

# Women Education in West Bengal: Initiatives and Challenges

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**Abstract** — *Despite strides in literacy rates, West Bengal grapples with a persistent gender gap in education. This paper explores the multifaceted challenges hindering women's educational attainment in the state, such as poverty, socio-cultural attitudes, and safety concerns. It further examines initiatives undertaken by the government and NGOs, including scholarship programs, girls' hostels, and awareness campaigns. By critically analyzing these initiatives, the paper aims to assess their effectiveness and suggest areas for improvement to achieve gender parity in education. This research contributes valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and social workers working towards this goal.*

**Index Terms** — *Women's Education, Gender Gap, Socio-Cultural factors, Government Initiatives, Barriers to Girls' Education.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper delves into the challenges hindering women's education in West Bengal and analyzes initiatives to bridge the gender gap. Despite progress, the state struggles with female educational disadvantage, resulting in a literacy rate of 76.26%, with 81.69% of males and 70.54% of females being literate. The gross enrollment ratio for grades 1-8 in 2022 was 108.5% overall, slightly higher for females. The government and NGOs have implemented schemes such as scholarships, hostels, and awareness campaigns, but more suitable measures are needed. Factors like poverty, socio-cultural attitudes, safety, and infrastructure are also examined. This research aims to assess these initiatives' effectiveness and provide insights for policymakers and educators working towards gender parity in education.

## II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

According to Sarkar & Chakraborty (2021), Gender inequality in India is reflected in its low ranking of 132

out of 187 countries on the gender inequality index. The literacy rate among women in India is significantly lower than men, with a 16.68 percent gap as of 2011. Some districts, like PurbaMedinipur and Kolkata, have higher literacy rates for both genders, while others such as Maldah and Murshidabad lag behind. In Purulia district, blocks like Jhalda-II, Arsha, and Baghmundi have the highest male-female literacy gap. In North 24 Parganas, blocks like Sandeshkhali-II, Hingaljanj, and Barrackpur-I also show gender disparities in literacy. These differences may be influenced by geographic location, with Purulia lacking development and North 24 Parganas benefiting from proximity to Kolkata. Despite government efforts, the gender gap in literacy persists. Prioritizing underprivileged districts and implementing policies to raise literacy rates and abolish gender inequality should be the focus of the Central and State Governments. Mondal, P. (2018). Conducted 'Problematic Issues and Successive Status of Women Education in West Bengal'. This mainly deals with how the education of women is essential for the development of the future generations. The children learn from their mothers and when the mother is well educated, it will help the child to focus on their studies and become an asset for not only West Bengal but for the world as a whole. It also states that women's education is essential in Bengal for the state to be fully developed. Mir, N. (2018). Conducted 'The impact of Kanyashree scheme in West Bengal'. The brainchild of the CM of Bengal Mamata Benerjee has been discussed here. The study primarily focuses on how the Kanyashree Prakalpa, also known as the Kanyashree Scheme is a flagship program for reducing the number of female child marriages, empowering teenage girls, and encouraging girls' education to become competent and independent adults. Girls of lower income family aging between 13-15, gets a Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) and how it impacts West Bengal and India. Biswas, S., & Deb, P. (2019)

conducted 'Role of Public Libraries in Empowering Women of Lalgola Community Development Block in Murshidabad district of West Bengal: An Analysis from Parents' Perception'. According to this article, the Bengal Public Libraries Act was passed on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1979. West Bengal has a State Central Library, district library and other libraries. The condition of libraries in West Bengal which was started with the aim of disseminating information was not good as most librarians are leaving which leads to the library being open for 2-3 days. The focus is on the impact of public libraries on women empowerment and how one-time Kanyashree grant has affect on the parents as well as the education of the girl child. Dey, A. K., & Sarkar, D. (2013), conducted a study on 'Deprivation of Women in Education in West Bengal'. Gender inequalities persist globally, with women facing unequal income, property ownership, and status. Developing nations, in particular, experience severe female deprivation due to poverty, while conservative attitudes hinder progress in affluent countries. Achieving gender equality is crucial for resource distribution, access to education and healthcare, and attaining one's potential. It also brings instrumental benefits, like improved efficiency. This study focuses on educational inequalities in West Bengal, India, where rural and marginalized communities struggle to provide equal opportunities for girls and women. Disparities exist between rural males and females, urban females, and those from scheduled and minority groups. Gender-sensitive planning and budgeting must be implemented to bridge educational gaps. Paul, P. (2020) Conducted a study on the topic 'Child marriage among girls in India: Prevalence, trends and socio-economic correlates' Child marriage is prevalent among uneducated, poor, and rural women. Research shows that a household's education and wealth are key factors influencing female child marriage in India. Girls and young women with higher education are less likely to marry before 18, while poverty increases the likelihood of child marriage. Addressing these issues through education and financial support can eliminate this harmful practice. Sengupta, P., & Guha, J. (2002) Worked on 'Enrolment, dropout and grade completion of girl children in West Bengal'. Household resource variables, such as parental education, particularly that of the mother, the father's employment, and family money, were some of the most powerful enabling

factors for females' school attendance and grade attainment. As anticipated, there was a large positive correlation between urban living and education outcomes, and noteworthy cohort effects were noted. Participation in the labor force by a girl kid greatly decreased the desire for and quantity of education received. Additionally, caste and religion were found to be significant determinants of education. Ghosh, B. (2011) Worked on 'Early marriage of girls in contemporary Bengal: A field view'. Since the beginning of time, early girl marriage has been a societal issue in India, and it still exists now for a variety of historical and contemporary reasons. Despite Bengali social reformers' attention being drawn to the matter in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, child marriage collusion persists in West Bengal as well. Adolescent girls' demands are acknowledged by rural stakeholders in an authoritarian and patriarchal manner, notwithstanding the implementation of legislative and administrative remedies. This has resulted in issues with girls' ability to finish their education, particularly in rural areas. Komarovskiy, M. (2004) conducted 'Women in the modern world: Their education and their dilemmas (Vol. 6)'. This study examines the biological differences between men and women and how they shape social roles. The researcher refutes common arguments by reviewing studies on cognitive abilities, achievement, and psychological predispositions. Additionally, the study highlights the negative impact of socialization on gender equality and the lives and relationships of men and women. Specifically, it mentions the experiences of bright and ambitious women at Barnard College after World War II, who often felt trapped by societal expectations. The study emphasizes the costs women face when choosing between domestic roles and other alternatives. Hamdan, A. (2005) in his 'Women and education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and achievements', The focus is on the position of women in Saudi Arabia regarding education. The country has been criticized for its treatment of women, who are denied basic education due to their perceived support for men. In the 1980s, women were allowed access to education, with more female humanities graduates than males. However, the mixing of genders was prohibited, limiting subject choices. This restriction remains a significant barrier to women's education in Saudi Arabia.

### III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- 3.1 To understand the problems associated with women education in West Bengal especially in the rural areas.
- 3.2 To comprehend the actions that various authorities have taken.

### IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 4.1 To what extent do socio-cultural attitudes, such as child marriage or prioritizing boys' education, contribute to the gender gap in education attainment for girls in West Bengal?
- 4.2 How effective are the existing scholarship programs and girls' hostels in West Bengal in increasing access to and completion of education for girls from underprivileged backgrounds?
- 4.3 How can awareness campaigns be tailored to effectively address safety concerns that deter parents from sending their daughters to school in West Bengal?
- 4.4 What are the potential areas for collaboration between the West Bengal government, NGOs, and communities to create a more sustainable and impactful approach towards achieving gender parity in education?

### V. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The research paper explores a critical social issue – the gender gap in education for West Bengal. A qualitative approach is well-suited to delve into the complexities of this topic. The method serves as a road map, describing the steps needed to obtain information and generate valid and reliable results. It typically comprises of the following fundamental components: journal analysis and net research.

➤ Objective 3.1 : To *understand the problems associated with women education in West Bengal especially in the rural areas.*

The chosen articles that have been provided in this paper highlights the critical need to understand the problems associated with women's education in West Bengal, particularly in rural areas. Here's why this objective is important:

*Persistent Gender Gap:* Studies by Sarkar & Chakraborty (2021) and Dey et al. (2013) reveal a

significant gender gap in literacy rates across West Bengal, with rural areas faring worse. This disparity hinders overall development and social progress.

*Impact on Future Generations:* As Mondal (2018) emphasizes, educated mothers can significantly influence their children's educational attainment. Mothers are known to be the first teacher of a child. Therefore, they should be given the required education and empowerment to raise their child in the best way possible. By addressing the educational needs of women, the society can empower future generations.

*Limited Effectiveness of Existing Initiatives:* While schemes like Kanyashree (Mir, 2018) offer financial incentives, research by Biswas & Deb (2019) suggests issues with library infrastructure and parental perceptions. Understanding these limitations is crucial for improving program effectiveness. This would be helpful in ensuring that West Bengal as a state is able to better focus on the education of their women.

*Socio-Economic Factors:* Studies by Sengupta & Guha (2002), Ghosh (2011), and Paul (2020) point towards poverty, child marriage, and limited family resources as major barriers. Addressing these issues requires a multi-pronged approach. Working with local communities to change attitudes towards girls' education and empower women (Hamdan, 2005) is crucial for long-term success.

*Global Relevance:* Komarovskiy (2004) and Hamdan (2005) discuss the broader context of gender roles and societal expectations that hinder women's education. Understanding West Bengal's specific challenges can inform solutions for similar issues worldwide.

Investigating the problems faced by women in rural West Bengal is crucial for achieving educational equity and empowering future generations. By analyzing the interplay of economic hardship, social norms, and existing initiatives, we can develop effective strategies to bridge the gender gap and create a brighter future for all.

➤ Objective 3.2 : To *comprehend the actions that various authorities have taken.*

The second objective of the paper is to understand the initiatives taken by different agencies. This research aims to understand the initiatives undertaken by various agencies to improve women's education in West Bengal, India. Examining these initiatives is crucial for several reasons:

*KanyashreePrakalpa (Kanyashree Scheme):*The KanyashreePrakalpa scheme, a flagship program in

West Bengal, tackles the crucial issue of girls' education through conditional cash transfers (CCTs) (Mir, 2018). This approach is justified by the understanding that poverty is a major barrier to education, particularly for girls from underprivileged families (Sengupta&Guha, 2002). By providing financial assistance, Kanyashree incentivizes families to keep their daughters in school, ultimately promoting educational attainment and delaying child marriage. Kanyashree provides a much-needed financial cushion for families, allowing them to prioritize education and reduce the pressure to marry off daughters young to ease financial burdens (Mir, 2018). Studies have shown a positive correlation between Kanyashree and higher school enrollment rates for girls in West Bengal. This increase in educational opportunities can empower girls and break the cycle of poverty. However, While CCTs have proven effective, some argue that conditioning cash transfers solely on school attendance might not address the root causes of low enrollment, such as social stigma regarding girls' education or lack of quality schooling options (Dey& Sarkar, 2013).

*Public libraries:* While the limitations of public libraries in West Bengal are concerning, as highlighted in Biswas & Deb (2019), we must not overlook their immense potential. Properly functioning libraries can be a powerful tool for women's education and empowerment. Let's delve deeper into how revitalizing these institutions can contribute to bridging the gender gap in education. Unlike private institutions, libraries provide free or low-cost access to books, resources, and technology. This is crucial for women from underprivileged backgrounds who may not be able to afford educational materials (Biswas & Deb, 2019).

*Beyond Libraries and kanyashree:* As highlighted in Dey& Sarkar (2013) and Ghosh (2011), addressing the gender gap in education requires a multifaceted approach. Combating social norms that perpetuate child marriage is crucial. Educational campaigns and community engagement initiatives can address these issues at the grassroots level (Ghosh, 2011). Educating mothers plays a vital role in breaking the cycle of disadvantage. Empowering mothers through literacy programs not only enhances their lives but also creates a more supportive environment for their daughters' education (Sengupta&Guha, 2002).

## VI. JUSTIFICATION OF THE ANALYSIS

The analysis aligns with the objectives. The studies cover various problems hindering girls' education in rural West Bengal, like poverty, child marriage, and social norms. Articles also explore initiatives like Kanyashree to address these issues. Research by Sengupta et al. (2002) highlights family resources' influence, while Ghosh (2011) explores child marriage. Roy (2017) examines the tea industry and its impact on education. Finally, Mir (2018) analyzes the Kanyashree scheme aimed at improving girls' education. Overall, the studies provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and existing efforts to promote female education in rural West Bengal.

## VII. INTERPRETATION

The research topic on "Women's Education in West Bengal: Challenges and Initiatives" is important because it has helped to identify and address the challenges that women face in accessing and completing education. It can also help to assess the effectiveness of the government's initiatives in promoting women's education. The findings of the research could be used to develop evidence-based policies and programs to improve women's access to education and empower women to reach their full potential.

## CONCLUSION

The selected articles for the study focus on the importance of women's education and its potential to improve the world. They also highlight the empowerment that education can bring to women, allowing them to take control of their lives. The chosen dissertation topic is "women's education and its challenges in West Bengal from 2000-2020." Indian articles focus on women's education in West Bengal, but not within the chosen timeframe, while foreign articles do not specifically address education in West Bengal.

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