

# Barriers to Higher Education: A Study on the Challenges Faced by Matua Women Students in North 24 Parganas

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**Abstract:** *The Matua community, an important socio-religious group in West Bengal, continues to grapple with socio-economic marginalization and educational disadvantages. This study investigates the challenges faced by Matua women students in accessing and completing higher education in North 24 Parganas, West Bengal. Despite the growth of educational institutions and affirmative action policies, Matua women encounter multiple barriers such as socio-cultural restrictions, financial constraints, inadequate institutional support, and gender-based discrimination. The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, utilizing surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions with Matua women students enrolled in higher education institutions. Findings reveal that systemic biases, lack of awareness about government schemes, and patriarchal attitudes further impede their educational aspirations. The study highlights the urgent need for community-based interventions, gender-sensitive educational policies, and targeted support mechanisms to improve higher education outcomes for Matua women.*

**Keywords:** Matua community, women's education, higher education, socio-cultural barriers, North 24 Parganas, gender discrimination, marginalized communities

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Matua community, predominantly comprising Scheduled Castes (SCs), migrated from East Bengal (now Bangladesh) during and after the partition of 1947. This migration was driven by socio-political upheavals and communal violence, forcing the community to settle in various districts of West Bengal, including North 24 Parganas. The Matua movement, initiated by Harichand Thakur and later championed by Guruchand Thakur, emerged as a socio-religious reform movement aimed at empowering marginalized communities, particularly the Dalits, through education and social awareness. Guruchand Thakur emphasized the transformative power of education, advocating that literacy and knowledge could uplift the oppressed sections of society and challenge the existing socio-economic hierarchies. However, despite this progressive vision, Matua women continue to face systemic challenges in accessing and completing higher education.

Higher education serves as a key driver of socio-economic mobility, allowing marginalized communities to challenge entrenched inequalities and secure better livelihoods. However, for Matua women, the pathway to higher education is riddled with obstacles stemming from their marginalized positionality within caste, gender, and class hierarchies. Patriarchal norms often relegate women to domestic spheres, discouraging them from pursuing education beyond the secondary level. Early marriage, family obligations, and the burden of household responsibilities further contribute to high dropout rates among Matua women. Additionally, financial constraints, lack of awareness about government schemes, and inadequate institutional support systems exacerbate these challenges.

Moreover, societal perceptions surrounding women's education perpetuate the notion that investing in a girl's education yields limited returns, leading families to prioritize the education of male members over female counterparts. The absence of gender-sensitive policies, combined with inadequate mentoring and counseling services in educational

institutions, further alienates Matua women from pursuing higher education. Discrimination based on caste and gender in educational settings adds another layer of difficulty, making it challenging for Matua women to thrive academically. This study seeks to explore the multifaceted barriers that impede the educational progress of Matua women in North 24 Parganas. By examining socio-cultural, economic, and institutional factors, this research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of these challenges and propose targeted policy interventions to promote inclusive and equitable higher education opportunities for Matua women.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Matua movement emerged as a socio-religious reform movement advocating for the dignity and education of marginalized castes. Scholars such as Chatterjee (2007) and Sarkar (2015) have highlighted how the movement's emphasis on literacy and empowerment aimed to break the cycle of oppression. However, educational attainment among Matua women has remained low due to entrenched societal biases and structural barriers.

Studies such as Sen & Ghosh (2019) and Chakraborty (2020) have identified financial hardship, early marriage, and household responsibilities as significant constraints that limit women's educational advancement in marginalized communities. Women from Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/STs) are disproportionately affected, with limited access to quality education and professional development opportunities.

The intersection of caste and gender creates additional obstacles for Matua women. According to Banerjee (2021), patriarchal norms often prioritize the education of male family members over female counterparts, perpetuating gender disparity. Furthermore, Das (2022) argues that institutional biases and inadequate support systems hinder the progression of marginalized women in higher education.

Affirmative action policies such as reservations and scholarships aim to address educational inequality. However, the awareness and effective implementation of these schemes often fall short for marginalized communities. Studies by Roy (2020) and Basu (2021) emphasize the need for targeted outreach and improved policy execution to ensure equitable access to higher education for disadvantaged groups.

## III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To identify the socio-economic and cultural barriers faced by Matua women in accessing higher education.
- To assess the impact of gender and caste-based discrimination on educational outcomes for Matua women.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of government schemes and institutional support mechanisms.
- To suggest policy recommendations for enhancing educational opportunities for Matua women.

## IV. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant as it addresses a critical gap in the literature concerning the intersection of caste, gender, and education. Understanding the challenges faced by Matua women in higher education can inform policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to design more inclusive and supportive learning environments. The significance of this study can be summarized as follows:

- The study highlights the barriers that prevent Matua women from accessing and completing higher education, emphasizing the need to eliminate gender and caste-based disparities.
- Findings from the study can guide policymakers in refining existing affirmative action policies and implementing targeted interventions to improve higher education outcomes for marginalized women.
- The study identifies gaps in institutional support mechanisms and suggests ways to strengthen mentoring, counseling, and awareness programs to create a more enabling academic environment.
- By shedding light on the socio-cultural and economic constraints faced by Matua women, the research contributes to the broader discourse on gender equity and educational justice.

- The study aims to empower Matua women by advocating for inclusive policies and practices that promote equal educational opportunities, ultimately fostering long-term socio-economic mobility.

## V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 5.1 Research Design

The study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to capture a comprehensive understanding of the barriers faced by Matua women in higher education.

### 5.2 Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling method was used to identify 200 Matua women students enrolled in higher education institutions in North 24 Parganas. Additionally, 20 in-depth interviews and 5 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted to gather qualitative insights.

### 5.3 Data Collection Tools

Survey Questionnaire: Structured questionnaires were designed to assess socio-economic backgrounds, educational challenges, and perceptions about institutional support.

In-Depth Interviews: Semi-structured interviews explored personal narratives, socio-cultural expectations, and gendered experiences.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): Group discussions facilitated the exploration of collective experiences and community-specific challenges.

### 5.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis: Descriptive statistics were used to analyze survey data.

Qualitative Analysis: Thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns and emerging themes from interviews and FGDs.

## VI. DATA ANALYSIS AND MAJOR FINDINGS

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the data collected from Matua women students in North 24 Parganas regarding their socio-economic background, barriers to higher education, awareness and utilization of government schemes, and the challenges they face, particularly due to early marriage and associated socio-cultural expectations.

### 6.1 Socio-Economic Profile of Respondents

The socio-economic profile highlights the financial, educational, and social conditions of Matua women and their families. It provides a background for understanding the challenges these women encounter in pursuing higher education.

**Table 1: Socio-Economic Profile of Respondents**

Category	No. of Respondents (N = 200)	Percentage (%)
Household Income Below ₹50,000/year	124	62%
Fathers' Education Below Secondary Level	142	71%
Mothers' Education Below Secondary Level	164	82%
Early Marriage (before 18 years)	116	58%
Engaged in Household Chores During Studies	148	74%

Source: Author Calculation

The educational aspirations of Matua women in North 24 Parganas are significantly hindered by socio-economic challenges. 62% (124 out of 200) of the respondents belong to families with an annual income below ₹50,000, limiting their ability to afford higher education, including transportation, study materials, and other ancillary costs. This financial hardship forces many families to prioritize basic needs over educational pursuits, often leading to early dropout or enrollment in substandard institutions.

Parental educational attainment further exacerbates these challenges, as 71% (142 out of 200) of the respondents' fathers and 82% (164 out of 200) of mothers did not complete secondary education. This lack of academic exposure results in limited parental guidance, making it difficult for young women to navigate higher education opportunities, scholarships, and career choices.

Early marriage also plays a pivotal role in disrupting education, with 58% (116 out of 200) of respondents marrying before the age of 18. Combined with domestic responsibilities, 74% (148 out of 200) engaged in household chores while pursuing their studies, leading to academic fatigue and discontinuation. These intertwined challenges collectively restrict the access of Matua women to higher education, reinforcing cycles of marginalization and limiting their socio-economic mobility.

### 6.2 Early Marriage and Its Impact on Educational Attainment

Early marriage significantly impacts the ability of Matua women to continue and complete higher education. The burden of family responsibilities, societal expectations, and lack of institutional support result in high dropout rates.

**Table 2: Impact of Early Marriage on Educational Attainment**

Age of Marriage	No. of Respondents (N = 200)	Percentage (%)	Continued Higher Education (%)	Discontinued Higher Education (%)
Married before 18 years	116	58%	19% (22)	81% (94)
Married between 18-21 years	52	26%	35% (18)	65% (34)
Married after 21 years	32	16%	59% (19)	41% (13)

Source: Author Calculation

The timing of marriage has a profound impact on the educational trajectories of Matua women in North 24 Parganas. Data reveals that **81% (94 out of 116)** of women who married before the age of 18 were forced to discontinue their education due to family responsibilities, societal expectations, and lack of institutional support. Only **19% (22 out of 116)** of these women managed to continue their education post-marriage, indicating that early marriage significantly disrupts academic progress.

For women who married between the ages of 18 and 21, the impact was comparatively moderate. Among this group, **35% (18 out of 52)** successfully continued their education, while **65% (34 out of 52)** dropped out due to family pressures and the burden of domestic responsibilities. Although the continuation rate was higher than that of early marriages, societal expectations still hindered educational persistence for a majority of these women.

In contrast, women who married after 21 years exhibited a much higher continuation rate of **59% (19 out of 32)**. This trend highlights that delaying marriage allows women to focus on their education, increasing the likelihood of completing higher studies. The data underscores the critical role of delaying marriage in enhancing educational outcomes and reducing dropout rates among Matua women.

### 6.3 Barriers to Higher Education

The barriers faced by Matua women in accessing and completing higher education stem from financial, social, and institutional constraints. These challenges prevent them from achieving their academic and professional aspirations.

**Table 3: Barriers to Higher Education**

Barriers	No. of Respondents (N = 200)	Percentage (%)
Financial Constraints	136	68%
Gender-Based Discrimination	110	55%
Lack of Institutional Support	94	47%
Distance and Lack of Transport	78	39%
Early Marriage and Family Pressure	116	58%

Source: Author Calculation

The study identifies several critical barriers that hinder the higher education aspirations of Matua women in North 24 Parganas.

A significant 68% (136 out of 200) of the respondents reported financial difficulties as the primary obstacle to continuing their education. With most families living below the poverty line, the inability to afford tuition fees, study materials, and transportation costs forces many women to either drop out or pursue less competitive educational paths.

Gendered societal norms and expectations play a significant role in limiting educational opportunities, as 55% (110 out of 200) of the respondents cited gender-based discrimination as a major deterrent. Cultural beliefs often prioritize marriage and domestic roles for women over professional development, discouraging higher education. 47% (94 out of 200) of the respondents reported inadequate institutional support, including a lack of mentorship, counseling, and career guidance. The absence of gender-sensitive policies and support mechanisms contributes to the high dropout rates.

Limited transportation options and safety concerns were cited by 39% (78 out of 200) of the respondents, restricting their mobility and access to educational institutions, particularly in remote areas.

Family pressure to marry early remains a significant barrier, with 58% (116 out of 200) acknowledging that early marriage led to the discontinuation of their education. This highlights the persistent influence of traditional norms on limiting women's educational trajectories.

#### 6.4 Awareness and Utilization of Government Schemes

Although government schemes like Kanyashree Prakalpa, Swami Vivekananda Merit-cum-Means Scholarship, and SC/ST Post-Matric Scholarship aim to facilitate educational opportunities for marginalized communities, many Matua women are unable to fully utilize these schemes.

**Table 4: Awareness and Utilization of Government Schemes**

Scheme Name	Awareness (%)	Utilization (%)	No. of Beneficiaries (N = 200)
<b>Kanyashree Scheme</b>	89%	61%	122
<b>Swami Vivekananda Merit-cum-Means Scholarship</b>	72%	45%	90
<b>SC/ST Post-Matric Scholarship</b>	65%	43%	86

Source: Author Calculation

Government schemes aimed at supporting marginalized communities play a crucial role in facilitating access to higher education. However, despite high awareness levels, the utilization rates among Matua women in North 24 Parganas remain relatively low due to procedural complexities and lack of guidance.

The Kanyashree Scheme, designed to promote education and prevent early marriage, enjoys high awareness among the respondents, with 89% (178 out of 200) reporting knowledge of the scheme. However, only 61% (122 out of 200) of them successfully utilized the scheme. The discrepancy highlights procedural challenges, such as difficulties in filling out forms, delays in disbursement, and lack of proper guidance on documentation, which prevent eligible beneficiaries from accessing the full benefits.

Awareness about the Swami Vivekananda Merit-cum-Means Scholarship was reported by 72% (144 out of 200) of the respondents. However, only 45% (90 out of 200) managed to avail the scholarship due to difficulties in understanding the eligibility criteria and navigating the complex documentation processes. The low utilization rate suggests the need for greater outreach and simplified application procedures.

The SC/ST Post-Matric Scholarship had a lower awareness rate, with 65% (130 out of 200) of respondents familiar with the scheme. Despite this, only 43% (86 out of 200) utilized the scholarship, indicating gaps in outreach efforts and a lack of assistance with the application process. Many eligible students remain excluded from receiving the benefits due to a lack of awareness regarding deadlines and submission requirements.

These findings underscore the urgent need for improving awareness, streamlining application processes, and providing mentorship to ensure that Matua women can fully benefit from these government initiatives.



### 6.5 Financial Challenges and Educational Discontinuation

Financial hardship remains a critical barrier to higher education. The inability to afford associated costs often leads to discontinuation despite available government assistance.

**Table 5: Financial Reasons for Educational Discontinuation**

Reason	No. of Respondents (N = 200)	Percentage (%)
Inability to Afford Fees	104	52%
Cost of Transport	74	37%
Expense on Study Materials	84	42%
Unavailability of Financial Aid	58	29%

Source: Author Calculation

Financial constraints emerged as a dominant barrier hindering the higher education pursuits of Matua women in North 24 Parganas. The analysis highlights several critical aspects of these financial challenges, including tuition fees, transportation, study materials, and access to financial aid.

A significant 52% (104 out of 200) of the respondents reported that their families were unable to afford tuition fees, leading to the discontinuation of higher education. Many families, struggling with low household incomes, prioritize essential needs over educational expenses. As a result, even those with the potential and aspiration to pursue higher education are forced to abandon their academic journey.

The financial burden extends beyond tuition fees, with 37% (74 out of 200) of respondents indicating that transportation costs posed a significant challenge. Given the lack of educational institutions in close proximity, commuting becomes expensive, discouraging many women from continuing their studies. Additionally, 42% (84 out of 200) found the cost of study materials, including textbooks and digital resources, to be prohibitive. This lack of access to essential learning tools further limits their academic success.

Despite the availability of government scholarships and financial aid, 29% (58 out of 200) of respondents reported difficulties in availing these benefits due to procedural complexities. Many face challenges in understanding eligibility criteria, completing application forms, and submitting the required documentation, resulting in the underutilization of available resources.

These financial challenges collectively create formidable barriers, limiting the ability of Matua women to pursue and sustain higher education. Addressing these issues requires targeted interventions, including financial assistance, streamlined scholarship processes, and improved access to educational resources.

### 6.6 Lack of Institutional Support

Institutional support plays a vital role in ensuring the retention of marginalized groups in higher education. However, the data highlights a severe lack of mentorship, counseling, and peer networks that could facilitate continued educational engagement.

**Table 6: Availability of Institutional Support**

Type of Support	No. of Respondents (N = 200)	Availability (%)
Mentoring Programs	46	23%
Career Counseling	38	19%
Peer Support Networks	56	28%
Remedial Education Programs	62	31%

Source: Author Calculation

Institutional support mechanisms such as mentoring, career counseling, and peer networks are essential for empowering marginalized students and ensuring their academic success. However, the findings reveal that Matua women in North 24 Parganas have limited access to these critical resources, contributing to high dropout rates and reduced academic engagement.

Mentoring programs provide valuable academic and emotional support to marginalized students, yet only 23% (46 out of 200) of the respondents reported access to such programs. The lack of structured mentoring leaves many Matua

women without guidance on navigating academic challenges, applying for scholarships, or making informed career decisions. Without proper mentorship, these students often struggle to stay motivated and meet their academic goals. Access to career counseling services was even lower, with only 19% (38 out of 200) of respondents reporting that they had received professional career guidance. Career counseling plays a pivotal role in helping students explore their strengths, understand career options, and align their educational choices with future aspirations. The absence of these services means that most Matua women lack direction, contributing to poor decision-making regarding higher education and career pathways. Peer support networks play a crucial role in fostering motivation, building confidence, and providing emotional support, especially for marginalized groups. However, only 28% (56 out of 200) of respondents reported having access to peer support networks. Without a strong community of peers to share experiences, exchange knowledge, and encourage each other, many students feel isolated and demotivated, which negatively impacts their academic performance and persistence.

### 6.7 Key Findings

The data reveals several critical insights that shed light on the challenges faced by Matua women in accessing and completing higher education. These findings are elaborated below:

A majority of respondents cited financial challenges as the primary reason for dropping out of higher education. Despite the availability of government scholarships, ancillary costs such as transportation and study materials remain unaffordable.

Early marriage remains a significant barrier to higher education. Family pressures to marry young and prioritize domestic responsibilities prevent many from continuing their academic journey.

Although awareness of government schemes such as Kanyashree Prakalpa and Swami Vivekananda Merit-cum-Means Scholarship is relatively high, procedural complexity and lack of institutional guidance lead to low utilization rates.

The absence of adequate mentoring, counseling, and peer support further alienates Matua women, contributing to higher dropout rates.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The findings highlight that financial constraints, early marriage, gendered expectations, lack of institutional support, and procedural challenges in accessing government schemes collectively hinder the educational progress of Matua women. Addressing these challenges requires targeted policy interventions, improved awareness campaigns, and enhanced institutional support mechanisms. Creating safe and accessible educational environments, coupled with financial assistance and mentorship programs, can play a pivotal role in empowering Matua women to pursue higher education and contribute meaningfully to their communities. The study reveals that Matua women students in North 24 Parganas face multiple barriers in accessing and completing higher education. Socio-economic constraints, cultural expectations, and institutional neglect significantly impede their academic progress. While affirmative action policies and scholarships have had a positive impact, their effectiveness is diminished due to lack of awareness and procedural challenges. To bridge this gap, it is imperative to introduce targeted interventions, strengthen institutional support, and promote gender-sensitive policies. Collaborative efforts between government bodies, educational institutions, and community organizations are essential to ensure equitable access to higher education for Matua women and facilitate their holistic development.

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