

GENDERED ASPIRATIONS AND OCCUPATIONAL PREFERENCES AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN A MARGINALIZED URBAN COMMUNITY IN DELHI: IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL GUIDANCE AND EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a stage in which young people begin to articulate interests, ambitions and imagined futures. These aspirations are not formed in isolation; rather, they are shaped by family expectations, community norms and the ways gender roles are understood and reinforced in everyday life. This study explored the educational and occupational aspirations of forty adolescents from Class VIII and Class IX residing in a marginalized urban settlement in Delhi. A structured questionnaire was administered and responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Findings suggested that both boys and girls expressed interest in pursuing higher levels of education, though their reasoning differed by gender. Girls associated education with dignity, self-worth and, in some cases, delaying marriage, while boys linked education with earning, financial responsibility and adulthood. Occupational aspirations appeared more sharply segregated by gender: girls gravitated toward teaching, healthcare and office-based roles, whereas boys showed preference for engineering, police, defense and business-related occupations. The findings highlight how gendered occupational sorting occurs well before entry into labour markets and point to the need for school-based guidance and early exposure to a wider set of career possibilities. Interventions that encourage adolescents to reflect on gender norms and aspirations may support more equitable educational trajectories and broaden their occupational imagination.

Keywords: gender, adolescence, aspirations, occupational preferences, education, marginalized communities, Delhi, career guidance

INTRODUCTION

Aspirations can be understood as ideas about the future that adolescents construct as they approach adulthood. These ideas are influenced by everyday social interactions and by the cultural scripts that define what a “good life” should look like for boys and girls. In India, schooling plays a central role in shaping these aspirations. For many young people, especially in urban low-income settings, formal education represents an important route toward upward mobility, even as social and economic constraints continue to shape what futures are seen as realistic.

What makes adolescence particularly significant is that it marks a transition between childhood and adulthood. During this period, individuals become increasingly aware of gender roles and begin to internalize expectations related to behaviour, responsibility, career choices and family formation (Menon, 2012). This awareness is not uniform across boys and girls. Most societies, including India, attach different meanings to boyhood and girlhood, and these meanings influence how adolescents see themselves in relation to learning, work and adulthood (Bhasin, 2003).

Interestingly, while a great deal of education research in India focuses on access, dropout and scholastic achievement, relatively less attention has been paid to how adolescents themselves imagine their futures. Aspirations are often treated as individual preferences, even though they are embedded in social relations. A girl may aspire to become a doctor, but the feasibility of that aspiration depends on mobility, family support, financial resources and social norms regarding gender and respectability. A boy may aspire to join the police or the army, but this may reflect not only personal interest but also the cultural association between masculinity and authority.

The present study attempts to draw attention to this terrain. It explores how adolescents living in a marginalized urban community articulate educational and occupational aspirations and how these aspirations relate to gender norms. Although small in scale, the study offers insights into how gendered expectations form early and how schooling might support or challenge such expectations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender refers to socially constructed differences between men and women (Menon, 2012). It encompasses norms, expectations and roles that individuals learn through family, school and media (Giddens, 1993; Morris & Maisto, 1988). Butler (1989) famously argued that gender is performed and reproduced through repeated acts, making it appear natural over time. Adolescence is a period when such acts become more visible as individuals negotiate self-identity and social belonging.

Gender socialization influences how children interpret appropriate behaviour. Studies have shown that boys are encouraged to be assertive, independent and emotionally restrained, whereas girls are expected to be sensitive, caring and compliant (Hussain et al., 2015). These expectations carry over into occupational choices. Occupations associated with strength, authority or risk-taking—such as engineering, police or military—are often coded as masculine, while those associated with nurturing or instruction—such as teaching or nursing—are coded as feminine (Atli, 2017; Mayén & Berges, 2014).

The relationship between gender and aspirations has been examined internationally. Lupaschuk and Yewchuk (1998) found that students hold gendered occupational stereotypes and that girls' choices are more constrained. Papageorgiou (1982) similarly noted that gender roles influence vocational preferences among adolescents. In the Indian context, patriarchal family structures shape educational decisions and mobility for girls (Sharma, 2016). Concerns regarding safety and household responsibilities limit girls' participation in co-curricular activities and public spaces, which in turn limits exposure to alternative careers.

Identity theory also provides a useful framework. According to Stets (2006), individuals manage multiple identities—role identities (student, daughter, son), personal identities and social identities (gender, class, religion). Adolescents adjust their behaviour to align with identities they consider salient. Gender becomes a strong identity during adolescence and shapes how adolescents imagine adulthood.

Taken together, the literature suggests that aspirations are shaped by gender norms, family practices and socio-economic contexts. It also highlights that occupational sorting begins early, often before adolescents make formal educational or vocational choices. The present study contributes to this discussion by examining aspirations among middle-school adolescents in a marginalized Delhi community.

METHOD

Research Design

The study employed a descriptive design to explore how adolescents interpret education, work and gendered roles. Descriptive designs are suitable when the goal is to observe patterns without intervention (Kumar, 2011). In this case, the intent was to document how boys and girls make sense of future plans rather than to test causal relationships.

Participants and Setting

The study included forty adolescents—twenty-two boys and eighteen girls—from Class VIII and Class IX. All resided in a marginalized urban settlement in Delhi characterized by limited economic resources, low-rise housing and restricted recreational spaces. Such areas often have strong gender norms, especially around mobility and domestic work.

Sampling

Snowball sampling was used due to school closures during the early COVID-19 period. Initial contacts helped identify further participants. While this method does not allow broad generalization, it is appropriate for exploratory studies in constrained settings.

Instrument and Data Collection

A structured bilingual questionnaire was used to collect data. Items covered demographic details, educational aspirations, occupational preferences, recreational activities, family expectations and perceptions about gendered behaviour. Most items were close-ended, although some invited brief justifications. Questionnaires were completed in community spaces and took approximately twenty-five minutes.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS. Frequencies and percentages were used to compare patterns across gender. For this manuscript, educational and occupational aspirations are presented in tables while other results are discussed narratively.

Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and confidentiality assured. Given participants were minors, parental consent was obtained informally. No identifying information is reported.

FINDINGS

The findings highlight differences and similarities in how boys and girls imagine education, work and gender roles.

Educational Aspirations

Both boys and girls expressed interest in education beyond secondary school, though their rationales differed. Girls associated education with self-worth, dignity and awareness. Several indicated that graduation or post-graduation could bring “respect” or help in “becoming independent.” Boys, on the other hand, linked education to earning and responsibility, noting that higher qualifications help in “getting a job,” “supporting the family” or “earning well.”

Table 1: Educational Aspirations by Gender

Level Preferred	Boys (n=22)	Girls (n=18)
Class 10	2	1
Class 12	6	3
Graduation	8	8
Post-graduation	4	5
Professional Degree	2	1

Girls did not show lower ambition than boys. If anything, they appeared slightly more inclined towards post-graduation. This challenges widespread assumptions that girls in low-income settings have limited interest in education. Rather, their aspirations appeared constrained at the level of occupations, not education.

Occupational Aspirations

Occupational preferences showed stronger gender differentiation.

Table 2: Occupational Aspirations by Gender

Occupation Type Boys (n=22) Girls (n=18)

Engineering	6	1
Police/Defense	5	0
Business	4	0
Teaching	2	6
Healthcare	2	7
Office/Admin	1	3
Others	2	1

Girls' interest in teaching and healthcare aligns with feminine-coded occupations emphasizing care and respectability (Mayén & Berges, 2014). Boys' interest in engineering, police and business reflects masculine-coded roles emphasizing authority and financial contribution (Atli, 2017).

Domestic Responsibilities and Mobility

Girls reported heavier involvement in household work. Tasks such as cooking, cleaning and caring for siblings were described as routine. Boys had fewer domestic duties and more freedom to play outside. Girls also faced stricter mobility controls; they were expected to return home earlier and avoid "moving without reason." These practices shape exposure and time, which influence occupational imagination.

Perceptions of Gendered Behaviour

Respondents articulated common gender stereotypes. Crying was seen as appropriate for girls but not for boys. Boys were expected to be "strong," and girls "polite." Even colours and clothing carried gendered meanings. These findings indicate that adolescents have internalized gender norms in subtle ways, echoing Butler's (1989) notion of gender performance.

DISCUSSION

The findings suggest that gender shapes not only occupational preferences but also the symbolic meaning of education. Girls' aspirations reflected a desire for dignity and social mobility, even while constrained by norms of respectability. Boys treated education more instrumentally, viewing it as preparation for future financial responsibility. This contrast reflects broader cultural scripts in which men are seen as providers and women as nurturers (Hussain et al., 2015).

It is noteworthy that girls did not lack ambition. Their high educational aspirations contradict the notion that patriarchal contexts necessarily dampen girls' desire for schooling. However, occupational aspirations remained limited to fields deemed "suitable." This early occupational sorting, which Lupaschuk and Yewchuk (1998) describe, may lead to gendered labour market segregation later.

Domestic responsibilities and mobility restrictions further contributed to gendered aspirations. Time spent on chores reduces opportunities for relaxation, exploration or social learning—activities that support decision-

making and aspiration development. Boys, with fewer constraints, have more informal exposure to public spaces and peer networks.

Schools have an important role to play here. By Class VIII and IX, adolescents already have gendered occupational schemas. If career guidance begins only in senior secondary classes, it might reinforce rather than disrupt these schemas. Middle school interventions that expose students to diverse role models, including women in science and men in care professions, may broaden imagination.

IMPLICATIONS

Several implications emerge for educational practice:

- (1) **Early Career Guidance:** Middle school is an appropriate stage for career exposure activities. Waiting until Class XI or XII may be too late.
- (2) **Addressing Gender Norms:** Interventions should encourage reflection on gender, not as moral critique but as social learning.
- (3) **Teacher Training:** Teachers may unconsciously reinforce stereotypes; awareness training can help.
- (4) **Community-School Coordination:** For girls, mobility restrictions limit access to skill-building opportunities. Local partnerships may mitigate this.
- (5) **Holistic Understanding of Aspirations:** Aspirations blend emotion, identity and social norms; guidance must therefore go beyond labour market information.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that adolescents living in marginalized urban settings express aspirations through the lens of gendered identities. Although both boys and girls desire higher education, occupational preferences diverge sharply. Gendered sorting appears to happen early, shaped by domestic responsibilities, mobility norms and family expectations. Schools, therefore, can play a crucial role in expanding occupational imagination and creating supportive environments for equitable aspiration formation.

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