



## EDUCATION FOR GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN AN INTERCONNECTED WORLD

*Moly Kuruvilla*

*Professor, Department of Women's Studies, University of Calicut, Kerala*

### Abstract

*This paper discusses the conditions and achievements of India in the fields of education and Information Communication Technology and examines whether the goal of gender equality is facilitated through ICT facilitated education. The gender bias in the present education system and the various challenges to gender mainstreaming in the Indian education system are analysed. The National Education Policy of India 2020 that emphasises the use of ICT as a means to empower India as a knowledge economy is examined as to how far it promises gender equity through ICT facilitated education. It is pertinent to examine how far inclusive and equitable are the resources of education and ICT in the Covid-19 context of India. Whether the digital India education is effective enough in its role as an instrument to facilitate gender mainstreaming is also analysed in detail. Suggestions on modifying the education system to transform gender relations are proposed by the author.*

**Keywords:** *Gender Gap in Education Attainment, Gender Bias in Education, NEP 2020, Gender Digital Divide, ICT Facilitated Online Education*



Aarhat Publication & Aarhat Journals is licensed Based on a work at <http://www.aarhat.com/erj/>

### INTRODUCTION

Countries worldwide were making faster strides towards Sustainable Development Goals 2030. Gender equity and equality in every sphere of life are acknowledged as a prerequisite for sustainable development, and gender mainstreaming is adopted as the globally accepted strategy to attain it. Since the 17 SDGs are all interlinked and interdependent, a relook into how the fourth goal of achieving quality and inclusive education contributes to the 5th goal of gender equality is quite significant. With the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic towards the end of 2019 and its continuation as first, second and third waves, the world is facing the tremendous setback to gender equality. The pandemic has resulted in the closedown of schools, colleges, and hostels, which has multiple adverse impacts on girls' education and career aspirations than boys (Acosta & Evans, 2020; UNICEF, 2020; Witter, 2021; World Bank, 2021). The education sector has moved from classrooms and campuses to online meetings and discussions. At this juncture, it has become imperative to discuss the interconnectedness between ICT led education and gender empowerment.

### Education for women empowerment

The opening sentence of the Kothari Commission remarked, "the destiny of India is being shaped in her classrooms". The future of the nation, its peace, happiness and prosperity all depend on the nature of education provided to the future citizens through its schools, colleges and university systems. Education instils the readiness for change in human minds, makes them more flexible, liberal and develops balanced outlooks. Education contributes to



improved physical and mental health; it increases the productivity of individuals and strengthens the potential for economic growth through gainful employment. Education helps to eradicate poverty and hunger and promotes peace, the rule of law and respect for human rights. All these are popularly accepted facts.

Education has also been considered the best instrument for facilitating women empowerment and ensuring gender justice by equipping men and women with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to meet the challenges of gender mainstreaming. Though the family, education system, media and religion are all considered agents of gender socialisation, the educational institutions play the most important role as it is there our children spent the majority of their time.

The potentials of education and ICT in facilitating gender empowerment and social change are widely discussed (Abubakar et al., 2017; Shehata, 2017). Whether it is online education, online shopping, the call taxis, net banking, e-ticket booking or e-tax filing, accessing health facilities or online marketing, the ICT provides immense support to women. ICT has changed the lives of single women, aged women, women with determination, women with young kids and sexual minorities across all sections of religion, class, caste, race or ethnicity to access information and resources in various spheres and ensure means of sustenance and livelihood.

It is pertinent to examine how far inclusive and equitable are the resources of education and ICT in the Covid-19 context of India. Whether the present ICT facilitated education system is effective enough in its role as an instrument to facilitate gender mainstreaming is also to be analysed in detail.

### Gender Gap in Education Attainment in India

The Global Gender Gap Report, 2021, reveals the impact of Covid-19 on the hard-earned gender equality in India. 'Home to 0.65 billion women, India has widened its gender gap from almost 66.8% closed one year ago to 62.5% this year' (WEF: Global Gender Gap Report, 2021, p. 27).

**Table 1: Gender gap in Educational Attainment India -2021**

Subindex	Score	India's rank/156 countries
Educational Attainment	<b>0.962</b>	<b>114</b>

**Source:** WEF: *Global Gender Gap Report 2021*

'In India, 96.2% of the Educational Attainment Gender Gap has been closed, with parity achieved in primary, secondary and tertiary education. Yet, gender gaps persist in literacy: one-third of women are illiterate (34.2%) compared to 17.6% of men'. (WEF: Global Gender Gap Report, 2021, p. 37). Whatever achievement gained in the past has been seriously implicated with the shift from physical to virtual classrooms. India's stark gender digital divide was pointed out in the GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report [GSMA] (2020). Barriers like domestic responsibilities (Miller & Shrum, 2011), lack of time to access and use the internet (Best & Maier, 2007; Johnson, 2010), lack of smartphones (Shrinivasa, 2020) or Television to access online classes (Lathabhavan & Griffiths, 2020) are all reported to affect the online education of girls.

Whether the education system is effectively fulfilling its potential for bringing about social change, the answer is a 'BIG NO'. Even the highly qualified boys and girls believe and sustain the traditional patriarchal mindsets of their parents. Even though education has the potential to bring about readiness for change in people's attitudes, the present education system offers little in this regard. The recent incident at Andhra Pradesh in India is a testimony to this argument. Two adult daughters of 27 and 22 years were killed by their parents. The mother is a gold medallist and a



school principal, and the father is a doctorate and Professor of a College. In the name of superstitious beliefs that the daughters will take rebirth, the educated parents themselves committed the homicide.

To the question of whether the present education system is challenging existing gender inequalities, the answer again is a 'BIG No'. Typical examples to substantiate this argument are listed below:

- In instances where the educated women fail to get employment or are prevented from taking up paid work outside the home, education serves as a national wastage.
- When educated and employed women are denied control of their earnings, the objective of education as a means for women empowerment remains unfulfilled.
- When the highly educated judiciary pronounces skin contact as mandatory in sexual harassment, education seems to lose its significance.
- When marriage and motherhood are considered the life goals of women, or when property rights are denied to daughters even by educated parents, education for gender equality becomes a myth.
- When several girls are attacked, raped or killed, or subjected to acid attacks by their highly educated boyfriends for not consenting to marry them, it endorses the failure of education in fulfilling the objectives of bringing about changes in mindsets.
- In the state of Kerala, noted for its high standards of literacy and education, when the labour force participation remains lower than the national average, and the women possess the lowest mental health profiles in the country, one cannot boast about education as an instrument of women empowerment.

Before making recommendations to modify education for gender equality, the gender bias existing in the present education system needs to be examined.

### **Gender Bias in Education**

Several studies reveal how the education system is entrenched with gender bias at all levels. Gender discrimination and differences can be found in the objectives of education, enrolment and retention rates, choice of subjects; content of texts (Jha, 2008; Thasniya & Kuruvilla, 2015); classroom practices like seating arrangements (Thasniya & Kuruvilla, 2017); dress codes (Zhou, 2015); teacher-student interactions (Bassi, 2003); division of responsibilities among boys and girls; disciplinary practices employed by teachers (Reay, 2001); co-curricular activities; time and space for leisure/ play in the schools and colleges (Connolly, 2004; Francis, 2004) and in the administrative positions of educational institutions.

As per the Right to Education (RTE) Act of India 2009, free and compulsory education is guaranteed for all children aged between six and 14, and the figures for primary school enrolment in India stood at an impressive-sounding 98% in 2018. But the gender experts are apprehensive that Covid-19 is likely to be a heavy blow to this achievement. Lack of mobile phones, digital skills and connectivity issues might have led to the dropout of millions of children from schools and colleges. In this regard, girls are more likely than boys to be withdrawn first because of parental indifference and ignorance on the significance of girls' education. Since the Covid-19 is still an ongoing pandemic, the complete statistics on dropouts are not available.

### **The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 on ICT**

India announced its new National Education Policy on 29th July 2020. The NEP 2020 is expected to change the educational landscape of the country so as to equip the youngsters with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to



meet the future challenges of the globalised world.

The Digital India Campaign launched on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2015 has been helping to transform the entire nation into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy. The new education policy of the digitally interconnected world, naturally has adopted ICT as the primary tool for meeting the challenges of education for sustainable development. NEP 2020 provides for 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and emphasises digitalisation in the education sector. Section 23 of the NEP titled ‘Technology Use and Integration’ puts forth a vision for the role technology would play in revolutionising the education sector. Regarding the use of ICT in education, the NEP 2020 states:

India is a global leader in information and communication technology and in other cutting-edge domains, such as space. The Digital India Campaign is helping to transform the entire nation into a digitally empowered society and knowledge economy. While education will play a critical role in this transformation, technology itself will play an important role in the improvement of educational processes and outcomes; thus, the relationship between technology and education at all levels is bidirectional. (NEP, 2020. P.56, 23.1)

The education policy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century has elaborate plans for ensuring digital infrastructure, developing digital skills, providing training to the teachers and promoting digital safety. As per the NEP 2020, an autonomous body, the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF), will be created to provide a platform for the free exchange of ideas on the use of technology to enhance learning, assessment, planning, administration, and so on, both for school and higher education. The NEP further explains:

The thrust of technological interventions will be for the purposes of improving teaching-learning and evaluation processes, supporting teacher preparation and professional development, enhancing educational access, and streamlining educational planning, management, and administration including processes related to admissions, attendance, assessments, etc.(p. 57, 23.5)

But the gender digital divide and the rural-urban digital divide in India are challenges that need to be overcome to facilitate the anticipated education-technology bidirectional linkage and integration for digital India education. Several global reports highlight the gender digital divide and the subsequent marginalisation faced by girls in education (GSMA, 2020, OECD, 2018),

### **The New Education Policy (NEP) 2020 of India and Gender Mainstreaming**

The NEP 2020 time and again highlights the cultural traditions of India when it specifies ‘India centred education’. But when these traditions are looked at from a gender perspective, certain affirmations are required in the NEP 2020 to not sustain the blackspots in the culture. Good elements in traditions like simple living, warmth and integrity in family relations, tolerance, respect for parents, teachers and elders etc. need to be preserved while hierarchical gender relations, double standards in matters of morality (insisting chastity and purity of female partner alone), gender and caste discrimination, denial of space, voice and property rights to women etc. are black spots in the Indian cultural traditions which need to be dispensed with. The concept of rootedness in traditions naturally develops a discomfort among gender experts. The apprehensions get deepened with the mere passive references made on gender and women’s education. Though Agriculture and allied disciplines, Legal Education, Healthcare Education and Technical Education are highlighted, nothing is mentioned about Gender/Women’s Studies in the NEP.

Though it is stated that there is a need for “changing mindsets and halting harmful practices to foster gender equity and inclusion”, the need for having Gender/Women’s Studies Centres and courses is missing in NEP 2020. The



four-year degree programme is a welcome move with multiple entry and exit options. This is more significant in the case of boys and girls from low-income families who may have to work and earn money for their fees. With the overemphasis on marriage and family building in their lives, numerous girls become drop out of higher education. This dropout could be arrested with the multiple entry option. There won't be wastage of any single year they have attended in college. As such this provision is a positive attempt towards gender mainstreaming in higher education.

### **Challenges to Gender Mainstreaming in Indian Education System**

The Indian education scenario faces the following challenges in its role as an instrument for gender justice:

- In a tradition-bound society like that of India, the culturally imposed household responsibilities (UNICEF, 2016), the indifference of parents towards educating girls, and poverty hamper girls' education.
- Gender bias is embedded at all levels of the education system.
- Lack of women in top decision making bodies. This may convey a wrong message to boys and girls that only men are capable of decision making and women are incapable or something that they dare not to do.
- Making quality higher education accessible and affordable to girls belonging to every class and caste is a major challenge in the globalised society that fosters the privatisation of higher education.
- The prominent gender digital divide with parents unwilling to purchase mobile phones or laptops for their daughters. The pandemic has disclosed the gendered digital divide when the new normal of online classes started. It has led to access and connectivity issues more for girls than boys.
- The youngsters, especially girls, lack digital skills and fall easy prey to cybercrimes.
- Staying back at home with lesser or no facilities for online classes might have led parents to push their wards into forced marriages. The exact data in this regard is yet awaited.
- There are no sufficient role models for boys and girls in the present socio-cultural setup that depict egalitarian family relations. The misconceptions learned from the family fail to be corrected when children reach school.
- The lack of gender sensitised teachers and educational administrators is yet another challenge.

### **Way Forward**

The Indian education system has been undergoing a gradual shift to online education platforms like SWAYAM and e-PG Pathshala during the last decade where it was a matter of choice for the student community. But with Covid-19, online education has become a necessity. The government has come up with the 'Blended Learning' programme for higher education to facilitate the paradigm shift. However, to harness the potential of ICT facilitated education for gender mainstreaming, the following suggestions are put forth:

- We need more gender-responsive policies with more investment in education to provide support to girls and other marginalised groups.
- Reservations and financial grants to the economically weaker and socio-culturally backward sections need to be continued.
- More scholarships and digital infrastructure in the form of mobiles, laptops, free WiFi services to be provided to the needy students based on the principles of gender mainstreaming.
- More online educational resources to be disseminated through radio, Television, and additional contact classes need to be provided to the needy students.
- Flexible examination formats are also required in the Covid-19 circumstances as any youngster losing an



academic year cannot be afforded and that too for reasons beyond their control.

- Digital skill training to students and teachers at all levels.
- Parental awareness campaigns to ensure effective use of ICT by their wards.
- Curricular components on Gender Studies appropriate to each level need to be included from the primary classes onwards. Though the NCERT has responded positively by including a paper on Gender Studies at the Plus Two level as an optional paper, a similar trend is lacking in the curriculum of SCERT of various states to which the majority of student community belong.
- Gender/Women’s Studies must be offered as a compulsory foundation course at the UG/PG level.
- The misconceptions learned from the family need to be corrected when children reach school and that too at the very beginning of school days. Teachers as agents of social change must be committed to reducing the gender-role typing through their own behaviours, classroom practices and language, especially when communicating with children.

### Conclusion

Irrespective of all its flows, the ICT facilitated online classes have saved the academic year of millions of students across the world. Gender equality has been a key objective of the educational policy of India for over three decades. Progressive changes have been achieved concerning the greater enrolment of girls in primary education. The focus of educational planning in India for the “decade of action” needs to be shifted to secondary and higher education, including professional education.

Now that gender equality and gender justice have been realised as essential requisites for peaceful living and sustainable development, the formal education system has to respond positively by including appropriate components on Gender justice as a compulsory curricular component at all levels of education.

The resistance to women’s emancipation and progressive ventures is stiffer than ever before, as revealed by the alarming rise in atrocities against girls and women in private and public spheres of life. New forms of violence which were never anticipated a decade before are directed at women. To minimise the negative impacts, our girls should be equipped with a better understanding of responsible handling of technological advancements and total awareness about one’s rights to live a life with safety and dignity. For this capacity building of girls and women through legal literacy, media literacy, mobile and computer literacy are essential. In India, the NCW is actively engaged in providing digital awareness classes to college and university students, which is to be fully utilised by the stakeholders.

Above all, the gender bias embedded in our culture is to be eliminated, and the willingness to change is to be ensured with the active participation of men and boys. In this context, the UGC has come up with directions to Higher Education Institutions to organise one-month-long webinars on gender sensitisation during the pandemic. Numerous online portals have sprung up in India during the Covid-19 pandemic. More innovative teaching-learning programmes through TV and Radio are anticipated to facilitate the education of all those who are crippled without digital infrastructure and connectivity. Also, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, gender positive and redistributive initiatives are required to ensure inclusive and quality education of girls and other sexual minorities. India cannot afford to leave anyone behind.

### REFERENCES

Abubakar, N.H., Dasuki, S.I., & Quaye, A.M. (2017). *The contribution of ICTs to women empowerment: A capability*



- perspective. Twenty-third Americas Conference on Information Systems, Boston.
- Acosta, A.M. & Evans, D. (2020, October 2). *COVID-19 and girls' education: What we know so far and what we expect*. Centre for Global Development. <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/covid-19-and-girls-education-what-we-know-so-far-and-what-we-expect-happen>
- Bassi, T. (2003). Gender in school: Observation from an exploratory study. *Journal of Indian Education*, 29(3), 135-146.
- Best, M. L., & Maier, S. G. (2007). Gender, culture and ICT use in rural South India. *Gender, Technology and Development*, 11(2), 137–155. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097185240701100201>
- Connolly, P. (2004). *Boys and schooling in the early years* (1st Edition). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203643082>
- Francis, B. (2004). Classroom interaction and access: Whose space is it? In H. Claire (Ed.), *Gender in education* 3-19: A fresh approach (pp.42-49). London: Association of Teachers and Lecturers.
- GSMA. (2020). *Connected women: The mobile gender gap report 2020*. <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2020.pdf>
- Jha, J. (2008). *Gender equality in education: The role of schools*. Nottingham.
- Johnson, V. (2010). Women and the internet: A micro study in Chennai, India. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 17(1), 151–163. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097152150901700107>
- Kuruvilla, M. & Thasniya, K.T. (2015). Gender stereotypism in the pictorial depictions of primary school text books. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*. 20(6), 16-26. <https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-20651626>
- Lathabhavan, R., & Griffiths, M. (2020). First case of student suicide in India due to the COVID-19 education crisis: A brief report and preventive measures. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 53. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102202>
- Miller, B. P., & Shrum, W. (2011). The gender digital divide in the research sectors of Ghana, Kenya, and Kerala: Are women more connected over time? *Gender, Technology and Development*, 15(1), 25-52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/097185241101500102>
- National Education Policy. (2020). *Ministry of Human Resource Development*, Government of India. [https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload\\_files/mhrd/files/NEP\\_Final\\_English\\_0.pdf](https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf)
- Reay, D. (2001). 'Spice girls', 'Nice Girls', 'Girlies', and 'Tomboys'; gender discourses. Girls' cultures and femininities in the primary classroom. *Gender and Education*, 13 (2), 153-167.
- Sadker, M., & Sadker, D. (1994). *Failing at fairness: How our schools cheat girls*. New York: Scribner.
- Shehata, A.M.H. (2017). Role of information and communication technology in closing gender employment gap in MENA Countries. *The Business and Management Review*, 8(4), 168-178. [https://cberuk.com/cdn/conference\\_proceedings/conference\\_26814.pdf](https://cberuk.com/cdn/conference_proceedings/conference_26814.pdf)
- Shrinivasa, M. (2020, August 19). Mysuru: Unable to get smart phone for online classes, girl commits suicide. *The Times of India*. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mysuru/mysuru-unable-to-get-smartphone-for-online-classes-girl-commits-suicide/articleshow/77615140.cms>



- Kuruville, M., & Thasniya, K.T. (2015). Gender stereotyping in the pictorial depictions of primary school text books. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 20 (6), 16-26. <https://doi.org/10.9790/0837-20651626>
- Thasniya, K. T. & Kuruville, M. (2017). Gendered behavioural practices in the primary and secondary schools of Kerala. *International Research Journal of Human Resources and Social Sciences*, 4(2), 42-51.
- UNICEF. (2020). UNICEF Education COVID-19 Response Issue Brief: COVID-19 and Girls' Education in East Asia and Pacific. [https://www.unicef.org/eap/media/7146/file/Issue\\_Brief%3A\\_Issue\\_Brief%3A\\_COVID-19\\_and\\_Girls%E2%80%99\\_Education\\_in\\_East\\_Asia\\_and\\_Pacific.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/eap/media/7146/file/Issue_Brief%3A_Issue_Brief%3A_COVID-19_and_Girls%E2%80%99_Education_in_East_Asia_and_Pacific.pdf)
- WEF. (2021). Global Gender Gap Report 2021. *World Economic Forum*, Switzerland. [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2021.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf)
- Witter, A. (2021, March 5). How COVID-19 is threatening girls' education. *ONE*. <https://www.one.org/international/blog/girls-education-crisis-covid-19/>
- World Bank. (2021). Girls' education. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/girlseducationIRLS>
- Zhou. L. (2015, October 20). The sexism of school dress codes. *The Atlantic*. <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/10/school-dress-codes-are-problematic/410962/>