



**SAFEENA
HUSAIN**

WHEN THE GIRLS GO MARCHING IN

We must embed accountability mechanisms across the National Education Policy, ensuring gender equality as the backbone of the system

FOUR million girls in India are still not showing up at school. The reason? They are females. While the number of girls not enrolled in schools has dropped significantly from 10 per cent in 2006 to just above 4 per cent, that figure is still disappointing. And once we delve into the nitty-gritty, we realise that while the average is dismal, the performance of some states is downright appalling. It has been ten years since the Indian government passed the Right to Education Act, but in states such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, girls' attendance in schools is below 60 per cent. The new draft National Education Policy (NEP) offers an opportunity to make a concerted push and finally resolve this problem.

In 1968, the first NEP was drawn up, promising a "radical reconstruction of education". As early as the sixties, the policy talked about "equalisation of educational opportunity", including that "the education of girls should receive emphasis not only on grounds of social justice but also because it accelerates social transformation." A new policy in 1986, with amendments in 1992, specifically recognised the use of education "as an agent of basic change in the status of women".

And yet, despite such a laudable mission and 15 years of concerted effort towards the millennium development goals (MDGs), supported by national and global funding, in 2019, we are still home to the third largest population of out-of-school girls in the world.

The draft NEP, opened to public scrutiny on June 1 this year, offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to change the way people think about and act towards girls' education. This is not just about education in isolation, but about using it as a pathway to solving many of India's urgent developmental challenges. As the World Bank puts it, girls' education is the single best investment a country can make.

As we align to a global set of sustainable development goals (SDGs) and enter their decade of delivery (by 2030), we know that educating girls can address at least nine of those 17 goals directly. Schooling girls can reduce child deaths, improve nutrition, prevent stunting, reduce HIV and AIDS

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prevalence, improve immunisation rates, increase women's earnings and potentially add \$700 billion to India's GDP as early as 2025. A 2015 McKinsey Report states that reaching gender parity will have a bigger impact in India than in any other region in the world. It will also have a critical global effect on climate change through reduced fertility rates.

Sadly, the status of gender parity in India makes all this seem like a pipe dream. Twenty-seven per cent of girls are married before they turn 18 and 7 per cent are married before 15. Thirty-one per cent of married women give birth by 18 and 38.4 per cent of children under five are stunted—a third of the world's population of stunted preschoolers are in India. The equally alarming statistics on violence against women, child trafficking and child labour indicate that India faces a gender crisis that must be tackled on a war footing.

We simply cannot wait 30 years for another education policy review. Despite some commendable proposals made by the MHRD in the draft NEP 2019, without decisive action and prioritisation, we might let down many more generations. In India's NEP, we have the opportunity to do that, making it imperative to structure and view the policy draft through a gender lens. At every step, from planning to budgeting, implementation, review and reporting, we must ensure that girls as well as boys count. The policy must review females' entire life cycle, from early childhood development to school and work transition. As a bare minimum, our goals must be:

- Gender parity in educational opportunities, including enrolment, retention, learning and completion rates.
- Gender parity in skill development, vocational training and transition to the workplace (NEP does not mention vocational training in terms of gender parity).
- Gender-appropriate infrastructure as a prerequisite in every school alongside support for safe, reliable transportation
- Gender parity in education of teachers and school leadership.
- Gender parity and sensitivity with dramatically improved gender norms in school curricula,



teaching and learning materials, and classroom practice. The draft NEP 2019 has identified that school curricula and textbooks play a role in inculcating gender sensitivity, but this needs to be put into practice.

- Universal provision for girls to complete education up to the higher-secondary level.

TO achieve all this, we need to embed accountability mechanisms across the NEP, ensuring gender equality is the backbone of the system. Monitoring data has to be disaggregated by gender at all levels and every new initiative should be judged effective only if it is successful for both boys and girls. One way of ensuring that the policy incorporates a gender lens is to form a subcommittee to review all its aspects, including collection, collation and analysis of all progress data in terms of gender equality. It is perhaps a start to have a department of gender studies within the National Council of Educational Research and Training, but this focus has to be elevated to a committee that stands above the NEP and reviews the whole design and implementation of every educational department from a gender perspective.

BRIDGE THE GAP
37 per cent of girls are married before they turn 18

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As long as we still have disrespectful narratives in our textbooks, all other efforts will fail. If we trap women in domestic roles in our test papers, with all portrayals of leadership as male, our girls will not thrive. If the teaching profession and leadership in rural India are dominated by men, the way we think about girls' education cannot change.

Despite laudable proposals across much of the draft NEP, we cannot assume that girls' rights will be protected without intentionality, especially those of the most marginalised. Given the overwhelming benefits of educating girls, the policy is not just a pathway to close the gender gap in education attainment, but also to ensure economic participation, health and survival of by tackling the deep-rooted mindsets that perpetuate discrimination. The time is now—we cannot wait another three decades for the education policy to be reviewed again. We must not lose another generation of girls to illiteracy, poverty, exclusion and violence. We applaud the draft NEP for its ambition, but it should not move ahead without our girls. ☐

(The author is founder and executive director of Educate Girls)