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## Education for Women: Status of West Bengal

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### Abstract:

*Education plays a pivotal role in the development of any society. It has become a universal human right all around the world. Statistics show that the emerging picture of women education in West Bengal is in backstage. This poor scenario of women education is noticeable mostly in rural area. There women have to face several socio-cultural hurdles to acquire education. Among the serious obstacles to women education, or dropping out from schools are child marriage, societal gender stereotypical perspective, Patriarchal social culture, school environment etc. Enabling girls to complete their education is to invest in future progress of the society. This paper is an effort to capture the emerging picture of women's education in West Bengal. Also it covers the extent, causes, consequences, and policy responses made to the problem of women dropouts.*

**Key words:** Education, Child marriage, School Environment, West Bengal, Women

*"You educate a man; you educate a man. You educate a woman; you educate a generation." - Brigham Young.*

Social development means the provision of equal opportunity & capabilities that enable everyone to assert their social & economic rights. Gender equality is recognized as a key of development in any nation. However, the social role prescribed for men and women by the society, kept them beyond the outreach of most of the developmental programmes for generations. In this context, education plays a vital role in the development of human capital in any society. Because equality of access to and attainment of educational qualifications is necessary to bring change in people's mind, to understand the value of human irrespective of sexuality. Thus, education has proved to be one of the best means for achieving development and economic growth that is both sustained and sustainable. It acts as a catalyst for social upliftment by enhancing the returns on investment made in almost every aspects of development effort like, population control, health, hygiene, employment of weaker sections of the society etc. Development of women does not mean to do some kind to them rather share the platform with them which they deserve. Therefore, women's education should be given the prime importance to achieve human development and social justice. This paper is an effort to capture the emerging picture with respect to women education in West Bengal.

Back to the earlier 19<sup>th</sup> century, the root of Indian women's movement lied in undivided Bengal. The credit for women education in modern times goes to missionaries and social reformers during colonial time like Raja Rammohan Roy, Annie Besant, David Hare, Alexander Duff, William Carey, Sorojini Naidu and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar who made endless efforts to regain the status of women in the society. They removed terrible social evils, like Sati-Pratha, child marriage and polygamy. They also struggled for widow remarriage and particularly for women education. Literacy rate in West Bengal has seen upward trend. Even though, there is still a clear gap between women equality in education in West Bengal. In the year 2001, West Bengal's literacy rate was 68.64 % out of which the male literacy was 77.02 % and female literacy rate was 59.61 %. Whereas, in 2011, literacy rate in West Bengal was 76.26%, where that in men and women were 82.67% and 71.16% respectively. Kolkata had the highest women literacy rate (84.98%) in the state followed by Purba Medinipur (81.81%) and North 24 Parganas (81.05%). Purulia had the lowest women literacy rate (51.29%) followed by Uttar Dinajpur (53.15%) and Malda (57.84%).

Various reasons are responsible for keeping women education in backstage. Child marriage<sup>1</sup> is one of them, which constrain the path of women primary education. Educational attainment demands time and this time delays the process of fixing marriage. Again, schools generally keep basic few records of their students and age is one of them. Age can be assumed from the school grade of the students that he/she attaining. Therefore, either parents keep out or the girl herself withdraws from the school to widen her age for marriage in the society. On the other hand, marriage is another mean of protecting child. If both the parents work outside then to protect their girl child from social cruelty like rape they use marriage as a secure weapon. The ritual marriage itself and the groom play the role of protector. Along with all these poverty, long distance of the secondary school, poor transportation, household work, and lack of family support are some hurdles that barricade the road of primary education. For children mostly of the 10-14 age group, are withdrawn from educational opportunities due to victimized by social crimes like child labour and trafficking. Mostly in rural areas where poverty, lack of job opportunity, ill health are become part of their life, in this kind of situations fraud people grab these children politely from family either in terms of some job assurance in city, or marry the girl and then sell them in the dark world. Playful childhood turns into slavery.

Societal gender stereotypical<sup>2</sup> perspective towards women robbed of women's confidence to think and learn without fear of failure; they are subsequently paralysed by their own low self-image. Their biological maternal capability sometimes metaphorically pronounced as their weakness. Very often it is said their role is to give birth to the baby and be a good mother by nurturing their baby properly. Again, women's work is especially in the home and in a small scale home based work. As a result, their contribution does not show up in national statistics, moreover, their labour is invisible. Therefore, they are considered as passive recipients, and kept aside from decision-making processes. Victimised by age old beliefs that educating women is useless because they are never been capable like men in the society.

Patriarchal social culture<sup>3</sup> also creates gender inequality in education. In the patriarchal social structure, parents are not expected to use the income of their daughters. Therefore, in several cases, they do not encourage their daughter to get higher education or to do better in the educational field. Even educated daughters are not encouraged to work and if they do so, it is also clearly stated to them that in the near future, it is the right of the groom's family to decide whether she will work or not. On the other hand, if there are both boy and girl in the family, then, very often educational preferences go in favour of boys. Because sons are expected to earn money and support their family, specially take care of parents in old age, to provide dowries for sister's marriage and upholds the status of the family as a whole. Whereas, girls are considered as 'Amanat' or 'Dharohar' (Drury, 1993). After marriage, they will go to their husband's houses, so its a waste of the money to educate them. Rather save money for daughter's marriage. According to Drury, other determinants of educational attainments are family income or wealth, parental education, empowerment and education of mother, family size, caste affiliations, and place of residence.

Even school environment<sup>4</sup> is itself responsible for the lagging behind the equity in education. Attitude and inefficacy of the teacher, insufficient number of teachers, lack of women teacher and girls' school, poor infrastructure such as lack of drinking water in the premises, absence of a proper sanitary system, and girls' toilet etc are some reasons for which girls express less interest in education. According to the Government of West Bengal 2003 report during 2001-2002 there are total 48224 schools, among which 11360 schools had no drinking water facility, and 42952 schools had no girls' toilet (Mukherjee, 2004). Course curriculum itself a problem. It is also found out that sometimes educational content is itself not pertinent to the social context and thus, it fails to touch upon those aspects of daily life that are of importance to the people. Existing educational programs do not acknowledge these needs and do not provide women with the opportunities to acquire knowledge that is relevant to their income-generating activities. The perceived irrelevance of education is thus one of the major causes. Along with that in West Bengal Primary schools usually refer to those teaching classes I to IV. There are about 52000 thousand such schools with co-education, but girls' schools number less than 500. Out of about 13000 and 2650 Secondary and Higher Secondary schools, only 1780 and 431 are exclusively for girls. According to some experts, this is one of the reasons behind substantial dropouts among girl students before completing primary education.

Finally, health aspect is another important factor that directly influences women's education. In West Bengal, 65% women less than 18 years of age have attained early marriage. Consequently, female foeticide, early motherhood, ill health due to malnutrition, conceive of baby several times either for religious reasons or for the urge of preferred child (boy / girl) are some unhealthy practices. Again, in West Bengal preventable diseases and unequal access to health care still affect women, especially those in the rural sector. Incidents of domestic violence against women, harassment and suicide due to dowry, rape, kidnapping etc. Are increasingly mentioned in the media. All these life threatening issues inequalise the sex ratio in West Bengal. Therefore, this population inequality also has a marked impact on educational attainment.

West Bengal government undertakes initiations to increase women's participation in education. The women's political activism steer the change from within the system. Government of has announced *Kanyasree Prakalpa*<sup>5</sup>, a conditional cash transfer scheme. The aim of the project is to improve the status of all teenage girls and delaying their marriage up to the legal age of marriage. Apart from that there are several central government-sponsored schemes especially targeted towards women, which are implemented by the government of West Bengal, like Rajiv Gandhi Scheme for Empowerment of Adolescent Girls (RGSEAG), Balika Samridhhi Yozana (BSY), Sukanya Scheme, Swabalamban, Swayamsidha, Swadhar, Support to Training and Employment Program for Women (STEP). Besides these, schemes like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) are also there. The state adopt Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC), where in collaboration with Unicef and NGOs such as Ramakrishana Mission etc. government lays special emphasis on building separate toilets for girls in school premises (Mukherjee, 2004). During 1917-1919 "The Calcutta University Commission formulated two principles in its report regarding female education; the modification of curriculum to suit the needs of different classes, and the utilization of the advice of the ladies in formulating a suitable scheme of instruction" (Gupta, 2000, 115). However, good were the recommendations, but are not implemented properly.

Although, in the expansion of women education the first step would be to save them, from female foeticide, trafficking, child marriage, rape, domestic violence etc. Government should take initiative to enforce laws and regulations immediately and strictly. Little progress can be made if the roots of such violence are erased out from the society and make the society a secure place for women.

State Government should undertake measures to minimize the gap and if required undertake positive discrimination in favor of females and introduce infrastructure to bring women to the arena of education. They should incorporate courses on techniques of self defense as a compulsory component in the syllabus of Physical Education. Concept and approaches of gender and related social legislations should be incorporate in the study material of school education to spread social awareness.

Again, mother's educational level is also associated with daughter's level of education. Higher education for mothers is associated with children's acquisition of knowledge, language, and literacy skills as well. Further, Donner (2006)<sup>6</sup> says parent and child interaction at the preschool level promotes the development of cognitive, language, and skills in children. The interconnectedness of women's literacy with family and society highlights the importance of women's education. Now-a-days men want to marry

educated girl because of two reasons: first, educated wife become a status symbol, and second, educated wife would take better care of children's education. As a result, now upper-class and middle-class parents put emphasis to their daughter's education to get desired groom. Although, in urban areas parents are generally motivate their daughter to get higher education and be financially independent. So that, how worse the situation would be a girl can secure herself and live her life with dignity.

At last, to empowered women, there needs to be a change in the mind-set of the people all over. Not just the women themselves, but the men have to wake up, hold the hands and jointly move towards equality and equity. Swami Vivekananda once said "There is no chance of the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing."

#### Notes

- Biswajit Ghosh & Ananda Mohan Kar did a field work on rural areas of South West Bengal to find out the causes and consequences of child marriage. In their work they found out that poor level of education is one of the root causes behind child marriage and vis-à-vis.
- Asis Kumar Dandapat, & Debjani Sengupta done a research work at Vidyasagar University in West Bengal on gender stereotype thought on women's higher education.
- David Drury (1993) in his book 'The Iron Schoolmaster: Education, Employment, and the Family in India' talks about different social factors in education. He also talks about the judgemental perspective of parents towards their children education.
- Rajika Bhandari & Frank J. Smith of North Carolina State University studied on rural areas of India to recognizing the important linkages between the family and the acquisition of female literacy in developing countries, particularly in rural areas, and by addressing some of the important familial, socio-cultural, individual-level, and institutional factors that constrain female educational attainment.
- Chief Minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee has announced Kanyasree Prakalpa, a conditional cash transfer scheme under the Department of Women Development and Social Welfare. This project is basically for empowering women. The project was initiated from 2013.
- Henrike Donner (2006) in her article explores new definitions of good mothering among middle-class families in Calcutta and the way early years education, and pointed out how women has reshaped women's lives as daughters-in-law and mothers of successful future white-collar workers. Through a detailed study the author tries to explain mother's attitudes to preschool education of their children in the present competitive educational scenario.

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