

THE DRAFT NEP HAS A GENDER STRATEGY, BUT IT'S AN INCOMPLETE ONE

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Education and related issues

The recently released draft National education Policy 2019 has equity as one of its founding goals, and gender as a cross-cutting theme. Yet, a closer look at its recommendations, proposed equity-inducing initiatives, and use of vocabulary renders its intent of establishing gender equality weak and vague. The draft NEP is guilty of envisioning gender equality by focusing on female students, with a brief discussion of including transgender children in schools. There is a conspicuous absence of any mention of male students vis-à-vis gender in education. The fact that boys too grow up with a gendered identity, rooted in notions of masculinity and superiority over other genders, seems to have been ignored, if not negated.

Closing the gender gap has been envisioned by increasing access to education for girls, ensuring their safety, lack of discrimination. Interventions to systemically and systematically create gender-sensitive and gender-equal mindsets of boys have been missed.

The section on gender sensitisation in schools, that entails a mandate to conduct awareness sessions on gender issues to break stereotyped gender roles, on the importance of harassment-free environments and equal treatment of genders, and on legal protections and entitlements for girls and women, makes no reference to the need to undo the constant socialisation of young boys to acquire traits of 'strength' and 'masculinity'. The Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act (POCSO) that has been put in place for sexual offences against children - not limited to any particular gender - has been interpreted as a legal protection for girls and women.

The emphasis on ensuring safety and security of girls attending school is a much-needed step. So is the effort to get transgender children to schools. However, these are rudimentary steps. They cannot be the only major policy directives to establish gender equality in education. While the draft policy speaks of efforts to give girls equal access to education by addressing societal obstacles, it stays silent on the role of boys and men in establishing a gender equal education system. It fails to acknowledge that boys are systematically socialised into becoming men who assume superiority and authority over other genders, and that their education has a role to play in this process. The draft talks of having female role models for girls, in order to strengthen their ambition and change societal mindsets of women's role. This is a step that has a potential to have a positive rippling effect, with females getting encouragement from one another while setting an example in front of the society. A similar thought about having male role models for boys, setting an example of gender sensitivity and practising respect for all genders, did not cross the mind of makers of this draft.

The only mention of boys in the section of gender equality is on the suggestion to have schools and social workers talk to parents on placing financial expectations on boys prematurely. The behaviour and attitude of boys vis-à-vis other genders has not been addressed in the draft. Promoting gender equality through programmes specifically targeted towards boys, along with those targeted towards girls and transgenders, is amiss. Consent finds a faint mention in the section on sex education as a part of the draft policy's basic health and safety training. How it is going to be imparted, when, and by whom is left unanswered.

Boys and men have been excluded from the narrative on gender equality and inclusive education by the draft NEP. The question then is - how do we expect the problem of gender inequality to be solved by solely looking at girls and occasionally at transgenders?

The issue is, in fact, not just part of the draft NEP; it is part of regular conversations and initiatives around gender equality. The presumption that gender-based discrimination and gender inequality can be addressed by focusing on women and solely on women is rather widespread. Gender issues are equated to what some of us erroneously term 'women's issues'. Seminars and conferences on gender equality often end up becoming occasions where women talk to women about women. While such women-to-women conversations are much needed, they cannot be expected to resolve the gigantic issue of gender inequality. Men and boys need to be included in the narrative. They too have a gender. And more so because they have been identified as a part of the problem, it is only natural to have them part of the solution.

Moreover, a document that speaks of gender as a cross-cutting theme for all aspects of policy implementation has apparently not been reviewed for gender biases in its language. On the page of the draft NEP, the message from the minister for human resource development, talks about one of the objectives of the NEP "to eliminate the shortage of manpower in science, technology, academics and industry". The choice of the term 'manpower' among a range of gender-neutral terms like workforce or human capital or human resources is contradictory to the spirit of 'equity' invoked in a subsequent paragraph of the same message.

A policy draft that has references to gender sensitivity and gender-neutral language has a chairman instead of a chairperson at its helm. The creation of a gender-inclusion fund is expected to build capacity to provide quality and equitable education to all girls. This makes it inconsistent with its own label. The fund's aim of providing equitable education cannot be restricted to girls, if it were to be called a gender-inclusion fund. The reason for excluding transgenders and boys from receiving equitable education with the help of this fund is confounding. Going by the pillars of this fund as it stands currently, it would be more appropriate to label it as a girls-inclusion fund.

While this is the draft of the NEP and thus open to modifications, it is hoped that the final text of the policy supports its promise of equity and gender equality in education more sincerely and consciously. The NEP envisions an impact on what children, for at least the next two decades, learn. It is thus critical that its voice on gender equality in education does not emanate from an exclusion of any gender that shall push the realisation of a gender-equal educational and social order further away from the foreseeable future.

Anushna is Head of Research, Project Kal

The views expressed are personal

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