

# GENDER EQUITY AND INCLUSION OF TRANSGENDER STUDENTS IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN ANALYSIS OF THE NEW EDUCATION POLICY 2020

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## DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.5177](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.5177)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the status of transgender students within Indian higher education institutions, focusing on the systemic, societal, and policy-level barriers that affect their access, participation, and well-being. Despite the legal recognition of transgender individuals by the Supreme Court of India in the NALSA judgment (2014), the implementation of inclusive educational practices remains inconsistent and insufficient. Through a multidisciplinary lens, the paper examines institutional practices, curriculum sensitivity, faculty and peer attitudes, and infrastructural support—or the lack thereof—that impact transgender students' academic and personal development. The study advocates for the transformation of higher education into a more equitable and inclusive space through policy reforms, awareness programs, and structural changes aimed at affirming transgender identities and rights. The research underscores the urgency for educational institutions to move beyond tokenism and actively engage in creating safe, supportive, and affirming environments for all students, regardless of gender identity.

**Keywords:** Transgender Students, Gender Equity, Higher Education in India, Inclusive Education, Educational Policy Reform

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. SETTING THE STAGE FOR GENDER AND TRANSGENDER INCLUSION IN INDIAN HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE ADVENT OF NEP 2020.

The pursuit of gender equity and inclusivity within higher education stands as a cornerstone for fostering national progress and upholding principles of social justice. Recognizing this imperative, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 articulates a vision for an equitable and vibrant knowledge society, aspiring to provide high-quality education for all.<sup>1</sup> However, for transgender individuals in India, the landscape of higher education has historically been fraught with significant challenges. Deep-rooted marginalization and pervasive societal stigma have created substantial barriers, hindering their access to and navigation within these institutions.<sup>2</sup> These pre-existing inequalities underscore the necessity for policy interventions like NEP 2020 to actively address and dismantle these systemic disadvantages.

Transgender individuals in India have long faced exclusion and discrimination across various spheres of life, and education is no exception. Societal norms often adhere rigidly to a binary understanding of gender, leaving transgender individuals feeling alienated and unsupported within educational environments.<sup>2</sup> The trauma, agony, and pain experienced by members of the transgender community are often overlooked, and their innate feelings and gender identities are frequently unappreciated.<sup>4</sup> This historical and ongoing marginalization suggests that NEP 2020 must incorporate specific and robust measures to effectively promote inclusion and equity for transgender students in higher education.

In this context of a pressing need for reform, the National Education Policy 2020 emerges as a landmark reform in the Indian education system.<sup>1</sup> This comprehensive policy aims to bring about a massive transformation in education, envisioning an education system rooted in Indian ethos that contributes directly to transforming India into an equitable and vibrant knowledge society.<sup>1</sup> Given the policy's ambitious goals and its emphasis on equity, it is crucial to analyze the extent to which it addresses the specific challenges and promotes the inclusion of transgender students within the higher education sector. This research paper seeks to answer the central question: What are the changes in the New Education Policy in India impacting higher education with reference to gender, and how does it address inclusivity and exclusivity regarding the transgender student population? To address this question, the paper will provide an overview of NEP 2020, critically examine its gender equity provisions, analyze its potential impact on transgender students, explore aspects of inclusivity and exclusivity, present relevant case studies and examples, consider intersectional challenges, and finally, offer recommendations for enhancing gender inclusivity for transgender students in higher education under NEP 2020.

## **1.2. OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY 2020: FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES AND FOCUS ON HIGHER EDUCATION.**

The National Education Policy 2020 is built upon five guiding pillars: Access, Equity, Quality, Affordability, and Accountability.<sup>1</sup> These foundational principles underscore the policy's commitment to transforming the Indian education system at all levels, from school to higher education. In the realm of higher education, NEP 2020 provides valuable insights and recommendations on various aspects, aiming to make both school and college education more holistic and multidisciplinary.<sup>1</sup> The policy envisions a move towards multidisciplinary and holistic education with flexible curricula, creative combinations of subjects, and the integration of vocational education.<sup>1</sup> It also emphasizes institutional autonomy and the promotion of quality research through the establishment of the National Research Foundation.<sup>1</sup>

A key objective of NEP 2020 is to ensure universal access to quality education for all learners, regardless of their social or economic background.<sup>7</sup> The policy explicitly states a particular focus on historically marginalized, disadvantaged, and underrepresented groups.<sup>7</sup> This commitment to inclusivity is further highlighted in the policy's aim to bridge the gap between the current state of learning outcomes and what is required, undertaking major reforms to bring the highest quality, equity, and integrity into the system.<sup>6</sup> The emphasis on marginalized groups within the foundational principles of NEP 2020 suggests a potential pathway for the inclusion of transgender students in higher education. However, the specific mechanisms and the extent to which the policy addresses their unique needs require a more detailed examination.

## **1.3. ANALYZING GENDER EQUITY PROVISIONS WITHIN NEP 2020: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION.**

NEP 2020 approaches gender as a cross-cutting priority with the aim of achieving gender equality in education, emphasizing the need for partnership between states and local community organizations to realize this goal.<sup>7</sup> A significant step in this direction is the establishment of the Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF), specifically designed to provide equitable quality education for all girls and transgender students.<sup>2</sup> This fund is intended to build the nation's capacity to deliver equitable and quality education to both these groups, addressing specific barriers and needs.<sup>7</sup>

Beyond the GIF, NEP 2020 also proposes other gender-sensitive measures. These include creating educational spaces free from discrimination and promoting the safety and security of female students.<sup>10</sup> The policy also aims to develop a more inclusive and gender-sensitive curriculum.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, NEP 2020 emphasizes the importance of

increasing the number of women in leadership positions within educational institutions, including principals, teachers, and other staff.<sup>13</sup> These measures collectively indicate a commitment to addressing gender disparities in education.

However, while these provisions aim for overall gender equity, the extent to which they directly address the specific needs and challenges faced by transgender students in higher education warrants further scrutiny. Although the GIF explicitly includes transgender students, the policy documents and related press releases often provide more detailed information regarding the fund's objectives and implementation strategies for girls, such as building hostel and toilet facilities.<sup>20</sup> This raises questions about whether the unique challenges faced by transgender students, such as the need for gender-neutral facilities and sensitization programs, are adequately addressed within the current framework of the GIF. A more detailed analysis of the GIF's guidelines and allocation mechanisms is necessary to ascertain its potential effectiveness in supporting transgender students.

## **1.4. IMPACT OF NEP 2020 ON TRANSGENDER STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: INITIAL OBSERVATIONS AND POLICY LEVERS.**

For the first time in India's education policy history, NEP 2020 explicitly mentions "Education for Transgender".<sup>8</sup> This recognition is a significant step forward, acknowledging the specific educational needs of this marginalized community. The policy's broader emphasis on inclusivity and equity also holds the potential for positive impacts on transgender students in higher education.<sup>6</sup> By focusing on historically marginalized, disadvantaged, and underrepresented groups, NEP 2020 creates a framework within which the needs of transgender students can be addressed.

Several key policy levers within NEP 2020 could be utilized to further promote transgender inclusion in higher education. The emphasis on creating equitable and inclusive education, the establishment of the Gender Inclusion Fund, and the focus on addressing the needs of SEDGs all provide opportunities for targeted interventions and support for transgender students. Furthermore, the policy's call for holistic and multidisciplinary education, along with flexible curricula, could create a more accommodating and supportive learning environment for students with diverse gender identities and experiences.

## **2. INCLUSIVITY FOR TRANSGENDER STUDENTS: EXAMINING ENABLING ASPECTS OF NEP 2020**

### **2.1. THE GENDER INCLUSION FUND: SCOPE AND POTENTIAL**

The National Education Policy 2020 explicitly establishes the Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) to support equitable education access for both girls and transgender students.<sup>7</sup> This fund aims to address specific barriers and needs, such as the provision of sanitation facilities and other community-based interventions, with the broader goal of eliminating disparities for socio-economically disadvantaged groups.<sup>8</sup> The GIF holds significant potential to address the unique challenges faced by transgender students in higher education, including the critical need for gender-neutral facilities within educational institutions.<sup>11</sup> Access to safe and appropriate infrastructure is paramount for transgender students to feel comfortable and included in their learning environment.

However, the effectiveness of the GIF in reaching and supporting transgender students hinges on the development of clear guidelines and the implementation of effective fund allocation mechanisms. While the policy mentions both girls and transgender students as beneficiaries, the operational details of the GIF, such as the specific criteria for accessing funds and the mechanisms for identifying and supporting transgender students, require further articulation. The current information available often focuses more extensively on the provisions for girls, such as the construction of hostels and separate toilets.<sup>9</sup> This suggests a potential gap in the comprehensive understanding and specific targeting of the unique needs of transgender students within the GIF framework. Without explicit guidelines that address these needs, there is a risk that transgender students may not fully benefit from the intended financial support.

### **2.2. EMPHASIS ON SOCIALLY AND ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED GROUPS (SEDGS)**

NEP 2020 recognizes transgender individuals as an integral part of Socially and Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), with the objective of providing equitable quality education to all students belonging to these categories.<sup>2</sup> This inclusion within the SEDG framework opens up possibilities for targeted interventions and the development of specific support mechanisms designed to address the unique challenges faced by transgender students in higher education. By

acknowledging their disadvantaged status, the policy provides a foundation for affirmative actions aimed at promoting their access, participation, and success in higher education.

However, it is crucial to ensure that the specific needs of transgender students are not inadvertently subsumed under the broader categories within SEDGs and that they receive focused and tailored attention. The diverse range of groups included under the SEDG umbrella, such as gender, socio-cultural, and geographical identities, as well as disabilities, necessitates a nuanced approach to policy implementation.<sup>5</sup> There is a potential risk that the particular challenges and requirements of transgender students might not be adequately addressed if the focus remains too broad. Therefore, specific strategies and resource allocation within the SEDG framework should be directed towards meeting the distinct needs of transgender students, ensuring that they can fully benefit from the policy's inclusivity goals.

### **2.3. FLEXIBLE CURRICULUM AND MULTIPLE ENTRY/EXIT POINTS**

The emphasis on a flexible curriculum and the introduction of multiple entry and exit points in higher education programs, as proposed by NEP 2020 <sup>5</sup>, could offer significant benefits to transgender students. Many transgender individuals may face interruptions in their educational journeys due to social stigma, family rejection, mental health challenges, or the process of gender transition. The flexibility to enter and exit programs at various points, with appropriate certification for the credits earned, can provide a much-needed support system for these students. This structure allows them to pursue their education at a pace that aligns with their individual circumstances, enabling them to continue their studies without being unduly penalized for temporary breaks or changes in their educational pathways. The option to receive a certificate after one year, an advanced diploma after two years, a bachelor's degree after three years, or a bachelor's with research after four years <sup>5</sup> offers a safety net and encourages transgender students to re-engage with higher education whenever their situation allows.

### **2.4. EXCLUSIVITY AND CHALLENGES: IDENTIFYING LIMITATIONS AND GAPS IN NEP 2020 FOR TRANSGENDER STUDENTS**

Despite its progressive stance on inclusivity and the introduction of the Gender Inclusion Fund, NEP 2020 has been criticized for its lack of specific provisions and comprehensive strategies to cater to the unique needs of the transgender community within higher education.<sup>11</sup> While the policy acknowledges the importance of diversity and non-discrimination, it falls short of providing concrete measures to address the entrenched discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion that transgender students often face in educational institutions.<sup>11</sup>

One of the key limitations identified is the absence of clear coding for gender-transitive accessibility within the policy framework.<sup>14</sup> This lack of specific guidelines on how to make educational facilities and resources accessible to transgender individuals can perpetuate existing barriers. Furthermore, the policy has been noted to have limited anti-bullying policies specifically targeted towards protecting transgender students from harassment and discrimination.<sup>14</sup> The absence of robust anti-bullying measures leaves transgender students vulnerable to hostile environments that can severely impact their academic experience and mental well-being. Poor provisions for teacher training and sensitization regarding transgender students also represent a significant gap.<sup>14</sup> Educators often lack the necessary knowledge and understanding to create inclusive and supportive classrooms for transgender students, which can lead to unintentional exclusion and discomfort. The policy also lacks structural measures such as specific scholarships or quotas for transgender students as affirmative action, which could further hinder their access to and persistence in higher education.<sup>14</sup>

Ensuring consistent and effective implementation of inclusive policies for transgender students across the diverse landscape of higher education institutions in India presents a significant challenge. While regulatory bodies like the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) play a crucial role in promoting and monitoring educational standards, the extent to which their guidelines specifically address and are effectively implemented for transgender students remains an area of concern.<sup>6</sup> While both UGC and AICTE have issued general guidelines on gender inclusion and have directed institutions to take steps towards creating more inclusive environments, these directives may not always translate into concrete actions and tangible support for transgender students at the institutional level.<sup>15</sup> The implementation of these guidelines can be uneven, with some institutions proactively adopting inclusive practices while others lag behind due to a lack of awareness, resources, or commitment.



This inconsistency highlights the need for more specific mandates and effective monitoring mechanisms to ensure that all higher education institutions in India create truly inclusive spaces for transgender students.

Finally, it is essential to consider whether NEP 2020 adequately addresses the diverse needs and challenges faced by both transmen and transwomen within the higher education system. The transgender community is not monolithic, and individuals with different gender identities and expressions may have distinct requirements for an inclusive educational experience. The policy framework needs to be nuanced enough to acknowledge and respond to this diversity, ensuring that the specific needs of transmen, transwomen, and gender non-conforming individuals are all taken into account. For instance, the challenges related to accessing healthcare for gender transition, navigating gendered spaces like hostels and restrooms, and facing societal biases may differ for transmen and transwomen. A comprehensive policy should provide targeted support and resources that are sensitive to these variations within the transgender community.

## **2.5. CASE STUDIES AND EXAMPLES FROM POPULAR MEDIA: ILLUSTRATING INCLUSIVITY AND EXCLUSIVITY**

Several instances in popular media and emerging case studies illustrate the ongoing efforts towards inclusivity for transgender students in Indian higher education, as well as the persistent challenges that remain. The state government of Maharashtra, for example, has taken proactive steps by mandating the establishment of transgender cells in all higher education institutions, aiming to create an inclusive academic environment.<sup>16</sup> These cells are tasked with providing counselling, career guidance, and academic support specifically tailored for transgender students, and institutions providing hostel facilities are also required to allocate sections for transgender students. Furthermore, the Maharashtra government has announced a fee waiver for transgender candidates seeking admission to universities, signalling a commitment to facilitating equal access to higher education.<sup>17</sup>

However, despite these progressive measures, popular media also highlights the significant challenges that transgender students continue to face. Reports indicate high dropout rates among transgender students due to social discrimination, financial constraints, and a lack of family support.<sup>3</sup> Many educational institutions still lack adequate infrastructure, such as gender-neutral toilets and restrooms, and there is often a lack of sensitivity and awareness among faculty and staff regarding the needs of transgender students.<sup>18</sup> The pressure to conform to binary gender categories and the fear of being outed can lead to significant mental health challenges and feelings of alienation among transgender students.<sup>18</sup> These examples underscore the gap between policy intentions and the lived experiences of transgender students, highlighting the need for more comprehensive and effectively implemented measures to ensure genuine inclusivity.

## **3. INTERSECTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS: ADDRESSING THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES FACED BY TRANSGENDER STUDENTS FROM MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES**

The challenges faced by transgender students in higher education are often compounded when their transgender identity intersects with other marginalized identities such as caste, class, religion, and disability.<sup>3</sup> Transgender students from marginalized communities, particularly those from rural backgrounds or lower socioeconomic strata, often face a compounded disadvantage in accessing and navigating higher education.<sup>3</sup> The intersection of their gender identity with their caste, class, religion, or disability can create unique and intensified barriers, further marginalizing them within educational settings. For instance, transgender students from disadvantaged caste backgrounds may experience discrimination not only due to their gender identity but also because of their caste status.<sup>19</sup> This intersectionality can affect their access to affirming resources, social validation, and overall well-being.

The National Education Policy 2020 needs to explicitly address these intersectional barriers to ensure that transgender students from all backgrounds have equitable opportunities in higher education. While the policy recognizes transgender individuals as part of SEDGs, it is crucial to develop targeted interventions and support programs that consider the specific challenges arising from the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. For example, transgender students from rural areas may face additional hurdles related to access to technology, awareness about inclusive policies, and availability of support networks. Similarly, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may require additional financial assistance and resources to overcome economic barriers to education. Recognizing and

addressing these intersectional realities is essential for creating a truly inclusive and equitable higher education system in India.

#### **4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING GENDER INCLUSIVITY FOR TRANSGENDER STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION UNDER NEP 2020.**

To further enhance gender inclusivity for transgender students in higher education under NEP 2020, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Strengthen the implementation of the Gender Inclusion Fund (GIF) by developing clear and specific guidelines for transgender students. This should include outlining the criteria for accessing funds, the types of support available (e.g., financial aid for transition-related expenses, gender-affirming resources), and mechanisms for ensuring that transgender students are aware of and can easily access the GIF.
- Develop and disseminate comprehensive guidelines for all higher education institutions on creating inclusive environments for transgender students. These guidelines should cover infrastructure (mandating gender-neutral facilities like restrooms and hostels), anti-discrimination policies (explicitly prohibiting discrimination based on gender identity and expression), and protocols for addressing grievances and ensuring a safe campus environment.
- Mandate and fund comprehensive teacher training and sensitization programs for faculty, administrators, and staff in higher education institutions. These programs should focus on fostering understanding and respect for diverse gender identities, addressing biases and stereotypes, and equipping educators with the skills to create inclusive and supportive learning environments for transgender students.
- Establish dedicated support systems and resource centers for transgender students within universities and colleges. These centres can provide counselling services (including mental health support and guidance on gender transition), peer support groups, academic advising, and information about relevant policies and resources. Collaborations with LGBTQ+ organizations and transgender community leaders can enhance the effectiveness of these support systems.<sup>3</sup>
- Promote the inclusion of transgender perspectives, histories, and experiences in the curriculum across various disciplines. This will help to raise awareness, challenge societal norms, and foster a more inclusive understanding of gender diversity among all students and faculty.<sup>11</sup>
- Implement proactive measures to address the intersectional challenges faced by transgender students from marginalized communities. This could include targeted scholarships, mentorship programs, and outreach initiatives designed to support their access to and success in higher education. Institutions should also work to create partnerships with community organizations that serve these intersecting marginalized groups.
- Establish robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms at the national and institutional levels to track the progress of transgender inclusion in higher education under NEP 2020. This data collection should include enrolment and retention rates of transgender students, their experiences with discrimination and inclusion, and the effectiveness of implemented policies and programs. The findings should be used to inform policy adjustments and ensure accountability.

#### **5. CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A TRULY EQUITABLE AND INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IN INDIA**

The National Education Policy 2020 holds significant promise as a catalyst for advancing gender equity and fostering the inclusion of transgender students within India's higher education system. The policy's foundational principles of equity and access, coupled with the specific mention of transgender individuals and the establishment of the Gender Inclusion Fund, represent important steps towards creating a more just and equitable educational landscape. However, as this analysis indicates, while NEP 2020 provides a broad framework for inclusivity, its effectiveness in truly addressing the unique and multifaceted challenges faced by transgender students will depend on its detailed implementation and the extent to which specific provisions and guidelines are developed and enforced.

The research highlights that despite the policy's progressive intentions, limitations such as the lack of specific guidelines on infrastructure, anti-discrimination measures, and teacher training for transgender inclusion could hinder its potential impact. Moreover, the intersectional barriers faced by transgender students from marginalized communities necessitate targeted and nuanced approaches that go beyond general inclusivity measures. The case studies and examples from popular media underscore both the progress being made at some institutional levels and the persistent challenges that many transgender students continue to experience.

Ultimately, realizing the vision of a truly equitable and inclusive higher education system in India requires sustained efforts, a deep commitment from all stakeholders, and the implementation of targeted interventions that are specifically designed to meet the diverse needs of transgender students. By addressing the identified limitations and embracing the recommendations proposed, India can harness the transformative potential of NEP 2020 to create a higher education system where all individuals, irrespective of their gender identity, have the opportunity to thrive and contribute to the nation's growth and development.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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