

**NAVIGATING THE EDUCATIONAL
ASPIRATIONS OF FEMALE STUDENTS:
A CASE STUDY OF LOW-INCOME AREA OF
ISLAMABAD**



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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that this thesis entitled: “**Navigating The Educational Aspirations of Female Students: A Case Study of Low-Income Area of Islamabad.**” submitted by Sania Asrar is accepted in its present form by the PIDE School Policy, Development and Governance, Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (PIDE), Islamabad as satisfying the requirements for partial fulfillment of the degree in Master of Philosophy in Development Studies.

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Author's Declaration

I, the undersigned **Sania Asrar**, hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. To the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made. This thesis contains no material that has been accepted as part of the requirements of any other academic degree or non-degree program, in English or in any other language. This is a true copy of the thesis, including final revisions.

Date: 29-10-25



Signature of Student

Sania Asrar

Dedicated to

The strong women of the world

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Abstract

In environment characterized by structural and economic inequality, aspirations serve as powerful through which human development and social mobility are understood. This study tries to understand how girls' educational aspirations are formed and what barriers they face, particularly in low-income communities, for the attainment of their aspirations. For this purpose, this study uses Bourdieu's theory of habitus and the capability approach, highlighting the way school-going girls' abilities and functioning are shaped within constrictive social, economic, and gendered environment by the interplay between habitus and capability and the way this interplay impacts the formation and realization of aspiration.

Adding to the understanding of the intricate structural and internal elements that influence the educational journeys of female students, particularly of the marginalized female students of Islamabad, this study uses a mixed method approach. The study relies on qualitative information from semi-structured interviews with students, teachers and key stakeholders from education department and quantitative data from structured questionnaires from school-going girls. In order to understand how aspirations are socially and structurally situated and dialectically related, the study uses empirical analysis on the data collected.

This research not only documents the presence of aspiration gaps but also inquiries into the structural forces that sustain the gap, primarily by integrating statistical evidence with lived experiences of the school-going girls. The result of this study draws policymakers, practitioners, and scholars' attention to some of the most pertinent questions related to equity, opportunity, and the transformative role of education in shaping futures.

Keywords: Aspirations, Habitus, Capability Approach, Human Development, Gendered environments, Structural and economic context.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Chapter 1	10
Introduction.....	10
Background of study	10
1.1. Statement of the Problem.....	12
1.2. Research Questions	12
1.3. Research Objectives.....	13
1.4. Significance of the research	13
Chapter 2	14
Review of literature.....	14
2.1. Preamble	14
2.2. Explaining Educational Aspirations and Habitus	14
2.3. Bourdieu’s Ideas of Habitus and Cultural Capital	15
2.4. Sen’s Capability Approach.....	18
2.5. Empirical Studies on Educational Aspirations.....	19
2.6. Socioeconomic Disparities and Educational Aspirations in Pakistan.....	22
2.7. Research Gap	23
2.8. Theoretical Framework	24
2.9. Conceptual Framework.....	26
Chapter 3	27
Methodological Framework.....	27
3.1. Research Approach	27
3.2. Research Method	27
3.3. Research Design.....	27
3.4. Units of Data Collection	28
3.4.1. Units of Quantitative Data Collection.....	28
3.4.1.1. Girls in school (ages 11–16)	28

3.4.2. Units of Qualitative Data Collection.....	28
3.4.2.1. Education Stakeholders.....	29
3.4.2.2. NGOs and Local Education Stakeholders.....	29
3.5. Data Collection Methods	29
3.5.1. Survey as a Quantitative Data Collection Method.....	30
3.5.2. Interviews as a Qualitative Data Collection Method	30
3.6. Data Analysis	30
3.6.1. Quantitative Data Analysis using Descriptive Analysis.....	30
3.6.2. Qualitative Data Analysis using Thematic Analysis	31
3.7. Sample size and sample strategy.....	31
3.8. Locale.....	32
Chapter 4	33
Analysis and Discussion.....	33
4.1. Quantitative Data Analysis:	33
4.2. Socio- Demographic Profile of Respondents.....	33
Factors Shaping Girls’ Educational and Career Aspirations.....	37
4.3. Factor 1: Family, Culture, and Control	37
4.4. Factor 2: School Environment and Infrastructure Play an Important Role in Shaping Girls Educational Aspirations	51
Factor 3: Socio-economic Status of the Families: Assessing Its Impacts on Girls’ Education.	59
4.7. Evaluating Girls’ Educational Aspirations Within Structural and Social Constraints ..	62
4.8. Qualitative Data Analysis:	70
4.8.1. Theme 1: Economic and Resource Constraints	71
4.8.2. Theme 2: Cultural and Familial Control.....	72
4.8.3. Theme 3: Structural and Institutional Weaknesses	74
4.8.4. Theme 4: Factors and Protective Anchors for Girls Education	75
Chapter 5: Conclusion And Recommendations	80
5.1. Conclusion	80
5.2. Recommendations.....	81
REFERENCES.....	83

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework	26
Figure 2: Parental Support for Aspirations	40
Figure 6: Desired Vs Expected Level of Education.....	40
Figure 7: Attainability of Desired Level of Education.....	67

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Summary of Data Analysis	32
Table 2: Educational Profile of Respondents	34
Table 3: Parents' Education and Occupation	35
Table 4: Family Structure.....	36
Table 5: Extent and Nature of Parents support	37
Table 6: Parents Aspiration for girls	38
Table 7: Correlations of Parents VS Girls Expected Education.....	41
Table 8: Cultural norms affect choices.	41
Table 9: Tabulation of Culture Affect Choice gap binary	42
Table 10: Perceived Opportunities for Girls in the Community	43
Table 11: Community opinion about ambitious girls.....	43
Table 12: Factors Contributing to Lack of Community Support	44
Table 13: Tabulation of community role and aspiration gap.....	45
Table 14: Aspirations and Gendered Views	47
Table 15: Educational Opportunities: Boys vs. Girls.....	47
Table 16: Perceptions of Gender Suitability for Certain Professions	48
Table 17: Reasons for occupational gendered views	49
Table 18: Reasons for Professions Perceived as More Suitable for Men	50
Table 19: Tabulation of professions more suitable for men and aspiration gap.....	50
Table 20: Schools profile	52
Table 21: Number of Classrooms	52
Table 22: Physical Infrastructure	54
Table 23: Digital Infrastructure.....	54
Table 24: Maintenance and Budget.....	55
Table 25: Teachers Count and facilities in a School	56
Table 26: student-teacher ratio per grade.....	57
Table 27: The cross-tabulation of teacher-student ratio.....	57
Table 28: Mobility and safety	58
Table 29: Monthly household income.....	59
Table 34: Desired VS Expected Education level.	63
Table 35: Desired Future Careers	66
Table 36: Summary Statistics of Aspiration Gap.....	68
Table 37: Correlation - Desired VS Expected Education	69
Table 38: Cross tabulation of Desired vs Expected level of education.....	69

Chapter 1

Introduction

Background of study

Aspiration is a humanly attribute that serves as a window into youths' hope and the perceived opportunities in the future. Social mobility, livelihood opportunities and empowerment of young people are frequently assessed through their aspirations. Higher aspirations, coupled with the necessary socio-economic and cultural conditions, are likely to be transformed into reality. On the other hand, aspirations without the necessary socio-economic and cultural arrangements result in shattered dreams. Similarly, Cameron, (2023) notes that the educational attainment, career choices, and personal growth of school-going girls are largely determined by their aspirations. However, in an environment characterized by structural constraints (Bourdieu, 1984), these aspirations could often be found caught in “blighted hope” (Hart, 2016) or “frustrated promise”. This becomes even more persuasive when it comes to low-income areas of Islamabad: although the idea of ambitious aspirations is present, the majority of girls expect the social conventions, the lack of financial resources, or the weaknesses of the institutional environment to determine their educational paths in the end.

Education has long been regarded as a personal asset as well as a social equalizer (Sen, 1999; Bourdieu, 1986). The capability approach by Amartya Sen (1999) conceptualizes education as an essential freedom that increases the opportunities of individuals, whereas the notion of habitus proposed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986) makes us remember that the opportunities are always organized in terms of social positions and inherited dispositions. Combined, these theoretical prisms bring into light how the aspirations of girls can be a manifestation of perceived liberties; however, their aspirations are hampered when they confront the deep-rooted social and cultural conventions, which bind them and expect them to expect less than what they aspire for. This duality shows that aspirations' gap could not only be attributed to personal or individual issues; rather it is more a structural phenomenon linked to inequality.

Given the ground realities including the inequalities, teacher shortages, poor condition of infrastructure, unequal access to school, gaps in educational aspirations of girls are persistent and

widespread in Pakistan: many girls are unable to realize their dreams to these structural issues (Andrabi et al., 2007; Human Rights Watch, 2018). Besides, the burden of work at home, the restriction on movement and the priority of a boy child make the situation complex for girls, as they could not attain their aspirations in such a disadvantageous condition, particularly when these couple with their low economic conditions (Qureshi, 2004). Despite having the potential to develop solid aspiration, girls often fail to do so because of these systemic constraints which influence their prospects of habitus.

Exploring gaps in the education system will not adequately explore the gaps in young girls' aspirations; therefore, alongside finding gaps in education system, the quest has been extended to how structural barrier changes or shape the education aspirations of girls. Certain questions arise while delving into the structural constraints: how personal dreams are being influenced by cultural expectation? How decision, which girls think that they have to undertake, are impacted by economic inequalities? And what are the final outcomes in the case of collision between the aspirations and the lived realities of these girls? Addressing this question is crucial not only for the purpose of explaining the career aspirations of young girls, but also for formulating relevant policies and undertaking necessary intervention measures.

Using both qualitative and quantitative research methods, this research sought to examine the aspiration gaps of girls studying in low-income areas of Islamabad. The data collected through surveys demonstrates that there exists a divergence between the girls' aspirations and the likely outcomes which they expect over the course of time, while the interviews conducted with key education stakeholders such as teachers. Policymakers and activists provide in-depth insights into the underlying institutional and cultural dynamics that cause divergence. The results of this study demonstrate the young girls, even though from low-income and comparatively conservative environment, possess high educational aspirations, yet their aspirations have often failed to materialize due to the structural obstacles, causing a significant void in terms of social mobility and equity.

In pursuance of exploring the gaps in educational aspirations of young girls, this study highlighted the disparities in education by drawing on the voices of the concerned stakeholders. The study has not been limited to the understanding of the factors limiting the prospects of girls; rather it explored

the facilitating factors fostering resilience and hope in them. Hence, the study establishes that aspiration gaps are both a symptom and consequence of the wider socio-economic inequities that need to be eliminated so that the cycles of low opportunities and broken aspirations have been prevented from reproducing itself across generations.

1.1.Statement of the Problem

The interplay of gender norms, poverty, inadequate educational infrastructure, and limited understanding of the role models, have significantly compromised the aspiration of school-going girls in low-income settings, causing them to develop low educational expectations. Girls not only have trouble getting a good education, but they also face a lot of other problems, such as not having enough money, traditional gender roles (Bradley & Saigal, 2012), societal expectations (Ishfaq, 2022), and limited access to resources and support systems that make it hard for them to see a better future.

A state of disequilibrium results from the discrepancy between aspirations and the existing opportunities to realize those aspirations. These disparities have a negative impact on the personal development of these females as well as the community's overall development, hence, sustaining cycles of underdevelopment and inequality. Therefore, this study aims to determine young girls' educational aspirations, how their aspirations are shaped by their lived realities, and if these realities create any aspirations gaps. It also determines the difficulties young girls encounter and comprehends how societal and economic variables affect their aspirations.

1.2.Research Questions

1. What are the educational aspirations of secondary school girls from low-income areas of Islamabad?
2. How do socio-economic and cultural factors shape or constrain educational aspirations?
3. What is the nature and degree of the aspiration gap among school-going girls in low-income areas of Bhara Kahu? That is, the discrepancy between their aspirations and expectations given the opportunities available to them.

1.3. Research Objectives

1. To identify the aspirations of school-going girls at the secondary level in the peri-urban low-income areas of Islamabad.
2. To explore the influence of habitus, power play, and socio-cultural norms on the educational aspiration of girls and to understand how such factors impede girls' aspirations to achieve higher education.

1.4. Significance of the research

Evidence-based policymaking requires an understanding of the dynamic effects of social capability and habitus barriers on girls' aspirations. The analysis's findings shed light on how social and habitus constraints restrict girls' aspirations for education, which can help shape the formation of policies aimed at removing these barriers. The social factors influencing girls' educational aspiration, which have been explored in this study, can serve as powerful intervention framework, particularly in the realm of making gender-sensitive educational reforms, for policymakers. Mentorship programs, school-based counselling, and initiatives aimed at making community's attitude more acceptable to girl's education could be some of the reforms, which the policymakers can pursue while crafting education related policies.

Chapter 2

Review of literature

2.1. Preamble

This section draws on diverse literature, which studies the structural and individual factors shaping or influencing the educational aspiration of young girls. A particular focus has been on the literature that studies young girls' aspirations and the structural constraints in the context of their lived experiences in low-income settings. Studies that specifically cover the connection between aspirations and educational outcome in Pakistan, particularly among girls who are marginalized is significantly lacking. Therefore, this review attempts to fill that gap by combining significant theoretical and empirical perspectives. The review is split into two major parts: the former involves the theoretical frameworks that support this study, and the second one provides both national and international empirical data.

2.2. Explaining Educational Aspirations and Habitus

The anthropological, sociological, psychological and economic literature of education implies that aspirations play a very instrumental role in determining the educational paths and career outcomes. Aspirations in education, i.e. aspirations of students regarding their intended level of educational achievement, are the focus of one of the main themes of social mobility, inequality, and educational research. Socioeconomic position, cultural capital, and institutional constraints influence aspirations (Buchmann & Dalton, 2002). There are theories that believe that aspirations are predetermined by infrastructural and cultural capital whereas others emphasize more on individual agency and rational choice.

The difference between what individuals look forward to accomplishing and what they actually achieve because of systemic limitations is known as aspirations gap. The term of aspiration gap proposed by Ray (2006) is when people compromise on their aspiration in the face of challenges such as poverty, discrimination, and not having role models. Studies show that the disparity in aspirations has been largest in the case of oppressed populations, like, patriarchal workplace,

students in the working classes, and ethnic minorities (Hart et al., 2011). It is possible that students have lower aspirations when they are faced with structural barriers on a regular basis such as discrimination, financial deficit, or institutional prejudices.

Social opportunity has an intrinsic influence on aspirations according to Appadurai (2004). He says that organizations and individuals that are moving to upward mobility are the ones that have higher aspirations, while poor people do not expect much, and they simply do what seems possible. Study conducted by Unterhalter and Walker (2013) on South African girls indicates that girls were highly ambitious at school, but the systematic obstacles such as poverty and gender discrimination immensely dimmed their abilities to fulfill their aspirations. A study carried out in the Australian workplace concluded that working-class students tend to have dual aspirations, the first one is “educated aspirations” (which are in line with the expectations of school) and the second is “alternative aspirations” (which are in line with family, culture and work obligations) leading to the establishment of both idealistic and practical aspirations (Zipin, 2024).

2.3. Bourdieu’s Ideas of Habitus and Cultural Capital

The ideas of habitus and cultural capital put forth by Pierre Bourdieu offer important insights into how societal structures influence individual (Jan, et al, 2012). According to Bourdieu's theory, habitus refers to the deeply rooted abilities, attitudes, and habits that people develop because of their social surroundings (Edgerton, Roberts, & Peter et al., 2012). Habitus has a significant impact on how school-age girls in low-income environments create their goals. The cultural capital are the non-financial resources like culture, language, and manners that favors dominant class in educational institutions. Children are frequently at a disadvantage when navigating formal education systems in low-income environments, where families may not have access to institutionalized cultural capital. Therefore, Bourdieu's framework aids in the explanation of how aspiration gaps develop and endure over time.

The term "cultural capital" describes the non-financial assets that people acquire through their social environment and upbringing, including language, educational background, manners, and values (Bourdieu, 1973). There are three types of cultural capital: institutionalized (like academic credentials), objectified (like books, instruments, or cultural goods), and embodied (like communication style, confidence, and behavior) (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014).

When it comes to education, schools frequently mirror the cultural norms and values of the prevailing social class. Students from wealthy homes already have cultural capital that conforms to institutional standards when they start school (Nash, 1990). However, the dominant cultural capital that is implicitly rewarded in educational settings is frequently absent from students from low-income or marginalized communities, such as the schoolgirls in Pakistan's impoverished areas. They might therefore find it difficult to excel academically.

Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital is further developed in the US by Annette Lareau's study (2011), which demonstrates how different parenting approaches influence kids' desire to pursue higher education. Lareau highlights two distinct parenting approaches. One of which is: middle-class parents usually try to actively involve themselves in child's care by encouraging and supporting them to realize their aspirations. Such parents try to do so, by exposing their children to academic discourses, promoting critical thinking, and encouraging them to get themselves involved in extracurricular activities. This approach builds the child's ability to develop greater ambitions and a sense of entitlement, which helps him, throughout its life, to navigate its educational pathways.

According to Lareau's research, middle-class students get habitus that help them succeed in college, whereas working-class students lack the social and cultural capital that help them pursue academic achievements. The economic discrepancy in educational system is explained by these terms of habitus and cultural capital.

Culture is an important factor for shaping aspirations. Francis & Skelton (2005) research in UK showed that girls belonging from working class desired to get enrolled in STEM fields in college, but cultural limitations stopped them in fulfilling their aspirations. It takes us to the argument of Erikson and Goldthorpe (2002) that no matter the ability aspirations increase with social status. Rose and Dyer (2008) identified that in India and Nigeria, the rural students desire to have higher education, but financial factors often compel the students to have to take up jobs early. Thus, the valuable framework that can be used to understand educational aspirations is a class-based elucidation of the cultural capital theory by Pierre Bourdieu (1977)

Habitus has a significant impact on how school-age girls in low-income environments create their goals. Their objectives are frequently influenced by their socioeconomic background, educational exposure, and parental expectations. Children from working-class homes, for example, typically

have lower educational expectations because their habits are more in line with short-term, practical results than with long-term educational goals. In a qualitative study of working-class students in the UK, it was discovered that many working-class students internalized sentiments of alienation from prestigious universities, which limited their aspirations. According to the survey, even individuals from underprivileged backgrounds who were academically proficient frequently believed that elite universities were "not for people like them (Reay et al., 2010).

The concept of habitus, therefore, describes how the social backgrounds of people affect their concepts of desirable or possible. Due to their experience of exclusion and limited access to cultural capital, this impacts their habitus. Such cultural and socioeconomic aspects are deeply embedded in the brain of children even at very tender age. Research findings indicate that goals are developed in the period of cognitive windows or key developmental stages. The capabilities and goals of a child are most flexible at these periods. The exposure of girls to role models and educational opportunities as well as positive reinforcement through these windows are important factors that define their aspirations. Possible career goals or advanced education, such as STEM, may be influenced positively by promoting academic achievement at the family and schools (Chung, Kainz, and Eisensmith et al., 2022). Dreams among various people vary widely in terms of socioeconomic background.

Lee, Saher, and Shabbir (2024) find that girls from comparatively well-off families are likely to have developed higher aspirations primarily due to the fact that they can have easy access to tutoring, college preparation programs and extra-curricular activities. On the contrary, girls living in impoverished condition and culturally backward areas usually have high aspiration gap: majority fail to realize their aspirations (Karen, Macours, Naudeau & Sophie, 2019).

This demonstrates the girls' educational aspirations differ because of their different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Potential and intelligence matter little in such cases; girls with the same potential move ahead in totally different educational paths, depending on their financial and cultural setting. It means, that these girls carry, along with them, their background, which has significant impacts on the degree of aspirations they develop in their earlier stages and the level which they achieve in their later stages of life (Karen, Macours, Naudeau & Sophie, 2019).

Habitus and cultural capital as developed by Pierre Bourdieu give some understanding of the role of social class in educational inequalities based on what the students see as possible or desirable. The scholars have argued in the recent past that the deterministic paradigm described by Bourdieu is not adequate in the explanation of how people, when they are faced with systemic constraints, act according to their own judgments on the situation they are facing.

2.4. Sen's Capability Approach

This is bridged by the capability approach developed by Amartya Sen (1999) which replaces structural determinism with real freedoms and opportunities that people should exercise their aspirations. Though the theory of Bourdieu effectively explains the desire to achieve education based on classes, some believe that the approach underestimates the level of human agency and does not adequately describe how some disadvantaged individuals can transcend the system. The capability approach by Amartya Sen gives valuable details about this drawback. He states that ambitions ought to be analyzed in regard to what individuals can actually accomplish based on their abilities, their agency and their context rather than simply in regard to preferences produced by social establishments.

The Capability Approach by Amartya Sen takes the attention out of resources by concentrating on the real freedoms of the people to decide on the type of life they treasure. This perspective of educational research can be highlighted as the role of the aspirations of girls as determined by the real possibility of the girl following what she thinks she can do and not necessarily what she wants to do. Sen draws a line between capabilities (the freedoms to achieve these states) and functioning (achieved states of being and doing). As an illustration, a girl might aspire to become a doctor, but she cannot realize this goal when she cannot access good education, move around, or even after being in supportive social networks.

The framework created by Sen can be particularly useful in understanding how the inability to transform goals into results is constrained by the overlapping deprivations such as poverty, the lack of agency, and gender norms. The capability approach focuses on the restriction of agency by gender inequality on girls and the potential in educational context. Such limitations are dictated by the fact that there are no opportunities to develop professionally and personally and the inability to reach an education (Molla & Gale, 2015).

The capability approach and habitus theory provides in-depth understanding of the aspiration gaps between young schoolgirls in the low-income areas of Islamabad. The capacity approach of Sen focuses on the importance of actual freedoms and opportunities in empowering females to achieve their potentials, whereas the Bourdieu concept of habitus focuses on the socioeconomic and cultural variables to develop aspirations. The combination of these frameworks, in its turn, indicates the complexity of the aspiration gaps and the importance of all-encompassing solutions that would close them successfully. It is a hybrid of key concepts of Bourdieu and Sen, which makes Hart highly influential framework a complex view of the aspirations in terms of education, albeit with a heavy focus on social justice (C. S. Hart, 2012).

Using Sen and Bourdieu to exemplify the way aspirations are the real liberties possessed by people to achieve the futures they appreciate besides their desires. She takes this together with the Bourdieu comments on habitus and cultural capital which reveal how access to cultural forms and internalized social dispositions may or may not hinder or support educational careers. The framework developed by Hart is highly applicable to situations in which inequality and gender difference is established, as the case in the entire rural Pakistan. Her essential understanding that objectives cannot be understood in isolation of the social and structural conditions that are favorable or unfavorable to them is a powerful tool in understanding the educational trajectories that the girls pursue within the low-income setting.

2.5. Empirical Studies on Educational Aspirations

Globally there has been a lot of research to understand the causes of aspiration gaps (Desired vs expected educational attainability). Educators have analyzed the catalyst of the phenomena and have identified structural and cultural capital as the main cause, especially in the marginalized communities. A strong relation between habitus and aspirations shows how habitus influence the aspiration of young girls. Theory of cultural capital gives the theoretically back to the argument and reinstate how inequalities in the societies instill larger aspiration gaps.(Reay et al., 2009).

According to a research, adolescents belonging from families with significant cultural capital have more access to resources, networks, and typically have higher educational and career aspirations (Blatchford, 2010). When talking about habitus, the most important factor is parents. Their beliefs and status tend to affect kids the most. Children's educational goals and accomplishments are

greatly influenced by their parents' aspirations, which frequently shape their prospects for the future King and Winthrop highlight how differences in emerging nations are sustained by cyclical gender inequality. Gender inequality is perpetuated when parents, whether intentionally or unintentionally, have lower expectations for some of their children, for example, daughters as opposed to sons which lowers the children's aspirations. Lack of exposure to traditional gender norms and role models frequently causes girls to prefer household responsibilities over occupations or leadership roles (King & Winthrop, 2015).

If parents have lower aspirations for certain children, particularly when it's lower for girls than boys, or younger children, then it can lower aspirations for the children themselves. Children's perspectives and performance are greatly impacted by parental views regarding gender academic aptitude. A study in China shows that boys whose parents thought they were naturally excellent in arithmetic scored 0.17 standard deviations higher than boys whose parents did not. Girls having similar biases performed worse academically (with 0.29 standard deviation), highlighting how such view cast negative impacts on their performance (Eble & Hu, 2019).

Peer influence plays an important role in shaping and influences the ways children view themselves and the world around. The study indicates that in a class, where both boys and girls present, peers exposed the students to the belief they are good at arithmetic. Contrary to the general perception that girls perform poorly in mathematics, the research found that due to the peer inculcation of the belief that all of them are good at arithmetic, everyone in the class, irrespective of gender, was affected in a similar way. In Pakistan the low female enrollment in fields such as mathematics and science could be attributed to the general conception that female cannot perform well in these fields (Pakistan Council for Science & Technology, n.d.).

Alongside the peer influence, mother's role is also important. Aspirations stem from the belief in one-self, which in turn is influenced by the living socio-economic realities and the gender perception regarding education. Low aspirations usually result in low self-belief, or it could be the other way around. A study in India by Dhar et al., (2022) finds that mother, in particular have a significant impact on how children view their gender role such as the customs and tradition that limit girls' chances of pursuing their dreams.

The existing literature also highlights the dynamics of interaction between aspirations and the final living reality that ultimately remains out there. Such literature emphasizes studying the interaction in underprivileged areas. For instance, Young Lives, (2010) have conducted a study in Ethiopia using both qualitative and quantitative data to show that children in underprivileged areas often change their educational goals. The results of the data reflect that children typically have high educational aspirations during their youth; however, over the passage of time, as they see and evaluate their academic performance, they change their aspirations. And when, their academic performance couples with their low-income and un-advantageous position, the change in aspiration is likely to be significant.

Low parental income usually has little impact on children's educational aspirations, however, in later years of youth the impact of poverty amplifies. Urban students have been found to perform better in their academic journey, while those in rural areas failed to develop a solid educational foundation. This is particularly due to government policies, whose focus on quality education has largely been reduced to urban centers, leaving rural areas administered poorly. Besides, children in rural areas have often been engaged in agricultural and labor markets to earn living for their families. As a result, they do not have enough time to manage their educational career, thereby, they develop any educational aspiration. The longitudinal data shows that children, particularly in rural areas, quit school too early in their life. Such patterns draw particular attention to the systemic obstacle that prevents many children from underprivileged backgrounds from developing and achieving their educational aspirations (Banerjee, Banerji, Duflo, Glenister, & Khemani n.d.).

Shah et al., (n.d.) highlight that kids in Pakistan gave up on their dream due to their socio-economic condition. Alongside, studies conducted globally indicate that gender differences have huge impacts on the academic performance of a child while scholarships have greatly transformed the women education landscape. Similarly, research conducted in China and India highlights the way household income and parental attitudes affect the future educational possibilities of girls (Chevalier, 2013). The empirical research's provide strong foundation in explaining habitus and aspiration gap in society. However, in the context of Pakistan, they are not very applicable (Wu et al., 2020).

2.6. Socioeconomic Disparities and Educational Aspirations in Pakistan

There has been a lot of work on girls' education, increasing dropout rates, lower female students' strengths in the school system of Pakistan. These papers have identified cultural expectations, economic disadvantages and social structures as the root cause of the poor education condition of the country.

While many students, especially those from underprivileged, minority, and economically disadvantaged backgrounds express high aspirations, their ability to achieve them is often constrained by limited cultural capital, economic hardship, gender norms, and institutional barriers. Extending this stream of literature to Pakistan context makes contribution to literature, since there has been limited work which focuses on the aspirations of the young school-going girls and hardly any talk on their dreams and ambitions in Pakistani context. My focus is to work on this very gap and to find out how habitus can change female hopes and dreams and trap them in the same vicious cycle of underdevelopment and socio-economic marginalization.

According to Arshed (2019), education is essential for fostering economic growth, lowering poverty, and developing human capital. However, gender inequality in education continues to be a problem in many developing nations, such as Pakistan, where patriarchal institutions, cultural norms, and socioeconomic variables have a big impact on educational attainment (Ashraf, 2018). To discover gaps pertinent to comprehending gender differences in schooling within Pakistan's low-income areas, this review synthesizes the body of existing research.

Besides, numerous studies have drawn attention to the structural obstacles that prevent girls from pursuing higher education, including early marriage, household duties, and the societal preference for sons (Ashraf, 2018; Kleven et al., 2019). Gender disparities in education are made worse by these strongly ingrained cultural standards, especially at the secondary and postsecondary levels. Significant discrepancies still exist despite government measures including digital education partnerships, alternative learning programs (ALPs), and stipend programs aimed at girls (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, n.d.)

When looking at the data it was found that household-level dynamics have not received enough attention in Pakistani research, which has mostly concentrated on macro-level analysis. Pasha

(2023) for instance, looked at gender biases in resource allocation and discovered that boys are frequently given preference when it comes to schooling. The paper emphasizes on the importance of education of the first-generation female students from underprivileged areas to be able to pursue education.

Structural, societal and economic limitations, are the main causes of flaws in Pakistan's educational system. Infrastructural issues, inadequate facilities, safety worries, and ingrained gender stereotypes that value males' education are just a few of the obstacles that girls frequently confront (Qureshi, 2004; Andrabi et al., 2007; Human Rights Watch, 2018). As a result of these issues, girls' literacy rate is significantly lower (2.5 years) compared to that of the boys (5 years of education).

2.7. Research Gap

There is a dearth of literature on the gap between aspirations and the outcomes, which, in this research have been studied expectations of the school-going girls in low-income settings of Pakistan.

In Pakistan, the literature shows a wide gap between the girls' educational aspirations and the final outcome they expect. Studies such as those of Sargani et al., (2021) reveal the prevalent gender disparities in entrepreneurial settings. Zafar et al., (2022) discusses the systematic challenges and socio-economic barriers girls in unprivileged areas face, limiting their abilities to attain their aspirations. However, these studies have not adequately studied youth's, particularly girls, educational aspirations, which this research have tried to examine. Furthermore, the existing literature have mainly been focused on youth ambitions and their job prospects, while little has been examined about the role of their distinct socio-economic backgrounds in influencing their aspiration and future career paths they would pursue for the attainment of their aspirations (Arif & Ejaz,2017).

In addition, the existing studies on girls' education in Pakistan have mainly focused on external obstacles like early marriages, poverty and the poor quality and inadequacy of infrastructure. The literature has studied these obstacles in isolation: they do not involve studying the interaction of these obstacles with the internalized norms and family expectation. The interaction of external factor with internalized norms regarding women education is important to be studied in detail, for it create amplified impact on the level of education women attain.

Combining the theories of Bourdieu and Sen, Caroline Hart's model offers an instrumental lens for viewing educational aspiration from a social justice perspective; however, the framework has not been used in empirical research conducted in Pakistan. There is a substantial conceptual and empirical gap here. In addition to understanding the aspiration-outcome disconnect, or aspiration gap, closing this gap is essential for informing interventions and policies that are based on the lived realities of school-age girls. Thus, by placing aspirations within theoretical and empirical discussions and tying them to the real-world experiences of girls in Pakistani low-income educational settings, this study adds to the body of literature.

2.8. Theoretical Framework

This study investigates how cultural and structural factors influence young female students' educational aspirations in Islamabad's low-income neighborhoods, Bhara kahu. It uses Sen's Capability Approach and Bourdieu's Theory of Habitus to comprehend how agency, structure, and social positioning affect the aspirations and the creation of the aspiration gap, which is conceptualized as the difference between desired and expected educational and career goals.

According to Bourdieu, habitus refers to deeply rooted attitudes, expectations, and dispositions that are influenced by one's early experiences, especially when it comes to social class and cultural norms (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). The habitus of girls, particularly those who found themselves marginalized, are largely influenced by their lack of access to education, the traditional gender norms and their financial difficulties. Such circumstances compel them to internalize what they normally believe to be realistic and achievable, resulting in lower expectations despite the high aspirations. Bourdieu termed this conflict between aspirations and expectations as "blighted hope" which according to him happens when an individual social surrounding cause him to lower or frustrate his/her aspirations.

In contrast, Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (Sen, 1999) stresses on the achievement of true development, which according to him can be achieved by increasing the actual freedom of people i.e. by enabling them to live the lives they have reason to value. Therefore, the capabilities of an individual and its actual opportunities to acquire those aspirations are closely linked. Sen's Capability approach serves as a crucial framework for seeing academic growth beyond access to

education: it helps evaluate aspirations in the context of people's autonomy, resources and the supportive environment, which is necessary for transforming their goals into reality.

Highlighting the importance of individual aspirations in attaining personal and community development, Sen's approach also helps in drawing relationship between aspirations and women's development. This is because people, as Sen considers, base their decisions on their ambitions and utilize their potential for a happy and better lives. The empowerment of women and that of the society is achieved when women strive for leadership position, ensure their active participation in economic activities, for such ambitions open doors to the attainment of new skills. Given the focus on the development and the way that lead to empowerment, this theoretical framework helps in understanding how socio-economic and cultural milieu influence people's aspirations.

2.9. Conceptual Framework

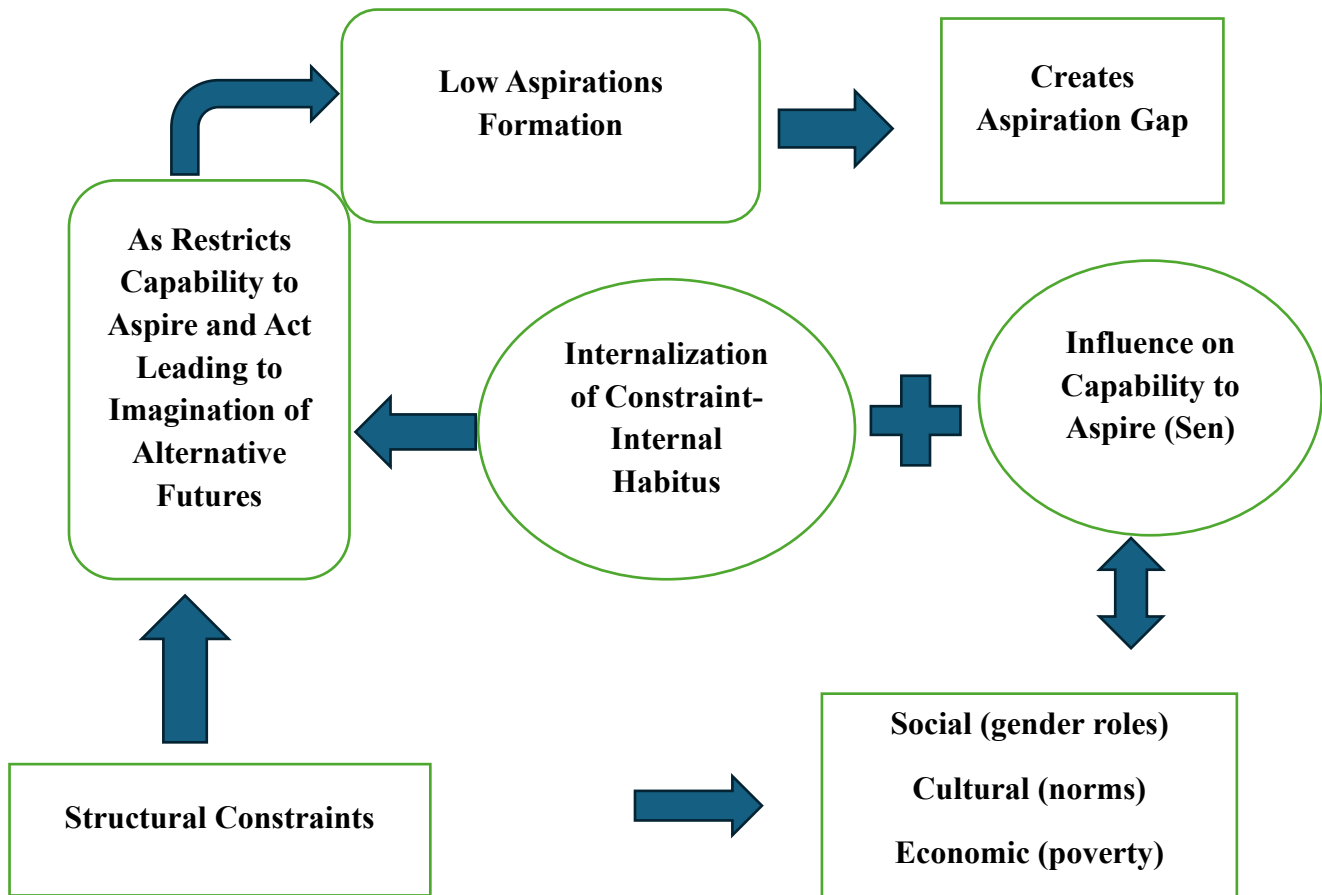


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework shows that there exists a relationship between habitus and aspirations: the attainability of aspirations depends on the structural and economic capital. Inadequate existence of these resources limits access to opportunities and impedes the process of aspiration formation, resulting in aspiration gaps (when aspirations are changed or compromised due to limitations). Together the habitus and capabilities internalize the concept of what is possible and achievable. Understanding and analyzing these phenomena remains central to the research by giving lens for interpreting findings and designing methodological base.

Chapter 3

Methodological Framework

The methodological framework has been developed to examine the educational and academic aspirations of schoolgirls living in low-income areas of Bhara Kahu, Islamabad. The chapter outlines the research design, method, collection procedures, data analysis and choice of instruments in the research. The objective is to present a reliable and methodical authentic explanation of the study.

3.1. Research Approach

The study is based on a mixed method approach, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative methods. Research questions can well be addressed through qualitative methods (Bryman, 2016). This method relies on the collection, interpretations and reporting of the data (Dawadi et al., 2021). Maxwell, (2016) asserts that qualitative data offers not only flexibility, but also logical grounds and an in-depth understanding of the cases involved in research methodology.

3.2. Research Method

Using descriptive research design, this study has undertaken a systematic mapping of habitus and educational landscape of the country. This has been done through a structured process: the data collected through quantitative methods such as surveys provided the foundation of documenting the existing patterns regarding aspirations, while qualitative methods such as interviews with key stakeholders provided depth to these patterns by contextualizing them. The research method used for this study allowed the researcher to explore the living realities of school-going girls and how those realities reinforce the patterns of the formation and the breaking-down of aspirations.

3.3. Research Design

The study uses a convergent parallel mixed method design. Under this research design, both qualitative and quantitative data have been gathered, examined and combined for analysis purposes. Given the variety of factors that influence aspirations, including, but not limited to, the personal narratives, community influence, cultural norms, this research design was more suitable.

Further, this design adequately gauged the qualitative factors such age, grade level and the socio-economic status. Amalgamation of qualitative insights with statistical trends provided with most effective way to capture aspiration trends and patterns.

3.4. Units of Data Collection

For the research three Units of Data Collection (UDCs) were employed

3.4.1. Units of Quantitative Data Collection

For the quantitative data collection process, the unit of data collection were schoolgirls enrolled in 6-10 grades.

3.4.1.1. Girls in school (ages 11–16)

School girls belonging to low-income families in Bhara Kahu were central to the study because its foundation is made up of their socio-economic constraints, available opportunities, and educational aspirations.

Information gathered from this UDC comprised of:

- The desired education level of girls
- The expected education level
- Aspirational gaps as calculated as the discrepancy between expected and desired levels.
- Influencing factors (e.g., school and teacher support, school infrastructure, socio-cultural expectations)

To get opinion and quantitative insights from this group both semi-structured interviews and structured surveys were used. This UDC made it possible to understand not only the aspirations but also the causes of aspiration gaps.

3.4.2. Units of Qualitative Data Collection

For the qualitative data collection process, stakeholders and NGO personnel working for education were the unit of data collection.

3.4.2.1. Education Stakeholders

In the qualitative data collection, the first UDC consisted of personnel of the FDE, teachers and principals from local government schools in Barakahu. This helped us to understand the institutional insights into the support networks, and barriers that girls encounter.

They were asked questions related to:

- Dropout rates and student attendance
- Remarks about student motivation, parental participation, and infrastructure limitations
- Educational policies and their effectiveness.
- State level policies for girls.

The semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data. The institutional realities highlighted the systematic challenges that offer either support or constrict girls' aspirations.

3.4.2.2. NGOs and Local Education Stakeholders

Community education workers and non-governmental organizations personnels working in the field of education were the second UDC. Their perspective gave insights into the gendered educational issues in Pakistan and systematic neglect to overcome that. Data was collected from field visits and interviews:

- Current initiatives to support education.
- Their observations of barriers to girls' education (financial, cultural, infrastructural)
- Policy reform and community-based solutions

This UDC filled the gap left by public policy and offered an important external perspective on the systems in supporting girls' aspirations.

3.5. Data Collection Methods

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected for this research.

3.5.1. Survey as a Quantitative Data Collection Method

The structured survey from school going girls of grade 6 to 10 made up the quantitative part of the research. The survey covered the socio-demographic (parental education, occupation, household income), aspirations (Expected vs desired level of education) and the constraints (Social, cultural, economic conditions collectively known as habitus) of the respondents. It helped us to understand either habitus support their aspirations or serve as obstacle that hinders their dreams. The main purpose of the survey was to document the academic aspirations of girls in low-income communities of Islamabad.

3.5.2. Interviews as a Qualitative Data Collection Method

In-depth interviews with educators, NGO persons and personnel of the Federal Directorate of Education FDE were held to get qualitative insights. It shed light on the issue of educational disparities in Pakistan. It Examined how outside influences such as social, cultural and economic circumstances affect and change the aspirations. interviews with educationist and FDE personnel provided insights into the socio-economic and cultural factors that impact girls' educational aspiration.

3.6. Data Analysis

The analysis of the data has primarily been focused on answering the research question and addressing the research objectives. Since the research involved both qualitative and quantitative data, understanding the insights from both of them was important. Therefore, the qualitative and quantitative data have been analyzed separately. However, a portion of the discussion chapter combines and merges the two kinds of data to generate a detailed understanding of the research findings.

3.6.1. Quantitative Data Analysis using Descriptive Analysis

The processing of numerical data has been performed through Stata software, which the researcher applied inferential statistical tests that helped in understanding the relationship between the various variables. The summarization of data, however, has been performed through descriptive analysis, which allowed the researcher to identify quantifiable patterns in the responses.

3.6.2. Qualitative Data Analysis using Thematic Analysis

To gain insights of the key stakeholders including teachers, NGO personnel, and officials of FDE, in-depth interviews have been conducted. The data from these interviews have been analyzed using thematic analysis. Clarke & Braun, (2014) note that thematic analysis helps in identifying recurring patterns and themes within the responses. In-depth interviews were conducted with the key education stakeholders, including teachers, NGO people and the personnel of the FDE. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved identifying recurring patterns and themes within the responses. For thematic analysis, codes were generated for each section or theme from the interviews. This coding process was conducted iteratively, revisiting the data multiple times to refine and validate the findings.

3.7. Sample size and sample strategy

The research used “Precision criterion-based purposive sampling strategy” where a criterion for the UDCs selection has been drawn to be selected for interviews. Criterion sampling involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance (Patton, 1990).

For this study, to satisfy the need of research. Surveys were conducted in 13 schools in Barakahu. The students in grade 6-10 were the subject of research concern. To ensure reliability, the research relied upon girls having different performances in class. From each grade (6-10), 3 girls were selected. The girls selected included a top performance girl, an average and a below average performance girl. Thus, the sampling was done as follows to calculate total survey participants:

$$13 \text{ (schools)} * 5 \text{ (Grades)} = 65*$$

$$3 \text{ (students from each grade)} = 195 \text{ participants}$$

So, a total of 195 participants were selected for the survey. Given the grade and number of schools, the number of surveys satisfy the rule of thumb and ensures reliability.

For interviews, which make the qualitative portion of this research, no clear methods and rules were followed. Rather, the choice was informed by well-established guidelines found in the literature that recommend assessing the sample's suitability in light of the study's goals (Kindsiko & Poltimae, 2024). Therefore, interviews were conducted until the point of saturation was reached, a point where further insights from interviews provided no additional information.

Table 1: Summary of Data Analysis

Participants Group	Number of Participants	Sampling	Instrument	Methods of Data Collection	Data Analysis
School Girls	195	Purposive Sampling	Structured Questionnaire	Survey and semi-structured interviews	Descriptive statistics (Stata, Excel)
Government Officials	2	Purposive Sampling	Semi structured interviews	Key Informant Interviews	Thematic Analysis
NGO Representatives	3	Purposive Sampling	Semi structured interviews and Field Visit	Key Informant Interviews & Field Visit	Field work data analysis and Thematic Analysis
School Principal and teachers	3	Purposive Sampling	Semi Structured interviews	Interviews	Thematic Analysis
Total	202				

3.8. Locale

The study's locale is the Bhara Kahu area of Islamabad. According to the Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, the population of Bhara Kahu is 119,034, and it is the largest union council of the capital territory (PBS, 2018). The region is underdeveloped and the people residing are mostly poor. Quality education, particularly for girls, is a distant dream. The rationale behind the selection of this site for this research was that the Barakahu, though at the outskirts of Islamabad, is one of the underdeveloped areas of Pakistan. While realizing their potential that could enable them to attain what they aspire for, girls face mounting challenges in the form of finance, socio-cultural and other traditional constraints.

Chapter 4

Analysis and Discussion

The research aimed to understand the formation and development of educational and career aspirations of female students in low-income area of Bhara Kahu, Islamabad. It attempts to navigate the role of habitus (the cultural and structural) in shaping the future of girls. Data collected from February to June 2025 consisted of two main parts; quantitative data collected from girls attempted to understand the lived experience of girls while qualitative data gathered insights from educational stakeholders, thereby finding trends and patterns in aspirations.

4.1. Quantitative Data Analysis:

For Quantitative data analysis questionnaire was administered to the young school going girls studying in classes 6-10 in the public schools of Bhara Kahu. Female students gave their insights in both close-ended and open-ended questions regarding the formation and development of their educational and career aspirations. The questionnaire tried to cover the topic through multiple nuances to capture the responses at both personal and national level. Personally, it tried to understand the development of capabilities and opportunities for girls and at national level it uncovered the role of habitus (structural and socio-economic disparities) in adjusting aspirations.

For the analysis of the data the findings used both descriptive (cross-tabulation) and inferential analysis (Correlation analysis). The cross tabulation tried to identify variables having categorical patterns while the correlation was used to analyze continuous variables (education, income etc.) This hybrid method helped to analyze every variable appropriately, aiming at investigating the interaction between different variables and understanding how the multiple factors shape the educational aspirations of young school-going girls, particularly those enrolled in secondary schools.

4.2. Socio- Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographic profile of respondents is important in understanding and contextualizing the results of the research. This section assesses the characteristics of the given sample; that is school-going girls of Bhara Kahu, Islamabad. The students, girls exclusively, provided insights into the

composition of the respondent group which influence the interpretation of later findings, especially if women-specific trends need to be observed.

4.2.1. Educational Profile of respondents

To understand the education level and performance of girls, data was analyzed using frequency distribution tables. It describes the age and class distribution of respondents in different schools of Barakahu.

Table 2: Educational Profile of Respondents

Grade/ Class	Age in years	Number of Respondents
6	10 – 15	39
7	12 – 15	39
8	12 – 16	39
9	14 – 16	39
10	116 – 17	39

As shown in the table above, an equal number of respondents were taken to evaluate their responses. In questionnaire, respondents were categorized based on their academic performance as low, average, or well-performing. Their performance record is based on their school result cards which were obtained from their class teachers with prior approval of the school’s principals.

4.2.2. Parental Education and Occupation

Children's aspirations, opportunities, and academic results are significantly shaped by their family background. A child's learning experiences, and future goals are greatly influenced by the sociocultural context in which they are raised, especially the parents' level of education. Understanding the relationship between parental education and a child’s developmental trajectory is essential for determining aspiration gaps and potential interventions.

Table 3: Parents' Education and Occupation

Father				Mother			
Education		Occupation		Education		Occupation	
Level of Ed	No	Professions	No.	Level of Ed	No.	Professions	No.
No education	41	Professionals	6	No education	78	Housewife	168
Primary	56	Technicians and Associate Professionals	14	Primary	61	Agriculture and Fishery workers	2
Matric	52	Clerks	30	Matric	33	Service and sales work	7
Intermediate (FA/ FSc)	31	Service Workers /Shop/Market Sales Workers	46	Intermediate (FA/FSc)	16	Elementary occupation	16
Bachelor's (BA /BSc)	11	Farming, fishing, Forestry.	6	Bachelors' (BA/ BSc)	5	-	-
Masters (MA/MSc)	3	Craft and Related Trades Workers	10	Masters (MA/ MSc)	3	-	-
MS/MPhil/ PhD)	2	Plant and Machine Operators and Assemblers	9	MS/MPhil/ PhD)	-	-	-
-	-	Elementary Occupations	69	-	-	-	-

The data indicates that most parents had low education levels with significant differences between fathers and mothers. Most of the mothers (78) reported no formal education at all, as opposed to the fathers (41). On the higher end of the scale, 17 fathers had received higher education level than 8 mothers. This trend is used to show that fathers are better educated than mothers across all degrees of education, hence there exists gender disparity in literacy in families. Gender discrepancies in educational levels determine the way parents view and provide education to their girls (Desai & Andrist, 2010). The results also indicate that daughters of better educated parents, especially fathers, had more faith in the fact that they can attain their dreams, which implies the significance of parental education in narrowing the aspiration gap.

Another important determinant of the aspirations of girls was parental occupation since it is indicative of the socioeconomic opportunities and resources that exist in the household. Statistics show that most of the fathers 69, have been in elementary occupations like laborers, loaders, and helpers, which are categorized as low to semi-skilled jobs. Only six fathers had professional positions, meaning that financial and cultural capital were not readily available to most families. For mothers, the pattern showed that out of 195 respondents, 168 were housewives, 7 were in services, and 16 were in elementary occupations. Women's minimum participation in the labor force has excluded them from the national economic growth, where they contribute the bare minimum. It also encourages and upholds the gendered expectations of the role of women in the household. Girls who see their mothers mostly with household chores may internalize the assumption that no matter the level of education, their future might be the same, thus demoralizing their intentions to acquire higher education or even professional jobs (Desai and Andrist, 2010; Lloyd et al., 2009). The results highlight the important role of parental education and occupation in the development of the aspirations of girls as they determine the material support, role models, and cultural expectations that girls have.

4.2.3. Family Structure

Table 4: Family Structure

Family Type	Number of respondents	Percentage
Joint	105	55%
Nuclear	86	45%%
	193	100%

Among those who responded, the majority lived in joint family structure; however, a significant number, around 45% lived in a nuclear family. Hasan et al. (2025) in their paper “Dual Impact of Family Structure and Parental Beliefs on Educational Access for Girls” highlight how family structure and parental attitudes affect children. Based on the 360 households, which the study analyzes, the authors conclude that girls in nuclear families have a higher chance of attending school than in a joint family. This is primarily due to the fact that nuclear families are likely to have more autonomy and parental support, while girls in a joint family structure face traditional barriers of household work that interfere with their educational goals.

Factors Shaping Girls' Educational and Career Aspirations

Studying the socio-demography of respondents is important as it provides an essential background which provides the educational aspiration of school-going girls. However, aspirations could not be allowed to be assessed alone on socio-demographic characteristics. Therefore, this research delve deep onto the deeper factors that are behind the formation of aspiration. These are parental role, household income, social and cultural norms and the role of schools and communities. These factors and the way they give rise to both opportunities and limitations in developing the educational career aspirations of girls have been discussed in the text below.

4.3. Factor 1: Family, Culture, and Control

Family, cultural norms, and social expectations create a complex web of obstacles that make professional careers and higher education seem unattainable, if not impossible. Girls mentioned three recurring reasons for the aspiration gap.

4.3.1. Parental Support: Extent and Nature

Girls' capacity to pursue their aspirations is greatly influenced by the level of support they receive from their parents and guardians. Support can vary from complete encouragement to partial approval, depending on whether parents emphasize traditional roles or favor other career paths. The findings show the diverse nature of parental support and their role in developing confidence in girls.

Table 5: Extent and Nature of Parents support

What do your parents and guardians say about your aspirations?	No. of Students	Percentage
Fully support and encourage me	57	28.8%
Support me but want different career	32	16.2%
They think my goal is difficult to achieve	39	19.7%
Want me to focus on home responsibilities	33	16.7%
Have not discussed future goals	33	16.7%

In table 5, girls were asked about the type and quality of support they receive from parents. While 28.8% felt fully supported and encouraged, a large number, more than 50%, revealed that they only got limited support from parents.

- 16.2% revealed that their goals don't align with their parents, so the parents want daughters to mold their aspirations according to them.
- 19.7% believed their daughters had unrealistic aspirations.
- 16.7% wanted their daughters to prioritize work at home.
- There were also 16.7% respondents who said their parents had never discussed future aspirations with them, signaling a communication gap.

So, the type of support respondents get from parents is often filtered through conditional support, thus shaping or limiting their perceived ambitions. Support is frequently conditioned on the girl's behavior, reputation, or probability of marriage, indicating that the family's acceptance of the girl's aspirations is based more on how well those goals fit with logistic convenience, community norms, and family honor than on the girl's own goals (Panzai et al., 2025). This leads to "perceived ambition containment," in which girls' aspirations are unconsciously self-edited in response to external approval. "You can study, but only here," or "you can work, but only in this field," are examples of the conditional nature of parental support, which restricts not only material opportunities but also the psychological construction of future possibilities (Amjad, 2024).

4.3.1.1. Parental Expectations and Aspirations for Daughters

Families' expectations and hopes for their daughters' education and future careers are frequently influenced by socioeconomic status, cultural norms, and perceived opportunities, which affects the extent to which girls are encouraged to pursue their education and the directions they are led in.

Table 6: Parents Aspiration for girls

What Career aspirations does your family encourage	No. of Students	Percentage
Doctor/Engineer	68	34.9%
Government Jobs	56	28.7%
Business/Entrepreneurship	1	0.5%
Creative Fields	2	1%
Staying at home	49	24.6%
Other	14	7%

Table 6 shows that most popular careers supported by parents were government job particularly teachers (28.7%) and doctor (34.9%), which reflects society's desire for traditional, safe, and

respectable careers for women. Less than 1% of respondents said their families supported them in creative or entrepreneurial endeavors, suggesting that different job options are not widely known or accepted.

Also, 24.6% of families wanted their daughters to stay at home as the course for the future. Given that many girls are expected to prefer household responsibilities ahead of their career goals, highlights a substantial ideological and cultural barrier. Staying at home translates to having unfulfilled aspirations in the matriarchal nature of society and the prevalent relations of power, once a male member of the family decides to or considers something to be done/carried out in a particular way, other members, particularly women, are unlikely to challenge it. Male decision regarding the future of a female child is considered to be final say. (Bhatia & Babu, 2021)

According to the opinion mentioned in the table, almost all the students subjected to questionnaires showed interest in one or another field. No one wanted to be exclusively restricted to domestic and household workings. But the, 24.6% of them consider they would not be able to garner the support of their parents for their studies. That means, this percentage of the students are likely to have shattered their aspirations.

4.3.1.2. Parental Influence on Girls Decision- Making

The degree of control and influence parents have over their daughters' decisions regarding their education, careers, and marriages is huge in patriarchal societies. In patriarchal cultures, this control frequently restricts girls' autonomy because parents particularly fathers or older male relatives make important decisions based on social norms, family values, and traditions.

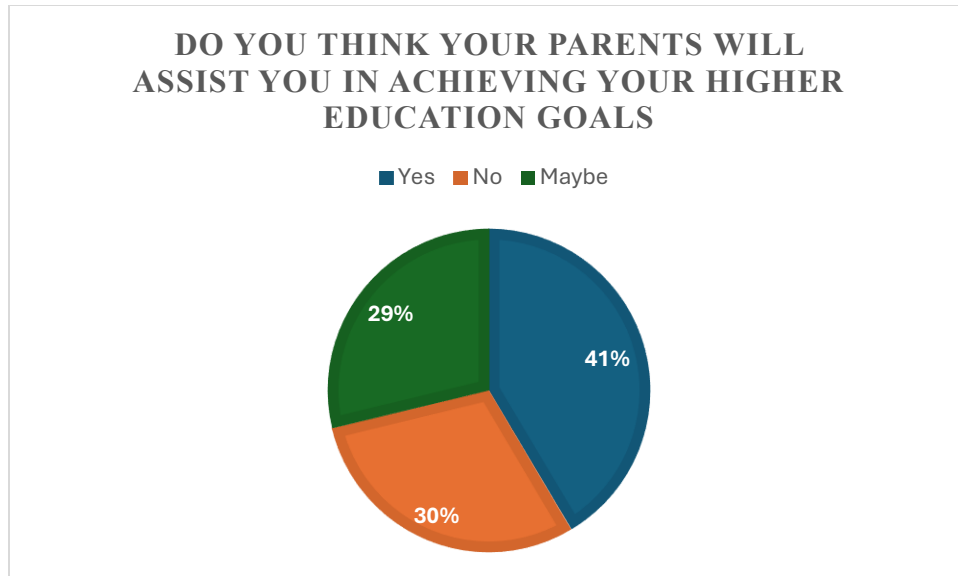


Figure 2: Parental Support for Aspirations

In Pakistan, girls are usually required to perform their duties at home rather than studying. The perceived economic benefit of educating girls is deemed small since the sons are traditionally perceived to be future providers and daughters are supposed to get married outside the family. As a result, parents spend much less on the education of their daughters (Raza et al., 2022).

To understand parental support the girls were asked about the extent of support they expect from their parents in persuasion of their academic aspirations. Of all the respondents only 41% believed that their parents would fully support them while the others were either sure that their parents would not support them (29.6%) or were unsure (28.6%). This shows parents play a significant role in their daughters pursuing higher education.

4.3.1.3. Inferential Analysis of Correlation between Parental Factors and Daughters

Aspirations

Inferential Analysis was carried out to understand the relationship between parental factors with girls academic and career aspirations,

Table 7: Correlations of Parents VS Girls Expected Education

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)
(1) Father education	1.000		
(2) Mother education	0.530	1.000	
(3) Expected Education of Children	0.440	0.429	1.000

p-value < 0.001

The results showed that positive correlation (0.530) between parents' education, i.e. households with educated fathers are likely to have educated mothers. This represents how education is the important factor for deciding spouse. Another important trend which was observed was that parents' education (father; 0.440, mother; 0.429) has a positive correlation with the expected education of daughters, showing that educated parents is a substantial factor for daughters' high aspirations.

4.3.2. Cultural and Social Influences on Girls Aspirations

In cultural societies like Pakistan norms of femininity, social responsibility and honor are given great importance. These norms serve as a catalyst for traditional domestic responsibilities assigned to girls and mold their aspirations in way that it fits into the socially acceptable society.

Table 8: Cultural norms affect choices.

Cultural norms effect on girls' choices?	No. of Students	Percentage
Positively	10	5.2%
Negatively	163	84%
Neutral	21	10.8%

The findings show that 84% of girls believe that cultural norms negatively influence their life decisions regarding academic and career aspirations. Due to family honor, purdah (female seclusion), and early marriage customs, parents discourage their daughters from pursuing higher education. Superficial or token support exists, but deeper structural norms prevent genuine encouragement of academic or professional goals (Jan, n.d). Furthermore, in areas where conservative values are prevalent, parents may permit their daughters to attend primary school but insist that they stay close to home. Besides, girl's career aspirations outside of socially acceptable fields (such as teaching or medicine) are frequently discouraged (Hassan et al., 2022). These results

are consistent with field notes and qualitative observations, which showed that girls often reported an internal conflict between their aspirations and what their families or communities deemed acceptable.

4.3.2.1. Inferential Analysis of Cultural Influences

The cross tabulation of culture affects, and Aspiration gap gave following results,

Table 9: Tabulation of Culture Affect Choice gap binary

Culture Affect Choice	Gap Binary		Total
	Small gap	Large gap	
1 (Neutral)	6	4	10
2 (Negatively)	71	95	166
3 (Positively)	17	4	21
Total	94	103	197

Pearson Chi2= 11.53, p = 0.003)

- Students in Group 1: who feel cultural norms have little or no effect on their choices. The results showed that 6 students have a small aspiration gap while 4 students have a large aspiration gap.
- Students in Group 2: who believe that cultural norms have a negative influence on their decisions, are more likely to have a wide aspiration gap. This implies that girls' capacity to aim for and pursue higher education goals may be constrained by constrictive cultural norms. Among them 71 students have a small aspiration gap compared to 95 students who have a large aspiration gap
- Students in Group 3: Students who feel cultural norms positively affect their choices. Only 4 have a larger aspiration gap and the remaining 17 students (81%) have a small aspiration gap. Showing Supportive cultural environments can promote higher aspirations, as evidenced by the smaller aspiration gap among students (Group 3) who believe that cultural norms have a positive influence on their decisions.

The findings confirm that cultural norms affect girls' choices with conservative values leading to larger aspiration gaps among girls

4.3.2.2. Community and Societal Constraints

Table 10: Perceived Opportunities for Girls in the Community

Does community support girls' aspirations	No. of Students	Percentage
Yes	21	10.7%
No	130	66.3%
Maybe	45	23%

Of all respondents 66.3% believe that community has a detrimental effect on girls' aspirations. Community support is important, especially in low-income societies where families don't challenge community rules and norms. When Aspirations come against the community norms families tend to support community and stop their daughters from achieving their academic aspirations. For instance, societies who believe that women should not work and perform duties at home never let their daughters get education considering it a useless thing to waste time. Aspirations when collide with unfeasible environments leads to aspiration gap.(Ray, n.d.).

Table 11: Community opinion about ambitious girls

Does your community support ambitious girls	No. of Student	Percentage
Approve	15	7.7%
Disapprove	108	55.7%
Neutral	71	36.6

The 55.7% disapproval echoes the societal conservation when it comes to girls' dreams and education. Even the respondents who chose the 'neutral' option believes that society only supports a girl's goals when they fit with conventional norms, such as becoming a teacher, a doctor, or working from home. (Chohan & Masrur Khan, 2006). To put it another way, an ambition is only conditionally tolerated if it conforms to gender norms that are established by community. Aspirations that call for independence, leadership, or public visibility are frequently met with silence, rejection, or distrust.(Naviwala, 2016)

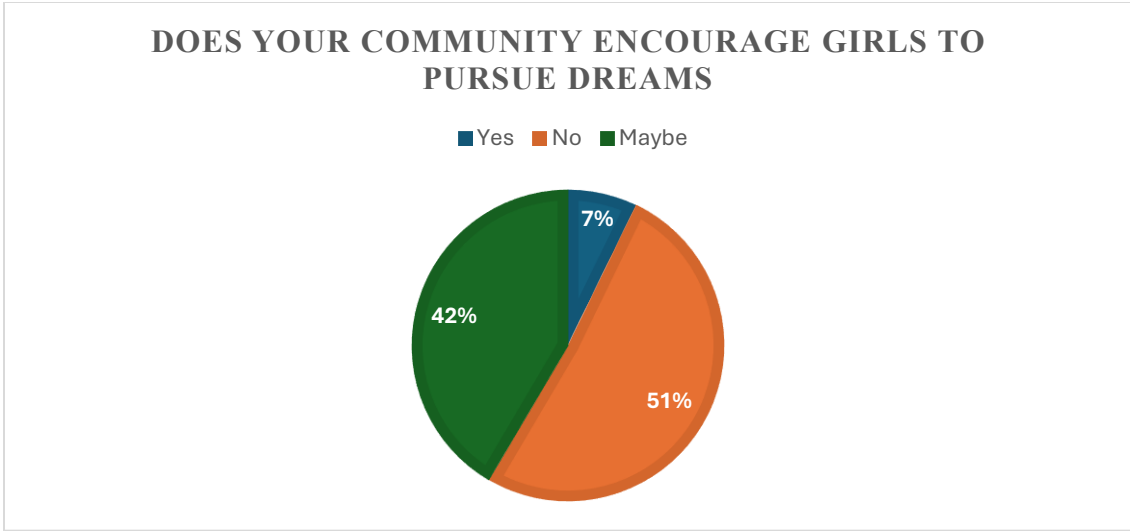


Figure 3: Community encouragement of Aspirations.

Only 7% of students said that their society clearly supported girls' goals, indicating a culture that inhibits ambition, particularly in non-traditional or professional settings. On the other hand, 51.3% believed that society does not support girls to pursue their dreams. This is particularly, due to, as (Jan, n.d.) mentioned, the notion of women as objects in patriarchal societies, where they do not necessarily could have their own dreams. Rather, they serve to encourage the existing structure of power. In a similar vein, Marxist feminist theorists contend that the goals set forth for working-class girls are designed to uphold rather than subvert the prevailing patriarchal system (Federici, 2004).

Table 12: Factors Contributing to Lack of Community Support

Category	No. of Responses
Strict/Conservative Society	33
Parental Control / No Autonomy	32
Lack of Investment in Girls	2
Gender Role & Job Type Bias	1
Honor & Safety Concerns	7
Some Community Support Exists	1
Other / Emotional	1

Responses establish the fact that habitus (culture, society and community) halt girls' aspirations as it believes girls empowerment upheld against their norms and values of femininity and patriarchy.

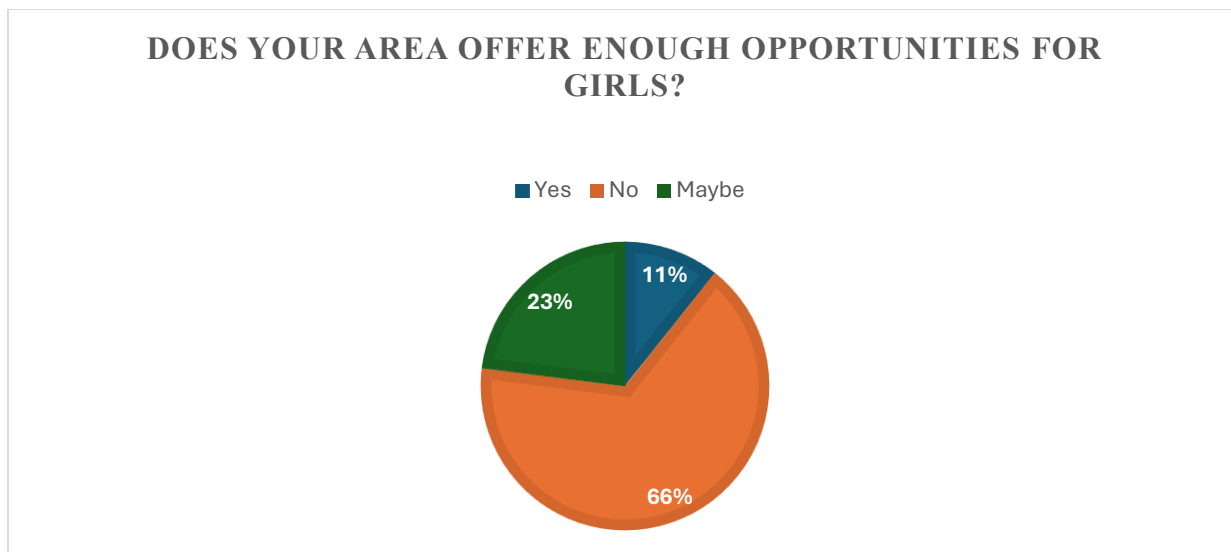


Figure 4: Community Support for Aspirations.

Around 66 percent of girls believed that community does not give support to girls’ education and career attainment. The most predominant reason for this is the traditional cultural roles designed for girls in society. Traditional societies adhere to the fact that girls’ most important duty is to be at home and do home chores. Therefore, anything which compromises upon this is considered unacceptable. Khoja-Moolji (2018) perfectly explains this phenomena as “educational aspirations always exist along the structural limitations.”

4.3.2.3. Inferential Analysis of Community Support

Inferential Analysis of Community Support with aspiration gap shows,

Table 13: Tabulation of community role and aspiration gap

Community Attitude and Aspiration Gap	Gap binary		
	Small gap	Large gap	Total
1 (Approve)	11	3	14
2 (Disapprove)	39	75	114
3 (Neutral)	41	25	66
Total	92	103	195

Pearson Chi2 = 20.80 Prob = 0.0000

- Those communities which don’t support girls’ aspirations tend to have higher aspiration gaps (75) showing that community limitations act as strong tools.

- While girls have low aspiration gap (11) if community supports them.

The findings show the influence of community support on girls' aspirations. Community support leads to low aspiration gap among girls leading to strong and empowered women while community who do not support girls' academic aspirations are likely to have great spiration gap restricting women and societal development.

4.3.3. Gender Perception and Bias Shaping Girls Aspirations

Academic and career aspirations of girls greatly depend upon the gendered views of society. Patriarchal society with gender roles disapproves girls empowerment leading to the high aspiration gap (Watson et al., 2002).

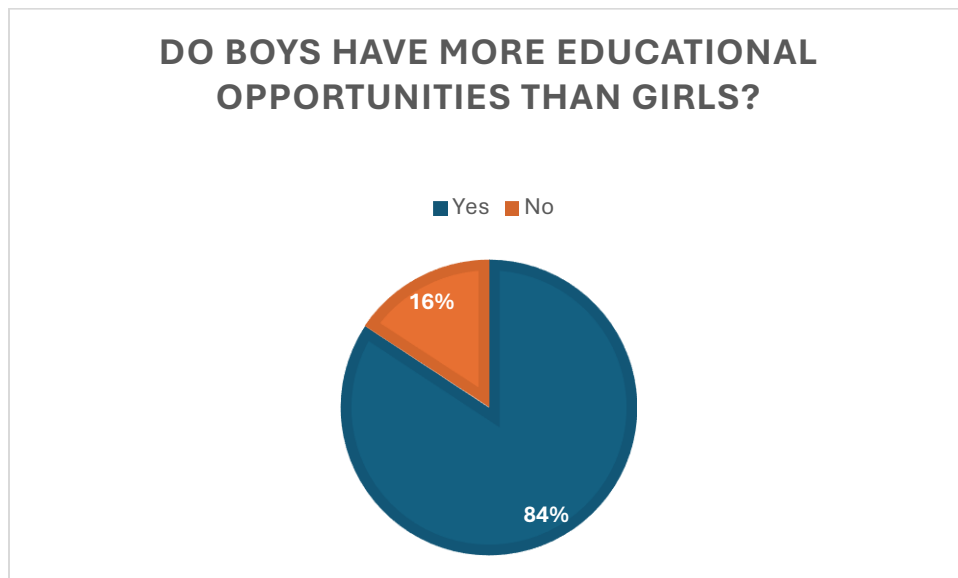


Figure5: Comparative Opportunities for Boys Vs Girls

The findings show that 84% of girls believed that boys have more educational opportunities than girls. Deeply ingrained gender inequality in opportunity systems is reflected here. The prevalence of such perception has significant consequences on their pursuance of education aspirations as they consider the structure unfair and unjust towards them. The perception of an unjust structure compels girls to believe that even if they study to the best of their capabilities, they would not be allowed to have equal opportunities and a just environment. So, in such conditions they are likely to quit and lose their motivation for higher studies. The paper by Edstrom proves that due to

prevailing gender norms that prioritize male education and mobility, boys typically have greater access to social, educational, and economic opportunities than girls. While boys are socially encouraged and given greater freedom to pursue a variety of opportunities, girls' aspirations and participation in public and professional spheres are constrained by these norms.(Edstrom et al., 2015). The CEO of Sunbeam, Ainee Nasir Jamy, gave a different perspective on the issue. She said:

‘I challenge the notion that educational deprivation is gender specific as I have seen both boys and girls experience the same institutional neglect in Islamabad's under-resourced areas.

But the girls had a different opinion about this and when I asked them why they have the opinion their response was as follows,

Table 14: Aspirations and Gendered Views

Category	No. of Responses
Cultural & Social Restrictions	12
Gender Norms & Role Expectations	10
Investment & Priority for Boys	9
Lack of Support for Girls	7
Mobility & Freedom	6
Assumed Capability	4
Equal Opportunity Reported	3
Other (Emotional/Individual)	2

These hypotheses posit that cultural norms, mobility constraints, and family investment patterns that favor boys as future breadwinners systemically restrict girls.

4.3.3.1.Descriptive Analysis of Educational Opportunities by Gender

In the questionnaire respondents were asked about the educational opportunities available to them compared to the boys of their community

Table 15: Educational Opportunities: Boys vs. Girls

Do boys have more educational opportunities than girls?	Aspiration gap						Total
	0	1	2	3	4	5	
1 (Yes)	57	16	38	32	14	5	162
2 (No)	14	4	4	4	2	2	31
3 (Neutral)	1	0	0	1	0	0	2
Total	72	20	42	37	16	7	195

The cross tabulation indicates that the size of the aspiration gap is strongly correlated with perceptions of gendered educational opportunities. Most respondents (83%) felt boys had more opportunities. Gap = 0 (57 students) meaning their desired and expected education are the same despite believing boys have more opportunities. A sizeable portion, when the gap is 2 (38 students) and when the gap is 3 (32 students), see a clear difference between their aspirations and real outcomes which they expect. By emphasizing on how real and perceived inequality can limit an individual’s ability to strive, this pattern aligns with capability approach

4.3.3.2.Perceptions of Gender Suitability in Professions

Gender suitability of profession is important for understanding the ingrained gender roles in the community. the questionnaire involved a question asking girls if they conceive certain professions more suitable for themselves vis-à-vis men.

Table 16: Perceptions of Gender Suitability for Certain Professions

Whether certain professions appear more suitable for men than women	No. of Students	Percentage
Yes	56	28.4%
No	119	60.4%
Not sure	22	11.2%

Despite the 60.4 disapproval of a profession’s gendered segregation, 28.4 percent, which is almost one-third of the total, believed that yes men are more suitable for some, while women for other. This reflects preconception regarding gendered segregation still exists somehow. Defining parameters of “feasible” career choice through gender norms are prevalent. Eventually, it leads to

the filtered support from family and community for girls, including the confident ones who strongly believe on their capabilities. Given such biasness, the aspirations of girls are increasingly negotiated in limited space: the aspirations is shaped and influenced in a way that strike a balance between one’s aspirations and the socially accepted norms.

If yes, Why

Girls were asked to explain why they considered certain careers only suitable for men,

Table 17: Reasons for occupational Gendered views

Category	No. of Responses
Cultural & Social Restrictions	27
Gender Roles & Stereotypes	18
Outdoor/Physical Work Assumption	16
Men as Breadwinners	15
Freedom & Time	13
Privilege & Power	13
Barriers to Interaction	3
Equal or No Bias Reported	2
Other / Emotional	1

When further asked for details, their answers predicted a strong presence of cultural and social restrictions which thus creates gender roles and stereotypes.

Which professions?

Table 18: Reasons for Professions Perceived as More Suitable for Men

Profession	Why it's seen as more suitable for men (from responses)	No. of Mentions
Labor Work	Includes: Wood cutter, Labors, Waiter, Sweeper	Physically demanding
Banking/Finance Security & Law Enforcement	Bank, Business Police, Lawyer	Office/outdoor, formal Work outside all day, risk
Sales & Manual Jobs Engineering	Gardener, Salesman Engineering	Outdoor, low respect jobs Technical requires field work
Social Media / Public-Facing Translation & Creative Arts	Singing, Vlogging, Influencer Music producer, Translator	Visibility, criticism for girls Mentioned positively as creative and personal aspiration
Office Jobs (General)	Office	Implied it's male-dominated or inaccessible
None / No Bias Reported	“No”	Believe all are suitable

This shows how gender roles are established in society. Where girls are considered to either stay at home or do work which involves little exposure and visibility.

4.3.3.3.Descriptive Analysis of Gender Suitability in Professions

Table 19: Tabulation of professions more suitable for men and aspiration gap

Professions more suitable for men	Aspiration gap						Total
	0	1	2	3	4	5	
1 (No)	17	10	11	12	4	2	57
2 (Yes)	46	4	28	23	10	4	116
3 (Not sure)	8	6	4	2	2	1	23
Total	71	20	43	37	16	7	195

Girls' aspirations are significantly impacted by gendered beliefs, according to data on perceptions of career suitability. Most respondents (category 2) concur that some careers are better suited for

men, which suggests that these views may limit girls' aspirations and cause a gap between their present opportunities and their long-term objectives. While the respondents who believed that women and men both are equal in terms of occupational aspirations have low aspiration gap. This indicates

Therefore, interventions should focus on expanding girls career horizon by exposing them to female role models in the various fields and by supporting and encouraging educational programs and gender equality

4.4. Factor 2: School Environment and Role of Infrastructure in Shaping Girls

Aspirations

In order to investigate the problem under consideration i.e. to assess the role of school environment and infrastructure in shaping girls' aspiration, data has been gathered from 13 out of the total 17 public girls' schools located in Barakahu, Islamabad. The primary focus was on the role of institutional and physical aspects of school in influencing girls' aspirations. The areas investigated include student-teacher ratios, classroom conditions, sanitation, educational material, extracurricular activities, and technology access. The quality of school infrastructure is particularly important in this regard, because it has direct impacts on the motivation, self-esteem, and future planning of students.

Data has been collected from the following schools:

Table 20: Schools profile

S. No.	School Name	Area Type	Classes	Enrollment
1	IMCG NHC FA	Urban	12	800
2	IMSG Lakhwal	Rural	10	600
3	IMCG Malpur	Rural	12	700
4	IMSG Bani Gala	Rural	10	1390
5	IMSG (1-10) NHC, Islamabad	Rural	10	1001
6	IMCG Phulgran Islamabad	Rural	12	807
7	IMCG Kot Hathial	Rural	12	1079
8	IMCG Maira Begwal, Barakahu	Rural	12	360
9	IMSG Saidpur, Islamabad	Rural	10	477
10	IMCG Quaid-e-Azam University Colony, Islamabad	Rural	12	1335
11	IMCG Rawal Town	Rural	12	605
12	IMSG Mohra Noor	Rural	10	600
13	IMSG Kurri F.A. Islamabad	Rural	10	406

4.4.1. Infrastructure and facility gaps

The learning and performance capabilities of students are largely determined by school infrastructure and other facilities. Adequate class rooms, sanitation, and clean drinking water are important factors for a student to perform well in academics (Teixeira et al., 2017). Therefore, revealing the gaps is crucial for understanding the barriers that limit students' opportunities.

4.4.1.1. Number and Condition of Classroom

Sustaining the learning potential of students requires sufficient and well-built classrooms and furniture.

Table 21: Number of Classrooms

Number of Classrooms	No. of Responses	Percentage
6 – 12	5	38.5%
12 – 18	5	38.5%
18 – 24	3	23.1%
Condition of Classrooms		
Good	1	7.7%
Fair	10	76.9%
Poor	2	15.4%

- There are six to twelve classrooms in 38.5% of the schools.
- An additional 38.5% have between 12 and 18 classrooms.
- There are only 23.1% with 18–24 classrooms

The data shows that most schools do not have enough classrooms to adjust their students. As a result, to many students are likely to share classrooms, that me cause them to sit in overcrowded spaces, impacting their learning outcomes

Out of all the 13 schools, which remained the focus of this study, just one school, which accounts for just 7.7 percent, reported to have adequate furniture that is also in good condition. Among them, 15.4 percent of the schools are reported to have been in poor condition, while a majority (76.9 percent) considered that the condition and availability of furniture was just fair. Such infrastructure could contribute to the discomfort and demotivation of students.

4.4.2. Physical Infrastructure

The foundation of learning, particularly that of good learning, is based on the physical infrastructure of educational institutions such as security, sufficiency of buildings, classrooms, furniture, playgrounds and other vital physical resources. Well-built areas and playground in educational institutions promote an atmosphere of learning by fostering health related well-being and by inculcating the values of discipline and integrity. These facilities, however, have been reported either inadequate or in poor condition in many schools of the area, affecting the overall performance of students.

Table 22: Physical Infrastructure

Facility	Yes	No
Ventilation of the Classrooms	12	1
The number of desks and chairs per students	8	5
Does the school have boundary wall?	12	1
Condition of toilets, are they clean and well-maintained?	10	3
Does your school have clean drinking water facility?	12	1
Does your school have handwashing stations with soap?	9	4
Does the school have a functional library?	6	7
Are there sufficient textbooks and learning materials?	12	1
Does the school have access to multimedia tools?	11	2
Are there science labs for practical experiments?	6	7

Although basic amenities like drinking water, ventilation, and boundary walls are typically available, a government school's principal emphasized that there are still large gaps in the system. Many schools lack functional libraries and clean, well-maintained restrooms, and many classrooms are short of desks and chairs, these infrastructural issues hamper educational learning.

4.4.3. Technology and Digital Infrastructure

In this era of technological advancement schools which lack important digital facilities tend to have lower levels of educational development among students. The availability of internet and functional computers are essential for realization of student's true potential.

Table 23: Technological Infrastructure

Digital Facility	Yes	No
Internet Availability in school?	7	6
Computers or tablets availability in school?	11	2

The results showed that there are government schools in the capital of Pakistan which do not have computer labs and internet connections. This creates educational loops not only for students but also halts teachers from developing and understanding new technological teaching techniques. Hence, disconnecting students from advanced digital and technological learning.

4.4.4. Maintenance and Budget

Persistent infrastructure problems are caused by a lack of systematic maintenance plans, irregular budget allocations, and limited financial resources in many underfunded schools. It is crucial to comprehend these limitations in order to create workable plans that give equal weight to short-term requirements and long-term institutional viability.

Table 24: Maintenance and Budget

Maintenance Frequency	Number of Schools	Percentage
Regularly	3	23.1%
Occasionally	8	61.5%
Rarely	2	15.4%

Budget Support	Yes	No
Is the school infrastructure supported by an adequate budget?	4	9

The table reflects a poor maintenance of school infrastructure. Among the total schools, only 23.2 percent reported regular maintenance, while another 15.4 percent stated that maintenance of the school has been ignored. The majority (61.5) stated that school maintenance activities are only done once in a while. Students are directly affected by the quality of maintenance performed and the quality of physical environment they live in. So, this uncared maintenance is likely to affect their long-term educational aspirations. Besides maintenance on the part of the government, the principals of four schools stated that they do not receive enough funds to maintain quality physical environment at school, depicting the financial problems the public schools are facing

4.4.5. Teachers' Attitude and Encouragement

Students learning outcomes and self-esteem are also greatly determined by the number and quality of teachers. Students' conception of self, of their skills and abilities is largely influenced by the behavior of teacher and the degree of support they maintain in the classroom. Moreover, teachers also play an important role in building resilience and fostering confidence; it becomes instrumental particularly in such a resource-constrained environment.

4.4.5.1. Teachers Count and Facilities in a School

The learning environment depends on teachers and on school facilities. Qualified teachers and sufficient resources are directly related to the quality of education that the students obtain.

Table 25: Teachers' Count and facilities in a School

Teacher Count	Number of Schools	
10 to 15	3	
15 to 20	5	
20 to 25	2	
25 to 30	3	
Staff Facilities	Yes	No
Is there a staffroom for teachers?	10	3
Are there sufficient teaching aids for teachers?	10	3

The number of teaching staff varied significantly across the schools that were surveyed. Although there were five schools that expressed that there were between 15 and 20 teachers, the rest showed a wider range with 10 to 30 teachers showing great differences. This kind of variance can probably be explained by the differences in the size of the institutions, enrollment, and funding opportunities. Significantly, schools with a smaller number of teachers experience difficulties keeping the sizes of their classes manageable, which may restrict the opportunity to provide individual attention and impact the quality of the instruction process in negative ways (UNESCO, 2017; Glewwe and Muralidharan, 2016).

Encouragingly, ten schools noted that they have adequate teaching aids and staffrooms, which means that teachers in such schools have access to simple professional support and supply. Nevertheless, three schools also said they did not have sufficient teaching facilities, highlighting the fact that structural inequalities remain in place and can undermine the quality of instruction and morale of teachers.

4.4.5.2. Student- Teacher Ratio per Grade

Table 26: student-teacher ratio per grade

Teachers per Class	Number of Responses
1–2 teachers	5
4–5 teachers	2
5- 6 teachers	1
6 – 8 teachers	1
Explained on a per-period basis	1
Not available (NA)	1
Students per Class	
0–20	1
21–40	5
41–60	4
61–80	2
81–120	2

Student teacher ratio per grade is overstretched in most schools, as each grade usually has one or two teachers. Some schools had 4-6 teachers per grade, and one had it that the teachers were period-by-period, which implies subject rotation or multi-grade teaching, especially in upper grade classes. The size of classes is usually large (in most cases, 21-60 students per classroom were reported). Some schools have as many as 120 students per grade which means there is a high overcrowding. High ratios like these present teachers with pressure, less personal attention and eventually lead to a drop in instructional quality.

4.4.5.3.Descriptive Analysis of teacher- student ration

The cross-tabulation of number of teachers and students per grade revealed the following results,

Table 27: The cross-tabulation of teacher-student ratio

How many students are there in school?	How many teachers are in school?				Total
	10-15	15-20	20-25	25-30	
100 to 500	0	2	0	0	2
1000 to 1500	1	1	1	2	5
500 to 1000	2	4	2	0	6
Total	3	7	3	2	13

The data shows a startling discrepancy between the number of students and the number of teachers in each school. Schools with 1000–1500 students, for example, sometimes have as few as 10–15 teachers, which means that each teacher may be in charge of more than 100 students. Similarly, the most common staffing level in schools with 500–1000 students is 15–20 teachers, which leads to high student–teacher ratios that significantly surpass the UNESCO-recommended standard of 1:30 for school education (EFPP, n.d.). As a result of this imbalance teachers are overworked, which limits their ability to give struggling students individualized attention, manage the classroom well, or provide them with specialized support (Barrett, 2007; Saiti & Saiti, 2018).

4.4.6. Mobility and Safety Concerns

Mobility and safety concerns are essential to ensure equal access to education and lessen gender differences in schools.

Table 28: Mobility and safety

Activity	Yes	No
Does the school have a playground?	6	7
Are there playgrounds?	6	6
Are there facilities for sports and physical education?	4	9
Are there spaces for cultural or artistic activities?	4	9
Safety & Security Measure		
School premises free from safety hazards or not?	9	4
Does your school have a security guard or monitoring staff?	12	1
Does your school have emergency exits?	4	9

The questions asked though to do not directly affect girls’ education, yet they have significant impacts on the learning outcomes. The results find that some basic facility and initiatives are well in place, yet the responses observe that gaps still exist. Notably, among the 13 schools only 6 have playgrounds and fewer have adequate sport facilities. Similarly, among all the 13 schools only four schools have had rooms and halls where girls could practice culture or art. As a result of the lack of such basic infrastructure, school-going girls are unlikely to develop holistic development, especially when they are restricted to indoor activities and to the four walls of home. So, having

inadequate such infrastructure, girls are unlikely to perform in their growth and development. The lack of emergency exits as reported by 9 schools is another problem that may cause great danger in case of an undesirable incident.

Imbalance could also be found in safety conditions. 4 schools reported the lack of guards and monitoring personnel. In the absence of guards, girls may not feel safe, and their parents may be reluctant to send them to school in such conditions.

Such deficiencies have not only practical, but also symbolic values: girls may feel that their surrounding may not necessarily reinforce their aspirations. Despite their educational aspirations, they may conceive of their environment, both physical and financial, as being inadequate to support them in their quest for higher education, particularly given their lack of proper resources, safety assurance, and holistic development.

Factor 3: Economic Status of families and its impact on Girls' Education

Economic background and financial stability play a crucial role in deciding girls' career and educational aspirations. In low-income areas like Bhara Kahu families struggle with financial disparity and restricted resources availability.

4.6.1. Monthly Household Income in PKR

Financial stability serves as a catalyst for high educational attainment as it provides students with academic resources and educational opportunities.

Table 29: Monthly household income

Income range	No of families	Percentage
Below PKR 20000	45	23.1%
PKR 20000 – 30000	53	27.2%
PKR 30000 – 40000	30	15.4%
PKR 40000 – 50000	28	14.4%
PKR 50000 – 60000	14	7.2%
PKR 60000 – 70000	11	5.6%
PKR 70000 – 80000	5	2.6%
PKR 80000 – 90000	2	1%
PKR 90,000– 100,000	2	1%
PKR 100,000 and more	5	2.6%

The findings show that more than 50 percent of families earn less than 30k in a month, representing the low-income society. Due to poor financial conditions girls fail to fulfill their basic educational needs like stationary, tuition, non-availability of internet and transportation facilities (Anand et al., 2009). This leads to aspiration gap and rising dropout of girls in school. (Satti & Jamil, 2021)

4.6.2. Factors Limiting Educational Aspirations

Respondents were asked about the factors they considered were limiting their educational aspirations,

Table 30: Limiting educational Opportunities

What challenges halt girl's aspirations	Number of Students	Percentage
Financial Constraints	65	33.2%
Non- accessibility to good education	9	4.6%
Family responsibilities	49	25%
Lack of confidence/motivation	9	4.6%
Societal or cultural limitations	55	28.1%
Others	5	

The findings revealed that lack of financial resources is a biggest obstacle in the process of education for girls in Pakistan. The strong 33.2% represent that despite having great aspirations economic condition stop girls from fulfilling it. This takes girls towards compromised aspirations as girls change their real aspiration to the one which seems achievable. Ihsan Ullah (2024) states that students change their career paths due to financial conditions. Therefore, even girls with high potential fail to fulfill their dreams.

4.6.3. Reevaluating Career Aspirations

The financial conditions lead to compromised and changed career choices for girls in low-income societies,

Table 31: Reevaluating Career Goals

Rationale to Pursue education	Number of Students	Percentage
Fulfilment of dreams	31	15.7%
To financially support family	98	49.7%
To become independent	16	8.1%
To earn respect in society	50	25.4%
Others	2	1%

The biggest source of motivation for girls to pursue education was to financially support (49.7%) their families. This shows girls' aspirations to be centered around financial independence. As education for these girls is a hope for ending the cycle of poverty their families have been living in for generations. Girls even mentioned that they changed their aspirations from becoming doctors and engineers to nurses and teachers to start earning money earlier

4.6.4. Descriptive Analysis: Monthly Household Income and Expected Education

Table 32: Correlation of monthly household income and expected education

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)
(1) Household Income	1.000		
(2) Challenges faced by girls	0.124	1.000	
(3) Expected education	0.402	-0.091	1.000

The positive correlation (0.4202) between wealthier families and expected level of education shows larger aspirations, meaning that girls from wealthier households tend to expect higher education than others. It suggests that wealthier families can support their children and provide resources, tuition and opportunities which generate higher educational aspirations among them (Ndu, 2022).

The negative correlation between expected education and challenges faced by girls indicate that girls with more challenges have low educational aspiration. The habitus internalize the idea of expecting less from themselves creating the larger aspiration gap. These findings show the role of habitus in redesigning girls' aspirations, i.e. wealthier households with larger aspirations while the challenging homes with small aspirations and greater aspiration gaps.

4.6.5. Access to Tuition and Study Support

The Bourdieu theory of capital, particularly talking of economic capital, discusses the direct relationship between higher educational attainment (opportunities, private tuition and academic resources) and financial sufficiency.

Table 33: Access to Tuition

Option	N. of students	Percentage
Yes	44	22.4%
No	119	60.7%
Sometimes	33	16.8%

The findings indicate how 60.7% of students do not have access to private tuition or any external academic support. Resulting in less to no study hours after school and completely dependent on school for the support in education. In public schools which have less resources and larger class sizes this support is insufficient and limits students' true potentials to flourish. The 16.8% responses of getting tuition sometimes show the fact that parents' affordability is biggest reason for academic assistance widening the gap between aspirations and performance.

In low-income areas like Bhara Kahu, poverty and lack of financial resources inhibit aspiration building and academic achievements of students especially girls. The socio-economic hurdles serve as a barrier that freezes all sources of educational achievement for girls continuing the cycle of women sufferings and disparities. The larger aspiration gap in the community is the indicator of the fact that poor habitus results in low educational attainment among girls.

4.7. Evaluating Girls' Educational Aspirations Within Structural and Social Constraints

The final theme discusses the difference between girls educational and career aspirations and expectations. It helps us understand the role of habitus and capabilities in designing and re-adjusting girls' aspirations and limiting their choices.

4.7.1. Desired vs Expected Education Level

This section compares the highest level of education girls aspire to achieve with the level they realistically expect to reach, highlighting the gap between expectations and aspirations.

Table34: Desired VS Expected Education level.

Education Level	Want to Get	Think will Get
Matric / O Levels	5 (2.6%)	41 (20.8%)
Intermediate / A-Levels	5 (2.6%)	44 (22.3%)
Bachelor's (BA/BSc)	36 (18.4%)	49 (24.9%)
Master's (MA/MSc)	36 (18.4%)	14 (7.1%)
MPhil/PhD	24 (12.2%)	14 (7.1%)
Professional (MBBS, BE, etc.)	73 (37.2%)	35 (17.8%)
Other Professions	15	0

To get a clearer picture of their aspirations, in the questionnaire girls were asked about the desired education they aspire to get. Most of them wanted to complete bachelors and masters in their favorite subjects. Amongst the favorite professions, many responded by citing the profession of medicine and teaching. Besides, they also showed interest in professions like journalism, business, art and some showed the interest of joining the armed forces.

But despite high levels of ambition, a clear disconnection was observed between what they want to become and what they think/ expected would become. The above table shows how the results changed, from aspiring to become professionals to the doubt of not even being able to complete their basic education. Where 37.3% of the students want to serve in the field of medicine, but among them only 17.8% believe that they would be able to join this profession. Similarly, among those who want to pursue higher studies, only 7.1% believed that they would be able to reach where they desire.

If we represent this in graph,

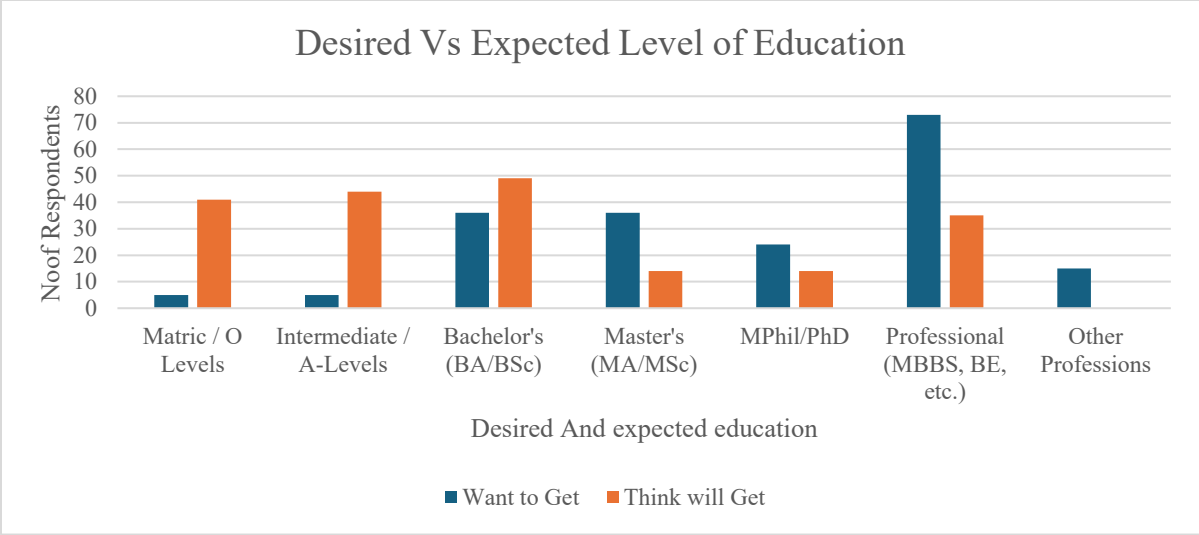
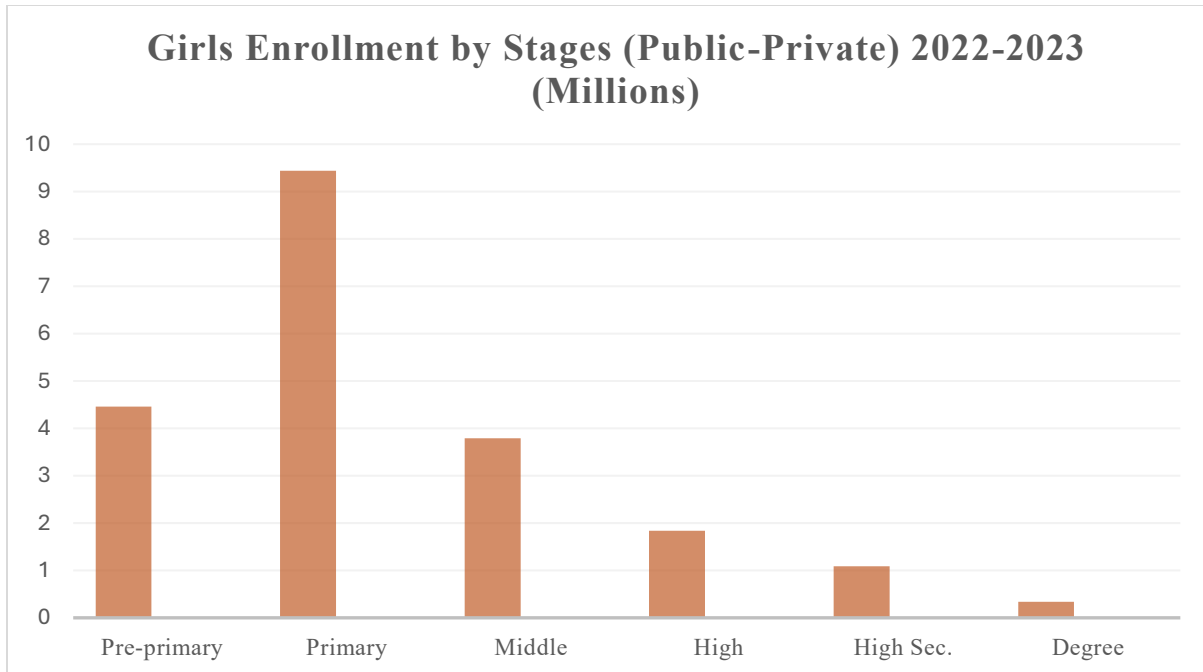


Figure 6: Desired Vs Expected Level of Education

The graph shows the stark difference between desired and expected level of education. Depicting that girl’s aspiration are changed and formed within a given socio-cultural and political milieu, the one where they are encouraged to pursue their dreams (Panezai et al., 2025). There is gap between girls’ educational aspirations and the belief in achieving that aspiration, indicating that they fear being robbed or succumbed to uncertainty of not being able to pursue their aspiration with in the given social, cultural and economic environment.

4.7.2. Aspirations Vs Expectations

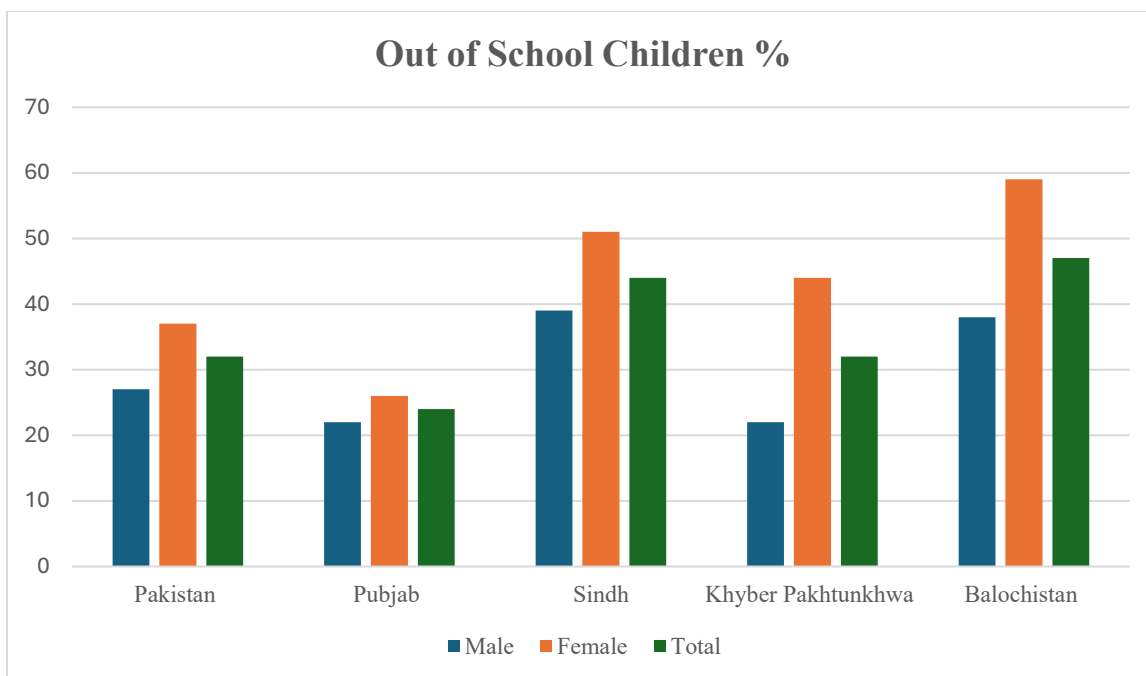
The living realities and educational aspiration for success have wide gaps. Girls in such low-income areas though strive to succeed and to pursue educational quests; however, their confidence, usually driven by their socio-economic and cultural conditions, on achieving their dream is fragile. Girl’s ideal perception of themselves and socially and culturally constrained potential exposes their potential toll, which significantly impacts their future educational goals. Pakistan Economic Survey 2022-2023 reveals the number of girls who fail, due to their constraints, to full their dreams and remain out of school. The survey indicates that too many girls quit school just after the completion of their primary education. The below graph shows girls enrollment by stages in both public and private schools across Pakistan



(Data Source: Girls Education in Pakistan: Statistic and Trends for 2022-2023, Pakistan Institute of Education, Government of Pakistan)

Figure 7: Girls Enrollment by Stages (Public Private) 2022-2023

According to the Survey, as of 2022-2023, around 46 million students are enrolled in some form of formal education: out of these 21 million are girls and 25 million are boys. The enrolled students usually leave school after the completion of their primary education. A bare minimum of 0.34 students successfully complete their higher studies, gender disparities continue till this high-grade educational level, with less girls completing their degree compared to boys. When compared to the desired future career, as pointed out in table 35, almost girls aspire to achieve degrees and make their career in fields such as medical and defense and law. However, whatever their aspirations are, majority could not complete their studies after primary education. The survey further highlights gender disparities in out-of-school children between girls and boys. The graph below shows the dropout trends:



(Data Source: Pakistan Economic Survey 2022-2023)

Figure 8: Out of School Children

The survey highlights that more than 25 percent of girls remain out of school in Pakistan, with significant regional disparities: in Punjab less than 25 percent girls are out of school, while in Baluchistan the number increases to 58 percent. Remaining out of school could be translated to having unfulfilled educational aspirations of these girls

Particularly when girls were asked about their aspirations and preferred future careers, they showed great interest in a variety of fields.

Table 35: Desired Future Careers

Career category	No of Student
Medical & Healthcare	78 (39.6%)
Engineering & Tech	7 (3.6%)
Defense & Law	40 (20.3%)
Business & Finance	4 (2%)
Creative Arts & Media	8 (4.1%)
Sports & Public Service	2 (1%)
Education	41 (20.8%)
Others	16

The data showed that the girls' answers varied significantly, indicating that they were very eager to pursue promising careers in both traditional and non-traditional fields. By the term 'traditional fields' here refer to careers which society and parents consider and frame as the only profession that are acceptable to girls. Such notions of career results in guiding their daughters away from male-coded careers and toward traditional or caring roles.(Hussain Channa et al., 2020).

In the table, it's interesting to note that most students chose to be the part of profession that are considered exclusive to male in the society. For example, army, police, entrepreneurship, banking, cricket, engineering etc. Nevertheless, over half of the students also expressed interest in traditional, socially acceptable professions like teaching and medicine. Girls' aspirations were genuinely their own, regardless of how society or culture views them, demonstrating how well these girls have a distinct sense of who they are, what interests them, and how they can recognize opportunities.

However, only 2% indicated interest in business or finance, and only 3.6% wanted to become engineers or technologists, which suggests that the lack of visibility, career guidance, and visible female role models in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) and business fields, especially for girls from low-income neighborhoods, are likely the reasons for this underrepresentation in these fields (Ihsan Ullah et al., 2024).

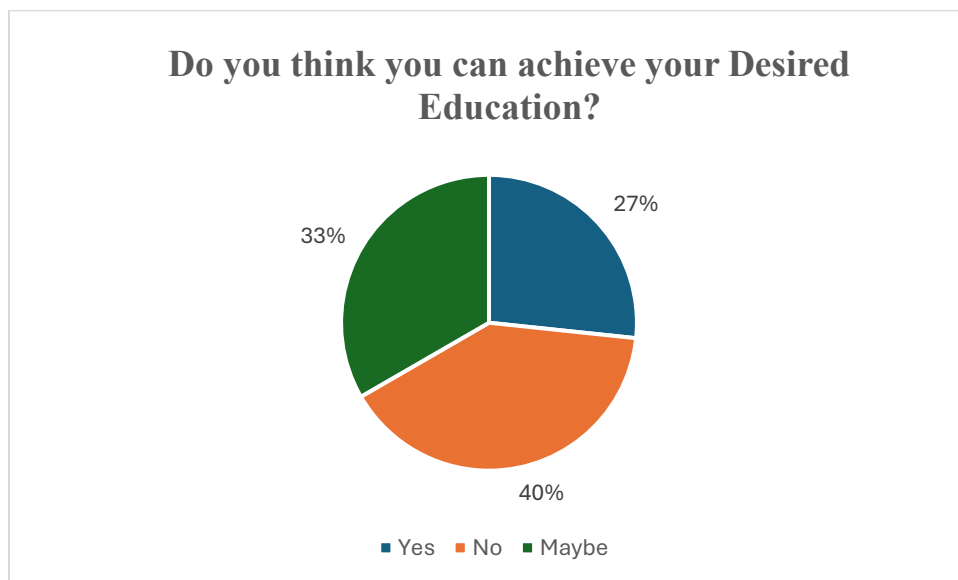


Figure 7: Attainability of Desired level of Education.

Furthermore, girls were asked whether they think they will be able to accomplish their dreams. 40% of the girls indicated they do not, and 33% weren't sure. They explained that achieving their aspirations would only be possible if conditions were in their favor, if not, it would be difficult.

It's a known fact that all young people experience some degree of uncertainty about the future, but for girls from low-income families, this uncertainty is much more severe and deeply ingrained (Lopez, 2025). In contrast to their middle- or upper-class peers, who might feel uncertain about their career choices or competition, girls in marginalized societies worry about their ability to continue their education, their employment status, and whether their goals will even be taken into account. (Lloyd et al., 2009).

Thus, an aspiration gap is created when there is ambition but unclear or blocked pathways (Amjad, 2024). While youth around the world may feel pressured about what to “become”, girls in low-income communities frequently remain uncertain about whether they will be allowed to “become anything at all”.

4.7.3. Descriptive Analysis of Aspiration Gap

If we find the summary statistics of desired vs expected level of education, the results are as follows:

Table 36: Summary Statistics of Aspiration Gap

Variable	Observation	Mean	Std. Dev	Min	Max
Desired VS Expected	195	1.594	1.528	-1	5

This Shows the gap between desired and expected level of education girls expect to achieve. After analyzing the result data revealed students desire 1.6 more educational levels than they believe they will achieve. This suggests that expectations differ from aspiration. The standard deviation of 1.53 indicates that there is significant variation among the students in the results. In rare cases, the minimum the students are 1 level behind their desired level of education. While the maximum gap is 5 where some students hoped for much more education than they believed was possible, indicating that a notable aspiration gap exists, i.e., high educational aspirations relative to expectations. To further quantify the results a correlation matrix was created to investigate the connections between the aspiration gap and other variables.

4.7.4. Inferential Analysis of Aspiration Gap

Table 37: Correlation - Desired VS Expected Education

Correlation Pair	Value	Interpretation
Desired vs Expected Education	0.547	Moderate positive correlation: students who desire more education also expect more, though the mismatch is where the gap emerges.
Aspiration Gap & Desired Level of Education	0.308	Weak positive correlation: students who desire higher education tend to have a slightly larger aspiration gap (what they want and what they expect.)

P value < 0.001

The analysis of correlation demonstrated moderate positive relationships between desired and expected education ($r = 0.547$, $p < 0.001$), which means that students who want to receive higher education tend to expect it as well. The desired level of education was also found to have a weaker yet significant correlation to the aspiration gap ($r = 0.308$, $p < 0.001$), where higher aspirations were found to have a larger gap.

For example. If a student has a dream of getting a PhD, but due to the structural constraint, her expected level of education limits to FA/FSC, her aspiration gap will be higher than someone who dreams of pursuing a degree in bachelor but expects FA/FSC.

Table 38: Cross tabulation of Desired vs Expected level of education.

Desired level of Education	Expected level of Education						Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
1 (Matric)	5	0	0	0	0	0	5
2 (Intermediate FA/ FSc)	1	3	1	0	0	0	5
3 (Bachelors BA/BSc)	16	7	13	1	0	0	37
4 (Master MA/ MSc)	13	13	8	5	0	0	39
5 (MS/MPhil/PhD)	0	5	7	2	12	0	26
6 (Doctor/Engineer)	6	16	19	6	2	34	83
7 (Other)	0	0	1	0	0	1	2
Total	41	44	47	14	14	35	195

Chi² (χ^2) = 165.97, p-value < 0.001

A cross-tabulation was also used to investigate further the association between the desired level and expected level of education among the students. Table below presents the desired education

level of female students (1 = Matric to 7 = Other) on the left and the realistic level to which they anticipate achieving (1 = Matric to 6 = Professional degrees such as Doctor/Engineer) on the right.

The Chi-square test of independence was used to establish that the relationship between desired and expected level of education was significant, $N = 195 = 0.001$. This result shows that the misfit between what girls desire and what they think they can accomplish is systematic, which proves the existence of the significant aspiration gap.

4.8. Qualitative Data Analysis:

To complement and expand the quantitative results, qualitative data were collected based on in-depth interviews with critical stakeholders who gave delicate insights into girl educational aspirations under low-income settings. The interview was conducted by Secretary of Education, Mohiuddin Wani, former Secretary, Asad Hayauddin, homeschool teacher, Lubna Hayauddin, one of local government school principals, and Sunbeam Organization Chairperson, Ainee Nasir Jamy.

These interviewees were selected because they had firsthand experience of working in education field. This group was carefully chosen as it gives the opinion of all spectrums involved in the educational system from policy makers to educators to NGO personnel's having their own independent and external perspective of the problem

The process of data collection involved mainly handwritten notes and memory recollection. Afterwards these notes were read and re-read to identify themes and they underwent thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2014). Familiarity with the transcripts was obtained through re-reading and key ideas were then coded systematically. This process helped to identify the themes supporting and developing the quantitative findings; in particular, it made it possible to mention the interaction between enabling factors and barriers to the education of girls.

In line with the survey results, the themes that have been identified in this case reflect the quantitative aspects affecting aspirations, which are: Household income and financial barriers, Parental education and support Policy and implementation gaps, Cultural and social norms, Institutional resources and opportunities. Influential stakeholders gave bright details on these themes.

Although monetary suffering, cultural pressure and deficiencies in policy become apparent obstacles, parental support, NGO aid, and teacher commitment become facilitating sources. It is the qualitative insights that thus consolidate and place the quantitative evidence into perspective to provide a more profound insight as to why the aspirational gaps have yet to be closed and within what reform avenue the opportunities might be.

4.8.1. Theme 1: Economic and Resource Constraints

Economic hardship was found on numerous occasions to be the greatest obstacle to holding onto the educational aspirations of girls in the low-income area of Islamabad. Convergence between the narratives of teachers, administrators, and policy officials was in the view that not only girls need to have access to education, but also the quality and sustainability of that education. Although the quantitative findings were moderate ($r = 0.547$) between desired and expected education, it also demonstrated that as the aspirations increased, so was the number of aspiration gaps.

A homeschooled teacher, Lubna Hayauddin, explained how secondary school attendance of a girl was often determined by financial pressure:

“Many girls want to study beyond matric, but when finances are thin, parents ask them to quit because brothers’ education is prioritized. They say ‘ek hi to afford kar sakte hain, ladke ki parhai zaroori hai.’”

Such an attitude highlights the gender aspect of resource aiding. Economic capital and cultural norms interact to bring about unequal educational paths in the words of Bourdieu (1986). Girls socialize into these limitations at an early age and reduce their anticipated standard of achievement even though they have ambitious aspirations. It is especially true when girls want to get professional degrees.

According to one government principal:

“If a girl dreams of becoming a doctor or engineer, the family immediately calculates years of fees, transport, and tuition. For most, it becomes an impossible dream.”

This is an example of the conversion problem that Sen (1999) points out through his capability approach in the fact that aspirations do not mean much unless there are resources to transform

them into capabilities. As students might want to pursue a higher education, lack of money reduces their realistic ambition, establishing a gap in aspirations. This finding is supported by a wide range of literature. For example, the studies carried out in Pakistan and other South Asian settings support the fact that female dropout rates are still the largest determinant of household poverty (Aslam, 2009; UNESCO, 2020). In low-income families, girls are particularly the most vulnerable due to their education being perceived less probable in providing direct economic benefits than boys. Such framing of cost-benefit also constrains the willingness of parents to invest. However, access is not the only aspect that is affected by financial constraints but also quality and continuity. As pointed out by stakeholders, most of the families in Barakahu rotate their girls among low fee privates, the setup of NGOs and government institutes based on the fee pressures. This break cuts off learning and demeans the confidence of girls in their long-term educational ship.

A student in a Bari Imam school told us.

“My brother is studying in a private school, and my parents sent me to the public school. I don’t like it here, but my mother says we can only afford Bhai ki parhai”

According to one chairperson of the NGOs, Ainee Nasir Jamy, the observation was:

“Aspirations don’t fade because girls don’t dream, they fade because reality keeps reminding them, they cannot afford consistency in education.”

Aspirations never get lost, girls do not dream, they are lost because there is always a reality to remind them that they cannot afford to continue education. The issue of poverty also interrelates with geography. Families already facing subsistence problems are not able to afford the cost of transport to colleges or higher secondary schools in the city center.

4.8.2. Theme 2: Cultural and Familial Control

Family and cultural expectations play a crucial role centrally in shaping the aspirations of girls. In low-income societies and communities such as Bhara Kahu education is not taken as an individual decision but a family matter that is highly affected by the gender norms.

Asad Hayauddin, who is the former Secretary of Education, underscored how the attitude of parents influences the education of girls:

“The dream of the girl never belongs to her in our system, but it must be approved of by the family, and in most cases the approval is restricted. “

Bourdieu (1977) opines about it as a habitus whereby people internalize the social structures surrounding them. Girls can fantasize about educational paths, like the idea of becoming a doctor or a pilot, but family restrictions, based on the concepts of honor, marriageability, and gender expectations, reduce the imagination to more acceptable paths.

Homeschool teacher Lubna Hayauddin said:

“Parents usually advise girls: learn just enough to get a good marriage proposal. Beyond that, it is a waste.”

Mobility was also considered as one of the most concerning issues for parents. As one government school principal expounded:

“The fathers in low-income communities when they themselves can’t afford commute for their daughters they question the system, how my daughter will travel? Who will ensure her protection?”

During interviews one thing that remained persistent was girls narrowing or compromising their aspirations in the face of realized limitations.

As one student stated,

“I always wanted to become a doctor but now it seems impossible. My cousin is studying nursing I think I can also do that”

When asked the reason, she said,

because my father cousin is a nurse and my father really respects her and has no issue with her working”

In low-income families, the navigation ability of girls is constrained by patriarchal scripts, which results in a kind of self-censorship. However, it would be erroneous to consider families as obstacles. Others underlined that parents who provided support could significantly change the

course. In the case of the majority of girls, the aspiration gap was validated by cultural and family restraint which reduced the ceiling on what could be accomplished.

4.8.3. Theme 3: Structural and Institutional Weaknesses

Institutional gaps in the education sector further reduce the avenues for girls in the low-income areas of Pakistan. The common themes found in the interviews were poor policy implementation, inadequate funding in schools, teacher irresponsibility and bureaucracy- all these directly affect whether the educational aspirations of girls can be fulfilled or not.

The systemic instability through repeated transfer of departments was cited by Secretary of Education Mohiuddin Wani:

“When officers change every few months, policies lose continuity. Projects start but are rarely completed, and the community loses trust in the system”

This is indicative of a wider governance failure that has been reported in the educational research (Andrabi et al., 2008) whereby change in political office compromises reform. Girls can have their hopes of higher education and policies that can help them are usually not carried out due to institutional fragmentation. On resource inequality, it also became a significant issue. Peri-urban and rural Islamabad Government schools are neglected in terms of infrastructures: poor sanitation, poor classes, absence of boundary walls, and science or IT laboratory.

Another significant theme identified was burden on teachers and their absenteeism. According to UNESCO (2022), the issue of teacher absenteeism in the Pakistani public schools is among the most critical obstacles to quality education.

The school principal, while discussing the issues of lack of teachers said:

“When I transferred to the school, we were 8 teachers short. The regular staff were taking 7 to 8 periods each day compromising their health and performance.”

The secretary of education Mohiuddin Wani responding to question discussing this issue said,

“The government is trying. We’ve launched multiple programs, partnered with organizations like TFP and working with fresh graduates from universities like NUST to give practical solutions.”

This official viewpoint demonstrates that initiatives are being made to engage young professionals in the development of new policies. Though, these programs' effectiveness still hinges on how well they interact with the local community and adjust to the lived realities of the kids, particularly the girls in rural or informal settlements.

Lubna Hayauddin, based on her experience as a homeschool teacher emphasized:

“Girls lose interest when the teacher merely reads out of the book and goes. They require not only presence, but also instructions.

This is a weakness of the institutions that is directly related to the aspiration gap: where girls may wish to continue learning, bad quality schools lower their confidence and their success rates and make their expectations of performance at higher levels lower.

Ainee Nasir Jamy posed the argument that although there are numerous policies on progressive education, however, in practice, nothing would change until the communities are engaged. This observation is in accordance with the observation of implementation gap where the policies fail not because of design but because of weak delivery mechanisms. Overall, structural and institutional weaknesses contribute to the aspiration gap since they limit the real possibilities of turning the desires into the accomplishments among the girls.

4.8.4. Theme 4: Factors and Protective Anchors for Girls Education

To maintain a sense of purpose even in the face of uncertainty, this theme examines the complex ways in which girls deal with limitations through compromise, perseverance, and support systems. This last theme highlights the opportunities, while the previous themes explored the different barriers that prevent girls from pursuing their educational and professional aspirations, including institutional gaps, cultural norms, family control, and financial hardship. It discusses the responses of girls, educators and other important stakeholders.

4.8.4.1. Expert Thoughts: From Issue to Opportunity

Interviews with educational stakeholders, from government officials to NGO personnel, gave a thought-provoking viewpoint for the future.

Secretary education Mohiuddin Wani underlined bureaucratic inefficiencies triggered with changing governmental positions,

“A bureaucrat works on a policy, prepares a workplan and when he is about to practically implement it, he is transferred to some other department, creating a gap which never get fulfilled”

Ainee Jamee, CEO of sunbeam, emphasized on the need of working solutions rather just discussing problems. She suggested,

“Curriculum should be designed in a way that it gets easily adapted by the communities”

Additionally, Jamy emphasized that in low-income communities, educational neglect impacts all students, suggesting a systemic issue rather than a gendered one.

“it’s not just a problem of girl’s school. I have seen schools where boys face same problems as girls”

A policy shift is the need for time, context-aware models, increased departmental coordination, and investments in human relationships within schools, particularly those that promote safe, inclusive learning for girls, are desperately needed. Additionally, feedback loops between communities, policy bodies, and schools, enabling factors. The true work identified is not only yapping about what's broken but rather working to protect what's left and taking those little steps towards a better and secure future for girls. The best way to start this is by learning from the models that are working and succeeding around us.

4.8.5. Best Practices: Model of Hope

In the process of identifying the limitations and enabling factors for marginalized school going girls of Bhara Kahu, Islamabad. There was this one model working in a home which gave the practical implementation of how there is still hope that aspirations can thrive in constrictive environments.

4.8.5.1.Lubna's Model: A Guide to Ambitious Environments

Lubna is a home schoolteacher who manages a small community school at her home. During the visit to the school came across the hope that was enlightening and thought-provoking. Lubna runs a informal school for out-of-school children of war-ridden area of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. She taught those underprivileged kids for whom literacy was a distant dream

These children, who under their ordinary circumstances were being left behind by the formal education system-either due to economic hardship, lack of access, or socio-cultural constraints. They were taken inside the home school and performed brilliantly there.

The environment was vibrant and humane centered, unlike the traditional classrooms, seen in public schools, that are often overstretched and kept rigid. As, rather than only curriculum-focused, children were taught humanity and compassion through actions e.g. they had to feed the animals and take care of them. Public schools may have failed to produce such qualities because of the lack of actions that allow children to watch live demonstrations of their actions. Alongside, children were engaged in interactive games, and critical thinking activities. Besides, they were also taught music and dance. Most importantly, they were learning with joy and freedom. They seem expressive and curious. Despite being labelled as “dropouts” or “left behind” by the system, their potential was undeniable.

What made the difference was not only their talent and potential, but the atmosphere of encouragement and respect. There was no mark of intimidation and silence that are often seen in in typical female classrooms sittings. Here, however, they were seen, heard and nurtured. This experience left me questioning: What made the difference was not only their talent and potential, but the atmosphere of encouragement and respect. There was no mark of intimidation and silence that are often seen in in typical female classrooms sittings. Here, however, they were seen, heard and nurtured. This experience left me questioning: Despite having the same socio-economic background as children in public schools, students in informal and non-institutional settings often perform better?

As Lubna said,

“I do not know the difference but what I understand is its never about having more resources but how you use what you have.”

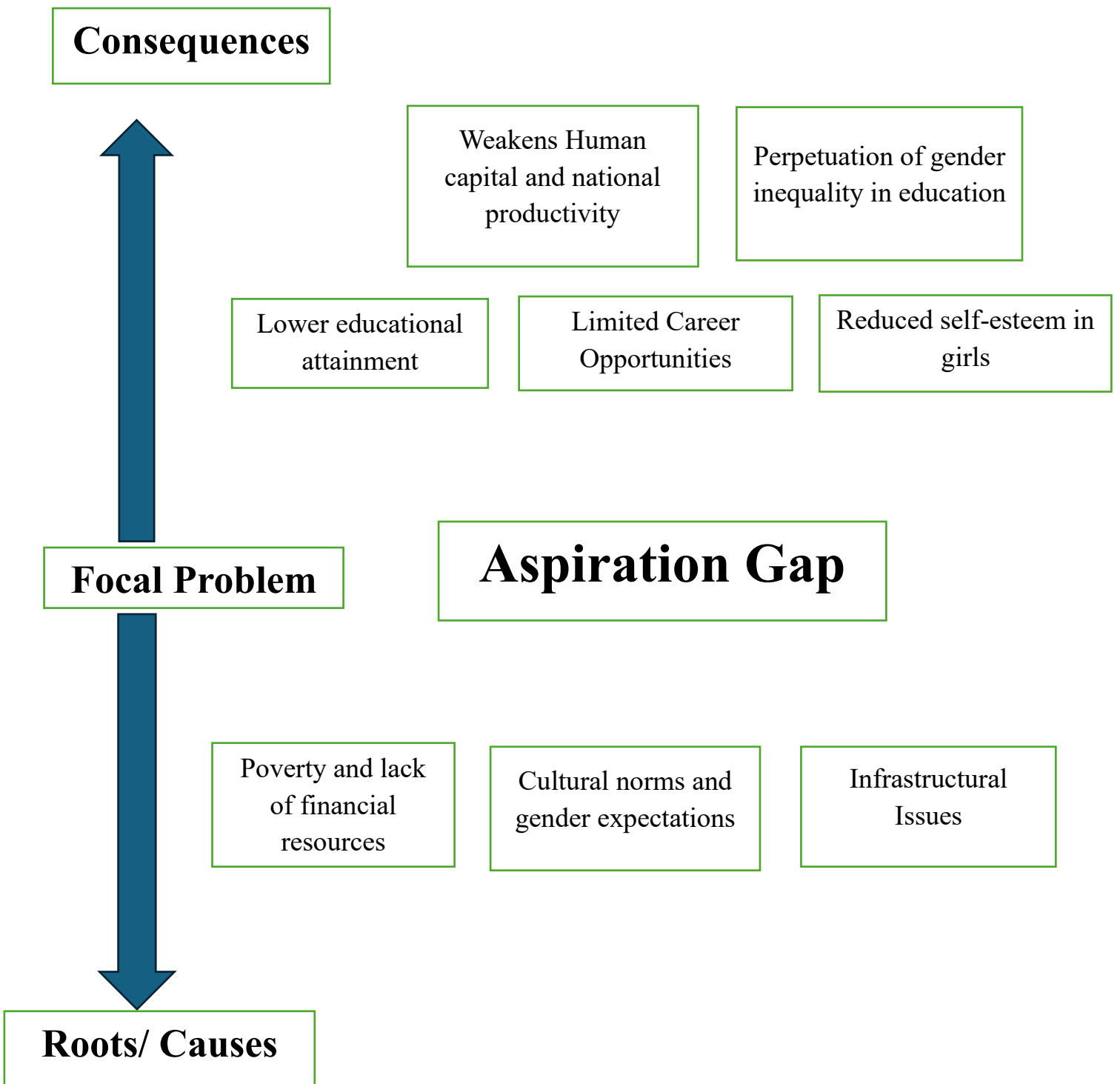
4.8.6. Aspirations aren't dead but fragile

The notion that girls in low-income societies don't have higher aspirations and they do not work to improve their lives is nullified by the collective insights of this research. Aspiration exists but they do not get the due support to nourish and develop them into realities. It suggests that aspirations are not dead, rather they are fragile, suppressed by habitus and need the support to blossom.

4.9. Closing Reflections: The Aspiration Gap and Its Wider Consequences

The findings show that habitus and capabilities of low-income societies lead to a high aspiration gap in the community. A developed society is the one in which all the members are given equal chances of upper mobility. When the rights of the women of the country are undermined, it's going to have larger consequences for the country overall well-being.

The Amalgamation of quantitative data from surveys and qualitative from interviews just proven the fact that all kinds of habitus limitations erode the human capital by sustaining cycles of underdevelopment. It not only perpetuates gender inequality in education but has greater impacts on national productivity. Thus, closing the aspiration gap is critical for improving the educational system and nations prosperity.



Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

This last chapter has been divided into two portions. The first portion covers a brief conclusion of the thesis and the findings discussed above. The later part of this chapter proposes certain recommendations.

5.1. Conclusion

The primary goal of this study was to explore how girls' educational aspirations have been shaped or influenced by the interplay of socio-cultural, institutional and financial limitations. By utilizing both data from quantitative surveys and qualitative thematic analysis, this research sought to highlight the role of five interconnected themes that shape or limit girls' abilities to aspire. These themes include: the aspiration gaps, parental influence, cultural and gender roles, school infrastructure and the socio-economic milieu. Based on this data collected from a low-income area of Islamabad, Bara Kahu, the study concludes that there exists a wide gap between the educational aspirations of school going girls and their expected level of education.

Sen's approach and Bourdieu's idea of habitus have been used as conceptual framework for this research. These theories helped interpret how possibilities are socially situated rather than being the personal choices of individuals. Extending this framework to the present study, the research finds that despite having high educational aspirations, girls from low-income areas of Islamabad have little chances of materializing their aspirations into reality. Majority of the girls believed that their aspirations are unlikely to be fully realized primarily due to their socio-economic and cultural conditions.

Further, the result of the study shows that ingrained gender norms, structural injustices and unequal access to enabling resources could largely be considered the responsible factors for the increasingly high aspiration gap. For instance, according to the results from cross-tabulation, majority of the girls responded that boys have more educational opportunities than girls, which suggests that girls' educational aspirations have also been dampened by the prevalent gender inequalities. Therefore, Sen Capability approach becomes instrumental here, which emphasize giving girls actual freedom and choices rather than only focusing on ensuring access. Actual

freedom and choices would in turn help them pursue their educational aspirations more confidently.

Gendered role expectations, parental attitudes, and cultural values have further been discussed on the lights of the respondents' narratives. Their narratives demonstrated that such factors have significant impacts on educational aspiration of girls: for example, parents' educational background, financial situations, and adherence to traditional gender division limit their ability to materialize their dreams into reality. Further, the study also found the role of school infrastructure on educational performance of girls' educational performance. The lack of female teacher, inadequate and poor infrastructure and sanitation facility, and the high cost of education worsen situations for girls: they cannot aspire high or find themselves unable to full their aspirations.

The study concludes that overcoming aspirations gap would require understanding the gap as being situated and dynamic: shaped and influenced by interplay of diverse factors such as institutions, cultural environment, and material conditions.

Therefore, to overcome the gap between aspirations and expectations, a multipronged strategy needs to be designed: a policy the play concurrently at the structural, social, and cultural level. This strategy can possibly be realized through intervention measures such as initiating conditional cash transfer, which will encourage parents to send their children to school; challenging restrictive gender norms, which can foster an environment of parental support for female education; promoting teachers training and, which can equip the girls to navigate their educational paths in today's competing marker; and embracing inclusive pedagogies, which can prove to be instrumental in inculcating the value of equality. Furthermore, establishing forums that aim at developing collective agencies. Such forums will allow girls, teachers, parents and community elders to participate in "community of inquiry". This community would in turn rethink the possibilities and jointly develop the solutions to the problems girls face in pursuing their educational pathways.

5.2. Recommendations

The aspiration gap in girls' education is not a result of individual failings, but structural and systemic injustices embedded in institutional arrangements, social norms, and material conditions. The results show that girls' freedom and ability to aim and succeed are restricted by the unequal

opportunities that exist for boys and girls, which are influenced by parental influence, cultural expectations, school infrastructure, and socioeconomic limitations. To address this, specific and context-sensitive interventions are needed that not only break down structural barriers but also broaden girls' skill sets (as described by Sen's capability approach) and change the patterns that sustain gendered inequality (as described by Bourdieu). The following actions are suggested in this regard:

5.2.1. The Need for Creating a National Framework for Girls Aspirations and National Equity

Pakistan needs to establish a legally binding policy framework, guarantying that fulfilling girls' educational aspirations be prioritized in all educational policies, both at the national and provincial level. The framework would prove to be more efficient when it focuses on the collection of data on gender-disaggregated aspirations and their attainment. Utilizing effective models such as "India's Beti Bachao Beti Padhao" campaign, (Sahni, 2024) the framework ought to incorporate community engagement tactics, public awareness campaigns, and school reforms into a cohesive national agenda.

5.2.2. Recognizing Individuality in Policy Design

When framing educational policies, one should never undermine the importance of individuality and particular community issues. Each community is different from others. Fitting all in one shoe policy only leads to mismanaged and under-discussed solutions ultimately failing its purpose and continuing pertaining cycle of illiteracy for underprivileged communities. For instance, the educational policy for Bari Imam community can not be fitted with other communities of Bhara Kahu. Bari Imam has its legacy of having strong belief in the Peer system. Any policy which doesn't fit there isn't the talk of table for them. So even if policy makers make a collective educational policy for all, it would only stay in papers, true essence could only be achieved if individuality is respected.

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