Unveiling the efficacy of the *Kanyashree Prakalpa*; A critical analysis of West Bengal's initiative to enhance women's education and diminish dropout rates

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Article Info	Abstract
	Comparative public policy is a domain of interdisciplinary study that uses public policy as a unit of analysis for comparing different regimes. A crucial aspect of public policy is public policy evaluation, which must deal with the impact of the policy and not with policy output. Evaluating public policy is crucial for governments because the success or failure of a given policy directly influences the government's image, impacting its likelihood of returning to power. In most cases, governments focus on highlighting policy outputs which consists of superficial statistical data. Such data may not be a proper representation of the actual impact of the policy. In this regard, this paper aims to evaluate the '*Kanyashree Prakalpa*' of the West Bengal Government to promote women education and reduce dropout rates. Department of Women Development and Social Welfare, Government of West Bengal (DWD&SW) has designed the *Kanyashree Prakalpa* in 2012- a conditional cash transfer scheme with the aim of improving the status and well-being of the girl child in West Bengal by incentivizing schooling of all teenage girls and delaying their marriages until the age of 18, the legal age of marriage. Using Thomas R. Dye's conception of public policy evaluation, this paper aims to study each indicator of the '*Kanyashree Prakalpa*' to understand the actual impact of the policy in solving the problem it claims to address, and thereby mention ways to improve the policy to better address the pressing problems related to girl child education in India. The paper also addresses the compatibility of the policy in relation to certain SDGs.

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1. Introduction; Why *Kanyashree Prakalpa*

Child marriage is a social evil that has plagued the Indian society throughout history. Efforts from social reformers such as Vidyasagar and Raja Rammohan Roy in the 19th Century brought the issue to light; moderate interventions were made to curb this social evil in the face of massive social resistance. Unfortunately, child marriage is still prevalent in the Indian society, and West Bengal is no different. The *Kanyashree Prakalpa* has been a tool of policy intervention by the West Bengal government to address the negative impact of child marriage in the state. It is mostly women who are subjected to child marriage which derails their life trajectory. According to the NFHS 4 (2015-16)[1], 24% men between the ages of 25-29 years were married before the age of 21 while 40.7% of women between the age group of 20-24 years were married before 18 years of age.

Education is one of the foremost tools of women empowerment and child marriage directly attacks education by cutting short a girl's schooling. Therefore, the Government of West Bengal introduced and launched the *Kanyashree Prakalpa* on October 1st, 2013 which aimed to improve the overall well-being of the girl child. Its primary goal is to enable the transition of girls into higher education and to reduce the prevalence of child marriage. Girls from poorer families were less likely to continue their education if they even enroll to begin with. The patriarchal mindset views women as burden, and marrying off a girl at a young age is seen as an effective way of getting rid of the burden as it makes no long-term sense to invest in a girl, educate and empower her as she would eventually marry away. The *Kanyashree Prakalpa* aims to strike the very root of this problem by incentivizing girl education through lucrative scholarships.

Against this backdrop, this study is structured around the following research objective: to evaluate the *Kanyashree Prakalpa* by differentiating between its policy outputs and policy impacts to assess its effectiveness in reducing dropout rates and delaying child marriage among adolescent girls in West Bengal. The key research question may therefore be framed as: does the *Kanyashree Prakalpa* create long-term positive changes in women's education and empowerment, or does it remain restricted to statistical outputs?

This research is necessary for two reasons. Firstly, while existing studies and government reports provide quantitative data on enrollment and scholarship coverage, such indicators majorly represent policy outputs rather than actual impacts on social mobility, empowerment and delayed marriage. Guided by Thomas Dye's framework, a qualitative evaluation is therefore essential to understand the underlying realities that do not fall under the radar of quantitative measures. Secondly, most policy assessments treat *Kanyashree* only as a welfare scheme, but this

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1. National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4)- 2014-15

paper instead situates it within the larger discourse on education, gender and development policy, thus highlighting its importance beyond immediate state boundaries.

Finally, this study makes three crucial contributions. Empirically, it tries to provide a critical analysis of *Kanyashree Prakalpa* through secondary sources, comparative perspectives on conditional cash transfers and its link with the Sustainable Development Goals. Conceptually, it refines the demarcation between impacts and outputs while evaluating gender-based welfare policies. Lastly, from a policy perspective, the study offers actionable recommendations that move beyond general observations to enhance the policy's practical relevance.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative policy evaluation approach to critically examine the *Kanyashree Prakalpa*. The analysis is guided by Thomas R. Dye's distinction between policy output and policy impact, emphasizing the need to move beyond superficial indicators such as enrollment figures or scholarship disbursals (outputs) and instead assess real-world consequences such as delayed marriage, enhanced empowerment, and long-term educational outcomes (impacts). The paper relies primarily on secondary sources, including government reports, evaluation studies, and existing academic literature, to assess how the scheme has been implemented and the extent to which its stated objectives have been achieved.

3. Review of literature

Globally, Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programs have become instrumental in linking social protection with human development outcomes. Millán et al. (2019) establish that long-term CCTs in Latin America significantly improve school retention and delay early marriage, while Rawlings and Rubio (2005) underscore that their success depends on conditionality enforcement and complementary social investments. Ladhani and Sitter (2020) provide a critical perspective, warning that cash incentives may reproduce dependency if not accompanied by structural gender reforms. Weiss (1999) adds that policy evaluation must bridge bureaucratic objectives with lived realities, emphasizing the interface between policy design and public experience. Together, these foundational studies inform the conceptual framework for assessing whether government schemes—such as India's *Kanyashree Prakalpa*—translate outputs into sustained impacts.

In India, successive governments have implemented female-centric CCTs like *Apni Beti Apna Dhan* and *Ladli Lakshmi Yojana*, aimed at curbing child marriage and promoting girls' education. Mukherjee and Pal (2017) situate these efforts within public policy

design, finding that the *Kanyashree Prakalpa* (KP) of West Bengal represents a more systematic intervention combining financial, educational, and social empowerment goals. Kumar (2024) extends this argument by linking educational access with societal attitudes, showing that patriarchal norms often dilute policy effectiveness. Chattopadhyay (2023) similarly argues that gender-centric administration in West Bengal strengthened policy legitimacy through bureaucratic empathy, a key determinant of program credibility.

Empirical research on *Kanyashree* consistently shows positive educational and social outcomes. Halder (2018) and Sen & Dutta (2018) highlight its effectiveness in reducing dropout and delaying marriage, with the latter urging greater beneficiary participation for deeper transformation. Das and Sarkhel (2023) confirm that schooling gains under *Kanyashree* do not always equate to improved learning outcomes, illustrating the tension between quantitative expansion and qualitative progress. Dey and Ghosal (2021) and Ghosh, Teckchandani, and Tripathi (2024) reinforce these findings through comparative district analyses, showing heterogeneous impacts across urban and rural zones. Haldar (2024) interprets *Kanyashree* as a tool for social norm reform, observing tangible attitudinal change in parental decision-making, while Mahata (2024) conceptualizes the scheme as a "social safeguard" for adolescent girls, enhancing self-esteem and financial inclusion.

Complementary studies emphasize structural strengths and weaknesses. Paroi and Sarkar (2020) conduct a SWOT analysis identifying transparency and community outreach as core strengths but warning against administrative bottlenecks. Mukherjee and Mukherjee (2020) evaluate its "desirability gap," noting uneven fund utilization and limited capacity-building among local schools. Ghosh and Teckchandani (2024) and Nandi et al. (2024) illustrate how *Kanyashree* catalyzes progress toward SDG-4 (quality education) and SDG-5 (gender equality), while falling short on SDG-1 and SDG-10 due to persistent income and regional disparities. Bhattacharya, Mitra, and Majumder (2025) corroborate its contribution to gender equality but caution that inter-generational empowerment remains nascent.

From a micro-perspective, Banerjee et al. (2023) highlight the scheme's resilience during the pandemic through the SAG–*Kanyashree* convergence model, which safeguarded adolescent health and education. Roy and Chakraborty (2024) and Chakraborty (2024) extend the discussion to regional human development and educational inequality, revealing how socio-economic differentials condition program uptake. Akhter et al. (2021) trace how institutional intermediaries such as teachers and libraries expand awareness, while Nandi et al. (2024) empirically confirm that Kanyashree beneficiaries report higher motivation and educational aspirations. Sen and Thamarapani (2023) identify KP as a model of feminist public policy,

stressing that keeping girls in school transforms both gender norms and household bargaining power. *Mukherjee (2022)* situates *Kanyashree Prakalpa* explicitly within the SDG-4 framework, emphasizing that educational continuity and capability development are central to measuring its transformative impact rather than its quantitative reach.

Despite extensive documentation, most studies remain quantitative and scheme-specific, emphasizing enrolment numbers, fund distribution, and administrative success. The literature underplays the qualitative dimensions of empowerment—agency, autonomy, and self-efficacy—which form the true metrics of social transformation. Addressing this critical gap, the present study reinterprets *Kanyashree Prakalpa* through an evaluative framework that distinguishes policy outputs from real impacts, positioning the scheme as a case study in how gender-responsive welfare can evolve from statistical success toward sustainable empowerment.

4. Finding
4.1. Conditional cash transfer

The West Bengal government, taking into account lessons learned from both domestic and global experiences, has implemented a conditional cash transfer (CCT) program to guarantee that girls remain in school until they turn eighteen and to reduce the number of child marriages. Experience both domestically and abroad has shown that merely enforcing broad laws and policies to stop the problem of child marriage is insufficient and unproductive. To address the issue, specific plans are needed. Out of all the policy initiatives aimed at addressing early marriage and guaranteeing girls' attendance in school, the CCT is becoming more and more popular.

CCT initiatives are comparatively new in the context of social assistance programs. In this regard, the nations of Latin America are regarded as the pioneers. Mexico and Brazil are known to have covered a huge section of their population under schemes *Progresa later* known as *Oportunidades*, and *Bolsa Familia* respectively. Eventually, the CCTs became widespread, particularly in India and other developing nations. The first CCT program in India was introduced in 1994 by the Haryana government under the name *Apni Beti Apna Dhan* (ABAD). According to the most current assessment, educational attainment has improved; yet, girls' education remains primarily valued in relation to marriage. Nearly 50% of the parents stated that their daughter's marriage-related expenses will be covered by conditional cash (Louis et al., 2018: 47).

The types of support offered by CCT programs differ in terms of how they are implemented. First of all, the incentives are subject to a set of requirements, which signify a social contract between the government and the incentive recipient and call for the achievement of predetermined standards. Second, rather of being in the form of

products, the benefits are given to the recipient directly in the form of cash. CCT programs are frequently viewed as efforts to create demand among underprivileged populations who face difficulties to accessing basic services like healthcare and education. The main objective of *Kanyashree Prakalpa* is to give girls the same respect as boys, giving them the chance to go into the workforce, put off getting married, and earn more negotiating power at home. The goal of this empowerment is to enable women to make significant decisions in their own life (West Bengal Government, 2015: 6).

The main objectives of the *Kanyashree Prakalpa* are:

- Extending the time spent in school to include completing secondary, upper secondary, and university courses, such as those in technical, vocational, or sports fields. The goal of this strategy is to give women a stronger base in the social and economic spheres of life.
- Delaying marriage until the girl is legally eighteen reduces the chance of early pregnancies, the risks of mother and infant mortality, and other negative health consequences, such as malnourishment.
- Making it mandatory for the cash benefits to be transferred into the bank accounts of the *Kanyashree* recipient in order to lay the foundation for the economic inclusion of girls.
- Changing the way that teenage girls, their families, and other important people in their life think, feel, and behave, all the while promoting gender parity with a focused outreach plan (west bengal government, 2016: 5).

The state-wide *Kanyashree* plan, which offers two financial support tiers, was put into effect in 2013. For single girls between the ages of 13 and 18 who are enrolled in Grades VIII–XII or their equivalent, the first phase consists of a yearly scholarship of Rs 500. This amount was increased to Rs 750 starting in the 2015–16 implementation year. In the second phase, single girls under the age of eighteen who are enrolled in sports, vocational or technical training, or education are eligible for a one-time stipend of Rs. 25,000.

4.2. Policy evaluation; Impact vs. Output

People often have the assumption that once a law has been passed, a bureaucratic division has been allocated to deal with the implementation of the law and money disbursed for implementation process, the purpose of the law, the bureaucrats and the costs will be automatically achieved. We live under the notion that when the Parliament adopts a policy and allocates money for it, and when the executive organizes a program, hires people, spends money and carries out activities in relation to the implementation of the policy, the effect of the said policy would be felt by the society. However in reality, these

assumptions are not accurate. India's experience with several with public policy programs portray the need for careful evaluation of the actual impact of public policies.

Is the government really aware of what it is doing? My answer is no. Governments usually have an idea of how much money they spend, how many citizens are given services, how much their services cost, how the programs are structured, managed and operated. Most importantly, governments are aware of how interest groups view their policies. Public policies are a way for the government to win the votes of majority communities. Public policies are therefore structured in a way so it benefits the majoritarian communities, which in turn will garner the votes of these communities. Thus, the government needs to ensure that the interest and pressure groups representing these communities are aware of the full scope and benefits of these policies. With knowledge of these policies, the interest groups can relay the information to the common masses, thereby educating them of the advantages of the policies, creating an image that the government cares. Therefore, governments often make sure that influential pressure and interest groups are aware of the public policies being introduced by the government.

But one question still arises – even if public policies are well structured, efficiently operated, properly utilized, adequately financed and supported by the majoritarian interest groups, do they work? How much do they benefit the society, are their benefits long-term or short-term? In this regard, Thomas Dye introduces the concept of differentiating between policy impact and policy output. Before that, let us understand what public policy evaluation is. Policy evaluation can be defined as the process of learning about the pros or cons, better say, the consequences of a particular public policy. Its objective is to conduct empirical examination of the effects of current policies and programs on the target groups in reference to the goals these policies were meant to achieve.

But policy evaluation cannot simply be tied to the mere achievements of a policy. Instead of focusing on the achievements, we must focus on the consequences of a public policy. Focusing on the consequences of a public policy can be referred to as focusing on the impact of a public policy, better termed as 'policy impact'. The impact of a policy means that the focus is on the real-world effects of the policy, which includes impact on the target group, spillover effects, impact on the immediate as well as the future conditions, direct costs of the public policy as well as the indirect costs. For the discussion on policy evaluations of the *kanyashree prakalpa* on the grounds of theoretical perspectives, it is extremely crucial to understand the difference between impact of a policy, or 'policy impact' and output of a policy, or 'policy output'.

The words 'impact' is often taken as synonymous to the word

'output'. It is common to confuse between the differences between policy impact and policy output and take them to mean the same. However, in reality, they are quite different. While focusing on policy impact, we cannot simply just measure government activity. For instance, the amount of rupees spent per member of a specific target group, say, per capita expenditure on welfare. This is neither a real nor an accurate measurement of the impact of the said policy on that specific target group. It is merely a measure of government activity– that is, a measure of the output of the policy, or policy output.

Unfortunately, most governments in the majority of instances produce heaps of statistical data that measure outputs. For instance, welfare benefits paid, medicare payments or school enrollments (which is applicable in the case of *kanyashree prakalpa*). Statistical data are an illusion that do not portray the true conditions of a situation. Such data highlight the output of a policy and not its real-world impact (Dutta & Sen, 2021: 7).

4.3. Policy determinants

a) **Target groups.** A target group is that part of the population for whom the policy was structured and implemented. It can be the backward sections of the society, a specific occupation group or the farmers. In regards to the *kanyashree prakalpa*, the target group is girl children between the ages of 13 to 18 years. Once a target group has been identified, the desired effect of the policy on the members of this group has to be determined. The desire outcome of *kanyashree prakalpa* is to prevent child marriage and school dropout by providing incentives through scholarship for education.

b) **Non-target groups.** Most policies have different effects on different sections of the population. For example, a welfare reform may also indirectly impact groups other than the poor. In the case of the *kanyashree prakalpa*, it is very difficult to identify a non-target group as the policy specifically targets girl children. We can assume that the non-target group in this case is the immediate family of the girl child who can benefit from the scholarship amount received by the child.

c) **Short-term and long-term effects.** Every policy requires a huge allocation of financial resources. One concern behind such an allocation remains as to whether benefits will overweigh the costs. It is also crucial to understand whether the policy is intended to bring in short-term changes or long-term changes. The *kanyashree prakalpa* is intended to long-term and long-lasting changes. With the support of scholarship, the policy intends to prevent dropout and increase enrollment of girl children to schools, which would lead to a generation of educated women.

d) **Cost-benefit analysis.** Like every decision in life, a public policy must also be subjected to a cost-benefit analysis. The worth of a public

policy majorly depends on whether the benefits outweigh the costs. The *kanyashree prakalpa* is backed by heavy moral implications and aims to bring forth major societal changes by empowering women from a young age. Additionally, a generation of educated women would receive employment, earn and become future taxpayers, thereby by paying off on the government's investment in the long-term.

4.4. Policy evaluation; What do governments usually do?

a) **Reports and hearings.** A very common way of policy evaluation followed by most government involves hearings and reports. On the floor of the legislature, the government administrators are asked to present the accomplishments of the policies. In this regard, annual reports of the specific program is presented. This is not an objective method of evaluating the policy. It tends to magnify the benefits of the policy. Statistical data is provided which can be very misleading. For instance, if reports state that post-implementation of the *kanyashree prakalpa* saw a rise in enrollment by 10%, it may mean that enrollment increased from 1 to 10 girl child, which is, a total of 10 girls. On the other hand, if enrollment of boys increased by a mere 2%, it can mean that enrollment increased from 1000 boys to 1050 boys, which is a total of 50 boys.

b) **Visiting sites.** Site visits include visits by administrators, consultants or legislators to the fields for inspections. There are high chances of these investigators picking up impressionable data about the effectiveness of the public policy, whether guidelines are being followed, whether there are adequate staff and whether or not the clients, that is, the target group is satisfied with the services. This is because in most cases the sites are informed about the visits beforehand, allowing them to prepare beforehand and present a picture that is not true. For instance, the aim of *kanyashree prakalpa* is to reduce school dropouts and prevent child marriage among girls. If *kanyashree* is successful, it would mean more girl child in school. But in most schools in West Bengal, girls do not come to school on a regular basis. The money they receive is not spent behind education but for their or the family's personal use. However, the school administrators may force the girl students to turn up on the day of the site visit, thereby showing a false image.

c) **A comparison with standards of professional levels.** Professional societies have created excellent standards for several government activities. The number of students per teacher, hospital beds per thousand people, and cases per welfare worker are a few examples of how these standards are typically stated as a desired level of output. Then, the ideal and real government outcomes can be contrasted. However, such comparisons with professional standard only tends to highlight the output and not the impact. Indicators of

women empowerment like enrollment ratio and decrease in dropout rates are only an output and shows nothing about the actual impact of the policy. Impact of the *kanyashree prakalpa* would include indicators such as how many girls under the policy ended up grabbing jobs post-education?

d) **Evaluation of citizen complaints.** A common approach by governments in regards to policy evaluation is the analysis of citizen complaints. Citizens' grievances can be collected through interviews, surveys and feedback form submitted by citizens. Coming to the *kanyashree prakalpa*, it is highly doubtful if this method would be applicable. The target group consists of girl students between the ages of 13 to 18 years of age. It is difficult to gather complaints for initiatives like *kanyashree prakalpa*, which targets low-income girls between the ages of 13 and 18. It may be challenging to conduct interviews, surveys, and online feedback forms in places where many people lack access to phones. Concerns exist regarding parental control over reactions as well. Forms might only be given out by the government to people who would respond favorably, resulting in skewed data and incorrect conclusions. Resolving these problems is essential in order to ensure an apt evaluation of policy.

e) **Public opinion survey.** A survey of public opinion may look like an adequate way of judging policy impact but it is not so. The same problems arise in the case of public opinion survey. Such forms may be manipulated and sent out to be filled up only by individuals who may react positively to it. This cannot lead to an adequate evaluation of the impact of the policy.

Policies that are evaluated with less efficacious methodologies, or that prioritize outputs over impact, may appear to have greater advantages than they actually do. This is significant because the administration wishes to emphasize its accomplishments. Public policy effectiveness serves as a kind of litmus test for the government. People are more inclined to vote for the administration again if measures are effective. However, it may be difficult for the administration to maintain its hold on power if a policy fails. Therefore, highlighting the advantages aids in the government's popularity and re-election (Dye, 2013: 48).

4.5. Policy evaluation; What should governments do?
The above mentioned evaluative methods do not effectively weigh costs against benefits. In order to understand the actual impact of the policies of the government on the society, there is a need for particularly designed and more complex policy evaluation methods. Such a method may involve comparisons which are designed to find out what changes in the society can be attributed to the policy. This means comparing

what happened to what may have happened if the policy had not been implemented. It is easy to determine 'what happened' as that is the main objective of most policy evaluation policies. In regards to the *kanyashree prakalpa*, we can refer to the study led by Anindita Sen and Arijita Dutta (Dutta & Sen, 2021) in 2018. The proportion of underage girl student not facing pressure of marriage had increased by 5.17% in Howrah, 4.04% in Murshidabad and 2.67% in Coochbehar.

a) **Before vs. after comparison.** One common approach the governments can follow is the before and after comparison. The most common and most effective method in this approach is a comparison of results in a particular area at two different points of time. One should be before the implementation of the program, and the other must be after the implementation of the program. The effect of the policy on the target group is to be examined. A before and after comparison helps understand the actual impact of the policy, but one issue still remains – what if other factors were responsible for the change, if any? If so, such changes in the target group cannot solely be attributed as the impact of the public policy.

b) **Predicted trend line vs. post-program comparison.** A better understanding of what may have happened if the program would not have been implemented could be made by a projection of the past trends into the post-program time period. Such projections can be compared with each other to figure out the changes in the society, to be precise, the changes in the target group after the introduction and implementation of the program. The differences between the projections in the pre-program phase and the post-program data can be attributed to the public policy itself. One thing that needs to be kept in mind is that data on target groups must be collected for a long period of time before the policy is even implemented in order to establish a viable trend line.

c) **Comparing jurisdictions with and without the programs.** Comparing program participants with non-participants or cities, states, or countries where the policy was implemented to those where it was not implemented is another popular evaluation design. Sometimes only the post-program period is used for comparisons; for instance, job records from participants in work-force training programs are compared to those from non-participants, or homicide rates in states with the death penalty are compared to those in states without it. In regards to *kanyashree prakalpa*, we need to find out any district in any other state of India that has similar socio-economic conditions. Such a state must have similar dropout rates and child marriage among girl trends like a district of West Bengal. Taking the example of such a district, we can study the changes in the district of West Bengal where the *kanyashree prakalpa* had been implemented.

d) **Comparison between control and experimental groups before and after comparisons.** The traditional research design includes applying

the policy solely to the experimental group, carefully selecting control and experimental groups that are identical to each other, and comparing the changes in the experimental group with the changes in the control group following the application of the policy. At the beginning, the control and experimental groups have to be the same, and each group's preprogram performance has to be measured and found to be the same. Only the experimental group may use the program. It's important to measure the postprogram variations between the experimental and control groups precisely. Administrators, policy evaluators and independent agencies may use this traditional research strategy because it offers the best chance of measuring changes resulting from the influence of other social influences.

4.6. Barriers to Kanyashree Prakalpa

The principal aim of the *Kanyashree Prakalpa* is to reduce the number of child marriages among underage girls by providing scholarships as a means of incentivizing them to continue their education. By reducing the financial strain that comes with raising girls, this policy aims to discourage parents from marrying off their daughters too soon. A decline in the frequency of early marriages is expected, which will lead to a decline in the percentage of students dropping out of school. As a morally sound strategy, the *Kanyashree Prakalpa* seeks to initiate significant women's empowerment from an early age. Although the policy's overall objectives and potential impact seem admirable, using traditional assessment approaches to actually assess its efficacy is a practical challenge.

The disparity between the seeming goals and the actual realities of policy execution gives rise to complexity. The complex dynamics at work may not be sufficiently captured by traditional evaluation techniques as mentioned in the above sections, making it difficult to determine the policy's true impact. Determining the effectiveness of the *Kanyashree Prakalpa* requires a sophisticated comprehension of the social environment in which it is being implemented, public attitudes, and the complexity of the problem being addressed. Therefore, even though the policy's general goals and possible advantages are clear, evaluating it in the real world is extremely difficult due to its complexity.

a) First, the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) system depends on a student's enrollment in school in order to award scholarships. Still, it begs the question of whether enrollment alone can guarantee true empowerment. Apart from enrollment, regular attendance is necessary, and although it is a required criterion, compliance with it needs examination. Maintaining regular attendance can be difficult, especially in rural locations. Furthermore, there is cause for concern regarding the possibility of collaboration between students and school administrators,

whereby a portion of the scholarship could be covertly transferred to the former in exchange for the students obtaining the majority share without meeting attendance requirements.

b) Second, women's empowerment is taken into account in ways that go beyond enrollment and attendance statistics, which calls for a review of the substantive aspects of education that are offered. There are fundamental concerns about the caliber of education provided by the government. An investigation of the availability of certified teachers and the sufficiency of infrastructure assistance is crucial for a critical appraisal. There is a glaring absence of these necessary elements in West Bengal's contemporary environment. Notably, the area struggles with high rates of unemployment that coexist with understaffed schools. This necessitates a more thorough analysis of the effectiveness of educational programs, raising concerns about the value of promoting female enrolment in schools when institutional shortcomings compromise the quality of education.

c) Thirdly, the *Kanyashree Prakalpa's* scope includes all girls between the ages of 13 and 18, a broad inclusion that invites criticism regarding the need for universal scholarship distribution. It begs the question of whether the threat of underage marriage is equally present for all girl child in the state of West Bengal. Although this vulnerability is recognized in rural settings, it does not always apply to their urban equivalents. Giving out scholarships to every girl without any discrimination seems to be a lack of judgment. A more prudent course of action may be to target financial aid towards a certain group of girl children who belong from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and are more likely to marry young.

This scholarship distribution decision-making would maximize resource allocation while also being in line with the complex socioeconomic circumstances. Through focusing financial assistance on girls who are facing real financial difficulties and a higher chance of child marriage, the program may have the greatest possible effect. Moreover, the money saved by not using a broad scholarship program might be used to increase the amount of aid given to the females who are actually experiencing financial hardship. This improved approach not only acknowledges the diversity of difficulties encountered by various groups of women, but it also emphasizes the wise use of few resources to improve the effectiveness of the *Kanyashree Prakalpa*.

4.7. Kanyashree Prakalpa and sustainable development goals; A critical appraisal

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015 to provide a global framework for addressing critical issues such as inequality, poverty, health, gender justice and education. A nation's national and regional public policies can be assessed from the lens of the SDG goals. The Kanyashree Prakalpa, a flagship social

policy of the West Bengal government in India, presents us an interesting case for studying how targeted welfare schemes align with broader global agendas. Its objectives, such as reducing rate of school dropout among adolescent girls and preventing child marriage directly connect to SDG 4 and SDG 5. However, when considered against SDG 1 and SDG 10, the scheme reveals certain limitations and thereby highlights the superficial nature of its poverty and inequality reduction schemes.

4.7.1. SDG 4: Quality education

Kanyashree Prakalpa's most crucial achievement lies in creating incentives for adolescent girls to stay in school till the age of at least eighteen. By offering conditional cash transfers tied to school enrollment and attendance, this scheme addresses Target 4.1, which is the completion of free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education. It also aligns with Target 4.5, which calls for eliminating educational disparities in regards to gender.

However, the question of educational quality still persist. While the scheme successfully increases female participation in schooling, the lack of proper infrastructure, faculty and limited curricular support undervalue its transformational potential. Therefore, the policy fails to address the qualitative dimensions of education. Thus, we can conclude that the policy is a partial fulfillment of SDG 4, wherein quantity is prioritized over quality.

4.7.2. SDG 5: Gender equality

The Kanyashree Prakalpa addresses Target 5.3, which aims to eliminate all harmful practices such as child marriage. By rewarding families to delay the marriage of girls until the legal age of eighteen, the policy directly intervenes in a long standing social practice. It also supports indirect Target 5.1, which focuses on ending discrimination against women and girls, as the policy signals the state's recognition of girls' rights to education and autonomy.

Furthermore, the transfer of scholarship money into personal bank accounts of the beneficiaries introduces young girls to formal financial systems, thus promoting economic inclusion and decision-making power within the family. However, the impact of these measures vary on the basis of implementation integrity and social acceptance. There is a need for complementary interventions like awareness campaigns, skill-building programs and labour market integration.

4.7.3. SDG 1: No poverty; A superficial link

At first glance, Kanyashree Prakalpa may appear to align with SDG 1, which seeks to end poverty in all its forms. The scholarships offered to families can marginally reduce financial strain, especially in low-income households. However, the amounts provided—₹500 to ₹750 annually as a

recurring scholarship and a one-time ₹25,000 grant—are insufficient to create lasting economic upliftment. These sums may ease short-term expenses such as school fees, books, or marriage-related savings, but they cannot substantially alter the structural conditions of poverty.

Moreover, the program does not address employment generation, skill development, or long-term income security—factors central to SDG 1's Target 1.1 (eradicate extreme poverty) or Target 1.4 (equal access to economic resources). As a result, the scheme's poverty-alleviation impact is at best incidental and superficial. It treats education as an anti-poverty measure without embedding systemic economic support mechanisms.

4.7.4. SDG 10: Reduced inequalities; Limited scope

Similarly, the program has a tenuous connection with SDG 10, which calls for reducing inequalities within and among countries. While the scheme is targeted at adolescent girls, it does not specifically prioritize those from the most marginalized groups—such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, or religious minorities—who face layered vulnerabilities. The universal distribution of scholarships to all eligible girls, irrespective of their socioeconomic background, dilutes the policy's redistributive potential.

Thus, while *Kanyashree Prakalpa* symbolically supports inclusion, it does not substantively reduce structural inequalities in access to quality education, healthcare, or employment opportunities. Target 10.2, which emphasizes the empowerment of marginalized communities, remains largely unaddressed. The scheme in its current form risks creating a narrative of equality without tackling entrenched hierarchies of class, caste, and region that perpetuate exclusion.

4.8. Some reflections

With the powerful slogan *'Ma, Mati, Manush'* (Mother, Land, People), the Trinamool Congress (TMC) won a landslide public mandate in West Bengal in 2011, bringing an end to the 34-year rule of the Left Front administration (Sarkar, 2022: 11). The theme of land was the central focus of the storyline surrounding the 2011 election. But following the election victory, a significant shift occurred, shifting the attention back to the role of mother and particularly women's empowerment. The infrastructure development names, like the *'Ma* Flyover'* in Kolkata, are a good example of this change in emphasis.

This transition raises questions about whether the *Kanyashree Prakalpa* is a real attempt at women's empowerment or just a tool of politics of populism in West Bengal. Populism is a common occurrence in modern democracies that crosses national borders. It can be seen in developed countries such as the United States, where Donald Trump's presidency serves as an example, as well as in underdeveloped countries. Notably, a number of West Bengal's public policies are

overtly biased towards women, such as the *Lakkhi Bhandar* and *Kanyashree Prakalpa*. This case poses a relevant question about the actual impact of these regulations, namely whether they are primarily symbolic or have real transforming power.

Analyzing the effectiveness of such public policy programs requires a thorough scrutiny, taking into account the many aspects of women's empowerment that go beyond symbolic actions. It is necessary to compare policy goals with actual results in order to recognize the possible discrepancy between political rhetoric and real social impact. Thus, a comparison of the actual results of the *Kanyashree Prakalpa* with its stated goals will shed light on the complex relationship between populist politics and real policy impact when it comes to women's empowerment in West Bengal.

5. Conclusions and Policy recommendations

A thorough analysis of the *Kanyashree Prakalpa* reveals that although the scheme has achieved decent success in expanding educational access for adolescent girls and reducing dropout rates in schools. *Kanyashree Prakalpa* as a Conditional Cash Transfer program deals with economic barriers to girls' education– however its long-term success depends on whether these policy output translate into sustainable impacts such as self-efficacy, empowerment and social mobility. By applying Dye's policy evaluation technique and locating evidence from secondary data and state-level assessments, this research underscores that true empowerment emerges not only from enrollment figures but from the institutional, behavioral and social changes the program stimulates.

At the policy level, *Kanyashree Prakalpa* aligns closely with SDG-4 (Quality Education) and SDG-5 (Gender Equality) by promoting continued schooling and delaying early marriage among girls. The policy also contributes indirectly to SDG-3 (Good Health and Well-being) through improved awareness of reproductive health and financial inclusion through direct benefit transfers. However, its contribution to SDG-1 (No Poverty) and SDG-10 (Reduced Inequalities) remains restricted, as spatial and economic inequalities remain across districts. Rural-urban differentials, administrative inefficiencies and poor capacity-building at local levels continue to restrict the policy's full potential.

a) **Building a real-time monitoring and evaluation ecosystem.** Establish a state-level digital dashboard – similar to the *Samagra Shiksha* MIS– integrating attendance data, disbursement records and academic performance. Biometric-linked registers in school or mobile-based beneficiary apps could flag absenteeism and dropout risks early. Third-party audits periodically, like in *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* policy would ensure data accountability and credibility.

b) **Introducing skill-and-career linkages.** Supplementing the stipend

with certified short courses in digital literacy, financial management through ITIs, entrepreneurship, *Skill India Mission* or community colleges. For instance, something like a "*Kanyashree Next*" module could train senior beneficiaries in bookkeeping, computer applications or tailoring – helping translate educational retention into employment.

c) **Adopting targeted conditionalities and differential transfers.** Moving beyond universal coverage, wherein every girl child in government educational institutes are provided with scholarship without assessing the actual necessity, the policy can be modified by linking eligibility with *Aadhar*-verified household income and socio-economic caste census. Instead of providing scholarship to even girls from healthy financial background, higher incentives can be reserved for girls in backward regions or SC/ST, minority and from financially weaker backgrounds, echoing Mexico's *Progresa/ Oportunidades* model where differential benefits led to improved inclusion.

d) **Institutionalizing community-school partnerships.** By forming Kanyashree Monitoring Committees in every school comprising teachers, parents and local NGOs to carry out monthly or quarterly meetings on attendance, safety and counselling. Such oversight of participatory nature like the one successfully piloted in Purulia district of West Bengal under the SABLA convergence would strengthen social norms promoting girl's education and delaying child marriage.

e) **Promoting Cross-Scheme convergence and life cycle support.** The policy can perform with more efficiency if the stakeholders work on creating formal interfaces with *SAG*, *Mission Shakti*, and the National Health Mission to provide nutrition, menstrual-hygiene support and mental-health counselling. Ensuring a continuum of care from adolescence to early adulthood can become a possibility if these services can be integrated under one digital platform.

To sum up, the *Kanyashree Prakalpa* represents a commendable goal of women's empowerment, but in order to fully realize its potential, it needs to be strategically improved. A holistic approach must include strengthening the CCT system, improving educational quality, undertaking targeted scholarship distribution, carrying out thorough effect assessments, and encouraging community engagement. In addition to addressing present issues, the government's dedication to strengthening and improving the *Kanyashree Prakalpa* would open the door for a more significant and long-lasting influence on women's empowerment in West Bengal. With policies that adjust to the changing demands of the populace, the *Kanyashree Prakalpa* is well-positioned to be a model of positive change, establishing standards for social development programs that are inclusive and successful.

Conflict of interest
The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Authors' contributions
All authors contributed to the original idea, study design.

Ethical considerations
The authors have completely considered ethical issues, including informed consent, plagiarism, data fabrication, misconduct, and/or falsification, double publication and/or redundancy, submission, etc. This article was not authored by artificial intelligence.

Data availability
The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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