

**Conditional Cash Transfer Schemes and
Women Empowerment: A Case Study of
Kanyashree Prakalpa in West Bengal**

Sukanya Ghosh,¹ Jyotika Teckchandani² & Neeta Tripathi³

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Abstract:

The concept of "Women empowerment" has become a burning issue for quite some time. It cannot be denied that genderization is a deeply ingrained social phenomenon. Some of the signs of extremely unequal gender relations that are common in our society include the large male-female ratio, the gap in literacy rates among both the genders, the early marriage of girl children, the low rates of female participation in politics and the workforce, etc. To combat this practice of gender discrimination and improve the status of women in India, the Indian government has taken major actions from time to time. Introduction of Conditional Cash Transfer Schemes is one such program. In keeping with this, the West Bengal government, too, has launched such a scheme, namely "Kanyashree Prakalpa", in 2013. Its objective was to encourage girls to continue their education and to delay their age of marriage and to make them empowered. The present study aims to determine how successful Kanyashree Prakalpa has been in bringing about the true empowerment of women, a decade after it was first introduced, in two socio-economically different districts of West Bengal, namely Kolkata and Purulia. Of these two districts, Kolkata is a megacity and the capital of West Bengal while Purulia is one of the backward districts of the state that has even received grant from Backward Regions Grant Fund. For this, data was first collected from randomly selected beneficiaries of both the districts with the help of a structured questionnaire and semi-structured interview schedule. The data was then statistically analyzed for uncovering the patterns and trends of the impact of such programs on its recipients living there. Then comparing the results of the scheme between the two districts via T test, the researcher found that while the Prakalpa yielded positive responses from both the districts, it made a greater impact in Purulia.

Key Words: *Conditional Cash Transfer Schemes, Genderization, Gender discrimination, Kanyashree Prakalpa, Social phenomenon, Status of women, Women empowerment*

Introduction:

The issue of "women empowerment" has become a matter of global concern for quite some time.

“Gender” is very deeply embedded in our social system and highly unequal gender relations are prevalent in our society. It cannot be denied that women for long have been the victims of patriarchal domination. There still exist huge disparities in male-female ratio, severe gaps in their literacy rates, poor female participation rates in politics, lower female participation in labour forces, etc. This is in spite of women making considerable progress and reaching milestones in several areas keeping at par with the men.

In India, historically parents have been found to mostly favour sons over daughters, a gender prejudice that has persisted for generations. Many Hindu traditional families still execute the “pumsavana” rite on expectant mothers with the belief that it will guarantee the birth of a son or will somehow alter the sex of the foetus if in case it is found to be female.¹ It is estimated that this strong son preference and the prevalence of practices like foeticide and female infanticide have led to the disappearance of nearly 100 million females who may just be considered “missing”.²

Even today, a large number of women are subjected to atrocities that include verbal, physical and emotional torture along with interpersonal violence. Denigrated as the lower sex, they are frequently discriminated against and are perceived as less deserving than the males. Our society’s deeply ingrained patriarchal traditions, societal norms, power imbalances and cultural beliefs cast a very detrimental effect on the women and impede their advancements in life. All these further compound their marginalization or deprivation, making it more difficult for them to attain an equal and just standing in society alongside their male counterparts. Thus, this discriminatory system of our society, which perpetuates gender inequality, frequently traps women in abusive cycles which they are often unable to break free.

However, this was not the situation for women since times immemorial. In ancient India they used to enjoy a high position and status in the society. They were seen as both active and important members of the community, and their activities extended beyond simply taking care of the daily domestic tasks.³ They were even worshipped as the Mother Goddess and were acknowledged as the creator as well as the destroyer of the entire universe.

During the early Vedic period, the women were accorded total involvement in educational, political, social and religious practices. They even enjoyed access to “upanayan” and “veda”.⁴ Maitreyi, Gargi, Lopamudra, Apala were some of the leading women sages who were highly revered in those times.

However, times changed and with it changed the position of the women in the society as well. The condition of the women underwent severe deterioration during the later Vedic period. Caste system, child marriage, Sati became prevalent in the then social system. Education for the womenfolk took a backseat and with time women were completely barred from getting education.

The condition of the women gained a lot of attention during the British rule which saw several social reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891),

Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883), Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842-1901) and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1956) among others fighting for the cause of the womenfolk. In this situation, under immense pressure, the British Government was forced to undertake several reforms for the improvement of the position of the women. Subsequently several laws and Acts like the 'Abolition of Sati' (1829), 'The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act' (1856), etc. were passed that sought to improve the conditions and bring about a social transformation for the women.

Status of Women in Post-independent India

Ever since India gained independence, Government of India has continuously been trying to bring a change in the condition of the women and to ensure gender equality by several provisions, laws and Acts. For example, Article 14 of the Indian Constitution guarantees "equality before law" and "equal protection from law" to all citizens of India. Similarly, Article 15 of the Constitution of India prohibits any sort of discrimination among its citizens on the basis of race, religion, caste, gender, or place of birth. The state has also been empowered by our Constitution to make or enact any special provision for women and children [Article 15 (3)]. The Constitution of India also guarantees to all its citizens equality of opportunity with regard to appointment or employment in offices under the state [Article 16 (1)]. Similarly, Article 16 (2) states that no one should be considered ineligible with respect to religion, race, caste, sex, etc. for any sort of employment to the office under the state.

Mention needs to be made here about the Directive Principles of State Policy which, too, have provisions for the women regarding upliftment of their status. These include Article 39(a) that calls for the equal right of men and women to adequate means of livelihood; Article 39(b) that seeks to provide equality of pay for equal work done for men and women; Article 39(e) that seeks to protect the health and strength of all workers, male, female and children alike from any sort of abuse and getting engrossed in such hobbies that are unsuitable for their age and strength and Article 42 which tries to ensure maternity relief for women and just and humane conditions of work for all.

But it is disheartening to see that despite all these efforts the condition of the women still remains pretty miserable. There remains a huge disparity between the laws, acts, policies and programs undertaken by the Government to achieve the desired objective of eradication of gender discrimination and the reality that prevails in our society.

Gender inequality thus still persists in our society. A shocking picture in this regard is reflected in the number of crimes that took place nationally as brought forth by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) that shows both the figures and the increasing trend of such brutal and inhuman crimes. As per the NCRB Report (2023)⁵ India witnessed a surge in crimes against women by four percent throughout 2022, the number of reported crimes escalating from 3,71,503 cases in 2020 to 4,28,278 cases in 2021 to 4,45,256 cases in 2022. The most alarming part was that out of this about

31.4% crimes were reported to be inflicted on the women by their husbands or relatives.

The practice of child marriage is also very widespread in India. As per the report of National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) (2019-21), 23.3% women were found to have been married before the age of 18 years and nearly seven percent women in age 15-19 years were reported to be mothers or pregnant at the time of the survey.⁶

UNICEF⁷ has provided a very grim picture of child marriage in India. It states that one out of every three child brides worldwide belong to India with Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh housing half of those brides in India. It further states that near about 40 percent of girls who are married before 18 years of age live in West Bengal, Bihar and Tripura.

With respect to education, it may be said that considerable disparity exists here also. As per the data obtained from the National Statistical Office (NSO), the male-female literacy gap nationally in 2021 was 12.9% where the literacy rate for females was 70.30% as against the male literacy rate that stood at 84.70%.⁸ In West Bengal, projected literacy rate of females is estimated to be at 70.54% while for men it is 81.69%.⁹ The research of World Economic Forum on Global Gender Gap (2024) exhibited that in matters of educational attainment gender inequality is still persistent in India as it ranked 129th in the category with a male-female literacy rate gap standing at 17.2%.¹⁰

Women also are expected to perform the unpaid works involving care giving and household chores mainly. Since success and the worth of labour are primarily determined by financial indicators, women's contributions, which are crucial to the proper operation of the family and society, are often overlooked and seldom receive the recognition they deserve. Additionally, these responsibilities prevent women from getting engaged in paid employment, and even in cases when they are able to do so, they may receive lower pay despite doing the same amount of work as men.

However, there has been a bright spot in the Periodic Labour Force Survey Report of 2022–2023 published on October 09, 2023 by the Ministry of Statistics and Program Implementation, which showed a significant improvement (four percent) in India's female labour force participation rate, bringing the total to thirty-seven percent in 2023.¹¹ This certainly is due to the Government of India's persistent efforts that have made this feasible. But at the opposite end of this light there still looms darkness as in the workplace also women face the brunt of gender harassment and violence. This continues even after the implementation of Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act in 2013, otherwise known as POSH Act. NCRB report reveals an increase in the number of victim counts for sexual harassment against women at workplace from 402 in 2018 to 422 in 2022.¹² As such it is indisputable that much work remains before we may achieve gender parity for which women empowerment is undoubtedly an important criteria.

Conditional Cash Transfer Schemes (CCT) and Kanyashree Prakalpa

Government, as already mentioned, has introduced a number of Acts, laws and programs from time to time to facilitate the much-needed and desired empowerment of women and to improve and elevate their status. One such program is the Conditional Cash Transfer Scheme (CCTs), which may be regarded as a financial tool that gives the targeted population direct cash payments upon meeting specific requirements.

CCTs, which was introduced as one social security policy in 1997 in Latin America under the name Progressa (later renamed Oportunidades in 2004), has been progressively adopted by numerous other nations worldwide with varying aims and purposes. Examples of some such international CCTs are Bolsa Familia introduced in Brazil in 2003, Program of Advancement through Health and Education introduced in Jamaica in 2002, Subsidios Condicionados a la Asistencia Escolar introduced in Bogota, Colombia in 2005, etc.

In India, the centre as well as numerous state governments has launched several CCTs that are especially targeted towards bringing about the welfare of the girls. Examples include Balika Samriddhi Yojana (Government of India, 1997), Balri Rakshak Yojana (Punjab, 2005), Girl Child Protection Scheme (Andhra Pradesh, 2005), Mukhya Mantri Kanyadan Yojana (Madhya Pradesh, 2006), Indira Gandhi Balika Suraksha Yojana (Himachal Pradesh, 2007), Dhanalakshmi Scheme (Government of India, 2008), Mukhya Mantri Kanya Suraksha Yojana (Bihar, 2008), Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (Himachal Pradesh, 2015), Kuvarbai Nu Mameru Yojana (Gujarat, 2020), Uttar Pradesh Bhagyalakshmi Yojana (Uttar Pradesh, 2021), Lek Ladki Scheme (Maharashtra, 2023), etc. _

The Government of West Bengal, too, has introduced Kanyashree Prakalpa, a Conditional Cash Transfer scheme in the year 2013. It has the dual objectives of motivating the girl children to pursue their education for long and to push their marriages at least to 18 years of age. This is to make them equipped so that in future they may have a better standing in the society and can avoid the associated risks of early pregnancies and other health problems.

Achieving higher education is still a major concern in West Bengal due to the sharp decline in girls' school attendance. This is also a result of the fact that many low-income parents do not see the financial value of sending their daughters to schools and instead believe that marriage will provide more stability for the girls and their families. They fail to realize that this may entail a life full of financial and social instability for them. Studies show that this lack of education leaves the girls ill-prepared for the work activities they may want to pursue later in life and renders them vulnerable to poverty and exploitation throughout their lives.

Kanyashree Prakalpa has 3 elements: K1, K2 and K3.¹³

- ❑ **K1-** This is an annual scholarship scheme of Rs 1000 given to unmarried girls between 13-18 years of age, enrolled in classes eight to twelve in a Government recognized regular or equivalent

open school or equivalent vocational or technical training course.

- ❑ **K2-** This is a one- time grant of Rs 25000 given to unmarried girls aged 18-19 years. Unmarried girls should have turned 18 years at the time of application and enrolled in a Government recognized regular or open school or college or pursuing vocational or technical training or sports activity or is an inmate of Home registered under J J Act 2000 before applying for this scheme.
- ❑ **K3-** Girl students of any age registered under K2, having at least 45% marks in graduation and presently pursuing a regular post graduate degree in science/arts/ commerce under any university are eligible for this scheme where science students receive Rs 2500 per month while arts students receive Rs 2000 per month.

It needs to be mentioned here that the benefits are sent straight to the recipients' bank accounts thus giving them complete freedom over how they spend their money. Thus the Scheme attempts to serve as a source for their complete financial inclusion in addition to empowering them.

Objectives of the Study

The present study is designed so as to comparatively analyze the impact of Kanyashree Prakalpa on the recipients in the two socio-economically different districts, Kolkata and Purulia of West Bengal, a decade after its introduction. Kolkata, a megacity, is the capital city and the most prosperous and advanced one among all the districts of West Bengal. Purulia, on the other hand, is one of the backward districts of the state so much so that it has received grant from the Backward Regions Grant Fund.

The following are the objectives of the present study:

- To find out the impact of Kanyashree Prakalpa with regard to women empowerment on the beneficiaries of Kolkata and Purulia.
- To determine the attitudinal change of the parents towards the girl children in both Kolkata and Purulia in the aftermath of Kanyashree Prakalpa.
- To study the change in the outlook of the society towards the marriage of the girl children in both the districts post the launch of Kanyashree Prakalpa.
- To compare the effectiveness of the Prakalpa in Kolkata and Purulia districts of West Bengal.

Methodology

The study undertook a two-stage sampling:

- Stratified Random Sampling was used to choose the districts of Kolkata and Purulia respectively from the lists of West Bengal's advanced and backward districts.

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- Simple Random Sampling was then used to choose a total of 502 recipients of the scheme, 251 from each of the two districts.

Thus the population of the study consisted of all the beneficiaries of Kanyashree Prakalpa in the entire state of West Bengal. The sample consisted of 502 Kanyashree beneficiaries (251 from each places of Kolkata and Purulia) that represented the entire population.

The researcher employed a mixed methods approach and employed the following tools to draw the conclusions:

- Structured questionnaire for the 502 recipients of the Prakalpa, 251 each from Kolkata and Purulia
- Semi-structured interview schedule for the parents of the beneficiaries with the aim of finding out the opinions of the stakeholders
- Focus group discussions
- T-test of difference to find out the significant difference between the two data sets of data that were gathered from the two specified districts

Findings and Interpretations

The following interpretations were arrived at after a detailed and thorough analysis of the data:

- The Conditional Cash Transfer Scheme, namely Kanyashree Prakalpa is successful in achieving women empowerment in both Kolkata and Purulia, the advanced and backward district respectively of West Bengal, with significant shifts in the perception of women's empowerment as noted following the implementation of the scheme in these two districts.
- Kanyashree Prakalpa brought significant changes in the attitude of the parents towards the girl children in both the districts under consideration.
- There has been a significant shift in the society's outlook towards girls' marriages in both of the aforementioned districts of West Bengal after the program's inception.
- There is a notable disparity in the Prakalpa's efficiency between the two districts mentioned, with Purulia experiencing a higher influence than Kolkata.

Based on the results above, it is thus clear that Kanyashree Prakalpa has had a significant influence in both Kolkata and Purulia districts of West Bengal. However, compared to Kolkata, which is an advanced district of West Bengal, it is seen that the program has a bigger influence in Purulia, a backward area. After conducting a thorough analysis of the data and information collected through the tools, the researcher concluded that the following variables primarily account for the variations in the scheme's impact across the two districts:

- The Kanyashree beneficiaries in Kolkata usually enjoy higher standard of living in comparison to

their Purulia counterparts. As such the former often view the program's benefits as opportunities to make their existing conditions only better as against the beneficiaries of Purulia who consider the program a crucial tool for addressing their core problems. Hence the latter respond more to the scheme than the former.

- Being a backward area, Purulia experience a relative sense of deprivation in comparison to Kolkata. This resulted in Kanyashree Prakalpa becoming potentially more successful in resolving the associated problems and enhancing the living conditions of its beneficiaries in Purulia.
- The dependence on the conditional components of the scheme is much less in Kolkata than in Purulia. This is due to the city's well-established educational infrastructure as well as increased awareness of the threat posed by many social evils like child marriage. Hence, in Kolkata, the focus is less in addressing the fundamental issues, whereas in Purulia, this is not so. Purulia recipients respond more strongly to the program as a result.
- The residents of an advanced megacity, Kolkata mostly have higher prospective income and more options for alternative sources of income than those in Purulia, a less developed region. Hence Kanyashree Prakalpa has a greater economic impact in Purulia than in Kolkata.
- In general, it is seen that individuals value personal independence and self-sufficiency more in regions with higher levels of development, like Kolkata. Hence it is likely that residents here resist government intervention. On the other hand, it is more probable that the people in underdeveloped areas like Purulia are more receptive to the concepts of government initiatives that support their general well-being.

Issues and Recommendations:

Kanyashree Prakalpa although, undoubtedly, has yielded a positive influence on the lives of its beneficiaries in both Kolkata and Purulia, there are a few issues that might be considered to improve the program's effectiveness. These are given below.

- Education is certainly a powerful tool for empowering girls but it needs to be accompanied by employment. The gap between the two is still very wide and needs to be bridged so as to usher in true empowerment of women.
- Merely educating the girls would not go a long way in achieving the objectives of Kanyashree Prakalpa. For this, they ought to be made employable too. Girls are frequently found to lack the necessary training and abilities needed in the workplace, which prevent them from getting employment or moving up the career ladder.
- Many women fail to pursue paid employment as they are forced to spend more time on unpaid labour such as providing care at home that include child rearing, looking after the family, etc. To

help with this, appropriate care giving facilities need to be established in the workplace so that they can take advantage of paid employment opportunities.

- In the workplace, gender inequality still exists, with women receiving lower pay than males despite doing the same amount of work. Addressing this practice is necessary to guarantee equity in the labour market.
- The program needs to incorporate career guidance and vocational training also to inspire and provide the recipients with the necessary skills for future employment opportunities.
- There has to be more robust and improved monitoring and evaluation so that are funds are used more appropriately and effectively.

Endnotes:

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Bio Profile of the Authors:

¹ Research Scholar, AISS, Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh

Email: sukanyaghosh0103@gmail.com

² Assistant Professor, AISS, Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh

Email: jtekchandani@amity.edu

³ Professor, Dyal Singh College, University of Delhi

Email: neeta.tripathi@dsc.du.ac.in