



UNSEEN STRUGGLES: WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN THE BACKWARD AREAS OF MURSHIDABAD

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ABSTRACT:

Education is a crucial social factor that helps in development by expending knowledge, thought, ability and skill. However, in our patriarchal society, the educational status of women is far behind than men. The present study is an attempt to analyse the educational status of women and male-female disparity in education in the Murshidabad district of West Bengal. Despite significant policy efforts and educational reforms in India, women's education in rural and backward regions like Murshidabad district of West Bengal continues to face persistent challenges. This article explores the multifaceted barriers that hinder educational access and attainment among women in the underdeveloped areas of Murshidabad. Socio-economic constraints, cultural norms, early marriage, inadequate infrastructure, and lack of awareness collectively contribute to the low literacy rates and high dropout levels among rural girls. Drawing on field insights, demographic data, and policy analysis, the study highlights the underlying factors responsible for the educational marginalization of women. It also examines the limited impact of governmental schemes and the role of non-governmental organizations in addressing these issues. The article concludes by proposing actionable recommendations to promote inclusive and sustainable educational opportunities for women in the region. By shedding light on these unseen struggles, the study calls for a renewed commitment to bridging the gender gap in rural education.

KEYWORDS:

DEVELOPMENT, SKILL, STATUS, REFORMS, BARRIERS, OPPORTUNITY, STRUGGLE.

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INTRODUCTION:

Education can change in mind, thought, outlook, personality and leads enlightenment as it facilitates knowledge, skills and abilities, which helps to achieve encouraging attitudes. Education makes a man civilized and takes a responsible role in making humans as social. Consequently, education is considered one of the basics need after food clothing and shelter (Vasanth, 2017). Education is one of the most powerful tools for social transformation, and women's education, in particular, plays a crucial role in shaping the socio-economic development of any society. In rural areas, where traditional mindsets and poverty often act as barriers to progress, educating women is a key step towards achieving gender equality, improving health and hygiene, reducing child mortality, and enhancing family incomes. Educated women are more likely to participate in decision-making, support their children's schooling, and contribute to the overall well-being of their communities. However, despite national schemes and global commitments to promote gender equity in education, women in many rural parts of India continue to be left behind. Among such regions, Murshidabad district in West

Bengal stands out as an area where the struggle for women's education remains particularly visible and urgent. Murshidabad, located in the central part of West Bengal, is historically rich but educationally deprived. The district has long been classified as socio-economically backward, with low literacy rates and limited development indicators, especially in its rural pockets. According to the latest census and educational statistics, the female literacy rate in Murshidabad is significantly below the state and national averages. Rural areas in the district are characterized by widespread poverty, early marriages, gender discrimination, and inadequate educational infrastructure—all of which contribute to a deep-rooted crisis in women's education. Schools in many villages lack basic facilities such as proper classrooms, girls' toilets, and safe transportation. Additionally, social customs and conservative beliefs continue to restrict girls' mobility and their right to learn beyond the primary level. This article explores the multiple dimensions of the problems faced by women in accessing education in the backward rural areas of Murshidabad. It seeks to identify the underlying socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors that

prevent girls and women from pursuing education. The scope of this study includes an examination of not just the visible barriers—like poverty or distance to schools—but also the less visible ones, such as societal attitudes, lack of parental motivation and policy implementation gaps. The article also highlights the role of government initiatives and non-governmental organizations working in the region and evaluates their effectiveness in addressing these challenges. Despite national efforts to promote universal education, rural women in districts like Murshidabad still face severe educational challenges. This article explores the unseen struggles behind these issues. By presenting both statistical insights and grassroots realities, it aims to contribute to the larger discourse on gender and education, while emphasizing the need for inclusive and context-specific strategies to uplift women's education in rural India. The findings and discussions presented here are intended not only to shed light on a critical problem but also to inspire educators, policymakers, and social workers to work collectively toward bridging the gender gap in rural education.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT:

Murshidabad district situated in the central part of West Bengal is a district steeped in historical and cultural significance. Once the capital of Bengal during the Mughal period, it now presents a stark contrast to its glorious past, ranking among the most educationally and economically backward districts in the state. The district shares an international border with Bangladesh and is primarily rural in character, with over 80% of its population residing in villages. The economy of Murshidabad is largely agrarian, supplemented by traditional cottage industries like silk weaving and bidi (hand-rolled cigarette) production. Despite these industries providing some form of employment, the region is plagued by poverty, landlessness, and inadequate infrastructure, all of which have a direct impact on access to and quality of education, especially for women and girls. In terms of educational indicators, Murshidabad lags significantly behind many other districts of West Bengal. According to the Census of India 2011, the overall literacy rate in Murshidabad was around 67.53%, compared to the state average of 76.26%. More concerning is the gender gap in literacy: male literacy stood at 72.47% while female literacy was only 62.39%. These figures indicate not just a general educational deficit, but also a deeply rooted gender disparity in educational attainment. Subsequent district-level surveys and reports suggest that the situation has improved only marginally over the past decade. Many girls still drop out after primary or upper-primary levels, often due to poverty, early marriage, or family pressure to support household chores. The traditional mindset and gender roles prevalent in rural Bengal, particularly in conservative regions like Murshidabad, further hinder the educational progress of women. Girls are often perceived as future homemakers rather than as individuals with careers or aspirations. Investing in their education is viewed by many families as unnecessary or even wasteful.

Social customs, such as dowry and early marriage, are still prevalent, reinforcing the belief that a girl's destiny lies within the domestic sphere. As a result, many girls are either not sent to school or are withdrawn before they can complete their education. Even in families where boys and girls are initially enrolled in school, the dropout rates for girls are much higher due to social expectations and safety concerns. Over the years, the government has launched several schemes aimed at promoting girls' education, including *Kanyashree Prakalpa*, *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*, *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*, and *Mid-Day Meal Scheme*. The *Kanyashree* scheme, launched by the Government of West Bengal, has been especially praised for encouraging girls to stay in school and delay marriage. However, the effectiveness of such schemes in Murshidabad remains limited. Many beneficiaries are unaware of their rights or face bureaucratic hurdles in accessing these benefits. Moreover, the reach of these programs is often restricted by inadequate monitoring, poor implementation, and a lack of community engagement. Thus, the backdrop of Murshidabad's educational challenges is a complex blend of socio-economic hardship, entrenched gender norms, and insufficient institutional support.

CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN EDUCATION:

In the rural and backward areas of Murshidabad, several interlinked challenges continue to hinder women's access to quality education. These challenges are rooted in economic hardship, traditional societal norms, infrastructural limitations, and institutional neglect. The following sub-sections highlight the major barriers faced by women in pursuing education in this region.

POVERTY AND FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS:

One of the most significant obstacles to women's education in Murshidabad is widespread poverty. Most families in the rural parts of the district live below or just above the poverty line. In such households, educational expenses—including school fees, uniforms, books, and travel—are considered burdensome. When forced to choose, families often prioritize the education of male children, viewing them as future breadwinners, while daughters are expected to contribute to household chores or family income. As a result, many girls drop out after primary school, either to help at home, care for siblings, or engage in informal work like bidi making, which is common in the region. The economic value of educating a girl is often undervalued in such contexts.

EARLY MARRIAGE AND GENDER DISCRIMINATION:

Deep-rooted cultural practices and gender discrimination also significantly restrict girls' access to education. In many rural communities of Murshidabad, girls are expected to marry early, often before they complete their secondary education. Families believe that investing in a girl's education is unnecessary if she is to be married off early. The social pressure to arrange a girl's marriage as soon as she reaches adolescence diverts attention away from her schooling. Additionally, the deeply ingrained

patriarchal mindset reinforces the idea that a girl's role is confined to the home, limiting her right to learn, grow, and aspire. These beliefs create an environment where the education of girls is neither prioritized nor encouraged.

LACK OF INFRASTRUCTURE AND ACCESSIBILITY:

In many backward villages of Murshidabad, basic educational infrastructure remains inadequate. Schools are often located far from homes and the absence of proper roads and safe transportation makes it difficult for girls to attend regularly. Many schools do not have boundary walls, functional toilets—especially girls' toilets—or adequate drinking water facilities. These gaps are particularly discouraging during adolescence, when the lack of sanitary provisions directly affects girls' attendance and dignity. Moreover, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient teaching staff, and a lack of learning materials diminish the overall quality of education, making it less engaging and effective for girl students.

LOW AWARENESS AND PARENTAL MOTIVATION:

Parental attitudes play a crucial role in shaping a child's educational journey. In rural Murshidabad, many parents—especially those who are illiterate themselves—do not recognize the long-term value of educating their daughters. Education is often viewed only in terms of immediate financial return, and girls are perceived as economic dependents who will eventually move into their husband's family. This mindset leads to apathy or even resistance toward continued schooling for girls, especially beyond the primary level. Without awareness campaigns or community outreach, these families remain disconnected from government initiatives designed to support girls' education.

SAFETY AND SOCIAL BARRIERS:

Safety concerns are a major deterrent for girls attending school in rural areas. Many parents are reluctant to let their daughters travel long distances, particularly if they have to walk through isolated or unsafe areas. Reports of harassment, verbal abuse, or fear of exploitation on the way to or from school further discourage regular attendance. In conservative rural communities, the fear of social stigma and gossip associated with adolescent girls studying in co-educational settings or interacting with male teachers and students often leads to restrictions on mobility and eventual withdrawal from school. These challenges, while varied in nature, are deeply interconnected. Poverty fuels early marriage; social norms limit aspirations; and weak infrastructure reinforces exclusion. Addressing women's educational struggles in Murshidabad requires not only policy-level intervention but also a shift in societal attitudes and ground-level commitment from all stakeholders.

VOICES FROM THE GROUND:

While statistics and policy analyses provide a macro-level understanding of the problems, the lived experiences of rural women and girls in Murshidabad reveal the deeper

emotional, social, and psychological dimensions of their educational struggles. These personal stories reflect not only hardship and deprivation but also resilience, determination, and hope for change. Below are a few narratives and observations collected from ground-level interactions that highlight the reality behind the data. Rubi Khatun, a 14-year-old girl from a remote village near Raninagar, had always dreamt of becoming a teacher. She was a bright student who consistently ranked among the top in her class. However, after the sudden death of her father, financial pressures forced her to leave school in Class VIII to work alongside her mother in bidi rolling. "I wanted to study more," Rubi says with downcast eyes, "but we had no money for books or clothes. My mother could not manage everything alone." Her story is not unique. In many households, girls like Rubi silently surrender their aspirations to the burden of poverty and social expectations. Nasima Bibi, from Jalangi block, was barely 15 when her parents began arranging her marriage. But unlike many others, Nasima resisted. With the help of a local girls' support group run by an NGO, she convinced her parents to delay the marriage and allow her to continue her education. "They told me I could choose education or marriage. I chose education," Nasima proudly says. Today, she is in Class XI and works part-time to fund her own studies. Her case reflects the slow but emerging shift in attitudes, driven by community awareness and personal courage.

TEACHERS ON THE FRONTLINE:

Mr. Sushil Mondal, a headteacher at a village school near Bhagabangola, shared his concern: "We see girls vanish from classrooms after Class VI or VII. When we follow up, we hear the same stories—marriage, housework, money problems. We try to talk to parents, but they are afraid of societal judgment and feel education won't help a girl in household life." Teachers like Mr. Mondal are trying to make a difference, but often lack institutional support, training, or incentives to tackle these deep-rooted issues effectively.

NGO INTERVENTION IN LALGOLA:

In Lalgola block, a local NGO named *Shiksha Bandhan* runs awareness drives, evening tuition centres, and menstrual health workshops for adolescent girls. One of the coordinators, Ms. Shampa Roy, explains, "We realised that unless we address the taboos around girls' health and mobility, school attendance won't improve. Our work is not just about education—it's about confidence-building." Through such community-based interventions, small changes are slowly beginning to surface.

These voices reveal the painful truth behind the lack of educational access for rural girls in Murshidabad, but they also point to potential pathways of change. From brave girls resisting societal pressure to committed teachers and grassroots workers, the struggle for women's education is not just a fight against poverty, but also against silence, stigma, and centuries of marginalization.

ROLE OF GOVERNMENT AND NGOS:

In recognition of the persistent gender gap in education, both the Central and State Governments of India have launched several schemes aimed at promoting girls' education. These initiatives seek to reduce dropout rates, delay early marriage, provide financial assistance, and improve educational infrastructure. While such programs have made notable contributions in various parts of the country, their impact in backward districts like Murshidabad has been mixed, often falling short of expectations due to systemic issues and contextual challenges.

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES AND THEIR IMPACT:

One of the most widely recognized and successful state-level programs is the Kanyashree Prakalpa, launched by the Government of West Bengal. Targeted specifically at adolescent girls between the ages of 13 and 18, the scheme provides financial incentives to encourage school attendance and prevent child marriage. While the initiative has been well-received in urban and semi-urban areas, its implementation in rural Murshidabad faces hurdles. Lack of awareness among families, difficulties in document verification, and bureaucratic delays often prevent deserving girls from accessing its benefits. The Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) scheme, launched by the Central Government, also aims to address declining child sex ratios and promote education for girls. However, the scheme functions primarily as an awareness campaign, and in districts like Murshidabad, its presence remains limited. Poor outreach and minimal ground-level monitoring have restricted its effectiveness in changing deep-rooted social attitudes. Other programs, such as the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and Mid-Day Meal Scheme, aim to improve enrollment and retention by making schooling more accessible and child-friendly. While mid-day meals have positively impacted attendance, the lack of girl-specific infrastructure—such as clean toilets and menstrual hygiene support—continues to be a deterrent for adolescent girls.

ROLE OF NGOS AND COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS:

In areas where government initiatives struggle to reach the most marginalised, local NGOs and community-based organizations have stepped in to fill the gaps. In Murshidabad, several small but dedicated groups are working at the grassroots level to promote girls' education. These organizations run awareness campaigns, organize health and hygiene workshops, and provide after-school tutoring or scholarship support. Self-help groups (SHGs), often comprising rural women, are also playing a growing role in sensitizing communities to the importance of girls' education. By empowering mothers and involving them in school management or village education committees, SHGs help bridge the gap between policy and practice. These community-led efforts foster a culture of support and accountability that formal institutions often fail to establish.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:

Addressing the complex and interrelated challenges faced by women in accessing education in the backward areas of Murshidabad requires a multi-pronged approach. While existing schemes provide a foundational framework, more targeted and locally responsive strategies are essential to bring lasting change. The following recommendations aim to bridge the gap between policy and practice, and promote inclusive, equitable education for rural girls.

IMPROVE SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE AND TRANSPORT FACILITIES:

A major deterrent to girls' education in Murshidabad is the lack of adequate school infrastructure. Many rural schools do not have functional toilets, especially for girls, which becomes a serious issue as they reach adolescence. It is crucial to ensure that all schools have separate, hygienic toilet facilities, access to clean drinking water, and secure classrooms. Moreover, the establishment of boundary walls and availability of female staff can create a safer and more welcoming environment. Transportation remains another challenge. Providing safe and affordable transportation for girls, especially in remote areas, can significantly reduce dropout rates. Introducing bicycle distribution programs, subsidized transport, or school buses in underserved villages can help girls travel to school without fear or fatigue.

PROMOTE AWARENESS THROUGH COMMUNITY OUTREACH:

Changing deep-rooted societal attitudes requires consistent community engagement. Awareness campaigns must be expanded to educate parents and community members about the importance of girls' education, the legal age of marriage, and the long-term socio-economic benefits of educating women. These campaigns should use culturally relevant communication methods—such as street plays, community meetings, local radio broadcasts, and school-based events—to reach a wider audience.

STRENGTHEN MONITORING OF GIRL CHILD EDUCATION PROGRAMS:

Many government schemes lose effectiveness due to poor monitoring and implementation. Regular tracking of school attendance, dropout rates, and learning outcomes for girls is necessary to ensure that interventions are having the desired impact. Village-level education committees and local Panchayats should be trained and empowered to monitor school performance and act as watchdogs for girl child education programs.

PROVIDE SCHOLARSHIPS AND INCENTIVES:

To offset the financial burden of education on low-income families, more need-based scholarships and conditional cash transfers should be made available to girl students. These incentives can be tied to regular attendance, academic performance, and postponement of early marriage. In addition to financial aid, providing free textbooks, uniforms, and menstrual hygiene products can

reduce the indirect costs of schooling.

ENCOURAGE VOCATIONAL AND SKILL-BASED TRAINING FOR GIRLS:

For many rural families, the perceived lack of employment opportunities for educated girls discourages continued schooling. To counter this, vocational and life-skills education should be integrated into the curriculum, especially at the secondary level. Training in areas such as tailoring, digital literacy, handicrafts, spoken English, or computer skills can empower girls economically and boost their confidence. Such programs should be linked with employment or self-employment opportunities through government or NGO support. Creating a pathway from education to employment can significantly enhance the value placed on girls' education in the community. Implementing these recommendations will require coordinated efforts from government agencies, local administration, schools, NGOs, and the community at large. Only through sustained and inclusive strategies can the cycle of educational deprivation be broken, enabling girls in rural Murshidabad to realize their full potential.

CONCLUSION:

The struggle for women's education in the backward areas of Murshidabad is not just an educational concern—it is a socio-cultural, economic, and moral issue that demands urgent and sustained attention. As this article has shown, rural girls in the region face multiple and overlapping challenges that block their path to education: financial hardship, gender discrimination, cultural norms around early marriage, inadequate school infrastructure, and a lack of safety and support. The voices from the ground—of girls who dropped out, teachers fighting against odds, and NGOs working tirelessly—reveal the lived realities behind the statistics. They remind us that progress in education is not merely about access, but about ensuring dignity, opportunity, and choice for every girl. As Malala Yousafzai rightly said, *"One child, one teacher, one book, one pen can change the world."* But for that change to happen in Murshidabad, every girl must first be given the chance to hold the pen. Despite well-intentioned programs like *Kanyashree Prakalpa*, *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*, and *Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan*, there are significant gaps in implementation, especially in the more remote and underserved areas. The benefits of these schemes often fail to reach the most vulnerable due to lack of awareness, red tape, and insufficient monitoring. Furthermore, societal attitudes rooted in patriarchy continue to undervalue girls' education, treating it as secondary to domestic responsibilities or marital obligations. A shift in mindset is essential. As Swami Vivekananda once said, *"There is no chance for the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is not possible for a bird to fly on one wing."* Empowering rural women through education is not just an act of justice—it is a pathway to holistic community development. Educated women are more likely to educate their children, participate in the economy, and become agents of change within their families and beyond.

Collective action is the need of the hour. Governments must strengthen school infrastructure, provide transport facilities, and make scholarship access easier and more transparent. Local NGOs and community-based organizations must continue their ground-level work of awareness-building and parental engagement. Village leaders, teachers, and women's self-help groups must act as change-makers within their own communities. Most importantly, the community must begin to see girls not as burdens, but as bearers of potential. To educate a girl is to invest in the future—not just of one individual, but of an entire generation. The rural girls of Murshidabad are not lacking in dreams or ability; they are only waiting for opportunity and support.

"To educate a woman is to educate a generation. Murshidabad's future depends on how we respond to these unseen struggles today."

If we wish to see true progress, we must ensure that the invisible struggles of today do not become the silent failures of tomorrow. The journey toward equity in education is long, but it begins with recognition, resolve, and responsible action—starting now.

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