



Religious and Familial Beliefs Shaping Educational Aspirations of Secondary School Students

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Abstract

This research explores how family and religious beliefs influence educational aspirations among high school students in Bangladesh. This study seeks to understand the interplay between these beliefs and aspiration formation among students. The study used a mixed methods approach, integrating survey data of 450 students and interviews to examine quantitative trends and interpretative practices. The results suggest robust parental support and religious interpretations that support education are linked to higher student aspirations, with restrictive or conflicting beliefs constraining them. It also shows that congruence between family and religious beliefs enhances aspiration stability, while incongruence creates uncertainty and negotiation. Comparing gender effects, the aspirations of female students are more responsive to normative beliefs, but supportive contexts can reduce inequalities. This study is unique in its holistic approach to familial and religious beliefs as inter-related rather than isolated systems. The study adds to sociocultural theories of education by emphasising the relational and dynamic aspects of aspiration. The study offers practical implications for policy, which should seek to involve families and religious organisations in creating supportive and consistent belief systems.

INTRODUCTION

Education is widely recognized as a fundamental driver of social mobility, economic development, and human capital formation, particularly in developing countries. In South Asia, and Bangladesh specifically, secondary education represents a critical stage in shaping individuals' future trajectories, including access to higher education, formal employment, and social participation. Over the past decades, Bangladesh has made substantial progress in expanding educational access, reflected in rising enrollment rates and improved gender parity at the primary and secondary levels (Dutta, 2025; Akther, 2022; Alam, 2022). However, increasing access has not been accompanied by a uniform rise in educational aspirations. Significant disparities persist in how students envision their educational futures, suggesting that structural expansion alone cannot fully explain variations in educational outcomes. Instead, deeper sociocultural dynamics continue to influence

how students interpret the value of education and construct their aspirations (Tytler & Ferguson, 2023; McClain, 2024; Merdiaty & Sulistasih, 2024).

A growing body of literature has emphasized that educational aspirations are not merely individual preferences or rational responses to economic incentives, but are socially constructed within broader cultural and normative frameworks. Within this perspective, family and religion emerge as central institutions shaping belief systems that guide students' attitudes, motivations, and expectations regarding education (Khalil, 2024; Naragatti, 2025; Trang & Tran, 2025). Families function as primary agents of socialization, transmitting values about the purpose of education, acceptable life trajectories, and definitions of success. At the same time, religious beliefs provide moral frameworks that influence perceptions of duty, discipline, gender roles, and long-term life goals. In contexts such as Bangladesh, where both family cohesion and religious identity remain deeply embedded in everyday life, educational aspirations are formed through continuous interaction between these belief systems rather than in isolation (Judijanto et al., 2024; Rahman, 2025).

Research has shown that family support is critical in the formation of students' educational aspirations. Parents' expectations, educational attainment and socioeconomic status help shape perceptions of the desirability and feasibility of higher education (Amin, 2023; Mitrova & Koceva, 2024). Education is frequently positioned by families as a means to achieve social mobility, prestige and generational improvement. But they can also place limits by emphasising the need for immediate economic contributions, adherence to gender roles, or premature entry into adulthood. These competing factors highlight that families' belief systems both support and constrain the development of educational aspirations, depending on the value placed on education within the family (Chen et al., 2023; Bernsen et al., 2022).

Likewise, religion has been found to have a strong yet nuanced impact on educational aspirations. Instead of having a consistent influence, religious beliefs serve as cognitive frameworks that can both enable and limit educational aspirations based on their interpretation and application. For example, research indicates that religious values that prioritise knowledge and discipline, and emphasise moral responsibility, can be beneficial for educational aspirations and persistence (Rainford, 2023; Saito, 2024). In contrast, other studies suggest that certain interpretations of religious beliefs, such as those related to gender roles, early marriage, or limited participation in public life, can restrict educational ambitions, particularly among women (Arif et al., 2024; Hasan et al., 2025). These mixed findings indicate that the influence of religion is not in and of itself deterministic but socially constructed and applied.

While studies acknowledge the role of both family and religion, the literature is fragmented in several key ways. First, the emphasis of much of the educational research in Bangladesh has been primarily structural factors such as poverty, school quality and policy reforms, often relegating cultural beliefs to background or minor variables (Alam & Mohanty, 2023; Hecht et al., 2023). These studies offer important insights into access and equity, but little insight into how students develop their aspirations internally, within their cultural contexts. Second, those studies that take cultural factors into account tend to treat family and religion as distinct factors. Such separation ignores the possibility that these belief systems interact, complementing or conflicting with each other to influence students' views of educational opportunity (Sato et al., 2025).

Third, there is a dearth of empirical studies that examine the influence of belief systems at the level of secondary schooling, a pivotal point in the education system where students make important decisions about whether to continue, specialize or exit from the education system. At this point, educational aspirations are not only influenced by previous experiences but also negotiated in response to conflicting

pressures from families, religions and social beliefs. This lack of integrated analyses at this stage is a glaring omission in the literature, especially in understanding the role of belief systems in shaping aspirations in this critical stage.

A further gap in the studies is the lack of focus on student agency. Although family and religious institutions are often framed as powerful, fewer studies examine how students interpret and adapt or even oppose these influences in shaping educational aspirations (Warner Colaner et al., 2023; Sovbetov, 2025). Aspirations are socially constructed through processes of interpretation, negotiation and adaptation. Failing to consider this agency risks reducing the connection between belief systems and educational success to a simplistic "cause-and-effect" understanding.

Recent scholarship has begun to call for more context-sensitive and integrative approaches to understanding educational aspirations, emphasizing the need to examine cultural beliefs as dynamic, relational, and socially negotiated processes (Christolouka & Verdis, 2025). In line with sociocultural theories, particularly Bourdieu's concept of habitus, aspirations can be understood as structured by internalized dispositions formed through socialization within family and community contexts. From this perspective, belief systems do not merely influence aspirations externally but become embedded within individuals' cognitive and moral frameworks, shaping what they perceive as possible, appropriate, and desirable.

Building on these theoretical and empirical considerations, this study addresses a critical gap by examining how religious and familial beliefs interact to shape educational aspirations among secondary school students in Bangladesh. Unlike previous studies that treat these factors independently, this research adopts an integrated approach that conceptualizes family and religion as interconnected belief systems operating within a shared sociocultural environment. By doing so, the study seeks to uncover not only the individual effects of these beliefs but also their combined influence, including patterns of alignment and misalignment that may strengthen or constrain aspiration formation.

The novelty of this study lies in three key contributions. First, it advances the literature by explicitly analyzing the interaction between familial and religious beliefs rather than examining them in isolation. Second, it focuses on the secondary education level, a critical yet underexplored stage in aspiration development. Third, it incorporates both quantitative and qualitative data to capture not only structural relationships but also students' lived experiences and interpretive processes. This mixed-methods approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of how belief systems shape aspirations as both measurable patterns and socially constructed meanings.

Accordingly, the main objective of this study is to investigate how religious and familial beliefs influence the educational aspirations of secondary school students in Bangladesh. Specifically, the study aims to (1) identify dominant familial and religious belief patterns affecting students' aspirations, (2) analyze the extent to which these beliefs shape aspiration levels, and (3) explore how students interpret and negotiate these influences in their educational decision-making processes. By addressing these objectives, the study contributes to ongoing debates on culture, education, and inequality, offering both theoretical insights and practical implications for designing culturally responsive educational policies and interventions.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a mixed methods research design to examine how religious and familial beliefs shape the educational aspirations of secondary school students in

Bangladesh. A mixed methods approach was considered most appropriate because educational aspirations are simultaneously structured by measurable social patterns and constructed through subjective interpretations. Integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches allows for a more comprehensive understanding of complex sociocultural phenomena, particularly when examining belief systems that operate at both structural and individual levels (John W. Creswell & Vicki L. Plano Clark, 2018).

The design followed a sequential explanatory strategy, in which quantitative data were collected and analyzed in the first phase, followed by qualitative data collection to explain and deepen the quantitative findings. This approach is widely recommended in educational research when the objective is to identify general patterns and subsequently explore the mechanisms underlying those patterns (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In this study, the quantitative phase provided statistical evidence on the relationships between belief systems and educational aspirations, while the qualitative phase offered insights into how students interpret and negotiate these influences in their everyday lives.

Research Context and Setting

The study was conducted in selected secondary schools across both urban and rural regions of Bangladesh. This selection was intended to capture variation in socioeconomic conditions, cultural practices, and exposure to religious and familial norms. Bangladesh presents a particularly relevant context for this research due to the strong integration of family structures and religious values in shaping social behavior and decision-making processes.

Schools were purposively selected to represent different institutional types, including public general schools and religiously affiliated institutions. This diversity allowed the study to examine how belief systems operate across distinct educational environments. Prior research has shown that educational aspirations may vary significantly across geographic and institutional contexts, making it essential to incorporate contextual diversity into the research design (Christolouka & Verdis, 2025). By including both urban and rural settings, the study also accounts for differences in access to educational resources, labor market opportunities, and cultural expectations.

Participants and Sampling

The quantitative phase involved a sample of 450 secondary school students enrolled in grades nine and ten. These grade levels were selected because they represent a critical transition point in the Bangladeshi education system, where students begin to make important decisions regarding academic continuation, specialization, or entry into the workforce.

A stratified sampling technique was employed to ensure representation across gender, school type, and geographic location. This approach enhances the generalizability of findings by reducing sampling bias and ensuring that key subgroups are adequately represented. The final sample consisted of both male and female students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

For the qualitative phase, a purposive subsample of participants was drawn from the survey respondents. Selection criteria included variation in educational aspiration levels (high, moderate, low), gender, and belief orientations identified in the quantitative analysis. A total of 30 students participated in semi-structured interviews. This sample size is consistent with qualitative research standards, which prioritize depth of insight over statistical representation (Michael Quinn Patton, 2015).

Data Collection Techniques

Quantitative Data Collection

Quantitative data were collected a structured questionnaire designed to measure educational aspirations, familial beliefs, and religious beliefs. The instrument was developed based on validated scales from previous studies on educational aspirations and sociocultural influences, with necessary adaptations to the Bangladeshi context.

Educational aspirations were operationalized through indicators such as desired level of education, perceived likelihood of attaining higher education, and future occupational goals. Familial beliefs were measured through students' perceptions of parental expectations, attitudes toward education, and norms regarding gender roles and economic responsibilities. Religious beliefs were assessed through items capturing the perceived influence of religious teachings, guidance from religious authorities, and interpretations of religious norms related to education.

Prior to full administration, the questionnaire was pilot tested with a group of 30 students to ensure clarity, cultural appropriateness, and internal consistency. Feedback from the pilot study resulted in minor revisions to wording and response categories. The final survey was administered in person with the assistance of trained research assistants, which helped minimize misunderstandings and improve response accuracy.

Qualitative Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews designed to explore students' lived experiences and interpretations of familial and religious influences. The interview protocol included open-ended questions focusing on how students perceive parental expectations, interpret religious teachings, and navigate potential conflicts between these belief systems.

Interviews were conducted in Bengali to ensure that participants could express themselves comfortably and accurately. Each interview lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and was audio recorded with participants' consent. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in probing emerging themes while maintaining consistency across participants, which is recommended in qualitative inquiry to balance structure and depth (Patton, 2015).

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical software to generate descriptive statistics and examine relationships between variables. Descriptive analysis was used to summarize the distribution of educational aspiration levels among students. Inferential analysis, including correlation and multiple regression, was conducted to assess the strength and direction of relationships between familial beliefs, religious beliefs, and educational aspirations.

Control variables such as gender, parental education, and socioeconomic status were included in the regression models to account for potential confounding effects. These analytical techniques are widely used in educational research to identify significant predictors of aspiration formation and to estimate the relative contribution of different variables (Hecht et al., 2023).

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and interpretive frameworks within the interview data. The analysis followed an iterative

process involving transcription, coding, and theme development. Initial codes were derived from the research questions and theoretical framework, while additional codes emerged inductively from the data.

This combination of deductive and inductive coding enhances analytical rigor by ensuring both theoretical alignment and sensitivity to context-specific meanings. Themes were refined through repeated comparison across cases, allowing the researcher to identify both common patterns and variations in how students interpret and negotiate belief systems.

Validity and Reliability

Several strategies were employed to ensure the validity and reliability of the study. In the quantitative phase, internal consistency of the measurement scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all variables meeting acceptable reliability thresholds ($\alpha \geq 0.70$). Content validity was ensured through the adaptation of established instruments and expert review during the questionnaire development process.

In the qualitative phase, credibility was enhanced through triangulation and peer debriefing. Findings from the quantitative analysis were cross-validated with qualitative insights to ensure consistency and depth of interpretation. Additionally, careful documentation of coding decisions and analytic procedures was maintained to enhance transparency and dependability.

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings further strengthens the overall validity of the study by providing complementary perspectives on the same phenomenon. Mixed methods research is widely recognized for its ability to enhance both internal and external validity through methodological triangulation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the empirical findings of the study in a structured and analytical manner. The results are organized into four main components: (1) descriptive patterns of students' educational aspirations, (2) the influence of familial beliefs, (3) the role of religious beliefs, and (4) the interaction between familial and religious belief systems, including gender-based variations. Each subsection integrates quantitative findings with qualitative evidence to provide a comprehensive understanding of how educational aspirations are formed and shaped. All statistical results are complemented by students' narratives to illuminate the underlying interpretive processes.

Descriptive Profile of Educational Aspirations

The initial analysis examines the distribution of educational aspirations among secondary school students, providing an overview of how students position their future educational goals. Table 1 presents the distribution of students' educational aspirations.

Table 1. Distribution of Educational Aspirations among Respondents

| Level of Aspiration | Percentage (%) |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Completion of secondary school | 18.5 |
| Higher secondary education | 42.7 |
| Undergraduate degree | 30.6 |
| Postgraduate degree | 8.2 |

Source: Primary survey data, 2026

Table 1 shows that the largest proportion of students (42.7%) aspire to complete higher secondary education, followed by those aiming to pursue an undergraduate degree (30.6%). A smaller proportion of students report aspirations limited to the completion of secondary school (18.5%), while only a minority (8.2%) express intentions to pursue postgraduate education.

To further illustrate this pattern, the distribution of aspirations is presented visually in Figure 1.

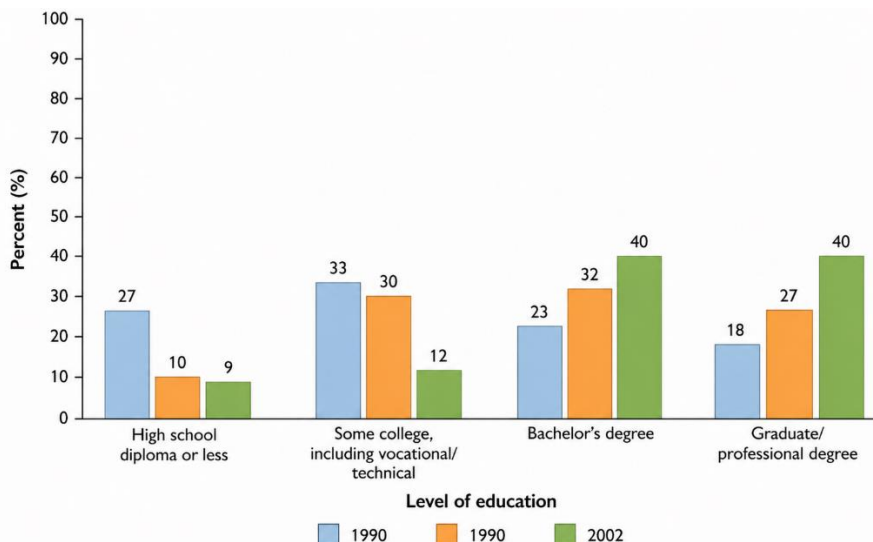


Figure 1. Distribution of Educational Aspirations among Students

Source: Primary survey data, 2026

Figure 1 confirms the pattern observed in Table 1, highlighting a concentration of aspirations at intermediate educational levels, particularly at higher secondary education. The proportion of students declines noticeably as the level of education increases, with the lowest percentage observed at the postgraduate level.

This distribution suggests that while education is broadly valued, aspirations tend to cluster around attainable or socially expected levels rather than extending to advanced academic attainment. The declining trend toward higher education levels indicates the presence of perceived barriers or uncertainties, including financial constraints, familial expectations, and sociocultural norms. These findings imply that educational aspirations are not solely determined by individual academic ability but are shaped by broader contextual and structural influences.

Influence of Familial Beliefs on Educational Aspirations

The second set of findings examines the role of familial beliefs, particularly parental expectations and support.

Table 2. Correlation Matrix of Key Variables

| Variable | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|-------------------------|----------|----------|----------|
| Educational Aspirations | 1.00 | | |
| Parental Support | 0.52 | 1.00 | |
| Religious Beliefs | 0.48 | 0.46 | 1.00 |

Source: Primary survey data, 2026

Table 2 presents the correlation matrix among key variables. The results indicate moderate positive correlations between parental support and educational aspirations ($r = 0.52$), as well as between religious beliefs and aspiration levels ($r = 0.48$). A

positive relationship is also observed between familial and religious beliefs ($r = 0.46$), suggesting a degree of interdependence between these belief systems.

These findings provide initial evidence that both familial and religious factors are associated with students' educational aspirations, supporting the inclusion of these variables in subsequent regression analysis.

Building on these correlations, regression analysis further confirms that parental support and education-supportive religious interpretations are significant predictors of educational aspirations ($p < 0.05$), even after controlling for gender and socioeconomic background.

Aspiration scores were measured on a five-point scale, where higher values indicate stronger educational aspirations.

Table 3. Parental Support and Educational Aspirations

| Level of Parental Support | Mean Aspiration Score |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Low support | 2.14 |
| Moderate support | 2.87 |
| High support | 3.62 |

Source: Primary survey data, 2026

The data show a clear upward trend, indicating that higher parental support is associated with stronger educational aspirations

Qualitative findings reveal that familial beliefs function as normative frameworks that define both the direction and limits of students' educational aspirations. Students consistently position their aspirations within family expectations rather than as purely individual ambitions.

A male student from an urban school described how his aspirations are shaped by parental expectations:

“My father always reminds me that education is the only way to improve our family’s situation. He often tells me that he could not study much because of financial problems, so now he expects me to go further than he did. Because of that, I feel like continuing to university is not just my own goal, but something I have to achieve for my family.”

This statement indicates that educational aspirations are constructed as intergenerational responsibilities rather than individual choices. The student frames higher education as a moral obligation tied to family improvement.

Another student emphasized how family narratives of sacrifice shape ambition:

“My mother always tells me about the difficulties she faced when she had to stop studying early. She says that I should not repeat the same experience. Sometimes I feel that my success will be like fulfilling her unfinished dream.”

Here, aspirations are influenced by emotional narratives and symbolic expectations, where education becomes a means of restoring lost opportunities within the family.

A third participant highlighted the collective dimension of aspiration:

“In my family, everyone believes that education is the most important thing. When I think about my future, I do not think only about myself, but also about how I can make my family proud and improve our status.”

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that familial beliefs do not merely encourage education but actively define its meaning as a collective and morally

embedded pursuit. Aspirations are therefore structured within a shared family framework that emphasizes responsibility, continuity, and social mobility.

Religious Beliefs and Interpretations

The third component of the analysis focuses on the influence of religious beliefs. The findings demonstrate that religion plays a differentiated role, depending on how it is interpreted in relation to education.

Table 4 presents the relationship between types of religious interpretation and aspiration scores.

Table 4. Religious Interpretation and Educational Aspirations

| Religious Interpretation | Mean Aspiration Score |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Education-supportive | 3.58 |
| Neutral | 2.91 |
| Restrictive | 2.23 |

Source: Primary survey data, 2026

Students who perceive religion as supportive of education report higher aspiration levels, while restrictive interpretations are associated with lower aspirations. Regression analysis also indicates that education-supportive religious interpretations significantly predict higher aspiration levels ($p < 0.05$).

Qualitative findings indicate that religious beliefs operate as interpretive frameworks that shape how students evaluate the importance and legitimacy of education. The influence of religion is not uniform but depends on how religious teachings are understood and applied in everyday life.

A female student described how religious teachings reinforce her motivation to pursue education:

“In our religious classes, we are often told that seeking knowledge is an important part of our faith. My teacher explains that learning is not only for this world but also for the hereafter. Because of that, I feel that studying is something meaningful and valuable in a deeper way.”

This response suggests that religion can legitimize educational aspirations by connecting learning with moral and spiritual values. Education is framed not only as a practical goal but as a virtuous activity.

Another student emphasized the role of religion in shaping discipline and persistence:

“Religion teaches us patience and hard work. When I feel tired or lose motivation, I remember that effort is important and rewarded. That helps me stay focused on my studies.”

In this case, religion functions as a behavioral guide that reinforces perseverance, contributing indirectly to higher aspiration levels.

However, contrasting interpretations were also evident:

“Sometimes people in my community say that girls should not study too much or go too far from home. They say it is because of religion, so it makes me unsure about how far I can continue my education.”

This statement highlights how restrictive interpretations can introduce uncertainty and limit perceived possibilities, particularly for female students.

Gender Differences in Aspirational Formation

The analysis also reveals significant gender differences in how familial and religious beliefs influence educational aspirations. Table 5 presents aspiration scores by gender and level of familial support.

Table 5. Educational Aspirations by Gender and Familial Support

| Gender | Low Support | High Support |
|---------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| Male | 2.45 | 3.71 |
| Female | 1.98 | 3.64 |

Source: Primary survey data, 2026

The data indicate that female students exhibit lower aspiration levels under conditions of low familial support (1.98), but their aspirations increase substantially under high support conditions (3.64), nearly matching those of male students (3.71). This suggests that family support plays a stronger moderating role for female students.

Qualitative evidence shows that gender mediates how familial and religious beliefs are experienced and internalized, particularly in shaping the boundaries of acceptable aspirations.

A female student described conditional support within her family:

“My parents support my education, but they also say that I should not go too far from home for studying. They worry about safety and what people might say. So even though I want to continue, I am not sure how far I will be allowed to go.”

This indicates that support for education may coexist with restrictions that limit its scope, particularly in terms of mobility and autonomy.

Another participant expressed internalized constraints:

“Sometimes I feel like I should not dream too big. I know that eventually I will have to get married, so I try to think about goals that are realistic within that situation.”

Here, aspirations are adjusted in anticipation of socially expected life trajectories, reflecting internal negotiation of norms.

A third student revealed strategic adaptation:

“I want to study more and maybe go to university, but I do not always say it openly. I prefer to show my results first, so that my family will support me gradually.”

This illustrates how students actively manage expectations by adapting how and when they express their aspirations.

These narratives suggest that gendered belief systems influence not only aspiration levels but also the processes through which aspirations are articulated, negotiated, and pursued.

Interaction of Familial and Religious Beliefs

The final analysis examines the interaction between familial and religious belief systems. The results show that these factors do not operate independently but interact in a cumulative manner.

Students who experience both strong parental support and education-supportive religious interpretations exhibit the highest levels of aspiration. Conversely, those

facing both weak familial support and restrictive religious interpretations demonstrate the lowest aspiration levels. Figure 1 illustrates this interaction effect.

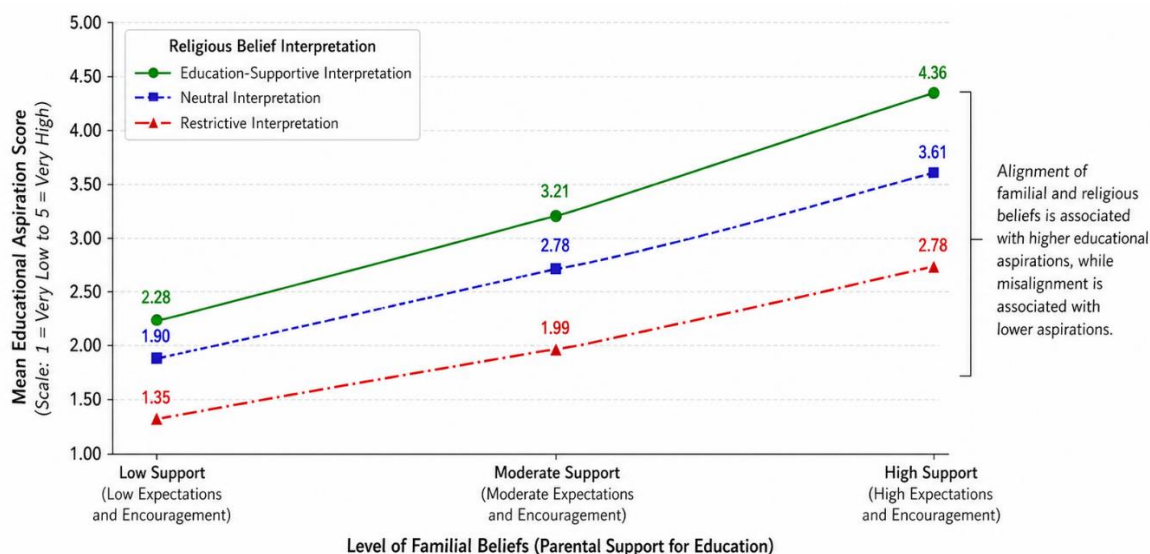


Figure 2. Mean Educational Aspiration Scores by Familial and Religious Belief Alignment

Source: Primary survey data, 2026

The figure shows a clear divergence in aspiration levels depending on the alignment of belief systems. When familial and religious beliefs are aligned in supporting education, students demonstrate strong and stable aspirations. In contrast, misalignment between these domains produces uncertainty and reduced ambition.

The interaction between familial and religious beliefs emerges clearly in students' narratives, particularly in shaping the stability or uncertainty of their aspirations.

A student experiencing alignment between belief systems stated:

“Both my parents and our imam say that education is very important. They always encourage me to study and continue to a higher level. Because of that, I feel confident about my future and do not have doubts about continuing my education.”

This indicates that consistent messages across belief systems reinforce clarity and confidence in aspiration formation.

Another participant emphasized the reinforcing effect of alignment:

“In my family and in our community, everyone believes that studying is the right path. When I think about my future, it feels clear because there is no conflict in what people expect from me.”

Here, alignment reduces ambiguity and strengthens commitment to long-term goals.

In contrast, a student experiencing misalignment described tension:

“My family wants me to start working early to support them, but at the same time, religious teachers say that education is important. I feel confused because both are important, but I cannot follow both at the same time.”

These narratives demonstrate that aspiration formation is shaped not only by individual belief systems but by their interaction. Alignment strengthens aspirational commitment, while misalignment introduces ambiguity and negotiation.

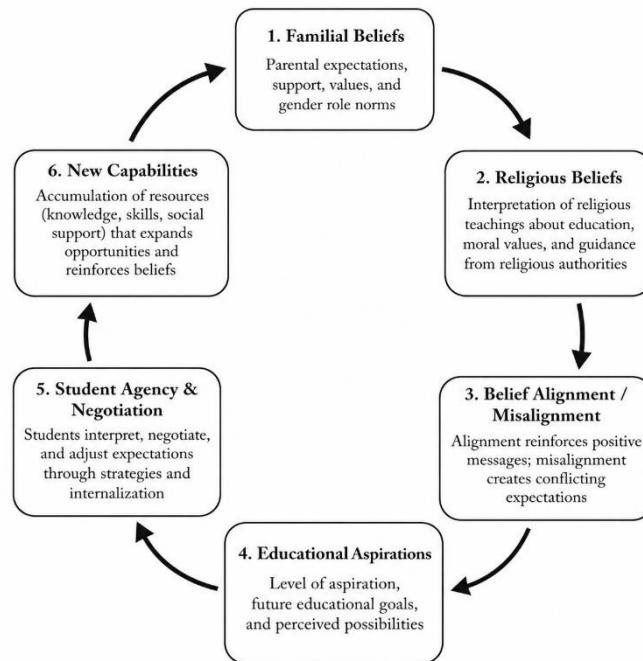


Figure 3. Conceptual Model of Familial and Religious Beliefs Shaping Educational Aspirations

Source: Developed by the authors based on research findings, 2026

To synthesize the findings, Figure 3 presents a conceptual model illustrating the cyclical relationship between familial beliefs, religious interpretations, and educational aspirations. The model highlights how alignment strengthens aspirations, while misalignment leads to negotiation and adjustment.

Intersecting Belief Systems and the Social Construction of Educational Aspirations

This study set out to examine how familial and religious beliefs shape the educational aspirations of secondary school students in Bangladesh, with particular attention to their interaction and gendered dynamics. The findings offer important insights into the sociocultural construction of aspirations, moving beyond structural explanations and emphasizing the role of belief systems as dynamic and relational forces. Rather than reiterating the empirical results, this section situates the findings within broader theoretical and empirical debates, highlighting areas of convergence and divergence with previous research, and articulating the study's contributions to scholarship and practice.

One of the central findings of this study is the strong influence of familial beliefs on educational aspirations. This aligns with a substantial body of literature that identifies the family as the primary site of aspiration formation, where values, expectations, and perceptions of opportunity are transmitted across generations (Amin, 2023; Mitrova & Koceva, 2024). Similar to findings reported by Tan and Fang (2023), parental expectations in this study were closely associated with higher levels of aspiration, reinforcing the argument that family-based cultural capital plays a critical role in shaping educational trajectories. However, this study extends prior research by demonstrating that familial influence operates not only through material support or academic encouragement but also through moral narratives of obligation, sacrifice, and intergenerational continuity. In this sense, aspirations are not merely encouraged but normatively structured, reflecting a collective orientation in which individual success is tied to family advancement. This finding contributes to

sociocultural models of aspiration by emphasizing the moral dimension of familial influence, which has been underexplored in much of the existing literature.

The role of religious beliefs, as revealed in this study, is similarly complex and context-dependent. Consistent with previous research, the findings indicate that religion can serve both as an enabling and constraining force in shaping educational aspirations (Rainford, 2023; Saito, 2024). Students who interpret religious teachings as supportive of knowledge acquisition tend to exhibit higher aspiration levels, confirming arguments that religion can function as a source of motivation and discipline. At the same time, the study also identifies restrictive interpretations that limit aspirations, particularly among female students, echoing findings from Arif et al. (2024) and Hasan et al. (2025) regarding the intersection of religion, gender norms, and educational access.

However, this study makes an important conceptual contribution by demonstrating that the influence of religion is mediated through interpretation rather than religiosity per se. This supports emerging perspectives in the sociology of religion that emphasize the negotiated and socially embedded nature of religious meaning (Khatib, 2026). Rather than treating religion as a monolithic variable, the findings highlight its role as an interpretive repertoire that students draw upon in making sense of their educational goals. This challenges deterministic assumptions about religion as inherently restrictive and underscores the need for more nuanced analyses that account for variation in religious interpretation across contexts.

A key contribution of this study lies in its examination of the interaction between familial and religious belief systems. While previous studies have often analyzed these factors independently, the findings here demonstrate that their alignment or misalignment plays a critical role in shaping both the level and stability of educational aspirations. When familial and religious beliefs are aligned in support of education, students exhibit higher and more consistent aspirations. Conversely, conflicting messages between these domains create uncertainty and lead to more cautious or moderated aspirations. This finding is consistent with Madeeha et al. (2024), who highlight the importance of parental expectations in shaping aspiration–expectation alignment, but extends this work by incorporating the role of religious beliefs as an additional layer of influence.

From a theoretical perspective, this interaction can be understood through the lens of Margaret S. Archer's (2003) concept of reflexivity, which emphasizes how individuals internally deliberate when faced with competing structural influences. In cases of belief alignment, reflexive deliberation is minimized, allowing for clearer and more stable aspiration pathways. In contrast, misalignment necessitates active negotiation, leading to more complex and sometimes constrained decision-making processes. This highlights the importance of considering not only individual belief systems but also their relational dynamics in understanding aspiration formation.

The study also contributes to the literature on gender and educational inequality by demonstrating how familial and religious beliefs interact to shape gendered patterns of aspiration. Consistent with prior research (Bates & Holt, 2023; Stromquist, 2007), female students were found to be more sensitive to normative expectations, particularly those related to mobility, marriage, and social propriety. However, the findings also reveal that gender disparities are not fixed but contingent upon the level of support and alignment within belief systems. When both familial and religious beliefs support education, female students exhibit aspiration levels comparable to their male counterparts. This suggests that cultural constraints are dynamic and can be mitigated through supportive normative environments.

This insight has important implications for theoretical debates on gender inequality, which have often focused on structural barriers such as access and resources. While

these factors remain important, the findings here suggest that normative and interpretive dimensions also play a crucial role in shaping educational outcomes. By highlighting the conditional nature of gender disparities, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how inequality is reproduced and potentially transformed within specific cultural contexts.

Another significant contribution of this study is its emphasis on student agency in the process of aspiration formation. While familial and religious beliefs exert strong influence, students are not passive recipients of these norms. Instead, they actively interpret, negotiate, and sometimes strategically adapt their aspirations in response to competing expectations. This finding aligns with recent research emphasizing the role of agency in educational decision-making (Warner Colaner et al., 2023), but also extends it by illustrating how agency operates within culturally embedded belief systems. Students engage in what may be described as “bounded agency,” where their choices are shaped but not entirely determined by the normative frameworks surrounding them.

The methodological approach adopted in this study further strengthens its contributions. By combining quantitative and qualitative data, the research provides both generalizable patterns and in-depth insights into the mechanisms underlying those patterns. This responds to calls for more context-sensitive and mixed-methods approaches in educational research (Christolouka & Verdis, 2025), particularly in understanding complex sociocultural phenomena. The integration of statistical analysis with narrative data allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how belief systems influence aspirations, bridging the gap between structural and interpretive perspectives.

From a practical standpoint, the findings have significant implications for educational policy and intervention. First, they suggest that efforts to raise educational aspirations should not focus solely on improving access or resources but must also engage with the belief systems that shape how education is valued. Programs that involve parents and families in promoting positive educational norms may be particularly effective. Second, the findings highlight the potential role of religious leaders and institutions in supporting educational aspirations. By promoting interpretations of religion that emphasize the value of knowledge and learning, these actors can contribute to more supportive normative environments.

At the same time, the study underscores the importance of addressing conflicting messages that may arise between different belief systems. Interventions that facilitate dialogue between families, schools, and religious communities may help reduce misalignment and create more coherent support structures for students. This aligns with broader governance perspectives that emphasize the importance of institutional coherence in achieving policy outcomes (Sumar et al., 2025).

Despite its contributions, the study is not without limitations. The use of a cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal inferences about the relationship between belief systems and educational aspirations. It is possible that students with higher aspirations may selectively interpret familial and religious beliefs in ways that support their goals. Longitudinal research would be valuable in examining how these relationships evolve over time and across different stages of education. Additionally, the study focuses on selected regions in Bangladesh, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts with different cultural or institutional characteristics.

Future research could build on this study in several ways. Comparative studies across different cultural or religious contexts would help determine whether the patterns observed here are generalizable or context-specific. Further research could also explore the role of schools and peer networks in mediating the influence of

familial and religious beliefs. Finally, more attention could be given to examining how digital media and globalization influence belief systems and educational aspirations, particularly among younger generations.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that educational aspirations among secondary school students in Bangladesh are shaped by the dynamic interaction of familial and religious belief systems. Familial beliefs function as primary normative frameworks that define expectations and acceptable educational pathways, while religious beliefs operate as interpretive resources that can either reinforce or constrain aspirations depending on their interpretation. A key finding is that the alignment between these belief systems strengthens aspiration levels and stability, whereas misalignment introduces uncertainty and leads to moderated or negotiated ambitions. Gender differences further reveal that female students' aspirations are more sensitive to normative expectations, yet supportive belief alignment can significantly reduce disparities.

Theoretically, this study contributes to sociocultural perspectives on education by conceptualizing aspirations as socially constructed and relational outcomes embedded within intersecting belief systems. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of engaging families and religious communities in educational interventions to promote supportive norms and coherent messages about education. However, the study is limited by its cross-sectional design and contextual focus, which may restrict causal interpretation and generalizability. Future research should adopt longitudinal and comparative approaches to examine how belief systems evolve over time and across contexts, as well as explore the role of schools and digital influences in shaping aspirations.

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