



Higher Education and the Rise of Women Entrepreneurs under NEP 2020 — A Study with Special Reference to Andhra Pradesh

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Abstract

Higher education in India is gradually moving beyond its traditional role of awarding degrees and preparing students only for salaried employment. With the introduction of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), the focus has begun to shift toward skills, innovation, flexibility, and entrepreneurship. This transition is particularly significant for women, for whom education can serve not only as a means of academic advancement but also as a pathway to economic independence and self-employment. Against this background, the present study explores how recent higher education reforms are creating possibilities for women to move from classrooms into entrepreneurial spaces. The study relies entirely on secondary sources, including policy documents, AISHE reports, publications of the Ministry of Education, reports of the Andhra Pradesh State Council of Higher Education, and existing scholarly literature. It examines entrepreneurship-oriented reforms introduced under NEP 2020, evaluates the ways in which educational changes may contribute to the emergence of women entrepreneurs, and suggests measures to strengthen this transition through higher education institutions. Andhra Pradesh is considered as a special reference because of its early implementation of NEP-aligned academic reforms and growing female participation in higher education. The analysis indicates that while skill-based learning, multidisciplinary education, and institutional innovation initiatives are opening new opportunities, translating educational access into entrepreneurial outcomes still requires sustained mentoring, institutional support, and targeted policy attention. The study highlights higher education as an evolving space where women's empowerment and entrepreneurship increasingly intersect in India's journey toward inclusive development and Viksit Bharat 2047.

Keywords: NEP 2020, women entrepreneurship, higher education reforms, Andhra Pradesh, GER

1. Introduction

“Education is fundamental for achieving full human potential, developing an equitable and just society, and promoting national development” (NEP 2020, Ministry of Human Resource Development, GOI). Higher education plays a pivotal role in fostering inclusive growth, socio-economic development, and human capital formation in emerging economies like India. Traditionally, the Indian higher education system has been oriented towards Degree attainment and employment generation. However, in recent years, its role has expanded to include innovation, skill development, and entrepreneurship. This transformation is particularly significant in the context of a rapidly evolving knowledge economy, where educational institutions are expected to produce not only job seekers but also job creators (Varghese & Sabharwal, 2022).

The introduction of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) marks a pivotal reform aimed at restructuring the Indian education system to align with global standards and national development goals. The policy emphasizes multidisciplinary learning, flexibility in curriculum, experiential education, and the integration of vocational and entrepreneurial skills within higher education. It also envisions increasing the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education to 50% by 2035, thereby expanding access and participation across diverse social groups (Tripathi et al., 2025). Furthermore, NEP 2020 highlights the importance of innovation ecosystems, incubation centres, and industry-academia collaboration as key drivers for encouraging entrepreneurship among students (Halder & Bisai, 2024).

India has made steady progress in women’s participation in higher education, with the Gender Parity Index (GPI) reaching near parity in many cases (Menon & Sharma, 2023). While women entrepreneurship has gained policy attention, its connection with higher education remains limited. NEP 2020 seeks to address this by integrating entrepreneurship, skill development, and innovation into the academic framework, potentially transforming institutions into hubs for women’s entrepreneurship (Kumar & Sondhi, 2025).

Andhra Pradesh offers a relevant context, with strong higher education indicators and active NEP-aligned reforms. The state has also supported women’s economic participation through self-help groups and entrepreneurship programs, though the impact of higher education on women entrepreneurship remains underexplored (Ghatol, 2021).

In this context, the present study seeks to examine the role of higher education in promoting women entrepreneurship, with special reference to Andhra Pradesh. Specifically, the study aims to analyse trends in women’s participation in higher education using indicators such as GER and GPI, and to evaluate how policy reforms under NEP 2020 contribute to creating an enabling ecosystem for women entrepreneurship.

2. Literature Review

Several studies have explored the relationship between education, entrepreneurship, and women’s economic empowerment.

Ramana Murthy (2025) examined rural women entrepreneurs in Andhra Pradesh, emphasizing the role of government schemes and self-help group networks in promoting economic empowerment. Their analysis highlights how AP government initiatives have contributed to financial inclusion and entrepreneurship development among rural women.

Hanuman Raju (2025) investigated rural women entrepreneurship in Andhra Pradesh, highlighting the importance of self-help groups, financial inclusion, and digital tools in supporting women-led businesses. The study suggests that capacity-building programs and improved access to credit can significantly enhance women’s participation in entrepreneurial activities.

Gupta (2024) examined entrepreneurship opportunities for women within the broader framework of NEP 2020 and the emerging startup ecosystem in India. The study argues that innovation hubs, skill development centers, and entrepreneurship training programs can create a supportive environment for women-led startups.

Narkhede et al. (2026) discussed key success factors for NEP implementation, including institutional readiness, curriculum redesign, and industry collaboration. Similarly, Kaur and Sharma (2023) argued that

NEP 2020 has the potential to transform the fragmented higher education system into an integrated and innovation-driven ecosystem.

Kaushal (2023) opined that women entrepreneurs in India face multiple challenges, including lack of access to finance, limited mobility, and weak professional networks. The study identified that government initiatives and self-help group (SHG) models have contributed to women's economic participation. The study concluded that the role of formal higher education in fostering entrepreneurship remains underdeveloped.

Lodhi and Verma (2024) argue that NEP 2020 can bridge this gap by integrating skill development, digital education, and entrepreneurship training into the academic framework. Similarly, studies highlight that multidisciplinary education and experiential learning can significantly enhance entrepreneurial intent among women (Aggarwal, 2024; Sarkar, 2025).

3. Objectives of the Study:

The study is conducted with the following objectives:

1. To analyse trends in women's participation in higher education in Andhra Pradesh using indicators such as Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) and Gender Parity Index (GPI).
2. To evaluate how educational reforms contribute to the emergence of women entrepreneurs.
3. To suggest measures for strengthening women entrepreneurship through higher education.

4. Research Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and analytical approach aimed to examine the relationship between higher education reforms and the emergence of women entrepreneurs in India, with special reference to Andhra Pradesh. It relies entirely on secondary data, mainly drawn from AISHE reports, NEP 2020 documents, and published research. Andhra Pradesh has been selected as the study area because of its relatively strong performance in higher education and its ongoing efforts to align with NEP reforms.

5. Findings & Discussion

- According to the AISHE 2021–22, women constitute nearly 49 percent of total enrolment in higher education in India, reflecting significant progress in educational access.
- In Andhra Pradesh, women's participation has steadily increased, with a GER of 36.5% and a GPI of 0.93 under NEP implementation.
- Women's entrepreneurial participation in the state has also grown, reaching 28% by 2023, showing a positive link between education and economic activity.
- Between 2020 and 2023, the AP government signed 36 MoUs aimed at expanding livelihood opportunities for women in Self-Help Groups, improving market linkages, and promoting women-led enterprises.
- Furthermore, the state government has taken critical steps to regulate private coaching institutions through the draft Coaching Institutions (Regulation and Control) Rules, 2026, which aim to mandate mental health wellness cells and ensure fee transparency through oversight mechanisms like the District Level Monitoring Committee
- The integration of vocational training, internships, and experiential learning into higher education curricula has enhanced students' readiness for self-employment and innovation-driven careers.
- Higher Educational Institutions in AP are increasingly focusing on innovation ecosystems, incubation centres, and industry collaboration, which are essential components of entrepreneurship development.
- The aggressive push for digital transformation, highlighted as a cornerstone of recent governmental regulatory reforms, further amplifies the tangible benefits of entrepreneurship education for women.

- Several barriers continue to limit women's entrepreneurial participation, including restricted access to finance and credit, limited mentorship and professional networks, socio-cultural constraints and mobility restrictions, and the persistent digital divide, particularly in rural areas.

In Andhra Pradesh, the adoption of NEP-aligned reforms, such as curriculum flexibility and skill development programs, has contributed to creating a more dynamic learning environment. The findings suggest that NEP 2020 has introduced a significant shift toward skill-based and multidisciplinary education, which is critical for fostering entrepreneurial capabilities. These observations are consistent with studies indicating that entrepreneurship education and institutional support play a crucial role in shaping entrepreneurial intent among students. However, the effectiveness of these reforms depends on implementation quality, faculty training, and infrastructure availability

6. Suggestions

Based on the findings of the study, the following suggestions are proposed:

1. Higher education institutions in Andhra Pradesh and across India must serve as incubators for female-led start-ups, providing not only academic knowledge but also practical business acumen, risk-management skills, and access to professional networks.
2. There is a need to strengthen institutional mechanisms such as incubation centres and entrepreneurship development cells at Undergraduate and Professional colleges to provide women with practical exposure, mentorship, and networking opportunities.
3. Targeted programs should be designed by the Government to support women entrepreneurs, especially in rural areas.
4. Financial inclusion and access to credit for women must be improved.
5. Higher Educational Institutions should adopt gender-inclusive measures such as dedicated entrepreneurship programs for women, safe campus infrastructure, and flexible learning opportunities.
6. There is a need to embed digital skills and entrepreneurial training in curricula, promote technology-enabled learning, and address the digital divide, especially in rural areas.
7. Faculty training and capacity building, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and adequate funding and infrastructure is required to effectively implement NEP 2020.

7. Conclusion

Higher education in India is gradually moving beyond its traditional role of awarding degrees. The reforms introduced under NEP 2020 reflect a broader attempt to connect education with innovation, entrepreneurship, and economic participation. The findings of this study suggest that rising female participation in higher education, combined with supportive policy initiatives, has the potential to create a stronger base for women entrepreneurs. Andhra Pradesh offers an interesting example of how educational expansion and women-focused development programmes can reinforce each other. However, educational access alone is not enough. The transition from graduate to entrepreneur requires supportive ecosystems such as mentorship, financial access, innovation networks, and social acceptance. Thus, while NEP 2020 provides a strong policy foundation, its effectiveness in promoting women entrepreneurship depends on robust implementation, institutional support, and complementary socio-economic measures. Higher education institutions can act as powerful catalysts for women entrepreneurship if they evolve into active innovation and skill development hubs.

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