



## The gender technology gap has to end

1. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has swept South Asia in recent months, existing inequalities have come to light. One aspect stands out: access to technology has never been so crucial to ensuring public health and safety.
2. Around the world, information and access to health care have largely moved online, and those left behind face grave disadvantages.

### Limited or no access

1. According to Global System for Mobile Communications (GSMA) estimates, over 390 million women in low- and middle-income countries do not have Internet access. South Asia has more than half of these women with only 65% owning a mobile phone.
2. In India, only 14.9% of women were reported to be using the Internet. This divide is deepened by earlier mandates to register online to get a vaccination appointment. Recent local data revealed that nearly 17% more men than women have been vaccinated.
3. While improving awareness of how to access vaccination and help are crucial to protecting women, the mindset around digital technology and device ownership must also change.
4. For example, when families share a digital device, it is more likely that the father or sons will be allowed to use it exclusively. In part, this is due to deeply held cultural beliefs: it is often believed that women's access to technology will motivate them to challenge patriarchal societies.
5. There is also a belief that women need to be protected, and that online content can be dangerous for women/expose them to risks. As a consequence, girls and women who ask for phones face suspicion and opposition.

### Feminist technology

The concept of feminism goes beyond the rights of women. It is about a way of life. In simple terms, it means being inclusive, democratic, transparent, egalitarian, and offering opportunities for all. We can call it equality through innovation.



Feminist technology (sometimes called “femtech”) is an approach to technology and innovation that is inclusive, informed and responsive to the entire community with all its diversity.

### Steps to an equitable future

1. At UN Women, we are encouraging companies to sign up and agree to principles that will lead to a more equitable future for all. As part of the Generation Equality Forum, the goal is to double the number of women and girls working in technology and innovation.
2. By 2026, the aim is to reduce the gender digital divide and ensure universal digital literacy, while investing in feminist technology and innovation to support women’s leadership as innovators.
3. We hope that more girls will choose STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) as their academic focus, enter digital technology careers, and aspire to be the next leaders in digital technology.
4. The policy cannot solve this on its own, but the private sector can. Companies should not look at gender-equal technology solely from an altruistic perspective but from a pragmatic one.
5. According to GSMA, closing the gender gap in mobile Internet usage in low- and middle-income countries would increase GDP by the U.S.\$700 billion over the next five years. Women and girls are the largest consumer groups left out of technology and could be major profit drivers.

### Blended learning won't work

1. A recent circular by the University Grants Commission (UGC) proposes that all higher educational institutions (HEI) teach 40% of any course online and the rest 60% offline.
2. The concept note circulated by the UGC argues that this “blended model of teaching” and learning paves the way for increased student engagement in learning, enhanced student-teacher interactions, improved student learning outcomes and more flexible teaching and learning environments, among other things.



3. The note also enlists a few other key benefits such as the increased opportunity for institutional collaborations at a distance and enhanced self-learning accruing from blended learning (BL).
4. Another claim is that BL benefits the teachers as well. It shifts the role of the teacher from being a “knowledge provider to a coach and mentor”. The note says this will enable teachers to have a greater influence and effect on students’ learning.
5. Further, as against traditional classroom instruction which is “teacher-directed, top-down, and one-size-fits-all”, BL is “student-driven, bottom-up, and customized”.
6. The note adds that BL introduces flexibility in assessment and evaluation patterns as well. Educators wish to embrace the forward-looking proposal but the ground reality is different.

## Challenges

1. The latest All India Survey on Higher Education (2019-20) report shows that 60.56% of the 42,343 colleges in India are located in rural areas and 78.6% are privately managed. Only big corporates are better placed to invest in technology and provide such learning.
2. Second, according to data portal statistics, Internet penetration in India is only 45% as of January 2021. This policy will only exacerbate the existing geographical and digital divide resulting in the exclusion of a large number of rural students.
3. Third, BL leaves little room for the all-around formation of the student that includes the development of their intelligent quotient, emotional quotient, social quotient, physical quotient and spiritual quotient.
4. The listening part and subsequent interactions with the teacher may get minimised. Also, the concept note assumes that all students who enter the arena of higher education have similar learning styles and have a certain amount of digital literacy to cope with the suggested learning strategies of BL.
5. This is far from true. Education in India is driven by a teacher-centred approach. Expecting these students to switch over quickly to collaborative and



technology-enabled learning will be stressful for them and may accentuate the existing dropout rate in higher education.

## Recommendations

1. Given these challenges, it is worth considering a few recommendations. The government should ensure equity in access to technology and bandwidth for all HEIs across the country free of cost.
2. Massive digital training programmes must be arranged for teachers. Even the teacher-student ratio needs to be readjusted to implement BL effectively. This may require the appointment of a greater number of teachers.
3. The design of the curriculum should be decentralised and based on a bottom-up approach. More power in such education-related policymaking should be vested with the State governments.
4. Switching over from a teacher-centric model of learning at schools to the BL mode at the tertiary level will be difficult for learners. Hence, the government must think of overhauling the curriculum at the school level as well.
5. Finally, periodical discussions, feedback mechanisms and support services at all levels would revitalise the implementation of the learning programme of the National Education Policy 2020, BL, and lead to the actualisation of the three cardinal principles of education policy: access, equity and quality.

## The 'Union government' has a unifying effect

### Highlights:

1. The Tamil Nadu government's decision to shun the usage of the term 'Central government' in its official communications and replace it with 'Union government' is a major step towards regaining the consciousness of our Constitution.
2. Seventy-one years since we adopted the Constitution, it is time we regained the original intent of our founding fathers beautifully etched in the parchment as Article 1: "India, that is Bharat, shall be a Union of States".
3. If a student of Indian polity attempts to trace the origin of the term 'Central government', the Constitution will disappoint him, for the Constituent



Assembly did not use the term 'Centre' or 'Central government' in all of its 395 Articles in 22 Parts and eight Schedules in the original Constitution.

4. What we have are the 'Union' and the 'States' with the executive powers of the Union wielded by the President acting on the aid and advice of the Council of Ministers headed by the Prime Minister.

### Central government

1. Even though we have no reference to the 'Central government' in the Constitution, the General Clauses Act, 1897 gives a definition for it. The 'Central government' for all practical purposes is the President after the commencement of the Constitution.
2. Therefore, the real question is whether such a definition for 'Central government' is constitutional as the Constitution itself does not approve of centralising power.

### The intent of the Constituent Assembly

1. On December 13, 1946, Jawaharlal Nehru introduced the aims and objects of the Assembly by resolving that India shall be a Union of territories willing to join the "Independent Sovereign Republic".
2. The emphasis was on the consolidation and confluence of various provinces and territories to form a strong united country.
3. Many members of the Constituent Assembly were of the opinion that the principles of the British Cabinet Mission Plan (1946) be adopted, which contemplated a Central government with very limited powers whereas the provinces had substantial autonomy.
4. The Partition and the violence of 1947 in Kashmir forced the Constituent Assembly to revise its approach and it resolved in favour of a strong Centre.
5. The possibility of the secession of states from the Union weighed on the minds of the drafters of the Constitution and ensured that the Indian Union is "indestructible".
6. In the Constituent Assembly, B.R Ambedkar, the Chairman of the Drafting Committee, observed that the word 'Union' was advisedly used in order to negate the right of secession of States by emphasising, after all, that "India shall be a Union of States".





7. Ambedkar justified the usage of the 'Union of States' saying that the Drafting Committee wanted to make it clear that though India was to be a federation, it was not the result of an agreement and that therefore, no State has the right to secede from it. "The federation is a union because it is indestructible," Ambedkar said.

## Union of States

1. The usage of 'Union of States' by Ambedkar was not approved by all and faced criticisms from Maulana Hasrat Mohani who argued that Ambedkar was changing the very nature of the Constitution.
2. Mohani made a fiery speech in the Assembly on September 18, 1949, where he vehemently contended that the usage of the words 'Union of States' would obscure the word 'Republic'.
3. Mohani went to the extent of saying that I think Dr Ambedkar is also of that view, and he wants to have that kind of Union. He wants to bring all the units, the provinces and the groups of States, everything under the thumb of the Centre.
4. However, Ambedkar clarified that "the Union is not a league of States, united in a loose relationship; nor are the States the agencies of the Union, deriving powers from it. Both the Union and the States are created by the Constitution, both derive their respective authority from the Constitution. The one is not subordinate to the other in its own field... the authority of one is coordinate with that of the other".
5. The sharing of powers between the Union and the States is not restricted to the executive organ of the government. The judiciary is designed in the Constitution to ensure that the Supreme Court, the tallest court in the country, has no superintendence over the High Courts.
6. Though the Supreme Court has appellate jurisdiction — not only over High Courts but also over other courts and tribunals — they are not declared to be subordinate to it.
7. In fact, the High Courts have wider powers to issue prerogative writs despite having the power of superintendence over the district and subordinate courts.

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8. Parliament and Assemblies identify their boundaries and are circumspect to not cross their boundaries when it comes to the subject matter on which laws are made. However, the Union Parliament will prevail if there is a conflict.

### Wordplay

1. The members of the Constituent Assembly were very cautious of not using the word 'Centre' or 'Central government' in the Constitution as they intended to keep away the tendency of centralising of powers in one unit.
2. The 'Union government' or the 'Government of India' has a unifying effect as the message sought to be given is that the government is of all.