Gender and Economic Policy Discussion Forum

Assessing the gendered implications of the National Education Policy 2020 on higher education in India

The National Education Policy (NEP 2020) proposes to "completely overhaul and re-energize the higher education (HE) system" (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). Many targets are laid out including the expansion of Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER)[1] in HE to 50% by 2035. It aims to address challenges such as severe fragmentation, rigid separation of disciplines, limited access, limited decentralized autonomy, ineffective regulation, and low emphasis on research. To do so, the policy seeks to consolidate the regulatory system through a Higher Education Council of India (HECI); change the pedagogic structure of undergraduate courses to a 4-year system; centralize curricula and assessments; expand vocational education and open-distance learning (ODL); and introduce a flexible entry and credit banking system. This discussion was aimed at critically reviewing NEP 2020, with a focus on HE, using a framework of gender equality and rights. More specifically, we aimed to understand how NEP 2020 impacts on the most vulnerable and marginalized sections of our society in the light of structural issues such as unequal access and systemic discrimination. We also wished to bring forth certain immediate and long-term action points for education policy. The speakers for this discussion were: Dr. Manasi Thapliyal Navani (Asst. Professor, School of Educational Studies, Ambedkar University, Delhi); Dr. Radhika Menon (Asst. Professor, Department of Elementary Education, Mata Sundri College for Women, Delhi University); and Dr. Protiva Kundu (Additional Coordinator - Research, Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability, New Delhi). This forum was chaired by Prof. Anita Rampal (Former Dean, Faculty of Education, Delhi University).

Contextualizing the discussion

In response to the planned scarcity approach of the Indian state towards HE, Dr. Navani noted that NEP 1986 had asserted on equality to address the severely restricted entry of students from marginalized communities. There was a special focus on women's education as a tool for empowerment. Since then, the HE ecosystem witnessed a dramatic expansion and restructuring.[2] Women's enrollment in HE had also steadily increased.[3] Despite this, inequalities based on gender and other socio-economically marginalized identities have strengthened over the years.[4]

Neoliberalisation of education sector through privatisation, expansion of technical skill-based courses and ODL, and contraction of public investment, is central to deepening inequality. Private sector today accounts for 78% of colleges and 67% of college enrolments in India. Dr. Kundu noted that increased privatization has accompanied contraction or stagnation of public investment in higher education, as depicted in Figure 1 (see annexure). The economic burden of these two factors is greater on low-income households comprising largely of students from marginalized backgrounds (Duraiswamy and Duraiswamy, 2016). Figure 2 (see annexure) shows that over time government expenditure (Center + States) as percentage of GDP has increasingly tilted towards technical education, when compared to university education. These factors have constituted a system where those who can afford are accorded high quality education, while those who cannot are forced to choose between ODL, vocational courses, diplomas and certifications offered by low-quality private providers. In 2018-19, 10.6% of HE enrollments were in ODL (Department of Higher Education, 2019).

Our speakers noted that students from marginalized backgrounds are increasingly pushed into ODL not just at the HE level, but also during schooling. State governments are already following a practice of pushing out weaker students into the open school system. This is because the results of the National/State open school examinations are not related to and do not count when the Board examination results of Class 10 or 12 are declared. Therefore, in a bid to showcase and manipulate their school scores in public, such exclusionary practices remain rampant. The entrance exams conducted in better provisioned government schools violate the RTE. In Delhi Government schools learning assessments are used to discriminate and segregate students, even at the primary or elementary level, into different sections, which violates RTE and the National Curriculum Framework that stipulates the same curricula for all students in a state till Grade 10. Thus, students who are already at the margin are further pushed into low quality alternatives, through dumbed down pedagogies and curricula thereby reproducing the existing social divide and inequalities.

The education sector has also consistently grappled with low public expenditure, under-financing, and under-allocation of resources. Despite accounting for a much larger share of HE enrollments, state universities grapple with issues of inadequate infrastructure, capital and human resources; low teacher quality; stagnant research and mis-management, owing to the lack of funds (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2013). The National Higher Education Mission (NHEM) or Rashtriya Uchhatar Shiksha Abhiyaan (RUSA), initiated in 2013, aimed to enhance state government's autonomy in educational reforms and provide efficient funding pathways for programmes. States were envisioned to play an active role in creating plans and addressing the local needs of institutions, encourage institutions to prepare institutional development plans, and bring them

to the State Higher Education Council, with funding earmarked through UGC for various projects. However, till date, NHEM remains the only centrally funded programme to enhance quality of higher education in states, and has consistently experienced budget cuts, undermining its objectives to efficiently enhance decentralization, autonomy, and local-level tailoring of reforms. Dr. Kundu mentioned that NHEM budget was reduced by 86% in the current fiscal compared to the previous.

Finally, the HE system lacks investment in capacity building and teacher training, leading to consistent shortage of teachers, and a highly skewed faculty distribution. For 37 million enrolments in HE, there are only about 1.4 million teachers. The rapid expansion of HE in scale is not supported by an equivalent improvement in the quality indicators or infrastructural essentials. Dr. Kundu noted that around 78000 posts are vacant in Central and state universities. At the All-India level, close to 58% of teachers are male while 42% are female (Department of Higher Education, 2019). However, this ratio varies across states with Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh reporting even lower parity. Teachers belonging to General category account for 57% of the total; OBC follows with 32%; while SC and ST with 9% and 2% respectively (Department of Higher Education, 2019). Therefore, a high disparity in terms of human resource, further impedes equality and inclusion. Moreover, there is an increased contractualization of the education workforce. A major proportion of teaching staff are engaged with multiple payrolls and multiple nature of appointments, including a high ratio of ad-hoc appointments. Due to this, many institutions in remote and rural areas, and even many state institutions, suffer from alarming teacher-pupil ratios that significantly hamper education quality, access and more crucially, students' chances of completion.

Key Issues in NEP 2020

Higher education cannot be viewed separately from school education and early child hood care and education. Inequalities and systemic inefficiencies rampant in the latter two impact access to, and performance, within the former. As a result, the discussion around higher education was contextualized within the larger education sector. The speakers highlighted multiple ways in which NEP 2020 subverts equality and rights. NEP 2020 should have effectively dealt with several other problems such as inadequate infrastructure, deficiencies in decentralized planning, shortage of human resources, and a highly skewed gender disaggregated distribution of faculty, lack of investment in human capacity building and teacher training, and delayed fund flows (Kundu, 2019). Not only has it not addressed the unique vulnerabilities of marginalized communities, but also actively pushes for greater privatisation sans public investment. Prof. Rampal noted that although NEP 2020 seems to be formulated under the garb of expanding access, it trivializes and contradicts fundamental right. She initiated the discussion by flagging several key issues that aggravate existing challenges and inequalities.

Increased Centralisation

Many proposals in NEP 2020 pave the way for greater centralisation and decreased autonomy of state governments. For instance, the policy stipulates that to develop school curricula state governments are required to work around an 'essential national component', sanctioned by the National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT), while incorporating local 'flavour' and regional needs. Moreover, standardised assessments, even at Grades 3, 5, and 8, will be guided by the National Assessment Centre. This nationalized testing regime violates the non-detention clause in section 16 of the RTE, which recognises that competitive testing intimidates students, and is detrimental to learning. In fact, in its preparation to dilute the requirements of RTE, which NEP 2020 clearly calls 'too restrictive', the no detention clause was amended from the original RTE Act a year earlier (Mody, 2019). Prof. Rampal added that with centralised (state/national) testing being introduced, the entire system gets distorted, focusing less on learning, understanding diversity and disparity for inclusion, but instead becoming an instrumental and commercial result-oriented regime (Rampal, 2018). Dr. Menon reminded us that every time there is an examination, children from disadvantaged backgrounds drop out.

Further, the policy proposes setting up of a centralised National Research Foundation, through the government and industry, for funding, mentoring, and expanding the quality of research. However, there is no mention of the NHEM or any significant proposals aimed at addressing its implementation challenges across states.

One of the most sweeping propositions towards centralisation, included in the earlier drafts, was the setting up of the National Education Commission under the stewardship of the Prime Minister, which could irreversibly tilt the balance of powers towards the Centre in the context of education governance. However, following strong opposition from the states and constitutional experts who said that this violated the federal structure of the country, this was dropped from the final draft of NEP 2020. In this light, Prof. Rampal stressed on the need to be conscious of the process of policy making, in addition to the policy itself, to be able to locate the hidden agendas and motives of the state. Often, they are riddled within a network of actors including state departments, ministries, private and non-profit enterprises, civil society, academicians, statisticians, and legal experts. The question of what gets left out and what remains in the final policy is a result of interplays between their needs and interests. Yet, the imagination of such proposals clearly points towards an inherent contradiction between what the policy claims to achieve (decentralisation and autonomy), and what it actually proposes (centralisation and greater controls).

Impetus to privatisation

NEP 2020 proposes the introduction of 'public philanthropic partnerships' (PPPs) to facilitate the entry of several kinds of private players and non-state actors. It criticises the RTE, which mandates the provision of good quality neighborhood education, while ensuring enrolment and completion. The policy considers RTE to be restrictive (Rampal, 2020), owing to its requirements in terms of quality, qualifications of teachers, and pupil-teacher ratio. In encouraging the entry of private actors, the policy simultaneously dilutes many of the standards and mandates put in place by RTE. For instance, open schooling at the elementary and primary levels is considered as a part of 'multiple pathways' for providing access, which completely contradicts the RTE, violating children's fundamental right.

Furthermore, the proposal to consolidate schools into complexes via mergers, and closure of schools with

'suboptimal' enrollments is yet another way of subverting the RTE. Prof. Rampal alerted us to the fact that school closures are already rampant with more than 1,40,000 schools being shut across states in the last 3-4 years. Rajasthan was the first state in India to adopt school consolidation, and based on data from the State Education Directorate it is estimated that between 2014 and 2019,19,500 schools were consolidated (Bordoloi and Shukla, 2019). Evidence shows that consolidation leads to greater dropouts, especially among students in small or remote habitations, from marginalized backgrounds such as SC, ST, women or differently abled groups (Chowdhury, 2017). Moreover, it leads to greater congestion and higher toll on existing infrastructure within schools, leading to cramped classrooms, unhygienic and unsafe toilets, insufficient meals, etc. Dr. Menon noted, in response to a question during the discussion round, that measures which push students out of the formal education system have a real danger of legitimising child labour. She drew attention to the fact that already in the amended child labour law children below 14 years of age have been permitted to work within household enterprises. In the light of COVID 19 related contraction of education, and greater pushing out, child labour is likely to get aggravated in the future.

In higher education, the policy identifies minimum enrollments for colleges to be 3000. However, AISHE survey shows that out of forty thousand colleges in India, only 4% have a reported enrolment of more than 3000 students. Most colleges across remote regions of the country record enrollments as low as 100. Students from remote and disadvantaged backgrounds would now get pushed out and be compelled to opt for low quality private substitutes in their proximity, or depend on ODL, which NEP 2020 clearly calls the natural path for higher enrolment in HE. Therefore, the sheer scale of consolidation and its implications for access should caution states and policymakers committed to equity and inclusion.

Legitimising dropout and exacerbating inequality

The pedagogic rehauling to a 4-year undergraduate programme would increase the average household out-of-pocket expenditure on education. Considering the withdrawal of state funding expected in the light of COVID-19 and economic recession currently underway, the proposal will discourage individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, including women, to enroll, and can also increase dropouts. Secondly, the introduction of flexible exit after each year further legitimises dropouts and for women reduces their agency to resist early marriage. Once women drop out it becomes increasingly difficult to re-enter and complete their education. Moreover, Dr. Navani pointed out that in countries where the Academic Credit Banking System (ACBS) was introduced to promote lifelong learning, such as in South Korea, 50% GER had already been achieved. Even then, evidence shows that the credentials of degrees acquired through ACBS were very poor in terms of the market credentials. Therefore, we need to critically evaluate these new systems of stratification on the anvil.

The policy stresses on multi-disciplinarity, and aims for more than 50% of HE enrolments in vocational or skill-based certifications. Similarly, it aims to expand ODL as a central pathway towards higher education. However, Prof. Rampal reminded us that these courses very often do not have any educational components, and only impart specific low-status

employability skills suited to market requirements. Under the guise of expanding access and lowering dropouts, the policy further pushes students out of the formal education system into low-quality low-cost options.

NEP 2020 cites digital education to be one of the pathways to universalize education, but without laying out concrete measures in addressing the digital divide. COVID-19 has already revealed that women, transgender students, and those from socially marginalized communities, took the hardest hit during the uptake of online education (The Hindu, 2020). Yet, NEP 2020 does not specify the infrastructural investments undertaken; how these plans would be implemented and evaluated, or how much outlay would be required, and how these would get dispersed. Therefore, it is doubtful as to how seriously the policy wishes to harness digital technology within a framework of equality. The proposal to expand projects under Digital India Mission should again be read with caution, considering the fact that many of these have dangerously underperformed their promises. For instance, it is estimated that less than 2.5% of the panchayats in India have internet connectivity, which was aimed for universalization under the BharatNet project (Gairola, 2018). Therefore, while structural inequality is already widespread within the education system and policy discourse, the NEP 2020, instead of addressing it, aggravates unequal access and violation of fundamental rights.

Homogenizing vulnerabilities

Privilege and deprivation are not unidimensional. Multiple socio-economic and cultural factors influence individual entitlements and experiences of discrimination, both inside and outside the education system, which then have a bearing on learning outcomes and educational trajectories. However, within NEP 2020, all disadvantaged identities are subsumed under one acronym – SEDG (Socio-economically disadvantaged groups). This accounts for gender-based marginalized identities including women, transgenders, intersex; caste-based identities such as SCs, STs and OBCs; differently abled persons; students from economically weaker sections (EWS), etc. But the policy fails to recognize their specific vulnerabilities and unique ways in which these identities shape education experiences. It does not lay out any group-specific data or propositions for enrolments, infrastructural requirements, responsive allocation of funds, etc. Rather, it proposes setting up of Special Education Zones (SEZs) in remote regions having a significant proportion of marginalized communities. SEZs, modelled as a counterpart to Special Economic Zones, would involve further restrictions, segregation, and dilution of minimum standards. For instance, it suggests that within SEZs, at the school level, a community volunteer, and worse still, a fellow student, can tutor others. This completely goes against the principles of equal access and quality education stipulated by the RTE. It segregates students from disadvantaged groups into a system with suboptimal inputs and learning outcomes. Furthermore, it is to be noted that 'SEDG' does not have any constitutional validity unlike identities such as women, transgenders, Scheduled Castes and Tribes; each of which have constitutionally guaranteed protection and affirmative action. Therefore, the framing of vulnerabilities in this new form makes it non-justiciable.

Trivialising pedagogy and learning

Under the new proposed pedagogy, early childhood care and education between 3-8 years is identified as a stage for

foundational literacy and numeracy. The focus is only on these two areas in a claimed bid to lighten the pedagogic and curricular demands from children. However, this undercuts the multifaceted requirements for holistic development of a child spelt out clearly in the RTE. Even within higher levels of education, the policy aims to make examinations 'easier' and less stressful for students, but it does not clarify the means to achieve this. This lack of clarity poses a real danger that the policy might trivialize learning and assessment systems. Prof. Rampal pointed out several terminologies which convey a very myopic understanding of pedagogy that is presented within the policy. For instance, it proposes 'lighter textbooks' to complement 'easier' learning. But it begs to be asked if the aim of the policy is to facilitate rote learning or actual engagements with textbooks leading to the development of critical thinking and co-creation of knowledge.

Insufficient focus on Financing

Public expenditure on education is currently estimated to be 4.4% of India's GDP. NEP 2020 aims to expand this to 6%. The expansion of public expenditure on education is not a new promise, and remains undelivered despite changes in political regimes. The policy plans to bank on India's projected GDP growth rate to expand education funding. However, the fluctuations in economic growth and the current economic recession have highlighted its short-sightedness. Even at the suggested rate, the expectation that a higher GDP will pave ways to higher spending is contingent upon a higher tax-GDP ratio. With both the central government and state governments grappling with shortages under the present GST regime, the amount of funding that would be allocated also remains uncertain. Furthermore, India's fiscal crises is only expected to worsen as we recover from COVID 19. It is estimated that tax revenues will contract by about 12% in the current fiscal due to the effects of the pandemic (Patnaik and Sengupta, 2020).

Dr. Kundu reminded us that while addressing gendered vulnerabilities, it is not necessary to be gender specific, but gender responsive. NEP 2020 fails in this regard. Even when 'gender' is mentioned, it is largely instrumentalized without transformative interventions. For instance, the policy offers two specific financing recommendations from a gender perspective – one, the inclusion of gender identity and respect for women as part of a larger value system that it seeks to promote through education. To this purpose, it recommends the inclusion of gender sensitization programmes across all educational institutions, which is not a novel plan. Two, it constitutes a Gender Inclusion Fund to provide equitable quality education. However, the details regarding the disbursement of this fund, what interventions would be covered under this, how it shall be monitored and evaluated, are missing from the policy. While the former NEP draft did mention two kinds of schemes under this fund - formula-based grants and discretionary grants, even this detailing is missing from the final draft.The fund aims to support state governments in implementing projects to promote sanitation, toilets, bicycles, conditional cash transfers, etc. to female students; though most states have already implemented many such interventions. Moreover, the priority of projects under this fund would be decided by the Central government and the funds would be dispersed with certain conditions. These measures would further centralize governance of education, which can lead to interventions losing out on-ground priorities during implementation. Another major issue is that there is no

clarity regarding whether the Gender Inclusion Fund would include higher education.

While the policy mentions the need for discussions within local government, it leaves out state governments as integral players within the education ecosystem. As previously mentioned, it does not address NHEM that reveals the tendency of centralization, espoused subtly within the policy. Though the policy makes recommendations regarding the need for multi-disciplinarity, the progression of colleges as degree-granting institutions, and the 4-year undergraduate programme, it misses out on harsh realities of the HE infrastructure in India. Limited number of colleges are presently equipped to successfully implement these provisions. For the majority of ill provisioned colleges in remote areas, undertaking these measures requires huge amount of investment at the hands of the government. Instead, by promoting philanthropic actors and bringing in community level players, it clearly lays out a plan within which greater consolidation and increased privatization, in the name of achieving targets, would further marginalize vulnerable groups including women.

Subverting constitutional rights

The policy locates the ethos of education within values such as *sewa* (service), *ahimsa* (non-violence), *swachhta* (cleanliness), *satya* (truth), *nishkama karma* (selfless action), *shanti* (peace), sacrifice, tolerance, diversity, pluralism, righteous conduct, respect for elders and respect for all people. Throughout the document, at the end of a long list of ethical and human values, are given the constitutional values of equality, liberty, fraternity and justice (Rampal, 2020). Interestingly, secularism does not find any mention. Moreover, the framework of values does not mention 'Fundamental Rights' but invokes Fundamental Duties. Such omissions and framing are far from accidental and instead need to be read against the set of concomitant policies that are being espoused under the present political regime. In the time of increasing communalisation, criminalisation of dissent and polarisation of the socio-cultural fabric, NEP 2020 fails to commit towards the centrality of rights-based constitutional values. Moreover, the singular framework for 'Indian' values has been borrowed heavily from Brahmanical and patriarchal discourses which is evident in the texts cited such as Panchatantra, Jataka and Hitopdesha, that are prescribed as learning pathways for moral and value education. Therefore, in addition to subverting the centrality of constitutional rights in curricula, the policy homogenises culture and values.

Increasing meritocracy and specialization in teacher recruitment and teacher education

The policy proposes the introduction of merit-based scholarships for teacher education and merit-based performance appraisals for promotion, tenure and progression to better roles. However, while making these claims, it fails to take into account the plurality of contexts and constraints within which most teachers operate across the education sector. By promoting meritocracy without providing support to teachers from marginalized communities and regions, the policy further dilutes the principle of diversity and inclusion. Moreover, while on the one hand, it aims to enhance teacher autonomy, many of the curricular changes it proposes, including a centralization of curricula for undergraduate programmes, would have the

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opposite effect, constraining teachers further, leading to an inability to contextualize and localize learning tools and pathways. Lastly, the policy prescribes all higher education institutions to inculcate multidisciplinarity which requires a teaching cadre that is equally multidisciplinary. In order to procure suitable jobs, teachers would now be forced to take up more and more specialized courses alongside their B.Ed. degrees. As the knowledge set becomes more and more specialized, it could lead to an increase in contractualization of the teaching workforce.This is because institutions would now be hiring teachers with very specific skills and knowledge bases for one-off courses that would be offered as part of the multidisciplinarity component and therefore an increasing number of teaching jobs would become contractual and temporary. Moreover, such demand-side forces in the teaching job market would also escalate opportunity costs for students pursuing teacher education, especially in the case of those from marginalized backgrounds, in the light of scholarships being granted solely on the basis of merit.

Through much of the above issues, it is clear that the policy seems to be riddled with many contradictions in the way that while it claims to achieve significant outcomes, there is limited focus on inputs and innovative strategies. Rather, in many ways, it continues to strengthen many of the existing issues within the education system which have presented severe challenges to universalizing free and quality education. Many of the issues in this section have also been discussed within the context of implications that it will have for women and individuals from disadvantaged genders who are already marginalized within the system. The discussion of these key issues has brought out some of the ways in which gendered vulnerabilities are likely to exacerbate through the proposed measures. The following section lays out some of the principal reasons due to which women have been made invisible within the NEP 2020.

Gendering the discourse within NEP 2020

There has been a paradigm shift in approaches to women's education between NEP 1986 and 2020. If the former envisioned education as an intervention towards women's empowerment, the latter detaches from the frameworks of equality and agency. NEP 2020 fails to identify quality education for women as a right. Instead, it conceptualizes gender sensitivity and respect for women as a consequence of the value system it espouses. As noted by Dr. Menon, women are missing from the policy. In terms of literal references, 'girls' education' and 'women' appear in only ten places. There are 6 references to girls in measures such as targeted schemes for SEDGs, gender inclusion fund, free boarding facilities, and the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya (KGBV), which in any case are mostly of poor quality. It does not specify what kind of expansion is planned under the free boarding scheme in Navodaya Vidyalaya and KGBV. In terms of the Gender Inclusion Fund, the lack of clarity on implementation and dispersal plans have already been discussed in the previous section. Also, while women have been identified as a vulnerable group that cut across several other groups subsumed under SEDGs, there aren't any concrete pathways stated in the policy through which women's vulnerabilities could be addressed. When it comes to the references to 'women', it primarily deals with specifying the role played by the Ministry of Women and Child Development rather than women's education programmes. Similarly, while the document mentions transgender students, thereby aiming to break gender stereotypes and binaries, it fails to be transformative even in their regard.

Secondly, the 1986 policy aimed to serve as a strategy towards the empowerment of women as a community. However, NEP 2020 continues to locate the entire learning exercise and evaluation indicators within the sphere of the individual. There is an attempt to isolate and atomize education to individual outcomes. This is one of the many ways in which the policy instrumentalizes the gender question, rather than upholding it within a rights-based feminist framework. It mentions gender sensitivity as integral to the ethos of education. However, Dr. Menon opined that the context in which it is mentioned is problematic. For instance, in Section 4.23, discussing curricular integration of essential subjects, gender sensitivity is located at the end of a long list of various other skills such as problem solving, logical reasoning, coding, computational reasoning, digital literacy, and ethical reasoning.

Again, the policy contradicts itself by proposing measures such as changing the name of the Ministry of Human Resource Development to the Ministry of Education with a view to bring the focus back on learning and all-round development. However, it continues to operate within a neoliberal framework, primarily focusing on creating efficient productive individuals, equipped with skills and values suitable for the market, rather than democratic citizens. In doing so, it focuses less on inputs and more on narrowly defined outputs. The neoliberal outlook is also evident in the way education workforce is characterized within the policy. For instance, Aanganwadi workers are envisioned as the foot soldiers responsible for the policy's ambitious Early Childhood Care and Education component. These community level workers are highly overworked and severely underpaid (Jamwal, 2020). The voluntary honorarium system fails to account for the multitudes of works thrust upon them. Aanganwadi workers are primary nodes of the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) undertaken by the Ministry of Women and Child Development. They are also integral nodes within the National Health Mission, overseen by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Despite being responsible for on-ground implementation of such crucial programmes, these workers function within highly constrained and poorly resourced environments, including poor infrastructure, lack of funds, and high regulatory confusion, owing to their placements across multiple ministries and departments (Jamwal, 2020). Considering that many Aanganwadi workers have repeatedly complained about not receiving regular salaries for more than nine months to even a year, it is alarming that most of the state sponsored grassroots work on women, child health and education are implemented through their unpaid labor. The present policy plans to capitalize on this body of unpaid and inadequately qualified labor, especially for its foundational stage of early childhood education. This is, but, one example on how the policy fails to adequately clarify the roles, responsibilities, and incentives of the sizeable workforce required to execute its propositions.

Many of the key issues highlighted in the previous section such as increasing privatization, greater impetus to consolidation, pedagogic change to 4-year undergraduate programme, ODL, digital learning, and push for low-cost for-profit private

substitutes, are likely to aggravate women's access to education.

Additionally, increasing out-of-pocket expenditure on education has curtailed the right to quality education for women and other disadvantaged groups. Figure 3 (see annexure) shows household per capita expenditure to be highest in private unaided institutions for both undergraduate and postgraduate courses. In this scenario, those who can afford, would choose to educate men owing to rampant son preference. Such inequality manifests much more acutely for women and individuals from marginalized backgrounds. Dr. Navani reminded us that while in terms of absolute enrollments there seems to be gender parity, it is important to understand the experience of women in higher education spaces and their progression within it. Nearly 80% of HE enrollments is at the undergraduate level. Only 12.5% at the postgraduate level, and 0.4% at PhD. Reform proposals pertaining to HE in NEP 2020 are specifically targeted at the undergraduate level, but it is also important to address women's transition to higher levels and the inequity in representation of women within academia itself. Moreover, women account for very low proportion of enrolments in institutes of national importance and state open universities. One other way in which inequality manifests is through unequal enrollment in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) courses as shown in Figure 4 (see annexure). The policy fails to address both realities and does not propose any measures apart from targeted merit-based scholarships to tackle these issues.

Finally, women in higher education, along with people from several other marginalized backgrounds, are routinely subjected to discrimination and harassment that promotes early dropouts or hinders enrolments altogether. Rampant atrocities and everyday discrimination based on caste, gender, and religion across university campuses needed to be addressed and eliminated, to create an environment for truly inclusive and egalitarian education. Dr. Navani opined that the sole focus on providing access rather than ensuring sustenance and addressing everyday experiences of exclusion seems to be myopic and narrow for a policy that claims to be futuristic.
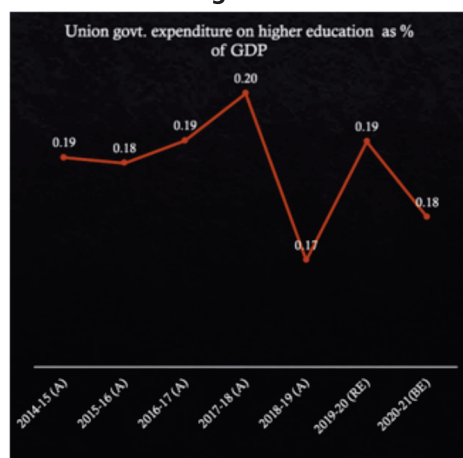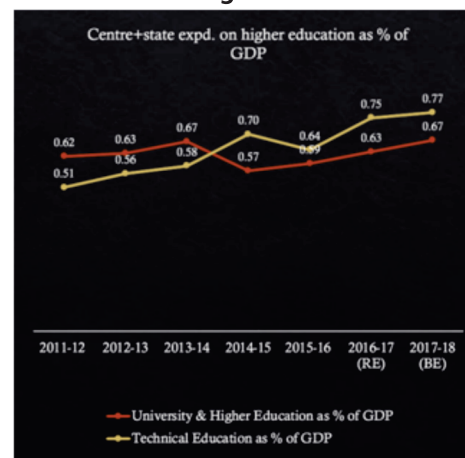
Recommendations

Our speakers asserted on the need to oppose NEP 2020 across both institutional and public domains. Former implies lobbying with state governments in neutralizing many disastrous effects of NEP 2020, as have already been proposed in Kerala and West Bengal. Moreover, organisations and civil society groups working in the field of education should, in their own individual capacities, influence and redirect state education programmes to develop their own culturally responsive curricula, policies and norms to negate the deeply unequal and unconstitutional nature of the policy.

While many measures in the policy remain unconstitutional, even the process of its formulation must be scrutinized. Firstly, the drafting committee of NEP 2020 does not comprise of any educationists, but is made up of bureaucrats and representatives from private universities. This lack seems to have contributed to the convoluted pedagogic and curricula measures proposed. Prof. Rampal noted that over the last few years, education discourse in India is being increasingly outsourced to corporate houses and technical consultants, thereby limiting the influence of rights-based feminist and diverse groups. Moreover, the policy, which was rushed through the Parliament during the COVID-19, must be re-tabled and reviewed by a Parliamentary Standing Committee comprised of representatives from various marginalised communities who can evaluate the efficacy of the proposals.

Most importantly, NEP 2020 must be opposed in the public domain including organising public discussions and critical reading of the policy and related documents. Such exercises which encourage the development of a broad rights-based consciousness around education should be undertaken. Diverse stakeholders should hold policymakers accountable for their failures in delivering equity and inclusiveness. For a policy with long term wide-ranging ramifications on the education system, it lacks adequate outcry and opposition required in amending and repealing its propositions. Therefore, as stated by Prof. Rampal, when the politicians and policymakers fail, there arises a need to democratise policy by bringing it out to people's forums and public spaces and asserting the constitutional right to universal free and compulsory quality education.
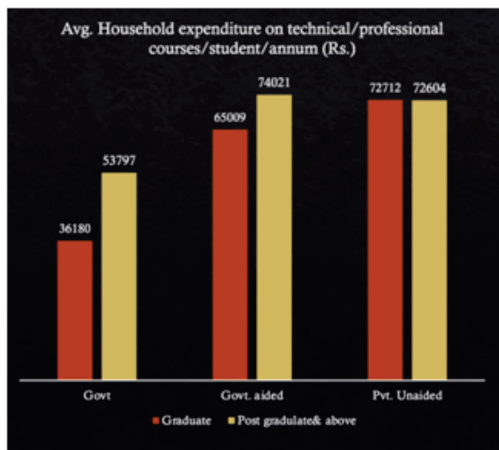
Annexure

Figure 1

*Source – Presentation by Dr. Protiva Kundu at
the 34th Gender and Economic Policy Discussion Forum*

Figure 2

*Source – Presentation by Dr. Protiva Kundu at
the 34th Gender and Economic Policy Discussion Forum*

Figure 3

*Source – Presentation by Dr. Protiva Kundu at
the 34th Gender and Economic Policy Discussion Forum*

Figure 4
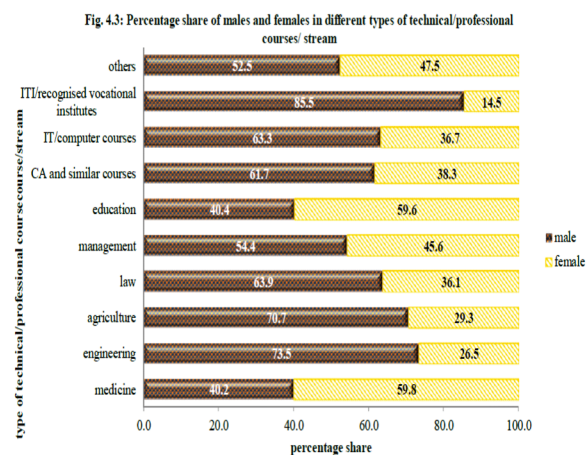
*Source – Presentation by Dr. Protiva Kundu at
the 34th Gender and Economic Policy Discussion Forum*

Endnotes

[1]Gross Enrolment Ratio is defined as the total enrolment in a specific level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the eligible official school-age population corresponding to the same level of education in a given school-year.

[2]Between 2002 and 2013, the number of institutions increased from 12,080 to 35,357, while student intake increased from 10.7 million to 32.3 million (Tierney and Sabharwal, 2016).

[3]GER in HE was recorded at 25.8% in 2019, of which 48.6% comprised of women, signifying greater gender parity (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Department of Higher Education, 2019).

[4]In 2018-19, of the total enrolments, 14.9% belonged to Scheduled Castes (SC) category, 5.53% to Scheduled Tribes (ST), 36.34% to Other Backward Classes (OBC), and only 5.23% to Muslim minority (MM). Only 2.32% of total enrolments comprised of students from other minorities.

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Chairperson

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