

The 'Empowered Girl-Child' as Human Capital: A Feminist Critique of the Neo-Liberal Co-Optation of Education Policy in India

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Introduction

The landscape of girls' education in India since the 1990s presents a potent paradox. Macro-level indicators celebrate progress: Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER) for girls in secondary education rose from 41% in 1991 to over 81% in 2021, female literacy rates have climbed steadily, and a powerful discursive campaign—epitomized by the slogan “Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao” (Save the Daughter, Educate the Daughter)—dominates policy rhetoric. Yet, this visible progress coexists with persistent and deepening contradictions: a staggering decline in female labor force participation (from 31% in 2005 to 24% in 2021), rampant gendered wage gaps, epidemic levels of sexual violence in educational institutions and workplaces, and the intensification of unpaid care burdens on women. This paper interrogates this paradox. It posits that the convergence of feminist advocacy for girls' education and the state's post-liberalization neo-liberal turn has produced a specific, depoliticized policy model. Within this model, education is framed not as a social right or a tool for critical consciousness, but as an individual investment in future economic productivity. The “empowered girl-child” is thus reconceptualized as a unit of human capital, a formulation that serves the interests of a market-driven growth model while neutralizing education's potential to fundamentally disrupt patriarchal and capitalist social relations.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework depicted three dimensional aspects to make the argument straight and systematic. The engaged perspectives are

1) The Feminist Vision: Education as Liberation and Social Transformation

Feminist theory, in its diverse strands, has historically viewed education as a cornerstone for challenging patriarchal domination. For radical feminists, education is a site for exposing and dismantling gendered power structures embedded in curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional culture (hooks, 1994). Socialist feminists extend this analysis to the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy, viewing education as integral to the system of social reproduction—the often-invisibilized labor of bearing and raising children, maintaining households, and sustaining cultural norms that reproduce the workforce. From this perspective, truly feminist education must foster critical consciousness, enable collective organizing, and challenge the sexual division of labor. It is inherently a project of *de-commodification*, treating knowledge and capability as public goods for collective flourishing, not private assets.

2) The Neo-liberal Logic: Human Capital Theory and the Entrepreneurial Self

In stark contrast, the neo-liberal paradigm, underpinned by Gary Becker's (1964) human capital theory, reframes the individual as a homo economicus—a rational, calculating

entrepreneur of the self. Education is stripped of its social and political character and recast as a private investment in skills and credentials to enhance future earnings and competitive advantage in the labor market. The state's role shifts from provider of a welfare good to facilitator of market opportunities and enforcer of individual responsibility. This logic dissolves the category of citizen with rights into human capital with market potential. Success and failure are individualized, obscuring structural inequalities of gender, caste, and class.

3) The Nexus: Strategic Co-optation and "Win-Win" Rhetoric

The intersection of these frameworks is not a dialogue but a strategic absorption. Neo-liberal governance has proven adept at co-opting the language of progressive movements—"empowerment," "agency," "choice"—and evacuating them of their transformative content. This is epitomized in the "gender equality as smart economics" doctrine advanced by institutions like the World Bank (2012). Here, investing in girls is advocated not primarily for justice, but because it yields higher economic returns: a more productive workforce, lower fertility rates, and better-invested future generations. This creates a seemingly unassailable "win-win" rhetoric that aligns feminist demands with capitalist growth objectives, thereby garnering broad-based consensus while deflecting more radical critiques. This paper uses this co-optation thesis as its core analytical lens to decode India's education policy trajectory.

Methodology: A Feminist Critical Policy Analysis

This research employs a qualitative methodology of feminist critical policy analysis. This approach treats policy not as a neutral, technical document but as a text that reflects and reproduces power relations, ideological assumptions, and social hierarchies (Bacchi, 2009). The analysis is conducted in two stages:

- 1) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA):** A close textual analysis of key national policy documents—including the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, official guidelines and mission statements for Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, and relevant Five-Year Plan chapters on education (post-1991). The focus is on tracing the evolution of keywords ("empowerment," "quality," "skill," "development"), identifying the implicit subject (the "girl-child") constructed by the policy, and uncovering the underlying logic (rights-based vs. investment-based).
- 2) Analysis of Outcomes and Contradictions:** Secondary data from National Sample Survey (NSS) rounds, Periodic Labour Force Surveys (PLFS), and academic studies on female employment, wages, and educational outcomes are interpreted through the theoretical framework. This stage connects discursive shifts to material consequences, highlighting the gaps between policy rhetoric and lived reality.

This methodology allows us to move beyond policy evaluation based on implementation efficiency to instead ask: What is the problem of girls' education represented to be in these policies?, and whose interests are served by this representation?

Policy Analysis: Constructing the "Girl-Child" as Human Capital:

The policy analysis composed of various themes as follows

- **From Social Welfare to Economic Returns: The Discursive Shift**

Post-1991 economic reforms marked a decisive pivot in India's education discourse. The earlier, albeit limited, welfare-state language of education for national integration and social equity began to be supplanted by a vocabulary of "global competitiveness," "employability," and "skill development." This shift was crystallized in documents like the *India Vision 2020* report, which explicitly linked education to labor market needs and economic productivity.

- **Decoding Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP): Saving for the Market**

Launched in 2015, BBBP is the most prominent girls' empowerment campaign. A critical reading of its official framework reveals its dual human capital foundation. The "Beti Bachao" component addresses the demographic crisis of a declining child sex ratio, framed as correcting a skewed future marriage and labor market. The "Beti Padhao" component explicitly promotes education to enable girls to become "earning members" of society. The scheme's operational guidelines emphasize measurable outcomes: enrolment ratios, school infrastructure, and gender-sensitive training. Conspicuously absent is any substantive mandate to revise patriarchal curricula, address teacher attitudes, or fund systemic interventions against campus sexual harassment. The girl is to be saved and trained to participate in the economy; the structures that make her vulnerable remain largely unchallenged.

- **The National Education Policy 2020: Flexibility, Skills, and the Stratified Future**

The NEP 2020, while lauded for its emphasis on "equity and inclusion," is deeply embedded in the human capital paradigm. Its push for vocational education from middle school onward, its focus on digital literacy, and its advocacy for "flexible" learning pathways subtly channel students—especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds—towards pre-determined, often gendered, labor market niches. The policy's promotion of public-private partnerships (PPPs) further deepens the marketization of education. The "empowered" girl envisioned by the NEP is a digitally literate, skilled, and flexible future worker, whose education is tailored to meet the demands of industry 4.0, not necessarily to cultivate critical thought or challenge social injustice.

- **The Corporate Gaze: CSR and the "Returns on Investment" Narrative**

This state-driven discourse is amplified by corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives in education. Campaigns by major corporations consistently frame girls' education through an ROI (Return on Investment) lens: "Educate a girl, uplift the community," where uplift is measured in economic metrics. This narrative reinforces the instrumental view, positioning corporations as benevolent partners in human capital development while obscuring their role in shaping a low-wage, precarious service economy that will employ these educated girls.

Empirical Contradictions: The Limits of Instrumental Empowerment

A) The Feminization of Labor: From Education to Precarious Employment

The promised pathway from education to "decent work" is fractured by reality. The period of rising female education has coincided with a fall in female labor force participation and a rise in precarious, informal, and contractual work. Educated women are funneled into gendered extensions of the care economy: IT-enabled services, retail, hospitality, and nursing—sectors characterized by flexibility, lower unionization, and the "glass ceiling." This is the feminization of labor under neoliberalism: the integration of women into the

workforce on terms that mirror their subordinate social status (Standing, 1989). Education provides a ticket into this segmented market, not out of gendered constraints.

B) The Intensified Double Burden and Crisis of Social Reproduction

The human capital model assumes that women's entry into paid work will not disrupt the unpaid care economy. This results in the double burden—women working a “second shift” at home. As state support for childcare, healthcare, and eldercare dwindles (part of neo-liberal austerity), this burden intensifies, creating a profound crisis of social reproduction. Educated women from middle-class families often “solve” this crisis by employing poorer, often less-educated, women as domestic help, thereby perpetuating a hierarchical chain of exploitation among women.

C) Reinforcing Intersectional Hierarchies: Caste, Class, and the “Ideal” Beneficiary

The benefits of human capital-driven education are not evenly distributed. They accrue disproportionately to upper-caste, urban, middle-class girls who can convert degrees into professional careers. For Dalit, Adivasi, and Muslim girls, structural barriers—social discrimination, poverty, lack of social capital—often limit returns on educational investment. They are more likely to end up in low-end, insecure jobs or remain outside the formal labor force altogether. The policy constructs a universal “girl-child,” but its outcomes starkly reveal the intersectional fractures of caste, class, and religion, reinforcing existing social hierarchies rather than dismantling them.

Discussion: Reclaiming the Radical Core of Feminist Education

The analysis reveals a profound disjuncture. The neo-liberal co-optation of girls' education has succeeded in increasing access but has failed—and is structurally incapable of—delivering gender justice. By framing empowerment as individual economic mobility, it renders systemic critiques of patriarchy and capitalism invisible. It produces a form of embedded agency that allows women to navigate within oppressive structures but not to collectively transform them. This necessitates a fundamental reimagining. A feminist educational project must begin by severing the conceptual link between learning and labor market utility. It requires a pedagogy of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) that enables students to analyze power, recognize the politics of knowledge, and understand their position within intersecting systems of oppression. Curriculum and institutional practice must actively challenge gender stereotypes, caste biases, and communal prejudices. Crucially, it must value and integrate the knowledge of social reproduction, teaching care, solidarity, and collective responsibility as central civic virtues, not private responsibilities.

This is not a call to abandon the goal of economic independence for women, but to recognize that true independence cannot be achieved through an educational model that itself is dependent on and reproductive of exploitative market logic. The struggle must be for an education that is de-commodified, publicly funded, and oriented towards building a just society, not just a skilled workforce.

Conclusion

The journey of the “girl-child” in Indian policy from a subject of welfare to a unit of human capital encapsulates the broader neo-liberal transformation of society. While the campaigns and enrolment numbers offer a veneer of progress, a feminist political economy critique exposes the instrumental core of this project. Educating girls for the market, rather than for themselves and their communities, represents a constrained, economistic vision of empowerment that ultimately serves

to stabilize, not subvert, the intertwined systems of patriarchy and capitalism. It integrates women into a growth model that thrives on precarious labor and privatized social reproduction. Moving forward, scholars, activists, and policymakers must resist the seductive “win-win” rhetoric and revive the radical, collective, and transformative demands of the feminist movement. The goal is not to produce better human capital, but to nurture critical citizens capable of building a world where education is a practice of freedom, and where the full humanity of every child—beti or beta—is the measure of true development.

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