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Policies and Framework for Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in Education

Ranu Kumari Gupta [1*], Prof. Meena Sirola [2]
[1] Research Scholar, Department of Education, Banasthali Vidyapith, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India
[2] Prof., Research Scholar, Department of Education, Banasthali Vidyapith, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

* Corresponding Author: **Ranu Kumari Gupta**

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Abstract
Gender equality and social inclusion are fundamental to achieving equitable, inclusive, and quality Education in the twenty-first century. Despite significant policy developments and institutional reforms, disparities arising from gender, socio-economic status, caste, disability, and geographical location continue to constrain inclusive educational outcomes, particularly in developing contexts such as India. This theoretical research paper critically examines the role of national policy and frameworks in advancing gender equality and social inclusion in education, with particular emphasis on the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) 2023. Drawing upon theories of social justice, capability, inclusive education, and gender-responsive education, the paper analyses how contemporary education policies seek to address inequities through structural reforms, curriculum transformation, learner-centred pedagogy, and institutional mechanisms. The paper particularly examines the Gender Inclusion Fund, support for Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), equitable access to education, competency-based learning, and gender-sensitive curriculum practices. The analysis indicates that although NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023 provide progressive and comprehensive directions for inclusive education, significant gaps remain between policy intentions and implementation. Infrastructural inequalities, socio-cultural norms, gender stereotypes, inadequate teacher preparation, digital divides, institutional limitations, and insufficient stakeholder awareness continue to affect educational inclusion. The paper argues that policy frameworks alone cannot ensure social justice unless supported by effective implementation mechanisms, teacher capacity development, inclusive institutional cultures, community participation, and continuous monitoring. The paper concludes that achieving meaningful gender equality and social inclusion requires a shift from merely providing equal opportunities towards creating equitable conditions in which every learner can participate, learn, develop capabilities, and achieve their educational potential.

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Introduction

Education is widely recognised as a powerful instrument for promoting social transformation, equality, human development, and democratic participation. In contemporary societies, access to quality education is not merely an individual right but also a fundamental condition for achieving social justice and sustainable development. However, educational systems across the world continue to reflect existing social inequalities. Gender, caste, socio-economic background, disability, language, geographical

location, and other forms of disadvantage can influence learners' access to educational opportunities, participation in classroom processes, academic achievement, and transition to higher levels of education. Gender equality and social inclusion therefore represent two interconnected dimensions of educational transformation. Gender equality seeks to eliminate discrimination, stereotypes, unequal opportunities, and structural barriers affecting learners based on gender. Social inclusion extends this concern to learners who experience disadvantage because of socio-economic conditions, caste, disability, language, location, or other social circumstances. An inclusive education system seeks not merely to bring disadvantaged learners into existing institutions but to transform educational structures and practices so that diversity is recognised and valued. In India, the constitutional commitment to equality and social justice has provided an important foundation for educational inclusion. Over time, several educational policies and programmes have attempted to reduce disparities in access and participation. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a major shift towards a more holistic, flexible, equitable, and inclusive education system. It explicitly identifies Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) and proposes measures to address their educational needs. The policy also proposes a Gender Inclusion Fund to strengthen access and participation of girls and transgender students, particularly among disadvantaged communities. The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE) 2023 further translates the broad principles of NEP 2020 into curricular and pedagogical directions. It emphasises holistic development, competency-based learning, learner-centred pedagogy, inclusion, Indian values, multilingualism, experiential learning, and the development of responsible and sensitive citizens. Against this background, the present theoretical paper analyses the conceptual relationship between gender equality, social inclusion, and educational policy. It specifically examines how NEP 2020 and NCF-SE 2023 provide a framework for reducing educational inequalities and identifies the challenges that may affect their effective implementation.

Literature Review

- **Faisal, Mohd. (2026) A study of gender representation in Hindi textbooks of NCERT at upper primary and secondary level.** The researcher found that NCERT Hindi textbooks at the upper primary and secondary level address gender issues and promote gender sensitivity. Some lessons directly discuss gender, while others indirectly convey gender-related messages, such as “Hum Panchhi Unmukt Gagan ke”, “Himalaya ki Betiyan” and “Kathputli”.
- **Kanodia, Sakshi. (2026) Gender neutrality under the Indian criminal laws 2023: a critical study.** The study concludes that gender neutral criminal laws are essential for constitutional justice, equality and dignity. The study recommends legal, judicial and policy reforms to protect the rights of all genders, including men and transgender persons and promote a more inclusive justice system.
- **Rohini Kumari (2025), From Disparity to Empowerment: Gender-Responsive SDG Policies in Gurugram. The** study found that India and Haryana have made progress in gender – responsive governance, but stronger policies, grassroots awareness and an inclusive framework are needed. International practices like gender budgeting, political quotas, reproductive healthcare and digital financial inclusion can further empower women.
- **Verma P. (2025), Advancing Gender Equality Through Education: Pathways Toward Inclusive Development,** highlights that gender equality in education requires more than equal access. It needs quality, safety, empowerment, gender equitable teaching, fair funding and institutional accountability to achieve inclusive development.

Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of the present theoretical study are:

- To examine the conceptual relationship between gender equality and social inclusion in education.
- To analyse theoretical perspectives underlying inclusive and equitable education.
- To examine the provisions of NEP 2020 related to gender equality and social inclusion.
- To analyse the contribution of NCF-SE 2023 towards developing an inclusive and gender-responsive curriculum.
- To identify major challenges in implementing gender equality and social inclusion policies in educational institutions.
- To suggest measures for strengthening inclusive and gender-responsive educational practices in India.

Methodology

The present study adopts a theoretical and analytical research approach. It is based primarily on secondary sources and does not involve primary data collection. Relevant policy documents, educational frameworks, scholarly literature, theoretical perspectives, reports, and conceptual discussions relating to gender equality and social inclusion have been examined. The major documents considered for analysis include the National Education Policy 2020, National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023, constitutional provisions relating to equality and education, and relevant perspectives on inclusive and equitable education. A conceptual and critical analysis has been employed to understand the relationship between policy objectives and their possible educational implications. The study focuses on four broad dimensions: access, participation, learning, and educational outcomes.

Conceptual Understanding of Gender Equality in Education

Gender equality in education refers to a situation in which learners have equitable opportunities, resources, participation, recognition, and outcomes irrespective of gender. It goes beyond ensuring equal admission or enrolment. Genuine gender equality requires educational institutions to examine the structural, cultural, curricular, and pedagogical practices that may reproduce gender-based inequalities.

Gender inequality may appear in several forms, including:

- Unequal access to education
- Gender-based stereotypes
- Unequal participation in classroom activities
- Discrimination and harassment
- Unequal access to digital resources

- Gendered expectations regarding subjects and careers
- Limited representation of women in educational leadership
- Inadequate sanitation and safety facilities
- Socio-cultural restrictions on girls' education

Therefore, gender equality requires both equality of opportunity and equity of conditions. While equality implies providing similar opportunities, equity recognises that learners may require different forms of support to overcome historically developed disadvantages.

Social Inclusion in Education

Social inclusion refers to the process of ensuring that all learners are able to participate meaningfully in Educational, social, cultural, and academic life. It recognises diversity as a natural feature of society rather than as a problem that needs to be eliminated.

In the educational context, inclusion encompasses learners who may face disadvantage due to:

- Socio-economic status
- Caste and social background
- Gender
- Disability
- Geographical location
- Language
- Migration
- Family circumstances
- Tribal and indigenous backgrounds

Inclusive education therefore requires a transformation of the educational system rather than simply placing disadvantaged learners within mainstream institutions.

Theoretical Foundations of Gender Equality and Social Inclusion

- **Social Justice Theory -** The concept of social justice provides one of the strongest theoretical foundations for inclusive education. From a social justice perspective, education should not reproduce existing social inequalities. Instead, educational institutions should create conditions in which disadvantaged learners receive appropriate opportunities and support. The principle of social justice therefore shifts the focus from formal equality to substantive equality. Substantive equality recognises that individuals with different social circumstances may require different forms of support to achieve comparable educational opportunities. NEP 2020 reflects this orientation through its emphasis on equitable access and support for SEDGs.
- **Capability Approach -** The capability approach, associated particularly with Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, provides another important theoretical foundation. According to this perspective, development should be understood in terms of people's real capabilities and freedoms rather than simply the availability of formal resources. Applied to Education, the capability approach suggests that providing a school or admitting a learner is insufficient. Learners must have genuine capabilities to attend, participate, learn, express themselves, and achieve meaningful educational outcomes. For example, two learners may have equal access to a school, but a learner facing poverty, disability, discrimination, or gender-based restrictions may not have the same real educational capability. Thus, inclusive education requires removing barriers that restrict learners' capabilities.
- **Inclusive Education Theory -** Inclusive education theory emphasises participation, belonging, diversity, and removal of barriers to learning. It challenges the idea that learners who are different from the majority should be separated or individually adjusted to fit an unchanged educational system. An Inclusive system modifies curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, infrastructure, and institutional culture to accommodate learner diversity.
- **Gender-Responsive Education -** Gender-responsive education recognises that educational institutions can either challenge or reproduce gender stereotypes. Curriculum content, textbooks, classroom interaction, language, examples, assessment practices, and teacher expectations can influence learners' perceptions of gender roles. A gender-responsive educational system therefore seeks to:
  - Eliminate gender stereotypes
  - Ensure equal classroom participation
  - Provide safe learning environments
  - Encourage girls and disadvantaged learners to pursue diverse academic and vocational pathways;
  - Promote gender-sensitive teaching practices
  - Develop respect for equality and human dignity.

NEP 2020 and Gender Equality

The National Education Policy 2020 places equity and inclusion among the central principles of educational transformation. It recognises that certain groups face persistent barriers in accessing and benefiting from education. One of the significant provisions is the identification of Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs). The policy acknowledges that disadvantage can arise from multiple and overlapping factors and therefore requires targeted interventions.

- **Gender Inclusion Fund -** The proposed Gender Inclusion Fund represents an important policy mechanism for addressing gender-related educational disparities. The conceptual significance of such a fund lies in targeted investment for improving access, participation, retention, and educational opportunities for disadvantaged learners. The Policy approach indicates a movement from a generalised understanding of equality towards targeted equity-oriented interventions.
- **Support for SEDGs -** NEP 2020 identifies various disadvantaged groups and emphasises targeted interventions to ensure their educational participation. Such an approach recognises that universal policies may not adequately address the needs of learners facing multiple disadvantages.
- **Safe and Inclusive Learning Environment -** Gender equality cannot be achieved without ensuring safety, dignity, respect, and freedom from discrimination. The policy's emphasis on inclusion therefore has implications for institutional culture, infrastructure, counselling, student support, and community engagement.
- **Vocational and Skill Education -** NEP 2020 promotes vocational education and exposure to diverse forms of work and skills. From a gender equality perspective, this

can challenge traditional assumptions that certain occupations are suitable only for men or women.

NCF-SE 2023 and Social Inclusion

The National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 provides an important curricular foundation for implementing the broader vision of NEP 2020. Its emphasis on holistic development and competency-based education provides opportunities to make learning more relevant to diverse learners.

Learner-Centred Education

A learner-centred approach recognises individual differences in learning pace, interests, abilities, language, background, and experiences. This is particularly significant for inclusive education because a standardised approach may disadvantage learners with diverse learning needs.

- **Experiential and Activity-Based Learning** - Experiential learning provides opportunities for learners to connect classroom knowledge with real-life experiences. It can promote participation among learners who may not perform equally well through traditional lecture-based methods.
- **Competency-Based Learning** - Competency-based learning focuses on what learners understand and can apply rather than simply measuring memorisation. Such an approach can support inclusion by providing diverse opportunities for demonstrating learning.
- **Gender-Sensitive Curriculum** - Curriculum plays an important role in shaping learners' attitudes towards gender. Gender-sensitive curricular content can challenge stereotypes and highlight the contributions of women and diverse social groups in different fields.
- **Respect for Diversity** - An inclusive curriculum should represent diversity in language, culture, social background, ability, gender, and lived experiences. Such representation can develop empathy, respect, democratic values, and social responsibility among learners.

Major Challenges in Achieving Gender Equality and Social Inclusion

Despite progressive policy provisions, several challenges may affect implementation.

- **Socio-Cultural Barriers** - Deep-rooted gender stereotypes, traditional social expectations, early marriage, unequal household responsibilities, and social perceptions regarding girls' education may restrict educational participation.
- **Economic Inequality** - Poverty can influence school attendance, retention, access to learning materials, digital resources, transportation, and participation in educational activities.
- **Infrastructural Limitations** - Lack of accessible buildings, adequate sanitation, transportation, assistive technologies, and safe educational environments can create barriers for disadvantaged learners.
- **Teacher Preparedness** -Teachers are central to implementing inclusive education. However, inadequate training in gender-sensitive pedagogy, disability inclusion, differentiated instruction, and culturally responsive teaching may limit policy implementation.
- **Digital Divide** -Increasing dependence on digital learning can create new inequalities when learners lack devices, internet connectivity, digital literacy, or supportive home environments.
- **Institutional Preparedness** - Policies require institutional mechanisms for implementation, monitoring, grievance redressal, counselling, data collection, and support services. Weak institutional capacity may create a gap between policy objectives and educational realities.
- **Curriculum and Textbook Representation**-If curricular materials continue to reproduce stereotypes or provide limited representation of women and disadvantaged communities, the transformative objectives of inclusive education may remain incomplete.

Policy-to-Practice Gap - One of the central theoretical arguments emerging from this analysis is that policy formulation does not automatically produce social transformation.

There may be a significant gap between: Policy → Institutional Implementation → Classroom Practice → Learner Experience → Educational Outcome.

A policy may provide a progressive framework, but its success depends upon financial resources, institutional leadership, teacher capacity, monitoring, community participation, and local adaptation.

Therefore, implementation should not be viewed as a purely administrative process. It should be understood as a continuous process of institutional and social transformation.

Role of Teachers in Promoting Gender Equality and Inclusion

Teachers occupy a central position in translating policy into classroom practice. Their beliefs, expectations, language, teaching strategies, and interaction patterns can either challenge or reinforce social inequalities. Teachers can promote inclusion by:

- Providing equal opportunities for classroom participation
- Avoiding gender stereotypes
- Using inclusive and respectful language
- Recognising individual learning differences
- Adopting differentiated teaching strategies
- Encouraging girls and disadvantaged learners to participate in STEM
- Creating a safe classroom environment
- Identifying learners requiring additional support
- Promoting cooperative and empathetic learning
- Engaging parents and communities in inclusive educational practices.

Teacher education and continuous professional development should therefore include gender sensitivity, inclusive pedagogy, disability awareness, digital inclusion, and social-emotional learning.

Role of Curriculum in Social Transformation

Curriculum is not merely a collection of academic subjects. It communicates social values, cultural identities, expectations, and conceptions of citizenship. A gender-responsive and inclusive curriculum should:

- Represent women and disadvantaged groups positively

- Challenge stereotypes
- Include diverse perspectives and experiences
- Promote constitutional values
- Develop empathy and respect
- Encourage critical thinking about discrimination
- Integrate equality and human dignity across subjects
- Provide opportunities for collaborative and experiential learning

In this context, NCF-SE 2023 provides an important opportunity to move from content-centred education towards a more holistic, inclusive, and competency-oriented educational experience.

Community Participation and Social Inclusion

Educational inclusion cannot be achieved by schools alone. Families, communities, local governments, civil society organisations, and educational institutions must work collectively. Community participation can contribute to:

- Improving enrolment and retention
- Reducing gender-based barriers
- Creating awareness regarding educational rights
- Supporting disadvantaged learners

Strengthening school-community relationships

- Improving accountability
- Addressing local socio-cultural barriers.

A participatory approach can make educational policies more responsive to local realities. Suggested Framework for Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Education A theoretically informed framework may be represented as follows:
Policy Commitment ⟶ Equitable Access ⟶ Inclusive Infrastructure and Institutional Support ⟶ Teacher Capacity Development ⟶ Gender-Responsive Curriculum Inclusive Pedagogy and Assessment ⟶ Learner Participation and Belonging ⟶ Improved Learning Outcomes ⟶ Social Empowerment and Equality.
This framework demonstrates that educational inclusion is a multidimensional process. Access alone cannot guarantee inclusion. Meaningful inclusion requires participation, belonging, learning, achievement, and empowerment.

Discussion

The theoretical analysis demonstrates that gender equality and social inclusion should not be treated as separate educational objectives. Gender intersects with socio-economic status, caste, disability, geography, language, and other dimensions of disadvantage. Consequently, educational policies need an intersectional understanding of inequality. NEP 2020 represents a significant policy shift by explicitly focusing on equity, inclusion, SDGs, and targeted interventions. The Gender Inclusion Fund illustrates an equity-oriented approach because it recognises that some groups may require additional support to overcome structural barriers. NCF-SE 2023 complements this policy orientation by focusing on curriculum, pedagogy, competencies, holistic development, and learner diversity. Its approach provides opportunities for schools to create learning environments that recognise differences rather than treating diversity as a deficit. However, the effectiveness of these frameworks depends heavily upon implementation. A progressive policy can produce limited results if teachers are not adequately prepared, infrastructure remains inaccessible, communities are unaware of policy provisions, or institutional monitoring is weak. The central theoretical implication is therefore that inclusive education must be understood as a process of systemic transformation rather than a programme of providing access to disadvantaged learners.

Educational Implications

The analysis has several implications for educational institutions:

- **For Teachers** -Teachers should receive continuous professional development in inclusive and gender-responsive pedagogy.
- **For Curriculum Developers** - Curriculum should provide balanced representation and eliminate discriminatory and stereotypical portrayals.
- **For Educational Institutions** - Institutions should establish safe, accessible, supportive, and non-discriminatory learning environments.

For Teacher Education Institutions

B.Ed. and teacher education programmes should integrate gender studies, inclusive education, social justice, disability inclusion, and constitutional values.

- **For Policymakers** - Implementation mechanisms should be accompanied by adequate financial resources, monitoring systems, institutional accountability, and measurable indicators.
- **For Communities** - Parents and community members should be involved in awareness programmes and decision-making processes related to educational inclusion.

Conclusion

Gender equality and social inclusion represent essential foundations for building an equitable and democratic education system. The theoretical analysis presented in this paper indicates that educational inequality is multidimensional and cannot be addressed through access-oriented interventions alone. Meaningful inclusion requires attention to participation, learning, safety, dignity, representation, institutional culture, and educational outcomes. NEP 2020 provides a progressive policy vision by emphasising equity, inclusion, SDGs, gender-responsive interventions, and holistic educational development. The Gender Inclusion Fund represents an important equity-oriented mechanism for addressing gender-based educational disparities. NCF-SE 2023 further strengthens this vision by providing curricular and pedagogical directions centred on holistic development, competency-based learning, learner diversity, experiential learning, and inclusive educational practices. Nevertheless, the success of these frameworks depends upon effective implementation. Infrastructure, teacher preparedness, institutional capacity, socio-cultural attitudes, digital inequalities, and limited stakeholder awareness may continue to create barriers. Therefore, the movement from policy intention to educational reality requires coordinated action at the national, state, institutional, community, and classroom levels. Ultimately, gender equality and social inclusion should not be considered additional components of education policy; rather, they should become fundamental principles guiding the design, delivery, assessment, and governance of education. A truly

inclusive education system is one in which every learner, irrespective of gender, social background, economic condition, disability, language, or geographical location, has the opportunity to participate, learn, develop capabilities, and contribute meaningfully to society.

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