



FROM WELFARE TO EMPOWERMENT: SHIFTING NARRATIVES OF WOMEN'S POLICIES IN WEST BENGAL

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of women-centric policies in West Bengal, focusing on the transition from welfare-based orientations to empowerment-oriented strategies. The state welfare initiatives for women such as pensions, subsidies, and health benefits were designed to provide short-term benefits, but they often failed to generate sustainable long-term gains. In recent decades, the Government of West Bengal has pioneered transformative schemes such as *Kanyashree Prakalpa*, *Rupashree Prakalpa*, and *Lakshmi Bhandar*, alongside community-based initiatives like *Anandadhara Self-Help Groups (SHGs)* and *Swasthya Sathi*, emphasizing education, health, financial independence, and social inclusion. These initiatives signify a paradigm shift that women are increasingly viewed as active agents of social change rather than passive recipients of aid. Drawing on government reports, archives, and international development frameworks, and secondary resources, this article examines the historical trajectory, impacts, challenges, and future directions of women's policies in West Bengal. This study critically analyzes the shift from welfare to empowerment within the framework of gender-sensitive governance in West Bengal. It explores how the state's flagship programs have redefined the narratives of women's participation, autonomy, and social justice while identifying persisting structural challenges that limit the realization of holistic empowerment. It concludes that while significant progress has been made, but achieving overall empowerment requires deeper structural reforms and capacity-building.

Keywords: *Women's empowerment, Welfare policy, West Bengal, Kanyashree Prakalpa, Rupashree Prakalpa, Self-help groups, Healthcare*

Introduction

Women's empowerment has emerged as one of the most significant dimensions of contemporary governance and development discourse in India. West Bengal, historically known for its progressive social policies and active political culture, has undertaken various welfare-oriented programs since independence to address gender inequality, poverty, and social exclusion (Chatterjee, 2019). Initially, women were primarily perceived as beneficiaries of state welfare recipients of financial assistance, food subsidies, or maternal health benefits. However, there has been a visible transition toward policies that seek to empower women as agents of change through education, employment, financial inclusion, and decision-making (Mukherjee, 2021).

This transformation occurs broader shifts in development thinking from the "welfare approach" to the "empowerment approach." The former emphasizes state protection and relief for vulnerable populations, whereas the latter focuses on enabling women to participate actively in economic, social, and political spheres (Kabeer, 1999). West Bengal's policy landscape reflects this evolution through emblematic schemes such as *Kanyashree Prakalpa* (promoting girls' education and delaying child marriage), *Rupashree Prakalpa* (providing financial support for marriage), *Lakshmi Bhandar* (ensuring income support to women), and *Anandadhara* (facilitating women's collectives through self-help groups).

Objectives of the Study

1. To trace the historical evolution of women-oriented welfare and empowerment policies in West Bengal.
2. To analyze the design, objectives, and implementation mechanisms of major schemes such as *Kanyashree Prakalpa*, *Rupashree Prakalpa*, *Lakshmi Bhandar*, and *Anandadhara*.
3. To assess the shift in policy discourse from welfare to empowerment and its implications for women's socio-economic status.
4. To evaluate the challenges, limitations, and structural barriers in achieving gender equality and empowerment.

Research Questions

1. How have women-centric policies in West Bengal evolved from welfare orientation to empowerment focus?
2. What are the transformative impacts and limitations of schemes like *Kanyashree*, *Rupashree*, and *Lakshmi Bhandar*?
3. What are the socio-economic impacts of this policy shift on women's lives?
4. What barriers still hinder gender equality and empowerment in West Bengal?

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research design integrating documentary analysis, policy review, and secondary data analysis. Sources include government reports, official scheme documents, statistical handbooks, and academic research papers published between 2010 and 2024. Analytical emphasis is placed on policy frameworks of the Government of West Bengal, particularly under the Department of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare, and Planning & Statistics Department reports. The study also draws upon frameworks of gender and development (GAD), feminist political economy, and empowerment theory (Sen, 1999; Kabeer, 2005) to interpret the transition from welfare to empowerment. The data interpretation follows thematic content analysis identifying recurring themes related to education, income generation, social inclusion, and policy effectiveness. While no primary data were collected, triangulation of sources ensures analytical reliability and conceptual depth.

Literature Review

The conceptual shift from welfare to empowerment represents one of the most significant transformations in gender and development discourse. The welfare approach, dominant from the 1950s to the 1980s, emerged in the early postcolonial period when women were viewed primarily as dependents requiring state protection and social assistance (Moser, 1993). This approach sought to alleviate women's poverty through short-term interventions such as food rations, maternity benefits, and family welfare services. However, feminist theorists criticized this paradigm for being paternalistic and depoliticizing, as it framed women as passive beneficiaries rather than active participants in development processes (Young, 1993; Rathgeber, 1990).

By the 1990s, a new empowerment paradigm emerged, shaped by feminist economists and development scholars who emphasized autonomy, participation, and agency (Sen, 1999; Kabeer, 1999). Empowerment was redefined as the capacity of individuals to make strategic life choices and transform power relations (Rowlands, 1997). Naila Kabeer (2005) conceptualized empowerment as a process encompassing resources, agency, and achievements, linking material access with social transformation. Similarly, Amartya Sen's capability approach placed emphasis on expanding the freedoms and opportunities that individuals have reason to value (Sen, 1999).

Scholars such as Batliwala (1994) and Stromquist (2015) further expanded the framework by situating empowerment within social, economic, and political structures. Batliwala (1994) argued that empowerment must challenge systemic inequalities and patriarchal norms, while Stromquist (2015) identified four dimensions-cognitive, psychological, economic, and political that together constitute sustainable empowerment. These conceptual insights underscore that empowerment is not limited to individual advancement but involves collective transformation and the redistribution of power in social institutions.

The welfare to empowerment transition thus represents a paradigm shift from protectionist to transformative policy frameworks. In the Indian context, this transformation has reoriented state policy from the distribution of welfare benefits toward promoting education, skill development, and financial inclusion, aligning with global gender equality agendas such as the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5) (UN Women, 2020).

The evolution of women's policy in India reflects a complex interplay between social reform, state intervention, and feminist advocacy. Post-independence, women's welfare was initially linked to family welfare, population control, and social protection under schemes such as the Community Development Programme (1952) and Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) (Government of India, 2020). These initiatives were largely welfare-oriented, aiming to improve health and nutrition outcomes but often reinforcing gendered divisions of labor (Kumar, 2018).

The 1974 Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (CSWI) was a turning point, revealing persistent gender inequalities in education, employment, and political participation (Government of India, 1974). This report catalyzed the shift toward policies emphasizing equality and participation. The 1985 National Perspective Plan for Women and the 2001 National Policy for the Empowerment of Women (NPEW) signalled formal recognition of women's rights as integral to development (Sinha, 2018).

In recent decades, central government programs such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP), National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), and Mahila E-Haats have expanded the empowerment agenda by promoting education, entrepreneurship, and digital inclusion (Chaudhuri & Roy, 2021). These programs reflect the Gender and Development (GAD) approach, focusing on altering power relations and increasing women's agency rather than merely integrating them into the economy.

The Indian Constitution provides a strong foundation for gender equality through Articles 14 (equality before law), 15 (prohibition of discrimination), and 39 (Directive Principles ensuring equal livelihood opportunities). The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992) institutionalized women's political representation by reserving one-third of seats in local governance bodies, significantly altering the gender landscape of Indian politics (Agarwal, 2019).

Feminist economists such as Bina Agarwal (1994) and Gita Sen (1999) have highlighted the link between property rights, land ownership, and empowerment, emphasizing that economic independence forms the basis of gender justice. Meanwhile, Dreze

and Sen (2013) argued that human development indicators particularly education and health remain central to women's substantive freedoms. These insights have deeply influenced the design of both national and state-level policies in India, including those in West Bengal.

Like India, West Bengal's socio-political history has been marked by a strong tradition of welfare-oriented governance, influenced by its long Leftist political legacy and active social movements (Chakraborty, 2021). The Left Front governments (1977–2011) prioritized redistributive welfare measures, including land reforms, rural employment, and universal literacy campaigns. While these policies advanced class-based equality, they often failed to address the gender dimension explicitly (Bardhan, 2011).

The post-2011 political transition under the Trinamool Congress (TMC) government brought a new gender-focused governance model. The government's flagship programs like Kanyashree Prakalpa (2013), Rupashree Prakalpa (2018), Lakshmi Bhandar (2021), and Swasthya Sathi (2016) represent a targeted empowerment framework (Mukherjee, 2021). These schemes aim to tackle multidimensional poverty by focusing on education, marriage security, income support, and healthcare.

Scholars have debated the political economy of these initiatives. While some view them as empowerment tools that enhance women's social and financial agency (Bhattacharya, 2022; Roy, 2023), others argue that their welfare-based delivery mechanisms risk reinforcing patron–client relationships and state dependency (Chatterjee, 2019; Das, 2021). For instance, Rupashree Prakalpa's marriage grants, though reducing immediate financial stress, have been critiqued for reproducing patriarchal expectations around marriage and femininity (Mukhopadhyay, 2022).

However, the introduction of Lakshmi Bhandar as an unconditional cash transfer to women marks a notable policy innovation, acknowledging unpaid care work as economic contribution (Roy, 2023). Moreover, Anandadhara, the state-level version of NRLM, fosters collective empowerment by enabling women's self-help groups to participate in microfinance, entrepreneurship, and community development (NABARD, 2022). This multi-layered approach has positioned West Bengal as a leading state in integrating welfare and empowerment within a gender-responsive governance framework.

The Gender and Development (GAD) approach provides the theoretical underpinning for analyzing West Bengal's evolving policy landscape. Emerging in the 1980s as a critique of the earlier Women in Development (WID) model, GAD focuses on transforming the social structures that sustain gender inequality rather than merely improving women's access to existing institutions (Molyneux, 1985; Razavi & Miller, 1995).

Molyneux (1985) introduced the distinction between “practical gender needs” (immediate welfare requirements) and “strategic gender interests” (long-term empowerment goals). This distinction is central to assessing policies like Rupashree and Lakshmi Bhandar the former addressing practical needs (marriage support), the latter having potential to fulfill strategic interests by enhancing women's financial autonomy.

GAD also emphasizes collective agency as a catalyst for empowerment. The Anandadhara model exemplifies this, as SHG networks create social capital, solidarity, and bargaining power for rural women (Chakraborty & Sen, 2020). Kabeer (2011) further noted that empowerment emerges through both “individual agency” and “collective struggle,” underscoring that gender equality requires institutional transformation at the community and policy levels.

Additionally, the intersectionality framework introduced by Crenshaw (1989) complements GAD by recognizing how gender intersects with class, caste, and regional disparities. In West Bengal, these intersections shape differential access to empowerment rural, Dalit, and minority women often face compounded barriers to participation (Chatterjee, 2019). Hence, analyzing empowerment through GAD and intersectional lenses provides a nuanced understanding of how women's policies operate within layered social hierarchies.

Recent feminist policy research also stresses “empowerment through governance”, where institutional reforms, accountability mechanisms, and participatory planning become key to gender justice (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015). West Bengal's gender-responsive budgeting and localized SHG networks reflect this institutional approach, demonstrating a hybrid model that merges welfare delivery with participatory empowerment.

The literature reveals consensus that empowerment cannot be achieved through welfare measures alone. While welfare ensures survival and protection, empowerment requires redistribution of power and access to resources. Scholars like Batliwala (2007) and Kabeer (2005) stress that empowerment is both a process and an outcome entailing self-confidence, collective mobilization, and transformation of patriarchal norms.

In the context of West Bengal, the state's evolving policy mix reflects both welfare continuities and empowerment aspirations. Kanyashree Prakalpa and Anandadhara illustrate transformative empowerment through education and collective action, whereas Rupashree and Lakshmi Bhandar represent protective welfare with potential empowerment dividends. The challenge, as highlighted by Cornwall (2016), lies in ensuring that empowerment does not become a technocratic buzzword detached from feminist praxis.

Thus, the conceptual and empirical literature together highlight that the shift from welfare to empowerment in West Bengal must be understood as an ongoing process of negotiation between state intent, institutional design, and women's lived experiences.

Historical Evolution of Women's Policies in West Bengal

The trajectory of women's policies in West Bengal reflects India's broader movement from state-led welfare provision to empowerment-based governance. Across seven decades, policy orientations have shifted in both design and intent—from protective welfare to participatory development and finally to transformative empowerment. This gradual but significant evolution can be understood in three major phases: the Welfare Era (1950s-1980s), the Participation Phase (1990s-2000s), and the Empowerment Phase (2011–present). Each phase demonstrates a distinct set of ideological assumptions, administrative strategies, and developmental priorities that together illuminate how gender and governance have been interlinked in West Bengal's social policy history.

1. The Welfare Era (1950s-1980s)

The early decades following India's independence were characterized by a welfare-state orientation aimed at rebuilding the economy and addressing widespread poverty and inequality. In this period, both national and state governments viewed women primarily as dependents requiring protection rather than as active agents of development (Mazumdar, 2007). Consequently, policies for women in West Bengal focused largely on maternal health, nutrition, widow pensions, and social assistance for vulnerable groups (Chatterjee, 2019). These welfare measures were rooted in a paternalistic understanding of women's roles centered around domesticity, reproduction, and care work (Kumar, 1993).

In West Bengal, this approach was further shaped by the socio-political consequences of the Partition of Bengal (1947), which led to massive displacement and poverty. Relief and rehabilitation programs targeted refugee women, offering them housing, rations, and basic employment in cottage industries, yet these interventions rarely addressed the structural inequalities underlying women's marginalization (Sarkar, 2015). Women's identities during this period were largely framed in familial and reproductive terms, and the state's welfare machinery was directed towards the maintenance of social stability rather than gender transformation.

The 1970s, however, brought new global and national attention to women's development. Following the United Nations' declaration of the Decade for Women (1975–1985), Indian policymakers began to recognize women as a separate policy constituency (Ray, 2009). The introduction of programs like the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS, 1975) signified a new stage in welfare governance, focusing on maternal and child health. West Bengal implemented ICDS widely, enhancing access to nutrition and healthcare for poor households. Yet, as feminist scholars note, even such interventions reinforced the image of women as caregivers rather than as autonomous rights-bearing citizens (Kabeer, 1999; Moser, 1993).

This era thus laid the institutional foundation for gender-targeted welfare, but the concept of empowerment remained absent. The state's welfare efforts alleviated immediate hardships without challenging patriarchal hierarchies or redistributing power. Policies remained focused on protection and relief rather than transformation and agency.

2. The Participation Phase (1990s-2000s)

The 1990s marked a turning point in women's policy design, shaped by economic liberalization, decentralization, and the global diffusion of the Gender and Development (GAD) paradigm. Unlike the earlier Women in Development (WID) model, which sought to integrate women into existing development structures, the GAD approach emphasized transforming social relations and enhancing agency (Molyneux, 1985; Sen, 1999). These ideas began to influence policy frameworks across India, including West Bengal.

At the national level, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992) institutionalized local self-governance and reserved one-third of seats for women in panchayats and municipalities. West Bengal, already known for its strong rural political culture, became one of the leading states to implement these provisions effectively (Basu, 2012). The decentralization process encouraged women's active participation in grassroots politics, especially in rural governance. Women began to occupy leadership roles in panchayats, influencing local decisions on education, water, and sanitation. Although initial participation was often symbolic, over time, women's presence in governance expanded their visibility and collective bargaining power (Chakraborty, 2021).

In parallel, the emergence of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) marked the rise of collective economic participation among women. Supported by government programs and institutions such as NABARD, SHGs provided microcredit, savings mechanisms, and capacity-building initiatives that promoted women's financial inclusion (NABARD, 2018). In West Bengal, SHGs later institutionalized through the Anandadhara program became instrumental in linking women's economic participation with social empowerment (Government of West Bengal, 2020). The group model offered not only economic opportunities but also spaces for solidarity, leadership, and political learning.

The participatory phase also coincided with the global shift towards rights-based development. Feminist activists and scholars argued that empowerment required participation in decision-making processes, not just access to welfare benefits (Rowlands, 1997; Kabeer, 2005). West Bengal's local governance reforms and SHG initiatives reflected this ideological change by integrating women into the operational core of development administration. However, critics caution that participation without control over resources or autonomy can reproduce existing hierarchies (Sinha, 2018). In many cases, patriarchal norms and elite capture limited women's agency, while socio-economic inequality continued to shape access to opportunities (Deshpande, 2014). Nevertheless, the participatory model represented a major conceptual break from the welfare approach. It marked women as contributors to, rather than dependents of, development. The shift from top-down service delivery to bottom-up participation set the stage for the next phase, in which empowerment would emerge as both the language and the goal of governance.

3. The Empowerment Phase (2011-Present)

The post-2011 period represents the most decisive transition in West Bengal's gender policy framework. Under successive governments, the state moved from participation-oriented programs to comprehensive empowerment strategies that sought to integrate welfare, education, health, and economic security. This transition was not abrupt but rather an institutional evolution that built upon earlier initiatives while reorienting their purpose toward long-term empowerment.

This period has witnessed the launch of several flagship schemes designed specifically for women's multidimensional empowerment. Kanyashree Prakalpa (2013) promotes girls' education and delays early marriage through conditional cash transfers, Rupashree Prakalpa (2018) provides financial assistance for marriage to economically disadvantaged women, Lakshmi Bhandar (2021) offers income support to women aged 25–60, and Swasthya Sathi (2016) extends cashless health insurance to families, with the woman as the primary cardholder (Government of West Bengal, 2022). These initiatives, complemented by SHG networks under Anandadhara, collectively represent a gendered redefinition of welfare as empowerment.

Rather than merely providing aid, these programs are structured around enabling access to education, healthcare, financial resources, and decision-making power. Scholars have interpreted this shift as evidence of a new policy paradigm one that integrates social justice with developmental efficiency (Banerjee, 2022; Kundu, 2023). The design of such schemes embodies the notion that empowerment entails not only access to resources but also recognition and participation.

However, this empowerment discourse is not without contradictions. Some researchers argue that while the state's schemes have expanded inclusion, they often reinforce the family as the primary site of policy intervention, thereby perpetuating traditional gender roles (Ghosh, 2021). Others caution that empowerment must be assessed not only by access to benefits but also by the transformation of social relations and power hierarchies (Kabeer, 2011).

The historical evolution of women's policies in West Bengal demonstrates a profound ideological shift from welfare dependency to participatory engagement and, finally, to empowerment as a multidimensional goal. The welfare phase (1950s-1980s) established the state's role as a provider of protection; the participation phase (1990s-2000s) redefined women as partners in governance and development; and the empowerment phase (2011-present) institutionalized gender as a cross-cutting policy priority.

This evolution reflects both national and global transformations in gender discourse, moving from needs-based interventions to rights-based frameworks. The state's contemporary gender strategy, embedded within schemes such as Kanyashree, Rupashree, Lakshmi Bhandar, Swasthya Sathi, and Anandadhara, represents a convergence of welfare, participation, and empowerment within a single developmental vision. Yet, as scholars consistently emphasize, empowerment remains an ongoing process one that must extend beyond policy frameworks to address deep-rooted inequalities in access, opportunity, and agency.

Case Analyses of Key Schemes

Kanyashree Prakalpa

Launched in 2013, *Kanyashree Prakalpa* incentivizes girls' education and discourages early marriage through conditional cash transfers. Beneficiaries receive 1000 rupees annually between ages 13-18 and a one-time grant of 25,000 rupees upon turning 18, provided they remain unmarried and continue education (Government of West Bengal, 2022). The scheme has reached over 8 million girls, significantly improving female enrollment and reducing dropout rates (UNICEF, 2021). The initiative won the United Nations Public Service Award in 2017 for "innovation in reaching the poorest." Studies show that *Kanyashree* not only delayed marriage but also enhanced aspirations and educational continuity among adolescent girls (Banerjee, 2020).

Rupashree Prakalpa

Introduced in 2018, *Rupashree Prakalpa* provides a one-time grant of 25,000 rupees to women at the time of marriage. While it offers immediate financial relief to low-income families, critics argue that it reinforces marriage as an end-goal for women rather than promoting autonomy (Das, 2021). However, others note that the scheme ensures safe and dignified marriages by reducing dowry pressures and indebtedness (Mukhopadhyay, 2022).

Lakshmi Bhandar

Launched in 2021, *Lakshmi Bhandar* represents a novel shift toward direct income support for women 500 rupees per month for general category women and 1,000 rupees for SC/ST households. The scheme embodies the idea of recognizing women's unpaid care work and ensuring a minimum guaranteed income (Government of West Bengal, 2022). Initial evaluations indicate that it enhances household consumption stability and women's financial agency (Roy, 2023).

Anandadhara (Self-Help Groups)

As part of the National Rural Livelihood Mission, *Anandadhara* operates as West Bengal's SHG platform fostering collective entrepreneurship, microfinance, and social capital. With over 12 lakh SHGs involving more than 1.3 crore women, it has emerged as one of India's most robust models of collective empowerment (NABARD, 2022). Studies indicate that participation in SHGs increases women's decision-making power, savings, and mobility (Chakraborty & Sen, 2020).

Swasthya Sathi

The *Swasthya Sathi* health insurance scheme provides cashless medical coverage for women-headed households, ensuring financial protection during health crises. It complements empowerment by reducing healthcare vulnerability and recognizing women as primary health decision-makers (Bhattacharya, 2022).

Discussion and Analysis

The policy evolution in West Bengal signifies a marked and deliberate transition from protectionist welfare models toward participatory and empowerment-oriented frameworks, reflecting broader global discourses on gender and development. In earlier decades, the state's women-focused policies were largely welfare-based, emphasizing social protection and relief. Over time, however, West Bengal's policy orientation has shifted toward fostering women's autonomy, agency, and inclusion in decision-making a transition that resonates with Amartya Sen's (1999) capability approach, which conceptualizes empowerment as the expansion of individuals' substantive freedoms and abilities to lead the kind of lives they value. This shift represents not merely a change in program design but a redefinition of women's role in development, from passive recipients of aid to active participants and contributors to social transformation.

The Kanyashree Prakalpa epitomizes this new direction by linking welfare support with long-term human capital formation. By providing financial incentives for girls' education and delaying early marriage, it has enhanced school retention and created behavioral shifts in gender norms. The program's international recognition, including the UN Public Service Award, underscores its success in demonstrating that social investment in education can yield transformative empowerment outcomes (UNDP, 2017). Similarly, Anandadhara, West Bengal's version of the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), exemplifies collective agency and economic self-reliance through women's self-help groups (SHGs). These groups have emerged as community-based institutions of microfinance and solidarity, enhancing women's decision-making power both within households and at the village level (NABARD, 2018). Together, these initiatives mark a strategic move toward capability-based empowerment, emphasizing skill development, financial inclusion, and community participation.

Yet, the relationship between welfare and empowerment remains deeply complex. The Rupashree Prakalpa, while designed to provide financial assistance for marriage expenses, risks perpetuating patriarchal expectations that tie women's social security to marital status. This illustrates how well-intentioned welfare programs can inadvertently reinforce gendered norms rather than dismantle them (Chakraborty, 2021). Likewise, Lakshmi Bhandar, aimed at providing a basic income to women from low-income households, addresses economic vulnerability but cannot, on its own, ensure sustainable empowerment without complementary measures such as skill training, employment generation, and market integration (Roy, 2023). True empowerment thus demands a multidimensional approach that includes not just income security but also enhanced access to education, healthcare, mobility, and representation in local governance (Kabeer, 2005; Cornwall & Rivas, 2015).

Moreover, women's empowerment in West Bengal is shaped by regional disparities. Urban women tend to benefit more from educational opportunities, digital inclusion, and exposure to institutional resources, while rural women remain constrained by limited mobility, unpaid care work, and entrenched gender hierarchies. Social conservatism in rural areas often impedes women's participation in the labor market and political processes, underscoring the need for localized strategies that integrate empowerment objectives into community-level planning. Intersectional challenges, including caste, class, and religious inequalities, further mediate women's access to empowerment programs (Mukherjee, 2022). Therefore, policy effectiveness depends not only on program design but also on context-sensitive implementation that recognizes women's diverse realities.

In sum, the state's shift from welfare to empowerment in West Bengal reflects both progress and paradox. While education- and livelihood-based schemes such as Kanyashree and Anandadhara exemplify transformative empowerment, schemes like Rupashree and Lakshmi Bhandar reveal the persistent tension between welfare relief and sustainable autonomy. Genuine empowerment must extend beyond financial transfers to foster institutional accountability, gender-sensitive governance, and normative change. Only through such integrative and intersectional approaches can West Bengal's policies achieve the vision of empowerment ensuring that women are not just beneficiaries of welfare but agents of social and economic transformation.

Challenges and Structural Barriers

1. Patriarchal Norms

Deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes continue to dominate social and cultural institutions in West Bengal, restricting women's ability to make independent decisions regarding education, employment, and marriage (Chakraborty, 2021). Families and communities often prioritize traditional gender roles, thereby limiting women's mobility and participation in public life. This entrenched social mindset undermines the intended transformative outcomes of empowerment schemes by reinforcing dependency on male authority.

2. Economic Dependence

Many women beneficiaries rely on state-provided cash transfers such as Lakshmi Bhandar or Rupashree, but these benefits alone do not create pathways to sustainable economic independence (Das, 2021). Without complementary livelihood training, access to credit, or integration into the labor market, such financial support risks reinforcing dependence rather than fostering autonomy. The absence of long-term employment strategies prevents women from translating welfare benefits into lasting empowerment.

3. Implementation Gaps

Administrative inefficiencies, cumbersome documentation processes, and unequal digital literacy across regions create significant barriers to accessing government schemes (UNDP, 2022). Many rural women lack awareness of eligibility criteria or face delays due to bureaucratic red tape. These challenges weaken program outreach and result in exclusion of the most marginalized groups from state support.

4. Rural–Urban Divide

The impact of women’s welfare and empowerment policies remains uneven across regions, with urban women benefiting more due to better access to infrastructure, education, and technology. In contrast, rural women face barriers such as inadequate transportation, poor connectivity, and lower awareness of entitlements. This divide perpetuates inequality and restricts the inclusivity of empowerment outcomes.

5. Limited Political Representation

Although the constitutional amendments have reserved seats for women in local governance, their representation often remains symbolic rather than substantive (Sinha, 2018). Many elected women leaders continue to operate under the influence of male family members or local power structures. The lack of gender-sensitive political training and institutional support further limits their effectiveness in influencing policy and decision-making processes.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

1. Integrate Skill and Employment Components

The government must integrate structured skill training, entrepreneurship development, and employment linkages within schemes such as Lakshmi Bhandar and Rupashree Prakalpa. By connecting welfare assistance with income-generating activities, women can transition from passive recipients to active economic agents. Establishing partnerships with vocational institutes and private enterprises can further promote sustainable livelihoods and long-term empowerment.

2. Shift in Messaging

Policy narratives should actively reframe women’s roles from “dependents” to “contributors” within social and economic structures. In particular, marriage-related schemes like Rupashree must promote agency and self-reliance rather than reinforcing traditional gender expectations. Public communication campaigns and community outreach programs can help reshape societal perceptions of women’s autonomy and aspirations.

3. Strengthen Monitoring and Evaluation

The state should develop robust gender-disaggregated data systems and adopt mixed-methods evaluations to assess the real impact of welfare schemes (Roy, 2023). Transparent and periodic monitoring mechanisms will ensure accountability, identify policy gaps, and guide evidence-based redesign for better outcomes.

4. Promote Collective Agency

Strengthening self-help group (SHG) federations, women’s cooperatives, and community-based organizations is essential for building social capital. Encouraging women’s collective participation in planning and decision-making will deepen democratic engagement and institutionalize empowerment at the grassroots level.

5. Digital Empowerment

Expanding women’s access to digital literacy programs and mobile-based platforms for registration, grievance redressal, and financial transactions can enhance transparency and inclusion. Digital empowerment will not only simplify administrative processes but also foster technological confidence among rural women.

Conclusion

West Bengal’s shift from welfare to empowerment in women’s policy design represents a transformative reorientation in state governance. The integration of social protection with education, financial inclusion, and health security marks significant progress toward gender equality. However, empowerment remains a multidimensional process requiring structural transformation in socio-economic relations and institutional practices.

Schemes such as Kanyashree Prakalpa, Rupashree Prakalpa, and Lakshmi Bhandar have contributed meaningfully to improving women’s educational attainment, financial stability, and social dignity. Kanyashree has encouraged higher education and delayed early marriages, while Rupashree has offered immediate relief to economically vulnerable families. Lakshmi Bhandar, in turn, has provided a crucial income safety net for women across diverse socio-economic contexts. Yet, these initiatives must evolve beyond welfare delivery to nurture women’s autonomy, agency, and participation in decision-making processes.

True empowerment lies not merely in cash assistance or access to benefits but in expanding women’s choices, voices, and control over resources. For empowerment to be sustainable, future policy design in West Bengal must integrate skill development, employment opportunities, and political representation. By linking welfare with capacity-building and leadership enhancement, the state can ensure that women become not only beneficiaries but also active architects of social and economic transformation a vision aligned with the broader goals of inclusive development and gender justice.

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