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Career Aspirations, Motivations, and Perceived Barriers of Female Students in Rajshahi Division

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Abstract

Girls at the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) level in Bangladesh often express strong ambitions for higher education and professional careers. However, these aspirations are frequently constrained by financial pressures, mobility restrictions, gendered expectations about "appropriate" behavior, and uneven access to academic guidance. In Rajshahi Division, where rural-urban contrasts and deeply rooted cultural norms shape everyday life, these constraints are especially pronounced. Despite the importance of this stage in shaping future possibilities, relatively few studies have examined how girls' aspirations, motivations, and perceived barriers intersect across different academic groups. This paper seeks to address that gap by exploring how HSC girls in selected colleges understand their futures, what motivates them, and what they perceive as obstacles to achieving their goals. The study employed a descriptive cross-sectional mixed-methods design, drawing on a multi-stage random sample of 396 students from Science, Humanities, and Business Studies groups across urban, semi-urban, and rural settings. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of six Likert-based subscales alongside open-ended items, complemented by twelve in-depth interviews. Quantitative responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics and composite means, while qualitative insights were examined thematically. The findings indicate that students across all groups aspire to purposeful academic and professional futures, though the intensity of motivation varies. Persistent financial constraints, limited guidance opportunities, gendered expectations, and prevailing social norms repeatedly shaped the extent to which these aspirations could be realized. Overall, the study reveals a persistent aspiration-capability gap that continues to influence the educational pathways of HSC girl students.

***Keywords**:* Girls' aspirations, Parental expectations, HSC level, Educational equity, Gender barriers.

1. Introduction

In many low- and middle-income countries, the central challenge in female education is no longer only getting girls into classrooms, but understanding whether schooling expands the futures they can realistically pursue (World Bank, 2018; UNICEF, 2019). Aspirations matter here because they shape how young people imagine "possible" lives, yet these aspirations are also socially produced and often bounded by local opportunity structures (Appadurai, 2004; Zipin et al., 2015). Motivation is the mechanism that connects these imagined futures to sustained effort, persistence, and goal-directed choices, especially during high-stakes transitions (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000). At the same time, aspirations and motivation are not formed or pursued in an

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unconstrained manner; they are shaped and often limited by financial hardship, gendered norms, restricted mobility, and uneven access to information and guidance, which affect how far girls can translate intentions into action (Kabeer, 1994; Nussbaum, 2000). The key issue, therefore, is the gap between what girls value and hope for and what they are actually able to achieve within the limits of their social and material circumstances (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). Understanding aspirations, motivation, and barriers together is therefore essential for explaining why strong educational hopes may coexist with constrained educational pathways.

Although girls' school attendance in South Asia has risen considerably in recent decades, entrenched social expectations continue to influence the aspirations girls are permitted to imagine for themselves (Kabeer, 1994; UNESCO, 2020a). In Bangladesh, initiatives such as the Female Secondary School Assistance Project (FSSAP) have expanded access to education (World Bank, 2007), yet expanded access alone has not eliminated the complex, localized challenges that continue to shape girls' educational trajectories (World Bank, 2018; UNICEF, 2021). These pressures become particularly visible at the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) level, when students begin to define clearer academic and professional goals and make decisions with long-term implications. At this stage, choices are increasingly shaped by how students evaluate their likelihood of success and the importance they attach to different educational pathways (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002).

Such dynamics are even more pronounced in the contrasting rural and urban environments of the Rajshahi Division. Cultural expectations, family norms, financial strain, the risk of early marriage, and limited exposure to career guidance often intersect in ways that constrain or redirect the ambitions of HSC girl students (Kabeer, 1994; UNICEF, 2021; BANBEIS, 2022). Understanding how girls interpret these conditions, and how they navigate their aspirations within them, is essential for grasping broader patterns of gendered educational experience. From a capability perspective, attention must be paid not only to aspirations themselves but also to the substantive freedoms that enable or constrain their realization (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000). Drawing on a mixed-methods approach, this paper engages with the everyday realities shaping these students' academic lives during this formative stage.

Against this backdrop, this paper examines the aspirations, career motivations, and perceived barriers of female students at the HSC level in selected colleges across the Rajshahi Division. More specifically, it explores how these students articulate their educational and career goals, what factors sustain or diminish their motivation, and how social, cultural, and economic conditions shape the opportunities available to them. By addressing these questions, this study seeks to contribute insights that may inform more equitable educational practices and policies, enriching ongoing debates on gender and education in Bangladesh.

2. Literature Review

Understanding how adolescent girls imagine their educational and career futures requires attention to three interrelated domains frequently highlighted in global and regional scholarship: aspirations, motivational dynamics, and the barriers that shape girls' ability to

act on their goals (Unterhalter et al., 2014). Existing research across international, South Asian, and Bangladeshi contexts offers important insights, yet notable gaps remain, particularly at the HSC level and in regions such as the Rajshahi Division.

Studies from low- and middle-income countries consistently show that adolescent girls articulate strong aspirations for higher education and professional careers, often matching or even exceeding the ambitions of boys despite facing more constrained opportunities (Madjdian et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2025). At the same time, these aspirations are highly sensitive to structural conditions like poverty, institutional quality, and the availability of local opportunities which frequently determine whether ambition evolves into realistic expectations or translates into successful transitions to tertiary education (Madjdian et al., 2021).

Comparable trends are evident across South Asia, where entrenched gender norms continue to shape the futures considered socially acceptable for adolescent girls (UNESCO, 2020b; UNICEF, 2021). Although enrollment has expanded substantially, girls remain concentrated in humanities and socially sanctioned fields, and their aspirations often reflect familial expectations around safety, reputation, and marriageability rather than independent long-term goals (Dundar et al., 2014; UNICEF ROSA, 2021). Evidence from India and Pakistan suggests that while many girls aspire to higher education, constraints related to mobility and subject streaming often limit access to non-traditional fields or professional pathways (Swainson, 2006; Parimala, 2022).

In Bangladesh, expansions in secondary education through initiatives such as FSSAP and various stipend programmes have significantly improved access (Islam, 2010; Salahuddin et al., 2014; World Bank, 2018). Yet several studies demonstrate that despite high aspirations, girls, especially those outside major metropolitan areas, remain disproportionately concentrated in humanities streams and tend to anticipate futures linked to socially acceptable local occupations (Kabeer, 2011). Research conducted in Khulna and Rajshahi shows that although interest in STEM exists, very few girls translate this interest into concrete goals such as engineering or technology, largely due to gendered stereotypes and limited access to reliable information (Rabbe & Alam, 2024; UKFIET, 2023). Collectively, these patterns suggest that while aspirations are present, they remain fragile and closely tied to local social norms.

Global and regional evidence points to a range of motivational drivers that shape how adolescent girls imagine their futures. Intrinsic interest in particular subjects, expectations about the economic benefits of education, encouragement from family members, exposure to successful female role models, and supportive school environments all strengthen motivation and promote more future-oriented planning (Mesa, 2013; UNICEF ROSA, 2021). At the same time, motivation is shaped by internalized gender expectations. Experimental work in African settings shows that when gender norms are made salient, girls tend to revise their aspirations downward, illustrating how socio-cultural pressures can affect self-belief and career orientation (Emenalo, 2024).

In South Asia, parental expectations and institutional factors play especially influential roles. Research from India, Nepal, and Pakistan shows that teacher guidance, access to

career information, and perceptions of safety strongly influence girls' willingness to pursue higher education or professional pathways (UNICEF ROSA, 2021; Swainson, 2006). Family strategies also matter: in many settings, girls are steered toward careers perceived as "safe," locally accessible, or compatible with anticipated domestic responsibilities.

Studies in the context of Bangladesh similarly highlight the significance of parental support, school climate, and the presence of role models in shaping girls' motivation (Asadullah & Chaudhury, 2009). Yet motivation frequently intersects with socio-economic realities. For rural and peri-urban girls, decisions often hinge on affordability, the distance to educational institutions, and perceived risks associated with studying away from home (Rahman & Akter, 2022). Even when motivation is strong, limited exposure to diverse career options constrains the ability to form informed and sustained goals.

While aspirations and motivation appear robust across many contexts, girls continue to encounter multiple, layered barriers that hinder academic progression and career development. Global evidence shows that poverty, limited access to quality secondary education, and weak labor markets reduce the returns to education for girls in many countries (Madjdian et al., 2021). Cultural expectations surrounding domestic work, early marriage, and reputational concerns further restrict aspirations or lead to early withdrawal from schooling (Mesa, 2013; UNICEF, 2025). Inadequate access to career information and financial resources also limits the translation of ambition into actionable plans (Allmang et al., 2021).

Across South Asia, girls often face structural and socio-cultural barriers like mobility restrictions, concerns about safety and harassment, and ongoing pressure to protect family honour. These are the factors that affect both educational continuity and the feasibility of attending institutions located farther from home (UNICEF ROSA, 2021; Swainson, 2006). Institutional constraints, including weak guidance systems, insufficient career support, and limited extracurricular opportunities, further hinder their ability to align interests with future goals.

Bangladesh reflects many of these regional patterns. Studies document persistent rural–urban disparities, uneven access to quality institutions, transportation challenges, and strong parental oversight, all of which shape girls' access to higher education and non-traditional fields (Begum et al. 2018). Even where aspirations are high, gender norms continue to impose mobility restrictions and narrow the range of socially acceptable academic pathways, particularly in districts such as Rajshahi where conservative cultural expectations remain influential (Rahman & Akter, 2022).

Despite a growing body of research on girls' education, important gaps remain. Much of the existing literature examines secondary or tertiary education in broad terms, offering limited insight into how aspirations, motivation, and perceived barriers intersect specifically at the Higher Secondary Certificate stage, a transitional period when girls begin making consequential academic and career decisions. Research frequently treats girls as a homogeneous category, paying insufficient attention to variations across Science, Humanities, and Business Studies groups. Moreover, relatively little empirical work has focused on the Rajshahi Division, where rural-urban disparities and locally

embedded cultural norms shape educational opportunities in distinctive ways. Addressing these gaps, the present study investigates how HSC girl students in selected colleges of Rajshahi articulate their aspirations, what sustains their motivation, and which structural and contextual barriers they encounter.

3. Theoretical Foundations

Understanding how HSC girls form and pursue their educational and career aspirations requires a framework that accounts for both individual motivations and the broader social and structural forces shaping their choices. No single theory can fully explain why girls may aspire strongly yet struggle to realize those aspirations. For this reason, the present study draws on three complementary perspectives. They are Expectancy-Value Theory, Self-Efficacy Theory, and the Capability Approach. This has been done to illuminate how aspirations emerge, how motivation is sustained, and how contextual barriers constrain the freedoms necessary to pursue long-term goals. These perspectives were selected deliberately: psychological models alone cannot account for the structural realities girls face, while structural models often overlook the personal and motivational factors that render aspirations meaningful in the first place.

Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) suggests that students' aspirations are shaped by their expectations of success and the value they attach to particular tasks or goals (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). For HSC girl students, these judgments are influenced by prior academic experiences, gendered socialization, and cultural messages about which subjects or careers are attainable or "appropriate" for girls. International and South Asian research shows that these influences often direct girls toward "safe" or feminized fields, shaping both perceived value and expected success (Madjdian et al., 2021; UNICEF, 2025; Swainson, 2006). Similar patterns are evident in Bangladesh, where social norms surrounding respectability, mobility, and family reputation significantly influence girls' educational choices (UNICEF, 2020). Within this study, EVT helps explain how girls initially form aspirations within the Science, Humanities, and Business Studies groups and how social norms contour what is viewed as desirable or realistically achievable.

Self-Efficacy Theory emphasizes the role of students' beliefs about their capability to succeed. Bandura (1997) identifies mastery experiences, vicarious learning, encouragement, and emotional states as the core sources of self-efficacy. These factors influence persistence, resilience, and the willingness to pursue demanding pathways. Evidence suggests that although many girls have strong academic ability, they often report lower confidence, especially in competitive or male-dominated fields (Mesa, 2013). Supportive teachers, relatable role models, and family encouragement have been shown to bolster girls' confidence and strengthen their motivation (Rabbe & Alam, 2024). In the South Asian and Bangladeshi contexts, self-efficacy is further shaped by parental monitoring, reputational considerations, and the availability of academic or career guidance (Sarker, 2016). Applied in this study, Self-Efficacy Theory helps explain why some girls pursue ambitious goals with confidence while others, despite high aspirations, express hesitation owing to limited encouragement, weak preparation, or restricted exposure to successful female role models.

The Capability Approach, articulated by Nussbaum (2011), shifts attention toward the structural and relational conditions that determine whether individuals possess the real freedoms or capabilities to pursue the futures they value. While girls may aspire to respected or professionally rewarding careers, their actual opportunities are shaped by financial constraints, limited mobility, safety concerns, and institutional weaknesses. These constraints are particularly visible in Bangladesh, where rural-urban disparities, community expectations, and reputational pressures strongly influence girls' educational pathways. Regional evidence shows that safety concerns, long or unsafe commutes, and limited institutional resources can significantly narrow girls' substantive freedoms, even when their motivation is high (UNICEF ROSA, 2021; Rahman & Akter, 2022). In the Rajshahi Division, transport challenges, cultural conservatism, and uneven institutional support shape not only which colleges girls can realistically attend but also the range of careers they can imagine. The Capability Approach therefore helps illuminate the structural barriers reflected in this study's measures of societal and contextual challenges.

Taken together, these three perspectives are mutually reinforcing. Expectancy-Value Theory explains how aspirations initially take form through expectations of success and the value students attach to different goals. Self-Efficacy Theory clarifies how motivation is sustained through confidence, mastery experiences, and social encouragement. The Capability Approach highlights how structural and contextual conditions expand or restrict the real freedoms required to pursue those aspirations. Combined, they offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the academic and career trajectories of HSC girls across the rural, semi-urban, and urban settings of the Rajshahi Division. This integrated lens guides the analysis by linking girls' aspirations, their motivational beliefs, and the contextual barriers that shape their educational and career pathways.

4. Methodology

A descriptive cross-sectional design was employed to examine the aspirations, motivation, and perceived barriers of Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) girl students in Rajshahi Division, Bangladesh. The target population comprised HSC girl students enrolled in general colleges within the selected administrative units of the division. This design was appropriate for capturing students' educational and career orientations at a single point in time without manipulation of variables (Cohen et al., 2018).

Sampling Procedure

A multi-stage cluster sampling strategy was used. The selection process began with the random selection of Rajshahi Division from the national administrative structure, followed by the random selection of one district (Chapai Nawabganj), one upazila (Shibganj), and one union (Monakasha). At each successive stage, a single college was randomly selected from the available institutions, resulting in the inclusion of Rajshahi Govt. City College, Chapai Nawabganj Govt. Girls' College, Shibganj Women's Degree College, and Adina Fazlul Haq Govt. College.

The four selected colleges represent four socio-geographic clusters within the division: a division-level urban college, a district-level town college, an upazila-level semi-urban college, and a union-level rural college. This structure enabled contextual comparison

across distinct administrative and settlement levels while preserving the integrity of the multi-stage selection process. These clusters reflect variation in institutional and geographic context rather than proportionate representation of all colleges within each administrative category.

Table 1: Multi-Stage Sampling Procedure and Socio-Geographic Clusters

Socio-geographic cluster	Administrative location	Settlement type	Multi-stage selection pathway	Selected college (study site)
Cluster 1: Urban (Division-level city context)	Rajshahi City Corporation, Rajshahi Division	Urban	Rajshahi Division - urban city context - college selected to represent the urban cluster	Rajshahi Govt. City College
Cluster 2: District town (District HQ context)	District headquarters, Chapai Nawabganj	District town (urban)	Rajshahi Division - Chapai Nawabganj District - district headquarters - college selected to represent district-town cluster	Chapai Nawabganj Govt. Girls' College
Cluster 3: Semi-urban (Upazila context)	Shibganj Upazila, Chapai Nawabganj	Semi-urban	Rajshahi Division - Chapai Nawabganj District - Shibganj Upazila - college selected to represent semi-urban cluster	Shibganj Women's Degree College
Cluster 4: Rural (Union context)	Monakasha Union, Shibganj Upazila, Chapai Nawabganj	Rural	Rajshahi Division - Chapai Nawabganj District - Shibganj Upazila - Monakasha Union - college selected to represent rural cluster	Adina Fazlul Haq Govt. College

Source: Field Survey 2025

From the selected institutions, respondents were drawn from three academic groups: Science, Humanities, and Business Studies. Although data collection yielded a larger number of responses, the final analytical sample comprised 396 students, with equal representation across the three academic groups (n = 132 each). This balanced composition facilitated meaningful comparison of aspirations, motivation, and perceived barriers across academic pathways.

5. Instrument and Subscale Development

To operationalize the study's objectives, the questionnaire included six theoretically informed subscales designed to capture the psychological, informational, and structural dimensions underpinning girls' aspiration formation. These constructs-Aspirations, Career Motivation, Confidence/Self-Efficacy, Awareness and Information Access, Perceived Societal Barriers, and Personal and Contextual Challenges—were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree). Subscale development followed a conceptually guided translation of the theoretical framework into measurable indicators. Expectancy-Value Theory informed the items related to motivation and task value (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002); Self-Efficacy Theory guided items on confidence and perceived ability (Bandura, 1997); and the Capability Approach shaped indicators addressing social constraints and structural limitations (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000).

Items were adapted from established international instruments (Gregor & O'Brien, 2015; Vallerand et al., 1992; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995; McWhirter, 1997), and the questionnaire was refined through a pilot test with 20 HSC girls to enhance clarity and contextual relevance. Each construct was carefully aligned with the study's objectives to maintain conceptual coherence. The final six domains were established after carefully reviewing the items and grouping related indicators together, so that conceptually similar responses were organized into coherent constructs aligned with the study's theoretical framework. Their substantive focus is summarized below in terms of the specific dimensions each subscale was designed to capture.

For analytical clarity, the adapted items were systematically grouped into six composite domains aligned with the study objectives. These domains capture (a) imagined educational and career futures (Aspirations), (b) intrinsic and extrinsic drivers of goal commitment (Career Motivation), (c) perceived academic and career capability (Confidence/Self-Efficacy), (d) exposure to higher education pathways and guidance (Awareness and Information Access), (e) gendered and social constraints (Perceived Societal Barriers), and (f) structural and contextual impediments such as financial hardship and mobility limitations (Personal and Contextual Challenges). The final instrument comprised 71 Likert-type items distributed across the six subscales.

Internal consistency reliability for each subscale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha to determine whether the items within a construct demonstrated sufficient coherence to justify composite mean calculation. In line with established methodological guidelines, values of .70 and above were treated as acceptable, while lower values were interpreted with caution, particularly for composite constructs that capture diverse contextual dimensions (George & Mallery, 2003; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). As the present study relies on descriptive analysis rather than latent variable modeling, alpha coefficients were used to evaluate scale consistency and were not treated as grounds for excluding subscales.

The questionnaire also gathered demographic information related to age, academic group, SSC background, parental occupation, housing type, and mobility options, etc, and included several open-ended questions. These qualitative responses enriched the analysis by linking variations in aspirations and constraints to students' socioeconomic and geographic contexts.

To deepen and contextualize the survey findings, twelve in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted. One student from each academic group (Science, Humanities, Business Studies) in every college was purposively selected to ensure representation. The interviews followed a thematic checklist covering aspirations, motivations, academic decisions, and perceived challenges. Interview notes were analyzed thematically and triangulated with the quantitative patterns to strengthen interpretive depth.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. For each subscale, item scores were averaged to generate composite means, an appropriate approach for summarizing Likert-type attitudinal data (Norman, 2010). Group-wise comparisons across Science, Humanities, and Business Studies allowed the study to identify

meaningful stream-specific variations. Results were presented through tables accompanied by narrative summaries. Qualitative insights from the open-ended responses and the IDIs were integrated throughout the analysis to contextualize numerical patterns and deepen understanding of students' lived experiences.

6. Results

Understanding the girls' social and economic backgrounds is essential for interpreting their aspirations, motivations, perceived barriers, and the futures they envision (Unterhalter et al., 2014). Although the HSC-level sample was evenly distributed across academic groups, more than 58% of the respondents had studied Science at the SSC stage, indicating that many students shifted academic groups upon entering college.

Educational patterns within families reflected long-standing gender disparities. Fathers were, on average, more formally educated than mothers: about 22% of fathers held a master's degree, compared to only 7% of mothers. Occupational patterns displayed a similar divide. While 38.64% of fathers engaged in farming and 15.91% operated small businesses, 85% of mothers were homemakers, highlighting the limited economic participation of women in many households.

Economic challenges were prevalent among respondents' families. Over half lived in tin-shed houses, and 60.35% of fathers earned less than BDT 20,000 per month. Among mothers, 89.65% had no income or earned less than BDT 10,000 monthly. Spending on private tuition was modest: only 29.8% of families were able to spend more than BDT 4,000 per month. Collectively, these indicators point to a predominantly low to lower-middle-income socioeconomic background.

As presented in Table 2, 39.4% of respondents walked to college, while 47.5% relied on auto-rickshaws. A substantial majority (82.3%) reported travelling alone. In terms of distance, 33.3% travelled between 2-4 kilometers daily, while 35.4% travelled less than 2 kilometers and 31.3% travelled more than 4 kilometers.

Table 2: Daily Mobility Patterns of HSC Girl Students (N = 396)

Mobility Indicator	**Category**	**n**	**%**
Mode of Travel to College	Walk	156	39.4
	Auto-rickshaw	188	47.5
	Other modes	52	13.1
Travel Companion	Travel alone	326	82.3
	Travel with others	70	17.7
Daily Distance Travelled	Less than 2 km	140	35.4
	2–4 km	132	33.3
	More than 4 km	124	31.3

Source: Field Survey 2025.

The persistence of early marriage during the HSC years emerged as a striking finding. More than one-third of the respondents (35.35%) were already married, with the highest concentration in rural colleges. Among these married students, only 14.39% received financial support from their husbands; most continued to rely primarily on their parents. Family structure also shaped educational experiences: over half of the respondents (52.53%) were firstborn daughters, a position often associated with increased household responsibilities. In addition, 68.18% reported that their fathers remained the main source of financial support for their education. Together, these figures highlight that despite the pressures associated with early marriage, parental support, particularly from fathers, was the decisive factor enabling girls to continue their studies.

Building on this demographic profile, the study examined students' educational and psychological characteristics using six composite subscales: Aspirations, Career Motivation, Confidence/Self-Efficacy, Awareness and Information Access, Perceived Societal Barriers, and Personal and Contextual Challenges. These subscales offer a structured lens for understanding how HSC girls articulate their goals, sustain motivation, and navigate the constraints that shape their academic and career trajectories. The following sections present the quantitative patterns for each subscale across the three academic groups.

Table 3: Aspirations Subscale

Stream	n	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max	Cronbach's Alpha
Business Studies	132	4.274	0.571	2.077	5.0	0.892
Humanities	132	4.439	0.397	3.231	5.0	0.79
Science	132	4.428	0.493	2.077	5.0	0.843

Source: Field survey 2025

Across all three academic groups, HSC girl students reported high levels of educational and career aspirations. On a five-point scale, mean scores were 4.274 for Business Studies, 4.439 for Humanities, and 4.428 for Science students, indicating that most respondents strongly agreed with statements reflecting ambitious futures. Humanities and Science girls showed very similar aspiration levels, with Humanities students scoring marginally higher. The standard deviations (0.397-0.571) suggest that responses were generally clustered toward the upper end of the scale, with relatively little dispersion. Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.79 to 0.892, indicating strong internal consistency of the Aspirations items across groups.

Table 4: Motivation Subscale

Group	**n**	**Mean**	**Std Dev**	**Min**	**Max**	**Cronbach's Alpha**
Business Studies	132	3.826	0.626	2.0	4.889	0.767
Humanities	132	4.002	0.465	2.0	4.889	0.549
Science	132	4.003	0.483	2.0	4.889	0.586

Source: Field survey 2025

Mean scores on the Career Motivation subscale were in the upper-mid range, pointing to a generally positive but somewhat more varied motivational pattern. Business Studies students reported a mean of 3.826, while Humanities and Science students reported almost identical means of 4.002 and 4.003, respectively. This suggests that girls in Humanities and Science maintained slightly stronger and more consistent motivation toward their educational and career goals than those in Business Studies. Standard deviations (0.465-0.626) indicate moderate variability, with Business Studies respondents showing the widest spread of responses. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.549 to 0.767, indicating acceptable reliability overall, though motivation scores for Humanities and Science should be interpreted with some caution due to comparatively lower internal consistency.

Table 5: Confidence / Self-Efficacy Subscale

Group	n	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max	Cronbach's Alpha
Business Studies	132	3.331	0.435	2.125	4.75	0.332
Humanities	132	3.231	0.459	2.0	4.75	0.554
Science	132	3.265	0.451	2.0	4.75	0.545

Source: Field survey 2025

Confidence or self-efficacy scores were more moderate than aspirations and motivation. Mean values were 3.331 for Business Studies, 3.231 for Humanities, and 3.265 for Science students, suggesting that girls, on average, felt only somewhat confident about their ability to achieve their goals through their current academic group. Differences across streams were small, and standard deviations (around 0.45) indicate a reasonably similar spread of responses in all three groups. Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.332 to 0.554, showing weaker internal consistency, particularly among Business Studies students. These results suggest that while the subscale captures an important dimension of students' perceptions, confidence scores should be interpreted carefully.

Table 6: Awareness & Information Access Subscale

Group	n	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max	Cronbach's Alpha
Business Studies	132	3.601	0.442	2.545	4.818	0.483
Humanities	132	3.618	0.353	2.727	4.455	0.147
Science	132	3.707	0.374	2.545	4.818	0.229

Source: Field survey 2025

On the Awareness and Information Access subscale, mean scores were again in the upper-mid range, indicating that girls perceived a moderate degree of exposure to information about higher education and careers. Business Studies students had a mean of 3.601, Humanities students 3.618, and Science students 3.707, with Science girls reporting slightly higher awareness overall. The relatively low standard deviations (0.353-0.442) show that responses were fairly consistent within groups. However, Cronbach's alpha values for this subscale were comparatively low (0.147-0.483), especially for Humanities and Science, indicating limited internal consistency and suggesting that these results should be viewed as indicative rather than definitive.

Table 7: Perceived Societal Barriers Subscale

Group	n	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max	Cronbach's Alpha
Business Studies	132	3.192	0.605	1.733	4.667	0.740
Humanities	132	3.128	0.489	2.2	4.4	0.578
Science	132	3.151	0.548	1.733	4.667	0.655

Source: Field survey 2025

Perceptions of societal barriers were situated around the midpoint of the scale, pointing to a moderate level of perceived social constraints across all academic groups. Mean scores were 3.192 for Business Studies, 3.128 for Humanities, and 3.151 for Science students, with only very small differences among the three groups. Standard deviations (0.489-0.605) reflect some variation in how strongly individual girls perceived societal barriers such as gender norms, family expectations, and community pressures. Cronbach's alpha values between 0.578 and 0.740 indicate acceptable internal consistency, suggesting that this subscale reliably captured a shared sense of social constraints among respondents.

Table 8: Personal & Contextual Challenges Subscale

Group	n	Mean	Std Dev	Min	Max	Cronbach's Alpha
Business Studies	132	3.644	0.408	2.267	4.867	0.566
Humanities	132	3.673	0.399	2.600	4.867	0.448
Science	132	3.721	0.419	2.533	4.933	0.315

Source: Field survey 2025

Scores on the Personal and Contextual Challenges subscale were also in the upper-mid range, indicating that girls across all streams experienced a noticeable level of practical and structural challenges in pursuing their education. Business Studies students reported a mean score of 3.644, Humanities students 3.673, and Science students 3.721, again with only minor differences across groups. The relatively similar standard deviations (0.399-0.419) suggest that experiences of financial constraints, transportation difficulties, and institutional limitations were broadly shared. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.315 to 0.566, indicating modest internal consistency and implying that the challenge scores capture a general pattern but should be interpreted with some caution at the subscale level.

Qualitative Contextualization of Survey Findings

Qualitative responses from the open-ended items and IDIs added contextual depth to the quantitative patterns. Overall, the findings revealed that most girls held strong aspirations for higher education and respected professions, even when facing personal and contextual constraints. Many described education as their primary pathway to security and self-reliance, with one Humanities student noting that *"education is the only way I can build a secure future."* Science students frequently expressed ambitions for medicine or engineering, while Humanities and Business Studies students spoke of teaching, law, banking, or government service. These aspirations closely reflected the consistently high aspiration scores across academic groups.

Motivational accounts also echoed the quantitative findings, with girls often connecting their drive for academic success to family responsibility, personal self-belief, and hopes for upward mobility. Firstborn daughters frequently highlighted the emotional burden of supporting younger siblings, and several girls described their parents' sacrifices as the primary source of their motivation. As a Business Studies student explained, *"My parents work so hard. I want my education to change our situation."* This sense of duty, combined with internal determination, aligned with the mid-to-high motivation scores observed across groups.

At the same time, girls described significant barriers that shaped their daily educational experiences, reinforcing the moderate levels of perceived societal barriers and contextual challenges captured in the quantitative results. Many students discussed challenges related to long or unsafe commutes, limited transportation options, or the need to walk alone, sometimes several kilometers each day. A Humanities student from a rural college shared, *"I walk to college alone every day. It's difficult, but I have no choice."* Others described the weight of household responsibilities, especially married students and firstborn daughters, who often balanced domestic duties with academic demands. Limited access to guidance on educational and career planning was another common concern, as students in both rural and urban institutions reported relying mostly on peers or siblings rather than structured counseling. Together, these narratives illustrate how girls navigate their aspirations within a landscape of motivational strengths, structural barriers, and informational gaps.

7. Discussion

The quantitative findings reveal a consistent pattern across academic groups and socio-geographic contexts: high educational and career aspirations, mid-to-high motivation, comparatively lower confidence, and moderate perceptions of societal and contextual barriers. Qualitative narratives reinforce these patterns by showing how girls articulate ambitious futures while navigating domestic responsibilities, limited guidance, and mobility constraints. Together, the findings point to a persistent aspiration–capability tension, where strong educational goals coexist with uneven psychological and structural resources.

High mean scores on the Aspirations subscale indicate strong commitment to higher education and respected professions across Science, Humanities, and Business Studies groups. This pattern is echoed in students' narratives describing education as a pathway to independence and security. Many articulated ambitions in medicine, engineering, teaching, banking, and government service, reflecting shared aspirations across geographic settings. As one rural student noted, "*I want to study further even if the road is long and no one in my village has gone this far*." These accounts demonstrate that aspirations function not only as academic goals but as expressions of resilience and future-oriented identity, consistent with prior South Asian research documenting ambitious educational visions among girls in constrained environments.

Mid-to-high scores on the Career Motivation subscale suggest sustained effort toward academic goals, particularly among Science students. Qualitative accounts reveal that motivation is often rooted in family responsibility and parental sacrifice. Firstborn

daughters described feeling accountable for younger siblings, and several students linked academic success to improving family circumstances. As one Business Studies student explained, "*My parents work so hard. I want my education to change our situation*." These narratives reflect the value component described in Expectancy-Value Theory, where educational effort is shaped by perceived importance and future payoff, even when certainty about success varies.

In contrast to aspiration and motivation, lower mean scores on the Confidence or Self-Efficacy subscale suggest uncertainty about personal capability. This gap appears in narratives of limited study time, household obligations, and marital responsibilities. A married student observed, "*I want to continue, but after marriage everything goes around household work*." Such experiences illustrate how confidence depends on supportive contexts and mastery opportunities, as emphasized in self-efficacy theory. The divergence between aspiration and confidence thus represents a psychological dimension of the broader aspiration-capability tension.

Moderate scores on Perceived Societal Barriers and Personal and Contextual Challenges indicate persistent structural constraints. Students described financial hardship, unsafe mobility, limited coaching access, and inadequate career guidance. A rural Science student stated, "*I want to join coaching, but the road is unsafe and my parents don't allow me.*" These accounts illustrate how environmental conditions shape the feasibility of educational pathways. From a capability perspective, such constraints restrict the substantive freedoms required to convert aspirations into outcomes. Rural–urban differences further accentuate inequality in access to information and institutional support.

Taken together, the quantitative patterns and qualitative narratives reveal a dynamic interaction among aspiration, motivation, confidence, and structural conditions. Aspirations provide direction and motivation sustains effort, but confidence mediates perceived feasibility while contextual constraints define practical limits. The qualitative accounts deepen understanding of how these dimensions intersect in everyday life, substantiating the presence of an aspiration–capability gap at the Higher Secondary Certificate stage.

These findings align with existing South Asian research showing that girls often maintain ambitious educational goals despite social and economic barriers (Madjdian et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2020b). The present study extends this literature by demonstrating how psychological and structural dimensions interact at a critical transitional stage of schooling. By integrating survey-based subscale patterns with narrative evidence, the study moves beyond measuring aspiration alone and highlights the conditions necessary for its realization.

8. Conclusion

HSC girl students in the Rajshahi Division aspire to futures that reach far beyond their present constraints, yet these ambitions unfold within the realities of their academic backgrounds, geographic contexts, and uneven access to support. While aspirations were consistently high across all academic groups, levels of confidence and awareness varied considerably, especially among rural girls, married students, and those in fields such as Business Studies where institutional opportunities were more limited. Their motivation,

often grounded in family responsibility and personal determination, coexisted with daily challenges related to mobility, financial hardship, household duties, and the absence of structured guidance systems.

These findings make clear that aspiration alone is insufficient. Without supportive institutions, safe mobility, and accessible information, girls must continually negotiate the gap between what they hope to achieve and what they can realistically pursue. By foregrounding students' voices and experiences, this study underscores the urgent need for targeted academic support, improved safety and mobility conditions, and meaningful guidance structures to better align girls' educational dreams with the opportunities available to them.

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