Education Policy and Women's Education : An Overview with Special Focus on the New Education Policy 2020

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Madhu Jha*

ABSTRACT

Education has a great role to play in transforming the lives of all individuals. The issue of access and equity in education becomes paramount for the marginalised sections of the society- women in this case. The State makes use of education policy as its main instrument to bring in this transformation. The latest declared National Education Policy-2020, which comes after more than three decades, requires a close examination from a feminist lens in the background of the earlier policies and the present educational status of women. This study is an attempt to analyse the positive and negative impacts of the policy particularly on women. Women's education after all shall remain critical for the overall growth of all societies.

Keywords: *Education, Policy, Feminist, Women, India*

At the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declared that everyone has the right to education, and that education should be free and compulsory at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Full development of our personality and strengthening of notion of rights is not possible without meeting the challenges of the new global order. Here I am reminded of Prof. Amartya Sen's understanding of development not in terms of Gross National Product but as a social development and as a process of expanding freedom for all people in society (Sen, 1999). Education has been considered by him as an enabling condition to enter any market and increases substantive freedom for all. Full development of our personality and strengthening of the notion of rights is not possible without education. A broad view of education encompasses the holistic development of students- development of the creative potential of each individual. To meet the challenges of the new global order, there is a need to critically study the existing education

* Associate Professor, Lakshmibai College, University of Delhi. Email : mjha.1973@gmail.com

policies and explore its versions. It is in this light that I locate the importance of the right education for women to bring a positive change in their lives.

Education of girls has become a development imperative for all nations due to the positive relationship between female education and indicators of social and economic development. Low levels of education affect the health, nutrition, employment and other parameters that determine the general status of women. Policies are formulated to express our collective liberal concerns. The issue of addressing women's low status in society through education is itself a huge challenge in the light of the existing asymmetry in educational access for boys and girls. However, the new discourse of equity and inclusion within development agencies and national governments fits badly with the dominant economic imperatives behind most of the education policies. It is a fact that parent's desire to investment in women's education is often determined by their economic and social privilege (Subramanian, 2005). Under patriarchy, gender division of work continues to alienate women from the work force. This results in lower female education reflecting the ideological bias against considering women as the bread winners of the house (Bandhopadhyay and Subramanian 2008).

The issue of addressing gender subordination in society through educational processes has thus been one of the most important yet complex challenges for the State. Access and equity in education have been of utmost priority since independence for the Indian State. Development of human capital for fulfilling the needs of the society is considered an important aspect of education. Women who comprise almost half of our population perhaps need education much more as a tool to bring transformation into their lives. This paper relies on conceptualisation of issues of access and equity for women in India's education policy specially in the light of the New Education Policy 2020.

INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL COMMITMENTS ON WOMEN'S EDUCATION

In terms of bringing the issue of women's education into the mainstream, we should recognize the existence of both a national entity as well as an international advocacy group.. The United Nations from time to time has put emphasis on the right to education in general and education of women in particular (Chowdhary, 2000). Feminist movements all over the world have been in the background of the process of adoption of the millennium development goals and education for all campaigns, such as at the Beijing conference and Conference on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (Vaughan, 2013). The Beijing Declaration promoted sustainable development through the provision of primary

education (United Nations, 1995) The initial engagement of the Indian state with women's education worked with the perspective of Women in Development and thereby considered education as an instrument for national development and encouraged women to contribute in this development by participating in public life (UNESCO,1968). From a liberal positioning of considering education as important for achieving gender equality in 1970s to considering women's education as important from human capital perspective in 1980s, (Women and Development), India has undergone great shifts in formulations of the policies on education in tune with the shifts at the international level. The United Nations declaration of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000 had 8 goals out of which one stressed on achieving compulsory primary elementary education by 2015 (MDGs, 2000). In pursuance of this, Indian Government passed the Constitutional 86th Amendment Act 2002 and made right to education a part of fundamental rights and considered it as an important aspect of right to life. The Act envisaged free and compulsory education for all children in the age group of 6-14 and thereby brought a sea change in the way the state had started accepting education as a top priority. Along with this change, liberalisation of economy, computerisation of offices and the sustainable development goal of the 2030 agenda provided enough reasons for the present government to realise the inadequacies of the existing policy on education and to bring reforms in the education sector. NEP 2020 envisions an Indian centred education system that can contribute and transform any nation on the basis of sustainable goals along with an equitable, inclusive and just society. The Indian State considers achievement of gender equality as a central 'objective' and also uses it as a 'strategy' for better implementation of the objective. In this sense, it derives its strength from a human rights framework. The Constitution of India (1951) not only grants equality to women and forbids any discrimination based on religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth, but also empowers the state to practice protective discrimination in favour of women. Under the protective discrimination clause, the State has passed several social and labour legislations and come up with special programmes and schemes for the welfare and development of women and children. The ground reality however, is quite the reverse of the above proclaimed position. Sex ratio does not favour women in India and a majority of women go through life in a state of chronic stress, even facing nutritional discrimination within the family. Fewer girls than boys attend school. Even when enrolled, fewer girls manage to stay in school and complete schooling. Most girls who drop out of school are working in homes and fields of their parental or marital families. Women's work is undervalued and unrecognised and women generally earn a far lower wage than men in spite of doing identical work. Most women do not own property. The rising violence against women inside and outside the family continues to further marginalise women. This study attempts to examine the new policy from a feminist lens in the background of the present

educational status of women. The entire document needs to be subjected to careful analysis in terms of gender so that we can find out the possible implications of its implementation for women as a major category .

EDUCATION POLICY FORMULATIONS IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

As a post-independence nation, India faced many challenges, and making its population literate was probably one of the most important. For India to embark on the path of social reconstruction, effective education policy formulations were of paramount importance.The table below gives us a fair idea about the level of literacy in 1951 and the trend in its increase in the years ahead.

Table-1 Literacy Rates in Post Independent India

Year	Female	Male	Gender Gap	Person
1951	8.9	27.2	18.3	18.3
1961	15.4	40.4	25	28.3
1971	22	46	24	34.5
1981	29.8	56.4	26.6	43.6
1991	39.3	64.1	24.8	52.2
2001	53.7	75.3	21.6	64.8
2011	64.6	80.9	16.3	73
2017	70.3	84.7	14.4	77.7

Gender Gap – Difference between male and female literacy
Source: Government of India, 2019

Table-1 shows that female literacy rate which stood at 8.9% in 1951 has reached 70.3% in 2017. The gender gap which had reached to 26.6% in 1981 has also reduced to 14.4% in 2017 which is the lowest gender gap in the history of independent India. The jump in female literacy has been higher in the decades from 1991-2001 and 2001-2011 probably due to factors like impact of globalisation, growth of media as a strong campaigner of social causes and right to education making education accessible to all.

Before going any further in this analysis, it is important to have an overview on the efforts that have been taken by the State to enhance the levels of literacy in the country. The sluggish growth in women's education after independence was due to the historical legacy of neglect of educating women. However, in the early 19th century efforts of social reformers and Christian missionaries led to the rise of a new group of elites educated women

who later paved the way for inclusion of women's education as a prominent agenda of the early women's movement (Majumdar, 1987). University of Education Commission was the first institution set up after independence to enquire into the subject of women. The report on discussion of women's education observed that there can be no educated people without educated women as it is women who are capable of passing on the benefits of educated minds even to the next generation (GOI, 1950).

The second Education Commission was set up in 1952 to suggest measures for its reorganisation. As regards women, the commission felt at the present stage of our social evolution, there is no special justification to deal with women's education separately. Every type of education open to men should also be open to women. Two divergent views regarding women's education were expressed by different women's organisations. One was education should prepare women for family responsibilities and hence the education content should be different from that of men. The other dominant view however supported similar pattern of education as ultimately women needed to get prepared to enter public life. The commission finally upheld the view that education should ultimately aim at preparing both men and women to be better parents and citizens (Mishra, 1966).

However these two commissions could not provide a clear and comprehensive structure of the national system of education. In order to ensure a clear and comprehensive structure of the national system of education, the government of India appointed an education commission under the chairmanship of Dr.D.S. Kothari on July 1964 to formulate a national policy on education (Mishra, 1966). The Commission fully accepted the recommendations of the National Committee on Women's Education (1958-59) which had differentiated view of the roles of men and women with regards to jobs according to which women were understood to be more adapted to work in sectors which were light and congenial in nature. The Kothari commission accepted the committee's recommendations like provision of special schemes for women's education, expansion of secondary education among girls, distribution of free books to girls, facilities of part time and vocational education for girls etc. The Commission also considered nursing, teaching and social service as areas where women had a role to play (GOI, 1966). The Kothari Commission report formed the basis of the 1968 national policy on education.

The education policy of 1968 can be considered as the first historic policy with the aim of achieving national development with a sense of common citizenship and culture. While reiterating the role of education in fostering the constitutional values of secularism, equality and socialism, the policy of 1968 stressed on the need for women to get educated

(NPE, 1968). The task of bringing social revolution through social engineering and women being active agents in this goal was well propounded in this policy. The policy laid down a common scheme of studies for boys and girls under a common school system. The education structure of 10+2+3 all over the country was proposed with a common curriculum for boys and girls. However the policy that was made in the background of the Nehruvian paradigm of welfare state worked with a myopic approach of Women in Development and considered women to be only the recipients of the welfare schemes. The policy fell short of expectations in making education for women a central tool to bring equality for women. The prevailing ideology of the state on the subject of women's education during this time was largely guided by socialism and nationalism.

The next shift in the approach of government can however be seen in the National Education Policy of 1986 and its Programme of Action (revised 1992) which gave education a mandate to work for women's equality and empowerment and went much further and included a section on education and women's equality. Before coming to this policy, special mention needs to be made of the 1974 report, Towards Equality, the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India by the government of India (GOI, 1974). The report had concluded that the traditional values in Indian societies were largely responsible for the low status of women and education often became a tool to project the image of women as dependent and victimised. The policy accepted that the education system had not been able to change the status of women in society and strived to bring all women under elementary education by 1995. In order to achieve this, the goal of bringing a national system of education was proposed so as to provide an access to education of a comparable quality to all citizens irrespective of caste, creed, location and sex. The policy made a landmark move by introducing Women's Studies as a discipline to be taught through various courses so that the existing stereotypical notions promoted in all books could be at least questioned. By bringing a women's dimension into the various courses the policy aimed at making men also a partner in the journey of changing the status of women and empowering them (GOI,1986). By focussing on the need to bring women into the development process, the policy made a major shift from looking at women as raisers of families to providers in their families. Stress on vocational training, skill development and technical education for women was given so that it could be linked to work opportunities.

As a programme of action, the policy envisioned the role of trained teachers and adult education instructors, activists and non- government organisations in promoting the essence of empowerment in women and enabling them to become decisions makers. It also suggested that women teachers should be recruited on preferential basis in rural areas so that

parents are encouraged to send their daughters to schools.

National Literacy Mission, The Shikshakari Project, Mahila Samakhya, Lok Jumbish experiment of residential camps to incorporate primary education for girls who missed the chance to get the same were a few successful innovations that were started to implement the goals of the education policy (Jain, 2003).

Although some direction for women's education did come through the 1986 education policy, yet the policy, it however did not address the issue of mainstreaming gender in all aspects of governance and society. The policy also fell short on issues of finances. The suggestion to contribute 6% of the Gross Domestic Product on education which was there in both the 1968 and 1986 policy also remained unfulfilled.

NEW EDUCATION POLICY (NEP) 2020

The Government after long deliberations approved the much awaited national education policy in the cabinet on the 29th July 2020 (PIB 2020). K. kasturirangan committee which had been formed in June 2017 to prepare a draft on National Education Policy submitted its report on 31st May 2019 and it was uploaded on Ministry of Human and Resource Development website to invite suggestions and comments from all stakeholders. The context of changing nature of neo liberal state, Right to Education in operation since 2010 and mounting international pressure all needs to be kept in mind while examining the merits of the new policy from the perspective of women.

The Indian state has witnessed great strides in overall literacy rate and female literacy rates in the last twenty years. The success of Sarva Siksha Abhiyan and the latest campaign of Beti Bachaon Beti Padhao have helped in laying down the bedrock on which the New Education Policy has evolved. The Policy targets at providing universal schooling from the age group of 3-18 years from the earlier target group of 6-14 years. This will definitely make education accessible to the remaining 1/3rd of women's population who still need to get literate.

SOCIO-ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED GROUPS AND WOMEN

In an endeavour to promote inclusiveness and equity, the policy outlines various schemes to support the Under Represented Groups in the education system, women being considered an important part of it like receiving funding in research, special internship programmes and creation of special educational zones. Education of girls as a Cross Cutting

Theme has been emphasized in the policy to give special focus on the need to include all women within the education system. The policy has reiterated the importance of education as the easiest path to end poverty and violence, promote better health and development that would even benefit the next generation. Even in the socio- economic category of Under Represented Groups, special focus has been given to women in these groups as they face discriminations on multiple bases like class, caste, gender and religion. Stress on mother tongue/ regional language till fifth grade as medium of instruction could help girls from marginalised communities to get access to education at primary and secondary levels.

REGIONAL VARIATIONS AND GENDER INCLUSION FUND

The policy for the first time recommends the setting up of Gender Inclusion Fund for the purpose of providing quality and equitable education for all girls (GOI 2020). This would be ensured through closing gender gaps in educational attainment levels, ensuring 100% participation of girls in schools, to help girls to take leadership positions and work as role models for others. The fund has been divided into two parts – the formula grant which would deal with the allotment to states for implementing the goals set up by the central government for helping girls and women to gain access to education. The discretionary fund however has been assigned for helping states to support effective community based interventions to address localised and context specific barriers like caste, class and societal norms which prevent access to quality education for girls.

Table -2 State-wise Gap in the Literacy rates of Males and Females in last two decades

State / Union Territory	Gender Gap		
	Rural	Urban	Total
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Andhra Pradesh	14.1	13.2	13.9
Assam	9.5	-5.1	8.9
Bihar	19.9	20.2	19.2
Chhatisgarh	18.4	7.0	16.7
Delhi	0.0	8.4	11.3
Gujarat	17.7	7.8	14.7
Haryana	19.4	14.0	16.7
Himachal Pradesh	13.1	4.8	12.4

Jammu & Kashmir	18.9	12.8	17.7
Jharkhand	19.2	14.0	18.3
Karnataka	15.1	8.8	12.9
Kerala	2.6	1.8	2.2
Madhya Pradesh	16.9	11.9	15.7
Maharashtra	15.6	7.7	12.3
Odisha	14.7	8.5	13.7
Punjab	11.5	7.1	10.0
Rajasthan	25.0	16.5	23.2
Tamil Nadu	13.4	6.4	10.0
Telangana	16.9	12.7	15.4
Uttarkhand	14.1	11.5	13.6
Uttar Pradesh	20.1	11.9	18.4
West Bengal	9.4	6.7	8.7
India	16.5	9.4	14.4

Source : NSS 75th Rural, Jul. 2017-Jan 2018.
Source: GOI 2019

A look at the above table endorses the view of NEP on variations in gender gap among various states and rural and urban areas. States like Rajasthan top the list with gender gap of 23.2% which means that the state needs to address the issue of female literacy through special measures and the proposed gender fund could be helpful in achieving it. Attention needs to be drawn towards states like Chhattisgarh and Gujarat where the difference between rural and urban gender gap in literacy is as high as 11.4% and 9.9% respectively. The policy recognises the existing regional variations in levels of women's education and suggests the incorporation of community based organisations at the grass roots levels in the task of advocating the need for women's education. The policy has made resources available to increase women in positions of leadership in schools so that girls could be empowered and encouraged to take on the roles of decision makers. The gender imbalance in the teaching profession as is clear from the table below, that has been specially observed in schools in rural areas.

Table-3
No. of Female Teachers per 100 Male Teachers at Different Levels of Education

Year	Primary	Upper Primary	Secondary	Senior Secondary	Higher Secondary
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
2005-06	65	67	61	62	NA
2006-07	66	65	63	61	NA
2007-08	80	67	61	58	NA
2008-09	73	71	60	60	NA
2009-10	84	75	63	63	NA
2010-11	76	80	61	65	59
2011-12	79	76	66	66	64
2012-13*	NA	NA	NA	NA	64
2013-14*	NA	NA	NA	NA	64
2014-15*	104	81	70	71	63
2015-16*	105	83	72	73	64

Source: GOI, 2019

Table -3 clearly points towards the reality that the percentage of female teachers is far lesser than that of male teachers especially at secondary, senior secondary and higher secondary levels. This becomes an important reason for dissuading some parents from sending their daughters to school. This is probably one of the reasons for increased dropout rates of girls at these levels. Having more female teachers works as a role model for the society and as an assurance of security for young girls. In this light the policy strongly recommends recruiting more women teachers on a preferential basis so that female students feel no inhibition in attending the schools.

Prioritising school safety and security:

Issues of female student's safety and sanitation has been considered as critical factors that ensure their attendance in schools. Guidelines on Transportation, physical safety and clean female toilets, availability of sanitary napkins to ensure menstrual hygiene have been issued by the government to enable female students to attend schools without fear.

Another important concern raised by the policy is the role of gender stereotypes in society especially in rural areas which dissuades girls from attending schools. In an effort to spread gender sensitisation in villages and schools' awareness sessions and workshops should be held by the government agencies and also information on legal provisions for women like law against sexual harassment at work place, Act against Domestic Violence, POSCO and others should be given to women by different ways so that they can be encouraged to send their daughters to schools.

TRANSGENDER CHILDREN/STUDENTS

The New education Policy has been laudatory also because for the first time transgenders have been recognised as a separate identity in an effort to uphold Supreme Court's 2014 directive. The society would try to address the stigma and discrimination they face in their lives. It has recommended creation of a national database on transgender children by the government so that beneficiaries could be identified. The policy also proposes to change the curriculum and syllabus so that new topics on children could be included. This segment of the population who also needs to be empowered has been totally forgotten by our policy makers. The issue of making education highly inclusive by accepting the prevailing gender based distinctions seems to have been addressed finally

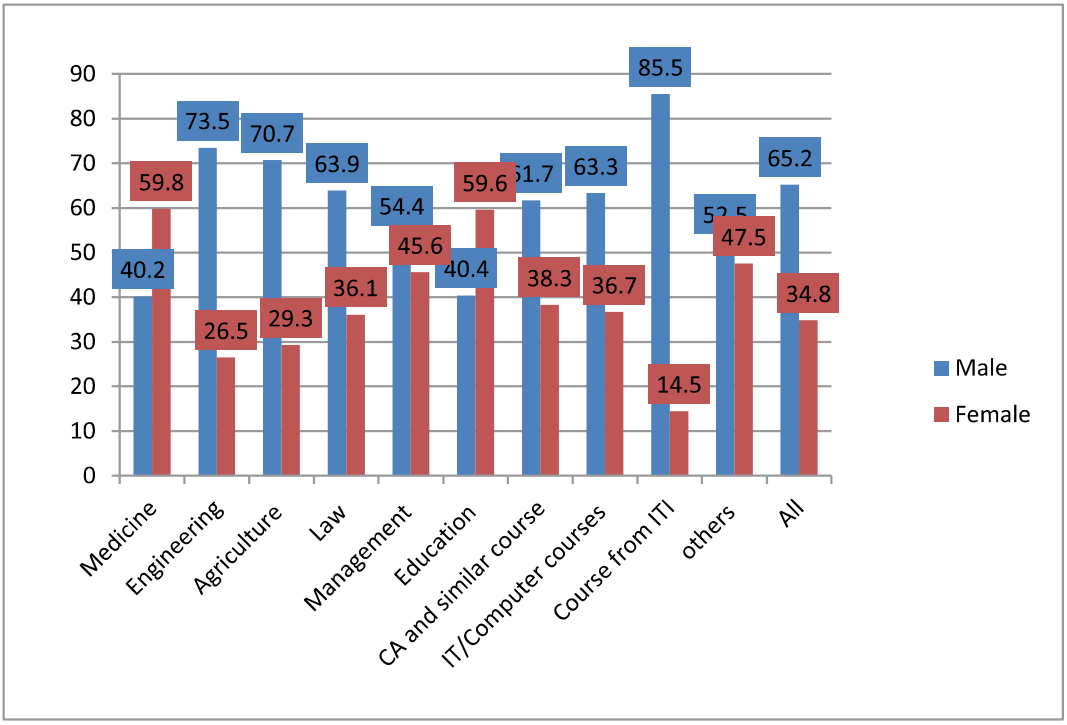
EXISTING GAPS IN THE NEP 2020

The policy has upheld and focussed only on women as a gender category totally ignoring the other gender identities that exist in our society. There was a need to promote the creation of gender equal orientation by changing the mind sets of boys as well. Emphasis on masculinity and glorification of physical strength encourages violence specially through, media and films. The policy should have included these issues while discussing about need of gender sensitisation in schools to break prevailing gender stereotyped. Acknowledging the fact that boys are mostly socialised into patriarchal roles of superiority over girls would have helped in realising that education can be an important tool to change the reality. The main goal of bringing gender equality through education can only be effective if we include boys as active participants in this narrative and stop only focussing and looking at girls. The document is silent on a few disciplines which have played a major role in promoting ethos of women's equality and gender sensitisation in India like that of women's studies, Dalit studies and environment studies. Omitting these kinds of studies itself can raise doubts on how serious the government is on the issue of inclusivity.

The creation of gender inclusion fund as a way to bring capacity to provide equitable education to women and transgender children needs to be seen with caution. One must understand that creation of the fund is only a step, unless it gets implemented and executed no goal would be achievable. One needs to note here that Nirbhaya Fund which had been created by the government in 2013 to provide safety to women has been only half utilised in the last seven years. Hence there is a need to have a detailed action plan to ensure how this Gender Inclusion Fund would be actually spent.

The policy falters on account of its inability to introduce any new innovative design to motivate women to take up unconventional courses and to take up courses which are largely dominated by boys. The table below can be useful for us to understand the existing asymmetry in terms of gender in different professional courses in India.

Table-4
Percentage Distribution of Students Pursuing Technical/ professional Course By Gender of the Student for each type of course



Gender Gap= Percentage of Males- Percentage of Females
Source: GOI 2019

The above graph displays clearly that gender gap in professional courses like vocational/ITI (71%), engineering (47%), Information and Technology (26.6%) are quite alarming. These are courses which are lucrative in terms of employment opportunities. Only

education and medicine are sectors with higher rate of females opting for them than males. The recent decision of the government to give 20% numeric quota for girl students in IITs can be seen as a policy to enhance the gender gaps visible in technical education. Such provisions should have been included in the policy so as create an equilibrium in the professional courses which have been dominated by males so far.

The policy continues to have the same mechanical approach towards inclusivity which the previous policies did. It requires a major restructuring of the curricula, syllabi and transformation of the attitudes of administrations, teachers and staff within educational institutions. There is a need for the government to ensure that there is functional democracy within all educational institutions so that an enabling environment wherein the right to expression, liberty and equality can be enjoyed by all women students and faculty without any fear. While insisting on the use of technology in education, the policy framers must also ensure the issue of access to digital technology for girls and their level of comfort in technology should be taken into account. In a country where only 28% of mobile owners have smartphones, its ramifications for women can be understood easily (Roy,2019 and Kaul,2018). A girl child as it is facing a number of problems like gender biases, and discrimination at different stages and in a situation of non- availability of any digital knowhow, education can become a handicap for them. Free distribution of academic material, digital gadgets and internet infrastructure could have helped in the process.

The activists and organisations working with women at the grass roots have redefined new approaches for women's education beyond the formal system (Ramdas, 1990). Innovative and participatory model of education can help in encouraging girls to treat education as a learning process in life and also to empower them. The Policy needs to expand such new approaches which could work beyond the formal structures. One also observes that elementary training in education needs to be connected to employment possibilities in the market but the new policy seems to have been inadequate in addressing the challenge. There is a need to develop economic capacity for girls in order to empower them and make them powerful.

The challenge of financing universal education continues to emphasize the need to raise revenue through levying fees. The NEP 2020 seems to have been made under the impact of the neo- capitalist faith in markets and ultimately has paved way to official acceptance of foreign partners in education. After resisting for a long time, India decided to open up much later than the other countries and began to invite foreign interference in education in the early 1990s (La Dousa,2007). With the new policy in operation soon, one can expect the entry

of many more private and foreign players in the field of education. One needs to mention here that the policy proposes multi-disciplinary approach in education and introduction of four- year undergraduate programmes. The financial burden of an extra year for doing under-graduation courses may discourage parents from continuing higher education especially of their daughters. The actual impact of this change on women's education in India where disparities in income have deeper impact on their lives will need a close inspection.

In a deeply hierarchical society with different socio economic backgrounds ensuring equality of opportunity in education becomes extremely important. One hopes that the New Education Policy will be able to promote holistic development of women and give them the freedom of choice which they have been aspiring for in the society as well as in the job market. Though the policy is welcomed as a collective liberal concern for women, yet its adaptability to the challenges of the new global order will be important to address the issues of inclusivity. One can only wish that women in India will not have to wait for three decades for another new policy on education. New levels of advocacy and agency awaits the fulfilment of the agenda of achieving equity and inclusiveness in women's education in India.

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