher education institution shall establish a Women's Mentoring Cell, providing every enrolled woman student with access to a trained mentor — preferably a woman professional or senior student.

Section 12: State governments shall organize annual Women's Education Awareness Campaigns in every district, featuring role models from diverse backgrounds who have benefited from higher education.

Section 13: Schools shall include career counseling and aspiration-building programs for girls from Class 8 onward, with special focus on higher education pathways.

Part VI: Safety and Institutional Environment

Section 14: Every institution of higher education shall provide safe, affordable hostel facilities for women students, with security arrangements and anti-harassment committees as mandated under the UGC (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal of Sexual Harassment) Regulations.

Section 15: Safe transportation arrangements shall be provided for women students commuting to institutions in rural and semi-urban areas, funded through the Gender Inclusion Fund.

Part VII: Monitoring, Accountability, and Enforcement

Section 16: A National Commission for Women's Higher Education shall be established as an

independent statutory body to monitor implementation of this Act, with the power to issue directives, conduct inspections, and recommend penalties.

Section 17: Every institution of higher education shall submit an annual Gender Equity Compliance Report to the Commission, including data on women's enrollment, retention, completion, and grievance redressal.

Section 18: Failure to comply with this Act shall result in withholding of public funding to the institution until compliance is achieved.

Section 19: A dedicated parliamentary committee — the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Women's Education — shall review the Commission's reports annually and submit recommendations to Parliament.

Part VIII: Special Provisions

Section 20: Women who were forced to discontinue their education due to marriage, pregnancy, or family pressure shall have the right to re-enter higher education at the point of discontinuation, with credit recognition for prior learning.

Section 21: Institutions shall provide crèche and childcare facilities for women students who are mothers, at subsidized or no cost.

Section 22: Women with disabilities shall receive additional support, including accessible infrastructure, assistive technology, and dedicated counselors.

2. Summary of Policy Recommendations

Area	Recommendation	Expected Outcome
Access Rights	Legal right to higher education for all women	No woman denied access on gender grounds
Financial Support	Women's Education Fund, fee waivers, stipends	Economic barriers removed for disadvantaged women
Gender Inclusion Fund	Mandatory operationalization with audits	Infrastructure and safety improvements
Digital Access	Free devices and connectivity for women students	Digital gender divide bridged
Mentoring	Women's Mentoring Cells + aspiration campaigns	Aspiration gap closed; role model effect activated
Safety	Mandatory hostels, transport, anti-harassment	Safe environment for women students
Accountability	National Commission + parliamentary oversight	Enforceable compliance and transparency
Re-entry Rights	Credit recognition for women returning after breaks	Marriage/motherhood no longer ends education

Table 11: Summary of Policy Recommendations — Women's Higher Education Access and Equity Act

Conclusion

This study concludes that NEP 2020 has a progressive vision for promoting women's access to higher education, but its implementation remains weak. Although the policy emphasizes gender

equity, inclusion, and flexible learning, many women are still unable to benefit because of low awareness, inadequate implementation, financial constraints, family responsibilities, and limited institutional support.

The findings reveal that 66% of women students are unaware of NEP 2020, and key initiatives such as the Gender Inclusion Fund are yet to be effectively implemented in many states. Women from socially and economically disadvantaged groups continue to face multiple barriers that reduce their chances of entering and completing higher education.

This study also introduces five new theoretical frameworks—the Educational Capability Denial Theory, Policy–Promise Performance Gap Theory, Patriarchal Filtration Theory, Digital Gender Divide Theory, and Aspiration–Capability Bridge Theory—to explain the gap between policy intentions and the actual experiences of women. These theories provide a new perspective for understanding the challenges affecting women's access to higher education.

To address these issues, the study proposes the Women's Higher Education Access and Equity Act, 2025, a legislative framework aimed at ensuring equal access, financial support, digital inclusion, mentoring, safety, and institutional accountability. Converting policy commitments into legally enforceable rights can help bridge the gap between policy and practice.

Overall, the study concludes that improving women's access to higher education requires more than a good policy. It requires effective implementation, adequate resources, continuous monitoring, and strong legal support. Only then can the vision of NEP 2020 be translated into meaningful educational opportunities for every woman in India.

Acknowledgment

The author sincerely thanks all the women students, educators, and community members who participated in this study and generously shared their experiences and insights. The author also expresses heartfelt gratitude to all mentors, research guides, and colleagues for their valuable guidance, encouragement, and support throughout the research process. Their contributions made this study possible.

Financial Support and Sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References (APA 7th Edition with Source Links)

1. Goswami, A. (2011). Pawan Agarwal, Indian Higher Education: Envisioning the Future.

New Delhi: SAGE Publications. 2009. 480 pages. Rs 895 [HB]. *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 8(1), 114-118.

2. Ministry of Education. (2020). All India survey on higher education 2019–20.
3. Deshpande, S. (2022). Higher education and the future of social inequality in India. *Inclusive Development in South Asia*, 185-214.).
4. AISHE report 2021–2022. Ministry of Education, Government of India. <https://aishe.gov.in/>
5. Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J. C. (1990). *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (Vol. 4). sage.
6. Chanana, K. (2011). Policy discourse and exclusion-inclusion of women in higher education in India. *Social Change*, 41(4), 535-552.
7. Akram, M., & Bazaz, R. Y. (2025). New Education Policy and Women's Education: A Critical Appraisal. In *New Education Policy, Sustainable Development and Nation Building* (pp. 170-186). Routledge India.
8. Lodhi, K., & Verma, P. (2025). Bridging the gender gap in education: The role of NEP 2020 in women empowerment. *Excellence International Journal of Education and Research*, 18(3), 93-98.
9. Nahar, M. (2022). For Promoting Women Empowerment: A Study of Role of National Education Policy of India 2020. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, 9(3), 773-784.
10. Ministry of Education. (2020). National Education Policy 2020. Government of India. <https://www.education.gov.in/>
11. National Sample Survey Office. (2022). NSS report on education. Government of India. <https://mospi.gov.in/>
12. Tilak, J. B. G. (2020). NEP 2020: A critical analysis. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 55(34). <https://www.epw.in/>
13. University Grants Commission. (2022). Annual report 2021–22. UGC. <https://www.ugc.gov.in>
14. UNESCO. (2021). Global education monitoring report: Non-state actors in education. UNESCO. <https://gem-report-2021.unesco.org/>

Appendix: Data Visualization Summary

The following tables summarize the key quantitative findings. These data can be visualized as bar graphs, pie charts, scatter plots, and line graphs for conference presentations.

Appendix A: Women's GER by Category

Category	Female GER %
All Women	28.5
General	32.1
OBC	26.3
SC	23.4
ST	18.9
Muslim Minority	16.2

Appendix B: Barrier Frequency Distribution

Barrier	% Reporting
Financial	62
Household duties	45
Lack of info	42
Family resistance	38
No digital access	36
Safety concerns	29
No nearby college	31
Early marriage	24

Appendix C: Barriers vs. Completion Rate

Barriers Faced	Completion Rate %
0-1	78
2-3	52
4-5	23
6+	7

Appendix D: NEP 2020 Awareness Data

Indicator	% of Women
Heard of NEP	34
Know provisions	12
Believe it helps	58
Saw actual change	8
Never heard	66