

Between Faith and Aspiration: Religion, Patriarchy, and the Educational Aspirations of Young Women in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Scholarly and policy debates on women's education in Muslim-majority societies have long been structured by a binary in which religion functions either as a structural barrier to girls' schooling or, in post-secular counter-narratives, as an enabling resource for women's self-cultivation. This conceptual paper argues that both framings are analytically inadequate: the first reproduces a secularist developmentalism that misreads the role of Islamic discourse in women's lives; the second risks a form of piety romanticism that brackets the material structures of patriarchal authority within which religious practice occurs. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory, the capability approach, and intersectionality, the paper develops an integrated conceptual framework — the Religious Negotiation of Educational Aspiration (RNEA) Framework — that theorises religion as simultaneously a structural field of constraint, a legitimising resource, a repertoire of agentic strategy, and a contested discursive terrain within which educational aspirations are formed, sustained, and sometimes foreclosed. The paper's central theoretical contribution is the concept of interpretive conversion: the process through which specific readings of Islamic texts are deployed to transform the social meaning of girls' schooling, functioning either to reduce educational resources to something practically unavailable to women or to amplify access by embedding educational aspiration within a framework of religious obligation. The paper situates this argument in the specific conditions of Pakistan — postcolonial governance, sectarian plurality, economic inequality, and rapid social change — while maintaining comparative generativity for Muslim-majority contexts in the Global South. It concludes with a testable theoretical proposition: that the direction and magnitude of religion's effect on young women's educational aspirations is mediated primarily by the interpretive tradition operative in the household, rather than by level of religiosity as such.

Summary

This revised manuscript responds to a rigorous internal review against Gender & Society submission standards. Seven substantive interventions were made: (1) The theoretical contribution is stated earlier and with greater precision; (2) The RNEA Framework now distinguishes analytical levels more explicitly and is defended against potential objections; (3) The postcolonial feminism/capability approach dialogue is extended through the addition of a bridging concept — 'interpretive conversion' — that resolves the universalism/relativism tension; (4) The intersectionality section has been strengthened to address caste-inflected hierarchies and disability as under-theorised axes; (5) The literature review has been expanded to engage Khoja-Moolji (2018) on pious women in Pakistani schooling and Ong (1988) on power and gender in Muslim societies; (6) Section 3 now directly addresses the 'piety romanticism' critique of post-Mahmood scholarship; (7) The conclusion articulates a testable conceptual proposition rather than a general call for further research.

Keywords: Educational Aspirations, Religion and Education, Muslim Women, Postcolonial Feminism, Capability Approach, Intersectionality, Interpretive Conversion, Pakistan, Global South, Islamic Agency

Introduction

The question of how religion shapes women's educational lives in Muslim-majority societies occupies a productive and persistently contested space in feminist sociology, comparative education, and development studies. Yet the conceptual vocabulary through which this question is most commonly answered remains impoverished. Dominant frameworks either treat Islam as a cultural obstacle to modernisation — a residue of pre-modern social organisation that must yield to the expanding logic of formal education — or, in a corrective move that has itself become something of an orthodoxy, celebrate Muslim women's religious practice as evidence of an autonomous, piety-centred form of agency irreducible to liberal-secular norms. This paper

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argues that neither position adequately theorises the relationship between religion and educational aspiration. Together, they foreclose the analytical space required to understand how young women in Muslim-majority societies actually navigate the intersection of faith, family, gender, and educational desire.

Pakistan offers a critically important site for interrogating these frameworks. As one of the world's most populous Muslim-majority states, with a female literacy rate of approximately 46–49 per cent against 71 per cent for men, chronic gender disparities in tertiary enrolment, a complex postcolonial political history, and significant internal sectarian diversity, Pakistan generates conditions under which the relationship between religion, gender, and education can be examined with the specificity it demands. Crucially, Pakistan is not simply an empirical location at which pre-existing theories are tested; it is a site from which new theoretical insights can be generated — a site of Southern theory production, in terms [1,2].

This paper advances a single, clearly stated theoretical claim: that religion functions in the formation of young Pakistani women's educational aspirations as a multi-directional force whose effects are determined not by the presence or intensity of religious belief but by the specific interpretive tradition operative in a given household and community context. To theorise this claim, the paper introduces the concept of interpretive conversion — the process through which particular readings of Islamic teaching transform the social meaning of girls' education, functioning either to reduce educational resources to something unavailable to women as a substantive freedom or to amplify access by embedding educational aspiration within a framework of religious obligation. This concept synthesises the capability approach's account of conversion factors with the postcolonial feminist insistence on the internal plurality and contestability of Islamic tradition, resolving a tension between these two traditions that has impeded their joint deployment in educational research [3,4,5].

The paper develops this argument through the Religious Negotiation of Educational Aspiration (RNEA) Framework, an integrated seven-component conceptual architecture that maps the analytical relationships between structural context, religious interpretation, gender norms, family mediation, aspiration formation, agency and negotiation, and educational outcomes. The framework is designed to be generative rather than descriptive: it identifies the mechanisms through which religion enters the aspiration formation process and the conditions under which those mechanisms operate in constraining or enabling directions, without reducing the complexity of aspiration formation to a linear causal model.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 maps the debate on religion, gender, and educational aspiration and identifies its theoretical fault lines. Section 3 develops the critique of the barrier thesis and the counter-critique of piety romanticism, introducing interpretive conversion as a conceptual resolution. Section 4 examines the postcolonial feminist critique of Western developmental frameworks and its implications for representing Pakistani women's educational experiences. Section 5 deploys the capability approach to theorise aspiration as substantive

freedom, with particular attention to the bidirectional operation of religious interpretation as a conversion factor. Section 6 applies intersectional analysis to disaggregate the category of 'young Pakistani women.' Section 7 presents the RNEA Framework in full. Section 8 draws policy implications. Section 9 situates the paper's contributions within Global South scholarship. Section 10 concludes with a testable theoretical proposition.

Religion, Gender, and Educational Aspiration: The Fault Lines

The scholarship bearing on this paper's central problem spans three distinct intellectual traditions, each of which captures important dimensions of the phenomenon while occluding others. Mapping these traditions — and identifying the fault lines between them — establishes the analytical space the paper seeks to occupy.

The first tradition is constituted by political economy and development economics accounts of gender gaps in education. In this literature, religion typically enters as a proxy for cultural context, modifying the incentive structures associated with girls' schooling but ultimately receding as development proceeds and the returns to female education rise [6,7]. The implicit developmental teleology in this account — the assumption that religious influence is inversely proportional to modernity — is not simply empirically questionable but theoretically incoherent: it cannot account for the documented increase in Islamic practice among educated, urban Pakistani women, nor for the use of Islamic argumentation by women's rights advocates working within Pakistan's civil society. Religion, on this account, is a variable that must eventually disappear from the equation; it cannot be a constitutive element of women's educational aspirations.

The second tradition, structural sociology of education, has moved beyond the crude modernisation framework by attending to the institutional configurations — school proximity, curricular content, safety environments, teacher behaviour — that mediate between household decisions and girls' educational participation [8,9]. Yet as Fennell and Arnot (2008) observe, structural accounts continue to operate primarily at the level of institutions and incentives, leaving largely unexamined the subjective dimensions of educational experience. The question of how young women form, sustain, and defend aspirations under conditions of constrained opportunity — the interior architecture of educational desire — lies beyond the scope of structural analysis [10].

The third tradition — feminist cultural sociology and anthropology of Muslim women's practice — has provided the most theoretically sophisticated engagement with the relationship between religion and women's agency. Mahmood's foundational study of the women's mosque movement in Cairo challenged secular feminist frameworks by demonstrating that Islamic piety practices constituted a form of ethical self-constitution irreducible to liberal autonomy. Rinaldo extended this analysis to Indonesia, showing how Muslim women activists deployed religious discourse to advance gender-equitable outcomes. In Pakistan specifically, Khoja-Moolji's ethnographic work on Islamist schooling for girls demonstrates how

religious educational institutions can generate forms of female empowerment and civic aspiration that secular development frameworks are ill-equipped to recognize [4,5]. Bano's study of madrasa education in Pakistan similarly demonstrates the internal heterogeneity of religious institutions and the active role of women in shaping their own religious education [11,12].

The fault lines between these traditions are consequential. The first tradition cannot theorise religion as anything other than an obstacle. The second cannot reach the subjective dimensions of aspiration. The third has produced sophisticated accounts of religious agency but has — as this paper argues in Section 3 — sometimes bracketed the material structures of patriarchal power within which that agency is exercised. What is required is a framework that draws on the analytical resources of all three traditions without reproducing their respective blind spots. Crucially, the aspiration literature itself — Appadurai's account of the culturally produced 'capacity to aspire,' Archer and colleagues' (2010) research on identity and educational desire, Baker's sociology of the global spread of educational norms — has been developed almost exclusively in secular, European and North American contexts and has not yet been adequately extended to Muslim-majority societies in the Global South. This extension is among the paper's central theoretical projects [13-15].

Beyond the Barrier Thesis: Interpretive Conversion as a Conceptual Advance

The 'barrier thesis' — the dominant representation of Islam in international development discourse on women's education — holds that Islamic practice constitutes a structural impediment to girls' educational participation, operating through restrictions on female mobility, purdah norms, and conservative jurisprudential interpretations that assign women's primary social function to the domestic sphere [16]. This thesis has driven the design of international education programmes that frame girls' schooling as a challenge of overcoming cultural and religious resistance, and it continues to shape funding architectures and evaluation frameworks associated with SDG 4 and SDG 5.

The empirical foundations of the barrier thesis are not entirely without merit. Restrictions on female mobility, the enforcement of purdah through community surveillance, and the use of religious idioms to justify the interruption of girls' secondary education are documented features of social life in many Pakistani communities [7]. The critical analytical question, however, is one of attribution: whether these constraints derive from Islam as such or from specific patriarchal deployments of Islamic discourse that are — and this point is crucial — internally contested within the tradition. Conflating Islam with particular patriarchal readings of Islam is not a matter of empirical error alone; it is an epistemological failure that reproduces the very essentialism that postcolonial feminist scholarship has identified as a condition of possibility for colonial and development governance [17,18].

The corrective to the barrier thesis, most influentially articulated in Mahmood's [4] work, has generated its own analytical risks, however. Mahmood's insistence that women's piety practices constitute genuine forms of ethical agency, even when those

practices appear to reproduce conservative gender norms, was a necessary intervention against a secular feminist tradition that could only recognise as agency what approximated liberal autonomy. But the post-Mahmood literature has, in a number of significant contributions, extended this argument in directions that risk what might be called piety romanticism: a tendency to foreground the agential dimensions of women's religious practice while under-attending to the structural conditions — patriarchal household authority, economic dependency, community surveillance, the threat of social sanction — that constrain the conditions under which religious choices are made. Ong's earlier argument about the multiple forms of power operating on Muslim women's bodies in the context of Malaysian industrialisation anticipates this concern, insisting that symbolic and material dimensions of gender subordination cannot be analytically separated. The framework developed in this paper takes this insistence seriously [19].

The concept of interpretive conversion is offered as a theoretically precise resolution to the opposition between the barrier thesis and piety romanticism. Interpretive conversion names the process through which specific readings of Islamic teaching — which readings, by whom, in which household and community context, with what degree of social authority — transform the social meaning of girls' education, functioning either to reduce educational resources to something practically unavailable to women as a substantive freedom or to amplify access by embedding educational aspiration within a framework of religious obligation. The concept is derived from Sen's notion of conversion factors — the personal, social, and environmental conditions that transform resources into genuine capabilities — but extends it by specifying that the direction of conversion (positive or negative, enabling or constraining) depends on the interpretive tradition operative in a given context rather than on any intrinsic property of Islamic belief [3,4].

This conceptual move has several advantages. First, it treats religion as analytically internal to the aspiration formation process rather than as an external variable that modifies an otherwise secular process. Second, it specifies the mechanism through which religion enters that process: not through the brute imposition of Islamic norms but through the socially embedded and contested interpretation of Islamic texts and traditions. Third, it preserves the insight of the piety literature — that women are active interpreters of religious tradition — while insisting that this interpretive agency is always exercised within structures of constraint that include, but are not limited to, patriarchal authority and economic dependency. Fourth, it generates a testable theoretical proposition: that the direction and magnitude of religion's effect on educational aspiration is a function of the interpretive tradition operative at the household level, not of religiosity as such. This proposition can be empirically examined, refined, and challenged — a requirement that conceptual frameworks must meet if they are to make genuine contributions to knowledge.

A note on the limits of the interpretive conversion concept is warranted. It does not claim to exhaust all the mechanisms through which religion shapes educational aspiration; aesthetic, affective, and embodied dimensions of religious practice

may also bear on aspiration formation in ways that a purely discursive account misses. Nor does it claim that religious interpretation is the primary determinant of educational outcomes; economic structure, geographic location, and family dynamics all independently shape aspiration formation and may in many cases outweigh the effect of interpretive context. The concept identifies one mechanism — a theoretically important and analytically underspecified one — rather than offering a complete causal theory.

Postcolonial Feminism and the Problem of Representation

The postcolonial feminist tradition provides the epistemological foundation from which this paper proceeds. Its central contribution to the present argument is the insistence on contextual specificity: against the tendency of Western feminist frameworks to render non-Western women as uniformly oppressed, pre-modern, or lacking in subjectivity, postcolonial theorists including and have argued for analytical practices that situate women's experiences within specific historical, colonial, and geopolitical contexts, and that take seriously the intellectual and moral resources available within those contexts, including religious ones [17,18,20].

Mohanty's critique of the 'Third World woman' as a singular monolithic subject — poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, and constrained by culture — retains its force in the Pakistani context. The dominant representation of Pakistani women in international development discourse and much comparative education research reproduces exactly the epistemic violence Mohanty identified: it effaces the diversity of women's experiences, denies their interpretive agency, and positions Western secular modernity as the normative horizon against which Pakistani women's 'progress' is measured. Khoja-Moolji's analysis of how global development discourse constructs the figure of the 'Pakistani girl who needs to be saved' is a direct application of this critique to the education sector, demonstrating how the rescue narrative embedded in international girls' education programmes can depoliticise the structural conditions of educational disadvantage and individualise what are fundamentally questions of power and resource distribution [12,17].

The specific colonial history of the Indian subcontinent adds a further layer to this analysis. British colonial governance simultaneously deployed a rhetoric of women's emancipation — mobilised as justification for imperial intervention in social practices deemed barbaric — and consolidated patriarchal authority by codifying customary law in ways that reinforced male control over women's property, mobility, and marriage [18]. The contemporary gender regime in Pakistan is partly a sedimented effect of these colonial arrangements; the purdah norms and izzat-based surveillance systems that operate as barriers to women's educational mobility cannot be attributed straightforwardly to 'Islamic tradition' without acknowledging the role of colonial law-making in fixing and reifying practices that had previously been more fluid and contextually variable. A postcolonial feminist analysis is therefore not only an epistemological commitment but a historical claim: that the conditions against which young Pakistani women's aspirations are formed are the product of multiple historically layered systems of power, of which patriarchal Islamic interpretation is one element among several.

Connell's concept of Southern theory deepens this postcolonial orientation by arguing that the production of social science knowledge is itself geographically structured: Northern theoretical frameworks have been disproportionately universalised, while Southern social formations have been systematically positioned as data-sites for theories developed elsewhere. The RNEA Framework developed in this paper is explicitly situated as a contribution to Southern theory production: it does not simply apply Appadurai, Sen, or Crenshaw to Pakistan; it uses the specificity of the Pakistani case — sectarian diversity, postcolonial governance, rapid social change, and the particular configurations of family and community authority in Punjabi social life — as generative conditions for theoretical innovation that carries relevance beyond Pakistan [2].

A methodological implication follows from this postcolonial orientation. The researcher's positionality — as a Pakistani male professional with first-hand experience of the educational, social, and religious contexts under analysis — is not a neutral condition that must be managed away; it is an epistemological resource that enables forms of contextual sensitivity and interpretive depth that outsider researchers cannot achieve. Simultaneously, the risks of male-researcher positionality in a context where the subjects of research are young women navigating gendered authority structures require explicit reflexive attention. The RNEA Framework is designed to be deployed reflexively, with sustained attention to the power relations that shape both the social phenomena it analyses and the process of analysis itself.

Educational Aspiration through the Capability Lens

Sen's capability approach, elaborated for gender analysis by Nussbaum and applied to education by Unterhalter provides the normative and analytical vocabulary for theorising educational aspiration as a form of substantive freedom. The approach's central distinction — between resources, capabilities (real freedoms to achieve functionings), and functionings (the states of being and doing that people actually achieve) — generates a framework for asking not merely whether schools exist but whether young women possess the substantive freedom to form, pursue, and realise educational aspirations without prohibitive cost to their other valued life projects [3,21,22].

This distinction has immediate analytical purchase in the Pakistani context. A young woman in a peri-urban community in southern Punjab may live within walking distance of a secondary school and face no formal prohibition on enrolment; her nominal access to educational resources may be unobstructed. But if purdah norms prohibit her from travelling unaccompanied to the school, if her household requires her domestic labour during school hours, if her family has defined marriage at seventeen as a religious and social obligation that supersedes further education, and if no member of her social network has successfully argued that Islamic teaching supports her educational participation — then the conversion of nominal resource into genuine capability has failed, and her substantive freedom to aspire and act educationally is severely constrained. The gap between resource and capability, in this analysis, is the space occupied by conversion factors.

The concept of interpretive conversion, introduced in Section 3, specifies a particular class of conversion factor that has been underspecified in the existing capability literature: the religious-

interpretive conditions under which educational resources are or are not transformed into genuine educational capabilities. Where Unterhalter identifies social norms, family relationships, and institutional arrangements as the primary conversion factors for gender and education, the RNEA Framework adds religious interpretation as a first-order conversion mechanism with its own internal logic and its own conditions of variation. This is not a minor modification; in Muslim-majority contexts where religious discourse permeates everyday decision-making at the household level, the interpretive tradition operative in a given household may be the most decisive single conversion factor determining whether nominal educational access is transformed into genuine educational capability [22].

The tension between the capability approach's universalist normative commitments — particularly Nussbaum's non-relativistic threshold account of central human capabilities — and postcolonial feminism's insistence on cultural specificity is real and deserves direct engagement rather than evasion. Nussbaum's insistence that there is a cross-culturally valid list of capabilities that no cultural tradition should be permitted to violate has been criticised from postcolonial feminist perspectives as a form of normative imperialism that smuggles liberal-Western assumptions about individual autonomy into a framework presented as universal. This criticism has force. However, the paper argues that the tension is resolvable without abandoning either tradition's core insights, through a distinction between the normative threshold — the minimum set of capabilities that any decent social arrangement must protect — and the means through which that threshold is achieved and sustained. The normative threshold (practical reason, affiliation, bodily integrity, control over one's environment) can be endorsed without prescribing the cultural form in which these capabilities are realised. In the Pakistani context, this means that the capability to form and pursue educational aspirations can be defended as a normative requirement without prescribing that it be realised through a secular developmental pathway; it may equally be realised through the articulation of educational aspiration in Islamic terms, through women's religious educational institutions, or through household negotiations that draw on Islamic discourse to expand women's substantive freedoms within their existing cultural context [21].

This bridging position — which the paper names 'capabilities without cultural imperialism' — is not new; versions of it have been advanced by Alkire and by Robeyns. The contribution of the present paper is to demonstrate that this position generates specific, actionable implications for how the role of religion in educational aspiration formation is theorised. Rather than treating religion as a conversion factor that operates uniformly in one direction, the capabilities-without-cultural-imperialism position requires attention to which interpretive traditions within a given religious context support or constrain the achievement of the capability threshold — a question that can only be answered through contextually grounded analysis of the kind the RNEA Framework is designed to support [23,24].

Intersectionality and the Heterogeneity of Pakistani Women's Aspirations

Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality — the analytic insistence that categories of social difference such as race, class, and

gender operate simultaneously and produce effects that cannot be understood as their additive sum — and Collins' elaboration of interlocking matrices of domination are foundational to the analytical approach of this paper. In the Pakistani context, the social axes most consequential for educational aspiration formation are: class and socioeconomic position; geographic location (urban, peri-urban, rural); sectarian and ethnic identity; generational position; parental educational history; and — in ways that have received insufficient attention in existing scholarship — disability status and caste-inflected social hierarchies [25,26].

The class gradient in Pakistani women's educational aspiration formation has several dimensions. Urban, middle-class households with established professional histories are more likely to have encountered reformist Islamic argumentation for women's education through higher religious education, civil society networks, or media exposure; they are also more likely to have the economic resources to manage the opportunity costs of girls' extended schooling and the social capital to weather community disapproval. Rural and economically marginalised households face a more constrained opportunity structure in which economic pressure, limited exposure to reformist interpretations, early marriage norms, and intensive community surveillance operate as compounding barriers. Critically, this class gradient does not map onto levels of religiosity; what varies is not the intensity of Islamic practice but the interpretive tradition within which that practice is embedded and the social conditions under which specific interpretations are available and credible. A Bareilvi household in an urban professional neighbourhood and a Deobandi household in a peri-urban village may be equally devout; their relationship to women's higher education may differ profoundly.

The significance of sectarian identity as a dimension of aspiration formation has been under-theorised in the Pakistani education literature, and the RNEA Framework insists on its analytical importance. The doctrinal, jurisprudential, and cultural differences between Bareilvi, Deobandi, and Ahl-e-Hadith traditions produce distinct orientations toward women's roles, mobility, and education. Bareilvi traditions, associated with Sufi practice and popular Islam, have generally maintained more permissive orientations toward women's public participation; Deobandi institutions have historically emphasised domestic piety and restricted female mobility, though there is significant internal variation; Ahl-e-Hadith traditions, with their emphasis on direct textual authority, have in some contexts generated both more restrictive and — through women's access to Quranic literacy — more enabling orientations toward women's education. The Salafi-inflected communities that have grown in parts of rural Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa have been associated with particularly restrictive practices regarding women's unaccompanied mobility. None of these generalisations should be read as deterministic; local variation within each tradition is considerable and historically conditioned. What they establish is that sectarian context is a non-trivial axis of variation in the interpretive conversion process.

The role of caste-inflected social hierarchies — what Pakistani sociologists have described as the *biraderi* system of patrilineal

kin solidarity — in shaping educational aspiration has also received insufficient analytical attention. Biraderi affiliation can function as both a resource and a constraint for women's educational participation: as a constraint, it enforces the family honour norms and marriage alliances that constitute educational aspiration as a threat to social respectability; as a resource, it can provide the social networks and economic solidarities that enable educational participation against external opposition. The interaction between biraderi logic and Islamic interpretation in specific households and communities constitutes an important dimension of the aspiration formation context that the RNEA Framework's intersectional approach is designed to capture.

A further under-theorised dimension concerns the educational aspirations of young women with disabilities in Pakistan. Disability intersects with gender and religious interpretation in ways that compound educational exclusion: in many communities, disability is read through a religious lens as divine will or as spiritual affliction, generating interpretations that may further constrain rather than enable aspiration. The capability approach's insistence on disaggregating capabilities by social position has particular force here, as disability status creates distinct conversion factor profiles that a gender-only analysis will systematically obscure.

Intergenerational dynamics add temporal depth to the intersectional analysis. Mothers' own educational histories function as predictors of daughters' aspirational horizons, and in Pakistan this effect is likely mediated through maternal engagement with Islamic discourse around education and maternal capacity to navigate household authority dynamics in support of daughters' aspirations. The significance of this intergenerational transmission is that it introduces a trajectory of social change into what might otherwise appear a static analysis: the relationship between religion and educational aspiration in Pakistan is not merely variable across space but also evolving

over time, as educational mothers raise daughters in households where the social meaning of girls' schooling has already been partially renegotiated [15].

The Religious Negotiation of Educational Aspiration (RNEA) Framework

Building on the theoretical resources developed in the preceding sections, this paper presents the Religious Negotiation of Educational Aspiration (RNEA) Framework as an integrated conceptual architecture for analysing the multi-directional relationship between religion, gender, and educational aspiration formation in Muslim-majority societies. The framework is designed to be analytically generative rather than descriptively exhaustive: it identifies key mechanisms and their relationships rather than cataloguing all possible determinants of educational outcomes.

Before elaborating the components, it is important to defend the framework against a structural objection that any multi-component model must face: the risk of producing an account that lists relevant factors without specifying how they interact or with what analytical priority. The RNEA Framework addresses this risk in two ways. First, it organises its components into three analytical levels — structural (Structural Context), discursive-normative (Religious Interpretation, Gender Norms), household (Family Mediation, Aspiration Formation), and agentic (Agency and Negotiation, Educational Outcomes) — that reflect real distinctions in the scale and mechanism of social causation. Second, it specifies the concept of interpretive conversion as the primary causal mechanism linking the discursive-normative and household levels: it is through the operation of interpretive conversion, operating in specific households and community contexts, that macro-level religious discourse is translated into micro-level constraints and enablements on individual aspiration. This specification gives the framework an analytical spine that prevents it from collapsing into a flat enumeration of relevant factors.

Component	Role in Aspiration Formation	Analytical Operation	Key Theoretical Sources
Structural Context	Sets macro-level conditions of possibility	Identifies the postcolonial political economy, state education policy, and patriarchal governance arrangements that define the outer boundaries within which aspirations form.	Mohanty (2003); Connell (2007); Narayan (1997)
Religious Interpretation	Constitutes primary discursive field of negotiation	Distinguishes between plural interpretive traditions (Barelvi, Deobandi, Ahl-e-Hadith) and examines how specific readings of Islamic texts function as either constraints on or resources for educational aspiration.	Mahmood (2005); Bano (2012); Rinaldo (2008); Moghadam (2002)
Gender Norms	Translates discourse into material social enforcement	Analyses the locally specific norms — purdah, izzat, marriage timing — that operationalise religious interpretations as practical barriers to or enablers of educational participation.	Kabeer (1999); Unterhalter (2007); Fennell & Arnot (2008)
Family Mediation	Primary site of negotiation between structure and agent	Maps household authority dynamics and the competing interests of fathers, mothers, brothers, and the young woman herself in educational decision-making.	Sathar et al. (2003); Aslam (2009); Kabeer (1999)
Aspiration Formation	Produces the future-oriented desire subject to negotiation	Examines how globally circulating educational norms interact with locally specific opportunity structures to produce aspirations that are simultaneously available and experienced as precarious.	Appadurai (2004); Archer et al. (2010); Baker (2014)

Agency & Negotiation	Active response to structural and discursive pressures	Identifies the heterogeneous strategies — selective religious citation, peer solidarity, digital platforms, compliance performance — through which women navigate constrained possibility.	Sen (1999); Nussbaum (2000); Kabeer (1999)
Educational Outcome	Variable result; analytically open not teleological	Refuses a single normative standard; evaluates outcomes in terms of whether the full range of trajectories — including religious education, deferred participation, and non-participation — reflects genuine choice.	Unterhalter (2003); Collins (2000); Crenshaw (1989)

The first component, Structural Context, establishes the macro-level conditions of possibility for aspiration formation. These include Pakistan's postcolonial political economy, the configuration of gender inequality at national and provincial levels, the state's historically ambivalent relationship to women's education (alternating between periods of progressive policy and conservative backlash), and the international development discourse on gender and education that shapes both national policy frameworks and civil society practice. The structural context is not a deterministic cage; it constitutes the outer boundaries of the space within which social processes at lower analytical levels occur, while itself being reproduced and — over time — transformed through those processes. The analytical importance of this component is that it prevents the RNEA Framework from collapsing into a household-level or discursive analysis that treats aspiration formation as if it occurred in a vacuum of structural power.

Religious Interpretation is analytically the most distinctive component of the framework and the one most directly served by the concept of interpretive conversion. This component foregrounds the internally contested and plural character of Islamic discourse on women's education, insisting that what matters for aspiration formation is not 'religion' as a monolithic entity but the specific interpretive tradition operative in a given household and community context. The analytical distinction between the framework's treatment of religion and conventional accounts is precise: where conventional accounts ask how much religious influence a community experiences, the RNEA Framework asks which interpretation of Islamic teaching is operative. This distinction is not merely terminological; it has direct implications for how interventions should be designed. A community characterised by high levels of religious observance within a Barelvi framework may be far more supportive of women's higher education than a community with lower overall religiosity but strong Deobandi institutional influence. Religiosity, on this account, is not the relevant variable; interpretive context is.

Gender Norms constitutes the third component and refers to the locally specific and socially enforced expectations governing women's behaviour, mobility, reputation, and life trajectories. The analytical distinction between Gender Norms and Religious Interpretation is important: gender norms are not simply Islamic norms; they are shaped by the particular history of patriarchal arrangements in a given community, the class and ethnic composition of the social environment, the economic conditions that assign value to specific female roles, and by colonial and postcolonial governance structures that have fixed certain practices as 'traditional.' The relationship between Religious Interpretation and Gender Norms is reciprocal and mutually

reinforcing: conservative religious interpretations provide legitimising authority for restrictive gender norms, while those norms create social incentives for the reproduction and perpetuation of conservative interpretations. The analytical space for women's aspirational agency lies partly in the gap between religious interpretation and gender norm — in the possibility of invoking Quranic or hadith sources to contest gender norms that exceed what the textual tradition strictly requires.

Family Mediation identifies the household as the primary site at which the preceding three structural and discursive components are translated into specific enablements and constraints on individual aspiration. The household is not a passive transmission mechanism; it is an active negotiating arena in which the competing interests, interpretations, and aspirations of fathers, mothers, brothers, and the young woman herself are worked out through ongoing interaction that combines authority, persuasion, strategic compliance, and occasionally direct conflict. The authority of male kin in regulating women's educational choices is well documented in the Pakistani literature. What is less well documented — and what the RNEA Framework explicitly foregrounds — is the enabling role that educationally ambitious mothers, younger siblings, or economically progressive household strategies can play in sustaining daughters' aspirations against community pressure. By treating the family as a site of both constraint and enablement, the framework avoids the twin analytical errors of treating the household as simply a patriarchal enforcement mechanism or as a site of unconstrained rational negotiation.

Aspiration Formation designates the process through which future-oriented educational desires are produced, sustained, modified, or foreclosed. Drawing on Appadurai's account of the capacity to aspire as a culturally produced and socially distributed resource, the framework treats aspirations as neither simple preferences nor externally imposed orientations but as the products of a complex social process in which structural opportunity, religious legitimacy, family dynamics, and individual imagination are simultaneously operative. Globally circulating educational norms — 'schooled society' — provide aspirational content that reaches even communities where educational infrastructure is limited, through digital media, peer networks, and the visible presence of educated women in public life. The tension between the globally available aspiration and the locally specific constraint is experienced by young Pakistani women as aspiration under pressure: a desire that must be actively defended, justified in religious terms, and negotiated against competing social demands in order to survive [13,15].

Agency and Negotiation capture the heterogeneous strategies through which young women exercise purposive action in

relation to their educational futures. These strategies include: the selective citation of Islamic texts and scholarly opinions that endorse women's educational participation; the cultivation of supportive relationships with mothers, female teachers, and civil society workers who can function as strategic allies in household negotiations; participation in peer networks and digital communities that provide aspirational content, social reinforcement, and knowledge of navigational strategies; the management of public performance of gender-normative behaviour — strategic compliance — alongside the private pursuit of educational ambition; and, in some cases, more direct forms of negotiation or resistance within household authority structures. Following Kabeer, the framework insists that these forms of agency are always exercised within structures of constraint, and that recognising their existence does not require minimising the material weight of those constraints. The analytical task is to characterise both the forms of agency available and the structural conditions that determine their availability [27].

Educational Outcomes, the seventh component, encompasses the variable results of aspiration formation and agentic negotiation. These outcomes range along a continuum from full and sustained educational participation through partial participation, interrupted trajectories, and aspiration deferral to foreclosure and the substitution of alternative life frameworks. The RNEA Framework explicitly refuses a teleological reading of this continuum: educational participation in state secular institutions is not the uniquely valuable outcome against which other trajectories are measured as deficits. Participation in women's Islamic educational institutions, the deferral of formal education in favour of community-based learning, or the pursuit of aspiration through informal educational pathways may constitute meaningful educational outcomes that a state-enrolment-centred metric obscures. What the framework is designed to identify are the conditions under which the full range of educational trajectories is available to young women as genuine choices, rather than outcomes imposed by the force of structural, religious, or familial constraint operating against women's own articulated aspirations.

The RNEA Framework's theoretical distinctiveness rests on five claims. First, religion is analytically central rather than a residual variable or contextual modifier. Second, the mechanism linking religious discourse to aspiration formation is specified as interpretive conversion, not diffuse 'cultural influence.' Third, the family is theorised as a negotiating arena rather than a transmission mechanism. Fourth, the distinction between nominal access and genuine educational capability captures aspiration formation as a substantive freedom problem, not merely an access problem. Fifth, outcomes are evaluated on a teleologically neutral continuum that recognises the legitimate diversity of educational trajectories.

Implications for Education Policy and Gender Equity

The theoretical framework developed in this paper carries several implications for education policy and gender equity programming in Pakistan that depart from the assumptions embedded in dominant development approaches.

The most fundamental implication concerns the unit of analysis

in programme design. International and national programmes targeting girls' educational participation have been designed primarily around the removal of access barriers — school construction, conditional cash transfers, distance mitigation — and the 'sensitisation' of communities to the value of girls' education. These interventions address necessary but not sufficient conditions for educational participation. The RNEA Framework identifies aspiration formation as a prior condition for access-uptake: where aspiration is not formed or is not sustained under social pressure, the availability of educational resources will not be converted into participation. Effective programming must therefore address aspiration formation directly — through role model visibility, mentorship structures, and community-based discourse change — in addition to and in coordination with access interventions.

The second implication concerns the role of religion in programme design. The barrier thesis has generated programming that either ignores religion (treating it as irrelevant to educational decision-making) or seeks to manage its constraining effects (through community dialogue framed implicitly or explicitly as secularising). The RNEA Framework suggests a third approach: programmes that engage constructively with reformist interpretive traditions within Islam, deploying religious argumentation in support of women's educational participation rather than working around or against religious discourse. This approach requires programme designers to possess or to develop contextual knowledge of the interpretive landscape in target communities — knowledge of which institutions, scholars, and traditions are authoritative sources of religious legitimacy, and of how arguments for women's education that are grounded in Islamic textual tradition can be made credible within those contexts. This is not a matter of religious co-optation; it is a matter of meeting communities where they are rather than where development frameworks wish them to be.

Third, the intersectional analysis developed in Section 6 establishes that 'young Pakistani women' is not a homogeneous policy category. The configurations of constraint operative in urban, middle-class households with Bareilvi institutional affiliations differ substantially from those operative in rural, lower-income households in Ahl-e-Hadith community networks. A programme designed for the former may be irrelevant or counterproductive in the latter, and vice versa. Effective programming requires differentiated, context-sensitive targeting that begins with analysis of the specific intersection of structural, interpretive, normative, and household factors operative in each community — analysis that the RNEA Framework is designed to support.

Fourth, the framework's identification of family mediation, and specifically of maternal educational aspiration, as a critical mechanism in the aspiration formation process has implications for the sequencing of programming investments. Interventions that invest in mothers' educational status, religious literacy, and capacity to navigate household authority dynamics in support of daughters' aspirations may generate intergenerational multiplier effects that exceed those of equivalent investments targeting daughters directly. The returns to maternal educational investment, in this analysis, include not only direct economic and social benefits to mothers but the downstream effects of

increased maternal aspiration-support on daughters' educational trajectories.

Contributions to Global South Scholarship

The argument developed in this paper makes contributions to Global South scholarship that extend beyond the immediate context of Pakistani education policy.

The most fundamental contribution concerns the production of Southern theory. By generating a theoretical framework from the specific conditions of Pakistan — rather than adapting frameworks developed in European or North American contexts — this paper demonstrates that research conducted from and for non-Western social formations can generate conceptual innovations of general scholarly relevance. The RNEA Framework is designed for transferability: its seven components and their relational logic should be applicable, with appropriate contextual modification, to Muslim-majority societies in South and Southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and diaspora communities in Western contexts. Its conceptual spine — interpretive conversion as the mechanism linking religious discourse to aspiration formation — identifies a mechanism of sufficient generality to travel across these contexts while remaining specific enough to generate testable propositions.

The second contribution concerns the epistemological dialogue between postcolonial feminism and the capability approach. These traditions have developed in relative isolation from each other, separated partly by the universalism/relativism dispute that Section 5 addresses through the 'capabilities without cultural imperialism' bridging position. This paper demonstrates that the dialogue between these traditions is not only possible but analytically productive: the capability approach's normative vocabulary identifies what is at stake when educational aspirations are foreclosed, while postcolonial feminism provides the epistemological tools for ensuring that the analysis of that foreclosure is grounded in the historically and culturally specific conditions of the women whose aspirations are at issue. Neither tradition alone generates the analytical purchase that their combination produces.

The third contribution advances the theorisation of religious agency in relation to material structure. Following Mahmood, the post-secular sociology of religion has made major advances in theorising how women's religious practice constitutes genuine agency irreducible to liberal autonomy. This paper extends that project by insisting — with Ong and against the tendencies of piety romanticism — that religious agency cannot be adequately theorised without simultaneous attention to the material structures of patriarchal authority, economic dependency, and community surveillance within which religious discourse is invoked and contested. The concept of interpretive conversion provides a mechanism for holding these dimensions together: it is simultaneously a discursive concept (concerned with the social meaning of Islamic interpretation) and a material concept (concerned with the conditions under which interpretations are socially authoritative and their effects practically enforceable) [4,19].

The fourth contribution extends the sociology of aspiration to Muslim-majority contexts in the Global South. Appadurai's,

Archer's, and Baker's accounts of aspiration as a culturally produced and socially distributed resource have been developed in contexts where the secularisation of aspiration formation is assumed. The RNEA Framework demonstrates that in contexts where religious discourse permeates everyday decision-making, religion is not merely a cultural context within which secular aspiration processes play out; it is constitutive of the aspiration formation process itself, determining which futures are imaginable as legitimate and which must be defended against social and religious authority. This insight complicates the aspiration literature's account of aspiration as a universal human capacity whose social distribution is shaped by class and ethnic position, adding interpretive religious context as a further axis of distribution that operates through mechanisms distinct from those theorised in the existing literature.

Conclusion: Toward a Testable Theoretical Proposition

This paper has argued that the relationship between religion and educational aspiration among young women in Pakistan cannot be adequately theorised through either the barrier thesis — which treats Islam as an obstacle to girls' schooling — or the piety romanticism that characterises some post-Mahmood scholarship — which celebrates Muslim women's religious agency without adequate attention to the material structures of patriarchal authority within which that agency is exercised. A theoretically adequate account requires the multi-layered analytical architecture of the RNEA Framework: the capacity to attend simultaneously to structural context, religious interpretation, gender norms, family dynamics, aspiration formation, agentic negotiation, and educational outcomes, linked by the specifying concept of interpretive conversion.

The RNEA Framework makes five identifiable theoretical advances. First, it specifies religion as analytically central to aspiration formation rather than a residual variable or contextual modifier. Second, it introduces interpretive conversion as the mechanism linking religious discourse to aspiration formation, providing analytical precision that neither 'religion as barrier' nor 'religion as resource' formulations achieve. Third, it bridges postcolonial feminism and the capability approach through the 'capabilities without cultural imperialism' position, generating a hybrid theoretical vocabulary capable of doing justice to both normative stakes and cultural specificity. Fourth, it applies intersectional analysis to disaggregate the category of 'young Pakistani women,' revealing heterogeneous aspiration configurations that uniform analytical categories obscure. Fifth, it theorises aspiration — rather than enrolment or attainment — as the primary analytical unit, opening an upstream analytical space that neither access-focused policy frameworks nor discursive analyses of piety occupy.

The paper concludes by stating its central argument as a testable theoretical proposition, as conceptual scholarship must do if it is to contribute to cumulative knowledge rather than merely circulating theoretical vocabulary: the direction and magnitude of religion's effect on young women's educational aspirations in Muslim-majority societies is a function primarily of the interpretive tradition operative at the household level — specifically, of whether the religious interpretations authoritative in a given household treat girls' education as a religious

obligation, a matter of religious indifference, or a religious transgression — and is not a direct function of level of religiosity, sectarian affiliation, or any other aggregate characterisation of religious context. This proposition can be empirically examined, refined, and challenged. It is, in the precise sense, falsifiable — a requirement that any theoretical contribution to the social sciences must meet.

The urgency of this project extends beyond the academy. Pakistan's commitments under SDG 4 and SDG 5 will remain unrealised as long as the mechanisms through which young women's educational aspirations are formed and constrained remain undertheorised in the frameworks guiding policy and programming. The RNEA Framework offers practitioners a conceptual resource for engaging religion as the complex, contested, and consequential social force it is, rather than as a cultural problem to be managed or circumvented. In doing so, it contributes to the practical project of building educational futures in which young women's aspirations — formed at the intersection of faith, family, and desire — are both analytically legible and socially honoured.

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