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Digital Exclusion of Girls in Indian Education

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Digital Exclusion of Girls in Indian Education

Abstract

The digitalisation of education in India was significantly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, many girls are systematically excluded from digital learning due to intersecting barriers of gender, class, and caste. High penetration of ownership of mobile phones among Indian households does not automatically translate into girls' learning access. Several factors such as patriarchal gatekeeping, class-based time poverty, and caste-based infrastructure gaps prevent girls from using digital tools for schooling. This paper employs a secondary data analysis and documentary meta-analysis to examine how these intersections compound to exclude girls from digital education. Using the intersectional feminist policy analysis framework, the paper assesses if the National Education Policy 2020 is equipped to deal with the digital gender divide in education. The paper concludes that without intersectional policy design and implementation, digital exclusion of girls will perpetuate educational disparities and constrain their economic mobility and development potential.

Introduction

It is troubling to still confront gender disparities in education in the twenty-first century. Despite widespread awareness and global exposure, substantive barriers to education for girls persist across India. These challenges begin early and compound throughout their lifetimes, manifesting in unequal access to quality schooling, career constraints, economic dependence and limited social mobility. While enrolment ratios between girls and boys have narrowed on paper, the reality on ground paints a different picture. Despite achieving near-parity in primary education enrolment, meaningful access to quality education, particularly in rural and low-income areas, is unequally distributed by gender. Today, the challenge is no longer simply getting girls into school but ensuring their meaningful participation.

The concept of educational access has changed over the past two decades due to technological advancements. Earlier, interventions largely focused on increasing enrolment and participation rates of girls. While these efforts successfully narrowed gender gaps in primary education, many qualitative barriers persist. Girls attending school did not necessarily lead to same learning outcomes, retention rates and economic or social mobility as boys. Now, with the introduction of online learning, a new dimension of access has been added. Girls must not only be in school, but they must have access to the digital tools and

platforms that increasingly mediate learning. Unfortunately, this has created a new frontier for gender inequality.

Following the COVID-19 lockdowns, the past five years have altered the education landscape globally. Rapid digitalisation of education has made electronic device access a prerequisite for learning. When schools shifted online in 2020, those without access to these devices were often excluded from schooling entirely. The consequences of this were not equal for all groups. Affluent families with multiple devices and reliable internet continued learning more or less smoothly. On the other hand, low-income households with limited supply had to decide who gets the device, for how long, and for what purpose. Girls consistently ranked low on this priority list.

This cannot be wholly attributed to device unavailability as 85.5% of Indian households own at least one smartphone (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2025). Patriarchal structures within households are a dominant factor in deciding device access and use. Boys were encouraged to use devices while girls were gatekept under the guise of safety. Thus, device access became a gendered privilege. However, this gendered exclusion is not uniform. Low-income girls face compounded barriers that girls from high-income households do not. Girls from backward or lower-caste households face additional hurdles. The digital divide in education is thus an intersectional crisis, shaped simultaneously by gender, economic, and caste disparities that operate not separately but interactively.

Literature Review

The concept of intersectionality is foundational to understanding how multiple inequalities operate simultaneously. Crenshaw (1989) coined the term "intersectionality" to describe how different systems of oppression, such as gender, race, class, do not function separately but as interacting systems that create distinct forms of marginalisation. Applied to digital exclusion of girls in education in India, intersectionality reveals that a low-income, scheduled caste girl does not experience gender, class and caste discrimination as three separate barriers. Rather, her exclusion from digital learning is produced by these systems operating together in ways that cannot be understood by examining gender, class, or caste separately. Intersectionality thus provides the analytical lens necessary to understand why single-axis solutions (addressing gender, poverty or caste alone) fail to close the digital education divide for marginalised girls.

The digital divide is conceptualised across multiple dimensions in existing literature. Wei et al. (2010) establish three levels of digital divide: first (access to information technology such as computers and internet), second (inequality in technology use and digital skills), and third (differences in learning outcomes and productivity arising from unequal access and skills). This framework provides a foundation for understanding digital exclusion of girls in India as girls may gain device access (first level) yet lack skills or autonomy to use devices (second level), resulting in learning disparities (third level). It also functions as a tool to understand the effectiveness of policy interventions on digital divide.

Research on women's technology access reveals that device availability alone does not ensure use. Vyas (2024) proposes a multi-level framework showing that women's mobile phone use is constrained by personal factors (confidence, digital literacy), family-level factors (permission, monitoring), and community-level factors (socio-cultural norms around appropriate use). This framework helps in understanding how prevalence of patriarchal norms at family and community levels prevent autonomous use of devices.

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified digital exclusion for girls, particularly in rural and low-income households. Singh and Bhartiya (2024) document that school closures and the shift to online learning presented significant challenges for rural students, particularly girls, due to limited access to technology and educational resources. The socio-economic and cultural factors exacerbating gender disparities such as early marriage and household responsibilities became acute during lockdowns. Shamim et al. (2024) also found that the pandemic worsened exclusion of girls as they spent more time on household chores and less time studying which in turn increased dropout rates.

There is an explicit linkage between technology access and broader social inequalities. Tewathia et al. (2020) examined the relationship between digital divide and social inequalities in India. They found that less educated, lower-income, and lower caste groups are further marginalised as they lack both information and communication technology (ICT) assets and skills to use them. Critically, the research suggests that ICTs may amplify social inequalities rather than reduce them. This finding is essential for understanding intersectional digital exclusion: technological advancement without addressing underlying gender, class, and caste inequalities may deepen rather than close educational disparities. Similarly, Rajam et al. (2021) studied the first-level digital divide and second-level digital divide among disadvantaged caste groups. They found a large divide, attributable to historic socio-economic deprivation and differences in education attainment and income.

While existing literature documents digital divide disparities by gender, class, and caste, a critical examination of how these inequalities interact with each other within households to prevent girls from using digital tools for schooling or their policy implications is missing. Most policy recommendations address digital divide broadly (universal access, digital literacy programs) without accounting for the compound barriers of patriarchal gatekeeping, time poverty, and caste-based deprivation that operate simultaneously for marginalised girls. This paper seeks to address this gap by examining digital exclusion of girls in education through an intersectional lens and whether current policies adequately address this issue.

Methodology

This study employs mixed method of analysis of literature and secondary data. Data sources include government data sources (Unified District Information System for Education Plus), national surveys (Time Use Survey) and surveys (Kantar-IAMAI Internet in India). Literature includes case studies, policy briefs and other reports on digital divide, gender, and education. The analysis applies the Intersectional Feminist Policy Analysis Framework (Kanenberg et al., 2019), which extends McPhail's (2003) feminist policy analysis to explicitly address how policies affect overlapping marginalised groups. Limitations include dependence on existing data disaggregation in surveys as they do not disaggregate by all three axes of gender, class and caste. Secondary data constraints limit the ability to cross-tabulate all intersecting identities across outcomes, making it difficult to quantify precise compound effects.

Findings

Girls in India face systematic digital exclusion from educational learning rooted in patriarchal norms that govern household device access. While the digital divide is often misunderstood only as an infrastructure problem, COVID-19 provided a natural experiment for understanding the gendered nature of this problem. Patriarchal structures dictate both device ownership and autonomous access to devices, which directly impacts girls' ability to participate in online education.

The Internet in India 2024 report found that 41% of the India population does not have access to the Internet (Kantar and IAMAI, 2024). Internet penetration is disparate across states as 72% people in Kerala can access the internet while the figure is as low as 43% in Bihar. 51% of the rural population lacks access, with lack of awareness being the primary

reason for non-usage. Of this, 18% reported not owning any ICT devices at home and 11% reported lack of Internet connection in school/college/office as reasons for lack of access. The disparity can be further evidenced by examining the internet traffic patterns, which reveal that metro cities account for 47% of the traffic while rural areas stand at only 31%. Further, actual access to mobile devices is highly concentrated among boys. When devices are limited, 20% of internet users access through shared devices; of these shared device users, 59% are women and 66% are below 19 years of age. More strikingly, rural areas show a higher device sharing rate than urban areas with rural shared device users having witnessed 24% growth since 2023. The report also found that online learning only 3% of total time spent on the internet (Kantar and IAMAI, 2024).

But ownership statistics alone cannot explain the education crisis that emerged during COVID-19. When schools shifted to online learning in March 2020, device access became a prerequisite for educational participation. Girls without device access or autonomy could not attend classes and without attending, they dropped out. This is key to understanding why the digital gender divide is fundamentally educational inequality and not merely technological disadvantage. Before the pandemic, girls' secondary education dropout rates stood at 15.1% nationally with significant state variation (Assam 32.9%, Bihar 22.7%, Madhya Pradesh 21.8%, West Bengal 13.6%, Telangana 10.6%) (Ministry of Education, 2020). When schools closed for 18 months (March 2020-September 2021), a shift can be observed. While headline statistics from UDISE+ 2020-21 appeared stable with secondary dropout rates at 14.2%, longitudinal studies tracking individual children revealed a different reality as an additional 9% of girls who were attending school before the pandemic reported complete discontinuation after the schools reopened (Council for Social Development, 2022). In other words, girls' actual dropout risk during pandemic was much greater because the UDISE+ dropout rates conflate those who remained nominally enrolled but never attended online learning.

State-level data from studies examining pandemic impact directly confirms this. In Bihar, the share of out-of-school or at-risk adolescent girls rose to 18.9% during COVID while in Maharashtra, 15.7% of adolescent girls were out-of-school or at-risk during pandemic (Council for Social Development, 2022). Further, UNESCO (2021) estimated that 11 million girls globally would not return to school post-pandemic, with the risk concentrated in low-income countries including India. Further, girls without device access and with high domestic labour burdens were unable to attend even when classes were offered online.

Time Poverty and Domestic Labour

Device access does not automatically translate to greater educational participation or learning outcomes. Girls are disproportionately burdened by domestic labour, which prevents meaningful use of devices even when accessible. India's Time Use Survey (TUS) reveals that women spend an average of 289 and 137 minutes per day on unpaid domestic and care work while men only spend 88 and 75 minutes per day. However, the time spent on learning by men and women are near-parity at 415 and 413 minutes respectively (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2025). Thus, it places a disproportionate burden on girls who must manage learning and unpaid household work simultaneously.

For girls in low-income households, the time burden is compounded. Girls shoulder significantly more responsibility for household chores and childcare than boys or their higher-income peers. When a girl in a low-income household is permitted device access, she faces many hurdles as she may be granted one hour of device use but is still required for four hours of daily domestic labour. Thus, she has insufficient discretionary time to develop digital literacy, complete assignments, or engage in independent learning.

Research across India has documented that girls' domestic labour increased during lockdown. As school closures eliminated the "legitimate" reason to leave home and spent time outside, girls were re-tasked into full-time domestic roles. It was observed that girls' time allocation shifted dramatically during pandemic: time previously spent in school was replaced by cooking, utensil and household cleaning, and childcare (Council for Social Development, 2022). For girls with shared device access, the time management became impossible as they could not attend classes if they occurred during cooking time; they could not complete assignments because assignments required uninterrupted focus during hours allocated to childcare or household responsibilities.

Moreover, gender norms shape how and when girls' time is allowed to be used. A survey by Centre for Catalyzing Change (2021) found that use of devices by girls is often framed as a waste of time and that phones are not safe as the girl may misuse them or harm her eyes. This is in stark contrast to the ease with which boys are able to access digital spaces. Even when girls gain access, it is only allowed for a limited amount of time with 41.9% of girls reporting they are allowed to use them for less than one hour a day. This disparity is not just limited to households as 57.6% of the girls feeling that their male counterparts gain easier access to digital facilities in schools and colleges. Often, girls' device use for independent learning is seen as an unhealthy distraction while boys' device use is framed as skill-building or an educational investment.

Intersectionality and Compounding of Educational Exclusion

The data reveals that gender, class, and caste do not operate as separate barriers but compound exclusion in a way that single-axis interventions cannot address. Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe populations are disproportionately concentrated in the poorest income quintiles and rural areas. Research using large-scale national data (Tewathia et al., 2020) found that lower caste strata lack both ICT assets and skills, and critically, that ICTs risk amplifying social inequalities rather than reducing them when designed without attention to structural barriers. For lower-caste girls, this means exposure to devices that wealthier girls can access does not lead to equivalent learning outcomes. This is because the supporting conditions are absent: time autonomy from reduced domestic labour, parental education and support, community-level infrastructure enabling reliable connectivity, and caste-based occupational mobility enabling return on digital skill investment.

The Kantar-IAMAI report (2024) showing 59% of shared device users are women gains additional meaning when disaggregated by caste and income. Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe households, concentrated in rural lowest-income quintiles, are precisely where shared device dependence is highest and most structurally permanent. The 24% growth in rural shared device users since 2023 disproportionately affects SC/ST girls. Unlike a high-income girl whose shared device use is temporary (until parents buy her a phone), an SC/ST girl's shared device dependence may be permanent and structurally embedded in caste-based poverty and landlessness.

When household poverty combines with caste-based deprivation and gender norms specific to certain caste contexts, girls face barriers that are not additive but multiplicative. An SC/ST girl in a low-income household does not experience "gender discrimination + class discrimination + caste discrimination" as three separate things but she faces a distinct form of exclusion where all three identities compound simultaneously and interactively. Thus, the analysis sheds light on the need for reframing policy through an intersectional lens. India's digital divide in education is not fundamentally a technology problem but a mix of gender, class, and caste problem that manifests in device access and learning outcomes. Device ownership does not ensure device access; device access does not ensure device autonomy; device autonomy does not ensure learning; and learning engagement does not ensure retention. This holds significant policy implications as interventions targeting only one aspect of the digital divide will not be sufficiently equipped to deal with the intersectional digital divide and its impact on education

Policy Analysis

To examine whether India's policies targeting digital divide address intersectional barriers, this paper applies the Intersectional Feminist Policy Analysis Framework (Kanenberg et al., 2019). The framework evolves McPhail's Feminist Policy Analysis Framework (2003), which critiques treatment of policies as "gender-neutral" compositions. McPhail's framework assumes that all policies affect women, even those not explicitly targeting women such as education, health and social security. However, McPhail's framework, while essential, does not address overlapping marginalised groups, i.e. women experiencing discrimination based on multiple intersecting identities such as race, caste, class and disability. Kanenberg et al.'s Intersectional Feminist Policy Analysis Framework (2019) addresses this gap by retaining McPhail's core insight of gender visibility in policy and adds explicit attention to intersecting systems of oppression and privilege.

The revised framework asks several critical questions that move beyond McPhail's initial single-lens formulation. It asks whether lower-caste, low-income, rural or disabled women are explicitly visible in the text of the policy or are erased through universal language, and whether they are meaningfully involved in policy design rather than spoken for by more privileged women. It also probes whether policies recognise that systems of oppression such as gender, class and caste operate simultaneously, creating compound barriers. Further, Kanenberg distinguishes structural change from symbolic reform by asking if policies are materially funded, accountable and capable of shifting underlying power relations, or if they simply add progressive language while leaving structural barriers intact. The framework examines how privilege and power are reproduced, who actually benefits in practice, and whether resources and decision-making roles reach those at the sharpest edge of inequality. The framework highlights how policies that treat "Indians" or even "girls" as a uniform group can deepen inequality for poor, lower-caste girls by failing to confront their specific, intersecting constraints.

Assessing National Education Policy's Approach to Intersectionality and Digital Divide

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 begins with a commitment to provide universal access to quality education and ensuring that no child loses learning opportunities because of circumstances of birth or background. The policy embodies through explicit attention to Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs) across multiple dimensions or identities: gender (female and transgender students), socio-cultural (SC/ST, OBCs, minorities), geographical (rural areas, small towns), disabilities, and economic conditions (migrant communities, low-income households). Acknowledging that dropout rates are

significantly higher for SEDGs, the policy provides several provisions such as a Gender-Inclusion Fund. The policy recognises that women cut across all underrepresented groups and how the exclusion and inequity is amplified for women within these groups.

This intersectional framing does not treat gender and other identities as separate problems to be addressed additively. Instead, it recognises how barriers compound and recommends for policies towards SEDGs to be especially targeted towards girls. The architects of NEP understood how a lower-caste girl's exclusion cannot be addressed through caste-based interventions alone, gender programs that ignore caste, or poverty programs that ignore both.

Next, the policy acknowledges technology's role in transforming education. It establishes the National Educational Technology Forum (NETF) as a platform for exchange on technology use and accounts for evaluation of technology interventions before scaling them. Educational platforms such as DIKSHA and SWAYAM are to be made accessible to a wide range of users including students in remote areas and 'Divyang' (persons with disabilities) students. These are substantive commitments addressing access barriers.

However, in the section specifically addressing online and digital education, the language becomes noticeably more universal. The policy acknowledges that the benefits of online and digital education cannot be realised without eliminating the digital divide. It also acknowledges that a substantial section of the population with highly limited digital access exists. The proposed response emphasises mass media distribution (television, radio, and community radio broadcasting) for educational content 24/7 in multiple Indian languages to reach students without reliable device or internet access. This addresses the first level of digital divide (access to devices and internet) through alternative technologies.

However, the language used, such as "the varying needs of the student population", is universal rather than specific. There is no explicit reference to the identified SEDGs that structured the earlier sections. It does not fully interrogate how the second level of digital divide (skills and autonomous use of technology) or third level (learning outcomes and productivity) might operate differently for SEDGs. For instance, there may be device availability but girls may not be able to access them due to patriarchal norms. Or, an SC girl from a low-income household may gain access to a school computer lab and participate in online learning platforms in her mother tongue through NEP's interventions (level 1). Yet if she has no autonomous device at home, spends hours daily on unpaid domestic labour, lives in a community where girls' technology use is socially restricted, and faces occupational

pathways shaped by caste discrimination, her access does not translate to the second or third level capability.

The following table (Table 1) applies questions selected from the Intersectional Feminist Policy Analysis Framework based on relevance to the context of this study.

Table 1: Applying the Intersectional Feminist Policy Analysis Framework to NEP 2020

The Intersectional Feminist Policy Analysis Framework	Evidence from NEP 2020	Assessment
<i>Intersectional Identities:</i> "How do diverse and intersecting identities such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual identity, gender identity/expression, class, religion, national origin, documentation status, migration status, carceral status, ability/disability, interact with other identity categories?"	NEP 2020's framing of SEDGs includes gender, caste, geography, disability, and economic status as intersecting identities. However, the digital education section does not carry this intersectional logic forward. It does not examine how these identities interact to produce compounded digital exclusion for girls.	Addressed in foundational equity sections; absent in digital education section
<i>Intersectional Identities:</i> "Does the policy address the multiple identities of women? The multiple oppressions an individual woman may face?"	NEP recommends that SEDG interventions be "especially targeted towards girls," implicitly acknowledging that women cut across all underrepresented groups. This intersectional framing, however, is not extended to the specific provisions on digital access and online learning.	Partially addressed
<i>State-Market Control:</i> "Is the unpaid and/or underpaid	NEP 2020's does not make a reference to time poverty as	Not addressed

labor and work of caring provided by vulnerable groups considered and valued or taken for granted?"	a structural barrier to girls' digital learning access.	
<i>State-Market Control</i> : "How does the policy mediate gender relationships between the state, market, and family? Does the policy increase different groups of women's dependence on the state or men? If so, which women are impacted most?"	NEP's proposed solution for the digital divide relies on mass media (TV, radio, community radio) delivered at the household level. This keeps girls' access to educational content contingent on household-level decisions, where patriarchal gatekeeping operates.	Partially addressed
<i>Gender Neutrality</i> : "Does presumed gender neutrality hide the reality of the gendered nature of the problem or solution?"	The digital education section uses terms such as "students" and "the varying needs of the student population" uniformly, which does not address the gendered nature of device access.	Not addressed
<i>Context</i> : "Does the policy make an 'essential woman' visible (white, able-bodied, cisgender, and privileged) while leaving others in shadow?"	Beyond the framing of SEDGs, the NEP defaults to universal language in later sections.	Partially addressed
<i>Material/Symbolic Reform</i> : "Is the policy merely symbolic or does it come with provisions for	The Gender-Inclusion Fund is mentioned but does not provide implementation metrics, disaggregated data	Partially addressed

funding, enforcement, and evaluation?"	collection mandates, or accountability benchmarks.	
<i>Power Analysis:</i> "Are women representing diversity along race/ethnicity, class, ability/disability identities involved in making, shaping, and implementing the policy?"	According to the Ministry of Education (2020), the consultation for NEP 2020 involved nearly over 2 lakh suggestions from 2.5 lakhs Gram Panchayats, 6600 Blocks, 6000 urban local bodies (ULBs) and 676 districts. Further, 2 of the 9 members in the Committee for Draft National Education Policy were women (UGC, 2019). There is no further disaggregated data available on the inclusivity of public consultations.	Partially addressed

This gap may not be a policy design inadequacy but an implementation challenge that policy evaluation must address. Operationalising intersectionality in digital education evaluation would require disaggregated data collection on device access, skill acquisition, and learning outcomes across different identities over aggregated figures. It can be followed by intersectional analysis identifying which specific identity combinations become disproportionately vulnerable during implementation. Finally, targeted corrective interventions can be employed based on the findings.

NEP's foundational sections demonstrate genuine intersectional vision. Its technology and digital education sections acknowledge both the transformative potential of technology and the reality of digital divide. The necessary next step is translating intersectional thinking from policy design into implementation. This requires the policy evaluation framework to operate at the same intersectional granularity as its equity vision. Only then can the policy identify whether digital platforms have reduced or reproduced the amplified exclusion it recognises that women in SEDGs face.

Limitations

This paper's analysis is constrained by several limitations that warrant acknowledgment. First, the secondary data used does not permit cross-tabulation of intersecting identities (gender, caste, class and region) across all outcomes. Most national surveys typically disaggregate by one or two axes, making it difficult to quantify the precise compound effect of intersecting identities. Second, this paper is focused on structural barriers to digital access at home (patriarchal gatekeeping, time poverty, caste-based infrastructure gaps) but does not fully examine the exclusion at institutional-level (school/college). Third, this paper assesses the National Education Policy 2020 but does not track actual implementation. The policy was released in 2020 and implementation is ongoing.

Conclusion

Girls in India face systematic digital exclusion from education rooted in intersecting inequalities of gender, class, and caste. These inequalities operate simultaneously and interactively, not separately or additively, creating a distinct form of exclusion that single-axis policies cannot address. The COVID-19 pandemic proved that digital access is now tantamount to educational access. Girls without device autonomy cannot access online learning; girls without time cannot complete assignments; girls without culturally contextualised support cannot overcome norms restricting device use. As India's education system incorporates permanent digital components, this cost will persist unless girls gain both device access and the social conditions to use devices meaningfully for learning.

National Education Policy 2020 demonstrates awareness of intersecting identities and recognises the vulnerability of women within socio-economically disadvantaged groups. However, this attention must be extended to address the digital gender divide as well. While it is difficult to account for all possible intersectional variations in policy design, implementation challenges manifest due to patriarchal norms, time-poverty and caste-based discrimination. This requires a shift in policy evaluation and plugging implementation gaps.

The digital exclusion of girls holds implications beyond educational outcomes. Education is fundamental to economic mobility, health outcomes and fertility choices. When girls are excluded from digital learning, the consequences cascade across their lifetimes. Economically, digital skills have become non-negotiable for employment. Girls excluded may thus be pushed toward informal, low-skill, low-wage work or economic dependence, which may perpetuate this inequality across generations.

Excluding half the population from digital learning means losing potential talent, innovation, and productivity. For India to achieve its development goals, digital inclusion must reach girls from all backgrounds. Without adopting an intersectional lens, digital inclusion will remain aspirational, and girls from marginalised backgrounds will continue to be excluded from the educational pathways that digital transformation promises.

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