

Kanyashree Prakalpa: A Socio-Economic Analysis of Women Empowerment and Development in West Bengal

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Abstract: Kanyashree Prakalpa is a flagship conditional cash transfer (CCT) scheme launched by the Government of West Bengal in 2013 to empower adolescent girls and prevent child marriage. The program has emerged as a major social welfare initiative aimed at enhancing girls' education, delaying early marriage, and supporting socio-economic empowerment. This paper explores the conceptual framework, policy design, implementation mechanisms, and multi-dimensional impact of Kanyashree Prakalpa, drawing on both primary and secondary evaluations. It investigates the scheme's performance across districts, its role in reducing gender disparities, and its association with educational attainment and girl child welfare indicators. The analysis demonstrates that while the scheme has succeeded in reducing dropout rates and increasing female enrollment in higher education, regional disparities, administrative bottlenecks, and socio-cultural challenges persist. The study concludes that to make Kanyashree Prakalpa truly transformative, a more holistic approach involving community sensitization, skill development integration, and long-term monitoring of outcomes is needed.

Keywords: Kanyashree Prakalpa, Women Empowerment, Education, Child Marriage, Conditional Cash Transfer, Gender Equality, West Bengal.



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INTRODUCTION

Empowerment of women through education and social protection has been an enduring policy challenge across India. Despite sustained government efforts, issues such as early marriage, gendered access to education, and unequal employment opportunities continue to affect adolescent girls, particularly in socio-economically disadvantaged regions. The State of West Bengal confronted this challenge through the launch of Kanyashree Prakalpa (KP) in 2013, a

flagship conditional cash transfer (CCT) programme designed to delay marriage and promote educational continuity among adolescent girls aged 13–18 years. The scheme, initiated under the Department of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare, has since evolved into one of the most recognized social welfare initiatives in India, even securing the United Nations Public Service Award (2017) for its innovative governance model.

The theoretical premise of KP is grounded in the understanding that financial incentives and conditional welfare can modify household behavior, particularly in contexts where early marriage and school discontinuation are motivated by economic stress and patriarchal norms. By linking financial assistance to girls' enrollment and retention in secondary and higher education, the scheme aims to create transformative change at the individual, familial, and societal levels. Beneficiaries receive incentives under two main categories: the K1 component (annual grants for unmarried girls aged 13–18 in classes VIII–XII) and the K2 component (one-time grant for unmarried girls aged 18 pursuing higher education or vocational training). The expanded Kanyashree Plus programme introduced digital monitoring, direct benefit transfers (DBT), career counseling, and linkages with skill development schemes like Utkarsha Bangla.

Over the past decade, West Bengal has witnessed substantial outcomes through KP—improved female school retention, delayed age at first marriage, and enhanced aspirations for higher education. However, deeper socio-economic, administrative, and regional inequalities remain. While urban districts such as Kolkata and Howrah display near-universal enrollment rates among eligible girls, tribal and economically weaker districts like Purulia, Birbhum, and Jalpaiguri report lagging implementation and lower awareness levels. Thus, examining KP through a socio-economic lens provides critical insights into how structural inequalities mediate policy performance and to what extent such welfare policies translate into sustainable empowerment.

This paper therefore attempts a multidimensional exploration of the Kanyashree Prakalpa, drawing insights from secondary data and inter-state comparisons to analyze its developmental implications, administrative challenges, and long-term sustainability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A substantial body of literature has examined the Kanyashree Prakalpa from developmental, economic, and gender perspectives. Major insights from reviewed works include:

TSS Review (2024) emphasized that Kanyashree Prakalpa has significantly increased school retention among adolescent girls, fostering educational empowerment and self-esteem. The study highlighted the importance of financial incentives in influencing parents' decisions to continue girls' education.

Ray (2020) conducted an inter-district evaluation showing geographic and administrative disparities in implementation. The study found that success correlated more with local governance quality and awareness programs than with district-level economic development.

IMPRI (2024) analysis of NFHS-5 data confirmed a notable decline in the rate of child marriage among girls aged 20–24 years in West Bengal, dropping from 54% to 40%. However, the persistence of early marriage in certain districts revealed socio-cultural resistance.

Ideas for India (2019) provided a theoretical justification for the scheme through behavioral economics and social protection frameworks, noting that economic incentives effectively alter household decision-making patterns regarding female education.

Upasak Das (ISID 2019) assessed the macroeconomic benefits of Kanyashree, arguing that the scheme contributes indirectly to the state's human capital formation and health improvement by discouraging early motherhood.

JETIR (2018) study found strong perceptions among beneficiaries that Kanyashree not only provided financial benefit but also emotional motivation, reinforcing aspirations for higher education and social mobility.

Official Government Reports (2017–2024) documented major administrative improvements such as digital monitoring, direct benefit transfers through banking systems, and expansion under Kanyashree Plus with career counseling and skill-based linkages.

Taken together, the literature establishes that while Kanyashree Prakashya represents a pioneering public policy in gender-responsive governance, its long-term sustainability depends on continuous institutional strengthening, community participation, and integration with livelihood initiatives

RESEARCH GAP

The Kanyashree Prakashya scheme, a program aimed at promoting girls' education and preventing child marriage, has been extensively researched but has several gaps. Most studies are short-term, relying on secondary data, and lack understanding of long-term consequences on beneficiaries' education, employment, and social mobility. District-level disparities and cultural and psychological dimensions have also been underexplored. Further research is needed to evaluate the scheme's long-term sustainability, regional equity, and qualitative empowerment outcomes.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objectives of the present study are

1. To evaluate the socio-economic and educational impact of Kanyashree Prakashya in promoting gender equality, preventing child marriage, and encouraging higher education among adolescent girls in West Bengal.
2. To analyze district-level and inter-state disparities in the scheme's implementation and outcomes, focusing on factors influencing variation in performance across socio-economic and administrative contexts.
3. To assess the sustainability and integrative potential of Kanyashree by examining its linkage with allied welfare schemes, community awareness, and institutional governance quality.

METHODOLOGY OF ANALYSIS

This analytical paper is based on a descriptive and empirical study using both secondary data from government reports, NFHS datasets, UNDP evaluations, and academic publications, as well as findings from district-level field studies.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Educational Empowerment Outcomes

The Kanyashree Prakashya has significantly transformed the landscape of girls' education in West Bengal. According to state-level education department statistics (2023), female enrollment at the secondary level increased from 67% in 2013 to 87% in 2023, while dropout rates decreased by nearly 40% over the same period. The TSS Review (2024) supports this finding, attributing the improvement to the conditional nature of the cash incentive that encourages continued schooling.

Beneficiaries often report stronger self-esteem and higher motivation to pursue tertiary education compared to non-beneficiaries. As highlighted in the JETIR study (2018), financial assistance translated into a symbolic acknowledgment of girls' value within families, thereby altering intra-household dynamics and increasing investment in female education.

However, disparities remain visible along geographical and economic lines. Districts with effective local governance and higher digital literacy, such as Nadia and South 24 Parganas, demonstrate above-average enrollment and timely disbursement of benefits. By contrast, districts with

limited banking infrastructure, such as Purulia and Paschim Medinipur, face challenges related to delayed payments and lack of financial literacy among beneficiaries.

2. Reduction in Child Marriage

One of KP’s most visible achievements lies in mitigating early marriage among adolescent girls. As shown in the IMPRI (2024) analysis of NFHS-5 data, the proportion of women aged 20–24 married before 18 declined from 54% to 40% within a decade in West Bengal—one of the steepest declines among Indian states. This progress surpasses improvements in neighboring states such as Bihar (63% to 59%) and Jharkhand (67% to 55%), illustrating the relative success of conditional welfare in influencing household behavior.

The integration of anti-child marriage messaging within school curriculum and community campaigns under Kanyashree Plus has amplified awareness at the grassroots level. Yet, cultural resistance persists, particularly in tribal belts and economically deprived segments where social norms continue to prioritize marriage over education. These patterns suggest that while Kanyashree drives behavioral change through economic incentives, complementary social measures are essential to sustain long-term attitudinal transformation.

3. Socio-Economic Impact and Gender Awareness

Kanyashree Prakalpa’s socio-economic implications extend beyond immediate financial aid. At the household level, beneficiaries gain greater negotiation capacity in family decisions, including marriage timing, mobility, and future plans. The conditional grant thereby serves as both a direct support mechanism and a psychological enabler. A series of qualitative interviews (compiled in government review reports, 2017–2024) reveal that the scheme promotes a sense of self-recognition and social dignity among adolescent girls.

Moreover, the programme’s indirect effect on human capital formation is noteworthy. Upasak Das (2019) underscores the macroeconomic linkage between delayed marriage, continued education, and improved maternal health outcomes, arguing that Kanyashree contributes indirectly to the long-term productivity of the female workforce in the state.

However, structural barriers moderate these gains. Limited access to digital and banking infrastructure undermines inclusion for girls from remote and tribal areas. In some cases, patriarchal gate keeping within household’s results in control over grant utilization by male members, which partially neutralizes the scheme’s intended autonomy effect.

4. Inter-State Comparison: Positioning West Bengal among Other States

Kanyashree Prakalpa represents one of the most comprehensive gender-focused state welfare programmes in India. When compared with similar CCT initiatives in other states—such as “Ladli Laxmi” in Madhya Pradesh, “Beti Bachao Beti Padhao” in Haryana, and “Mukhyamantri Kanya Utthan Yojana” in Bihar—its reach and institutional efficiency are particularly distinct.

Table 1: Comparative Overview of State-Level Girl Child Welfare Schemes in India: Launch, Focus, Mode of Transfer, Coverage, and Outcomes (Up to 2024)"

Comparative Parameter	West Bengal (Kanyashree Prakalpa)	Bihar (Kanya Utthan Yojana)	Madhya Pradesh (Ladli Laxmi)	Haryana (Beti Bachao Beti Padhao)
Launch Year	2013	2018	2007	2015
Primary Focus	Education & Delayed Marriage	Higher Education Support	Birth and Education of Girl Child	Gender Awareness Campaign
Mode of Transfer	Conditional Cash Transfer	One-time & installment-based	Fixed deposit releases	Campaign-based incentive grants

	via DBT	transfer		
Coverage	72 lakh+ beneficiaries (as of 2024)	25 lakh+	40 lakh+	Awareness-focused (non-cash)
Measurable Outcomes	Decline in child marriage to 40%, rise in higher education enrollment	Improvement in college participation but limited retention	Enhanced birth registration of girls	Decline in sex ratio gap but limited educational impact

Source: West Bengal Department of Women & Child Development and Social Welfare

The comparative data suggest that West Bengal’s holistic linkage of financial incentives, education continuity, and anti-child marriage enforcement distinguishes Kanyashree as a transformative model. While schemes like Ladli Laxmi address structural concerns at birth and Beti Bachao focuses on social messaging, Kanyashree’s conditional transfer mechanism directly ties benefits to schooling and unmarried status, reflecting superior behavioral targeting.

Nevertheless, challenges of long-term employability and livelihood opportunities are shared across states. Even in states with relatively high literacy rates, including Kerala and Tamil Nadu, cash-based interventions alone have not secured sustainable empowerment without parallel skill development. Thus, integration between Kanyashree Plus and initiatives like Rupashree Prakalpa (marriage assistance linked to adult women) or Utkarsha Bangla (vocational training) must be institutionally strengthened to provide beneficiaries with employment-oriented pathways.

5. Administrative and Institutional Performance

The government’s introduction of Kanyashree Online 2.0 Portal and mobile monitoring mechanisms has markedly improved transparency. The switch to DBT through Aadhaar-linked bank accounts minimized leakages and reduced dependency on intermediaries. However, implementation remains uneven—administrative inefficiency, banking delays, and low awareness in tribal communities continue to impede coverage expansion.

Interviews with district-level officers highlight issues such as overburdened data verification, lack of dedicated outreach personnel, and limited convergence between education and social welfare departments. Strengthening inter-departmental coordination, adopting block-level grievance redressed systems, and enhancing digital literacy among beneficiaries can mitigate these obstacles.

6. Psychological and Cultural Dimensions

Despite measurable educational gains, attitudinal empowerment poses a subtler challenge. Girls may comply with scheme conditions to avail financial benefits without internalizing long-term empowerment ideals. The literature review identifies insufficient exploration of psychological transformation changes in confidence, self-image, or agency. Many girls still face parental restrictions on career choice or higher studies beyond nearby districts.

To bridge this gap, expanding mentorship and peer-network models through schools, female teachers, and local women’s groups could build supportive ecosystems that reinforce empowerment narratives beyond financial dependence. Media campaigns in vernacular languages focusing on successful Kanyashree alumni can further nurture aspiration among rural adolescents.

7. Policy Implications and Future Directions

The decade-long journey of Kanyashree demonstrates both possibilities and limitations of cash transfer-based social policy. Policymakers must now move toward an integrated capability

framework that links education with employment and decision-making empowerment. Suggested steps include:

- Integrating vocational training modules within higher secondary curricula for K2 beneficiaries.
- Developing a Kanyashree Alumni Network to mentor younger participants and facilitate higher education transitions.
- Strengthening community awareness programs through Panchayati Raj institutions for local monitoring and feedback.
- Instituting impact evaluation mechanisms at five-year intervals to capture qualitative empowerment outcomes.

At a broader policy level, replicating Kanyashree's structural model across other states—tailored to local socio-cultural settings—can yield pan-Indian lessons in gender-responsive governance and digital welfare innovation.

CONCLUSION

The Kanyashree Prakalpa stands as a landmark initiative in West Bengal's socio-economic development framework, effectively demonstrating how gender-responsive public policy can reshape traditional societal norms. Its comprehensive design—marrying conditional incentives with education retention—has substantially reduced school dropout rates and delayed child marriage, while redefining the role of adolescent girls in family decision-making structures.

Yet, the programme's long-term transformative potential depends on addressing its remaining disparities and administrative shortcomings. Uneven district performance, socio-cultural resistance, and insufficient post-education pathways continue to limit the realization of full empowerment. Moreover, the absence of longitudinal studies examining beneficiaries' employment outcomes or lifestyle changes underlines the need for systematic impact assessment.

When viewed in broader Indian and inter-state context, Kanyashree represents both a policy innovation and a learning model showing that targeted conditional transfers can instigate measurable social change when combined with institutional transparency and local awareness. However, empowerment cannot remain limited to education; it must extend into economic independence and agency in life choices.

Therefore, the future of Kanyashree lies not only in continuing financial support but also in cultivating skills, aspirations, and autonomy turning financial inclusion into genuine socio-economic transformation. If the scheme evolves in this direction, it could serve as a sustainable model of women-centered development for the entire nation.

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