

# Do job aspirations cause job choice? Insights from women entering male-dominated occupational training in India

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## Funding information

Cambridge Political Economy Society Trust;  
Cambridge Trust; Rajiv Gandhi Foundation

## Abstract

**Motivation:** The participation rate of women in India's labour force is not only one of the lowest in the world, it has also been declining. To increase women's employment, some observers argue for reducing occupational gender segregation so that more women enter non-traditional jobs.

**Purpose:** I ask how aspirations for non-traditional jobs are formed among young women in Delhi. The aim was to enable policy-makers to foster occupational aspirations for non-traditional jobs so women could enter jobs considered to be men's work, reducing gender segregation and increasing women's participation in the labour market.

**Methods and approach:** I interviewed 72 young women from low-income households in Delhi, following a semi-structured guide. These young women were training either in jobs seen as the preserve of men—taxi drivers, electricians, and electronics mechanics—or in traditionally female work in beauty salons.

**Findings:** Contrary to conventional wisdom, young women's entry into non-traditional training in Delhi was not a result of their occupational aspirations. Rather, entry into training saw them aspire to the jobs for which they trained.

**Policy implications:** To increase women's entry into jobs dominated by men, policy-makers do not need to influence young women's occupational aspirations. Instead, they should focus on factors that directly affect job entry—for example, having training centres close to where these young women live—and provide opportunities for young women to train.

Traditional concepts of occupational aspirations, generally derived from the global North, do not apply in the same way to young women in India. My study raises questions about these conceptions of aspirations and prompts future studies to assess whether they apply in other parts of the global South.

## KEYWORDS

aspirations, female employment, female labour force participation, India, male-dominated jobs, occupational gender segregation, occupational training, young women

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, India's female labour force participation rate was significantly lower than the world average, but it was also lower than that of nearly all other South Asian countries (ILO, 2013). Furthermore, female participation in the labour force in India was declining, having decreased from 37% in 2004–2005 to 29% in 2009–2010 and to 21% in 2019 (ILO, 2013; Kapsos et al. 2014; Choudhary & Verick 2014; World Bank, 2020).

The low and declining female labour force participation has been a significant policy challenge that has important and well-known detrimental development implications (Duflo, 2012; World Bank, 2011). Women's participation in the labour force is important for (1) economic growth (World Bank 2018, para 5); (2) for women themselves—women's employment is associated with increased decision-making power within the household (Kabeer, 1997), a delay in the age of marriage and childbirth (Fletcher et al., 2017; Heath & Mobarak, 2014; Jensen, 2012); and (3) through positive spillovers, for others around them—women's control over resources is associated with better nutrition (Sivasankaran, 2014) and schooling (Qian, 2008) of their children. Indeed, given the scale of the challenge in India, failing to address it could hinder the attainment of at least two of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): SDG 5 “to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls,” and SDG 8 “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all,” especially target SDG 8.5 “By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value” (Sahai, 2020).

Several quantitative studies that analysed female labour force participation in India found that occupational gender segregation is central to why women's participation is low and declining (Chakraborty, 2016; Chatterjee et al., 2015; Kapsos et al., 2014). These studies argue that since many of the sectors that experienced high employment growth between 1994 and 2010 were not traditional for women in India, women's participation in the labour force remained low and had even declined. Kapsos et al. (2014, p. 23) show that “less than 19 percent of the new employment opportunities generated in India's 10 fastest growing occupations were taken up by women.” In the absence of occupational gender segregation, women's employment could have increased by 20.7 million instead of the actual growth of only 8.7 million between 1994 and 2010 (Kapsos et al., 2014).<sup>1</sup>

Policy documents have therefore highlighted the importance of examining how occupational gender segregation can be reduced in India and how women can be supported in obtaining work in growing sectors that are often not traditional for them (Fletcher et al., 2017; Kapsos et al., 2014; Sudarshan, 2014). Although the employment of women in non-traditional jobs is recognized as an important issue, there are very few empirical studies analysing women's entry into non-traditionally female jobs in India.

Several studies find occupational aspirations to be among the most significant predictors of vocational attainment and outcomes (Ashby & Schoon, 2010; Burke & Hoelter, 1988; Marini, 1978; Porter, 1954; Schoon & Polek, 2011; Sewell et al., 1969). Gardiner and Goedhuys (2020) in a review for the International Labour Organization (ILO)—“Youth aspirations and the future of work”—argue that influencing youth aspirations through policy can be key to achieving target labour market outcomes. They state that aspirations are malleable and could be “design[ed] through policy” so that young individuals then “are likely to accept the opportunities [in the labour market] offered to them through policy interventions” (Gardiner & Goedhuys, 2020, p. 9). The report goes on to analyse the factors that shape occupational aspirations so that youth employment can be increased.

It could therefore be reasonably expected that understanding the factors that shape aspirations for non-traditional jobs is key to young women's entry into them. If we could understand how occupational aspirations for

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<sup>1</sup>The 10 “Major Division” of occupational categories, that Kapsos et al. (2014 p. 24) identify, following the National Sample Survey, are: Legislators, Senior Officials and Managers; Professionals; Technicians and Associate Professionals; Clerks; Service Workers and Shop and Market Sales Workers; Skilled Agricultural and Fishery Workers; Craft and related Trades Workers; Plant and Machine Operators and Assemblers; Elementary Occupations; Workers not Classified by Occupations.

non-traditional jobs can be fostered, then policy design could expand the ambit of occupational choices for young women who hitherto have tended to enter training for traditionally female jobs.

This article therefore examines the question of how occupational aspirations for non-traditional jobs are formed among young women who enter training for non-traditional jobs? The motivation for this research was that answering the question would help overcome occupational gender segregation and, in turn, increase female labour force participation. In so doing, this article would also fill an important empirical gap, one which is key to policy.

The study examined the question for young women in Delhi. It draws on a total of 72 interviews, primarily with young women training in the non-traditional jobs of being taxi drivers, electricians, and electronics mechanics and those training in the traditional job of working in beauty salons. These young women were from low-income households and mostly under the age of 21, and were single. The declining labour participation rates of young women are significant for a range of reasons: (1) they explain a large part of the overall decline in female participation rates—approximately 53% of the 19.16 million drop in employment between 1993–1994 and 2011–2012 had occurred within the age group of 15–24 years (Andres et al., 2017); (2) they account for a large part of the lower youth participation rates—while less than half of India's youth enters the workforce, among those who do not, most are women; (3) they are important because of India's demographic juncture, as the country has the world's youngest population. Furthermore, the lower strata of the consumption decile saw a more pronounced drop in female participation in the labour force between 2006 and 2011 (Andres et al., 2017).

The study considers women in occupational training, which can reduce gender segregation and thus increase women's participation in the labour force. The analysis of National Sample Surveys in India found that, conditional on reporting that they were willing to accept a job, women who attended skills or vocational training were more likely to be in a job that appeared not to correspond directly to their education levels (Fletcher et al., 2017). Additionally, teachers, principals, and mobilizers at the training organizations were also interviewed.

Following the literature on occupational aspirations, this study expected to find that the entry of young women into occupational training would, at least in part, be explained by their aspirations occupations. However, examining the role of occupational aspirations in young women's entry into the training programmes, the findings in fact challenge the conventional wisdom that occupational aspirations shape occupational entry. Rather, they suggest that it was undertaking the training that shaped occupational aspirations rather than the other way around.

The article has two significant implications. First, on an empirical level it implies that to understand entry into non-traditional training, it is essential to look beyond aspirations for them. Policy-makers do not need to understand how to foster occupational aspirations for non-traditional jobs, as other studies have put forward (Gardiner & Goedhuys, 2020). Provide opportunities for young women, support their entry, and aspirations will follow. The finding thus calls for a reorientation of policy strategy, a shift of focus from targeting occupational aspirations to entry itself. Second, in theoretical terms, the article raises questions about the conventional understanding on the development of occupational aspirations, which have mostly been studied in the "Minority World," (i.e. countries of the global North) as Kabiru et al. (2013, p. 92) term it. These findings raise questions about the concept of occupational aspirations—their developmental and directional characteristics—and indicate that they may not apply in the same way across contexts. For these young women from low-income backgrounds in Delhi, their occupational aspirations do not form until they enter occupational training. Instead of occupational aspirations leading to occupational entry, it is the training that forges occupational aspirations.

In addition, this study is unusual in its methodological approach. Nearly all studies on female labour force participation, occupational gender segregation in India, and indeed on occupational aspirations have been quantitative (Dercon & Singh, 2013; Fletcher et al., 2017, p. 284; Kapsos et al., 2014; Klasen & Pieters, 2012, 2015; Maertens, 2013; Mitra, 2008; Mondal et al., 2018; Rustagi, 2010; Schoon & Polek, 2011; Yates et al., 2011). By studying young women's entry decisions qualitatively, this article is able to examine and build on these studies and explore the "how" and "why," taking the research further and enabling policy to be informed. It also offers an

empirical analysis of entry into training for occupations—taxi drivers, electricians, and electronics mechanics—that are rarely studied for women, especially in India.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 discusses what aspirations are and what they are not. It draws out how the sociological, psychological, and economic literature characterizes occupational aspirations as those which (1) act as motivators; (2) develop over time, becoming concrete at around the age of 14; and (3) tend to lead to their achievement (4) leading policy-makers to focus on occupational aspirations as a way of reducing socioeconomic inequalities. Section 3 describes the methods used to examine the research question. Section 4 demonstrates that the participants did not display any of the fundamental characteristics of occupational aspirations discussed in the literature in Section 2. While several participants said that they had no occupational goals at all before entering the training, for others they were unset—fleeting, flexible, and amorphous— and generally not thought through. The section thus shows that aspirations as specific set goals (Bernard et al., 2011; Bernard et al., 2014; Haller & Miller, 1963; Locke & Latham, 2002) that are sustained and for which individuals plan and invest (Bernard et al., 2011), and which develop to become realistic objectives (Cook et al., 1996; Gottfredson, 1981), do not apply to the experiences of young women from low-income households in India's capital, Delhi. In such a situation of occupational aspirational void, Section 5 finds that childhood dreams (such as being a model or a teacher) and parents' unevaluated wishes (such as for their daughter to become a lawyer or a doctor) were expressed as their occupational desires. Section 6 demonstrates that with initial desires beyond reach and an "incapacity" (Appadurai, 2004) to develop specific occupational aspirations, entry into occupational training forged occupational aspirations rather than the other way around. These young women did not form specific, set occupational aspirations, while still harbouring an amorphous desire to "become something." In such cases, it is opportunities, the chance to become something, that create aspirations. The article concludes in Section 7 with discussions on the policy implications, namely that occupational aspirations for non-traditional jobs do not explain entry into them, and the concept of occupational aspirations may not apply in the same way across contexts. This implies that policy needs to shift its focus to increase women's entry into "male" jobs. The creation of occupational aspirations for non-traditional job training does not hold the key for policy intervention. Instead, policy should look beyond occupational aspirations and focus directly on factors that determine entry, which could include factors such as providing job-related information or creating support among parents.

## 2 | ASPIRATIONS: DEFINITION, THEORY, SIGNIFICANCE, AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Over several decades, concern with social mobility, maximizing individual talent and capabilities, and breaking out of aspirational poverty traps have led research across sociology, psychology, and, recently, economics to define and study aspirations. These studies suggest at least three features that characterize aspirations.

First, what is common to the understanding of aspirations across disciplines is the fundamental association with having a goal (Hart, 2016; Locke & Latham, 2002). As such, a vital characteristic of aspirations is that they act as motivators: "they are goals in which individuals are willing, in principle, to invest time, effort, or money to attain" (Bernard et al., 2011, p. 6). Bernard et al. (2011) argue that, even though the willingness to invest may be conditional or potential, it distinguishes aspirations from idle daydreams and wishes. To invest implies thinking, planning which steps to invest in, forethought (Albert & Luzzo, 1999), which helps individuals guide their behaviour towards a specific future outcome. In sum, aspirations are specific targets or goals for the future that have involved some thinking about the investments these would involve, and a pathway to achieve them, that motivate the individual to take steps towards realizing them.

Conversely, the absence of aspirations (having set goals) could be understood as aimlessness (the absence of set goals). Bernard et al. (2011) argue that a lack of aspirations can be viewed as fatalism, which implies an absence of goals. Fatalism denotes a "helplessness that a person may feel with regard to proactively modifying his or her

future” and is equivalent to “not making the necessary investments to better one’s well-being” (Bernard et al., p. 2). Ray (2006) posits that frustration of aspirations might lead to fatalism. Hart (2016, p. 328) similarly argues that a belief that it is impossible to change one’s circumstances or “acquiescent contentment” could inhibit aspirations (Hart, 2016).

Second, theories on occupational aspirations emphasize their developmental aspect—aspirations develop over time as an individual grows from childhood to adolescence, starting to become realistic and concrete at around the age of 14 (Gottfredson, 1981). Aligned with this insight, various studies (Cook et al., 1996; Gutman & Akerman, 2008; Helwig, 1998; Hitlin, 2006; Mau & Bikos, 2000; Schoon & Polek, 2011) focus on late adolescents and early adults, the intuitive basis being that, since individuals begin to make decisions regarding their future at this age, aspirations tend to lose their abstraction and become realistic and concrete (Cook et al., 1996). As aspirations are a summary or a combination of the “preferences held, the expectations formed, and the constraints acknowledged by an individual with respect to the future” (Bernard et al., 2008, p. 6), it is reasoned that individuals are able to take their preferences and constraints into account to form thought-out, concrete occupational goals. Implicitly or explicitly, these studies indicate that preferences and expectations are constrained by factors such as gender representation in occupations and their socialization. Okamoto and England (1999), analysing the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth in the US, argue that “the sex composition of the occupations men and women aspired to and expected affected the occupations they worked in fourteen years later (...).”

Third, since at least the 1950s, studies have shown that occupational aspirations shape occupational pathways (Ashby & Schoon, 2010; Burke & Hoelter, 1988; Marini, 1978; Porter, 1954; Schoon & Polek, 2011; Sewell et al., 1969) and “most researchers agree that the occupational and educational aspirations of adolescents are among the most useful predictors of eventual educational and occupational choices made in adulthood” (Rojewski, 2005, p. 132). This is especially true for adolescents and young adults. For example, as early as 1954, Porter, in a study based on white high-school boys in the US, found that 80% of the boys surveyed had a vocational attainment that was consistent with their vocational aspiration measured at the end of high school. Marini (1978), on the basis of several studies, including Kohout and Rothney (1964), Kuvlesky and Bealer (1967), and Portes et al. (1968), argues that “even in studies which find a relatively low degree of congruence between aspirations and attainment, the highest proportion of individuals who end up in a given occupational category are those who initially desired to enter it” (p. 725).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, longitudinal studies such as that of Astin and Myint (1971) argue that for adult women such educational and occupational aspirations in high school are the most closely related to actual career choice (Marini, 1978). More recently, several studies such as Schoon and Polek (2011) show that occupational aspirations at the age of 16 are a critical predictor of attaining higher social status and earnings in the mid-30s even after controlling for indicators of educational achievement, general cognitive ability, and family socioeconomic background. Based on two large, representative samples of the British population born in 1958 and 1970 of individuals in mid-adulthood, they further demonstrated that those with “aspirations for a professional job” were “more likely to participate in further education, and are more likely to achieve a professional career in their adult years” (Schoon & Polek, 2011, p. 215) compared to their less ambitious peers.

Therefore, these studies have implicitly or explicitly emphasized the need to understand how aspirations are formed. Influencing aspirations to bridge socioeconomic inequalities and achieve desired education and training outcomes has then become a focus of policy, as argued in the ILO report (Gardiner & Goedhuys, 2020). Poverty of aspirations has been used to explain educational and social economic inequalities in member states of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (Gale & Parker, 2015).

In sum, research on aspirations over decades and across disciplines establishes aspirations as: (1) set, thought-out goals that individuals (2) develop over time, becoming concrete at the age of 14 and, importantly, (3) that tend

<sup>2</sup>“Congruence” is defined as where the individual’s occupational aspiration and attainment are in the same occupational category (Marini, 1978).

to lead to their achievement (4) leading policy-makers to call for influencing aspirations to overcome socioeconomic inequalities and achieve target labour market outcomes. The following sections will show that these fundamental characteristics of occupational aspirations were not demonstrated by young women in non-traditional and traditional training in Delhi. They had wanted to become something but did not know what—they did not have a clear occupational goal that had taken shape over time and led to their entry into training to be taxi drivers, electricians, or electronics mechanics. Instead, occupational aspiration was a consequence of entry into the training rather than its cause.

### 3 | METHODS

One of the ways this study contributes to the understanding of female labour force participation is through its choice of method. Most studies on female participation in the labour force and occupational gender segregation have been quantitative. The data itself is not entirely adequate (Hirway & Jose, 2011), nor does it help in understanding women's subjective decision-making: why women enter a job, how their aspirations are formed, or what the underlying mechanisms are. Given the paucity of qualitative studies, some studies have tried to infer women's subjective decision-making from quantitative data (Lansky et al., 2017). This study, by using qualitative methods, informs questions of the "why" and "how" of women's work outcomes, moving beyond the "what" that quantitative studies have offered.

The study is primarily informed by 72 semi-structured interviews that were conducted and analysed between 2017 and 2020. Of these, 56 were with young women trainees themselves (21 taxi driver trainees; 23 beauty trainees; six electrician trainees and six electronics mechanic trainees), the main subject of this study, and there were also 16 interviews with trainers, teachers, mobilizers, and principals at the training organizations to gather contextual information about the training (see [Appendix 1.1](#) for the interview guide).<sup>3</sup>

The young women participants were contacted at the training centres—those who were training to work as taxi drivers and personal chauffeurs at a non-governmental organization (NGO), trainee electricians and electronics mechanics at the government Industrial Training Institute (ITI)<sup>4</sup>; and the beauty trainees were also at an NGO.

The case of driving was chosen purposively, while the other two cases were identified through snowballing and purposive sampling (where trainee drivers helped identify the NGO for beauty training, and the trainees and teachers at the beauty training helped identify the ITI).

Although the durations of the training varied—for drivers and beauty trainees, the courses lasted for a minimum of six months and at the ITI (for electricians and electronics mechanics) for two years—I maintained continuity in recall period of a maximum of six months by interviewing trainees who had finished six months of training.

The young women trainees selected were between the ages of 15 and 24 (following the United Nations definition of youth) and lived in low-income neighbourhoods. In fact, most of the participants were in the narrower age range of 16 to 21. Specifically, 77% of the beauty-worker trainees, 77% of the driver trainees,<sup>5</sup> 83% of electricians, and 80% of electronics mechanics fell within this age range. These young women, probably because of their young age, were single (although this was not a selection criterion).

<sup>3</sup>Although more interviews with women electricians and electronics mechanics trainees would have been preferable, I had interviewed all the girls in the 15–24 age range in their first year, i.e. they had completed six months of the training, maintaining the six-month recall period, in the two courses.

<sup>4</sup>The Government of India set up ITIs under the Ministry of Labour to offer vocational training to the youth in the country.

<sup>5</sup>For driving training, the minimum age of a participant was 18, the legal minimum to be able to drive in India.

The study selected participants from low-income families. They resided in Tier III colonies, areas that, according to the Delhi government, fare worst in terms of social infrastructure, physical infrastructure, plot size, and other economic conditions in the city. These areas have a significantly lower level of assets compared to the Delhi average (see [Appendix 1.4](#) for details). They resemble slums and the participants—by training for “blue-collar” occupations in NGOs and institutes that explicitly served disadvantaged communities—self-selected into the criteria. They were from families where fathers worked as rickshaw pullers, construction labourers, were employed in the informal economy, etc., and their mothers tended not to be in paid employment (see [Appendix 1.4](#) for socio-demographic details of the participants such as family income, and education levels).

The study took a comparative case study approach that was key to its design. It compared across non-traditional training programmes (driving, and electrician and electronics mechanic training), and the traditional training programme (beauty training) which helped identify the factors responsible for the differences in the occupational paths. The comparison within the non-traditional training programmes helped with triangulating the findings, and the differences in responses between the two non-traditional training programmes (driving at the NGO vs. electrician and electronics mechanics at the ITI) helped nuance the findings (Bryman, 2015).

The analysis followed an inductive thematic analysis approach and used a computer-assisted qualitative analysis software, MAXQDA, to manage and systematically organize the large amount of information and themes. Boyatzis (1998, p. 161) explains thematic analysis as an exercise where explicit codes are attached to qualitative data or “encoded.” An inductive approach is more appropriate for exploratory studies rather than “confirmatory,” hypotheses-driven studies (Guest et al., 2012). Therefore, the inductive approach automatically seemed the appropriate choice for this study, as interviews had quickly revealed that factors such as aspirations, while important in the literature, had little to do with participants' entry.

To analyse the data, the interviews, which were conducted in Hindi, were then translated and transcribed into English. Step 2 identified potential themes such as “No goals,” “No thinking about jobs,” “Lack of forethought/planning/thinking about goals,” “Early dreams,” among others. The next step identified patterns and related themes. For example, “No thinking about jobs” was related to not having occupational goals. In step 4, coding categories were developed, such as “unset occupational aspirations.” The final step developed the analytical framework by interpreting codes and integrating them with the literature, for example, “entry not a result of aspirations but leads to them.” The comparison between the responses of women in traditional and non-traditional training aided the analytical process throughout.

## 4 | OCCUPATIONAL ASPIRATIONS DO NOT LEAD TO YOUNG WOMEN'S ENTRY INTO OCCUPATIONAL TRAINING

Following the literature on occupational aspirations, this study expected that the entry of young women into occupational training would be, at least in part, explained by their aspiration for the occupation. That three of the four training programmes were in non-traditional occupations, an atypical choice, only underscored the expectation that women who have entered such programmes would have done so on the basis of a strongly felt aspiration rather than following social norms. As such, the study started out by trying to understand how aspirations for non-traditional occupations were formed for the young women who entered them. However, when I asked the participants across the four training programmes what they wanted to be, they invariably reported that they “now” wanted to be what they were training in—taxi drivers, electricians, electronics mechanics, and beauticians. Observing their emphasis on “now” revealed that not only had they not aspired to the training they were in, but in fact had not had specific occupational aspirations before they entered the training.

For those training to become electricians and electronics mechanics at the ITI, the courses they were enrolled on had not been their first choice or sometimes even among their first five choices on the application form. The rank at which they opted for the training is shown in [Table 1](#).

TABLE 1 Preference number indicated for the non-traditional training in the application form at the ITI.

S. No.	Electrician		Electronics Mechanic	
	Name of Trainee (Anonymized)	Choice Number	Name of Trainee (Anonymized)	Choice Number
1	Ujwala	2	Karishma	25
2	Bhavya	7	Rekha	11
3	Lubhawna	4	Anchal	2
4	Patanjali	1	Sanyukta	1
5	Anubha	8	Kriti	15
6	Esha	1		

For five of the 11 electrician and electronics mechanic trainees at the ITI, the course did not figure in their first five choices. For even those participants whose preference ranking appeared to be within the first choices, they had not aspired to become an electrician or an electronics mechanic beforehand, and it was because of other factors that they found themselves doing the training. For example, Esha's grandfather persuaded her to fill in electrician as her first choice on the application form, even when she was resistant to becoming an electrician until she started the training. In exceptional cases, participants did not even know they had opted for atypical training. Anchal, an electronics trainee, said that she did not know whether or not she had filled in the choice to study electronics but had ended up on the course. She explained that she had asked her friend to complete the form: "I don't quite know [if electronics was filled in on the form or not]. She didn't tell me and I never asked her. But her 'knowledge' is better than mine. So I told her to fill in my form too."

Examining participants' responses revealed a lack of occupational goals and an aimlessness in occupational terms, defying the predictions in the literature (discussed in Section 2) whereby aspirations lead to entry on a training course. I asked Mitu, a trainee driver: what did you want to do before you heard about this NGO?

*Before finding out about here, I had no idea what I'd do. Seriously, I was completely aimless before I came here because I really did not know what to do, but now that I have got some "knowledge" about this field, I only want to become a "professional" taxi driver. [...] I hadn't thought of anything by class 12. The only thing on my mind was that I should go to college, because everyone goes to college after passing 12th grade. I never thought about what I wanted to become. I thought only about finishing 12th grade and then going to college and then getting some decent job [if I don't have to stay at home]. The question about which job never came to my mind.*

Even in the cases where a participant may have had a notion of a particular job, it was quickly forgotten. Mariam, a beauty trainee, told me that when her father suggested that she should do a nursing course, she wanted to do it at that moment, but that drifted away soon after: "jobs enter my mind and then they leave."

Tuheena, a beauty trainee, wanted to become "something," like most others, but had not thought about what this might be. I asked her: "Have you ever thought what you want to do in the future?"

*No, I haven't thought anything really. If I become something, then that will be good. It's just that I want to do something in my life. I don't know what I want to do, but do something for sure. [...] People have a certain aim in their lives, that they want to become that, which I don't have [...] That's why I haven't thought of some specific goal. So, I just know that I don't want to sit idle; I just want to keep doing something.*



Esha's "aspirations" had not become concrete and realistic by the age of 14. Esha, a trainee electrician, reported that even in the 12th grade at the age of 18 she had not thought of becoming anything specific: "At that time in 12th, I wanted to become everything [laughs]. [...] (Even in the 11th and 12th) we were confused, and the confusion never went away."

Although participants did desire to "become something," they did not express specific occupational aspirations. Some clearly stated that they had no goals; others said they had not thought about what they wanted to become while wanting to become something; and some expressed multiple job interests, but had not taken steps towards fulfilling these, failing to transform their interests into concrete targets. As such, their earlier occupational dreams, if they had any, were unset, unthought out, and fleeting as opposed to occupational aspirations that are set, thought out, and planned goals that have developed and been sustained over time, leading to their achievement, as discussed in Section 2.

## 5 | MODEL, SINGER, ACTRESS: UNLIKELY DREAMS FILL THE ASPIRATIONAL VOID

In the absence of set goals, many sustained their childhood dreams even after the age of 14 and these were expressed as their occupational "aspirations." They wanted to be models, actresses, singers, famous chefs, and the like. Some had fleetingly seen the police as children and expressed a desire to enter the police. Many had become fond of their teachers as young children and said that they wanted to be teachers as a whim. Others had made their parents' unlikely dreams their own and wished to become doctors and lawyers.

Kirti, a beauty trainee, had wanted to be a singer, although she felt her voice was not melodious. However, she had not considered other jobs.

*[I wanted to become a singer] for a long time. I wanted to become a singer, but due to my hoarse voice, I could not become a singer and then I entered this parlour training too. [...] I had never thought about any other field.*

Several participants wanted to be teachers. Ambika, a beauty trainee, reported that while she had not planned on or sought information on how to become anything specific, she had wanted to be a teacher.

*During my childhood I had thought of becoming a teacher...you know when you are a child...you see teachers teaching you in school...you think we will also teach...just that.*

Mohini, a trainee driver, reported that she wanted to enter the police because she had a 'craze' for it:

*I haven't seen anyone working in the police, but a "craze" has always been there [to enter the police]. Movies like Mardaani<sup>6</sup> created a "craze" in me to be in the police force [laughs] [...] No, I didn't plan or think about it.*

Tina, a beauty trainee, had wanted to be a lawyer following her father's wishes, but could not pursue it. On being asked what had made her think of becoming a lawyer, she replied:

*Just like that. I liked it. Papa used to say that I'll make you a lawyer. I'll make at least one of my daughters a lawyer. So I thought that at least I could become one, but then I couldn't complete my studies so then I left this idea but that was my dream.*

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<sup>6</sup>Mardaani is a Bollywood movie that is centred around a female police officer.

For some, what they wanted to be as a child was still the case at 18. For others, what they wanted as a child fell away, but nothing specific replaced it. For some, what they saw in a film became their dream. These dreams have important differences from aspirations. They were usually not thought through, but reflected, for example, a “craze” based on a film. Such dreams were accompanied by little or no planning or reflection on how they might be achieved, and there were no investments or steps taken towards fulfilling them, which are fundamental characteristics of occupational aspirations. However, there were some exceptions among the participants. Hamida, a trainee driver, was in the third year of an undergraduate degree in Political Science at Delhi University. She wanted to join the police. She was one of the few who had thought about her occupational future, found out about her goal, and tried to work towards it. Her father, who had passed away, had encouraged her to play sports and had wanted her to achieve something in this field. She felt that becoming a police officer would make use of her sporting skills while also giving her the security and respect of a government job. Hamida, had taken the exam to enter the police but was unsure if she would be successful. While the exam results had not arrived yet, she had entered driver training as a fall-back to her aspiration of becoming a police officer. Patanjali, a trainee electrician, was the only participant in the non-traditional training programmes who had aimed to be where she was. She had wanted to be in the police as a child, but this changed to wanting to become an electrician. When she was in the 9th or 10th grade, her brothers had explained to her that that is what she should aim for, after which, she said, “my mentality became this in the 9th and 10th grade.” Patanjali’s aspirations, acknowledging her constraints, evolved (from police to electrician), she had thought about what was required to achieve it (10th and 12th grade studies), and she had set a specific goal.

This section has shown that, predominantly, the dreams did not appear to be occupational “aspirations.” A fundamental characteristic of aspirations is that they are concrete goals, which act as motivators, with individuals being willing to invest, even if conditionally, which distinguishes aspirations from idle daydreams (Bernard et al., 2011, p. 6). The responses tended to indicate that desires were unthought-out, did not stimulate action, and did not lead to steps being taken towards their fulfilment. They were wishes, not occupational aspirations.

What explains participants’ “incapacity to aspire” for their occupational futures? While a full examination is beyond the scope of this article, I suggest a few plausible factors for future research. First, gendered constraints in the form of uncertain futures after marriage for these single young women could have contributed to their undefined occupational aspirations. Vijayakumar (2013) argues that flexible aspirations, the quality to “be like water,” can be an aspiration in itself for women in India. Second, the participants’ contexts of poverty could have formed inhibiting “mental models” (World Bank, 2015) and “outcome in-expectancies” (i.e. beliefs about one’s environment, such that an individual believes that their actions will not lead to the aimed outcomes) (Bandura, 1977), creating beliefs that their circumstances would be determinative of their outcomes, and the futility of their aspiring. Furthermore, insofar as the poor have limited experiences of paths to go from wants to achievable goals, their “navigational” capacity (Appadurai, 2004) could have been compromised. To the extent that women’s occupational choices have been more limited than men’s, relatively poor women’s capacity to aspire could be doubly limited by a lack of experience of “practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture and refutation” (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69) due to their gender and socioeconomic status.

In this context of poverty and navigational incapacity, there was no pathway to achieving these occupational desires and no resources to set realistic goals. While these seem plausible reasons for participants not forming occupational aspirations, more research focusing on their “incapacity to aspire” would be useful. Assessing the role of education in the formation of occupational aspirations would be especially informative.

## 6 | ENTRY CREATED OCCUPATIONAL ASPIRATIONS

Despite not aspiring to the occupational training in which the participants were enrolled, and in fact having no set concrete occupational aspirations at all initially, after entry into the training their goal was to become a successful electrician, electronics mechanic, driver or beautician.

The trainee electrician, Ujwala, no longer wanted to consider the option of any other job. I asked her about taxi driving, teaching, or any other job. She explained how her aspirations had become “set now”:

*I don't want to consider anything else because now my goal is “set” as to what I am to do after this. If I do something else now, then it will bother me that I have done this and now I'm not using it and doing something else.*

Mariam, a beauty trainee, had wanted to be a famous sports star, but she happened to enter beauty training and now wanted to get a job in a beauty salon. She explained: “First, you have to enter a specific field and then you will get knowledge about it. You will learn more and more and you will like it more. As happened with me.” Many participants stated that since they had received training they would only go for a job in that vocation, signalling that they did not want to waste the investment they had made in it. Significantly, for almost all the participants, the entry into training presented the opportunity to “become something.” They could see a path before them that led to a job and it was this promise to be something that was, for various reasons, meaningful to them: to make their parents proud, to be respected by those around them, or to live a “modern lifestyle.” Their entry into occupational training was not a result of “preferences” and “plans” (Devine, 1994), but once they had entered the training that is what they aspired to become.

## 7 | DISCUSSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Several policy documents and academic studies have emphasized the need to draw women into non-traditional jobs in India as a matter of priority. How can this be done? Many studies have shown that occupational aspirations are important in shaping occupational choices. Based on these studies, policy reports have recommended that policy should shape young people's aspirations to achieve a desired labour market outcome. So, this study asked: how do aspirations for non-traditional job training develop for young women from low-income families in Delhi? The intention was that answering this question would help policy shape young women's occupational aspirations for non-traditional jobs and reduce occupational gender segregation and increase female labour force participation.

The study found, however, that occupational aspirations are not the key to entry into a job—in fact they did not really exist for most young women. So, in answer to the question, the study found that there were no specific aspirations for non-traditional jobs among the participants and hence this did not account for their entry into them. In contrast to studies that argue that having occupational goals leads to their achievement, this study shows that occupational aspirations were a consequence of entering an occupational training programme. This article started out by outlining three features of aspirations. First, fundamentally they are goals. Second, occupational aspirations develop over time, theoretically starting to become concrete at around the age of 14. Third, occupational aspirations influence entry into the occupation. Put simply, having goals tends to lead to their achievement.

This article has, however, shown that none of the three features was fully applicable to the study participants. Section 4 showed that almost none had occupational goals. Section 5 demonstrated that childhood dreams did not develop to become concrete and realistic aspirations at the age of 14, which might have prompted them to take steps towards their fulfilment. Their own childhood dreams (to be a model or actress) or of their parents for them were expressed even as late as 18 years of age. Section 6 showed that, in a situation where there were no clearly perceived occupational targets, but there was a desire to become something, occupational aspirations were a consequence of entry rather than a cause.

Overall, this article has two significant implications. First, in empirical terms, it implies that to understand entry into non-traditional training, it is essential to look beyond aspirations. It is opportunities for young women that are needed. Once young women enter training, the aspirations follow. Second, in theoretical terms, the article raises questions about the conventional understanding of the development of occupational aspirations, which has mostly been studied in what is often referred to as the “global North” or the “Minority

World,” as Kabiru et al. (2013) term it. This study finds that traditional theories on occupational aspirations based on the “global North” do not really apply to the context of young women in low-income groups in India. These findings raise questions about the concept of occupational aspirations—their developmental and directional characteristics—and indicate that they may not apply in the same way across contexts. For these young women from low-income contexts in Delhi, their occupational aspirations do not become concrete at around 14 years of age. In fact, they do not form at all until they enter occupational training. Rather than occupational aspirations leading to their achievement, it is entry or achievement that forge occupational aspirations for the particular occupation.

Furthermore, by qualitatively examining young women's occupational aspirations and occupational gender segregation, when most studies on these subjects are quantitative, this article adopts a new methodological approach. Its focus on young women training to be taxi drivers, electricians, or electronics mechanics offers empirical analysis that relate to occupations that are rarely studied for women, especially in India.

The finding that aspirations follow opportunities is important for policy-making. Policy reports have recommended intervening in occupational aspirations to increase youth employment and achieve particular outcomes. Development interventions have also followed this recommendation. For example, the report on employment policy for ILO states, “We have argued that [...] youth's aspirations are malleable” and policies should “align youth educational and work aspirations” by intervening to “re-orientate jobseekers towards vocational training or towards training curricula for jobs in high demand” (Gardiner & Goedhuys, 2020, p. 38). However, the findings of this article indicate that policy around young women's entry into occupational training should look beyond occupational aspirations and examine factors that directly shape entry into training, such as providing job-related information or creating support among parents. While discussing all the other factors that shape entry and their associated policy implications is beyond the scope of this article, what it does is to show what policy does *not* need to do. Given the costs of interventions, it is arguably as important for policy-makers to know what not to do than knowing what to do, if not more so. This article establishes that policy-makers do not need to intervene to affect young women's occupational aspirations for non-traditional jobs in order to expand their occupational choice in India.

Furthermore, since young women's occupational aspirations are not the constraint for their entry into training, the finding emphasizes the importance of the availability of training—the “demand side”—even in forging aspirations. So far, as training centres still tend to focus on traditionally female job training (such as sewing, beauty parlours, etc.) for women in country contexts such as India, this article underscores the need for that to change in order to reduce occupational gender segregation.

However, availability does not automatically mean access. One of the factors that policy-makers need to consider is to support access by making training available close by (and potentially the eventual location of the jobs too). Several studies in India—Gilbertson (2014) in Hyderabad, Lukose (2005) in Kerala, Jeffrey (2010) in Meerut and Ranade (2007) in Mumbai—emphasize the restricted mobility of young women. In line with these studies, the participants reported that they had hardly gone anywhere other than school and the local market before the training. Almost all participants lived in the areas where the training was provided or in areas close by. Therefore, the distance to where the training was offered was a critical factor in their ability to access it. As such, it is not only the availability of non-traditional training that is essential, but it needs to also be close to where the young women live for them to be able to avail themselves of the opportunity.

This article is especially timely in the context of COVID-19, which particularly affected female-dominated sectors—such as hospitality, retail, tourism, etc.—globally. Young women have experienced higher job losses and lower recovery rates in India (Abraham et al., 2021) and also worldwide (ILO, 2021). In this context, if the policy aim is to enable young women to enter non-traditional jobs, then such policy need not intervene to encourage occupational aspirations for the jobs, but rather focus directly on entry itself.

Although there is a long-standing literature on aspirations in sociology and psychology and now a burgeoning scholarship in economics, the application of the term “aspirations,” especially in the context of policy, has drawn some criticism. For example, Unterhalter et al. (2014, p. 140) have argued that in policy arenas, “the rhetoric of

aspiration ultimately serves as a diversion from the reality of increasing social exclusion and inequality." This article, by focusing to the "incapacity to aspire," does exactly the opposite. It underscores the social exclusion and inequality manifest in their social location in terms of gendered constraints, poverty, and, often, low education that could be creating an "incapacity to aspire." As Dalton et al. (2016, p. 13) argue, "far from being an innate trait of poor people, low aspirations emerge as an equilibrium outcome as a consequence of their initial disadvantage." These young women, before entering the training, often showed no occupational aspirations at all.

This article has focused on occupational gender segregation and occupational aspirations in the context of India, but, of course, occupational gender segregation is a global systematic phenomenon that characterizes countries of the "minority" as well as the "majority" world. Women tend to be clustered in lower-paid, lower-status occupations and confront glass ceilings, gendered pay gaps, and discriminatory experiences at work worldwide (ILO, 2019; World Bank, 2011). Although the study was conducted in India, its findings and policy implications are relevant beyond the country. Young women in many low- and lower-middle income countries report restrictions on their mobility. For example, studies on in countries in sub-Saharan Africa show how the restricted mobility of young women affects their employment (Chakravarty et al., 2017). Similarly, at the global level, vocational training for women tends to focus on traditionally female jobs (Kabeer, 2012; Langevang & Gough, 2012).

The finding that traditional theories on occupational aspirations, based on the "global North," do not fully apply to the context of young women in low-income groups in India suggests the need for future studies to consider if they apply to young women in low-income contexts, at least in large cities in low- and lower-middle income countries. Could aspirations form differently in low- and lower-middle income contexts than is anticipated by traditional theories on occupational aspirations, mostly based on the "global North"? There is the further question of how many young women are able to continue on their non-traditional occupational path and take up the jobs, once occupational aspirations are formed after entry into the training? What causes those who do not continue to leave? Such questions, focusing on the next step on the occupational pathway, are an important area of future study.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Parts of this article are excerpts from the author's PhD dissertation. I am grateful to Professor Brendan Burchell for his guidance when the ideas of the paper were developing, and to Professor Pauline Rose, who provided helpful remarks on this paper. I would also like to thank Liran Morav and Shreya Sinha for their comments on an early draft. Any errors are, of course, mine.

## FUNDING INFORMATION

This research was supported by funds from Cambridge Commonwealth Trust; Cambridge Political Economy Trust; the Rajiv Gandhi Cambridge Trust Scholarship; and the Department of Sociology, University of Cambridge.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared due to ethics and confidentiality reasons.

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**How to cite this article:** Sahai, G. (2024). Do job aspirations cause job choice? Insights from women entering male-dominated occupational training in India. *Development Policy Review*, 00, e12740. <https://doi.org/10.1111/dpr.12740>



## APPENDIX A

### Methods

#### 1. Interview guide

The following is the interview guide that I used with the primary participants in the study—the young women trainees in Delhi. The questions were complemented by prompts (e.g. “You have not mentioned X: what do you feel about that?”), probes (e.g. “Tell me more about this?”, “Why do you say that?”, “How did that come about?”) and verbal and non-verbal cues to continue (e.g. nodding, smiling, maintaining eye contact or saying “I see” in an encouraging way). The themes explored in the interviews were based on the literature and were informed by experiences in the field. As such, the themes explored in the interviews included sociobiographical and familial characteristics, occupations of the family, value of work, peer networks and relationships, family relationships, autonomy and relationships, gendered cultural beliefs, information and advice, occupational goal making and planning, *inter alia*.<sup>7</sup>

- What is your name?
- How old are you?
- Until what class did you study?
- Where do you live? Whom do you live with? Who are your family members?
- What do they do?
- How did you think of entering the training?
- Did you always want to enter this occupation? Why or why not?
- What did you want to become as a child? Why?
- Had you thought about it or planned for it?
- How did you decide what you want to become?
- How did you get into this occupational training?
- What do you want to become now?
- Did your parents want you to become something? What did they want you to become?
- Do your parents support you for the training? What was their reaction to the training? Is your parents' approval important to you? If so, why?
- If they did not support you, would you still be able to do the training? Why?
- How did you learn about the training?
- What was your friend's reaction to the training?
- Does your friends' approval or support matter to you?
- What do your friends do? Who are they? Where do you know them from?
- How did your neighbours react to your training?
- Do you want to do a job? Why?
- Imagine that you are married and you have no dearth of money, would you still want to do a job? Why?
- When you thought of joining this training, how did you feel? Why?
- What kinds of jobs do you think men are good at? What kind of jobs do you think that women are good at? Why?
- Are there jobs you wouldn't want to do? Why?
- Is there anyone who inspires you, who you look up to? Who is it and why do they inspire you?
- Do you use social media like Facebook? What do you tend to look at on Facebook? Does Facebook provide you with useful information regarding jobs?

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<sup>7</sup>Interview questions put to trainers, mobilizers, and teachers to gather additional contextual information on the training can be shared on request.

TABLE A1 Monthly Income distribution of participants.

Training type	Median income, INR	Income quartile	
		Q1, INR	Q3, INR
Driver training centre	10,000 (GBP 111.10)	8,000 (GBP 89.90)	15,500 (GBP 177.80)
Beauty Training centre	8,000 (GBP 89.90)	6,000 (GBP 66.70)	9,000 (GBP 100)
ITI <sup>10</sup>	Electronic Mechanic	<17,000 (GBP 188.90)	-
	Electrician	<17,000 (GBP 188.90)	-

- Have you seen women driving a taxi? Or an e-rickshaw? How do you feel when you see them? Would you want to do those jobs?
- If I tell you that there is an NGO which trains you in driving and then also links you with a job, would you want to do the training?

## 2. Location of the training centres

The three training centres were in and around Jahangirpuri, a Tier III area in Delhi. The travel distance between the driving training centre and beauty training centre was 4.8 km (2.9 miles); between the beauty training centre and the electrician and electronic mechanic, at the ITI was 950 m (0.6 miles); and between the driving training centre and electrician and electronic mechanic training centre (ITI) was 4.6 km (2.8 miles).

## 3. Sociodemographic details of the sample: Income and education

### (i) Income

Although all the participants lived in Tier III colonies, the (interquartile) income range of their families, self-reported by most participants, was still wide, from about INR 6000 to INR 15500 (GBP66.7–177.8) per month as shown in Appendix A1. The median income at the driver training was INR 10,000 (GBP 111.10); at the beauty training was INR 8,000 (GBP 89.90); and at the ITI was INR <17,000 (GBP 188.90).<sup>8,9</sup>

### (ii) Education

Participants' education was enquired about and analysed, but the selection was not made on its basis. Overall, the median education in driver training was 12th standard passed; at beauty training was 10th standard passed; at the ITI for both electricians and electronic mechanics was 12th standard passed.

## 4. Socioeconomic context

These tier III localities, which resemble slums, generally had a lower level of assets compared to the average levels in Delhi. For example, 6% of the households in Jahangirpuri, one of the areas where many of the participants lived, had none of the following: radio, television, computer/laptop, telephone/mobile phone, bicycle, two-wheeler, car, as opposed to 3% for Delhi. Less than 2% of Jahangirpuri had a computer or laptop with the internet as opposed to 18% for Delhi. Assets for mobility—cycle, two-wheelers, or cars—were lower for Jahangirpuri: 24% vs. 30%; 19% vs. 39%; 3% vs. 21%, respectively.

<sup>8</sup>Conversions from Indian national rupee to pound sterling are made at the exchange rate 90 INR to 1.0 GBP throughout the study.

<sup>9</sup>INR 17000 was used as a threshold to calculate the income comparisons as the ITI did not have further information on household incomes of the families of its trainees.

<sup>10</sup>Details of income of the participants was not available at the ITI as they only collected income as below and above INR 17,000 (GBP 188.9).