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Unfolding the potentials of women including girls and children

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Abstract

Education is the fundamental element required to achieve human potential and the develop an equitable and just society. There is a need to provide education to all sections of society, irrespective of caste, creed, gender, religion etc. The new National Education Policy 2020 states that gender based bias often affects an individual's ability to develop and hampers the nation's growth, innovation and progress.

Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar, the architect of Indian constitution, also believed in measuring the progress of a community by the degree of progress which its women have achieved. Government should, therefore, ensure equal opportunity to learn and excel for all Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs).

In the present context the gap between learning outcomes and what is required must be bridged by undertaking major reforms that bring the highest quality, equity and integrity into the education system from kindergarten to higher education.

The constitution of India has provided equal rights and opportunities to men and women. Despite several policies at the Centre and state level women continue to face many hurdles in education. Under the fast changing conditions in the country in recent times, increased attention is being paid to education of women but problems still persist. Besides sociological issues, infrastructure and ground level problems make women's education an uphill task. The problems include availability of safe transport, lack of financial support, lack of social consciousness, lack of proper facilities, unwillingness of female teachers to serve in rural areas and lack of enthusiasm and interest of those in charge of education.

These hardships obstruct the wave of change in society. An objective evaluation of earlier efforts is required so that better and more effective approaches can be used. The government must work with a strong will power to provide better infrastructure, environment, funds, curriculum, teachers training and other necessities.

A survey recently released by the Ministry of Health found that there is a direct relationship between the nutritional status of children and the education of their mothers. Many development economists too have studied subject how better education enables women to emerge as change agents.

Keywords: Unfolding, women, girls and children, National Education Policy 2020

Introduction

Education is the fundamental element required to achieve human potential and the develop an equitable and just society. There is a need to provide education to all sections of society, irrespective of caste, creed, gender, religion etc. The new National Education Policy 2020 states that gender based bias often affects an individual's ability to develop and hampers the nation's growth, innovation and progress.

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Under the colonial rule steps were taken for the education of girls by Christian missionaries and Indian social reformers such as Jyotibharao Phule, Mahatma Gandhi, Pandita Ramabai, Ram Manohar Lohia and so on. After Independence, the first National Education Policy was introduced in 1968 and it was proposed that education of girls should receive emphasis, not only on grounds of social justice, but also because it accelerates social transformation. During 1951 to 1981, the percentage of literacy among women improved from 7.93 per cent to 24.82 per cent. However, in absolute numbers, illiterate women have increased during this period from 158.7 million to 241.7 million (excluding Assam). 57 per cent of the illiterate population and 70 per cent of the non-enrolled children of school stage are girls. In spite of the effort made so far, the education system has not been able to make sufficient contribution towards women's equality. The National Education Policy of 1986 advocated time bound elementary education for girls and adult education for women with vocational studies, professional studies, technical studies and reorganisation of other educational activity for the overall development of women.

In this new National Education Policy 2020 there is a provision for equitable access to quality education for all students. There is also assurance that some steps would be taken by government to bridge the gender gap. These steps include clear targets for higher Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) for SEDGs (gender identities are major category in it) and enhancing gender balance in admission to higher education. The government has also planned to provide vocational and technical education to women. For women this is a crucial step towards becoming empowered and independent.

Despite some progressive provisions in the policy, which promises an overhaul of the education system-the first such move in 34 years-such as a Gender Inclusion Fund toward equitable education for girls as well as transgender students and a substantial increase in public investment to bring education spending to 6% of gross domestic product, there are growing concerns about its implications on girls' education.

"I fear it will be harder to convince families to send their children to school, because schools will become unaffordable and girls will start dropping out. Child marriage and child labor will increase,"

I am referring to a provision in the new policy that boosts public-private partnership in education-with this, there are concerns that many schools will become privatized and will no longer be free and accessible to all. Low-income families

will not be able to afford school fees, which may impact girls more.

survey of 500 families in their area revealed that just 8% girls have access to a device.

most of the Dalit girls will be left behind due to the new policy's stress on digital education, without any reference to the infrastructure work needed to make this shift.

A document by the National Commission For Protection of Child Rights indicates that 40% of girls in the 15-18 age bracket are out of school. Accessibility, affordability, and patriarchal social structures are the most significant barriers. "A whole generation is at the risk of being wiped out because the policy is based on exclusion," Exclusion happens on many levels. For example, the policy doesn't address the issue of gender, said Jyotsna Jha, director at the Centre for Budget and Policy Studies.

"It says the Gender Inclusion Fund will be available to states based on priorities decided by the center. What does that mean? It doesn't talk about girls' education, only gender identity and sensitivity, respect for women, the idea of sacrifice but it undermines the whole issue of gender discrimination and reforms for equity in education."

The New Education Policy (2020) is a historic effort and first omnibus policy after thirty-four years, under Modi regime. The purpose of NEP is a framework to guide the development of education in the country.

This is India's third policy which replaces the 1986 NEP. According to the Government, the NEP 2020 is formulated after having considered over 2 lakh suggestions from different levels of local self-bodies, 2.5 lakh gram panchayats, 6,600 blocks, 6,000 ULBs and 676 districts with the aim of holistic productivity and contributing citizens for building an equitable, inclusive, and plural society with an increased Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) of 50% by 2035.

The National Education Policy, 2020 has conveyed the structural change in the education system which aims to make India the global knowledge superpower ensuring equity and Inclusion

Equity and Inclusion

The aim of equity and inclusion is now at the heart of new NEP. In the fields of higher or school education, inclusion involves restructuring the whole system with the aim of ensuring the wide range of educational opportunities; this includes curriculum, pedagogy and recreational opportunities, etc. The policy is designed to avoid segregation and isolation of ethnic and linguistic minorities, those with disabilities and also those who face learning difficulties due to language barriers and are at the risk of educational exclusion.

NEP 2020 has set the goal for all to be authoritative with the command of different languages at different levels of education

Gender equality and inclusion

NEP aims to ensure equity and inclusion in and through education by addressing all forms of exclusion and marginalization, disparity, vulnerability and inequality in education access, participation, retention and completion and in learning outcomes.

Gender equality and inclusion are vital in achieving these aims and leaving no one behind. Education needs a greater focus on accessibility, equity and quality. Remarkable signs of progress have been noticed in the past few years in respect of female participation up to secondary level. Such progress could be because of Government's policies and

programmes run for girl child-like “Beti Bachao Beti Padhao”, “Sukanya and Balika Samridhi Yojana” and many more.

But girls’ enrolment is lower than that of boys at upper secondary education. Gross Education Ratio during 2015-2016 stands only 23.4% against 25.4% for boys in higher education and the gap is visible at all the social categories.

Now, NEP’s biggest effort is to bring gender sensitivity as an integral part of curriculum and gender inclusion fund to be raised upto class 12 which covers all the socio-economically disadvantaged groups and also the transgenders.

The condition of the primary education at government schools, the dropout rates of girls has put the country on the back foot in education. But the new NEP has given more focus to school learning with a new way of coping multi-disciplinary programs and focuses on the 21st-century skills in teaching, learning and assessment.

Alternative and innovative education centres will led to multiple pathways of effective learning and widespread participation of students of different groups.

India has been pushing for gender equality in the education system. Every child deserves to reach their full potential, but gender inequalities in their lives and in the lives of those who care for them hinder this reality. Gender inequality affects the lives of all genders, however, statistically, girls are more disadvantaged. Lack of emphasis on and awareness about menstruation and menstrual hygiene management (MHM), poverty, customs, substandard school structure, brutality, and outrage among peers, vulnerability are among the multiple factors which contribute to the gender differences in enrollment and the attendance rates.

Previous studies have shown that the physical environment of schools does not adequately support the needs of girls to manage their menstrual days, and does not provide strong social and emotional support. As we try to understand the importance levied by the government on menstrual hygiene management in the recently released National Education Policy (NEP).

One of the understated areas is to understand how schools can provide the social and physical environment to support the transition of girls through the adolescent phase. Boys and girls have different experiences of puberty; post-puberty girls need to manage menstrual blood every month. Most of the schools assume menstrual hygiene management (MHM) to be implicit in their Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) strategies.

The purpose is to understand the attention paid to menstrual hygiene and menstrual management needs through an analysis of the recently released NEP 2020. We try to check the policy coverage by checking the inclusion of language and keywords used in the policy document (such as Menstruation, MHM, WASH, etc.), which will include different aspects of menstrual hygiene management. With the launch of new SDGs, Goal 4 integrates genders into policies, teacher education, and a comprehensive educational environment. Thus, it is essential to understand the attention paid to MHM in the NEP, which can be considered as a reflection of the government’s concern about the cause.

I further checked the gender-related keywords in the policy document. The word “girl” has been used eight times in the policy document. However, it is mostly used (a) to show the girl child as an underrepresented group (b) to provide them a quality education. Similarly, the word “women” and “female” have been used to show them in a vulnerable

position. The policy document talks about starting a gender sensitisation program for teachers, which will focus on how to teach students with disabilities. However, it doesn’t speak about explicitly taking care of the needs of girl students in the class, especially menstrual hygiene management. It doesn’t even talk about sensitising the non-teaching staff about the unique needs of girl students. The policy also talks about starting a gender inclusion fund and merely mentions about providing quality education to girls and transgender students but does not talk about the usage of this fund to manage their unique needs for menstruation.

However, it includes sanitation-related keywords, including toilet, water, sanitation, and hygiene. It includes the word “toilet” and “sanitation” and associates it with the provisioning of sanitation and clean working toilets. These findings suggest that usage of the word “toilet” and “sanitation” are a mere reflection of the needs for school infrastructure rather than focusing on the psychological needs of the female students. Another critical component for menstrual management, along with the provision of sanitation facilities, is the word “water.” It includes the provisioning of clean water for drinking for all individuals. However, it does not mention the usage of clean water by the girls and female teachers in the school to manage menstruation.

Despite being more gender-responsive as compared to other education policies, NEP 2020 fails to address the unique needs of girls, which is crucial in bridging the gender inequality gap.

Besides, NEP has an ambitious target of 50% Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in higher education by 2035, an essential vision to constructively utilise a large number of the youth population. Currently, it is only about 27%. To attain this, it aims to add 3.5 crore new seats to HEIs.

Curbing commercialisation of education is another major point of NEP. Private HEIs can’t charge arbitrarily and there will be a capping on the fee. All charges set by private HEIs will be transparent and fully disclosed. All education institutions will be held to similar standards of audit and disclosure as a no for ‘profit’ entity. Surpluses, if any, will be reinvested in the educational sector.

Overall, NEP 2020 has lofty vision and goals and will prove to be capable of meeting the needs and challenges of India in the 21st century. The only challenge at hand would be its implementation

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