

Breaking the Poverty Cycle

Can “aspirations” drive economic empowerment for rural women?



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Executive Summary

This document explores the transformative role of aspirations in driving economic empowerment among rural women, particularly those from marginalised households in India. Building on seminal research suggesting that low aspirations perpetuate a cycle of deprivation, the literature review highlights how role models, social norms, and systemic barriers shape decision-making and outcomes.

Key findings from a scoping study in Latehar and Gumla districts of Jharkhand reveal that women aspire to economic independence, improved family welfare, and personal growth. However, these aspirations are constrained by patriarchal norms, resource constraints, and socio-cultural barriers. Importantly, variations in aspirations by socio-economic background reflect distinct challenges and opportunities.

The study proposes incorporating an “aspiration lens” into ongoing evaluations by The/Nudge Institute, aiming to address systemic barriers and foster inclusive growth. By leveraging aspirations as a driver of change, the study advocates for empowering rural women to break the poverty cycle and achieve lasting socio-economic transformation.

Introduction

Can higher aspirations among rural women serve as a pathway to economic empowerment? Two foundational essays—"The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition" by Arjun Appadurai and "Aspirations, poverty and economic change" by Debraj Ray—published in the 2000s, made a critical link between aspiration and poverty, drawing significant attention from economists. Building on this work, Ray developed theories on how aspirations, especially around living standards and social status, shape individual behavior and evolve alongside a country's development.

He underscores that aspirations are inherently social, influenced by the experiences of others perceived as comparable. While moderate aspirations can boost motivation and lead to positive change, overly ambitious ones can result in frustration. In recent years, the study of aspirations has gained recognition as a key area of both theoretical and empirical research.

Literature Review

Aspirations encompass desires and ambitions for various aspects of life and well-being, such as education, job security, wealth, health, political influence, or social status (Ray, 2006). These aspirations may be personal or directed towards others, such as parents' goals for their children. Aspirations serve as a motivating force, driving individuals to make decisions and put forth effort to achieve their goals (Dalton, Ghosal, and Mani, 2016; Ray, 2006; Genicot and Ray, 2017).

Individuals with high aspirations often exhibit forward-thinking behavior: they save more, adopt innovative technologies, run small businesses, and invest in their children's education (Bernard, 2014; Dalton, 2015; Kosec and Khan, 2016). They also tend to demonstrate higher civic engagement (Kosec and Mo, 2017).

Aspirations and Poverty Cycle

One proposed explanation for the persistence of poverty is the failure to cultivate aspirations. (Appadurai, 2004; Duflo, 2013; Genicot and Ray, 2017; Lybbert and Wydick, 2018; Macours and Vakis, 2014; Ray, 2006).

Limited aspirations can trap individuals in cycles of poverty, preventing them from achieving better living standards or participating fully in economic life.

To combat low aspirations, development interventions often connect individuals with role models (Beaman, 2012; Bernard, 2014; Riley, 2017), provide access to well-paying job opportunities, and facilitate peer interactions (Dasgupta, 2015). Aspirations also influence perceptions of women and their participation in household decision-making. In farming households, where women are involved in decision-making processes:

- Higher aspirations correlate with improved technical efficiency on plots managed by women and men (Seymour, 2017).
- Better land management practices lead to increased crop yields (Goldstein and Udry, 2008).
- Greater investment in land quality through measures such as fertilizer use and intensive tillage enhances productivity (Dillon and Voena, 2018).

When women participate in decision-making roles within households, outcomes in health, nutrition, and education tend to improve. Gender equity leads to higher household investments in health and education (Behrman, 1999; Quisumbing and Maluccio, 2003; Thomas, 1990).

Two influential essays connected aspirations with poverty, suggesting that the poor may find themselves trapped in a self-reinforcing cycle of poverty and low aspirations. This cycle occurs because their environment either limits the development of motivating aspirations or repeated failures discourage them from pursuing their goals. Appadurai (2004) illustrated how culture and social norms influence aspirations while highlighting how the context of poverty diminishes the capacity of the poor to aspire ambitiously. These ideas sparked a surge of research into aspirations as key factors influencing the behaviors of the poor. For example, aspirations may explain why the poor often fail to seize opportunities or, alternatively, achieve remarkable results from seemingly modest interventions (Duflo, 2012).

Aspirations and Social Context

La Ferrara (2019) provides a comprehensive review of the theoretical and empirical linkages between aspirations and outcomes. Research consistently shows that aspirations shape decision-making and drive efforts (Dalton, Ghosal, and Mani 2016; Genicot and Ray 2020), influencing outcomes at both individual and collective levels. Interventions that elevate aspirations often lead to improved outcomes since they serve as critical mechanisms for change (Beaman, 2012; Chiapa, Garrido, and Prina, 2012; Bernard, 2014).

Models further explore the interaction between aspirations and factors such as social mobility, inequality, and economic growth. Moderate levels of inequality can foster mobility and growth by enhancing aspirations; however, high levels tend to stifle them (Genicot and Ray, 2017). Aspirations are inherently social and context-dependent—particularly impacting the poor, who may feel constrained by their circumstances (Appadurai, 2004; Ray, 2006; Dalton, Ghosal, and Mani, 2016).

Empirical studies highlight the significant influence of role models (Beaman, 2012; Macours and Vakis, 2014; Riley, 2019) on shaping aspirations through social networks such as neighbors or peers (Bernard, 2014; Gagete-Miranda, 2020; Galiani, Gertler, and Undurraga, 2021). Additionally, factors like living standards, life experiences, and the local environment significantly impact individuals' perceptions of what is achievable.

Adverse circumstances like conflict and natural disasters can severely undermine hope and aspirations (Kosec and Mo, 2017).

Gender Dynamics in Aspirations

Gender plays a critical role in shaping aspirations, particularly in rural settings where societal norms and economic opportunities are often intertwined. Studies indicate that rural women's economic contributions significantly influence household well-being. For instance, pensions received by women improve girls' health outcomes (Duflo, 2003), and women are more likely than men to spend on children's goods (Bobonis, 2009). Similarly, income earned by women positively impacts children's survival rates and educational attainment (Qian, 2008), while cash transfers enhance their bargaining power, improving nutritional outcomes (Angelucci and Attanasio, 2013).

Consequences of Aspirational Disparities

However, raising aspirations does not always guarantee better outcomes. When aspirations exceed available opportunities or resources—leading to frustration—they can redirect focus towards other dimensions such as religion, exacerbate social tensions, or even result in criminal or extremist behavior (Ray 2006, 2016).

Aspirations encapsulate individuals' goals across various life aspects, including income, wealth, education, and social status shaped by internal motivations alongside external influences. Individuals often develop their aspirations through observations within their cognitive window—such as peers and family members (Dercon and Singh, 2013; Genicot and Ray, 2017). Furthermore,

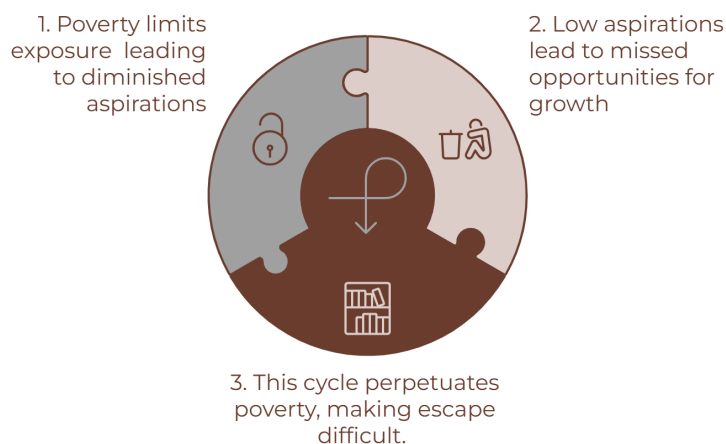
- Economic and social conditions significantly impact aspiration levels
- Better health outcomes can elevate students' aspirations (Chong, 2016).

Consequences of Low Aspirations

Low aspirations can perpetuate poverty cycles by limiting efforts towards improvement:

Key points:

- *Poverty can lead to low aspirations creating a self-reinforcing cycle. (Dalton, 2015).*
- *Individuals with low aspirations may not fully utilise available development resources such as cash or training opportunities. (Bernard, 2014).*
- *Breaking this cycle requires addressing both material needs alongside aspirational barriers.*



The Self-Perpetuating Cycle of Poverty

Low aspirations correlate with poorer outcomes across various dimensions, including lower earnings or reduced educational attainment (Avitabile and De Hoyos, 2018; Beaman, 2012; Sánchez and Singh, 2018), along with worse health metrics. They also relate to decreased civic engagement (Kosec and Mo, 2017) resulting in diminished likelihood of holding the government accountable for inequality and poverty (Healy, 2017).

Aspirations function as a dynamic reference point, shaped by an individual's circumstances and the information available to them. They can evolve over time in response to changes in one's situation and access to new information (Appadurai, 2004; Ray, 2006; Dalton, Ghosal, and Mani, 2016).

Since aspirations depend on information availability and are influenced by social preferences—they may not always align with an individual's potential. While aspirations can serve as motivating yet realistic goals, they can also represent constrained or limited objectives. Awareness of opportunities is crucial; living in isolation or having limited knowledge of available possibilities—whether consciously or unconsciously—can suppress aspirations (Appadurai, 2004; Ray, 2006; Bernard and Taffesse, 2014).

Moreover, psychological factors such as low self-esteem can reinforce these aspiration traps, particularly for those already facing poverty. The additional constraints imposed by poverty increase the risks associated with pursuing goals, which can further lower expected benefits from investing effort into any objective. This cyclical relationship between low aspirations and poor outcomes highlights the importance of addressing both external conditions and internal perceptions to foster better life trajectories.

Aspirations of most excluded households

Drawing insights from the literature on rural women's aspirations, we reflect on its relevance within our work. Our focus is on the most excluded households—those facing extreme poverty, material deprivation, and limited resources.

These families often experience chronic food insecurity and lack of opportunities for sustainable income. Such conditions create a "poverty trap," preventing them from accumulating the resources needed to improve their situation over time.

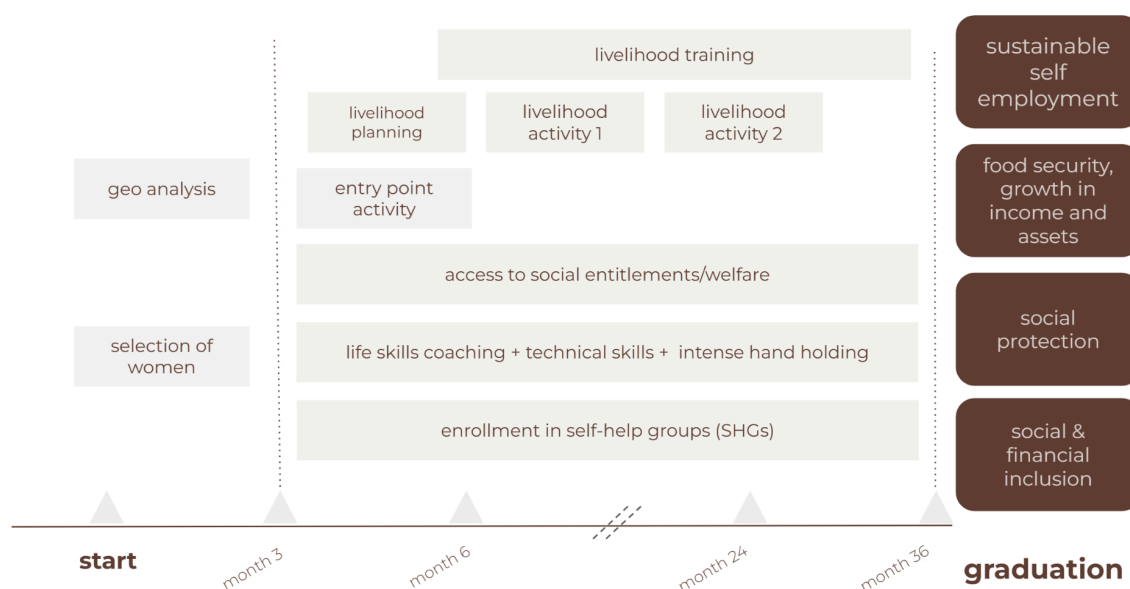
Breaking the Poverty Trap: The TUP Program

A significant initiative addressing these challenges is the "Targeting the Ultra Poor" (TUP) program. This comprehensive approach provides:

- **Productive Assets:** Facilitating sustainable self-employment and asset ownership.
- **Training:** Providing livelihood training, life skills, technical skills, and intense handholding support
- **Social entitlements and Protection:** Ensuring access to welfare benefits and promoting social and financial inclusion.
- **Consumption support:** Offering immediate relief to stabilise households.

Studies, such as those in India and Bangladesh, show that such interventions can lead to long-term benefits (Banerjee 2020, 2024), including:

- **Increased consumption:** Enhanced ability to meet daily needs and improve living standards.
- **Growth in Income and Assets:** Elevated financial status through diversified income sources and asset accumulation.
- **Income diversification:** Reduced dependency on a single income stream, increasing economic resilience
- **Food security:** Improved access to sufficient and nutritious food, ensuring better health and well-being.



Graduation approach is a globally recognised strategy for poverty alleviation among the most marginalised populations

Exploring Aspirations Beyond Survival: A Scoping Study in Latehar and Gumla Districts, Jharkhand

The/Nudge Institute adapted this approach in 2019, as its [Economic Inclusion Programme](#) (EIP), and now supports implementations across 8 states. As part of this initiative, we conducted a scoping study in the Latehar and Gumla districts of Jharkhand to understand the aspirations, challenges, and motivations of excluded rural women. This study aimed to explore whether *aspirations can drive economic empowerment for rural women*.



The Inquiry Process

Through interviews and focus group discussions, we engaged nine women from our implementation cohorts. The goal was to uncover:

- Their aspirations
- The systemic enablers that could support them, and
- The barriers that prevent progress

This exploration formed the foundation for further intensive study, guiding future interventions to help these women achieve long-term economic stability.

The narratives shared by these women were deeply personal, collectively painting a picture of resilience amidst adversity. Their aspirations, shaped by socio-cultural norms, family dynamics, and economic realities, reveal a constant tension between survival and the desire for personal and familial upliftment.

Women's Key Aspirations:



Women's Key Aspirations: Pathways to Empowerment

1. **Economic Empowerment:** Many women aspired to achieve economic independence by acquiring skills in sewing, candle-making, and vegetable farming—activities they see as pathways to financial stability and poverty alleviation. Others expressed a desire to migrate for better job opportunities, despite potential familial resistance and uncertainties.
2. **Family and Social Dynamics:** Women's aspirations were closely intertwined with family well-being. Many dreamed of supporting their children's education or improving their family's living conditions. However, acting on these aspirations depended heavily on familial support.

In families with supportive husbands, siblings, or community members, women felt more confident and motivated to pursue their goals. Conversely, opposition from husbands or in-laws, often rooted in patriarchal norms, mistrust, or substance abuse posed significant barriers.

3. **Personal Growth and Intrinsic Motivation:** Women expressed a desire for personal growth to navigate their circumstances. This included building confidence, overcoming fear, and gaining knowledge about opportunities and rights.

Their aspirations extended beyond personal advancement, envisioning better futures for their families and communities. Breaking free from cycles of poverty, improving their children's prospects, and creating a life free from violence and societal judgment were recurring themes.

Challenges to Aspirations

1. **Patriarchal Norms:** Cultural and societal expectations often confine women to caregiving roles, limiting personal ambitions. Internalised gender roles made it difficult for women to conceptualize or pursue goals outside the home.
2. **Economic Barriers:** Limited access to land, financial capital, and training posed significant constraints. For women aiming to start small businesses or enhance farming practices, these barriers were difficult to overcome without external assistance.
3. **Lack of Exposure:** Poverty and remoteness severely limit these families' exposure to the outside world, depriving them of essential skills, education, and role models who could inspire and guide them toward economic improvement. This isolation perpetuates a cycle of poverty, leaving them trapped with little opportunity to uplift their economic conditions or envision a better future.
4. **Social Constraints:** Domestic violence, societal mistrust, and restrictive norms further diminished women's autonomy. These factors suppressed their aspirations and eroded their confidence and decision-making abilities.

Pattern Observed

Socio-economic and cultural backgrounds shaped aspirations in distinct ways. For example, Scheduled Caste (SC) women often focused on off-farm economic activities, like small businesses, possibly due to greater exposure to external opportunities but limited land access. In contrast, women from Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) prioritised farming improvements, reflecting their relatively higher land access but limited exposure to alternative livelihoods.

Despite their varied aspirations, a common theme among these women was the systemic barriers that hinder their progress. Many aspirations were either stifled or abandoned due to a lack of support, resources, or confidence.

Way Forward

Our scoping study on rural women's aspirations in the Latehar and Gumla districts reveals valuable insights into the relationship between aspirations, systemic barriers, and socio-economic realities. We propose integrating aspiration-building into two ongoing studies by The/Nudge Institute's Impact team:

1. **Sustainability Study of Graduated Cohorts:** Incorporating an aspiration lens to assess sustainable changes in women's economic behaviors and outcomes.
2. **Evaluation of Graduation Approach from a Gender Lens:** Examining the intersection of gendered aspirations with programme approaches, focusing on women's unique goals and barriers.

Both studies will incorporate the question: *Can Aspirations Drive Economic Empowerment for Rural Women?* This will provide a comprehensive understanding of how aspirations influence empowerment pathways.



Objectives of the Planned Study

The study will focus on the following objectives:

1. **Identify Aspiration-Building Needs:**
Map current aspirations, assess gaps, and determine interventions to align aspirations with achievable outcomes.

2. **Examine the Role of Aspirations in Economic Empowerment:**
Investigate how aspirations influence women's economic decision-making and participation in livelihoods.
3. **Assess Alignment with Program Outcomes:**
Explore how current programmes can integrate aspiration-building for long-term impact, ensuring aligned aspirations lead to greater sustainability.

Conclusion

This study underscores the transformative potential of aspirations in driving economic empowerment for rural women, specially those from the most excluded households. Integrating the question, “*Can Aspirations Drive Economic Empowerment for Rural Women?*” into ongoing research offers a unique lens to examine how aspirations shape economic behaviors and outcomes.

Literature underscores that aligning aspirations with program objectives fosters sustained motivation and leads to improved outcomes. Findings from subsequent studies will guide the design of targeted interventions that address systemic barriers, build skills, and provide the support needed for women to achieve their aspirations.

Embedding aspiration-building into economic empowerment initiatives can enable rural women to transcend survival, unlock new opportunities, and contribute to sustainable development and social transformation. This approach not only advances individual progress but also strengthens gender equity and inclusive growth, fostering a brighter future for families and communities.

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