

Employability Focused Reforms in Higher Education and Women's Political Participation in India: An Empirical Assessment

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Abstract—The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has changed the direction of higher education in India by giving strong importance to employability, skill development and vocational learning. Most discussions on these reforms look only at their economic value. This paper looks at a different question: do employability-focused reforms in higher education also help women take a bigger part in politics? Using government data on education and elections, along with existing research, the paper studies whether skill-based education is connected to voting, contesting elections, joining Panchayati Raj institutions, and taking part in policy discussions. The paper finds that while more women are now entering higher education and even voting more than men in recent elections, this has not led to equal growth in women contesting elections or holding political office. The gap is explained by social norms, regional differences, and weak links between skill policy and civic education. The paper suggests that education reform should be treated as a tool for both economic and political empowerment of women.

Index Terms—NEP 2020, Higher Education, Employability, Women's Political Participation, Panchayati Raj, India

I. INTRODUCTION

Education has always been seen as more than a path to a job. It also shapes how people think about their rights and about public life. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 places employability and skill development at the centre of higher education reform. It calls for vocational education to become part of every degree programme, for short-term certificate courses, and for closer links between colleges and industry, so that students are “industry ready” by the time they graduate (Ministry of Education, 2020). The National Credit Framework, brought in to support

NEP 2020, even allows up to half of a student's total credits to come from skill-based courses (University Grants Commission, as cited in Department of Higher Education, 2025, p. 3).

At the same time, India has been going through a quiet but important change in its politics. Women now vote in larger numbers than men in national elections, something that did not happen before 2019. Yet, when it comes to contesting elections or being elected, women remain far behind. This gap between voting and winning raises a question that is not often asked in policy discussions: can higher education reforms aimed at jobs also open the door to political life for women? This paper argues that education is not only an economic tool. It can also build the confidence, knowledge and networks that a person needs to take part in politics. But this only happens when skill education is joined with civic learning, something that current employability-focused reforms do not always do.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A large body of research connects education with political participation in general terms. Educated citizens are more likely to vote, to understand government schemes, and to demand accountability from elected leaders. However, most of this research treats education as a single, general factor. It does not separate the effect of academic education from newer, employability focused or vocational education.

On the policy side, several recent studies have examined NEP 2020 closely. These studies note that the policy's skill and vocational components are designed mainly to solve India's employment problem, especially for the country's large working-age population

(Sharma & Pathak, 2024). Similar studies highlight that National Credit Framework and apprenticeship-linked degree programmes are meant to bridge the gap between what students learn and what industries need (Department of Higher Education, 2025, p. 2). Very few of these studies, however, look at whether such skill-building also builds civic or political capacity among students, and almost none focus specifically on women.

On the political side, India's own experience with the 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992), which reserved one-third of Panchayati Raj seats for women, is often cited as the country's largest experiment in inclusive local democracy

(Scroll.in, 2026). Scholars generally agree that reservation increased the number of women in local government, but debate continues on whether it increased their real decision-making power, since many elected women still work under the guidance of male family members, a pattern researchers call "proxy representation" (pmfias.com, 2026). At the national level, the Women's Reservation Act, 2023 (106th Constitutional Amendment) promises 33 percent reservation in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, but its implementation has been delayed until after the next delimitation exercise (Shankar IAS Parliament, 2026).

What is missing in the existing literature is a direct link between the employability turn in higher education and women's political behaviour. This paper tries to fill that gap, even if only in a preliminary and exploratory way.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the key employability-focused provisions of NEP 2020 relevant to women students.
2. To study recent trends in women's higher education participation in India.
3. To study recent trends in women's political participation, covering voting, contesting elections, and representation in Panchayati Raj institutions.
4. To assess whether a relationship can be observed between employability-oriented education reform and women's political participation.

¹ The Gender Parity Index (GPI) compares female and male GER; a GPI above 1.0 means more women than

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper follows a mixed-methods, descriptive-analytical design. It is based entirely on secondary sources. Three types of data have been used. First, government and policy documents, mainly the NEP 2020 text and related UGC and AICTE notifications, to understand the employability provisions of the reform. Second, statistical data from the All-India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2023-24 and the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), to track women's participation in higher education and the workforce. Third, Election Commission of India (ECI) statistical reports and Ministry of Panchayati Raj data, to track women's voting, candidature, and representation in elected bodies.

A comparative lens is applied across states with different levels of women's reservation in Panchayati Raj institutions (some states have raised the reservation to 50 percent, such as Bihar and Rajasthan) and different levels of female gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education ¹(Department of Higher Education, 2025, p. 3). This comparison is used only to suggest patterns, not to establish strict statistical causation, since many other social and economic factors also affect political participation.

V. NEP 2020 AND THE EMPLOYABILITY TURN IN HIGHER EDUCATION

NEP 2020 is built around the idea that education must prepare students for real jobs, not just degrees. It recommends that all undergraduate programmes, including the new four-year multidisciplinary degree, should offer vocational courses as part of the main curriculum, not as an extra activity

(Ministry of Education, 2020). Colleges are encouraged to run short certificate courses in soft skills and trade skills, and to build stronger ties with local industry so that students can complete internships and apprenticeships during their studies (iqac.aksuniversity.ac.in, 2025). The University Grants Commission's National Credit Framework allows students to earn up to half their total academic credit through skill, value-addition and ability-

men, relative to their population, are enrolled in higher education.

enhancement courses, along with internships and projects (Department of Higher Education, 2025, p. 3). These reforms are, without doubt, useful for closing India's skill gap. But they are framed almost completely in economic language, around words like productivity, industry-readiness, and the demographic dividend. Civic education, political literacy, or leadership training rarely appear as goals of the skill and employability framework. This is an important gap, because if higher education is treated only as a training ground for jobs, its older role as a training ground for citizenship may slowly be forgotten.

VI. WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: RECENT TRENDS

Women's presence in Indian higher education has grown steadily and, in recent years, has even overtaken that of men in relative terms. According to the AISHE 2023-24 report, female enrolment in higher education rose from 1.57 crore in 2014-15 to 2.24 crore in 2023-24, a growth of 42.2 percent, compared to a much smaller rise among male students (Department of Higher Education, 2025, p. 1). Women now form close to half of all students, and the female Gross Enrolment Ratio stood at 31.2 in 2023-24, higher than the male GER, giving a Gender Parity Index of 1.08 (Department of Higher Education, 2025, p. 3). This means that, relative to population, more young women than young men are now entering colleges and universities.

Yet this growth in enrolment has not been matched by an equal rise in employment outcomes. The Periodic Labour Force Survey shows that only about 18.2 percent of women are in regular salaried work, compared to 26.5 percent of men (superkalam.com, 2026). Women also remain concentrated in a narrow set of disciplines within higher education, which limits their entry into fast-growing sectors such as artificial intelligence and software engineering (easemyprep.in, 2026a). This gap between rising enrolment and weak employment outcomes is the same gap that NEP 2020's employability reforms are meant to close. If it is closed only in economic terms, without attention to civic and leadership skills, its benefits for women's public and political life may remain limited.

VII. WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN INDIA: RECENT TRENDS

7.1. Voting behaviour

The clearest sign of change in women's political participation is in voting. In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, women's turnout, at 65.78 percent, was higher than men's for the second general election running (News on Air, 2024), and women voters outnumbered men in as many as twelve states (SheThePeople, 2024). This is a sharp change from 1962, when female turnout was only around 46.6 percent (pmfias.com, 2026). Election observers connect this rise partly to greater female literacy and education, and partly to targeted voter-awareness programmes run by the Election Commission, such as the Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) programme and all-women 'Pink Booths' (pmfias.com, 2026).

7.2. Contesting elections and representation

The picture changes sharply when it comes to contesting and winning elections. In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, only 797 of 8,337 candidates, about 9.5 percent, were women, only a small rise from 9 percent in 2019 (Salve & Suresh, 2024, para. 2). Of these, only 73 women were elected, giving women just 13.8 percent of seats in the 18th Lok Sabha, a fall from 78 women MPs in the previous Parliament (Salve & Suresh, 2024, para. 1). Representation in state assemblies is even lower, at around 9 percent, and no state assembly currently has more than 20 percent women MLAs (pmfias.com, 2026). The Women's Reservation Act, 2023, which promises one-third reservation in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies, has not yet come into force, since it is linked to delimitation after the next Census (Shankar IAS Parliament, 2026).

7.3. Panchayati Raj institutions

At the grassroots level, the picture is far more encouraging. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment of 1992 reserved one-third of seats in rural local bodies for women, and several states, including Bihar, Himachal Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat, later raised this to 50 percent (Scroll.in, 2026). As a result, more than 1.4 million women now hold elected positions in Panchayati Raj institutions, and in eighteen states, women occupy more than half of all

panchayat seats (Scroll.in, 2026). This makes local government the one level of Indian politics where women's numerical presence is close to, or above, parity. However, a 2008 study by the Ministry of Panchayati Raj found that about 85 percent of elected women were first-time representatives, and only 15 percent managed to get re-elected once their seat's reservation status changed, suggesting that many women may not be building lasting political careers (Eastmojo, 2024).

VIII. ANALYSIS: DOES EMPLOYABILITY-FOCUSED EDUCATION TRANSLATE INTO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION?

Bringing the education and political data together shows a mixed and uneven picture, which matches the paper's opening argument.

First, rising female enrolment in higher education does line up with rising female voter turnout. Both trends have moved upward together over the last decade, and both crossed a symbolic line around 2019, when women's voting rate first matched, and then passed, men's rate (SheThePeople, 2024). This suggests education, including newer skill-based education, may be building the basic confidence and awareness needed to vote.

Second, this relationship becomes weak, even absent, once we move from voting to contesting and winning. Despite record female enrolment and a Gender Parity Index above 1.0 for seven straight years (Department of Higher Education, 2025, p. 3), the share of women candidates and winners in the Lok Sabha has barely moved, staying under 15 percent (Salve & Suresh, 2024, para. 1). This gap suggests that employability-focused education, as currently designed, builds skills for the labour market but does little to build the political networks, party access, and campaign resources that are needed to contest elections. Political parties, not colleges, remain the real gatekeepers of candidature, and only 12 percent of national party candidates in 2024 were women (Eastmojo, 2024).

Third, the comparison across levels of government points to reservation, not education, as the strongest

single factor behind women's presence in politics. Local government, where reservation is legally guaranteed and even raised above one-third in several states, shows the highest share of women representatives (Scroll.in, 2026). National and state legislatures, where the promised 33 percent reservation is not yet in force, show the lowest share. This suggests that structural rules such as legal reservation currently matter more than educational reform in deciding whether women hold political office in India.²

Taken together, these findings support a cautious conclusion. Employability-focused higher education reform appears to strengthen the civic and informational side of women's political participation, mainly visible in voting, but it does not, by itself, close the much larger gap in candidature and representation. That gap is shaped more by party structures, social norms about women's public role, and legal reservation, than by education policy alone.

IX. BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES

- Framing of skill education: NEP 2020's employability language is built around jobs and industry, with almost no explicit mention of civic education, leadership training, or political literacy as goals of skill development.
- Socio-cultural constraints: Family and community expectations still discourage many educated women from entering public political life, even when they are qualified and confident.
- Party gatekeeping: Political parties give very few tickets to women; only about 12 to 16 percent of major party candidates in 2024 were women (Eastmojo, 2024).
- Regional disparities: States differ widely in both female GER and the level of women's reservation in local bodies, so national averages hide large gaps between, for example, southern and some northern states.
- Delayed reservation: The 33 percent reservation for women in Parliament and state assemblies, promised in 2023, will not take effect until after the

by improving the quality of their participation once elected, even if it does not by itself remove the barrier to candidature.

² This does not mean education is unimportant. It may work indirectly, by making women more confident once a reserved seat becomes available to them, and

next delimitation exercise, leaving a long implementation gap.

argued, a dual instrument of economic and democratic empowerment for women.

X. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Add civic and political literacy modules to the skill and value-addition courses already permitted under the National Credit Framework, so that employability courses also build democratic awareness.
2. Encourage colleges, especially women's colleges, to run student election bodies, debate societies, and leadership internships with local government offices, linking classroom skill training to real public experience.
3. Use existing institutions, such as women's colleges affiliated to state universities, as local centres for voter education and political mentorship, building on the goodwill created by ECI programmes like SVEEP.
4. Speed up the delimitation process so that the 33 percent legislative reservation promised under the Women's Reservation Act, 2023, can be implemented sooner rather than after 2029.
5. Track women's political participation as a formal indicator in higher education monitoring, alongside employment outcomes, so that policymakers can see whether reforms are working on both fronts together.

XI. CONCLUSION

This paper set out to ask a simple question: does employability-focused reform in Indian higher education, as pushed forward by NEP 2020, also help women take a larger part in political life? The answer, based on available data, is partial. Education, including newer skill-based education, seems to walk hand in hand with rising voter awareness and turnout among women. It does not, however, walk hand in hand with a rise in women contesting or winning elections, where progress remains slow and is driven mainly by legal reservation rather than by education policy. If India wants higher education reform to support both economic growth and democratic depth, employability frameworks must be widened to include civic and political literacy, not just job skills. Only then can higher education become, as this paper has

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