



Bridging the Divide: NEP 2020 as the Catalyst for Women's Educational Empowerment and the Realization of SDG 5 (Gender Equality)

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ABSTRACT

The worldwide goal of gender equality, as outlined in Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5), recognizes education as the foremost means for women's empowerment. In India, despite considerable historical progress, women persist in encountering multifaceted obstacles, encompassing entrenched traditional roles, early marriage, and systemic marginalization in society and economy (Mir & P.K. 2024). This review paper critically analyzes the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 as a transformative regulatory framework designed to align national efforts with the 2030 Agenda (NEP 2020 & SDG Report 2025). Utilizing a qualitative research design, this study synthesizes primary sources—including the NEP 2020 policy document and the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025—with secondary scholarly literature. The analysis indicates that despite NEP 2020's strong measures, such as the Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF), aimed at Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), there are still major challenges, such as significant gaps in implementation and a "learning crisis" in retaining girls in school at the higher secondary level.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Gender Equality, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Gender Inclusive Fund (GIF), Educational Equity.

INTRODUCTION

Women are the most important part of a society's foundation and structure. They are very important in setting cultural conventions since they live in countries where men are in a position of power. Providing them the ability is a key part of sustainable development that has a big impact on families and national economies. Educated women improve society by pushing for basic rights, creating healthier children, and helping the economy flourish. So, they are the primary

individuals to establish communities in a rising country. The Indian government has introduced in place a number of programs and efforts to help women become more empowered, educated and well-rounded. These initiatives include a wide range of areas, including education, research, economic independence, and social welfare. For example, Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao, Rani Laxmibai Atmaraksha Prashikshan, Sukanya Samridhi Yojana, and the Maternity Benefit Act. Nevertheless, women's empowerment is acknowledged as a complex and vital component of worldwide social development and gender equality (Kaur, 2025). This shows that gender equality is not just a problem in one place, but a basic building block that has to be in place for the whole world to go forward. It entails a transforming process that empowers women to claim control over their lives, make strategic decisions, and engage comprehensively in economic, political, and cultural domains (Kabeer, 2005; Kaur, 2025). This shows that real empowerment comes from moving from a condition of not being able to choose to one of having the capacity to choose, which lets women set their own objectives and work toward them. Empowerment is not only a goal for a specific region; it is an essential prerequisite for sustainable development that generates a "ripple effect," enhancing the quality of life for families, communities, and national economies (Kaur, 2025). This viewpoint stresses the strategic value of women's education and agency, as their personal advancement acts as a driver for extensive prosperity and enduring improvement throughout all societal strata. The world is in a "global development emergency" right now, even though countries have made promises to work together for decades. Only 35% of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) objectives are on schedule to be reached by 2030. Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) is all about ending discrimination, violence, and harmful practices including child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) in order to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls (SDGs Report, 2025).

Education is the most important component of this process of empowerment. It is widely regarded as the most powerful tool for achieving gender equality, as it enhances women's capabilities, self-confidence, and agency to participate in decision-making (Kaur, 2025). UNESCO's empirical evidence indicates that each additional year of education may enhance a woman's future income by as much as 20%, emphasizing that education is an intrinsic rather than merely an instrumental objective (Kabeer, 2005; Kaur, 2025). However, the global landscape remains uneven; while internet connectivity and primary school completion rates have risen, approximately 272 million children and youth remained out of school in 2023, with persistent inequalities driven by wealth, geography, and gender (SDGs Report 2025).

In India, the history of women's education has been a complicated process of change (Mir & P.K, 2024). This complex change shows an important move back from ancient times, when prominent individuals like Gargi and Maitreyi had high-level intellectual discourse, to the Middle Ages, when society and religion limited formal learning in favor of domestic roles. However, the medieval period witnessed a sharp decline in educational opportunities for women due to societal and religious constraints that prioritized domestic roles and limited access to formal learning. The

British colonial era brought about important changes by contributing to people like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, and after India got independence, the constitution and the Right to Education Act (2009) brought the issue back into focus. However, long-standing social and cultural norms and economic barriers still make it hard for everyone to get an education (Mir & P.K, 2024). Traditional gender roles often dictate that girls prioritize household chores and caregiving over their studies, and the heavy burden of unpaid care work (women spend 2.5 times more hours than men) remains a significant barrier to their educational attainment (Mir & P.K, 2024; SDGs Report, 2025).

Current data reveals a significant "learning crisis" and retention bottleneck within the Indian education system (Bansal & Bewtra, 2022; Gochhayat & Ravindran, 2025). This underscores that despite massive efforts toward universal enrollment, the quality of learning and the ability of the system to maintain its student base remain critical challenges that require more than just incremental fixes. The majority of kids go to primary school, but as they grow older, fewer of them stay in school (NEP 2020). This "leakage" in the educational pipeline demonstrates that schools usually are no longer accessible or helpful when kids move up to higher grades, where economic demands and family expectations start to clash with official learning. According to U-DISE+ data, about 12.6% of students drop out of secondary school (Classes 9–10). This statistic serves as a stark reminder that the early secondary years are a high-risk period where institutional shortcomings and student disengagement culminate in a significant loss of human potential. The situation is even worse for girls in some states, like Bihar and Assam, where the dropout rate for girls is much higher than for boys (Gochhayat & Ravindran, 2025). This gendered disparity indicates that educational outcomes vary across the country and are strongly affected by regional socio-cultural norms. This means that targeted interventions like the Gender Inclusion Fund are needed to help adolescent girls in these areas overcome the specific challenges they face. Research shows that the dropout rate for girls aged 16 to 18 is much higher (0.231) than for boys (0.192) (Bansal & Bewtra, 2022; Gochhayat & Ravindran, 2025). This suggests that as girls get older, socio-economic pressures, such as the lack of good infrastructure for menstrual hygiene and the risk of early marriage, force them out of school. To address these systemic inequities, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 was introduced as the first education policy of the 21st century, aiming to reconfigure the entire system to support the targets of SDG 4 and SDG 5. The vision of "Equitable and Inclusive Education: Learning for All" in NEP 2020 marks a major change from small changes to a complete overhaul of the system. The strategy aims to make sure that no kid misses out on a chance to study because of their birth or background by creating the Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) and putting the needs of Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) first. This review paper examines how NEP 2020 acts as a catalyst for closing the gender gap by linking national educational goals with global mandates for women's empowerment.

RATIONALE

The urgent need to assess whether NEP 2020's regulatory and structural mechanisms can transform policy goals into measurable empowering achievements for women and girls drives this study. India has improved enrollment, but the gender disparity in retention and higher education participation shows structural issues. Several key variables in the educational and social context need this research:

1. **To close the funding gap, use the Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF):** The Gender Inclusion Fund, a historic move toward providing equal and high-quality education to females and transgender children, is one of the key motivations for this study. Due to poor menstrual hygiene facilities, almost 20% of Indian girls drop out of school when their periods start (Bansal & Bewtra, 2022). The GIF prioritizes gender-segregated bathrooms, menstrual hygiene supplies, and bicycles to help female children enter education. This study highlights the necessity to analyze how these monies are distributed and if they remove the physical impediments that cause high dropout rates.
2. **Bridging Intersectionality and SEDGs Divide:** NEP 2020 recognizes women's presence in all underrepresented groups, with inequalities exacerbated for those in SEDGs, such as SC, ST, and migrant communities. ST enrollment dropped from 10.6% in elementary to 6.8% in upper secondary. These groups' female pupils fell much more. Studying the policy's advice to create Special Education Zones (SEZs) in locations with significant SEDG populations and target schemes toward females in these groups is crucial (NEP, 2020; Bansal & Bewtra, 2022). To understand how the policy tackles these multi-dimensional hurdles, targeted interventions like upgrading Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs) to Grade 12 must be examined.
3. **Enhancing Agency via Vocational and Teaching Methods:** Traditional Indian educational approaches reinforce gender stereotypes through a "hidden curriculum" portraying females as docile and modest, while boys are seen as forceful (Kabeer, 2005). This article examines how NEP 2020's planned curricular and pedagogical reforms—such as early vocational exposure, "bagless days," and the elimination of "hard separations" between vocational and academic streams—enhance female students' personal autonomy. Early study shows that vocational training boosts female students' self-confidence and job goals, which empower them.
4. **The Teacher is the Heart of Inclusion:** The policy emphasizes the teacher as the key to major reforms (NEP 2020). A teacher's excitement and role dedication create a welcoming classroom for all kids (Kundu, 2018). How NEP 2020's gender sensitization workshops for educators may break stereotypes and provide a safe space free from harassment and intimidation must be assessed.
5. **Global creative Finance Trends:** This study's rationale is the growing trend towards creative finance for gender equality. Gender Bonds are crucial to channeling private

resources into women's empowerment programs in underdeveloped countries, where gender equality is underfunded by US\$420 billion (UN Women Case Study Series, 2025). Iceland issued the first sovereign gender bond to support care and eradicate violence, setting a worldwide standard (UN Women Case Study Series, 2025). How NEP 2020 aligns India's education finance with global trends like gender-responsive budgeting and precise resource monitoring is crucial. This will provide long-term finance (SDGs Report, 2025).

Finally, this assessment is current and important since it reveals structural and socio-cultural friction areas that must be addressed to maximize NEP 2020. This research uses SDG 5 to evaluate the policies and give an evidence-based framework for making gender parity a non-negotiable educational result in the next age (UN Women Case Study Series, 2025).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study utilizes a qualitative research design to synthesize primary and secondary sources. Primary source analysis involves a critical review of the NEP 2020 policy document and the Sustainable Development Goals Report 2025 to map national tenets against global indicators. Secondary source evaluation incorporates findings from scholarly literature and reports, such as U-DISE+ and NSSO, to analyze gendered enrollment and dropout dynamics.

FINDINGS

1. Conceptual and Structural Consistency with SDG 5

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is closely related to Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5). It is about lifelong learning, digital inclusion, and getting rid of bias. The Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) is a significant element of this alignment. It is a revolutionary regulatory mechanism that seeks to enhance the nation's capability to ensure all females and transgender children have equitable access to quality education (NEP, 2020; Bansal & Bewtra, 2022). This is a historic change in Indian policy that recognizes gender as a non-binary spectrum and sets up a particular monetary mechanism to make sure that the promise of "Learning for All" is backed by actual funds. The policy alters the whole education system to help the 2030 Agenda. It doesn't create slight adjustments; it makes significant changes (NEP, 2020). The strategy recognizes that to achieve global standards for gender equality, both institutional culture and physical infrastructure requires a comprehensive redesign, emphasizing "systemic transformation" above gradual reform. The GIF helps states carry out targets set by the federal government, which is in line with SDG Target 5.c, which encourages the improvement of laws and policies that promote gender equality (Bansal & Bewtra, 2022). This framework for working together between the national goal and the state-level execution is a deliberate work to make gender equity a non-negotiable operational mandate throughout all of the entire nation's diverse regions.

2. Reducing The Many Barriers To Retention

The study shows that female students in India have an extensive issue with retention, as the dropout rate for 16–18-year-olds rises to 0.231, which is much higher than the rate for men,

which is 0.192 (Gochhayat & Ravindran, 2025). This important piece of information shows that there is a "leaky pipeline" in women's education. During late adolescence, socio-economic constraints like the weight of unpaid care labor or the risk of early marriage become stronger, which means that a lot of human potential is lost. Results indicate that over 20% of girls discontinue their education entirely with the first signs of menstruation due to inadequate school facilities for menstrual hygiene (Bansal & Bewtra, 2022). This depressing conclusion shows that women's empowerment is often blocked by fundamental biological requirements and infrastructure. For example, without fixing physical barriers like cleanliness and private toilets, theoretical educational rights can't be moved into regular classroom attendance.

To help overcome these obstacles, the GIF makes the following possible:

- **Infrastructure And Sanitation:** Having separate bathrooms for men and women, regular supply of menstrual hygiene products, incinerators, and vending machines for sanitary pads (Bansal & Bewtra, 2022). Giving these fundamental services makes ensuring that a girl's biological requirements will not stand in the way of her education.
- **Safety & Access:** Programs that let kids ride bikes and set up walking groups make it safer and more comfortable for parents, which makes females more likely to join in even if it's only for a short distance (NEP, 2020; Bansal & Bewtra, 2022). Parents are more willing to let their girls keep going to school if they feel they are safe on the way to school.
- **Financial incentives:** conditional cash transfers, stipends for girls with special needs (CWSN), and free textbooks and uniforms to aid with the "hidden costs" of school (Bansal & Bewtra, 2022). Lowering the cost of attending to school makes it easier for impoverished families to choose education over labor for their daughters.

3. **Making The Agency Stronger By Changing Vocational And Educational Systems**

The NEP 2020-mandated early vocational exposure, highlighted by the 10-day "bagless period" for Grades 6–8, reveals a favorable correlation with greater self-confidence, employment objectives, and personal agency among female students (NEP, 2020; Bansal & Bewtra, 2022). Girls feel more in charge of their future professions when they learn useful skills early on. The policy also talks about teaching that is sensitive to gender. Most schools have started to use gender-neutral language in the classroom to break down stereotypes (NEP, 2020; Bansal & Bewtra, 2022). Changing the way teachers talk makes all students feel like they can do any career or function. It is crucial to hire high-quality female teachers from Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) since these teachers can assist females go to school more often and are good role models (NEP, 2020; Bansal & Bewtra, 2022). Young girls get the courage to dream big and keep studying when they see successful women who are like them.

DISCUSSION

The results show that NEP 2020 has a strong theoretical basis for reaching SDG 5, but it is not working well because of big gaps in implementation and social and cultural friction points.

1. **The Learning Crisis and Structural Friction** : Even though the GIF was set up, real-world data shows that many schools still don't provide hostels and creches for teachers, which are very important for keeping and promoting women (Bansal & Bewtra, 2022). This indicates that having a fund isn't enough if schools still fail to provide the basic amenities that women need to work there comfortably. The "learning crisis" is especially severe for girls from SEDGs, as enrollment falls for Scheduled Tribe (ST) pupils reduce from 10.6% at the primary level to 6.8% at the higher secondary level (NEP, 2020; Bansal & Bewtra, 2022). This shows that females from tribal groups are most likely to drop out of school as they go up in grades. This suggests that an intersectional divide where social, economic, and geographic factors make gender disparity worse (NEP, 2020). This indicates that a girl's education is significantly more difficult because of where she lives, her family's economic situation, and her background.
2. **Breaking down social and cultural norms:** The debate states that poverty and traditional gender norms are still the main reasons why people fails to enroll. This illustrates that what others expect from girls frequently matters more than what they want to learn. In India, women spend 2.5 times as many hours on unpaid caregiving and household chores as men do. This makes it hard for girls to focus on schoolwork (SDGs Report, 2025; Gochhayat & Ravindran, 2025). This shows that females often don't have enough time to study since they have to do so much household duties. The policy encourages conversations between social workers and parents about child marriage and negative perspectives on women's work; however, the study shows that there is still resistance to progressive gender norms in rural areas (Bansal & Bewtra, 2022; UN Women Case Study Series, 2025). This means that that it requires a long time to abolish traditional practices in villages, even when the government tries to encourage people to come up with of new ideas.
3. **The Function of Creative Finance:** The study investigates the creation of innovative financial strategies to mitigate the global annual funding shortfall of US\$420 billion for gender equality (UN Women Case project Series, 2025). This shows that we really need to discover new ways of receiving money because existing methods have failed well enough to help us attain our goals. The issuing of the world's first sovereign gender bond by Iceland sets an example for how capital markets may help initiatives that eliminate violence against women and move care work around (UN Women Case study Series, 2025). This example illustrates that governments may utilize unique financial measures to directly pay for projects that assist women. The GIF in India is a comparable strategy change toward gender-responsive budgeting, but it only works if resources are recorded precisely money gets distributed well at the district level (Bansal & Bewtra, 2022). This implies that the fund will only work if the money is handled well and given to the right places in the community. In conclusion, NEP 2020 acts as a catalyst by providing the necessary resources (GIF, infrastructure) for empowerment. However, the transition towards agency and outcomes requires a collective effort to professionalize the teaching profession and maintain gender parity as a crucial educational objective across all

Indian states (Kaur, 2025; Gochhayat & Ravindran, 2025). This shows that the reform provides people the tools they need, but real change only comes when everyone works together to make gender equality the top priority in every classroom.

SUGGESTIONS

To properly use the Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) on the ground, a multi-faceted approach is needed that takes into consideration physical infrastructure, financial incentives, social and cultural norms, and structural responsibility. The following proposals for empowering girls and women in Indian society are based on the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and best practices from throughout the world:

1. GETTING RID OF PHYSICAL AND STRUCTURAL BARRIERS TO ACCESS

- **Targeted Infrastructure for Menstrual Hygiene:** The building of gender-segregated toilets with a regular supply of menstrual hygiene goods, such as sanitation vending machines and incinerators, must be a top priority for implementation on the ground. This is very important because over 20% of females in India drop out of school when they reach puberty because the infrastructure is not good for them.
- **Improving Safe Transportation:** States could use the money to buy bikes or set up cycling and walking organizations that people in the community can join. These strategies have been shown to get more girls involved by making parents feel safer and more comfortable, especially in rural regions where schools are far away.
- **More residential facilities:** Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs) should be improved and expanded to give girls from low-income families a good education until Grade 12.

2. ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AND FINANCIAL INCENTIVES

- **Direct Financial Support:** The plan should include conditional cash transfers to encourage parents to send their daughters to school and targeted scholarships for girls from Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs).
- **Support for Vulnerable Groups:** GIF funds should be used to pay stipends to girls with special needs (CWSN) from Class 1 to Class 12 and to give free textbooks and uniforms to girls from Class 1 to Class 8 who are below the poverty line.
- **Innovative Financing:** India might look into using the GIF to test out gender-responsive budgeting and new financial tools that direct private money into projects that help women.

3. BREAKING DOWN POINTS OF FRICTION IN SOCIETY AND CULTURE

- **Involve the community and parents:** Social workers should talk to parents regularly to fight detrimental attitudes including putting household duties ahead of schooling, seeing women as bad workers, and marrying children.
- **Self-Defense and Confidence Building:** For females in grades 6 through 12, use the Rani Laxmibai Atmaraksha Prashikshan (self-defense training) to help them feel safer and more confident.

- **Teacher as Role Model:** GIF should help hire high-quality female teachers from SEDGs who can understand the local language and be good role models for girls, which will motivate them to go to school every day.

4. CHANGES IN TEACHING AND LEARNING AND IN SCHOOLS

- **Required Gender Sensitization:** All schools should have gender sensitization workshops for teachers and administrators to help them understand how to manage a classroom that is open to everyone and to get rid of gender stereotypes.
- **Vocational Integration:** Require early vocational exposure (such "bagless days") to help female students feel more in control of their lives and their professional goals, which are important for long-term empowerment.
- **Workplace Support for Educators:** To keep more women in the education field, the budget should be used to provide creches for teachers and staff so they may lead in the classroom while also taking care of their children.

5. TARGETING BY GEOGRAPHY AND BY INTERSECTION

- **Special Education Zones (SEZs):** Areas with a lot of SEDGs should be made SEZs, where GIF resources are "pumped" in as supplementary resources to bring together different schemes and improve backward areas.
- **Inclusive Digitalization:** The GIF should support digital literacy training and give rural women entrepreneurs access to e-commerce platforms (like the "Buy from Women" initiative) to help them reach more customers.

CONCLUSION

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a big change for Indian schools. It goes beyond small changes to make the whole system work better for everyone, with the goal of achieving gender equality. The policy aligns national goals with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5). It creates a strong regulatory framework that sees education as the most important factor in women's empowerment and inclusive development. The creation of the Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) is a major step forward in breaking down the many barriers that prevent females from getting an education. It focuses on issues like infrastructure, safety, and money that have historically led to high dropout rates among teenage girls. The policy also recognizes that achieving true equality necessitates the rectification of intersectional injustices encountered by women in Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). The theoretical connection between NEP 2020 and worldwide mandates is robust; nonetheless, the shift from policy to practice is significantly contingent upon effective implementation at the grassroots level and the professionalization of the teacher's role as a facilitator of an unbiased classroom environment. India's success in achieving SDG 5 will depend on its ability to efficiently distribute targeted financing, bridge the digital divide, and demolish entrenched socio-cultural norms that restrict female agency, especially while the globe confronts a "global development emergency." In the end, making gender

equality a non-negotiable goal in education is not only the right thing to do, but also a smart way to invest in the future of the whole country.

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Cite this Article:

Razia Azhar, " Bridging the Divide: NEP 2020 as the Catalyst for Women's Educational Empowerment and the Realization of SDG 5 (Gender Equality)" *Shiksha Samvad International Open Access Peer-Reviewed & Refereed Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, ISSN: 2584-0983 (Online), Volume 03, Issue 03, pp.178-187, March-2026. Journal URL: <https://shikshasamvad.com/>



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**Bridging the Divide: NEP 2020 as the Catalyst for
Women's Educational Empowerment and the
Realization of SDG 5 (Gender Equality)**

Published in 'Shiksha Samvad' Peer-Reviewed and Refereed
Research Journal and E-ISSN: 2584-0983(Online), Volume-03,
Issue-03, Month March 2026, Impact Factor-RPRI-3.87.

Dr. Neeraj Yadav
Editor-In-Chief

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DOI:- <https://doi.org/10.64880/shikshasamvad.v3i3.20>