

Women's Education and Social Empowerment: A Study on Gender Equality in Bankura and Purulia Districts of West Bengal

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Abstract:

Education plays a fundamental role in promoting gender equality and enhancing women's empowerment. Despite considerable policy attention in India, significant regional disparities in girls' educational attainment persist, particularly in economically disadvantaged rural districts. This study examines the status of women's education in Bankura and Purulia districts of West Bengal and investigates the socio-economic and cultural barriers affecting girls' educational continuation. The analysis is based on primary data collected from a random sample of 500 households. Descriptive statistical analysis and econometric modeling are used to examine patterns of educational participation and the determinants of school continuation among girls. An empowerment index is constructed to measure women's decision-making capacity and social autonomy within households. A binary logit model is estimated to identify the factors influencing girls' continuation in education beyond the secondary level. The results show that economic constraints, early marriage, infrastructural limitations, and patriarchal norms significantly restrict girls' educational opportunities. The findings also demonstrate that higher educational attainment contributes positively to women's empowerment within households.

Keywords: Women's Education, Gender Equality, Empowerment, Rural West Bengal, Bankura District, Purulia District, Social Development

1. Introduction:

Education is widely recognized as a key factor in promoting social development and reducing gender inequality. It helps individuals acquire knowledge, develop skills, and build the capacity to participate actively in economic, social, and political life. For women, access to education has particularly important implications. It not only improves their personal opportunities but also contributes to better family welfare, improved health conditions, and higher educational attainment for the next generation. Researchers have frequently emphasized that women's education strengthens their ability to make informed decisions and increases their participation in household and community activities (Nussbaum, 2011).

The development of women's education in India can be traced back to the social reform movements of the nineteenth century, when reformers began to challenge discriminatory social practices and advocate educational opportunities for women. After independence, the Constitution of India established the principle of equality and encouraged universal access to education. Over time, several national education policies and government programmes have been introduced to promote gender inclusion and expand

educational opportunities for girls. However, despite these initiatives, gender disparities in education continue to exist, especially in rural and economically disadvantaged regions where social and economic inequalities remain strong.

In many rural areas of India, girls still encounter several obstacles that affect their ability to continue schooling. Economic difficulties often lead families to give priority to the education of boys rather than girls. In addition, traditional cultural norms and gender expectations sometimes discourage girls from pursuing education for a longer period. Early marriage also remains an important factor that interrupts girls' educational paths. Apart from these social factors, infrastructural challenges such as inadequate school facilities, long travel distances, and limited access to higher secondary schools further contribute to the discontinuation of girls' education.

In West Bengal, the districts of Bankura and Purulia represent regions where these challenges are particularly visible. Both districts are largely rural and are characterized by relatively high levels of poverty and limited educational infrastructure. As a result, female literacy rates in these districts remain comparatively lower than in many other parts of the state. According to the Census of India (2011), the national female literacy rate was 65.46 percent, while the male literacy rate was 82.14 percent. In West Bengal, female literacy reached 71.16 percent, although significant variations exist across districts. Areas such as Bankura and Purulia continue to face difficulties in improving female literacy due to persistent socio-economic constraints and traditional gender attitudes.

Figure 1. Map of Bankura and Purulia Districts

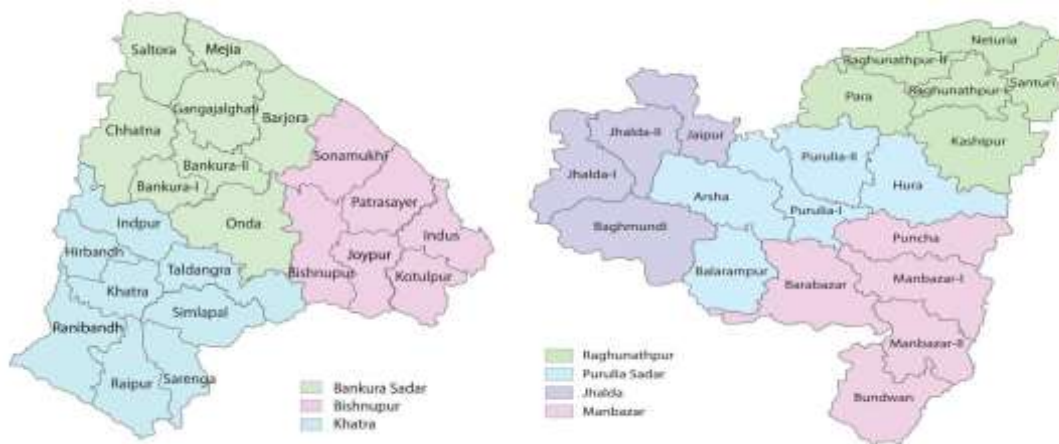


Figure.1 .1. Bankura District

Figure.1 .2. Purulia District

In this context, women's education should be understood not only in terms of literacy but also as an important pathway to empowerment. Education helps women develop awareness, confidence, and the ability to participate in various aspects of social and economic life. Empowerment, in this sense, refers to the expansion of individuals' ability to make meaningful choices and exercise control over decisions that affect their lives (Kabeer, 1999). Higher educational attainment can influence different dimensions of empowerment, including mobility, economic participation, awareness of rights, and involvement in household decision-making.

Figure 2. Women's Participation in Agricultural Labour in the Study Area



Note. Photograph taken by the author during field survey, Purulia district, 2024. Consent was obtained prior to documentation.

Although access to schooling has improved in recent years and several government programmes have been introduced to encourage girls' education, the continuation of education beyond the secondary level remains a challenge in many rural areas. While previous studies have discussed general patterns of female literacy, fewer studies have examined how education influences women's empowerment in specific rural districts such as Bankura and Purulia.

Figure 3. Classroom Participation of Adolescent Girls in a Rural Secondary School



Note: Photograph taken by the author during field survey in Bankura district (2024). Informed consent was obtained prior to documentation.

Against this background, the present study aims to examine the current status of women's education in selected rural communities of these districts and to identify the major socio-economic and cultural factors that influence girls' continuation in education. Using primary household survey data along with descriptive statistical and econometric analysis, the study attempts to explore the relationship between educational attainment, socio-economic conditions, and women's empowerment. The findings of the study

are expected to contribute to a better understanding of the challenges and possibilities associated with promoting gender-inclusive education in rural areas of West Bengal.

3. Objectives of the Study:

The study is guided by the following objectives:

- To examine the current status of women's education in Bankura district and Purulia district.
- To identify socio-economic and cultural barriers affecting girls' education.
- To analyze the relationship between educational attainment and women's empowerment.
- To assess selected government initiatives supporting girls' education.
- To propose strategies for strengthening gender equality through education.

3. Review of Literature:

Education is widely recognized as an important factor in enhancing women's empowerment and social participation. It enables individuals to acquire knowledge, develop awareness, and participate more actively in economic and social life. According to Kabeer (1999), empowerment can be understood as the process through which individuals gain the ability to make strategic life choices in situations where such opportunities were previously limited. In this sense, education plays a crucial role in increasing awareness of rights, improving access to information, and strengthening women's capacity to participate in decision-making processes. Similarly, Sen (1999), through the capability approach, argues that education expands human freedom by enhancing people's capabilities to lead the kind of lives they value.

From a broader human development perspective, Nussbaum (2011) emphasizes that education contributes to the development of fundamental human capabilities such as critical thinking, social awareness, and individual autonomy. Therefore, education should not be viewed merely as a tool for economic advancement; rather, it serves as an essential foundation for human dignity, equality, and active participation in democratic society.

In the Indian context, the relationship between women's education and social development has been widely discussed. Drèze and Sen (2013) highlight that improvements in female literacy are strongly associated with better health conditions, enhanced family welfare, and overall social progress. Educated women are more likely to participate in household decision-making and invest in the well-being of their children, which contributes to long-term social development.

Several studies also suggest that structural inequalities continue to affect educational opportunities for girls in India. Bandyopadhyay and Subrahmanian (2018) show that factors such as caste, class, and regional disparities significantly influence access to education and the continuation of schooling among girls. These inequalities are particularly visible in rural areas where educational resources and opportunities remain limited.

Research conducted in rural parts of eastern India indicates that multiple socio-economic barriers still hinder girls' educational progress. Sengupta and Ray (2018) observe that early marriage, poverty, and traditional expectations regarding girls' domestic responsibilities often interrupt their schooling. As a result, many girls discontinue education after the secondary level, which restricts their opportunities for higher education and long-term empowerment.

Recent empirical research has also highlighted the importance of household conditions in shaping girls' educational outcomes. For instance, Biswas and Das (2023) find that access to basic household amenities and improved living conditions positively influence girls' educational participation in rural India. Such

factors often determine whether girls are able to continue their studies beyond the primary or secondary level.

At the global level, several international organizations have emphasized the broader benefits of women's education. According to UNESCO (2014), educating girls has significant intergenerational effects, as educated women are more likely to invest in the education, health, and well-being of their children. This contributes to long-term improvements in social and economic development.

Despite the growing body of literature on women's education and empowerment, limited empirical research has focused specifically on districts such as Bankura and Purulia in West Bengal. Many existing studies concentrate on national or regional trends, which often overlook the local socio-economic and cultural conditions affecting girls' education in these districts.

Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by examining the relationship between women's educational attainment and empowerment in rural communities of Bankura and Purulia. By focusing on the local context, the study aims to provide a clearer understanding of how education influences women's social participation, decision-making power, and overall empowerment in these regions.

4. Sampling Design:

The empirical analysis is based on primary data collected from 500 households in Bankura and Purulia districts of West Bengal. The study focuses on households with at least one girl aged between six and twenty-one years.

A multi-stage random sampling method was employed to ensure representativeness of the sample. In the first stage, the two districts were selected as the geographical focus of the study due to their relatively lower female educational attainment and socio-economic challenges. In the second stage, five administrative blocks were randomly selected from each district. In the third stage, five villages were randomly selected from each block, resulting in a total of fifty villages.

Finally, ten households with school-age girls were randomly selected from each village using village household lists. This sampling procedure ensured that the final dataset consisted of 500 households representing diverse socio-economic conditions across both districts.

5. Data Collection:

Primary data were collected through structured household interviews conducted with parents or guardians. The survey collected detailed information on household socio-economic characteristics such as income, parental education, occupation, family size, and social group.

Information was also collected on the educational status of girls within the household, including school enrollment, grade level, attendance patterns, and dropout experiences. In addition, respondents were asked about various barriers that might affect girls' education, including financial constraints, early marriage, and distance to school, transportation difficulties, and availability of sanitation facilities in schools.

Data were also collected on women's participation in household decision-making, awareness of government programs, and involvement in community activities. These variables were later used to construct an empowerment index measuring women's autonomy and participation within households.

6. Construction of the Empowerment Index (0–10)

To quantify women's empowerment within households, an empowerment index was constructed based on several indicators reflecting decision-making power, social autonomy, and awareness of rights. The index

captures different dimensions of empowerment that are often influenced by education and social participation.

Five indicators were used in constructing the index:

1. Participation in household financial decisions
2. Participation in decisions regarding children’s education
3. Ability to independently visit markets or health centers
4. Awareness of government welfare schemes
5. Participation in community meetings or local institutions

Each indicator was assigned a score ranging from 0 to 2 depending on the level of participation or awareness. A score of zero indicates no participation or awareness, a score of one represents partial involvement, and a score of two represents full participation or awareness. The scores were summed across all indicators to obtain the final empowerment index.

The resulting index ranges from 0 to 10, where higher values represent higher levels of empowerment and decision-making autonomy within the household.

7. Methodology

The empirical analysis combines descriptive statistical methods and econometric modeling.

Descriptive statistics are used to summarize the socio-economic characteristics of the surveyed households and the educational status of girls. Measures such as mean, median, mode, and standard deviation are calculated to describe the distribution of key variables.

To examine the determinants of girls’ continuation in education beyond the secondary level, a binary logit model is estimated. The dependent variable indicates whether a girl continues education beyond secondary school.

The econometric model is specified as:

$$P(Y_i = 1) = \frac{1}{1 + e^{-(\beta_0 + \beta_1 Income_i + \beta_2 MotherEdu_i + \beta_3 EarlyMarriage_i + \beta_4 Distance_i + \beta_5 Sanitation_i)}}$$

where $Y_i = 1$ indicates continuation of education beyond secondary level and 0 otherwise.

8. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Deviation
Age of girls (years)	14.8	15	15	3.2
Years of schooling	7.6	8	10	3.9
Household monthly income (₹)	7850	7600	7000	2150
Distance to nearest secondary school (km)	3.4	3	2	1.6
Empowerment index (0–10)	4.9	5	4	2.1

The table summarizes the key characteristics of the sampled households and girls. The average age of girls in the sample is approximately fifteen years, indicating that many respondents are at the middle or secondary school stage. The mean years of schooling is 7.6 years, suggesting that many girls discontinue education before completing secondary education.

The average household income is ₹7,850 per month, reflecting the relatively modest economic conditions of households in the study area. The average distance to the nearest secondary school is 3.4 kilometers,

which can create accessibility challenges in rural areas.

The empowerment index has an average value of 4.9, indicating moderate levels of empowerment among women in the surveyed households.

9. Empirical Results

9.1 Current Status of Women's Education

The survey results indicate that access to primary education among girls has improved considerably in the study area. Approximately seventy-four percent (74%) of girls in the surveyed households were enrolled in school at the time of the survey. However, continuation beyond the secondary level remains limited, with only forty-one percent (41%) of girls completing secondary education. A noticeable decline in enrollment occurs after the age of fifteen, when many girls either discontinue schooling or assume domestic responsibilities within the household. Household income and parental education strongly influence the likelihood of girls continuing their education.

9.2 Barriers to Girls' Education

The survey identified several barriers affecting girls' educational participation. Economic constraints were reported by sixty-two percent of households as the primary factor limiting girls' schooling. Many families struggle to afford the costs associated with education.

Early marriage was reported by thirty-seven percent of respondents as a major factor interrupting girls' education. In several communities, social norms encourage marriage during adolescence, which leads to school discontinuation.

Inadequate transportation facilities and the absence of proper sanitation infrastructure in schools were also frequently reported. These infrastructural challenges discourage regular school attendance among adolescent girls. Additionally, patriarchal preferences favoring boys' education continue to influence household decisions when resources are limited.

9.3 Empowerment Index Results

The empowerment index provides insights into the level of women's autonomy within households. The average empowerment score in the sample is 4.9 out of 10, indicating moderate levels of empowerment.

Women with higher educational attainment recorded significantly higher empowerment scores. Among women who completed secondary education or higher, the average empowerment index was 6.7. In contrast, women with education below the primary level had an average empowerment score of 3.2.

Women with higher empowerment scores reported greater involvement in financial decisions, children's education decisions, and community activities. They also demonstrated higher awareness of government welfare programs.

These results suggest that education plays a significant role in enhancing women's autonomy and decision-making power within households.

10. Econometric Results

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	z-value	p-value
Household income	0.00021	0.00008	2.63	0.008
Mother's education	0.42	0.11	3.81	0.000
Early marriage	-1.28	0.29	-4.41	0.000
Distance to school	-0.36	0.14	-2.57	0.010

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	z-value	p-value
Sanitation facility	0.53	0.18	2.94	0.003
Constant	-2.11	0.67	-3.15	0.002

The econometric results show that household income and mother’s education have positive and statistically significant effects on girls’ continuation in education. Early marriage and greater distance to school significantly reduce the likelihood of educational continuation. The availability of sanitation facilities in schools has a positive effect on girls’ schooling outcomes.

11. Findings

The study reveals that although primary school enrollment among girls is relatively high in Bankura and Purulia districts, continuation beyond secondary education remains limited. Economic hardship is the most significant barrier affecting girls’ education. Early marriage and infrastructural challenges such as transportation and sanitation facilities also contribute to school dropout among adolescent girls.

The econometric analysis confirms that socio-economic factors and school infrastructure significantly influence girls’ educational continuation. The empowerment index analysis further demonstrates that higher education is associated with greater decision-making power and social participation among women.

12. Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence on the status and determinants of girls’ education in Bankura and Purulia districts of West Bengal. While progress has been made in expanding educational access, several socio-economic and cultural barriers continue to restrict girls’ educational attainment.

Policies aimed at reducing economic constraints, improving school infrastructure, and preventing early marriage are essential for promoting girls’ education. Strengthening awareness programs and enhancing the implementation of government initiatives can also help improve educational participation among girls. Promoting girls’ education is crucial for achieving gender equality and fostering sustainable socio-economic development in rural communities.

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