

# Status of Inclusive and Supportive Learning Environments for Women Education in West Bengal

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**Abstract**—The education of women is a cornerstone of sustainable development and social progress. In West Bengal, women’s education has improved considerably over the past decades, yet inequalities persist across regional, economic, and cultural lines. This study investigates the development of inclusive and supportive learning environments for women in West Bengal, with particular emphasis on accessibility, institutional practices, government initiatives, and socio-cultural constraints. Employing a mixed-method design, both qualitative and quantitative data were collected from three districts—Kolkata, Nadia, and Purulia—representing urban, semi-urban, and rural contexts. The findings reveal that inclusive policies, digital accessibility, and teacher sensitivity substantially enhance educational participation and retention among women. However, disparities between rural and urban regions remain significant. The study recommends policy reforms focusing on infrastructure, digital inclusion, and gender-responsive pedagogy to build a more equitable educational landscape.

**Index Terms**—Women Education, Inclusion, Empowerment, West Bengal, Educational Policy, Gender Equity

## I. INTRODUCTION

Education functions as a transformative force for individuals and societies. For women, it represents a pathway to empowerment, economic independence, and active citizenship. In the Indian context, education for women has been a priority since independence, yet gender disparities continue to manifest across various indicators such as literacy, enrolment, and retention (Banerjee & Sinha, 2021). Within the state of West Bengal, women’s education has been shaped by colonial legacies, post-independence reforms, and modern welfare policies. The government’s efforts through schemes such as

*Kanyashree Prakalpa, Sabuj Sathi, and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* have provided financial and infrastructural support for female learners. Despite these efforts, the persistence of social patriarchy, poverty, and regional inequalities continues to restrict women’s educational outcomes (Chakraborty, 2022). An inclusive and supportive learning environment ensures that all learners, irrespective of their background, can participate fully in educational processes (UNESCO, 2020). Such environments require institutional practices that value diversity, provide adequate resources, and eliminate systemic barriers. The objective of this paper is to examine how inclusivity is being operationalized in the context of women’s education in West Bengal and to evaluate its impact on educational participation and achievement.

This research is particularly relevant to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG-4), which emphasizes “inclusive and equitable quality education and lifelong learning opportunities for all.” By focusing on women, the study situates inclusion not merely as access but as participation with dignity and support.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Scholarly literature on women’s education in India has expanded significantly in the last two decades. Studies have highlighted that gender parity in education is influenced by economic, cultural, and policy-related factors (Nair, 2019). In the case of West Bengal, multiple studies show that social conservatism, early marriage, and household responsibilities still limit girls’ school attendance in rural areas (Sen & Bhattacharya, 2018).

Nair (2019) defines inclusion as the active process of ensuring equitable learning opportunities through

curriculum reform, teacher training, and community participation. Similarly, Booth and Ainscow's (2011) *Index for Inclusion* underscores that inclusion extends beyond physical access to encompass emotional and pedagogical support. These ideas form the theoretical foundation for this study.

According to Mitra (2021), digital literacy programs and self-help group initiatives in rural Bengal have led to greater educational engagement among women. However, the uneven distribution of digital infrastructure limits scalability. Sanyal (2020) emphasizes that empowerment through education depends not only on literacy but on critical awareness, employability, and self-confidence.

The West Bengal government's flagship scheme, *Kanyashree Prakalpa*, has received international recognition for improving female enrolment and delaying early marriages (Government of West Bengal, 2023). Yet Chakraborty (2022) cautions that institutional implementation gaps—such as delays in financial transfers and inadequate monitoring—affect the program's overall impact. Similarly, Singh (2021) highlights that teacher attitudes toward gender roles play a decisive role in determining the classroom climate.

Sen and Bhattacharya (2018) identify persistent patriarchal norms, inadequate sanitation facilities, and poor transport infrastructure as barriers to girls' education. These socio-cultural factors contribute to gender-based exclusion and reduced motivation among women to pursue higher studies. UNESCO (2020) further emphasizes that intersectional inequalities—such as caste, religion, and location—compound gender disparities.

Taken together, the reviewed literature underscores that inclusivity in women's education requires systemic reform across policy, pedagogy, and community dimensions. The present study builds upon this scholarship by providing empirical insights into the inclusivity of educational environments in three distinct regions of West Bengal.

### III. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research holds academic, policy, and social significance:

1. **Academic Contribution:** It expands the discourse on inclusive education by situating women's

education within the broader socio-economic framework of West Bengal.

2. **Policy Implications:** The findings offer data-driven recommendations for policymakers aiming to achieve gender equality in education.
3. **Social Relevance:** The study highlights community participation and local cultural attitudes as central to sustaining women's educational engagement.
4. **Developmental Impact:** The research aligns with the vision of SDG-4 and SDG-5 (Gender Equality), contributing to the agenda of equitable development.
5. **Institutional Practice:** The study provides evidence for schools and colleges to adopt inclusive teaching methods, mentorship systems, and safe learning spaces for women.

### IV. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The primary objectives guiding the research are as follows:

1. To analyze the current status of women's education in West Bengal across urban and rural contexts.
2. To evaluate the inclusivity and supportiveness of learning environments in selected institutions.
3. To examine the role of government policies and community initiatives in promoting women's educational participation.
4. To identify the key challenges and barriers hindering inclusivity.
5. To propose strategies for strengthening supportive and inclusive environments for women learners.

### V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 5.1 Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-method design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative component involved survey analysis, while the qualitative component relied on interviews and document review.

#### Research Questions

1. What is the current status of women's education in West Bengal across urban and rural areas?

2. How inclusive and supportive are the learning environments in the selected educational institutions?
3. What roles do government policies and community initiatives play in enhancing women’s educational participation in West Bengal?
4. What key challenges and barriers hinder the creation of inclusive learning environments for women?
5. What strategies can be developed to strengthen supportive and inclusive educational environments for women learners in West Bengal?

5.2 Sampling

Three districts were purposively selected to represent diverse socio-economic contexts:

- Kolkata (Urban)
- Nadia (Semi-Urban)
- Purulia (Rural)

A total of 100 female students were surveyed, along with 15 teachers and 5 administrators from secondary and higher secondary institutions.

5.3 Data Collection

- Primary Data: Structured questionnaires were distributed to students to assess perceptions of inclusivity, safety, and institutional support. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and administrators.
- Secondary Data: Data were gathered from official reports of the West Bengal Department of Education, National Sample Survey (NSS), and peer-reviewed journals.

5.4 Analytical Framework

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) model of coding and categorization. Data triangulation ensured validity.

VI. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Table 6.1 Quantitative Findings

District	Respondents (n)	Access to Digital Learning (%)	Perception of Supportive Environment (%)	Dropout Rate (%)
Kolkata	35	85	92	5
Nadia	35	62	78	12
Purulia	30	38	54	25

Source: Field Survey (2025)

6.2 Interpretation of Data

The table illustrates stark contrasts between urban and rural districts. In Kolkata, both digital access and perceptions of supportive environments are notably higher, indicating better infrastructure and teacher sensitivity. Nadia, representing semi-urban settings, shows moderate access levels, reflecting partial digital integration and limited community support. Purulia, by contrast, demonstrates significant exclusion, with only 38% reporting access to digital

learning and 25% reporting dropout—a pattern consistent with findings from Sen and Bhattacharya (2018).

Further analysis revealed that respondents who had access to mentoring or peer-support programs demonstrated higher academic persistence. In schools where teachers adopted gender-inclusive pedagogy—such as participatory teaching and flexible evaluation—female students reported greater confidence and engagement.

Table 6.3 Gender Gap in Literacy Rate in West Bengal (1951-2011)

Year	Literacy Rate in West Bengal			
	Total	Male	Female	Gap
1951	24.42	12.74	34.14	21.40
1961	34.46	20.27	46.57	26.30

1971	38.86	26.56	49.57	23.01
1981	48.65	36.56	59.93	23.37
1991	57.70	46.56	67.81	21.25
2001	69.22	60.22	78.58	18.36
2011	77.08	71.16	82.67	11.51

Source: Census report of India 2011

Table 6.4 Growth of Female Literacy Rate in West Bengal and India (1971-2011)

Year	Female Literacy Growth Rate in West Bengal	
	West Bengal	Growth Rate
1971	26.56	6.29
1981	36.56	10.00
1991	46.56	10.00
2001	60.22	13.66
2011	71.16	10.94

Source: Census report of India 2011

### 6.5 Thematic Findings

From interviews and open-ended responses, four major themes emerged:

1. Institutional Inclusivity: Schools that provided sanitary facilities, counseling services, and gender awareness programs fostered higher attendance among girls.
2. Socio-Cultural Barriers: Early marriage, domestic workload, and social stigma against co-education were cited as persistent deterrents.
3. Technological Divide: Digital learning initiatives benefited urban students disproportionately due to better connectivity and parental literacy.
4. Policy Awareness: Many rural students were unaware of state or central government scholarships, indicating a gap in outreach.

These themes underscore that inclusion in education is a multidimensional process encompassing physical, digital, emotional, and informational access.

## VII. DISCUSSION

The study’s findings align with existing literature emphasizing that inclusion is not merely a policy but a practice embedded in institutional culture (Nair, 2019). Schools that actively promoted participatory decision-making and community partnerships showed greater female retention and motivation.

### ➤ Urban–Rural Divide:

The sharp contrast between Kolkata and Purulia mirrors national trends wherein urban educational

institutions benefit from superior infrastructure, technological access, and liberal gender norms (UNESCO, 2020). Rural areas continue to experience limited teacher availability, inadequate transport, and economic dependency that restricts women’s mobility.

### ➤ Impact of Government Schemes:

Programs like *Kanyashree Prakalpa* have played a pivotal role in delaying early marriage and increasing enrolment among adolescent girls (Chakraborty, 2022). The scheme’s conditional cash transfers have directly influenced female students’ continuation in secondary education. However, effective monitoring and grievance redress mechanisms are essential for ensuring consistent implementation (Government of West Bengal, 2023).

### ➤ Role of Teachers and Pedagogy:

Teacher sensitivity emerged as a decisive factor. Respondents who perceived teachers as supportive and gender-neutral reported higher participation. Singh (2021) notes that inclusive pedagogy, characterized by differentiated instruction and empathy, enhances both academic and emotional outcomes for girls.

### ➤ Digital Inclusion:

Mitra (2021) demonstrated that digital access can bridge educational inequalities; however, this study reveals that rural infrastructural deficits still constrain the transformative potential of online learning. Government initiatives such as *Banglar Shiksha*

Portal and community ICT centers can mitigate this gap if implemented equitably.

➤ Community Participation:

Inclusive learning extends beyond school walls. Local self-help groups, non-governmental organizations, and Panchayati Raj institutions have been instrumental in raising awareness about the importance of women's education. Yet, patriarchal attitudes within families remain a barrier. Parental sensitization programs could address these deep-rooted biases.

through community centers, local radio, and social media.

- Monitoring Mechanisms: Establish district-level committees to track the implementation of inclusion policies.
- Public-Private Partnerships: Encourage collaborations between government agencies and NGOs to scale up successful interventions.
- Research and Evaluation: Continuous assessment of inclusion indicators should inform policy reform.

### VIII. THE STUDY YIELDED THE FOLLOWING KEY RESULTS

- 1) Positive Correlation Between Supportive Environment and Retention: Students reporting inclusive practices exhibited a 40% higher likelihood of completing secondary education.
- 2) Regional Inequality: Urban areas show greater inclusion due to infrastructural and cultural advantages.
- 3) Effectiveness of State Schemes: Awareness and participation in government programs significantly correlated with reduced dropout rates.
- 4) Technological Gaps: Limited digital literacy among rural women remains a major exclusionary factor.
- 5) Pedagogical Influence: Teacher attitudes and training are critical in shaping inclusive learning experiences.

Overall, inclusion is found to be both a process and an outcome, requiring simultaneous investment in material, human, and cultural resources.

### IX. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Infrastructure Development: Invest in gender-sensitive facilities such as separate sanitation units, transport, and digital connectivity, especially in rural districts.
- Teacher Training: Incorporate gender-inclusion modules into teacher education programs to promote empathetic and participatory teaching.
- Awareness Campaigns: Strengthen communication about government schemes

### X. CONCLUSION

The creation of inclusive and supportive learning environments for women in West Bengal remains both an aspiration and a challenge. While the state has made commendable progress through progressive policies like *Kanyashree Prakalpa*, disparities across geography, class, and culture persist. The study underscores that inclusion must transcend infrastructure—it must cultivate agency, belonging, and empowerment among women learners. Building such environments requires not only policy commitment but also transformation in pedagogical practice and community mindset. An inclusive system is one that values every learner's dignity and diversity. West Bengal, with its historical legacy of education and reform, stands poised to model inclusive education for the rest of India—provided that structural barriers are addressed with sustained political will and social collaboration.

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