

Rupashree Scheme and the Discourse of Women's Marriage Support in West Bengal: Empowerment or Dependency?

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Abstract:

This article gives a nuanced analysis of the Rupashree Scheme initiated by West Bengal government to give a one-time financial grant for the marriage of economically disadvantaged adult girls. The article explores whether the scheme functions as an instrument for women's true empowerment or operates within a framework that sustains economic dependency with traditional gender norms. The paper outlines specific research objectives and questions by seeing policy documents, official reports, and theoretical discussions on cash transfers, gender, and welfare-state politics, and also applies a qualitative approach, and engages with the broader literature on gendered welfare policies. This article also examines the scheme's design, process of implementation, and its role within the state's social welfare agenda. The study provides a detailed understanding of the state-led policy interventions to shape women's rights, roles and opportunities in contemporary West Bengal by linking Rupashree within the wider discourse on welfare and empowerment of women.

Keywords: Rupashree Prakalpa, cash-transfer scheme, women's empowerment, gender and welfare, economic dependency

Introduction:

Over the previous two decades, cash-transfer schemes directed toward women and girls. The programs expanded significantly across South Asia by reflecting a growing policy emphasis on gender-sensitive welfare issues. In this context, the Government of West Bengal introduced the Rupashree Scheme in 2018, offering a one-time financial grant of 25,000 rupees to economically disadvantaged families to assist the marriage expenses of their adult daughters. The scheme complements other state policies such as Kanyashree which supports adolescent girls school education and retention by positioning as a poverty-alleviation initiative and a deterrent to child marriage, The visibility of these welfare policies has made them integral to discussions on gender related policy initiatives, welfare populism in West Bengal. This paper analyses Rupashree through the interlinked frameworks of empowerment and dependency, asking whether the scheme enhances women's autonomy by providing financial support and recognition, or whether it perpetuates the idea of marriage as the central avenue for women's social and economic security. The study focuses on official policy documents, civil-society related reports, and academic debates on various platforms to understand Rupashree scheme's implications for women's rights and welfare politics in the state by situating this scheme within the broader scholarship on gendered cash transfers and critiques of welfare populism.

The analysis situates Rupashree scheme within the broader idea of gender justice and welfare governance in India, where the intersection of welfare issues, empowerment initiatives, and

women's rights remains a critical site of policy debate. In the politically dynamic landscape of West Bengal, welfare schemes have become one of the important aspect that define the features of governance and political identity. Among all the schemes of West Bengal government, Rupashree stands out as a major policy initiative for its full focus on marriage of adult girls, a deeply social yet economically challenging institution for many families. While the scheme's prime objectives are to reduce financial burdens and prevent child marriage in the state by incentivizing the poor families, its design and implementation invite deeper scrutiny and analysis. This article engages in a comprehensive analysis of the Rupashree scheme by situating it within feminist theoretical frameworks, examining its socio-political context, and assessing its potential to empower or constrain women. Rupashree reflects on the broader political, social, and gendered implications in contemporary West Bengal, contributing to ongoing policy debates on the nature and purpose of welfare-led empowerment.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine the structural design and implementation framework of the Rupashree Prakalpa.
2. To analyse how the scheme is represented in policy discourses concerning gender and marriage.
3. To evaluate the forms and limits of empowerment generated by the scheme for women beneficiaries.
4. To investigate whether Rupashree perpetuates dependency or challenges patriarchal gender relations.
5. To suggest evidence-based recommendations for enhancing the scheme's transformative potential.

Questions of the Study:

1. What are the key design features, objectives, and eligibility criteria of the Rupashree Prakalpa?
2. How is the scheme framed in official policy documents with respect to gender roles, marriage, and women's welfare?
3. To what extent does Rupashree contribute to women's financial or social empowerment?
4. Does the scheme reinforce dependency or traditional patriarchal norms among its beneficiaries?
5. What changes or complementary measures could enhance Rupashree's role in promoting women's independence and rights?

Methodology:

This study adopts qualitative analysis combining document exploration, critical synthesis of literature and review of secondary empirical evidence, reflecting the exploratory and evaluative nature of the research questions. Document analysis draws on primary sources such as official Rupashree websites, government reports and the scheme's FAQ and online application portals, district-level descriptions, and government press releases. These materials provide detailed information on the programme's design, eligibility criteria (e.g., age and income thresholds),

benefit structure, and administrative mechanisms, forming the factual foundation for the study. Complementing this, a literature review was conducted, including peer-reviewed articles, working papers, policy briefs, NGO reports, and reputable media commentary, to capture critical perspectives on Rupashree and related gender-targeted transfers. Civil-society evaluations and think-tank analyses were used in highlighting implementation challenges and normative implications of the scheme. The study relies on secondary resources and document analysis; it does not include primary fieldwork or interviews in the present paper. Thus, claims about micro-level impacts draw on published local studies and reports rather than new ethnographic data.

The study also situates Rupashree within broader comparative debates on unconditional versus conditional cash transfers for women, focusing on their impact on women's bargaining power, autonomy, and social norms. Employing a feminist policy analysis lens, the research interprets whether the scheme functions as gender-transformative or gender-accommodative one. Some secondary statistical data and published evaluations are used to substantiate claims regarding the scheme's reach, effectiveness, and the grievances reported by beneficiaries. This multi-layered approach allows for a nuanced assessment of Rupashree, integrating formal policy design, critical perspectives, and comparative insights to evaluate its potential in advancing women's empowerment.

Literature Review:

The literature on women's welfare in India frequently grapples with the tension between short-term relief and long-term empowerment. Welfare schemes targeted at women have historically oscillated between providing immediate assistance such as nutrition, healthcare, and marriage support and fostering structural changes through education, skill development, and employment generation (Choudhury, 2019; Khera, 2017). Scholars have highlighted that while immediate relief is necessary to address pressing vulnerabilities, it does not automatically translate into empowerment unless women's agency and decision-making capacity are simultaneously strengthened (Kabeer, 1999).

Kabeer (1999) defines empowerment as the expansion of women's ability to make strategic life choices through access to resources, agency, and achievements. From this perspective, programmes like Rupashree can be considered empowering only if they go beyond providing financial resources and actively enhance women's ability to make choices and exercise control over their lives. Batliwala (1994) further argues that empowerment must involve structural transformation, addressing root causes of gender inequality such as patriarchal norms, economic exclusion, and social marginalization. In contrast, temporary relief measures, while alleviating immediate hardships, often fail to challenge these systemic barriers. Scholars like Menon (2012) and Kapur (2014) caution that welfare schemes in India frequently reinforce women's dependency on the state, positioning them as passive beneficiaries rather than active agents capable of shaping their lives. In the context of marriage-related welfare schemes, this dependency can be reinforced by normalizing the role of women primarily as wives and daughters within patriarchal family structures (Roychowdhury, 2019).

Marriage remains a socially significant and economically burdensome institution for many women in India. The dowry system, despite legal prohibition under the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, continues to place enormous financial pressure on low-income households (Bloch & Rao, 2002). Studies indicate that marriage expenses are among the largest expenditures for economically disadvantaged families (Sur & Bhattacharya, 2017). Against this backdrop, state initiatives such as Rupashree emerge as targeted interventions aimed at reducing these financial burdens. However, as Pateman (1988) argues in her theory of the “sexual contract,” policies that tie women’s welfare to marital status risk reproducing patriarchal norms, as they emphasize women’s roles within the family over their recognition as autonomous citizens. By linking financial support to marriage, schemes like Rupashree reinforce the centrality of marriage as a defining life event for women rather than expanding their opportunities for independent social, educational, or economic development.

Feminist scholarship provides multiple lenses to evaluate such welfare interventions. Kabeer (1999) emphasizes that empowerment involves resources, agency, and achievements; while Rupashree provides resources, it offers limited scope to expand agency. Batliwala (1994) underscores the need for structural transformation; marriage-support schemes like Rupashree address immediate symptoms (marriage expenses) but do little to tackle systemic issues such as dowry, unemployment, or gendered social norms. Menon (2012) critiques the instrumentalization of state feminism in India, arguing that welfare schemes are often co-opted for electoral politics rather than for genuine empowerment. Fraser (1997) proposes a dual approach of redistribution (economic support) and recognition (valuing women’s rights and social status); while Rupashree provides redistribution, it largely fails to provide recognition or challenge social hierarchies.

Scholarship on cash transfers highlights the multiple ways in which financial support can influence women’s lives, including increasing household resources, improving intra-household bargaining power, and symbolically recognizing women as rights-bearing citizens (Hossain & Moore, 2018; Duflo, 2012). Evidence from South Asia suggests that regular and conditional cash transfers targeted to women can improve health and education outcomes, strengthen bargaining positions, and promote social participation (Barrientos, 2013). Conditional transfers linked to specific behaviors such as school attendance or health visits can encourage long-term investments in women’s human capital, while unconditional transfers to women’s accounts may enhance autonomy and decision-making. However, the literature also cautions that one-time or irregular transfers, such as marriage-related grants, often have limited empowerment potential and mainly address immediate financial pressures (Duflo, 2012; Sur & Bhattacharya, 2017). Without complementary measures such as education, skill-building, legal protections, and labor-market access, cash alone rarely transforms entrenched gender norms.

A central debate in the literature revolves around whether welfare interventions are primarily palliative or transformative. Critics argue that schemes focused on consumption or short-term relief, including marriage grants, can inadvertently reproduce social hierarchies and dependency, thereby limiting women’s ability to exercise strategic choices (Kapur, 2014; Menon, 2012). Advocates, however, contend that such measures are crucial first steps in addressing immediate vulnerabilities and can be empowering if linked to broader programmes

of education, employment, and rights awareness (Hossain & Moore, 2018). In the Indian context, the challenge lies in designing policies that balance immediate support with pathways to long-term empowerment, ensuring that interventions like Rupashree do not remain isolated palliative measures but contribute to structural changes in women's socio-economic and cultural positioning.

Historical Context of Marriage Support in Bengal:

Marriage in Bengal, as in much of India, has traditionally been both a social expectation and a significant economic burden, particularly for lower-income families. Anthropological and sociological studies indicate that while dowry practices in Bengal were historically less ostentatious than in North India, they still imposed considerable financial pressure on households (Chowdhury, 2016). For economically disadvantaged families, arranging a daughter's marriage often involves borrowing money, selling assets, or accumulating debt. In many cases, marriage-related expenses dominate household budgets and can exacerbate existing financial vulnerabilities. This economic dimension of marriage has long intertwined with social and cultural norms that prioritize women's marital status as a measure of family honour and social legitimacy.

The historical trajectory of women's welfare in Bengal is shaped by the region's reformist movements in the 19th century. Reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar campaigned for widow remarriage, the promotion of women's education, and the abolition of child marriage. These initiatives reflected a broader concern with women's social rights and the reduction of practices that perpetuated gender-based disadvantage. Despite these efforts, dowry practices and other patriarchal norms persisted, and marriage continued to function as a site where women's social and economic subordination was reproduced (Sarkar, 2001). The reformist interventions, while progressive for their time, were limited in scope and primarily focused on legal and social recognition rather than addressing the economic dimensions of marriage for poorer households.

In the post-independence period, the Indian state introduced various welfare measures aimed at reducing women's economic vulnerabilities, including schemes linked to education, health, and marriage. Conditional cash transfer programmes emerged as an important policy tool, providing targeted financial support to households with daughters, often contingent on education or marriage-related criteria. Within this broader policy environment, West Bengal has been notable for its emphasis on women-centered welfare schemes, such as Kanyashree, which targets adolescent girls' education, and Rupashree, which directly provides financial assistance to families at the time of their daughters' marriage. The Rupashree Scheme, introduced in 2018, represents one of the most explicit state interventions linking financial aid to marriage, aiming to alleviate the immediate economic burden on families and discourage child marriage by incentivizing marriages at legal age.

While schemes like Rupashree provide short-term financial relief, they also raise important questions about the long-term implications for women's empowerment and autonomy. By tying benefits to marriage, such programmes intersect with longstanding cultural expectations about women's roles within the family and society. Understanding this historical and socio-economic

context is therefore essential for evaluating the scheme's effectiveness, as it situates contemporary policy within a continuum of reformist efforts, state intervention, and persistent structural challenges related to gender, marriage, and economic inequality in Bengal.

Design, Implementation, and Assessment of the Rupashree Scheme:

The Rupashree Scheme, launched by the Government of West Bengal in April 2018, is a state-level welfare initiative that provides one-time financial assistance of ₹25,000 to women from economically weaker families at the time of their marriage (Government of West Bengal, 2018). The primary objective of the scheme is to reduce the financial stress faced by poor households during marriage and to discourage child marriage by making the cash benefit conditional upon reaching the legal age of marriage (Government of West Bengal, 2018). Eligible families are those with an annual income below ₹1.5 lakh, and the applicant must be an unmarried woman aged 18 years or above, marrying a groom aged at least 21. The benefit is limited to the applicant's first marriage, and applicants must be residents of West Bengal, either by birth or through a minimum of five years of residence (Government of West Bengal, 2018).

To ensure transparency and financial inclusion, the amount is directly transferred to the bride's bank account, emphasizing her ownership of the benefit. Applications can be submitted through district-level facilitation centres or via the Rupashree Online Portal, where beneficiaries must upload documents such as proof of age, residence, income, bank details, and marriage registration certificates (Government of West Bengal, n.d.). This digitalised process aims to streamline administration, minimize corruption, and ensure timely delivery of benefits to eligible recipients.

The scheme's social rationale is particularly relevant in the context of West Bengal's persistent challenge of early marriage. According to the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5, 2019–21), about 42% of women aged 20-24 in the state were married before the age of 18 (IIPS & ICF, 2021; UNFPA India, 2022). Child marriage remains concentrated among rural and economically disadvantaged groups- the very demographic targeted by Rupashree. By conditioning financial aid on adult-age marriage, the scheme attempts to create a protective incentive against early marriage while offering short-term economic relief. However, while it helps mitigate the immediate costs associated with marriage, it does not directly address the deeper causes of women's vulnerability, such as limited access to education, employment, and social mobility (Menon, 2012; Batliwala, 1994).

In terms of implementation and scale, Rupashree has achieved significant outreach across the state. Government data show that, as of 31 December 2023, more than 85.53 lakh women had benefited from the scheme since its inception (Government of West Bengal, 2023). Annual records indicate continued high levels of disbursement: for instance, the Finance Department's 2024–25 Budget reported 1.93 lakh beneficiaries receiving a total of ₹529.04 crore, while the Chief Minister's Administrative Calendar (2024) recorded 2.19 lakh beneficiaries with disbursements of ₹603.65 crore during a given period (Government of West Bengal, 2024a, 2024b). At the district level, reports such as that of Paschim Medinipur documented over

83,000 cumulative beneficiaries and several thousand ongoing cases in 2023–24. These figures underscore both the scale and consistency of the programme’s delivery across regions.

Although data discrepancies exist due to differences in reporting timelines and administrative units, the overall trend indicates that Rupashree has become one of the most widely implemented marriage-linked welfare schemes in West Bengal. The scheme’s combination of income targeting, legal-age conditions, and digital payments reflects a strong administrative framework. However, as several scholars and civil society reports note, the programme remains largely welfare-driven rather than transformative (Kabeer, 1999; Pateman, 1988; Batliwala, 1994). While it provides immediate financial relief and helps delay early marriage, its empowerment potential is limited unless complemented by education, livelihood, and awareness initiatives that can create sustainable pathways for women’s autonomy and equality.

Complementarity with other policies:

The empowerment potential of the Rupashree Scheme is closely linked to its integration with broader policy measures. When embedded within a comprehensive policy framework, Rupashree can work in tandem with adolescent-focused incentives, such as the Kanyashree Scheme, which aims to delay marriage and promote educational retention among girls. By ensuring continuity in education and providing conditional support for skill development, these complementary initiatives can address structural factors that contribute to early marriage and women’s economic vulnerability, thereby enhancing the long-term impact of marriage-linked financial assistance.

Beyond educational interventions, Rupashree’s effectiveness could be significantly strengthened through post-marriage support measures, including access to vocational training, employment programmes, and legal protections against domestic and economic exploitation. Coupled with robust social services, such measures would allow women to translate short-term financial relief into sustained agency and autonomy. In the absence of such complementary policies, Rupashree largely remains a targeted welfare measure addressing immediate financial needs, rather than serving as a transformative tool for gender empowerment and structural change.

Empowerment Potential of Rupashree:

The Rupashree Scheme provides immediate material relief to economically disadvantaged families, which can help reduce financial stress and indebtedness associated with marriage expenditures. In households where high wedding costs often necessitate borrowing, the grant can alleviate pressure and free resources for other essential needs. For adult brides, the financial support may also carry symbolic significance, representing public recognition and, when women retain control of the funds, potential use for household savings or small investments (Chatterjee, 2021).

However, empowerment is a multidimensional concept, and short-term financial relief alone is insufficient to produce lasting change. Literature on gender-targeted cash transfers emphasizes that predictable, regular, and paired interventions—such as education, vocational training, and legal literacy—are more likely to enhance women’s bargaining power, decision-making, and

life choices (Kabeer, 1999; Duflo, 2012). A one-time marriage grant, while beneficial in alleviating immediate economic stress, lacks continuity and may have limited impact on expanding long-term autonomy unless women exercise control over the use of funds and receive complementary support.

The empowerment potential of the Rupashree Scheme can be understood through multiple dimensions, reflecting both economic and socio-cultural impacts. While the programme provides immediate financial relief, its broader significance lies in how it interacts with women's agency, social recognition, and structural constraints.

1. Delaying Child Marriage and Promoting Legal-Age Marriages:

By conditioning the benefit on marriage at the legal age of 18 or above, Rupashree creates an incentive for families to postpone daughters' marriages. This can reduce the prevalence of child marriage, particularly in economically disadvantaged and rural households where early marriage is common (UNICEF, 2020). Delaying marriage not only allows girls to continue education or participate in skill development programmes but also enhances their bargaining position within households. Families perceive a tangible benefit from waiting, which may shift normative expectations regarding the timing of marriage and girls' life trajectories.

2. Financial Relief and Reduction of Economic Vulnerability:

The one-time grant of ₹25,000 eases immediate economic pressures associated with marriage, which are often significant for low-income families. By reducing the need for high-interest loans or asset liquidation, the scheme can free household resources for other essential expenses, such as nutrition, health, or education. For women, this financial support can contribute to a sense of economic security, especially if they retain control over the use of funds. In rural contexts, where household finances are tightly constrained, the grant can reduce stressors that otherwise exacerbate vulnerability and dependence (Chatterjee, 2021).

3. Social Recognition and Dignity:

Rupashree also carries a symbolic dimension: receiving a government-sanctioned grant in the woman's name represents public acknowledgment of her social worth. This recognition can bolster women's self-esteem and dignity, particularly in patriarchal contexts where women's contributions and needs are often undervalued. Even modest financial support, when directly credited to the bride, signals state recognition of her as a rights-bearing individual rather than merely a dependent family member.

4. Potential for Expanding Agency:

While the grant is a one-time transfer, its empowerment effects are more pronounced when women have autonomy in decision-making related to the use of funds. Ownership over the money, even for a single expenditure, can symbolically reinforce agency, giving women a limited but meaningful opportunity to exercise choice. This is particularly relevant in households where financial decisions are traditionally male-dominated, as it can foster incremental shifts in intra-household dynamics.

5. Limitations and Conditionality of Empowerment:

Despite these positive aspects, Rupashree's empowerment effects are conditional and context-dependent. The grant alone does not ensure long-term economic independence, social mobility, or freedom from patriarchal constraints. Sustainable empowerment requires complementary interventions, such as continued education, vocational training, access to employment opportunities, and legal awareness. Without these supports, the scheme primarily functions as short-term relief and may inadvertently reinforce the notion that women's security and social value are linked primarily to marriage rather than broader capabilities.

Rupashree produces both material and symbolic benefits, offering immediate financial relief, promoting legal-age marriages, and enhancing recognition of women's individual identity. However, its capacity to achieve transformative empowerment hinges on integration with broader gender-sensitive policies and structural measures that support women's autonomy and life choices beyond marriage.

Dependency Debate:

While the Rupashree Scheme offers immediate financial relief and symbolic recognition, scholars and commentators have raised concerns about its potential to foster dependency rather than promote lasting empowerment. These critiques focus on how the scheme interacts with existing social norms, state practices, and structural inequalities:

1. **Reinforcing Patriarchal Norms:** By conditioning benefits on marriage, Rupashree implicitly frames marriage as the central life goal for women. This emphasis risks reinforcing the idea that a woman's social and economic security is tied primarily to her marital status, rather than her education, employment, or independent agency. Scholars argue that such design choices may perpetuate patriarchal structures instead of challenging them or expanding alternative pathways for women's life choices (Kapur, 2014).
2. **Indirect Support of Dowry Practices:** Although the scheme is intended as a marriage-support measure, critics contend that it may inadvertently supplement dowry payments. In contexts where dowry remains a social expectation, the one-time grant could be absorbed into household or groom-side expenditures, thereby normalizing and legitimizing a practice that the state formally seeks to discourage (Roychowdhury, 2019). This unintended consequence illustrates the tension between welfare provision and the reinforcement of entrenched social norms.
3. **Paternalistic Welfare Approach:** Rupashree reflects a top-down, paternalistic model of welfare, wherein women are positioned as passive beneficiaries of state aid. The scheme does not necessarily engage women as active agents of change or provide mechanisms for them to exercise decision-making over broader aspects of their lives. This approach can limit the transformative potential of the programme, reducing women's role to that of dependent recipients rather than empowered participants in shaping their life trajectories.
4. **Short-Term Relief with Limited Structural Impact:** The one-time financial grant addresses immediate economic needs but does not tackle the underlying structural factors that constrain women's empowerment, such as limited access to education, employment opportunities, or skill development programmes. Without complementary

interventions targeting these areas, Rupashree may alleviate temporary financial stress but fails to produce sustainable changes in women's social, economic, or political standing.

Rupashree provides tangible short-term benefits, these critiques emphasize the importance of considering long-term empowerment and structural transformation when designing marriage-linked welfare programmes. The scheme's reliance on marriage as the primary condition for support highlights the broader debate on whether welfare initiatives for women reinforce dependency or genuinely expand agency.

Implementation Challenges:

The Rupashree Scheme relies on a digital application infrastructure designed to streamline access and ensure transparency. Applicants can submit their documents through district facilitation centres or via the online Rupashree portal, with direct electronic transfer of funds to the bride's bank account. Despite this modernized approach, evidence from government evaluations and NGO reports highlights several implementation challenges. Key frictions include limited awareness of the scheme among eligible beneficiaries, bureaucratic delays, and the administrative burden of submitting multiple documents, such as age proof, income certificates, and marriage registration records. These challenges can create uneven access, favoring those with better information, literacy, and administrative support even within low-income communities, thereby potentially exacerbating intra-community inequalities.

Corruption and procedural leakages remain a persistent concern. Media reports and investigative accounts note instances of bribes and informal payments demanded during the application process, which can delay or restrict access for the most vulnerable families (The Telegraph, 2021). In addition, delays in disbursement are frequently reported, with funds sometimes arriving weeks or months after the scheduled marriage date. Such delays undermine the scheme's primary objective of alleviating immediate financial stress during a culturally significant life event.

The urban–rural divide also shapes implementation outcomes. While rural households, particularly in remote districts, constitute a significant share of beneficiaries, urban poor families often face different forms of economic vulnerability, including higher living costs and less direct access to facilitation centres, which can limit their participation. Similarly, low levels of awareness among rural women, compounded by limited access to digital resources, highlight the need for proactive outreach and capacity-building measures to ensure that the scheme reaches all intended beneficiaries effectively. Overall, while Rupashree has achieved wide coverage, these implementation realities reveal that administrative efficiency, awareness campaigns, and equitable access remain critical to realizing its intended social and economic objectives.

Policy Implications and Recommendations:

The analysis of the Rupashree Scheme highlights several areas for policy refinement to enhance its potential for gender-transformative impact.

1. Reframe Public Messaging:

State communication strategies must consciously shift from portraying marriage as the ultimate or inevitable milestone in a woman's life to promoting a narrative centered on women's rights, autonomy, and the multiplicity of life choices available to them. The framing of welfare schemes such as Rupashree should therefore transcend the traditional notion that financial assistance for marriage is the primary indicator of empowerment. Instead, the scheme should be repositioned as one component within a broader policy framework that supports women's diverse aspirations—be it higher education, skill development, entrepreneurship, or marriage—thereby affirming the principle of informed choice. Such a reframing would not only align with contemporary gender equality discourses but also contribute to dismantling entrenched social expectations that confine women's value to their marital status. By integrating empowerment-oriented messaging and enabling women to exercise agency over the direction of their lives, the Rupashree scheme could evolve from a welfare provision aimed at facilitating marriage into a transformative initiative that upholds women's dignity, independence, and right to self-determination.

2. Conditional Design Adjustments:

While maintaining the anti-child-marriage condition as a fundamental safeguard, the design of the Rupashree scheme could be enhanced through the introduction of flexible, optional components that better reflect women's diverse aspirations. Rather than restricting the grant solely to marriage-related expenses, a portion of the financial assistance could be made convertible into a women's savings or investment account, thereby encouraging financial independence and long-term security. Alternatively, beneficiaries who choose to allocate the funds toward educational pursuits, vocational training, or small entrepreneurial ventures could receive a matched contribution from the state, creating incentives for self-development and empowerment. These conditional design adjustments would uphold the scheme's protective function against early marriage while also expanding its developmental potential. By allowing women to exercise greater discretion in how the resources are used, such reforms would reinforce agency, support a wider range of life choices, and align the scheme more closely with the broader goals of gender equality and sustainable empowerment.

3. Ensure Direct Control of Resources:

To ensure that the Rupashree scheme effectively promotes women's empowerment rather than serving as a short-term financial relief measure, it is crucial to strengthen procedural safeguards that guarantee the woman's direct control over the received funds. The grant should be transferred with clear verification of the girl's consent and understanding of the process, thereby minimizing the risk of male household members appropriating the money. In contexts where cultural norms may restrict women's financial autonomy, the state could implement supportive measures such as financial literacy sessions or local monitoring mechanisms to enhance women's capacity to manage resources independently. Additionally, systematic tracking of who actually controls and decides the use of the grant whether the bride herself or other family members can generate valuable data to assess the scheme's real impact on women's agency. By institutionalizing women's ownership and decision-making authority over the funds, the scheme would move beyond symbolic support, contributing more meaningfully

to long-term empowerment and the transformation of gendered power relations within households and communities.

4. Integration with Skilling and Livelihoods:

The Rupashree scheme requires its integration with wider programmes for enhancing the transformative potential of this policy to promote skill development, livelihoods, and financial inclusion. Instead of functioning merely as a one-time marriage grant, the scheme can be linked with complementary initiatives offering vocational training, micro-credit facilities, and employment opportunities for young women, particularly those from low-income backgrounds. Such linkages would enable beneficiaries to convert short-term financial support into a foundation for long-term economic stability and independence. Collaborations with self-help groups, women's cooperatives, and entrepreneurship development programmes could further strengthen this process by equipping women with practical skills and market access. Embedding Rupashree within a larger network of empowerment-oriented schemes would not only enhance women's financial resilience but also promote sustained social mobility and greater participation in the workforce. In this way, the scheme could evolve from a welfare measure addressing immediate needs into a catalyst for enduring empowerment and inclusive growth.

5. Simplify Access and Strengthen Grievance Mechanisms:

Administrative simplification and stronger grievance mechanisms are essential for making the Rupashree scheme more fair and effective. Many women, especially those in rural or marginalized areas, struggle to access the scheme because of complicated paperwork, lack of awareness, and delays in payment. Reducing the amount of required documents, providing both online and offline application options, and using local help centers can make the process easier and more inclusive. At the same time, an efficient grievance redressal system is needed to ensure that complaints are handled quickly and transparently. Setting up time-bound, local-level grievance platforms and involving community workers can help women receive timely assistance and build trust in the system. Lessons from other women-focused schemes show that removing bureaucratic hurdles and ensuring prompt responses greatly improve access and satisfaction. By simplifying procedures and strengthening accountability, the Rupashree scheme can reach more women and deliver its intended support more effectively.

6. Commission Rigorous Impact Evaluation:

Rigorous impact evaluation is essential to understand how the Rupashree scheme influences women's autonomy, financial stability, and long-term life choices. A well-designed longitudinal mixed-methods study would provide comprehensive evidence by combining quantitative data with qualitative insights. This approach should include comparison groups to assess differences between beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries, along with in-depth interviews and surveys to capture women's personal experiences, challenges, and decision-making processes. Regular tracking of indicators such as educational continuation, employment participation, and household financial practices would help reveal whether the scheme truly enhances empowerment or merely provides temporary relief. Generating such robust evidence is crucial for identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the current design and for guiding

future policy improvements. By grounding decisions in empirical findings, policymakers can ensure that Rupashree evolves beyond a short-term financial aid programme into a sustainable instrument for advancing women's rights, economic independence, and social transformation.

Conclusion:

The Rupashree Scheme represents both progress and limitation in West Bengal's welfare approach to women's empowerment. It has offered essential financial assistance to economically disadvantaged families, helping to delay early marriages and providing symbolic recognition of women's rights at a vulnerable stage of life. By reducing the financial stress associated with marriage, the scheme has addressed a genuine social and economic concern, particularly for poor households. However, as a one-time marriage-linked grant, its capacity to transform the deeper structural causes of women's disempowerment remains limited.

At the same time, Rupashree risks reinforcing women's dependency and framing empowerment primarily through the lens of marriage. Implementation challenges such as corruption, lack of awareness, and bureaucratic hurdles have further reduced its effectiveness. For the scheme to move beyond temporary relief and become a genuine instrument of empowerment, it needs to be integrated with broader measures such as education, skill development, employment opportunities, and strict enforcement of anti-dowry laws. Only through such structural reforms can Rupashree evolve from a short-term welfare initiative into a long-term strategy that strengthens women's agency and challenges patriarchal norms in Bengal's socio-political context.

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