



Kanyashri Prakalpa and the Prevention of Child Marriage: A Socio-Educational Analysis

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Abstract: *Child marriage remains one of the most critical social challenges affecting the physical, psychological, educational, and economic development of girls, particularly in developing societies. In India, despite legislative measures and social awareness initiatives, early marriage continues to restrict girls' autonomy and educational opportunities. The Government of West Bengal introduced Kanyashri Prakalpa in 2013 as a conditional cash transfer scheme aimed at improving the status of adolescent girls by encouraging their continued education and delaying marriage until the legally permissible age. The present study explores the role of Kanyashri Prakalpa in preventing child marriage through a socio-educational perspective. The study examines how financial incentives, educational continuation, increased awareness, and social empowerment contribute to transforming attitudes towards early marriage. The article argues that Kanyashri Prakalpa has emerged not merely as an economic assistance programme but as a comprehensive social intervention promoting girls' education, decision-making capacity, self-confidence, and gender equality. However, challenges related to poverty, patriarchal norms, social resistance, and implementation gaps continue to influence its effectiveness. The study concludes that Kanyashri Prakalpa represents an important model of gender-responsive public policy, but sustained community participation and educational interventions are essential for achieving long-term social transformation.*

Keywords: *Kanyashri Prakalpa, Child Marriage, Girls' Education, Women Empowerment, Gender Equality, Social Policy, West Bengal.*

Introduction: Child marriage is a deeply rooted social problem that affects millions of girls worldwide, particularly in developing countries where poverty, gender discrimination, cultural traditions, and limited educational opportunities influence family decisions regarding marriage. According to international development perspectives, child marriage is not only a violation of human rights but also a significant barrier to girls' education, health, economic independence, and participation in social life. Girls married at an early age often experience discontinuation of education, early pregnancy, economic dependency, and reduced opportunities for personal development.

In India, child marriage has historically been associated with social customs, poverty, concerns regarding female security, and patriarchal perceptions regarding the role of women. Although the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act (2006) established legal measures against early marriage, social practices continue to influence marriage decisions in many rural and economically disadvantaged communities. Therefore, preventing child marriage requires not only legal intervention but also educational, economic, and social empowerment strategies.

Recognizing the importance of adolescent girls' development, the Government of West Bengal launched Kanyashri Prakalpa in 2013. The scheme provides financial assistance to unmarried girls who continue their education and encourages families to postpone marriage until girls reach adulthood. The programme has received national and international recognition because of its innovative approach towards gender empowerment and social development.

Kanyashri Prakalpa represents a shift from traditional welfare approaches toward empowerment-oriented policy intervention. Instead of treating girls as passive beneficiaries, the scheme attempts to enhance their educational participation, economic security, social awareness, and personal agency. The present study critically examines the contribution of Kanyashri Prakalpa in preventing child marriage by analysing its socio-educational significance.

Kanyashri Prakalpa: Objectives and Features: Kanyashri Prakalpa was launched by the Government of West Bengal in 2013 as a gender-responsive social protection initiative aimed at improving the socio-economic and educational status of adolescent girls. The primary objectives of the scheme are to encourage girls' education, prevent child marriage, enhance the social position of young women, and promote gender equality. The scheme is based on the understanding that child marriage is not merely a cultural practice but is closely associated with poverty, educational deprivation, gender discrimination, and limited opportunities for girls. By providing financial incentives linked with educational continuation and delayed marriage, Kanyashri attempts to address the structural factors responsible for girls' vulnerability (Government of West Bengal, 2022; UNICEF, 2021).

The scheme represents a shift from traditional welfare approaches towards an empowerment-oriented model where adolescent girls are recognized as active participants in their own development. Through economic assistance, educational support, and social awareness, Kanyashri seeks to create an environment where girls can continue their studies, develop aspirations, and make informed decisions regarding their future (Kabeer, 1999; Sen, 1999). The major components of the scheme are discussed below.

Annual Financial Assistance: One of the important features of Kanyashri Prakalpa is the provision of annual financial assistance to eligible unmarried girls who continue their education. This financial support is designed to reduce the economic burden on families and encourage parents to prioritize their daughters' schooling rather than arranging early marriage. In many economically disadvantaged households, financial constraints often compel parents to view daughters' marriage as a practical solution to reduce family expenditure. By providing monetary assistance, Kanyashri attempts to change this perception and make girls' education a valuable investment for families (Government of West Bengal, 2022).

Conditional cash transfer programmes have been recognized globally as effective mechanisms for improving educational participation among disadvantaged groups. Such programmes create incentives for families to maintain girls' school attendance and delay marriage decisions. According to Baird et al. (2011), economic incentives linked with education can significantly influence parental decisions regarding girls' schooling and reduce vulnerability to early marriage. Similarly, UNESCO (2021) emphasizes that financial barriers remain one of the major causes of girls' educational discontinuation, and targeted economic support can contribute significantly to educational equity.

In the context of West Bengal, Kanyashri's annual assistance functions as both an economic support mechanism and a social message that values girls' education. The scheme challenges the traditional belief that investment in daughters provides limited social or economic returns and encourages families to recognize girls as individuals with educational and developmental potential (Kabeer, 2005).

One-Time Grant: Another significant component of Kanyashri Prakalpa is the provision of a one-time financial grant to girls who remain unmarried until the age of 18 and continue their educational or vocational

pursuits. This component directly addresses one of the major objectives of the scheme—the prevention of child marriage. By linking financial benefits with delayed marriage, the programme creates a positive incentive for families to postpone marriage decisions and allow girls to achieve educational milestones (Government of West Bengal, 2022).

The one-time grant reflects the principle that social policies can influence behaviour by creating alternative opportunities for vulnerable groups. Instead of treating marriage as the primary pathway for adolescent girls, Kanyashri promotes education, skill development, and future career planning as meaningful alternatives. According to Nanda et al. (2016), interventions that combine economic incentives with empowerment strategies are more effective in delaying marriage because they address both financial and social factors influencing early marriage decisions.

Furthermore, the grant contributes to increasing the perceived value of girls within families and communities. When families receive institutional recognition for supporting girls' education and delaying marriage, it gradually contributes to changing social attitudes regarding the role and status of women (Sen, 1999; Kabeer, 1999).

Promotion of Educational Continuity: A central objective of Kanyashri Prakalpa is to promote educational continuity among adolescent girls by encouraging their enrolment and retention in secondary, higher secondary, and higher education institutions. Education plays a crucial role in delaying marriage because girls who remain in school are more likely to develop awareness, confidence, aspirations, and decision-making abilities. Therefore, educational participation becomes an important protective factor against child marriage (UNICEF, 2021).

Research indicates that girls' education has a strong relationship with delayed marriage, improved health outcomes, economic independence, and greater participation in social decision-making. According to the World Bank (2018), expanding educational opportunities for girls is among the most effective strategies for reducing child marriage and promoting women's empowerment. Education provides girls with knowledge about their legal rights, increases their bargaining power within families, and enhances their ability to make informed life choices.

Kanyashri strengthens this relationship between education and empowerment by ensuring that adolescent girls remain connected with educational institutions. Schools become spaces not only for academic learning but also for developing social awareness, leadership qualities, and confidence among girls. Thus, the scheme transforms education into a mechanism of social mobility and gender justice (Sen, 1999).

Social Awareness: Beyond financial assistance, Kanyashri Prakalpa contributes to creating social awareness regarding girls' education, legal marriage age, gender equality, and women's rights. The implementation of the scheme through schools, government institutions, and community networks facilitates communication between families, educators, and local authorities. Such awareness-building activities help challenge traditional beliefs that support early marriage and gender discrimination (Government of West Bengal, 2022).

Social norms play a significant role in sustaining child marriage. In many communities, early marriage is associated with concerns regarding family honour, social security, and economic responsibility. Changing such attitudes requires continuous awareness programmes that encourage communities to recognize girls' education and empowerment as essential for social development. According to UNICEF (2021), community-level engagement is necessary for addressing the social and cultural factors that sustain child marriage.

Through its awareness component, Kanyashri promotes a broader understanding of gender equality by encouraging families and communities to view girls as individuals with rights, aspirations, and

developmental potential. The scheme therefore contributes not only to individual empowerment but also to gradual transformation of social attitudes towards girls and women (Kabeer, 2005).

Kanyashri Prakalpa as an Instrument for Preventing Child Marriage

Economic Incentives and Delayed Marriage: Economic vulnerability is one of the major factors contributing to child marriage. Poor families often arrange early marriages because they perceive daughters' marriage as a financial responsibility and may lack resources to support prolonged education. Kanyashri Prakalpa addresses this economic dimension by providing financial incentives connected with girls' educational continuation and delayed marriage (UNICEF, 2021).

The financial support provided through the scheme creates an alternative economic pathway where educating daughters becomes beneficial for families. Rather than considering girls as economic burdens, families gradually begin to recognize the long-term value of education and skill development. This transformation reflects Amartya Sen's concept of development as the expansion of human capabilities, where education enables individuals to enhance their choices and opportunities (Sen, 1999).

Conditional financial assistance also helps reduce immediate economic pressures that often contribute to early marriage decisions. According to Baird et al. (2011), economic incentives can influence household behaviour by reducing the opportunity costs associated with keeping girls in school. Therefore, Kanyashri functions not only as financial assistance but also as a mechanism for reshaping social and economic perceptions regarding daughters.

Education as a Protective Factor: Education is widely recognized as one of the strongest protective factors against child marriage. Girls who remain in school generally marry later, develop greater awareness of their rights, and acquire skills necessary for independent decision-making. Kanyashri strengthens this protective role of education by encouraging girls to continue their studies beyond adolescence (World Bank, 2018).

Educational institutions provide girls with knowledge, social networks, and confidence that enable them to challenge restrictive gender norms. Educated girls are more likely to participate in decisions regarding marriage, employment, and personal development. Therefore, education becomes not merely an academic achievement but a pathway towards social transformation and empowerment (Kabeer, 1999).

By promoting educational continuity, Kanyashri contributes to delaying marriage and expanding girls' future possibilities. The scheme demonstrates that investment in girls' education has broader social benefits, including improved family well-being, reduced gender inequality, and increased participation of women in economic and social activities (UNESCO, 2021).

Enhancement of Girls' Agency and Decision-Making: Women's empowerment involves the expansion of women's ability to make meaningful choices regarding their lives, education, marriage, employment, and social participation. Kanyashri contributes to this process by enhancing girls' sense of independence, confidence, and self-worth. The scheme provides adolescent girls with recognition and institutional support, enabling them to imagine futures beyond early marriage (Kabeer, 1999).

Through continued education and financial assistance, many beneficiaries develop aspirations for higher education, professional careers, and economic independence. These aspirations challenge traditional gender roles that restrict women's identities primarily to domestic responsibilities. The scheme therefore contributes to the development of agency among adolescent girls by increasing their ability to negotiate personal and social decisions.

According to Sen (1999), empowerment occurs when individuals gain the freedom to choose and pursue lives they value. From this perspective, Kanyashri functions as a capability-enhancing intervention that expands girls' opportunities and strengthens their position within families and communities.

Transformation of Parental Attitudes: Parents play a crucial role in determining girls' educational opportunities and marriage decisions. In many cases, parental attitudes influenced by traditional gender norms, economic concerns, and social pressures contribute to early marriage. Kanyashri Prakalpa attempts to transform these attitudes by demonstrating the social and economic value of educating daughters (UNICEF, 2021).

The financial benefits associated with the scheme encourage parents to reconsider early marriage decisions and support girls' continued education. Over time, families may begin to perceive daughters not merely as dependents but as individuals capable of contributing to family and social development. Such changes indicate a gradual transformation in gender relations and social expectations (Kabeer, 2005).

Thus, Kanyashri operates at both individual and community levels. While it directly benefits adolescent girls, it also influences parental decision-making and contributes to broader social change. By encouraging families to invest in girls' education, the scheme challenges patriarchal assumptions and promotes a more equitable understanding of women's roles in society.

Socio-Educational Impact of Kanyashri Prakalpa: From a socio-educational perspective, Kanyashri Prakalpa has generated significant positive outcomes by addressing the interconnected issues of girls' education, child marriage, gender inequality, and social empowerment. The scheme goes beyond providing financial assistance by creating an enabling environment where adolescent girls can continue their education, develop aspirations, and participate more actively in social life. By linking economic incentives with educational continuation and delayed marriage, Kanyashri has contributed to transforming the social perception of girls and strengthening their position within families and communities (Government of West Bengal, 2022; Kabeer, 1999). The major socio-educational impacts of the scheme are discussed below.

Increased School Retention: One of the most significant contributions of Kanyashri Prakalpa has been its role in improving girls' educational retention, particularly at the secondary and higher secondary levels. Economic constraints are among the major factors responsible for girls' school dropout, especially in disadvantaged communities where families often prioritize the education of sons over daughters. The financial assistance provided through Kanyashri reduces the economic burden associated with girls' education and encourages families to maintain their daughters' school participation (UNESCO, 2021).

The scheme has strengthened the relationship between education and social empowerment by ensuring that adolescent girls remain connected with educational institutions during a critical stage of their development. Continued schooling provides girls with academic knowledge as well as opportunities for social interaction, personality development, awareness creation, and skill enhancement. According to the World Bank (2018), investment in girls' education produces long-term benefits by improving employment opportunities, delaying marriage, and enhancing women's participation in social and economic activities.

Furthermore, educational continuity helps girls develop greater awareness about their legal rights, health, and personal choices. Thus, Kanyashri's contribution to school retention represents not only an educational achievement but also a significant step towards preventing child marriage and promoting women's empowerment (Sen, 1999).

Reduction in Early Marriage Tendencies: The prevention of child marriage is one of the central objectives of Kanyashri Prakalpa. By linking financial benefits with the condition that girls remain unmarried until the legally appropriate age, the scheme creates a practical incentive for families to postpone marriage decisions. In communities where early marriage is influenced by economic insecurity and social traditions, such incentives provide families with an alternative pathway that prioritizes education over premature marriage (UNICEF, 2021).

The scheme challenges the perception that marriage is the primary or only secure future option for girls. By encouraging continued education, Kanyashri expands girls' aspirations beyond domestic roles and promotes the idea that girls can pursue higher education, employment, and personal development. Research on conditional cash transfer programmes indicates that economic incentives combined with educational opportunities can significantly influence household decisions regarding marriage and schooling (Baird et al., 2011).

However, the reduction of child marriage cannot be attributed only to financial assistance. Kanyashri's effectiveness also lies in its ability to generate awareness among families and communities regarding the harmful consequences of early marriage and the importance of girls' rights. Therefore, the scheme operates as both an economic intervention and a social transformation programme.

Improvement in Self-Confidence and Empowerment: Kanyashri Prakalpa has contributed significantly to enhancing self-confidence, self-esteem, and social visibility among adolescent girls. Recognition through government support provides girls with a sense of identity and importance, reinforcing the idea that they are valuable members of society. The opportunity to continue education and receive institutional support enables girls to develop greater confidence in expressing their opinions and making decisions regarding their future (Kabeer, 1999).

Education plays a central role in developing girls' agency because it expands their knowledge, aspirations, and ability to negotiate social expectations. Girls who remain in school are more likely to participate in decision-making processes related to education, marriage, and career choices. From the perspective of Amartya Sen's capability approach, empowerment occurs when individuals gain the freedom and resources necessary to choose the kind of life they value (Sen, 1999).

Many Kanyashri beneficiaries develop aspirations for higher education, professional careers, and economic independence. Such aspirations challenge traditional gender roles and contribute to the gradual transformation of social attitudes towards women's capabilities and responsibilities.

Promotion of Gender Equality: Kanyashri Prakalpa represents an important policy initiative for promoting gender equality by addressing structural disadvantages faced by girls. Historically, gender discrimination has influenced educational opportunities, mobility, decision-making power, and access to resources. The scheme challenges these inequalities by recognizing girls' education and development as important social priorities (Kabeer, 2005).

By providing direct benefits to adolescent girls, Kanyashri increases their visibility within families and communities. The scheme sends a significant social message that girls' education is not only a private family matter but also a matter of public development and social justice. This approach contributes to changing patriarchal attitudes that traditionally undervalue girls' education and autonomy.

Gender equality requires more than equal access to resources; it also requires transformation of social norms and power relations. Kanyashri contributes to this process by empowering girls with educational opportunities, financial support, and greater awareness of their rights. Therefore, the scheme aligns with broader national and international goals of achieving gender equality and women's empowerment (UN Women, 2020).

Strengthening of Social Inclusion: Kanyashri Prakalpa has also played an important role in promoting social inclusion by supporting girls belonging to economically weaker and socially disadvantaged sections of society. Poverty and social inequality often restrict educational opportunities for girls, increasing their vulnerability to early marriage. By providing financial assistance, Kanyashri helps reduce educational disparities and improves access to development opportunities (Government of West Bengal, 2022).

The scheme is particularly significant for rural and marginalized communities where economic difficulties, limited educational resources, and traditional gender norms often restrict girls' advancement. By bringing disadvantaged girls into the educational system, Kanyashri contributes to reducing social exclusion and promoting equitable development.

Social inclusion through education has long-term implications because educated girls are more likely to contribute to family welfare, community development, and economic growth. Therefore, Kanyashri represents not only a welfare initiative but also an instrument for building a more inclusive society.

Challenges and Limitations: Although Kanyashri Prakaalpa has made significant contributions towards preventing child marriage and promoting girls' empowerment, several challenges continue to affect its complete effectiveness. Child marriage is a complex social issue influenced by economic conditions, cultural traditions, gender norms, and institutional limitations. Therefore, financial incentives alone cannot eliminate all barriers faced by adolescent girls. The major challenges associated with the implementation and impact of the scheme are discussed below.

Persistence of Patriarchal Norms: One of the major challenges in preventing child marriage is the persistence of patriarchal social structures and traditional gender norms. In some communities, girls are still perceived primarily as future wives and caregivers rather than as individuals with independent aspirations. Such beliefs influence parental decisions regarding education, mobility, and marriage.

Although Kanyashri provides economic incentives, deeply rooted social attitudes cannot be transformed immediately through financial support alone. Sustainable change requires continuous gender sensitization programmes involving parents, community leaders, teachers, and local organizations (Kabeer, 2005).

Poverty and Economic Pressure: Economic hardship remains a significant barrier to girls' empowerment. In extremely poor households, immediate financial survival may take priority over long-term educational benefits. Some families may continue to view early marriage as a way of reducing economic responsibilities.

While Kanyashri reduces some financial pressures, broader poverty reduction strategies, employment opportunities, and livelihood support are necessary to create sustainable improvements in girls' educational participation. Addressing the economic roots of child marriage requires coordinated efforts beyond a single welfare scheme (World Bank, 2018).

Lack of Awareness: Another challenge is the lack of adequate awareness regarding the eligibility criteria, application procedures, and benefits of the scheme among some families, particularly in remote rural areas. Limited access to information may prevent deserving girls from receiving support.

Effective implementation requires stronger awareness campaigns through schools, local government institutions, community organizations, and digital platforms. Teachers and community workers can play a crucial role in identifying eligible beneficiaries and ensuring that the benefits reach vulnerable groups.

Educational Barriers: Although Kanyashri encourages educational continuation, several educational barriers continue to affect girls' participation. These include distance from schools, inadequate infrastructure, lack of transportation facilities, safety concerns, shortage of teachers, and limited opportunities for higher education in rural areas.

Therefore, financial assistance must be complemented by improvements in educational infrastructure and supportive learning environments. Creating safe, accessible, and quality educational institutions is essential for achieving the long-term objectives of the scheme (UNESCO, 2021).

Thus, Kanyashri should be supported by comprehensive educational reforms, community awareness programmes, vocational training opportunities, and employment pathways for women to ensure sustainable empowerment.

Policy Implications

- The experience of Kanyashri Prakalpa provides important lessons for developing gender-responsive social policies. The success of the scheme demonstrates that effective interventions against child marriage require integration of economic support, educational opportunities, and social awareness. The following policy implications emerge from the analysis:
- Government programmes should adopt a multidimensional approach by combining financial assistance with educational development, awareness campaigns, and skill-building initiatives. Economic support becomes more effective when accompanied by social and educational empowerment.
- Community involvement is essential for changing traditional attitudes towards girls' education and marriage. Local leaders, teachers, parents, and social organizations should actively participate in awareness programmes aimed at promoting gender equality.
- Schools should function not only as academic institutions but also as spaces for developing gender awareness, leadership skills, health education, and career guidance among adolescent girls.
- To sustain girls' aspirations beyond school education, government initiatives should provide vocational training, career counselling, and employment-oriented skill development programmes.
- Strong monitoring systems are necessary to ensure that scheme benefits reach the most vulnerable groups. Regular evaluation can identify implementation gaps and improve the effectiveness of policy interventions.

Conclusion: Kanyashri Prakalpa represents a significant socio-educational intervention aimed at addressing the complex problem of child marriage through empowerment rather than mere regulation. The scheme recognizes that early marriage is not only a legal issue but also a consequence of poverty, educational deprivation, and gender inequality. By providing financial assistance, encouraging educational continuation, and promoting social awareness, Kanyashri has contributed to delaying marriage and improving the status of adolescent girls in West Bengal.

The greatest achievement of Kanyashri lies in its transformation of social attitudes. It challenges the traditional perception that girls' lives are defined primarily by marriage and domestic responsibilities. Instead, it promotes the idea that girls have the right to education, personal development, and independent aspirations. The scheme demonstrates that economic support combined with educational empowerment can become a powerful instrument for social change.

However, preventing child marriage requires continuous efforts beyond financial incentives. Sustainable transformation demands stronger community involvement, gender-sensitive education, improved employment opportunities, and effective implementation of legal protections. Kanyashri Prakalpa should therefore be viewed as an important foundation for women's empowerment and gender equality rather than as a complete solution to child marriage.

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