



## EMPOWERING ADOLESCENT GIRLS: ROLE OF KANYASHREE PRAKALPA IN CAPACITY BUILDING THROUGH EDUCATION IN WEST BENGAL

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### Abstract

This study offers a thorough analysis of the Kanyashree Prakalpa, a prominent conditional cash transfer initiative in West Bengal, assessing its efficacy in empowering teenage girls since its launch in 2013. The research analyses the scheme's educational, social, and economic ramifications, providing a comprehensive evaluation of its differential impacts across several caste categories (General, Scheduled Caste, and Scheduled Tribe) and geographical regions. The research, derived from a synthesis of scholarly studies, governmental reports, and journalistic sources, concludes that the policy has been largely successful in achieving its primary objectives of improving educational attainment and reducing child marriage and has received considerable national and international recognition. The analysis reveals persistent problems, including the continued prevalence of child marriage in certain areas, possibly insufficient financial support for some individuals, and a notable disparity in accessibility and effectiveness for the most marginalised groups. The main argument posits that while Kanyashree is a successful and lauded initiative, its long-term efficacy requires a shift from a purely conditional cash transfer model to a holistic "cash-plus" approach that includes vocational training, skill development, and robust community support to address the complex socio-economic and cultural factors perpetuating gender inequality.

**Keywords:** *Kanyashree, Capacity Building, Caste, Women Empowerment, Conditional Cash Transfer*

#### Introduction

The Kanyashree Prakalpa was established as a targeted social program to address the significant challenges faced by adolescent girls in West Bengal. Before the plan commenced in 2013, the state demonstrated a notable prevalence of child marriage and alarmingly high female school dropout rates, circumstances that were intrinsically linked and mutually exacerbating. This pervasive issue was not merely a matter of individual choices but was deeply rooted in a complex network of socio-economic factors. Gender stereotypes, conventional conventions, and dowry expectations sometimes led parents to view their daughters as economic burdens rather than as worthwhile investments in education. Consequently, orchestrating an early marriage for a daughter was perceived as a strategy to secure her future and preserve the family's dignity, while perpetuating a cycle of poverty and disempowerment.

Statistical data from nationwide polls underscores the severity of this situation. The District Level Household Survey (DLHS-3) conducted in 2007-08 revealed that West Bengal ranked fifth in India for child marriage prevalence, with 54.7% of girls being child brides. This figure significantly deviated from the national average, highlighting the state's unique vulnerability. Furthermore, educational data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) revealed a substantial reduction in school attendance for girls, plummeting from 85% in the 6-10 age bracket to merely 33% for those aged 15 to 17 years. The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for girls has experienced a substantial decline, from 88% at the elementary level to only 33.3% at the higher secondary level, indicating a disproportionate attrition of girls from the educational system during adolescence. This institutional withdrawal from education limited their future growth, leaving them unprepared for the job market and susceptible to persistent poverty and exploitation. The Kanyashree Prakalpa was designed as a direct intervention to disrupt this cycle by making investment in a girl's education and delayed marriage monetarily beneficial for her family.

**The Design of the Policy:** The Kanyashree Prakalpa is a Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) initiative, a policy framework that provides financial aid based on beneficiaries fulfilling specified behavioural criteria. The main goal of the initiative is to improve the status and well-being of girls, especially those from low-income families, by promoting education and discouraging early marriage. The policy's strategic financial architecture aims to alter the cost-benefit calculus for families, making the choice to

educate a daughter more appealing than facilitating her early marriage. The initiative aimed to enhance financial inclusion and empowerment by depositing rewards directly into bank accounts registered in the girls’ names, thus providing them greater control over their resources. This design has garnered support from UNICEF, which actively contributed to the formulation of the scheme’s guidelines and advocacy materials.

The scheme operates through two primary components:

- **Annual Scholarship (K1):** This component provides an annual scholarship of Rs. 1,000. The scheme provides an annual scholarship of Rs. The scheme offers a financial incentive of 1,000 to unmarried girls who are enrolled in Class VIII or higher. The initiative provides 1,000 to unmarried girls aged 13 to 18 who are enrolled in Class VIII or above. This continuous financial incentive is a crucial motivator for girls to remain in the educational system throughout their critical adolescent years, providing a regular and reliable source of support for school-related expenses.
- **One-Time Grant (K2):** This is a substantial grant of Rs. 25,000 paid to girls upon turning 18, provided they are unmarried and are still engaged in an academic, vocational, or sports pursuit. This significant lump sum acts as a powerful financial opportunity that directly competes with the socio-economic pressures of early marriage and dowry, offering a tangible reward for delaying marriage and continuing education.

The project includes an additional upgrade, the K3 scholarship, which provides a monthly stipend for female students pursuing postgraduate studies, thereby expanding the policy’s reach to foster further education and ongoing empowerment. Eligibility depends on a family income limit of ₹120,000 per year; however, this criterion is waived for females with a physical disability of 40% or more, those who are orphaned, or those residing in a facility registered under the Juvenile Justice Act, 2000. But now there is no longer any income barrier; Kanyashree is now for everyone. The requirement for awards to be deposited directly into the girl’s bank account is essential, promoting financial inclusion and granting recipients greater control over their finances. This strategic plan elevates the endeavour from a rudimentary charity programme to a comprehensive framework for economic and social empowerment.

Component	Description	Eligibility Criteria	Purpose
<b>Annual Scholarship (K1)</b>	₹1,000 per year	Unmarried girls, 13–18 years old, enrolled in Class VIII or higher, with a family income of up to ₹1,20,000/year.	This program encourages girls to continue their education throughout their adolescence, thereby lowering the rate of dropouts.
<b>One-Time Grant (K2)</b>	₹25,000 one-time	Unmarried girls, 18-19 years old, enrolled in education/training/sports.	It provides a financial alternative to early marriage and dowry and supports higher education.
<b>Post-Graduate Scholarship (K3)</b>	₹2,000-₹2,500 per month	The candidate must be registered for K2, have passed UG with at least 45%, and will be pursuing PG studies.	Encourages long-term educational attainment and self-sufficiency.

### Impact on Capacity Building

**Academic Achievement and Retention:** A lot of research shows that Kanyashree Prakalpa has had a big and positive effect on the education of girls. The programme has successfully increased the number of students who enrol in school and lowered the number of students who drop out, which was one of the main goals of the policy. Very thorough academic research that used the difference-in-differences method and data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) found that the program increased the chances of getting a secondary or higher education by 6%. This quantitative finding is supported by qualitative data, as one study indicated that most participants responded positively to the effort, with 94% expressing a strong desire to pursue additional education, reflecting a considerable shift in their expectations.

The real importance of better memory retention goes beyond just how long a girl is in school. The program uses money to keep females at school, which is the main way they can improve their skills. Being in school for a long time provides you more than just academic knowledge; it also helps you grow socially, emotionally, and mentally. This constant learning process builds up girls’ self-esteem, social power, and feeling of self-worth, which goes against the traditional idea that girls are inferior in patriarchal countries. The funds provided by Kanyashree are not an end in themselves but a means to an end, with education being the primary avenue for a girl’s improved status in both economic and social spheres.

**Prevention of Child Marriage:** The initiative’s impact on child marriage presents a complex narrative of minimal success and persistent challenges. Academic analysis substantiates that the Kanyashree initiative has successfully achieved its primary purpose. The aforementioned research paper determined that the programme decreased the likelihood of child marriage by 6.7%. Moreover, the study indicates that the incidence of child marriage has “considerably diminished in several districts” subsequent to the implementation of the system. The programme has effectively transformed the perspectives of adolescent girls and their parents towards early marriage, resulting in girls becoming more aware of their rights and, in certain instances, independently deciding on marriage. A study utilising survey data indicates that Kanyashree has “to some extent” succeeded in preventing child marriage in rural regions by incentivising families to delay marriage until after the age of 18.

Nonetheless, their accomplishments are assessed in light of conflicting information. Notwithstanding the scheme’s commendable initiatives, recent Sample Registration System (SRS) data indicates that West Bengal continues to exhibit the highest percentage

of females married before the age of 18 in India, at 6.3%. An article published in the prestigious scientific publication Lancet similarly emphasised the state's ongoing challenges with its elevated rates of child marriage. This striking contrast between a policy's efficacy and the ongoing issue underscores a significant policy difficulty. The Kanyashree initiative, albeit being a potent targeted intervention, cannot independently surmount the deeply rooted socio-economic constraints that precipitate early marriage. The analysis reveals that during economic crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, families experiencing income loss may resort to marrying off underage girls as a survival tactic, demonstrating that severe poverty and profound insecurity can surpass the financial incentives offered by the programme.

**Increasing Social and Psychological Empowerment:** In addition to its quantifiable benefits for enrolment and child marriage, the Kanyashree Prakalpa has significantly influenced the social and psychological well-being of its beneficiaries. The initiative aims to augment the "social power and self-esteem of girls" with a targeted strategy for behaviour change communication. This concept transcends basic cash assistance by integrating youth-orientated efforts, including events, competitions, Kanyashree clubs, and the promotion of influential female role models to foster empowerment.

This method has produced tangible outcomes. Research on self-perception among beneficiaries revealed that Kanyashree females are better positioned than their non-beneficiary peers, regardless of caste background, with no significant disparities in attitudes among other caste groups. The initiative effectively establishes a novel social identity—termed the "Kanyashree girl"—linked to education, autonomy, and empowerment. This identity directly challenges the traditional perception of a girl as merely a commodity for home and marriage. Moreover, beneficiaries have transformed into agents of social change, orchestrating awareness campaigns on several topics, including health, sanitation, and child protection. The administration at the block and district levels has utilised these girls to engage with communities and prevent child marriages, showcasing their acquired social influence and self-assurance.

### **Dimension of Capacity Building**

- 1. School enrolment (ages 13–18):** The enrolment rate of girls aged 13–18 in West Bengal increased from 79.8% in 2014 to 89.8% in 2016, reflecting a 10-percentage-point rise, notably with significant improvements in rural regions. Increased and maintained attendance at the secondary level signifies the enhancement of educational potential, as a greater number of girls progress and persist in higher grades instead of discontinuing their education throughout adolescence. The dropout rate for girls at the secondary level decreased from 23.06% in 2012-13 to 19.79% in 2015-16 following the implementation of Kanyashree, which the government identified as a significant contributing factor.
- 2. School attendance (Classes VIII–XII):** Average attendance in 12 sampled schools rose from 72% (2011–12) to 75% (2013–14) following the implementation of Kanyashree; 10 out of 12 schools indicated an increase in female attendance. Enhanced daily attendance bolsters learning outcomes, examination performance, and consistent engagement in school activities, thereby cultivating academic abilities and discipline among adolescent girls. Rapid Assessment indicates perceived changes: girls express increased confidence in pursuing school, enhanced ability to withstand pressure for early marriage, and report elevated aspirations.
- 3. Decreased incidence of child marriage:** A study utilising survey data indicates that Kanyashree has "to some extent" succeeded in preventing child marriage in rural regions by incentivising families to delay marriage until after the age of 18. The decrease in underage marriages prolongs girls' youth, enabling them to complete secondary and higher secondary education while developing social, health, and economic competencies prior to marriage.
- 4. Financial Inclusion:** Banking Accounts In the Pratchi research sample, 85.1% of girls aged 13–21 have individual bank accounts; the prevalence was 87.5% in rural regions and 78.5% in urban areas. In 12 rapid-assessment schools, about 10,286 new minor accounts were established for Kanyashree recipients. Possessing and managing bank accounts, along with receiving direct deposits, enhances financial literacy, fosters monetary management, and increases negotiating power within the household.
- 5. Participation and Leadership of Girls (Kanyashree Clubs):** The shift from personal financial assistance to collaborative engagement signifies a girl's transformation from a recipient to a participant. The Kanyashree Prakalpa's financial transfers offer the necessary economic incentive to retain girls in school, while the Kanyashree Chhatri Sangha (Clubs) fosters the social influence that cultivates enduring agency. By establishing formal committees with elected officials, girls transcend the position of passive beneficiaries. In these positions, they oversee sub-committees focused on hygiene, sports, and discipline, reflecting the operations of municipal institutions. This practical experience in governance imparts the essential principles of democracy, including accountability, collective decision-making, and organisational management, before to their attainment of adulthood.
- 6. Empowerment, self-assurance, decision-making:** Girls indicate enhanced self-esteem, improved public speaking skills, and greater capacity to negotiate with parents over education and marriage; the authors conclude that Kanyashree "significantly empowers adolescent girls in West Bengal."
- 7. Awareness of the legal marriage age:** A significant percentage of adolescent girls (ages 13–21) accurately identified 18 years as the legal age for females and 21 for males; awareness levels increased where Kanyashree and SABLA intersected. Understanding the legislation and the ramifications of early marriage enhances legal and protective capabilities, empowering girls to oppose early marriage and engage in negotiations with their families.
- 8. Participation and Aspirations in Higher Education:** A study on higher education reveals that the reduction of child marriage through Kanyashree has enhanced the appeal of higher education for young women and elevated their educational

goals. College-enrolled beneficiaries report increased financial freedom, enhanced mobility, greater involvement in campus activities, and a heightened feeling of gender equality among Kanyashree grantees.

- 9. Comprehensive scheme overview and connections to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):** The official portal highlights the enhancement of the status and welfare of girls from underprivileged households via conditional financial transfers to ensure their continued education and postpone marriage, in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals pertaining to gender equality and education.

### **An Analysis by Caste and Regional Demographics**

**Differential Impacts Across Caste Categories:** A fundamental principle of the Kanyashree Prakalpa is its universal eligibility determined by socio-economic condition rather than caste. The financial conditions of the initiative, including waivers for specific vulnerable groups, are intended to guarantee that help is provided to all socio-economically disadvantaged households, irrespective of their caste. Practice has primarily demonstrated the effectiveness of this design. Research findings indicate that once girls are enlisted as beneficiaries, the program universally advantages them. A study revealed that “all caste category beneficiaries exhibit superior self-perception” compared to non-beneficiaries and that “no significant differences in attitudes exist among various caste groups.” This discovery substantiates the policy’s framework and affirms that its advantages are widely encompassing.

Nevertheless, an examination of the data uncovers a significant disparity between the policy’s inclusive objectives and the actuality of its execution. A 2017 study from the Pratichi Institute indicated that the rejection rate for the plan was the highest among Scheduled Tribes (ST), at 12.3%. This discovery suggests a multifaceted set of obstacles that disproportionately impact marginalised populations. This obstacle may result from supply-side challenges, like insufficient awareness and outreach in distant tribal regions, or bureaucratic obstacles in obtaining essential documents such as birth certificates or bank accounts. Alternatively, it may be a demand-side issue, wherein entrenched cultural norms concerning education and marriage within specific communities exhibit resistance to change, resulting in families rejecting the scheme’s benefits despite financial eligibility. For genuine equity, the scheme must not only be universally accessible in theory but also confront these particular culturally and logistically entrenched barriers encountered by the most marginalised.

**Geographic and Regional Discrepancies:** The effects of the Kanyashree Prakalpa vary throughout different regions of West Bengal. A comparative analysis between the socio-economically advanced district of Kolkata and the less developed district of Purulia revealed that the initiative had a “greater impact” in Purulia. This discovery aligns with the idea of decreasing returns in social policy. In a region such as Purulia, characterised by pervasive poverty and historically constrained educational possibilities, a conditional cash transfer serves as a crucial and substantial safeguard against the demands of early marriage. The financial incentive acts as a more effective trigger for behavioural change in a context where resource scarcity is the principal obstacle to education.

In contrast, in a developed urban environment like Kolkata, where education and postponed marriage are prevalent social norms for several households, the Kanyashree award may be regarded as an additional benefit rather than a revolutionary incentive. Certain urban girls and their families have articulated the viewpoint that the initiative is more appropriate for “rural, impoverished families.” This gap illustrates that the policy is generally effective, but its transformative impact is most significant in the regions that require it the most. A survey revealed that awareness levels of the system varied significantly across rural and urban students.

### **Critical Assessment**

The Kanyashree Prakalpa has received extensive acclaim as a paradigm for public service delivery, showcasing notable characteristics in its design and execution.

#### **Advantages of the Scheme**

- **Framework of Effective Governance:** The scheme is acknowledged for its comprehensive IT enablement, a framework that enhances efficiency, transparency, and accountability in fund disbursement. This digital infrastructure corresponds with extensive national initiatives and has garnered many e-governance awards for the program.
- **Global Acknowledgement:** The strategy has received significant worldwide recognition, particularly by earning the United Nations Public Service Award in 2017. This acknowledgement highlights its creative design and replicability as a global paradigm for empowering adolescent girls. The initiative coincides with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) concerning education, health, gender equality, and poverty alleviation.
- **Multifaceted Influence:** The program has demonstrated its efficacy as a diverse instrument for social advancement. It has not only diminished school dropout rates and child marriage but has also cultivated social consciousness and facilitated self-employment chances for certain individuals.

**Limitations and Deficiencies:** Notwithstanding these achievements, a thorough assessment uncovers some significant deficiencies and shortcomings that must be rectified for the initiative to attain its maximum potential.

- **Inadequate Resolution to Child Marriage:** Although it has yielded beneficial outcomes, the plan alone does not constitute a comprehensive solution to the complex issue of child marriage. The elevated prevalence of child marriage in West Bengal, notwithstanding the program’s implementation, indicates that financial incentives alone are unable to tackle the intricate nexus of poverty, insecurity, and lack of physical autonomy that renders young girls susceptible to premature marriage.

During economic crises, such as the COVID-19 epidemic, families experiencing loss of income may turn to marrying off underage girls as a survival tactic, circumventing the program's incentives.

- **Inadequate Financial Incentive:** Certain studies suggest that the value of scholarships and grants may be insufficient for all recipients, especially for deserving students with elevated school costs. This indicates that although the program offers an incentive, it may not completely mitigate the financial strain of education for all worthy females.
- **Implementation Gaps:** The investigation has shown some implementation issues. A study revealed that numerous households are oblivious to the scheme's conditions, so constraining its outreach, especially in distant regions. Additionally, certain students have been noted departing from school immediately upon receiving the K2 stipend, a behaviour that, although not prevalent, underscores a potential gap in the policy's primary aim of fostering persistent higher study.

### Recommendations and Policy Proposals

To rectify the stated deficiencies and obstacles, the Kanyashree Prakalpa must transition from its existing structure to a more holistic "Cash-Plus" model, amalgamating cash assistance with an extensive array of ancillary services.

**Enhancing the "Cash-Plus" Model:** The current behavioural change communication plan has a strong basis; nevertheless, it requires enhancement to incorporate comprehensive vocational training and skill development initiatives. The primary objective of women's empowerment is not merely to postpone marriage but to attain financial independence and self-sufficiency. By explicitly associating the K2 grant and post-18 education with marketable skills, the initiative can empower recipients to break the generational cycle of poverty and exploitation, hence reducing their susceptibility to early marriage. Offering training in food preservation and processing, as well as business coaching for individuals seeking to utilise their K2 grant to establish a cyber or stationary shop, would be a rational progression in this development. Case studies indicate that beneficiaries have utilised their K2 grant to achieve self-employment, such as purchasing a sewing machine or establishing a nursery. This strategy would establish the Kanyashree girl as an entrepreneur and economic contributor, a formidable identity that would inherently discourage early marriage.

**Enhancing Targeting and Execution:** To mitigate the elevated rejection rates and insufficient awareness within the most marginalised populations, the implementation strategy must adopt a more proactive approach. This would entail a transition from a passive, institution-centric application procedure to a more proactive, community-oriented outreach paradigm. Dedicated community workers could implement door-to-door campaigns in remote and tribal areas, streamlining the application process and offering direct assistance to families in acquiring essential documentation, rather than depending on girls and their families for information. Revising the income threshold and increasing the grant amounts should be contemplated to maintain the policy's relevance and ensuring its incentives are sufficiently robust to contend with escalating living costs and school expenditures.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the Kanyashree Prakalpa is a globally acknowledged and highly efficacious conditional cash transfer program that has significantly enhanced the scholastic level and welfare of adolescent girls in West Bengal. The policy has effectively catalysed societal change by intentionally incentivising education and postponing marriage, thereby empowering a new generation of young women. The investigation verifies its extensive performance in augmenting school enrolment, diminishing dropout rates, and favourably influencing the self-perception of recipients across all caste categories.

Nonetheless, the scheme's progression is far from complete. The ongoing prevalence of child marriage and its varying effects on marginalised groups, particularly Scheduled Tribes, indicate that policy must be modified and developed. Their future success depends on transcending a solely financial motivation to evolve into a comprehensive social and economic empowerment initiative. By implementing a "Cash-Plus" model that combines financial assistance with skills training and a more proactive, community-oriented approach, Kanyashree can advance towards its primary objective: to ensure not only a girl's right to education and postponed marriage but also her complete potential for an independent, self-sufficient, and dignified existence. This continual growth will guarantee that the policy remains a symbol of advancement in the persistent struggle for gender parity.

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