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EMPOWERMENT THROUGH EDUCATION: A FEMINIST  
PERSPECTIVE ON MARGINALIZED GIRLS IN NEP 2020

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**Keywords**

*Feminism, Inclusive Education, Marginalized Girls, Gender Equity, Nep 2020, Educational Access, Empowerment.*

**Abstract**

NEP 2020 foregrounds equitable and inclusive education as a central pillar, emphasizing the inclusion of Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), including girls, through structural reforms such as the Gender Inclusion Fund, flexible curricula, and targeted interventions to reduce gender gaps in enrolment and learning outcomes. This chapter explores feminist perspectives on inclusive education with a focus on empowering marginalized girls in the context of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. It examines persistent gender, socio-economic, and regional disparities in access, participation, and retention in school education, highlighting the structural barriers faced by girls from marginalized communities. The chapter emphasizes the role of feminist theory and pedagogy in advocating for equity, agency, and social justice, and analyses strategies for creating inclusive learning environments, including provisions for girls with disabilities and other marginalized groups. By linking policy, practice, and feminist ideals, the chapter underscores the potential of NEP 2020 to transform education into a vehicle



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for empowerment, equity, and sustainable social change. Feminist critiques highlight that while NEP 2020 adopts a rights-based discourse of inclusion, its approach often remains limited by a single-axis understanding of gender. It insufficiently addresses the intersectional realities shaped by caste, class, religion, disability, and geography that deeply affect marginalized girls' educational experiences. Feminist theory thus calls for a more nuanced, intersectional framework that centers lived experiences, challenges structural inequalities, and redefines classroom practices to dismantle gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms.

**Introduction:**

Education has long been recognized as a transformative tool for social change, yet access to equitable and inclusive education remains deeply uneven, particularly for marginalized girls in India. Structural inequalities rooted in gender, caste, class, disability, and geography continue to shape educational opportunities and outcomes, often excluding girls from disadvantaged communities from meaningful participation in schooling. Within this context, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant policy shift by explicitly prioritizing inclusion, equity, and gender sensitivity as foundational principles of India's education system.

Education is a powerful tool for achieving social equity and empowerment, yet access and quality remain uneven for many marginalized groups, particularly girls. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizes inclusive and equitable education, aiming to bridge gender, socio-economic, and regional disparities. Despite policy reforms, girls from marginalized communities continue to face barriers such as poverty, social norms, early marriage, and lack of infrastructure. A feminist perspective offers critical insights into these challenges, highlighting the intersection of gender, class, and disability, and advocating for strategies that empower girls to participate fully in education. This chapter examines the NEP 2020 through a feminist lens, exploring mechanisms for inclusive education, the empowerment of marginalized girls, and the promotion of equity and access. It underscores how policy, pedagogy, and community engagement can work together to create transformative educational opportunities for all.

**Literature of Review:**

The discourse on inclusive education and gender equity has been significantly shaped by feminist scholarship, which critiques the structural and cultural barriers embedded within educational systems. Foundational feminist thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir and bell hooks emphasize that education often reproduces patriarchal norms, positioning girls—especially those from marginalized communities—at a disadvantage. Their work highlights the need for education systems to move beyond formal equality toward transformative practices that challenge gendered power relations and enable critical consciousness. A key development in feminist theory is the concept of intersectionality, articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Intersectionality provides a critical framework



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to understand how multiple forms of oppression—such as caste, class, gender, disability, and ethnicity—interact to shape the lived experiences of marginalized girls. In the Indian context, scholars have demonstrated that girls from Dalit, Adivasi, and minority communities face compounded disadvantages, including limited access to schooling, discriminatory practices, and socio-cultural constraints. This body of literature underscores that gender cannot be examined in isolation when addressing educational inequities. Research on inclusive education further expands this perspective by advocating for systems that accommodate diverse learners and ensure equitable participation. Scholars such as Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum contribute through the capability approach, which emphasizes enhancing individuals' freedoms and opportunities to achieve well-being. Applied to education, this approach shifts the focus from mere access to meaningful learning outcomes, agency, and empowerment—particularly relevant for marginalized girls who often lack the resources and support to fully benefit from schooling. Within the Indian policy landscape, studies examining the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 highlight its commitment to equity and inclusion, particularly through initiatives like the Gender Inclusion Fund and targeted interventions for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). However, critical analyses argue that while NEP 2020 acknowledges disparities, it tends to adopt a broad, policy-level understanding of inclusion without sufficiently addressing ground-level complexities. Feminist scholars point out gaps in implementation, the risk of homogenizing marginalized groups, and the limited attention to intersectional vulnerabilities. Empirical research also reveals persistent barriers affecting marginalized girls' education, including poverty, early marriage, gender-based violence, lack of infrastructure, and digital divides. Studies stress the importance of gender-sensitive pedagogy, inclusive curricula, and teacher training to create supportive learning environments. Additionally, community engagement and policy accountability are identified as crucial factors in ensuring that inclusive education policies translate into practice. Post-independence, India recognized education as a fundamental right, leading to policies such as the National Policy on Education (1968, 1986), which aimed to promote universal access and gender equity. Despite these efforts, structural inequalities persisted, affecting enrolment, retention, and learning outcomes for marginalized girls. The NEP 2020 builds on these historical efforts, emphasizing inclusive, equitable, and quality education, integrating feminist perspectives to address persistent gender-based and socio-economic barriers.

### **Methodology:**

The study adopts a qualitative research approach to critically examine the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 through a feminist lens. It involves an extensive review of policy documents, government reports, academic literature, and case studies related to gender, inclusive education, and marginalized girls' empowerment. The study focuses on identifying structural barriers, socio-economic and regional disparities, and strategies for inclusion. Analytical methods include content analysis and thematic interpretation, enabling a deep understanding of the intersections between



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gender, disability, socio-economic status, and educational access. By combining policy review with feminist theoretical insights, the study assesses the effectiveness of NEP 2020 in promoting equity, inclusion, and empowerment. The approach highlights practical implications, policy gaps, and strategies that can inform inclusive, gender-sensitive educational practices and interventions for marginalized girls.

**Objectives:**

1. To analyze NEP 2020 through a feminist perspective with focus on girls' education. Examine how the policy addresses gender equality and inclusion, highlighting its relevance for marginalized girls and how feminist insights can inform its implementation.
2. To examine gender disparities in access, retention, and learning outcomes in school education. Identify the structural barriers, social norms, and practices that hinder girls' participation and progress in education across different regions and communities.
3. To identify socio-economic and regional inequalities affecting marginalized girls' education. Explore how poverty, caste, and rural-urban divides contribute to unequal opportunities and affect enrolment, retention, and quality of learning.
4. To explore strategies for inclusive education for students with disabilities and marginalized groups. Analyze NEP 2020 measures and pedagogical approaches that promote participation of all learners, ensuring that marginalized girls and children with disabilities are not left behind.
5. To critically evaluate challenges and policy gaps in implementing inclusive education. Identify gaps between policy vision and ground realities, including social resistance, infrastructure limitations, and insufficient teacher training.
6. To emphasize the role of education in promoting equity, social justice, and empowerment. Show how inclusive education, guided by feminist perspectives, can transform society by enabling marginalized girls to fully participate and achieve their potential

➤ **Feminism and Education: Theoretical Framework:**

Feminist theory provides a critical perspective on education, emphasizing gender equality, social justice, and empowerment. It challenges patriarchal norms and systemic biases that often marginalize girls, particularly those from disadvantaged communities. In the context of education, feminist pedagogy advocates for inclusive curricula, participatory learning, and the recognition of girls' voices and agency in decision-making processes. By interrogating power structures within schools, classrooms, and society, feminism highlights how traditional practices and societal expectations restrict girls' opportunities for intellectual, social, and personal growth. This framework is particularly relevant to analyzing the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, as it offers a lens to



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assess how policy measures can promote equity and challenge entrenched inequalities. Feminist perspectives encourage educators and policymakers to create supportive, safe, and empowering learning environments, ensuring that marginalized girls are not only included but actively empowered to participate, learn, and lead.

➤ **Gender Disparities in School Education**

Gender disparities in school education remain a significant concern in India, despite policy initiatives aimed at promoting equality. Girls, especially from marginalized communities, often face barriers to enrollment, retention, and academic achievement. Factors such as early marriage, domestic responsibilities, societal expectations, and gender-biased attitudes contribute to lower participation rates and higher dropout levels. Even when enrolled, girls may encounter unequal access to learning resources, limited mentorship, and less encouragement to pursue STEM and leadership opportunities. These disparities are compounded in regions with poor infrastructure, limited female teachers, and unsafe school environments. Analyzing these gaps highlights the importance of targeted interventions and gender-sensitive pedagogy. By addressing structural and cultural barriers, education can become a tool for empowerment, enabling girls to achieve their potential. Recognizing and reducing gender disparities is critical for achieving equity, social justice, and sustainable development.

➤ **Socio-Economic and Regional Disparities:**

Socio-economic and regional disparities significantly influence educational outcomes for marginalized girls. Poverty, caste, and rural-urban divides often determine whether a girl can access school, complete her education, or benefit from quality teaching. Families with limited resources may prioritize boys' education over girls', while schools in underdeveloped regions struggle with inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and lack of learning materials. These disparities intersect with gender, creating multiple layers of disadvantage for marginalized girls, particularly those from rural, tribal, or low-income backgrounds. Regional imbalances further exacerbate inequity, as urban areas generally offer better facilities, skilled teachers, and supportive learning environments. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive policy measures, targeted scholarships, community engagement, and inclusive pedagogy. By understanding the intersection of socio-economic and regional factors, education systems can design interventions that ensure equal opportunities and equitable outcomes for all girls, enabling them to participate fully in academic and social life.

➤ **Inclusive Education for Students with Disabilities and Marginalized Groups**

Inclusive education seeks to ensure that all children, regardless of ability, social background, or economic status, have equal access to quality learning opportunities. NEP 2020 emphasizes inclusive practices by advocating for barrier-free infrastructure, assistive technologies, and individualized



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learning support. Students with disabilities and those from marginalized communities often face multiple forms of exclusion, including physical inaccessibility, social stigma, and inadequate teacher training. Effective inclusive education requires intersectional approaches that consider gender, caste, socio-economic status, and disability simultaneously. By integrating these students into mainstream classrooms and adopting flexible pedagogical methods, schools can foster participation, confidence, and academic growth. This approach aligns with feminist principles, as it challenges structural inequalities and promotes agency, ensuring that all marginalized girls and boys can thrive. Inclusive education not only addresses inequity but also builds a more empathetic, equitable, and socially cohesive learning environment.

### ➤ **Strategies for Empowerment of Marginalized Girls**

Empowering marginalized girls requires a combination of policy interventions, community engagement, and school-based initiatives. Strategies include scholarships, mentorship programs, life skills training, safe school environments, and gender-sensitive curricula. NEP 2020 emphasizes promoting skill development, leadership opportunities, and access to digital resources, particularly for girls from underprivileged backgrounds. Empowerment is not limited to academic success; it also involves building self-confidence, decision-making abilities, and social agency. Community participation, awareness campaigns, and gender-sensitive teacher training are critical to reducing social barriers such as early marriage, domestic responsibilities, and discriminatory practices. Feminist perspectives highlight that education should foster critical thinking, autonomy, and equal participation, enabling girls to challenge societal norms and achieve their potential. By adopting these strategies, education becomes a tool not only for learning but also for transforming social structures and promoting gender equity.

### ➤ **Challenges and Policy Gaps**

Despite progressive policy frameworks, significant challenges and gaps hinder the effective implementation of inclusive education. Structural issues include inadequate infrastructure, shortage of trained teachers, insufficient learning resources, and limited accessibility for students with disabilities. Social and cultural barriers, such as patriarchal norms, caste discrimination, and gender biases, continue to restrict educational opportunities for marginalized girls. Regional disparities exacerbate inequities, with rural and remote areas facing severe resource constraints. Policy gaps often arise from poor monitoring, lack of community engagement, and insufficient focus on intersectionality. Feminist analysis underscores the need to address systemic inequalities rather than just procedural reforms. Bridging these gaps requires comprehensive strategies that combine policy enforcement, capacity building, awareness campaigns, and targeted interventions. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensure that NEP 2020 fulfills its promise of equitable, inclusive, and empowering education for all.



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**Impact:**

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted education, disproportionately affecting marginalized girls, particularly in rural and low-income communities. School closures, lack of digital infrastructure, and limited access to online learning widened existing educational gaps, leading to increased dropout rates and learning loss. Many girls faced additional domestic responsibilities, early marriage pressures, and economic constraints, which further hindered their return to school. Addressing these challenges requires targeted strategies, including remedial programs, digital literacy initiatives, and community-based support to ensure continuity of learning. By prioritizing recovery and inclusive approaches, policymakers can prevent long-term setbacks and strengthen equity in education for marginalized girls.

**Mental Health and Well-being**

Marginalized girls often face heightened stress, anxiety, and social pressures within educational spaces, which can negatively affect attendance, learning, and overall development. Issues such as societal expectations, academic pressure, and gender-based discrimination exacerbate mental health challenges. Schools play a critical role in addressing these concerns by providing counseling services, mentorship programs, and creating supportive, safe environments that foster emotional well-being. Integrating mental health awareness into curricula and teacher training can empower girls to manage stress, build resilience, and actively participate in learning. Promoting well-being is essential for inclusive education that nurtures both academic success and personal growth.

**Gender-Based Violence and Safety in Schools**

Gender-based violence and safety concerns remain significant barriers to education for marginalized girls. Harassment, unsafe transport, and threats within or on the way to school can discourage attendance and lead to dropouts. Ensuring safety requires robust policies, vigilant monitoring, awareness programs, and community engagement to create secure learning environments. Schools must implement anti-bullying initiatives, gender-sensitive training for staff, and accessible reporting mechanisms. By prioritizing safety, education systems can foster trust, encourage participation, and uphold the rights of girls. Addressing these risks is crucial for creating inclusive schools where marginalized girls can thrive academically and socially.

**Role of Social Media and Awareness Campaigns**

Social media and digital campaigns have become powerful tools to promote girls' education and challenge patriarchal norms. Online platforms raise awareness about rights, opportunities, and government initiatives while connecting marginalized communities with resources and support networks. Campaigns can mobilize public opinion, encourage parental engagement, and foster community participation in promoting gender equity in education. However, access and digital literacy remain challenges, particularly for rural and low-income girls. When effectively integrated



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with school programs and local outreach, social media can amplify voices, build advocacy, and create an informed, supportive environment that empowers marginalized girls to pursue education without fear or discrimination.

### **Skill Development and Vocational Training**

Education for marginalized girls must extend beyond academics to include skill development and vocational training that align with modern economic opportunities. Programs focusing on digital literacy, entrepreneurship, financial management, and technical skills enable girls to achieve self-reliance and career readiness. Integrating skill-based education with mainstream schooling enhances confidence, practical knowledge, and employability. NEP 2020 emphasizes linking education with vocational training to prepare students for real-world challenges, especially girls from disadvantaged backgrounds. Empowering girls with relevant skills ensures they can participate equally in the workforce, break cycles of poverty, and contribute meaningfully to society while fostering personal and economic independence.

### **Role of NEP 2020**

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 addresses challenges faced by marginalized girls by promoting equity, inclusion, and flexibility in education. It emphasizes remedial programs and digital learning initiatives to recover COVID-19-related learning losses, while fostering safe and supportive school environments. NEP advocates for mental health support, counselling, and gender-sensitive pedagogy, ensuring holistic well-being. Policies on inclusive education, skill development, and vocational training equip girls with economic and practical skills. Additionally, NEP encourages community engagement, awareness campaigns, and gender equity measures, challenging patriarchal norms. Together, these provisions aim to enhance access, retention, empowerment, and agency of marginalized girls across India.

### **Significance:**

The paper is significant as it addresses the critical need for gender-sensitive and inclusive education in India, focusing on marginalized girls who face systemic barriers in access, retention, and learning. By analyzing the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 through a feminist lens, it highlights how policy can promote equity, social justice, and empowerment. The study underscores the importance of intersectional approaches that consider gender, socio-economic status, regional disparities, and disabilities, ensuring that no child is left behind. It also emphasizes the transformative role of education in challenging patriarchy and social inequality, encouraging schools, educators, and policymakers to create safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments. This chapter contributes to understanding how feminist-informed policies and practices can enable marginalized girls to realize their potential and participate fully in the educational system, ultimately fostering a more equitable and just society.



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## Conclusion

A feminist analysis of inclusive education within the framework of NEP 2020 reveals both its progressive intent and its structural limitations. The policy marks a significant step toward recognizing education as a vehicle for equity, particularly through its focus on marginalized groups and gender inclusion. However, feminist perspectives make it clear that true inclusion cannot be achieved through access-oriented reforms alone; it requires a deeper transformation of the social, cultural, and institutional forces that perpetuate inequality. Central to this transformation is the recognition of intersectionality, a concept advanced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, which highlights how overlapping identities—such as gender, caste, class, and disability—shape the educational experiences of marginalized girls. Without integrating such an approach, policy interventions risk remaining superficial, failing to address the complex and layered realities that many girls face. Inclusive education must therefore move beyond uniform strategies to adopt context-specific, responsive measures that reflect diverse lived experiences. Furthermore, feminist pedagogical approaches, influenced by thinkers like bell hooks, emphasize the importance of classrooms as spaces of empowerment, dialogue, and critical engagement. This involves rethinking curricula, teacher training, and institutional practices to challenge stereotypes, promote agency, and ensure that marginalized girls are not only present in schools but are active participants in the learning process. While NEP 2020 lays a strong policy foundation, its effectiveness ultimately depends on implementation, resource allocation, and sustained commitment to social change. Addressing barriers such as poverty, gender-based violence, and discriminatory norms requires coordinated efforts across sectors, including education, health, and community development. Equally important is the need to amplify the voices of marginalized girls in decision-making processes, ensuring that policies are informed by those they seek to serve. In conclusion, empowering marginalized girls through inclusive education is not simply a matter of policy compliance but a transformative project rooted in justice and equality. A feminist lens not only critiques existing gaps but also offers pathways toward more equitable and participatory education systems. By embedding intersectionality, fostering critical pedagogy, and prioritizing lived realities, NEP 2020 can evolve from a framework of inclusion into a catalyst for genuine social transformation.

Feminist perspectives highlight that achieving inclusive and equitable education requires addressing gender, socio-economic, and regional disparities. NEP 2020 provides a progressive framework through inclusive policies, skill development, mental health support, and community engagement. Empowering marginalized girls ensures not only their academic success but also social and economic agency. By combining feminist insights with practical interventions, education can become a transformative tool, breaking cycles of discrimination and inequality, inclusive, and empowered society for future generations.



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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

#### **PLAGIARISM POLICY**

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