

Impact of Kanyashri Prakalpa on Educational Continuity among Adolescent Girls in West Bengal

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Abstract: *Educational continuity among adolescent girls remains a significant challenge in developing societies due to poverty, gender discrimination, household responsibilities, social norms, and early marriage practices. In India, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged communities, girls often discontinue their education during adolescence because of financial constraints and socio-cultural pressures. The Government of West Bengal introduced Kanyashri Prakalpa in 2013 as a conditional cash transfer scheme aimed at improving the socio-economic status of adolescent girls by encouraging school retention and delaying marriage. The present study examines the impact of Kanyashri Prakalpa on educational continuity among adolescent girls in West Bengal from a socio-educational perspective. The study explores how financial assistance, institutional support, and awareness generation contribute to girls' continued participation in secondary, higher secondary, and higher education. The article argues that Kanyashri Prakalpa has significantly contributed to reducing educational discontinuation, enhancing educational aspirations, improving self-confidence, and promoting gender equality. However, challenges such as poverty, inadequate educational infrastructure, social restrictions, and regional disparities continue to influence girls' educational trajectories. The study concludes that Kanyashri Prakalpa represents an important educational empowerment initiative, but its long-term effectiveness depends on integrating financial support with quality education, skill development, and broader social transformation strategies.*

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Introduction: Education is widely recognized as one of the most powerful instruments for individual development, social transformation, and economic progress. For girls, education has additional significance because it enhances personal autonomy, improves decision-making capacity, delays early marriage, increases employment opportunities, and strengthens participation in social and economic life. However, despite significant progress in girls' educational participation in India, adolescent girls continue to face multiple barriers that affect their ability to remain in educational institutions.

Educational discontinuity among girls is often influenced by a complex interaction of economic, social, cultural, and institutional factors. Poverty remains one of the primary reasons for school dropout, as families with limited resources may prioritize the education of sons while considering daughters' education as less economically beneficial. In addition, household responsibilities, gender-based expectations, safety concerns, lack of transportation facilities, and early marriage frequently interrupt girls' educational journeys (UNESCO, 2021).

Adolescence represents a critical stage in girls' lives when decisions regarding education, marriage, and future opportunities are often determined. In many communities, the transition from secondary to higher secondary education becomes a vulnerable period because families may withdraw girls from school due to financial pressures or social expectations. Therefore, ensuring educational continuity requires interventions that address not only access to education but also economic security, social awareness, and empowerment.

Recognizing these challenges, the Government of West Bengal introduced Kanyashri Prakalpa in 2013 as a comprehensive social protection initiative for adolescent girls. The scheme aims to encourage girls to remain in education and delay marriage by providing financial assistance to unmarried girls who continue their studies. Unlike traditional welfare programmes, Kanyashri adopts an empowerment-oriented approach by linking financial support with educational participation and personal development (Government of West Bengal, 2022).

The scheme has received national and international recognition for its innovative approach towards promoting girls' education and gender equality. It reflects the understanding that educational continuity among girls cannot be achieved through educational institutions alone but requires supportive social and economic conditions. The present article critically examines the impact of Kanyashri Prakalpa on educational continuity among adolescent girls in West Bengal and analyses its role in promoting educational empowerment.

Conceptual Understanding of Educational Continuity among Adolescent Girls: Educational continuity refers to the sustained participation of students in formal education without interruption until the completion of desired educational levels. For adolescent girls, continuity in education involves regular attendance, retention, transition between educational stages, and successful completion of secondary and higher education. Educational continuity is closely associated with several factors:

Economic Factors: Financial constraints significantly influence girls' educational participation. Expenses related to books, transportation, uniforms, examination fees, and other educational requirements may discourage economically disadvantaged families from continuing girls' education. Conditional cash transfer programmes attempt to reduce such barriers by providing direct financial assistance (Baird et al., 2011).

Social and Cultural Factors: Traditional gender norms often influence educational decisions within families. In some communities, girls' education is considered less important because marriage and domestic responsibilities are viewed as their primary roles. Such perceptions contribute to higher dropout rates among adolescent girls (Kabeer, 1999).

Early Marriage and Educational Discontinuation: Child marriage remains one of the major barriers to girls' education. Marriage at an early age often results in school dropout, reduced mobility, and limited opportunities for personal development. Therefore, delaying marriage is an important strategy for ensuring educational continuity (UNICEF, 2021).

Psychological and Aspirational Factors: Education contributes to girls' confidence, aspirations, and decision-making abilities. Girls who remain in school develop greater awareness about their rights and

future opportunities. Therefore, educational continuity is not only an academic issue but also a pathway towards empowerment (Sen, 1999).

Kanyashri Prakalpa: An Overview: Kanyashri Prakalpa was launched by the Government of West Bengal in 2013 with the objective of improving the status of adolescent girls through educational support and social empowerment. The scheme primarily focuses on preventing child marriage and encouraging girls to continue education. The scheme consists of two major financial components:

Annual Scholarship: Under this component, unmarried girls studying in educational institutions receive annual financial assistance. The objective is to reduce financial barriers and encourage families to continue supporting girls' education.

One-Time Financial Grant: Girls who remain unmarried until the age of 18 and continue education or vocational training become eligible for a one-time grant. This provision creates an incentive for families to delay marriage and support girls' educational aspirations.

The underlying philosophy of Kanyashri is based on the principle that girls' education is an investment in social development. By providing financial support, the scheme attempts to transform families' perceptions regarding daughters' education and future prospects (Government of West Bengal, 2022).

Impact of Kanyashri Prakalpa on Educational Continuity

Reduction in Educational Dropout: One of the most significant contributions of Kanyashri Prakalpa is its role in reducing educational dropout among adolescent girls. Financial difficulties are among the major causes of school discontinuation, particularly at the secondary level. By providing monetary assistance, Kanyashri reduces the economic pressure experienced by families and encourages them to maintain girls' educational participation.

The scheme acts as a protective mechanism during adolescence, a period when many girls are vulnerable to leaving school due to economic or social reasons. Financial support enables girls to continue purchasing educational materials and meeting schooling-related expenses, thereby improving retention rates.

According to global evidence on conditional cash transfer programmes, economic incentives linked with education can positively influence school attendance and retention among disadvantaged groups (Baird et al., 2011). Kanyashri reflects this approach by connecting financial benefits with educational continuation.

Improvement in Transition from Secondary to Higher Education: The transition from secondary to higher secondary and higher education represents a critical stage in girls' educational pathways. Many girls discontinue education after secondary schooling because of financial constraints, family pressure, or marriage-related decisions.

Kanyashri encourages girls to continue beyond secondary education by providing sustained institutional support. The scheme motivates families to view higher education as a realistic possibility for daughters rather than an unnecessary expense.

Educational continuity beyond secondary level expands girls' career aspirations and improves their opportunities for employment and economic independence. Thus, Kanyashri contributes to creating a more educated and skilled female population in West Bengal.

Enhancement of Educational Motivation and Aspirations: Financial assistance under Kanyashri has psychological as well as economic effects. Government recognition and monetary support create a sense of

value and encouragement among adolescent girls. Many beneficiaries develop stronger educational aspirations and greater motivation to pursue higher studies.

Education provides girls with opportunities to imagine alternative futures beyond traditional gender roles. Through continued schooling, girls gain confidence, develop social networks, and acquire knowledge necessary for personal and professional growth (Sen, 1999).

Therefore, Kanyashri contributes not only to keeping girls in schools but also to transforming their attitudes towards education and future possibilities.

Strengthening Parental Support for Girls' Education: Parents play an important role in determining whether girls continue their education. Economic difficulties and traditional beliefs often influence parental decisions regarding girls' schooling. Kanyashri contributes to changing parental attitudes by demonstrating tangible benefits associated with educational continuation.

The financial incentives encourage families to reconsider early marriage decisions and recognize the importance of educating daughters. Over time, the scheme contributes to changing the social perception of girls from economic dependents to potential contributors to family and society (Kabeer, 2005).

Promotion of Gender Equality through Education: Educational continuity is closely connected with gender equality. Educated girls are more likely to participate in decision-making, access employment opportunities, and challenge discriminatory practices.

Kanyashri promotes gender equality by ensuring that girls receive institutional support during adolescence. The scheme challenges patriarchal assumptions by recognizing girls' education as a social priority rather than a private family matter.

By supporting girls' educational participation, Kanyashri contributes to broader goals of women's empowerment and inclusive development (UN Women, 2020).

Challenges Affecting Educational Continuity: Although Kanyashri Prakalpa has made significant contributions towards improving girls' educational retention and reducing discontinuation, several socio-economic, cultural, and institutional challenges continue to influence the educational trajectories of adolescent girls in West Bengal. Educational continuity is a complex process that depends not only on financial support but also on family conditions, social attitudes, educational infrastructure, safety, and future employment opportunities. Therefore, while Kanyashri addresses some immediate barriers, broader structural challenges require continuous attention and policy intervention (UNESCO, 2021; UNICEF, 2021).

Persistent Poverty: Economic vulnerability remains one of the most significant barriers affecting educational continuity among adolescent girls. Although Kanyashri Prakalpa provides financial assistance to reduce the economic burden of education, extreme poverty continues to influence household decisions regarding girls' schooling. In economically disadvantaged families, immediate survival needs, household responsibilities, and income-related pressures may receive greater priority than long-term educational investment. As a result, some girls may discontinue education despite receiving financial support (World Bank, 2018).

Poverty often affects girls differently from boys because families with limited resources may prioritize the education of male children while expecting girls to contribute to domestic work or enter marriage at an early age. Economic constraints related to transportation costs, educational materials, private tuition, and higher education expenses continue to affect girls' ability to remain in educational institutions. According to Sen

(1999), poverty should not be understood merely as a lack of income but as a deprivation of capabilities and opportunities. From this perspective, ensuring educational continuity requires not only financial assistance but also broader strategies for expanding girls' capabilities and choices.

Conditional cash transfer programmes such as Kanyashri can reduce economic barriers, but sustainable educational participation requires complementary measures including poverty reduction, livelihood opportunities for families, and accessible educational facilities (Baird et al., 2011). Therefore, addressing the economic roots of educational discontinuation remains essential for achieving the long-term objectives of girls' empowerment.

Social and Cultural Barriers: Social and cultural norms continue to play a significant role in influencing girls' educational participation. In many communities, patriarchal attitudes and traditional gender expectations shape perceptions regarding the role and responsibilities of adolescent girls. Although Kanyashri promotes education and delays marriage through financial incentives, deeply rooted social beliefs regarding female mobility, domestic responsibilities, and marriage priorities may continue to restrict educational opportunities (Kabeer, 1999).

Gender stereotypes often influence parental decisions about girls' education. Some families may consider investment in girls' education less valuable because daughters are expected to leave their parental homes after marriage. Such perceptions reduce educational aspirations and may contribute to early withdrawal from schooling. Kabeer (2005) argues that women's empowerment requires transformation of unequal social structures and gender relations rather than merely providing access to resources.

Concerns regarding girls' safety, mobility, and social reputation also affect educational continuity, particularly in rural and conservative communities. Restrictions on travelling long distances for education or attending institutions outside the local area may limit girls' opportunities for higher education. Therefore, social awareness programmes, gender sensitization, and community participation are necessary alongside financial interventions to create an environment where girls can continue their education without social restrictions (UNICEF, 2021).

Infrastructure and Accessibility Issues: Educational infrastructure and accessibility remain important determinants of girls' educational continuity. Although Kanyashri encourages girls to remain enrolled in educational institutions, inadequate infrastructure and limited accessibility can create barriers, particularly for girls living in rural and remote areas. Distance from schools, lack of safe transportation facilities, insufficient sanitation facilities, shortage of teachers, and inadequate learning resources may discourage girls from continuing their studies (UNESCO, 2021).

The transition from secondary to higher secondary and higher education is especially challenging when educational institutions are located far from residential areas. For many adolescent girls, travelling long distances may create safety concerns and discourage families from allowing continued education. The availability of safe, inclusive, and accessible educational environments is therefore essential for ensuring that financial support translates into actual educational participation.

According to the World Bank (2018), improving girls' educational outcomes requires investments not only in scholarships and financial assistance but also in school infrastructure, teaching quality, and supportive learning environments. Thus, strengthening educational facilities and ensuring safe access to institutions are necessary measures for maximizing the impact of Kanyashri Prakalpa.

Limited Career Opportunities: Educational continuity becomes more meaningful when girls perceive clear connections between education and future opportunities. Although Kanyashri encourages girls to remain in education, limited career guidance, insufficient vocational training, and restricted employment opportunities may reduce motivation for pursuing higher education. When families do not see clear economic returns from girls' education, they may continue to prioritize early marriage over prolonged schooling (World Bank, 2014).

Career aspirations play an important role in sustaining girls' educational engagement. Education enables girls to develop skills, confidence, and decision-making abilities, but these benefits become stronger when linked with employment opportunities and economic independence. Sen's (1999) capability approach emphasizes that development should expand individuals' real opportunities to choose and achieve meaningful lives. Therefore, educational continuity should be supported by skill development, career counselling, entrepreneurship opportunities, and employment pathways.

The integration of Kanyashri with vocational education, digital skills training, and career-oriented programmes can further enhance its effectiveness. Such initiatives would encourage girls not only to remain in education but also to envision education as a pathway towards economic independence and social empowerment (UN Women, 2020).

Policy Implications: The experience of Kanyashri Prakalpa provides several important policy lessons:

1. Financial assistance should be combined with quality education, counselling, and skill development programmes.
2. Schools should provide gender awareness programmes, career guidance, and counselling services for adolescent girls.
3. Parents, local leaders, and community organizations should participate in promoting girls' education.
4. Safe transportation, better school facilities, and accessible higher education opportunities are essential.
5. Regular assessment of beneficiaries can help identify challenges and improve programme effectiveness.

Conclusion: Kanyashri Prakalpa has emerged as an important socio-educational intervention for promoting educational continuity among adolescent girls in West Bengal. By combining financial assistance with educational encouragement and social awareness, the scheme addresses some of the major barriers responsible for girls' educational discontinuation. It has contributed to improving school retention, encouraging transition to higher education, delaying marriage, and strengthening girls' aspirations.

The significance of Kanyashri lies in its empowerment-based approach. The scheme recognizes that girls' education is not merely an educational issue but a foundation for social equality, economic development, and human capability enhancement. By supporting girls during a crucial stage of life, Kanyashri enables them to continue education and imagine broader possibilities for their future.

However, educational continuity requires more than financial incentives. Long-term success depends on addressing poverty, improving educational infrastructure, challenging patriarchal norms, and creating employment opportunities for educated women. Therefore, Kanyashri Prakalpa should be viewed as a powerful foundation for girls' empowerment that must be complemented by wider educational and social reforms.

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