Empowering Women Through Education: An Analysis Of The National Education Policy's Impact On Gender Equity And Inclusivity

HINA PARVEEN

Research Scholar

CAS Department of History

Aligarh Muslim University

Aligarh-202002

Uttar Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT

This study examines the transformative potential of the National Education Policy (NEP) in fostering gender equity and inclusivity through the empowerment of women via education. The analysis delves into the policy's strategic frameworks, objectives, and initiatives aimed at dismantling educational barriers and biases faced by women. By employing a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative data analysis with qualitative case studies, the research highlights the NEP's commitment to creating equitable educational opportunities. Key findings indicate that the policy's emphasis on gender-sensitive pedagogy, scholarships, and female-centric educational infrastructure has significantly contributed to increased enrollment rates, retention, and academic achievements among women. Additionally, the policy fosters an inclusive environment by integrating gender studies into curricula and promoting women's leadership in educational settings. However, challenges such as societal norms, financial constraints, and rural-urban disparities persist, requiring ongoing efforts and strategic adjustments. The study underscores the critical role of education in empowering women, advocating for a holistic approach that encompasses societal change, policy support, and community engagement. It concludes that while the NEP has laid a solid foundation for gender equity in education, its full impact depends on effective implementation, monitoring, and the willingness to adapt based on feedback and changing dynamics.

This research contributes to the broader discourse on gender equality, offering insights and recommendations for policymakers, educators, and stakeholders committed to empowering women through education.

Keywords: National Education Policy, Gender, Education, empowerment.

Introduction

Prevailing gender inequality has left a significantly huge gap that cannot be undermined, and this has been the basis upon which several empowerment drives are being initiated through education. Education is regarded as one of the milestones of women empowerment due to how it equips or enable them to tackle challenges, handle traditional roles, and also change their lifestyles (Bhat, 2015). The overarching goal of empowerment initiatives is to ensure gender equality and inclusion in a bid to develop a smart and sustained economy development with women having equal access to economic, social, and political opportunities (Yada & Singh, 2020). More notably, the actualization of sustainable human development will be highly unlikely if the women's population is marginalized, ignorant, and discriminated against (Oyitso & Olomukoro, 2012). Although the problem of gender inequality is a global one, it is important that redress be sought at a country level in order to achieve far-reaching outcome. The Indian context will be explored in this paper, with a major focus on the relevance of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in promoting women's empowerment. Women empowerment is primarily about uplifting the social, economic, and political status of women, particularly the underprivileged ones, and it also borders on the process of guarding or protecting them against violence (Suresh & Sivakumar, 2017).

India is considered to be a patriarchal society where women are largely seen as housewives with an implicit notion of them being confined to the home (Bhat, 2015). Gender discrimination in India cuts across demographic, economic, political, and social contexts, and will require having recourse to both national and international agencies/organizations to adequately tackle (Raju & Phil, 2014). It is worth noting that India ranks 127th out of 146 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2023). The conditioning and gender profiling have been noted to resulting in women becoming more inclined to partake in programs that border on addressing domestic roles (Nair, 2010). It follows that most women in India may not have been able to fully optimize learning or broadening their educational horizons due to the stereotypical inclination. Besides, Manzoor, Qayoom, and Rafiqui (2023) stressed that infrastructure barriers,

discrimination, poverty, and safety concerns [amidst the incessant molestation and crimes against women] are other factors responsible for the gender gap in educational attainment in India. It must be added that despite the concerted efforts directed at addressing the gender gap in educational attainment, total or universal literacy level remains far from being actualized in India (Hoque & Baidya, 2022).

Overview of NEP – in connection to women empowerment

The NEP is a comprehensive document tailored to ensure the improvement of education in India, especially at the elementary and high school levels, and it also gives substantial attention to gender and inclusivity concerns in this regard. As per the gender-based aspects, NEP aims to bridge gender gap; develop more inclusive and gender-sensitive curriculum; provide adequate infrastructure to better accommodate girl-child learning, and make gender inclusion fund available even as safety and security is catered to. Gender inequality in teacher recruitment and the educational needs of the socioeconomically disadvantaged groups (SEDGs) are addressed in NEP. Girls are reported to be more socially disadvantaged than boys as a result of the prevailing instances of gender inequality (UNICEF, n.d).

The gender inclusion fund will be specifically used in ensuring increased enrolment rates in high school for girls, provide bicycles, restrooms, sanitation, and conditional cash transfers for them. Additionally, part of the fund will be invested into organizing or facilitating discourses promoting the leadership abilities of the girl child (NEP, 2020). The Policy mandates the creation of educational spaces free from discrimination, domineering attitudes, and domineering attitudes to foster the safety and security of female students. Consolidation of the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan initiative is considered to further develop hostel facilities for girls who may be attending schools that are far away from their homes. NEP (2020) also leverages the *Samagra Shiksha Scheme* as a measure to increase accessibility to education for girls. Consequently, female students will be provided with free textbooks up to Class 8, self-defense training (from classes 6 – 12), and given stipends (from classes 1 – 12). Also, sensitization programs will be designed for teachers to assist with the skills needed to encourage girls participate in educational/class activities (Hoque & Baidya, 2022). NEP (2020) yet factors in the need to raise awareness for the education of girls among families with the deployment of Anganwadi workers – to oversee the counselling.

Aim and objectives

The aim of this present study is to analyze how the National Education Policy 2020 contribute to women empowerment through education.

The objectives are thus highlighted:

- To explore the state of women empowerment and gender inequality trend in India
- To evaluate the impact of NEP on women empowerment in India

Literature review

Rammohan and Vu (2018) evaluated how socio-economic and cultural elements influence gender inequality in India's educational space at the district level, and found out that girls from poor districts are less likely to get educated than the ones from rich districts. Based on this, the authors noted that economic development is a critical factor for reducing gender gaps in education.

Sahoo (2016) conducted a study to examine the challenges of girls' education in India, and discovered that the states of both elementary and secondary school education are deplorable for girls. The findings showed that the enrolment rate of girls into elementary and secondary levels of education decreased between the period of 2012 – 2015. The authors attributed this to the lack of infrastructure, parents' socioeconomic condition, poor parental attitude towards education, superstitions connected to girls' education, and lack of security.

The inadequacy of girls' education in South Kashmir was highlighted in the work of Gul and Khan (2015). This was linked to inappropriate curriculum, insufficient basic educational facilities, poorly maintained/developed school buildings, shortage of teachers, lack of motivated teachers, boring teaching techniques, and additional burden of work for students at home. The researchers therefore recommended that additional resources be provided while also investing in teachers' training to promote effective girls' learning.

Panda (2017) broadly examined the condition of women empowerment in India and emphasized its significance to the development of a sustainable nation. The author added that women empowerment was needed for securing the future, and canvassed for a change in the mindset of people – especially men – towards

women in India. This was considered in the light of the increasing inclination of the world towards equity and equality.

Shettar and Rajeshwari (2015) investigated the challenges facing women empowerment in India, and suggested that empowerment initiatives for women can only be far-reached if they are directed at the social and economic statuses of the individuals concerned. As such, it would be necessary to implement clear-cut social and economic policies to bring about holistic development to women.

Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, with both quantitative and qualitative datasets used in addressing the research objectives in a principled and systematic way (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Creswell, 2014). As a result, it was possible to adopt the interpretivism and post-positivism philosophical underpinnings in the analysis and elucidation of the data (Fetters, 2016). It follows that mixed-methods research avails the in-depth or comprehensive discussion of the concept or subject matter under review (Enosh, Tzafrir & Stolovy, 2014). Data can be gathered from multiple sources and synergistically used in investigating complex problems in a mixed-methods research (Poth & Munce, 2020).

Although education is about the most important element in women empowerment but since its influence spread across different spheres, it is incumbent to consider other variables when analyzing NEP's impact. Suguna (2011) and Khair (2019) noted that educated women can have a positive impact on the social and economic development of India as they make noteworthy contributions in their professional fields and homes. Goulart (2021) pinpointed that women empowerment is a function of economic (employment, income generation and financial decision-making), leadership (leadership abilities, community participation), health (health perceptions, healthcare access, bodily autonomy), security & justice (safety, policies/laws), sociocultural (actions against gender-based violence), psychological (social support, women's self-esteem), and human development (education, vocational training, basic needs) parameters.

Data collection

Secondary data were used in this study, and they were sourced from different databases. Datasets on literacy rate, labour force participation rate, estimated earned annual income, and work-related leadership position (legislators, senior officials, and managers) rates were collated from The Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum while statistics for crime against women were obtained from India's National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB). All these (datasets) were used for the quantitative analysis, and covered the period between 2015–2023, meaning that data from 5 years before and 3 years after the implementation of NEP were explored. There was no report on Global Gender Gap in 2019; this could have been due to the COVID-19 incidence. This was done to permit some degree of – before and after implementation – comparison. For the qualitative study, data were extracted from publications that examined the impact of NEP on women empowerment.

Quantitative and qualitative findings

Quantitative findings

	Literacy rate (%)	
Year	**Female**	**Male**
2015	61	81
2016	63	81
2017	59.3	78.9
2018	59.3	78.9
2019	n/a	n/a
2020	65.8	82.4
2021	65.8	82.4
2022	69.1	83.45
2023	70.3	84.7

Table 1 showing the literacy rate for both female and male in India between 2015 and 2023

From the *Table 1* above, it can be seen that the gender gap narrowed over time – from 20% difference in 2015 to 14.4% in 2023. Also, the literacy rate for female was on a decline (3.7%) between 2016 and 2018, which was before the implementation of NEP. However, a 4.5% increase can be observed for female literacy between 2020 and 2023.
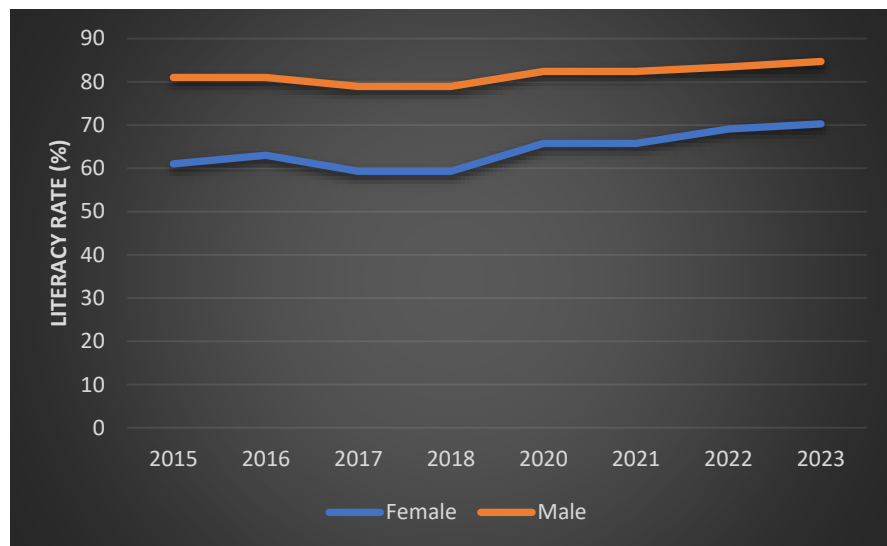
Figure 1 showing the chart of literacy rate in India

Year	Labour force participation rate (%)	
	Female	Male
2015	29	83
2016	28	82
2017	28.5	82
2018	28.7	81.7
2019	n/a	n/a
2020	24.6	81.6
2021	22.3	79.6
2022	19.23	70.09
2023	28.26	76.14

Table 2 showing the labour participation rate for both male and female in India

Table 2 above shows a general decline in labour participation rate in India between 2015 and 2022. The gender gap in this respect was highest in years 2020, 2021 and 2022 where it amounted to around 57.3%. The difference reduced to 47.88% in 2023, a year where increases in the labour participation of both sexes were recorded.
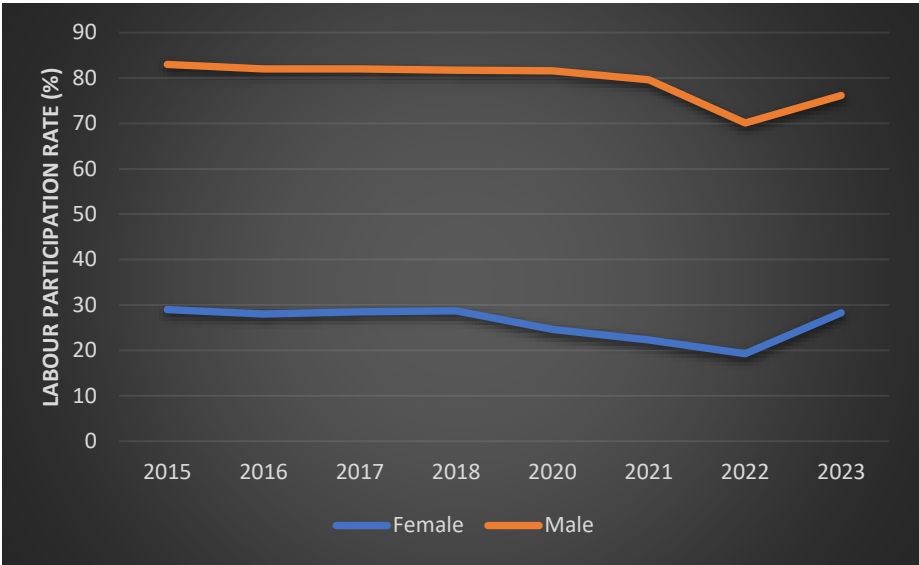

Figure 2 showing the chart of labour participation rate in India

	Estimated earned annual income (US$)	
Year	Female	Male
2015	2,257	9,175
2016	2,103	9,045
2017	2,424	10,428
2018	2,602	11,195
2019	n/a	n/a
2020	2,300	11,100
2021	2,200	10,800
2022	2,130	9,900
2023	2,400	10,520

Table 3 showing the estimated earned annual income of female and male in India

From *Table 3,* it can be seen that there was an increase of 15.28% in the estimated earned annual income of female between 2015 and 2018 while that of male workers was 22.02%. For the period 2020 and 2023, the increase for female was 4.35% – while it decreased by 5.23% for males – after a drop in the income structure has been recorded in 2020. The highest difference in estimated earned annual income for both male and female was recorded in 2021 when it reached 79%. It was, however, reduced to 77% in 2023.
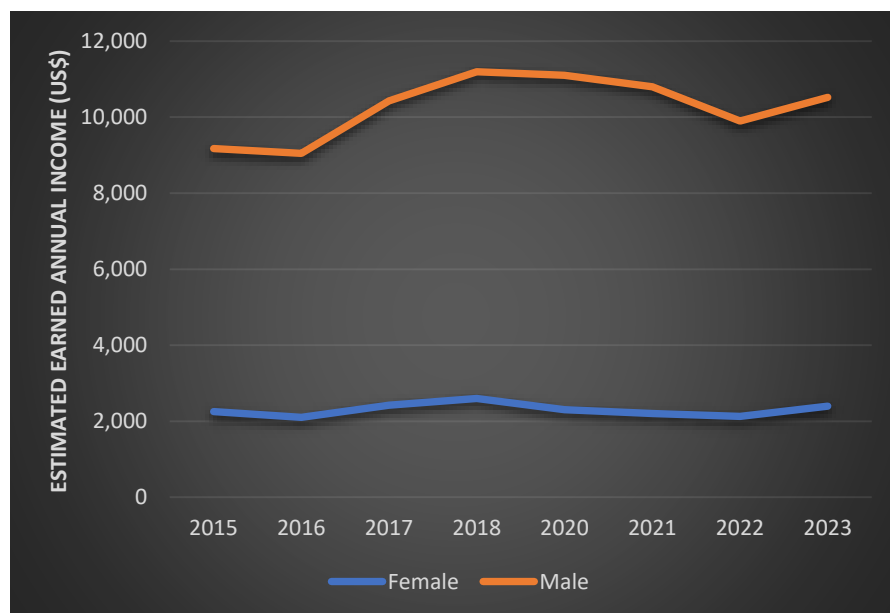

Figure 3 showing the chart of estimated earned annual income in India

	Leadership positions (legislators, senior officials, and managers) (%)	
Year	Female	Male
2015	n/a	n/a
2016	n/a	n/a
2017	12.9	87.1
2018	12.9	87.1
2019	n/a	n/a
2020	13.7	86.3
2021	14.6	85.4

2022	17.64	82.35
2023	15.94	84.07

Table 4 showing the rate of female and male in leadership positions

From *Table 4,* the gender gap in the occupancy of leadership positions was highest in 2017 which reflected a 74.2% variation. The gap has reduced over the years with a 68.13% difference reported in 2023. More so, there was an increase of 0.8% in the rate of female assuming leadership positions between 2018 and 2020 while the increase was 2.2% between 2020 and 2023 – even though the increase was around 3% within the period of 2021 and 2022 before dropping to 2.3% between 2022 and 2023.
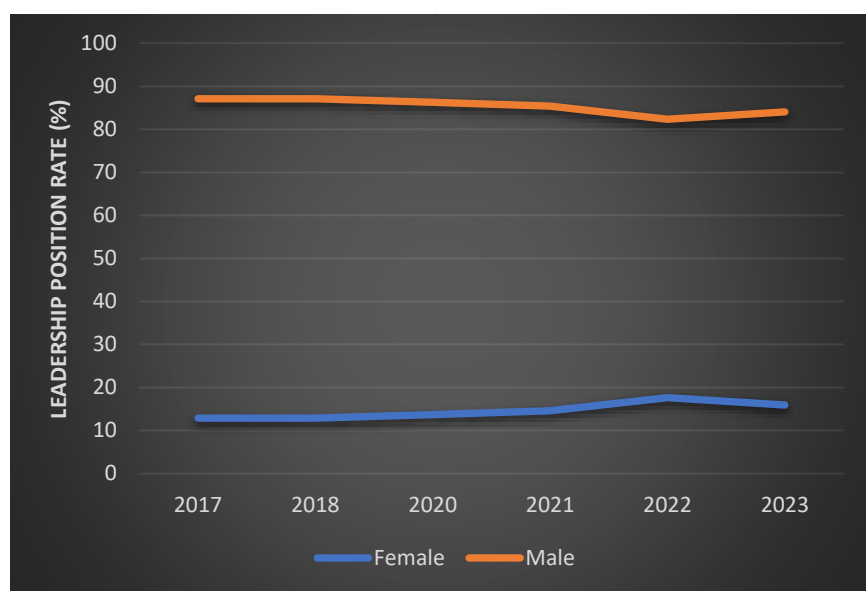

Figure 4 showing the chart of leadership position rate between female and male in India

Crime against women	
Year	No. of cases
2015	327,394
2016	338,954
2017	359,849
2018	378,277
2019	405,891
2020	371,503

2021	428,278
2022	445,256
2023	463,066

Table 5 showing the number of cases of crime against women in India

Table 5 above shows that the number of cases of crime against women in India increased by 23.97% and 24.65% between 2015 – 2019 and 2020 – 2023 respectively. A 8.47% reduction was observed between 2019 and 2020.
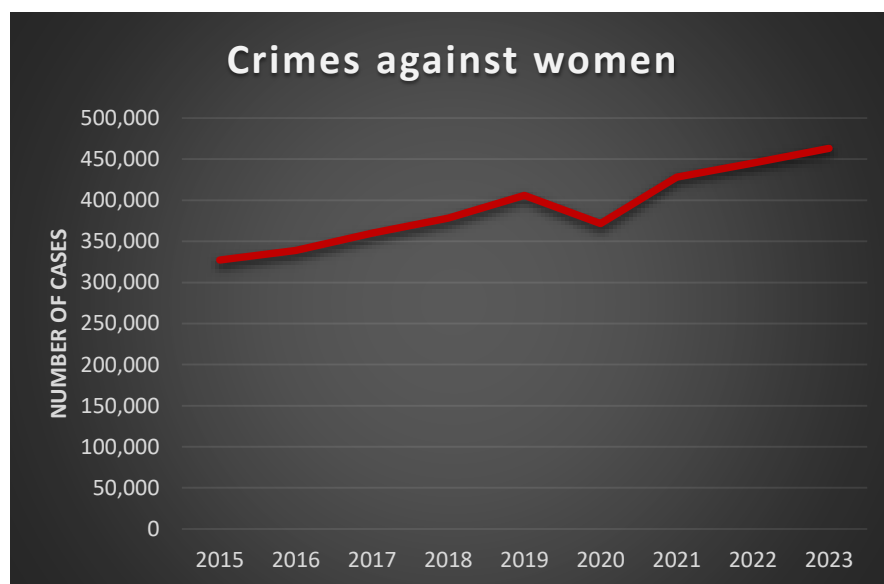
Figure 5 showing the number of cases of crime against women in India

Qualitative findings

Hoque and Baidya (2020) stated that NEP 2020 has the potential to empower women, as gender gaps and female discrimination are reduced in tandem with increased female literacy. Moreover, the possibilities realizable with equitable education for girls can lead to the substantial economic growth and the establishment of more sustainable families. The authors also stressed that NEP creates a clear path for girl-child education, with the view of changing the conventional disposition of families towards the education of male and female children. However, they pointed out that the Policy needs to give more attention to the development and

implementation of an improved gender-specific curriculum, particularly as it concerns sex education components and legal literacy.

Bhatt (2020) collated series of responses from a survey conducted on NEP in 2020. One of the respondents noted that the policy present girls with the avenue to undertake vocational training early, and this can make them to be better prepared to take up work opportunities. However, another respondent raised concern over the possible unaffordability of schools as a result of the public-private partnership that the policy encourages. This could cause girls to drop out and even lead to an increase in child labor and child marriage. Moreover, the policy did not touch on child protection in the face of the rising cases of child sexual abuse. One respondent also highlighted that, despite the policy's stance on gender sensitivity in relation to curriculum design, it failed to effectively address girls' education, gender discrimination and equity reforms in education.

Jameela (2023) pointed out that the lack of specific targets in NEP makes it difficult to measure the policy's progress impact. Also, implementation gaps can emerge as a result of the lack of infrastructure, trained personnel and resources thus the potential benefits of policy may not reach girls and women in remote areas and marginalized communities.

Khan (2023) asserted that NEP paves the way for women empowerment as they are enabled to take up leadership roles and also partake in decision-making processes. All these made possible through education and entrepreneurial and skill development. The author stressed that the formulation of the policy is quite commendable, as it was in line with the provisions of the Sustainable Development Goals, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), UNESCO's Gender Equality in Education Framework, and international best practices. Implementation challenges, lack of robust accountability and monitoring framework, and ill-addressed issues of intersectionality and marginalized groups are cited as NEP's limitations.

Discussion

The NEP could support women empowerment to a large extent, as the qualitative study highlighted. The potential of the policy in this direction is heralded by the fact that it was formulated based on international best practices, and it leans towards addressing critical concerns that hinge on the lack of infrastructure, security/safety and gender-sensitive curriculum for girls, as well as aiming to take care of those (girls) who fall within SEDGs. That aside, although it may not very evident to determine the degree of the policy's impact through quantitative measures at the moment, there is a possibility that the provisions of NEP set the tone for greater level of awareness in the fight against gender inequality in India. For one, literacy rate of females has increased since the implementation of the policy with gender gap [in education] narrowing – albeit slightly. The rates at which women participate in labour force and take up leadership positions also seems to have improved. It is, however, important that care is exercised in singularly attributing all these changes to NEP as other initiatives are also being designed to promote women empowerment and gender equality. Nonetheless, there is still a long way to go, as the improvements realized so far are like scratching the surface. This is due to the significantly wide margin in the gender gap, particularly in the areas of labour force participation, estimated earned annual income, and leadership position.

The problem of implementation, however, remains a major concern as some of the authors/respondents in the qualitative study pinpointed. Without a strategic or detailed implementation plan, the measures highlighted in the policy may not be brought to fruition. Moreover, NEP seems to be limited in addressing the issue of crime against women, as the number of cases has consistently risen through the years. Seeing a reduction in the number of crimes against women could be pivotal in empowering them, and education can play a crucial role here. The lack of a monitoring/evaluation framework was also pointed out as one of the limitations of NEP. A well-designed framework can aid policymakers to identify the areas that are working and those that may need some improvements. It basically sets the precedence to have an effective review of the policy and fine-tune it to extensively and appropriately tackle the issues of gender inequality as it relates to the Indian context. That said, a monitoring framework is yet highly important considering that girls are more inclined to drop out of schools – compared to boys – in India (Subrahmanyam, 2016). This is to the end that it provides a means through girls enrolled in schools can be efficiently followed through to increase the chances of them finishing

their education. Against this backdrop, the NEP may have to be revisited to tie up loose end, making it more pointed and instrumental to the present-day (gender gap) situation in India.

References

Bhat, R. A. (2015). Role of Education in the Empowement of Women in India. *Journal of Education and Practice*, *6*(10), 188-191.

Bhatt, N. (2020). Examining India's new education policy through a gender lens. Available at https://www.devex.com/news/examining-india-s-new-education-policy-through-a-gender-lens-98007#:~:text=Despite%20some%20progressive%20provisions%20in,its%20implications%20on%20girls'%20education

Creswell, J. W. (2014). *A concise introduction to mixed methods research*. SAGE publications.

Creswell, J. W., & Clark, V. L. P. (2017). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Sage publications.

Enosh, G., Tzafrir, S. S., & Stolovy, T. (2015). The development of client violence questionnaire (CVQ). *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, *9*(3), 273-290.

Fetters, M. D. (2016). "Haven't we always been doing mixed methods research?" Lessons learned from the development of the horseless carriage. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, *10*(1), 3-11.

Goulart, C. M., Purewal, A., Nakhuda, H., Ampadu, A., Giancola, A., Kortenaar, J. L., & Bassani, D. G. (2021). Tools for measuring gender equality and women's empowerment (GEWE) indicators in humanitarian settings. *Conflict and health*, *15*(1), 39.

Gul, S. B. A., & Khan, Z. N. (2015). A Perceptual Study of Girls Education, Its Factors and Challenges in South Kashmir. *Online Submission*, *3*(1), 106-110.

Hoque, A., & Baidya, A. (2022). New Education Policy - 2020: A critical analysis of gender-inclusive perspectives. *University News, 60*(23).

Jameela, T. (2023). The National Educational Policy 2020 and women rights in India. *JETIR 10*(9), C702 – C709.

Khair, S. B. (2019). Women's Education in India: Reality and Statistics. *International Journal of Research in Humanities & Soc. Sciences*, 7.

Khan, R. (2023). Promoting gender equality and women's empowerment through National Education Policy 2020: A critical analysis and recommendations. *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews 4*(12), 727 – 731.

Manzoor, S., Qayoom, K., & Rafiqui, A. R. (2023). Present Status of Women Education in India. *In Lal Kumar, A. C. (2023), Recent Trends in Education,* Volume 11. AkiNIik Publications.

Nair, N. (2010). Women's education in India: A situational analysis. *IMJ*, *1*(4).

Oyitso, M., & Olomukoro, C. O. (2012). Enhancing women's development through literacy education in nigeria. *Rev. Eur. Stud.*, *4*, 66.

Panda, D. (2017). Women Empowerment in India: Rational and Present State. *International Journal of Emerging Research in Management & Technology*, *6*(9), 169.

Shettar, D., & Rajeshwari, M. (2015). A study on issues and challenges of women empowerment in India.

Poth, C., & Munce, S. E. (2020). Commentary--Preparing today's researchers for a yet unknown tomorrow: Promising practices for a synergistic and sustainable mentoring approach to mixed methods research learning. *International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches*, *12*(1).

Raju, E., & Phil., M. (2014). Gender Discrimination in India. *IOSR Journal of Economics and Finance, 2*, 55-65.

Rammohan, A., & Vu, P. (2018). Gender inequality in education and kinship norms in India. *Feminist Economics*, *24*(1), 142-167.

Sahoo, S. (2016). Girls 'Education in India: Status and challenges. *International Journal of Research in Economics and Social Sciences (IJRESS)*, *6*(7), 130-141.

Subrahmanyam, G. (2016). Gender perspectives on causes and effects of school dropouts. *Stockholm: SIDA*.

Suguna, M. (2011). Education and women empowerment in India. *International journal of multidisciplinary research*, *1*(8), 198-204.

Suresh, P., & Sivakumar, T. (2017). Women Empowerment in India-a changing scenario. *Kaav International Journal of Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences*, *4*(1).

UNICEF India (n.d). Gender equality. Available at https://www.unicef.org/india/what-we-do/gender-equality

World Economic Forum (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023). Global Gender Gap Report.

Yadav, D., & Singh, S. (2020). Status of Women Education in India. *Shanlax International Journal of Economics*, *9*(1), 28-35.