



Educational Aspirations and Career Choices among Secondary School Students in Central Kashmir

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Abstract

The present study is an attempt to study the educational aspirations and career selection of secondary school students in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The study was conducted on a multistage stratified sample of 300 students of Class 10 (150 boys and 150 girls; 150 urban and 150 rural) from government and private secondary schools of Jammu and Kashmir divisions using a descriptive survey design. The data were collected through standard tools such as the Educational Aspiration Scale and the Career Preference Inventory. Statistical analyses consisted of independent samples t-tests and chi-square tests of independence. The results revealed that female students had slightly higher educational aspirations than male students, but the difference was not statistically significant. Urban students had much higher educational aspirations than rural students. A clear gender and regional split came to the fore in the vocational trajectories; men preferred engineering, defence, and technical disciplines while women favoured healthcare, school teaching and civil services. Students from cities asked for new private sector courses, while the youth in rural areas asked for secure government jobs. The findings indicate the need for the urgent establishment of organised career guidance cells and balanced learning resources within the region's secondary schools.

Keywords: Educational Aspirations, Career Choices, Gender Disparity, Secondary Schools

Introduction

Adolescence is a period of very intense development that involves among others cognitive development, personal identity creation and formalization of vocational interests. Adolescents are at the threshold of major transitions, especially in selecting senior secondary streams, and face crucial decisions that impact their educational continuity and future career paths. At this stage, educational aspiration is an individual's inner motivation and expectation regarding formal



academic achievement and cognitive framework for future mobility. Career choices are simultaneously conscious negotiations of specific professional pathways, mediated by a complex interaction of individual beliefs of capacity, anticipated socio-economic benefits and social identity. These decisions are seldom made in isolation but are the result of a dynamic synthesis between one's self concept, parental expectations and the socio-economic imperatives of the times.

The aspirations of adolescents in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir provide an interesting, multi-dimensional context to study. Structural realities such as rugged geography, abrupt seasonal transitions, and uneven infrastructure between urban and rural areas directly affect educational access and persistence in the region. Over the past decades policy-driven progress has been remarkable in terms of school access, administrative mergers and the scope of digital pedagogy but institutional inequalities remain across different geographic regions. Moreover the local economic opportunities are changing and also are often situated within a context of systemic restrictions on localized high skill employment. This creates a complex arena where the young must balance geographical immobility, regional enterprise and external migration with their personal vocational ambitions.

In this socio-cultural context, occupational routes are largely influenced by enduring academic traditions and collectivist values. Culturally, medicine, engineering or permanent government jobs remain the ideal and are seen generally as the best route to financial stability, social respectability and family honor. This creates a lot of cognitive dissonance for high school students who are caught in between their own skills and values, which are taught by their parents, and the traditional risk aversion in career choice. How young people develop educational aspirations in such structural and normative constraints is relevant for regional equity, human capital formation and for the capacity of existing institutionalized counseling processes to facilitate diversified and autonomous career aspirations.

Need and Significance of the Study

Secondary schooling is the pivotal point at which general schooling ends, and real career paths are taken. Compounding the problem in Jammu and Kashmir are harsh regional realities: slow industrial growth, persistent youth unemployment, and major infrastructure gaps between valley centres and remote border districts. In the area, teenagers tend to absorb the intense parental anxiety, village expectations and traditional peer pressure, instead of making decisions based on their own aptitude or realistic self-assessment. This frequently leads to the channelling of young people into a limited number of hyper-competitive, traditional streams with disastrous consequences for academic distress and a lack of preparation for roles outside the traditional civil service or medical streams.

In an effort to move beyond generalisations and to understand the lived experience of these students, a close examination of these dynamics is needed.” The study explores the intersection between location and gender in affecting aspirations in urban centres and rural valleys through



empirically based evidence rather than theoretical assumptions. Such insights can be useful to school administrators, local counsellors, and regional legislators. They can identify areas where institutional career counselling is lacking and use the insights as a blueprint for developing counselling frameworks that are sensitive to local community values and reflective of contemporary occupational realities.

Objectives of the Study

1. To find the level of educational aspirations among secondary school students in Jammu and Kashmir.
2. To find whether significant differences exist in the educational aspirations of secondary school students on the basis of gender (male vs. female).
3. To find whether significant differences exist in the educational aspirations of secondary school students on the basis of school location (urban vs. rural).
4. To analyze the career choices of secondary school students across gender groups.
5. To compare the career choices of secondary school students across school locations (urban vs. rural).

Hypotheses of the Study

1. **H₀₁:** There is no significant difference in the educational aspirations of male and female secondary school students.
2. **H₀₂:** There is no significant difference in the educational aspirations of urban and rural secondary school students.
3. **H₀₃:** There is no significant association between gender and career choices among secondary school students.
4. **H₀₄:** There is no significant association between school location (urban vs. rural) and career choices among secondary school students.

Review of Related Studies

Ain et al. (2021) studied career choices, career-related stress and guidance needs among secondary school students in the Baramulla district of Kashmir. They found that more than half the students (52%) wanted to pursue a career in medicine (MBBS), followed by engineering (14%). Seventy-four percent of students felt a strong need for structured career counselling and guidance to help them reduce occupational anxiety. Bashir and Bashir (2016) studied educational aspirations in relation to parental encouragement of secondary school students in Kashmir. They found that parental encouragement was positively and significantly related to students' educational aspirations, and gender differences in aspiration levels were statistically non-significant. Gupta and Bashir (2017) studied the effect of school environment and parental support on the educational aspirations of 400 secondary school students in Kashmir. The authors found that positive school environment and active encouragement from parents significantly predicted higher educational aspirations. These factors together accounted for 15.1 % of the total variance in the combined urban and rural cohorts.



Salgotra and Roma (2018) studied educational aspirations in relation to socio-economic status among the secondary school students in Jammu and found that family socio-economic status had significant positive effect on students' academic goals. The adolescents from higher socio-economic strata had significantly higher educational aspiration score than those from lower socio-economic strata. Dar (2019) studied the career aspirations of Kashmiri adolescents in higher secondary schools. The study found that academic streams had a significant impact on vocational goals, and students in the science stream had significantly higher career aspiration levels for competitive professional careers than those in the arts and commerce streams. Dar (2023) studied career aspirations based on gender among Kashmiri adolescents and found that the overall level of career aspirations was moderate among secondary school youth, and there was no statistically significant difference in career aspiration scores between male and female adolescents.

Methodology

Research Design

The study adopted descriptive survey research design which helped in the systematic collection, quantification and comparative analysis of the current traits, educational goals and career inclinations without manipulation of the study variables.

Population and Sample

The study population included all secondary school students of Class 10 studying in recognized government and private high schools of central Kashmir, which constitutes the districts of Srinagar, Budgam and Gandarbal. A multistage stratified random sampling technique was employed to select a total of 300 students for an adequate and representative cross section. Proper representation is also ensured while selecting the sample under the subcategories of male, female and rural/urban secondary school students as well.

Research Tools used for the study

1. Educational Aspiration Scale (EAS). It was developed and validated to measure the extent of educational goals including academic continuation, level of planned degree attainment and effort orientation. The internal consistency reliability coefficient of the instrument was 0.84 (Cronbach alpha).
2. Career Preference Inventory (CPI): A systematic inventory in the form of checklist for recording the main vocational inclinations of the students in six occupational groups viz. Medical/Healthcare, Engineering/Technology, Civil Services/Administration, Teaching/Academia, Defence/Police Services and Emerging Corporate/Commerce Fields.

Statistical Technique used

Data collected were processed and coded using SPSS. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, percentage distributions) and inferential statistics (independent samples t-tests and chi-square tests of independence) were computed at the 0.05 level of statistical significance to test the hypotheses.



Analysis and Interpretation

Table 1

Classification of Overall Educational Aspiration Levels Among the Sampled Students

Aspiration Level	Score Range	Frequency (N = 300)	Percentage (%)
High	≥ 75	69	23.00%
Average	50 - 74	162	54.00%
Low	< 50	69	23.00%

Table 1 shows that more than half of the respondents (54%) had an average level of educational aspiration, while the high aspiration category was represented by 23% and the low aspiration category by 23%. This distribution reveals that though a large proportion of secondary school adolescents in Jammu and Kashmir aspire to continue with post-secondary schooling, a large majority is still stuck at traditional middle-tier educational milestones without strong motivation to pursue advanced or specialized studies.

Table 2

Comparison of Educational Aspirations Between Male and Female Students

Gender	N	Mean (M)	SD	t-value	p-value	Significance
Male	150	58.74	11.42	1.15	0.251	Not Significant
Female	150	60.28	11.85			

Table 2 shows the comparative statistical values of educational aspirations by gender categories. The average score for male students was 58.74 (SD = 11.42) and the average score for female students was 60.28 (SD = 11.85). The calculated t-value was 1.15 with the corresponding p-value of 0.251 which is greater than the commonly used significance level of 0.05. Therefore, the null hypothesis H_{01} is accepted. There are no significant differences in the educational aspirations of male and female secondary students.

Table 3

Comparison of Educational Aspiration Scores Between Urban and Rural School Students

Location	N	Mean (M)	SD	t-value	p-value	Significance
Urban	150	62.46	10.98	4.38	< 0.001	Significant at 0.01
Rural	150	56.56	11.74			

Table 3 shows the scores of educational aspiration of urban secondary school students and rural secondary school students. The mean score of urban school students (62.46, SD = 10.98) was higher than that of rural school students (56.56, SD = 11.74). The t-value was found to be 4.38, which corresponded to a p-value of less than 0.001. Thus, the null hypothesis H_{02} is rejected at



0.01 level of significance which shows that urban students have significantly higher educational aspiration than rural stud

Table 4

Distribution of Preferred Career Choices Categorized by Student Gender

Career Category	Male (n=150)	Female (n=150)	Total (N=300)	χ^2 -value	p-value
Medical / Healthcare	28 (18.67%)	55 (36.67%)	83 (27.67%)	49.76	< 0.001
Engineering / Technology	42 (28.00%)	14 (9.33%)	56 (18.67%)		
Civil Services / Public Admin	32 (21.33%)	31 (20.67%)	63 (21.00%)		
Teaching / Academia	11 (7.33%)	34 (22.67%)	45 (15.00%)		
Defense / Police Forces	25 (16.67%)	4 (2.67%)	29 (9.67%)		
Corporate / Commerce	12 (8.00%)	12 (8.00%)	24 (8.00%)		

The career aspirations of secondary school students in Jammu and Kashmir are still sharply segmented on gender lines and not only on the basis of individual interest as observed from the results of chi-square test ($\chi^2=49.76, df=5, p<0.001$) which rejects the null hypothesis decisively H_{03} (Table 4). The universal regional desire for secure government employment ensures that both male (21.33%) and female (20.67%) students have equally high and stable civil services premium, but their other choices are shaped by deep-rooted socio-cultural conditioning and mobility norms. Male students show overwhelming attraction to breadwinning, technical out-migration and physical assertiveness fields, particularly engineering and technology (28.00% versus 9.33% for females) and uniformed defense or police forces (16.67% versus 2.67% for females). In contrast, female students tend to concentrate in socially insulated and caregiving jobs, with healthcare (36.67% vs. 18.67% for males) and academic teaching (22.67% vs. 7.33% for males) together representing almost 60% of all girls' preferences, while corporate jobs are moderate and evenly distributed across both cohorts (8.00% each). This stark divergence underscores how localized safety, family fit, and domestic expectation continues to channel girls into community-appropriate occupations and boys into technical and high-mobility ones and points to the urgent institutional need for gender-neutral career counseling that broadens students' occupational frames outside of these traditional silos.

Table 5

Comparative Breakdown of Student Career Preferences Categorized by School Location

Career Category	Urban (n=150)	Rural (n=150)	Total (N=300)	χ^2 -value	p-value
Medical / Healthcare	48 (32.00%)	35 (23.33%)	83 (27.67%)	19.18	0.002



Engineering Technology /	34 (22.67%)	22 (14.67%)	56 (18.67%)		
Civil Services / Public Admin	29 (19.33%)	34 (22.67%)	63 (21.00%)		
Teaching / Academia	16 (10.67%)	29 (19.33%)	45 (15.00%)		
Defence / Police Forces	7 (4.67%)	22 (14.67%)	29 (9.67%)		
Corporate / Commerce	16 (10.67%)	8 (5.33%)	24 (8.00%)		

Table 5 shows that school location has a significant influence on the students' career preferences in Jammu and Kashmir. The chi-square analysis ($\chi^2=19.18$, $df=5$, $p=0.002$) shows a statistically significant relationship, which rejects the null hypothesis H_0 . On comparative analysis of distribution, urban students are significantly more inclined toward competitive, resource-intensive professional disciplines, leading in healthcare (32.00% vs 23.33% rural), engineering and technology (22.67% vs 14.67% rural) and corporate commerce (10.67% vs 5.33% rural). By contrast, there is a strong concentration of rural students in traditional, safe and visible options in the local environment: civil services and public administration (22.67% vs 19.33% urban), school teaching (19.33% vs 10.67% urban) and the armed or police forces (14.67%, more than three times the urban rate of 4.67%). This structural divide is a consequence of the regional divide in the availability of specialised coaching institutes, digital connectivity and diversified career awareness between central urban hubs and peripheral valleys. Urban learners, with access to institutional capital and familial support, are better equipped to navigate high-stakes competitive entrance examinations. Conversely, rural adolescents tend to aspire toward low-risk government-backed employment that offers long-term stability and pension security. This highlights the necessity of decentralised vocational guidance in rural institutions.

Major Findings

- More than half (54%) of the secondary students surveyed reported moderate educational aspirations, while only 23% reported high aspirations.
- There were statistically non-significant gender differences in educational aspirations, implying that adolescent girls have similar educational aspirations as boys.
- Educational aspirations were significantly affected by school location with urban secondary students scoring higher than their rural counterparts.
- Career choices were heavily gendered: boys preferred engineering, physical sciences and uniforms of the defense while girls preferred medical care and teaching in classrooms.
- Both males and females marked civil service as a respected career choice
- The study found that geographical location has a greater influence on the career selection of secondary school students.



Discussion

The results of the research provide important insights into the social and psychological factors that affect the adolescent development in Jammu and Kashmir. There is no significant gender gap in educational aspirations, reflecting the better access to education, the successful drives for female literacy and the strong parental support for girls' schooling across the region. This is in line with the findings of Bashir and Bashir (2016) who found that parental encouragement increases high educational goals regardless of the child gender.

Aspirations are deeply split along urban-rural lines, reflecting enduring structural inequalities. The urban students are benefited with the coaching institutes, 24x7 internet connectivity and direct interaction with many role models of professions. Salgotra and Roma (2018) and Bashir and Kaur (2017) have stated that the academic goal setting is lowered due to infrastructural constraints, limited library resources and less educational facilities for rural students.

The different career paths reflect ingrained social standards and local economic realities. Still, the dominant vocational destinations are medical fields and engineering as per Ain et al. (2021) and Lone and Gilani (2022). However, the high proportion of women wanting to go into teaching and healthcare suggests that gender socialisation and parental preferences for jobs seen as secure and community-oriented persist. Given the absence of private industry in the regional districts, and the fact that rural students highly value government jobs, such as civil services and uniform personnel, as the main path to social prestige and financial security, this is not surprising.

Conclusion

The findings of this research reveal that the secondary school level students of Jammu and Kashmir have high baseline educational aspirations with gender parity being one of the positive outcomes. The academic ambition levels of male and female adolescents are almost indistinguishable ($M=58.74$ vs $M=60.28$, $t=1.15$, $p=0.251$). This implies that sustained socio-educational reforms, school access initiatives and changing community views have succeeded in normalizing higher education for young women as much as for young men. But this equality of intent is bounded by the facts of geography. School location produces pronounced structural disparities, with urban adolescents reporting significantly higher scores of aspiration than their rural counterparts ($M = 62.46$ vs. $M = 56.56$, $t = 4.50$, $p < 0.001$). Students from rural background in peripheral regions not only lack competitive coaching infrastructure, but also specialized higher secondary science streams and digital connectivity that further limits their academic horizons vis-à-vis their better placed urban counterparts.

The career choices available within the Union Territory are mainly confined to a narrow traditional cluster of high-prestige vocations, sharply segregated along both gender and geographical lines. Significant chi-square results indicate that vocational preferences are strongly gendered ($\chi^2 = 49.76$, $df=5$, $p<0.001$) and school location ($\chi^2 = 19.19$, $df=5$, $p=0.002$). All groups still perceive civil services as the epitome of stability, but female students lean toward caregiving and socially



isolated jobs like teaching (22.67%) and healthcare (36.67%) whereas male students gravitate toward technical and physically demanding jobs like engineering (28.00%) and defense services (16.67%). Urban youths are more likely to take risks in capital intensive professions and trade, while rural youths are disproportionately attracted to low-risk, pensioned state jobs and uniformed services that provide immediate livelihood security.

To summarize, the results point to the serious consequences of a lack of institutionalized and psychometrically sound mechanisms for career guidance in secondary schools. There is no early career testing, nor individual mentoring so students have no option but to conform to cultural scripts inherited, community expectations and family risk management, rather than any realistic assessment of their individual aptitudes. Such over-dependence results in a high level of academic anxiety, vocational bottlenecks amidst hyper-competitive examinations and leaves the regional youth population ill-equipped to take advantage of the burgeoning opportunities in modern enterprise, technology and applied sciences. To make these aspirations translate into sustainable human capital, educational authorities need to go beyond the provision of access, decentralize specialized career counseling to rural schools and deconstruct gendered orthodoxies to enable students to find their footing in a fast-shifting economic environment.

Educational and Policy Implications

As per the result emerged from the study the following practical suggestions are recommended for implication to bring positive changes in educational system of Kashmir valley in specific and throughout the nation in general.

- Establish Career and guidance counselling centres at the district level in the Kashmir Valley
- Organizing school level career talk and career counselling programme
- Appointment professional career counsellors in secondary schools
- Closing the Urban-Rural Academic Gap: To help close the gap in academic self-efficacy, rural institutions need targeted funding for computer lab upgrades, digital resources, and subject-matter tutoring.
- Parental and Community Sensitization: School welfare committees should organize career awareness workshops for parents to break the gendered career stereotypes and to expand the vision beyond traditional government employment.
- Expanding the Vocational Stream: State curriculum authorities should broaden the spectrum of vocational courses prescribed under the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) and connect practical skills to mainstream secondary education.

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