

# Aligning the National Education Policy 2020 with Sustainable Development Goal 4(Quality Education): A Pathway to Women's Empowerment in India

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## Abstract

This paper examines the important aspects of National Education Policy 2020 and Sustainable Development Goal 4(Quality Education) that promote women's empowerment in India by enhancing their socio-economic independence, decision making ability and role in nation building. This study explores the provisions of NEP 2020 for Women Empowerment and identifies barriers to effective implementation. It also makes recommendations to overcome these barriers. This study analysed the notable progress made in women's education and empowerment in India, with a particular focus on the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and its alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). This paper examines the historical background, educational reforms, policy initiatives and Government initiatives while also highlighting the key challenges that hinder effective implementation. These challenges include socioeconomic inequalities, cultural norms, lack of proper infrastructure, and gender-based violence. The study emphasizes that truly empowering women requires a well-rounded approach that combines education, job opportunities, legal protection, and a strong support system. This paper explores the role of government initiatives and NGOs in supporting women's rights and providing essential services. It highlights the need for inclusive policies, active community involvement, and regular monitoring to make empowerment programs more effective. By overcoming these challenges and building on its strengths, India can keep empowering women, creating a more equal society and driving social and economic progress.

**Keywords:** Women Empowerment, NEP 2020, SDG 4, Gender Equities, Women Education, Challenges and barriers.

## 1.0 Introduction

According to Cambridge English Dictionary, Empowerment means "to authorize". Empowerment is the process of enabling and authorizing individual to think, take action and control work in an autonomous way. It is the process by which one can gain control over one's destiny (Guha P.,2021).

An important factor in women's empowerment is education. "If you educate a man you educate an individual, however if you educate a women you educate a whole family. Women empowered means mother India empowered." – Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. Women's education has a significant impact on their

life. The most crucial tool for empowering women in society is knowledge. Education aids in addressing their difficulties, challenging their responsibilities, and enhancing their quality of life. Through education and training, women's empowerment and capacity building can assist them better their lives. Until women are educated and empowered, India can never become a developed country, which is only possible if they contribute to the best of their potential (Jatana R. and Nahar M.,2022).

The National Education Policy 2020 is a comprehensive framework designed to improve India's education system and prepare it for the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century. It was approved by India's Union cabinet on 29<sup>th</sup> July 2020 and replaced the previous National Education strategy from 1986. India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant shift in the country's educational landscape, emphasizing inclusivity, flexibility, and holistic development. With a specific focus on empowering women through education, NEP 2020 aims to address gender disparities and enhance career opportunities for women across various sectors (Kumar S,2024). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to ensure that all children and young people, especially those from economically and socially disadvantaged backgrounds, have access to an equal and inclusive education (Jatana R. and Nahar M.,2022). Even though women's education is a priority, the dropout rate for girls after high school persists despite these efforts. At the secondary and post-secondary levels, enrolment is also declining. In addition to other factors, menstruation and a lack of access to sanitary facilities are two of the most common reasons why girls drop out of school (Jatana R. and Nahar M.,2022).

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by United Nations members in 2015, created 17 world Sustainable Development Goals. The aim of these global goals is "peace and prosperity for people and the planet". Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education is part of the UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals. This goal is a commitment to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all". This goal is a pivotal driver for positive change, emphasizing the transformative power of education in fostering a sustainable and equitable world (UNESCO). The objective of SDG 4 is to ensure that all people have free access to high-quality primary and secondary education, with a focus on eliminating inequalities based on gender, economic position, and other variables (Sharma D.,2024). The goal includes a number of objectives, such as eradicating gender inequities in education, providing equal access to affordable technical, vocational, and higher education, universal elementary and secondary education, and early childhood development. Furthermore, SDG 4(Quality Education) emphasizes enhancing the infrastructure of education, expanding the pool of skilled educators, and advancing education for sustainable development. By accomplishing these goals, SDG 4 hopes to empower people and advance the general socioeconomic advancement of societies around the globe (UN).

By 2030, Sustainable Development Goal 4, which is a component of the UN's larger sustainable development agenda, aims to guarantee inclusive, egalitarian, high-quality education and encourage opportunities for lifelong learning for everyone. By promoting lifelong learning, SDG 4 strives to empower individuals to adapt to evolving challenges, foster a culture of continuous improvement, and contribute actively to sustainable development in a rapidly changing global landscape (Sharma, D., 2024). By tackling educational gaps and advancing inclusive education, fundamental literacy, and vocational training, NEP 2020 helps achieve this goal.

Combining NEP 2020 with Sustainable Development Goal 4(quality education) could have a major impact on women's empowerment in India. NEP 2020 aims to close the gender gap in education, ensuring that all women have access to quality learning opportunities. This, in turn, would help them actively participate

in the workforce and society. Aligning these efforts could lead to greater social and economic empowerment for women, contributing to the country's overall progress.

The importance of this study stems from its critical analysis of how the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 corresponds with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) to enhance women's empowerment in India. This study examines the provisions of NEP 2020 and underlines its potential to reduce disparities in gender in education, improve socioeconomic possibilities for women, and contribute to a more equitable society. The paper identifies important obstacles and constraints to the effective implementation of these regulations and offers actionable recommendations to solve them.

## **1.1 Historical overview of Women Empowerment in India**

### **1.1.1 Ancient Period**

In Ancient India Women were honoured and valued (Baidehi R.,2022). They had access to religious activities and education, and they had a comparatively high status. During the Vedic era, women such as Gargi and Maitreyi were distinguished academics. Women taking part in religious rituals and philosophical discussions is mentioned in the Rig Veda. Furthermore, although it established certain restrictive standards, the ancient law document known as the 'Manu smriti' emphasizes the significance of women's duties in society.

### **1.1.2 Medieval Period**

Women's position fell during the medieval period. Sati (self-immolation of widows), child marriage, and purdah (veil) were commonplace. Women were primarily constrained to household responsibilities, with limited access to education and public life. Despite these constraints, certain women made major achievements during this time, like Razia Sultana, the only female ruler to rule Delhi, and Mirabai, a religious poet.

### **1.1.3 Colonial Period**

During the British colonial period, social reform movements focused at enhancing women's rights emerged. Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar advocated against customs such as Sati and child marriage. Vidyasagar initiated the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, which permitted widow remarriage. The introduction of Western education opened up new prospects for women. Women like Savitribai Phule, one of India's earliest female teachers, played an important role in improving women's educational opportunities.

### **1.1.4 Post Independence Period**

After India gained independence in 1947, the Constitution granted women equal rights. Over the years, several laws were introduced to protect these rights. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 ensured equality in marriage and divorce, while the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 aimed to end the dowry system. With these changes, women became more active in politics, education, and the workforce. Leaders like Indira Gandhi, India's first female Prime Minister, paved the way for women in leadership and set a strong example for future generations.

### **1.1.5 Modern Period**

Women's empowerment in modern India has made significant progress, thanks to various government initiatives, educational reforms, legal protections, and increased political participation. Programs like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao focus on girls' education and well-being, while the National Policy for Women's Empowerment takes a more holistic approach to their development.

Laws such as the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013) and the Maternity Benefit (Ame-

ndment) Act (2017) have strengthened women's rights and workplace protections. Efforts to increase political representation, like the Women's Reservation Bill and reserved seats in Panchayati Raj institutions, have encouraged more women to take part in decision-making.

On the economic front, initiatives like Mahila E-Haat and Stand-Up India support women entrepreneurs, helping them gain financial independence and contribute to the country's economy.

## 1.2 Review of related literature

Sundaram M. and et al (2014) did a study on role of education on Women empowerment to raise awareness among women in the Madurai district about various forms of empowerment and the role that education plays in empowering women. The study's findings indicate that women's empowerment is significantly influenced by educational attainment, and it comes to the conclusion that education is the only way to successfully empower women. Therefore, increasing the level of education among women is crucial.

Mandal B. (2018) studied on Women empowerment in 21<sup>st</sup> century and opined that Women's education in Indian society throughout the Vedic era had a positive history. This study demonstrates that women's empowerment involves developing their social, economic, political, and legal strength to assure equal rights and confidence in asserting their rights. Women's empowerment is essential for a country's overall growth. Additionally, this report highlights women's constitutional rights and the benefits of numerous NGOs and national organizations. Educating women is crucial for their empowerment. Education can enhance women's social, political, and economic self-awareness.

Mundhe E. (2021) did a study on issues and challenges of women empowerment in India. The study found that women in India are underdeveloped and, despite government efforts, still lag behind men. Gender disparities exist in education and work. Women's decision-making authority and freedom of mobility differ according on age, education, and employment status. Research indicates that women continue to accept unfair gender standards in society. There is a significant gender gap in political participation. According to the study, access to school and employment are the sole criteria that enable goal attainment. However, views towards gender equality also have a significant role.

Jatana R. and Nahar M. (2022) studied the role of National Education Policy of India 2020 for promoting Women empowerment. The study critically assesses NEP 2020's contribution to women's emancipation. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 appears to attempt to provide equal and inclusive education for all pupils, with a focus on girls and young women from low-income homes. The study suggested several approaches to increase the number of women attending college. As a result of the study's findings, the researchers also proposed ways to empower women through NEP.

Devi C. and et al. (2023) studied initiatives and challenges of women empowerment in India. The study explored the Indian government's initiatives for women's empowerment at the local, panchayat, state, and national levels. Study the obstacles of implementing government plans. The study relies entirely on secondary sources of data. The study highlights gender imbalance in education and employment. Recommendations include increasing literacy rates for girls and providing employment opportunities for women.

Khan R. (2023) analysed the NEP 2020, how the policy promoting gender inequality and women's empowerment and also how the NEP 2020's provisions and implementation align with its goals. The study investigated the policy effect on gender gaps in access to education, retention rates, and learning outcomes. The report examined the effects of curriculum improvements, teacher training, and safe and inclusive environments in educational institutions. Furthermore, the research finds gaps and obstacles in

implementing the NEP 2020 in terms of gender equality and women's empowerment. This includes policy translation, educator capacity building, and progress tracking. Drawing from the results, the paper offers suggestions for improving the NEP's ability to advance women's empowerment and gender equality within the educational system.

Kumar S. (2024) in his study investigated the impact of NEP 2020 on career advancement and women empowering through education. The study investigated the effects of NEP 2020 on gender inclusion, skill development, and access to higher education through surveys and interviews with women, educators, and policymakers. The results show that by addressing gender gaps and encouraging holistic development, NEP 2020 has the potential to improve women's employment chances. Nevertheless, issues like cultural norms and gaps in execution continue to exist. The study highlighted the necessity of teamwork in order to remove obstacles and optimize the effects of NEP 2020, providing insights into how education policies might promote gender equality and empowerment.

Paria M. and Sardar S. (2024) in their study examined the challenges and opportunities for women's education under NEP 2020. Challenges include gender bias, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to digital resources, especially in remote areas. The policy promotes flexible learning, enhanced vocational training, digital literacy initiatives, and efforts to reduce dropout rates. They found that NEP 2020 aims to empower women by providing equal access to education and skill development, which can boost their socio-economic participation. To maximize the policy's potential, effective implementation and overcoming local obstacles are crucial.

Sharma D. (2024) conducted a study to examine the connections between the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which both seek to promote high-quality education at the national and international levels, respectively. As a component of the UN's larger sustainable development agenda, SDG 4 provides a thorough framework for guaranteeing inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education for everyone by 2030. India's innovative program, NEP 2020, reflects a commitment to revolutionary reforms in the education sector and is in line with the concepts of SDG 4.

### 1.3 Significance of the study

Women's empowerment is critical to achieving sustainable gender equality, and education plays a pivotal role in this process. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) aim to address gender disparities and promote equitable education opportunities. Previous studies have explored the role of education in empowering women, highlighting the positive impact of policies like NEP 2020 on gender inclusion and skill development. Researchers have also assessed challenges such as cultural norms and infrastructural gaps. However, there is limited empirical evidence evaluating the on-ground impact of NEP 2020 on women's empowerment.

This study focuses on how education can change the lives of women in India for the better. It shows how National Education Policy 2020 along with Sustainable Development Goal 4 can help women access education, overcome barriers and reach their full potential. By looking at the challenges and offering practical solutions this study highlights ways to create an inclusive system that supports women. Which will help women of India to be part of the workforce and contribute to society.

Additionally, regional disparities in policy implementation and the intersectionality of challenges faced by marginalized women remain underexplored. This study aims to bridge these gaps by analysing the implications of NEP 2020 in diverse socio-economic contexts, with a focus on women's education and

empowerment. By aligning NEP 2020 with SDG 4, it seeks to provide actionable recommendations for achieving sustainable gender equality.

### 1.4 Objectives

1. To examine the provisions of National Educational Policy 2020 and sustainable Development Goal 4 that directly impact women's educational empowerment.
2. To analyse how the National Education Policy 2020 corresponds with Sustainable Development Goal 4 to enhance women's empowerment in India.
3. To explore the challenges and barriers related to Women Empowerment in India.

### 2.0 Methodology

This study uses Descriptive Research approach. The researchers collected the data from a variety of secondary sources, including books, journals, Government report, along with draft of NEP 2020 and various websites. These sources provided comprehensive information on women empowerment, including historical context, policies and programs. The collected data was systematically reviewed and analysed to identify key themes and patterns related to women empowerment. This involved synthesizing information from multiple sources to provide a coherent and comprehensive understanding of the topic.

### 3.0 Results:

#### 3.1 Findings

The study revealed the following findings:

1. It was found that NEP 2020 strengthens women's educational opportunities by introducing gender-inclusive policies like scholarships, infrastructure support, and flexible learning pathways.
2. Women's leadership in education is encouraged through policy provisions promoting female participation in decision-making roles, but implementation challenges remain.
3. Cultural norms and gender stereotypes continue to hinder progress, affecting enrolment, retention, and leadership opportunities for women in education.
4. Alignment with SDG 4 supports holistic, multidisciplinary education, but challenges in equitable access and quality remain, especially in rural areas.
5. Combining education, economic opportunities, legal protections, Government initiatives and social support is the necessity of a comprehensive approach to women's empowerment.

#### 3.2 Discussion

The historical background of women's empowerment in India shows remarkable change over time. Women were highly respected in the Vedic era and actively engaged in religious practice and education. But during the Middle Ages, their standing declined as a result of customs like child marriage and Sati. Social reforms started during the colonial era, when leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar fought for the rights of women. Significant legal and educational gains resulted from the Indian Constitution's grant of equal rights to women after independence. Government initiatives, educational reforms, legal measures, and greater political participation have all contributed to the ongoing advancement of modern India.

A major focus in discussions about women's empowerment is the transformative power of education. Jawaharlal Nehru's famous words, "If you educate a man, you educate an individual, but if you educate a

woman, you educate a whole family," highlight this.

### 3.2.1 Provisions of National Educational Policy 2020 for Women Empowerment

1. **Provision of Gender Inclusive Fund:** The NEP aims to remove gender inequities in education and ensure 100% participation through a Gender Inclusion Fund. This fund will provide scholarships, infrastructure support, and financial aid to help bridge the gap in female education. School and higher educational institutions must provide safe, inclusive and harassment free environments for female students. Special provisions, including hostels, transportation services, and bicycle distribution schemes will be implemented in rural areas to improve females' access to education. (NEP, P6.2.1)
2. **Provision of Women leadership in Education:** The policy emphasizes women's leadership in education by promoting the active participation of women in key decision-making roles within schools, colleges and universities. Recognizing the underrepresentation of women in leadership position the policy aims to increase the number of female institutional heads, principals, teachers, hostel wardens, and education administrators. To achieve this targeted resources and training programs will be provided to equip women with leadership skills, mentorship opportunities, and professional development. Special efforts will be made to recruit and retain women in leadership roles, particularly in rural and remote areas. Additionally, the Maternity Benefit Act will be implemented to provide creche(childcare) facilities for female educators. Educational institutions will also be encouraged to create women friendly workplaces by offering flexible work policies, leadership training and incentives. These measures aim to empower women in the educational sector. (NEP, P6.2.2)
3. **Provision of School safety, security and hygiene for girls:** The policy prioritizes school safety, security and hygiene for girls to create a harassment free and inclusive learning environment. Schools are mandated to implement strict safety guidelines ensuring that female students are protected from discrimination, harassment and intimidation. To achieve this, safety protocols will be incorporated into the institutional accreditation process, making it a fundamental requirement for schools to maintain gender sensitive policies. Additionally mandatory training programs for educators, administration and school staff will be conducted to help them identify, prevent, and address gender-based violence.
  - a. Another critical focus is hygiene. Schools required to provide separate, well-maintained toilets for girls equipped with essential menstrual hygiene products and sanitation facilities. The policy emphasizes the need for safe and reliable transportation through bicycle distribution programs and dedicated school transport services to ensure that girls can attend school without concern for their safety. (NEP, P6.2.3)
4. **Provision Addressing social norms and gender stereotypes:** The policy recognizes that deep-rooted social norms and gender stereotypes continue to hinder women's education and empowerment. To address these challenges, the policy mandates community engagement and awareness programs that actively work to change societal perceptions regarding girls' education, employment, and leadership roles. Schools, educators, and social workers will collaborate with parents, local communities, and civil society organizations to promote discussion on topics such as the importance of girls' education beyond primary levels, the negative impact of early child marriage, and the need for women's financial independence.
  - a. Furthermore, schools will integrate gender sensitization programs into their curriculum, encouraging students to challenge traditional stereotypes that limit women's role in society. (NEP, P6.2.4)
5. **Provision of Gender sensitisation in school:** The policy emphasizes gender sensitisation in schools to promote equality, inclusivity, and respect. Schools will integrate gender awareness programs into

the curriculum, educating students on women's rights, equal opportunities, and the elimination of stereotypes. Mandatory training sessions for teachers, staff, and students will focus on harassment prevention and gender sensitive behaviour. Additionally legal awareness on laws like POSCO act, Prohibition of child marriage act, and sexual harassment of women at Workplace act will be included. These measures aim to foster a safe and inclusive learning environment, ensuring students challenge gender discrimination and advocate for gender equality in society. (NEP, P6.2.5)

6. **Provision of Educational support for women in underrepresented groups (URGs):** The NEP 2020 prioritizes educational support for women in underrepresented groups, including those from Scheduled castes, Scheduled tribes, Other Backward Class, minorities, and Economically Weaker Sections. To bridge educational gaps, the policy provides targeted scholarships, hostel facilities, transport support, and flexible learning pathways, such as open and distance learning (ODL) and vocational training. Special emphasis is placed on increasing female enrolment in higher education through financial aid and mentorship programs. Recognizing that education is key to social upliftment, these initiatives aim to remove systematic barriers, encourage women's participation in diverse fields, and empower them to achieve economic and social independence. (NEP, P6.2.6)
7. **Provision of Multidisciplinary and holistic education for Women:** NEP promotes multidisciplinary and holistic education for women by integrating Sciences, Humanities, Vocational training and Arts to provide a well-rounded learning experience. The rigid separation between academic disciplines is removed, allowing women to pursue diverse fields of study and gain interdisciplinary knowledge. Flexible learning pathways, including multiple entry and exit options, internships, and research opportunities, ensure that women can tailor their education to their career aspirations and personal circumstances. The policy also incorporates life skills, financial literacy, and digital education, equipping women with practical knowledge and confidence for the workforce. By fostering critical thinking, creativity, and real-world problem-solving skills, NEP 2020 aims to enhance women's academic and professional opportunities, empowering them to contribute effectively in various sectors. (NEP, P10.1), (NEP, Chapter 11, pp.225-226)
8. **Provision of National scholarship fund and financial support:** to ensure equitable access to education, a National Scholarship fund has been established to ensures tuition waivers, stipends, and financial aid for female students, enabling them to pursue higher education without financial constraints. The policy mandates that private institutions allocate 50%-100% of their scholarships to girls from disadvantaged backgrounds. (NEP, P12.2.4), (NEP, P18.6.3)

These measures aim to promote women's participation in education, empower them with knowledge and skills, and foster gender equality in academic and professional spaces.

In order to address gender inequities and encourage women's involvement in school and the workforce, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 places a strong emphasis on gender inclusion, financial support, and flexible learning routes. By offering financial aid, infrastructure support, and scholarships, NEP 2020 elements like the Gender Inclusion Fund and assistance for women in underrepresented groups seek to foster a climate that supports women's empowerment. NEP 2020 addresses safety, security, and hygiene concerns in schools, creating a harassment-free and supportive environment for female students. It also focuses on changing societal perceptions and challenging gender stereotypes through community engagement and gender sensitization programs. By aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), NEP 2020 seeks to empower women socially and economically, enhancing their opportunities in the workforce and contributing to overall national development.

Despite progressive policies, there are still certain challenges and barriers.

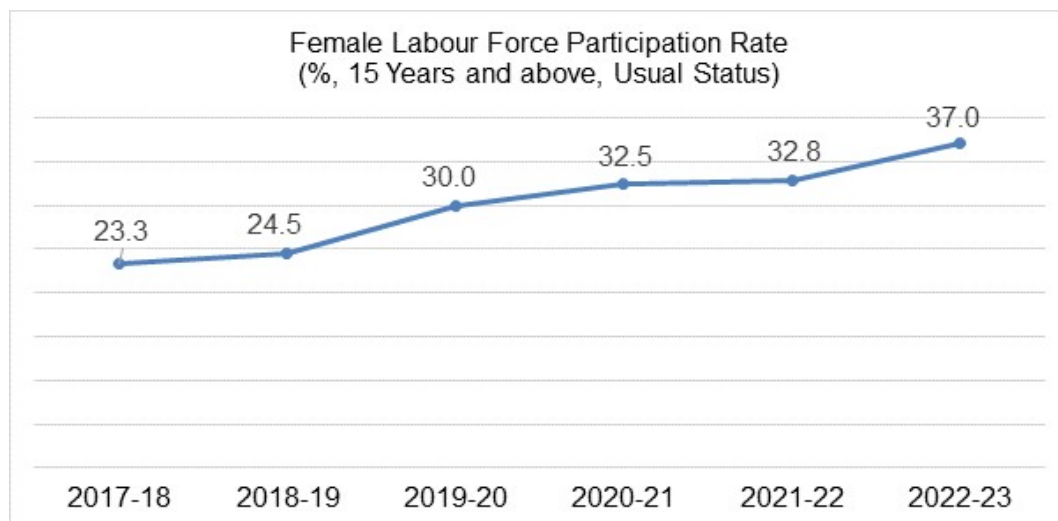
### 3.2.2 Challenges and Barriers to Women's Empowerment in India:

1. **Socioeconomic gaps:** Despite NEP 2020's progressive policies, socioeconomic gaps continue to be a key impediment to women's empowerment. Women with economically disadvantaged backgrounds frequently deal with financial restraints that limit their options for access to education and employment possibilities. Many families find education to be prohibitively expensive, including tuition, uniforms, books, and transportation. Furthermore, the opportunity cost of seeking education or job rather than contributing to family revenue or domestic responsibilities exacerbate the situation.
2. **Cultural norms and Gender Stereotypes:** Deeply embedded cultural conventions and gender stereotypes continue to impede women's empowerment. Traditional beliefs in many cultures emphasize male education and employment, while women are primarily responsible for homemaking and caring for children. These societal expectations frequently result in early marriages and pregnancies, disrupting women's education and limiting their prospects for personal and professional development. Changing these norms takes long-term community engagement and awareness campaigns.
3. **Lack of Infrastructure:** Inadequate infrastructure poses a huge obstacle to effectively implementing the NEP 2020. Many educational institutions, particularly those in rural areas, lack basic amenities such as separate restrooms for women, clean drinking water, and safe transportation. The lack of these necessities can deter women from pursuing school and employment, resulting in high dropout rates and limited career possibilities.
4. **Digital divide:** The digital divide is a significant barrier to women's empowerment, especially with NEP 2020's emphasis on digital literacy and online learning. Women's access to digital devices and the internet is limited, particularly in rural and remote locations, making it difficult for them to participate in online education, skill development programs, and employment opportunities that are remote. This digital divide exacerbates the existing inequities between urban and rural communities.
5. **Implementation gaps:** One major obstacle still stands in the way of effectively implementing NEP 2020's measures for women's empowerment. Progress tracking, educator capacity building, and policy translation have various drawbacks. Strong oversight, sufficient money, and continuous evaluation are necessary to ensure that the policy's gender-inclusive initiatives are successfully carried out at the local level.
6. **Safety Issues and Gender-Based Violence:** Gender-based violence and safety concerns are major obstacles to women's empowerment. Women may be discouraged from pursuing education and careers due to fear of harassment, abuse, and assault, especially in places with insufficient safety precautions. To guarantee that women feel safe and supported in their pursuits, companies and educational institutions must establish stringent safety regulations and foster harassment-free environments. Marginalized women are more vulnerable to domestic violence, workplace harassment, and other forms of abuse, which further restrict their ability to thrive.

Government initiatives and NGOs play a crucial role in advocating for women's rights and providing support services aimed at women's empowerment. Programs like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and the National Policy for Women's Empowerment focus on promoting girls' education and holistic development. Legal measures, such as the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act (2013) and the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act (2017), have strengthened women's rights and protections, ensuring a safer and more inclusive environment for women.

Periodic Labour Force Survey Report 2022-23 released by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation on 9<sup>th</sup> October 2023 shows that the Female Labour Force Participation Rate in the country has improved significantly by 4.2 percentage points to 37.0% in 2023, as per ‘usual status’ concept of measuring labour force participation.

According to Ministry of Women and Child Development (2023) This significant jump in the female labour force participation rate is an outcome of the decisive agenda set by the Government for ensuring women’s empowerment through policy initiatives aimed at their long term socio-economic and political development. Government’s initiatives have spanned across women’s lifecycle including large scale initiatives for girls’ education, skill development, entrepreneurship facilitation and safety in the workplace. Policies and legislations in these areas have been driving Government’s ‘women-led development’ agenda.



Source: Periodic Labour Force Survey 2022-23

Periodic Labour Force Survey, another data shows enhanced female employment indicators, showing significant strides in female participation in economic activity across various categories, including rural and urban. As per the PLFS, the rural FLFPR has increased significantly by 23 percentage points between 2017-18 and 2023-24 (24.6% in 2017-18 and 47.6% in 2023-24) indicating a rising contribution of women to rural production. There is also the belief that this data is now being better captured by PLFS survey.

NITI Aayog report has pointed out that self-employment among rural women has occurred across sectors where government support has been prominent. At the national level, 70 central schemes across 15 ministries focus on supporting entrepreneurship. The Ministry of MSME, Ministry of Agriculture, and Ministry of Skill Development lead these efforts. On the state level, as well, more than 400 state-level schemes support entrepreneurship. Together, these initiatives are helping rural women thrive in diverse sectors (Ministry of Labour and Employment, India.2024, Nov). In addition, the government has implemented various schemes and programmes contributing towards improving female workers' employability, the most promising of which is the Skill India Mission. Promotion of self-employment for women has been on the priority areas of the government with initiatives like ‘Stand up India’ that provides loans to women including the marginalized communities. Improved workforce participation, declining unemployment rates, and enhanced opportunities for women reflect the country’s progress toward

economic resilience and gender equality. The data underscores the effectiveness of government initiatives and the growing focus on education, skill development, and entrepreneurship as drivers of employment (Ministry of Labour and Employment, India, Nov, 2024)

NGOs, through grassroots efforts and community engagement, work to change societal perceptions and support women's empowerment by providing essential services like legal aid, counselling, vocational training, and health care. They also conduct awareness programs and campaigns to promote gender equality and challenge traditional gender roles and stereotypes. By collaborating with government bodies, NGOs influence the development and implementation of policies that address women's specific needs and promote their overall well-being. Together, these efforts contribute to creating an environment that supports and promotes women's empowerment in India.

### 3.2.3 Recommendations to ensure women empowerment in India, through the NEP 2020 and SDG 4:

- a. **Strengthen access to Education:** Providing financial support, scholarships, stipends to girls especially for women from disadvantaged communities. Building adequate infrastructure, such as safe transportation, well-maintained schools, and separate sanitation facilities for girls, especially in rural and tribal areas, is essential to ensure women education. Flexible learning options, such as online and open distance learning (ODL), can also accommodate women with familial or societal constraints.
- b. **Promote digital inclusion:** Bridging the digital divide is essential, as limited access to technology and the internet often excludes marginalized women from modern education and employment opportunities. Government and private initiatives should ensure affordable digital devices, internet access, and digital literacy training, particularly in underserved rural and tribal regions.
- c. **Empower Women Through Vocational Training and Skill Development:** Many women lack the skills needed for employment in a rapidly changing economy. Expanding vocational training, entrepreneurship programs, and financial literacy courses can help women gain independence and participate in the workforce. Mentorship programs and industry partnerships should be established to provide hands-on experience and support.
- d. **Ensure Safety and Protection in Educational and Work Spaces:** To address safety concerns, which are often a deterrent for women's education and employment, strict anti-harassment guidelines and legal protections should be implemented and monitored. Schools and workplaces should have robust grievance redressal mechanisms and mandatory gender-sensitization training for staff. Awareness campaigns about women's rights and protections under laws like the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act and the POSCO Act can empower women to stand up against discrimination and violence.
- e. **Challenge Social Norms and Gender Stereotypes:** Social attitudes that devalue women's education and independence remain one of the biggest barriers. Community-driven campaigns and programs should focus on transforming these perspectives by engaging parents, local leaders, educators, and religious institutions. Schools can play a pivotal role by integrating gender sensitization programs into the curriculum to instill values of equality and respect from an early age.
- f. **Enhance Policy Implementation and Monitoring:** While policies like NEP 2020 aim to promote inclusivity, gaps in their on-ground implementation often limit their reach. Establishing robust monitoring frameworks and feedback mechanisms involving local communities, NGOs, and government bodies can ensure these policies adapt to the specific needs of marginalized women and address regional disparities effectively.

- g. **Foster Women's Leadership:** Promoting leadership development among marginalized women can encourage them to take active roles in decision-making processes. This includes increasing women's representation in educational and political institutions and training them for leadership roles with mentorship opportunities and professional development programs.
- h. **Focus on Intersectional Disparities:** Acknowledging that marginalized women often belong to multiple disadvantaged groups (such as caste, religion, and economic status), policies should adopt an intersectional approach. Tailored initiatives that address overlapping barriers, such as targeted scholarships and specialized mentorship for women from Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and minorities, are essential.
- i. **Promote Health and Well-Being:** Marginalized women often face inadequate access to healthcare, which impacts their ability to pursue education or employment. Accessible healthcare services, nutritional programs, and menstrual hygiene initiatives in schools and communities can improve their overall well-being and remove health-related barriers.

The findings highlight the necessity of a comprehensive approach to women's empowerment, combining education, economic opportunities, legal protections, Government initiatives and social support. Policymakers should develop and implement inclusive policies that address the diverse needs of women and promote their empowerment across various sectors. Ensuring effective implementation requires robust monitoring and evaluation frameworks, regular audits, and capacity-building programs for educators and policymakers. Additionally, enhancing safety measures in educational institutions and workplaces is crucial to address gender-based violence and create a supportive environment for women. By adopting these comprehensive strategies, policymakers can achieve sustainable progress in women's empowerment and gender equality.

#### 4.0 Conclusion

This study underscores the significant progress made in women's education and empowerment in India while also shedding light on the persistent challenges. A holistic approach, incorporating education, economic opportunities, legal protections, Government initiatives and social support, is pivotal for achieving sustainable gender equality. By addressing these barriers and leveraging the strengths identified in the literature, India can continue to advance women's empowerment into the 21st century. Specifically, education emerges as a powerful tool for women's empowerment, transforming individual lives and benefiting communities and the nation at large. The alignment of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4) offers a comprehensive framework to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all. This alignment emphasizes the importance of integrating gender sensitivity into educational frameworks, providing financial aid and scholarships, enhancing infrastructure, and fostering leadership opportunities for women. It also highlights the necessity of robust policy implementation, continuous monitoring, and community engagement to challenge deep-rooted cultural norms and stereotypes. By focusing on these multidimensional strategies, India can create an environment that nurtures women's aspirations, fosters their participation in various sectors, and ensures their rights and safety, ultimately contributing to the nation's socio-economic development and progress.

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