Becoming someone

Can aspirations shape economic empowerment for rural women?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY **3**

Chapter- 1: Introduction **5**

Aspiration and Poverty 5

Aspirations of most excluded households 5

Chapter-2: Review of Literature: **7**

Aspirations and Poverty Cycle 7

Gender Dynamics in Aspirations 8

Consequences of Aspirational Disparities 9

Consequences of Low Aspirations 9

Chapter-3: Research Design and Methodology: **11**

Research Design 11

Research Methodology 12

Chapter- 4: Data Analysis, Interpretation and Major Findings **14**

Emerging Themes and Patterns 14

A. Aspirational Signals: Four Dominant Themes 14

B. Pre- and Post-Marriage Aspirational Shifts 19

C. Age-Based Differentiation in Aspirational Trajectories 22

D. Enabling Factors Supporting Aspiration Formation: What Helps Women Imagine More? 24

E. Barriers to Aspiration Fulfillment: When Survival Leaves No Space to Dream 26

F. Impact of Exposure on Aspirations: What Counts as “Exposure”? Reimagining Possibility Through Contact, Context, and Confidence 27

G. Health, Loss, and Resilience: Holding On in the Face of Invisible Weight 28

Chapter-5: Suggestions **30**

Conclusion **37**

References **38**

Annexure **40**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"There was a time when I didn't want to live. But now I feel like maybe I can also do something."

- Saraswati.

This report is built around a simple but powerful question: *What happens when women who've been excluded all their lives are finally asked what they want?*

Through 24 life-story interviews and 4 group discussions with rural women from deeply marginalised communities, this study uncovers the often-overlooked inner world of aspiration; how it is born, how it grows, and what holds it back.

For many women in this study, dreams weren't absent; they were delayed, denied, or dimmed by early marriage, poverty, isolation, and silence. And yet, when given a chance through a goat, a group, a little recognition; they begin to imagine more: for themselves, for their children, and for their communities.

What We Heard

Women's aspirations were neither uniform nor dramatic. They emerged in quiet, determined forms:

- ***"I want to rear goats and never have to migrate again." - Hiramani***
- ***"I want my daughter to wear a school uniform." - Sohnmain***
- ***"I want to go to the market without asking anyone." - Namita***

These were not just goals; they were acts of resistance, expressions of dignity, and signs of hope. Across interviews, four strong themes emerged:

1. Economic improvement was almost universal- goat rearing, vegetable shops, farming, all rooted in lived struggles with debt, hunger, and seasonal work.
2. Children's education, especially for girls, became a vessel for dreams women could not pursue for themselves.
3. Personal independence and dignity surfaced quietly, especially among younger women who saw economic freedom as a way to be heard at home.
4. Social mobility was voiced not as ambition, but as the desire to avoid shame of migrating, borrowing, or being pitied.

What Shapes These Aspirations

Aspiration is not just personal; it is deeply social, gendered, and contextual. It was found that:

- Supportive families, exposure to new ideas, and small program inputs (like livestock or SHG loans) created space for aspiration to grow.

- Barriers like early marriage, domestic violence, remoteness, and low literacy narrowed what women believed was possible.

- Aspirations changed with age: Younger women dreamed of enterprise and autonomy; middle-aged women focused on their children; older women spoke of peace, respect, and the wellbeing of grandchildren.

Most strikingly, exposure; seeing others succeed, visiting a market, joining a group, was often the turning point. It wasn't just the goats that changed their lives. **It was the belief that "someone like me" can do something.**

What This Means for Programs

If aspiration is this powerful, we must stop treating it as an intangible side effect of livelihood programs. This report calls for making aspiration a central intervention; designed for, nurtured, and measured.

Recommendations:

- Designing age-responsive approaches: Younger women need space to lead; older women need space to share wisdom.

- Turning SHGs/small groups into aspirational ecosystems: Use visual goal tools, storytelling, and peer celebration and not just thrift and credit.

- Embedding gender, confidence, and resilience training: Equip women to believe they deserve to act on their dreams.

- Listening as a practice: Women told us how deeply they valued being heard. Create spaces where dreams, no matter how small, are acknowledged and honored.

A Final Note

Aspiration is not a luxury. It is the foundation of agency. And for many women in this study, it is the first thing poverty took away and the last thing they are now reclaiming.

These aren't just stories of goat rearing or income generation. They are stories of becoming, of imagining something more, and of believing it might just be possible.

***"I realized I can do something, while sitting in the small group."*- Manita**

Chapter 1: Introduction

Aspiration and Poverty

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.

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:

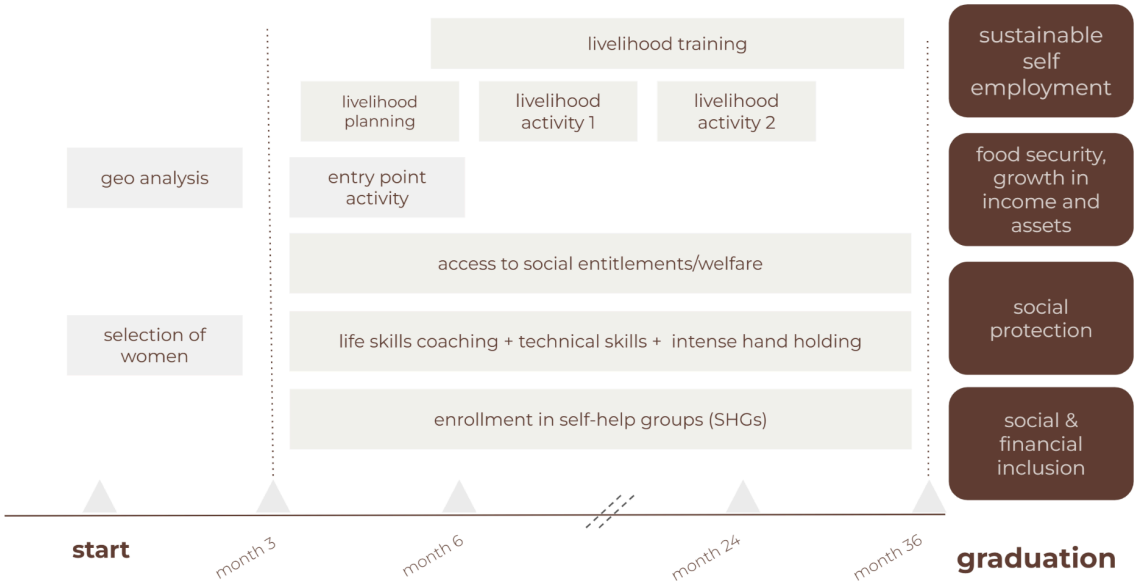
- **Productive Assets:** Facilitating sustainable self-employment and asset ownership.
- **Training:** Providing livelihood training, life skills, technical skills, and intense handholding support
- **Social entitlements and Protection:** Ensuring access to welfare benefits and promoting social and financial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

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

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).

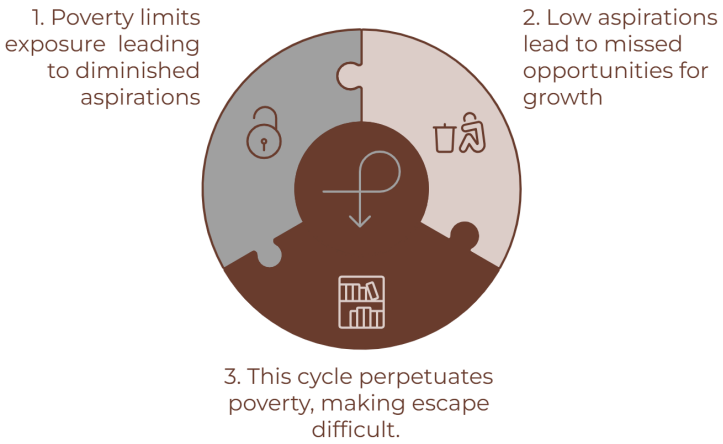
Aspirations encapsulate individuals' goals across various life aspects, including income, wealth, education, and social status shaped by internal motivations alongside external influences. Individuals often develop their aspirations through observations within their cognitive window; such as peers and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

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, life-course oriented research design to explore how aspirations are formed, constrained, or reimagined by rural women who occupy the most socially and economically excluded positions in society. Anchored in a feminist and intersectional approach, the design recognises that aspirations are not merely individual desires but deeply shaped by structural conditions, life-stage events, and institutional interactions.

The research design is grounded in the understanding that aspiration is both a subjective orientation toward the future and a political act of imagining beyond one's assigned place. To capture this complexity, the study integrates life-history interviews with contextual stratification, ensuring that women's experiences are understood in relation to their caste, marital status, income level, geographic remoteness, and program exposure. This stratified purposive sampling framework enables the study to map not just what women aspire to, but why, under what constraints, and through what sources of support or resistance.

Methodologically, the study combines 24 in-depth narrative interviews and 4 focus group discussions (FGDs) to provide both granular depth and community-level insight. These methods were chosen to capture not just stated goals but the emotional, social, and discursive environments in which aspirations are formed. Data is analysed using a discourse-analytic and thematic coding framework, tracing the intersections between aspiration and domains such as livelihood, mobility, education, dignity, and personal transformation.

The research creates a rich interpretive scaffold to examine aspiration as a developmental, gendered, and socially-contingent process, while simultaneously generating program-relevant insights for the Graduation Approach-based Economic Inclusion Program.

Research Questions:

1. What is the current level of aspiration among individuals in the target group?

2. What personal, social, and environmental factors have led to the current aspiration level?

3. What have been the most influential programs' contributions to aspiration formation?

4. What enabling factors have supported the development of aspiration?

5. What barriers have inhibited the development or realization of aspiration?

Research Methodology

1. Methods of Data Collection: To explore the aspirations of women who occupy the most socially and economically excluded positions, **a stratified purposive sampling approach was adopted**. It started by reviewing the literature on rural women's aspirations in India, which consistently highlights four intersecting factors that shape outlook and opportunity:

a. Household Economic Position (e.g., asset base and income flows)

b. Marital Status (single or married)

c. Social Group (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group - PVTG versus non-PVTG)

d. Geographic Accessibility (remote, medium-remote, non-remote villages)

Using these factors as strata the variations were captured across the very axes that can expand or constrict a woman's capacity to imagine and pursue a different future. Firstly, the program universe was mapped and then intentionally selected cases that embodied each possible intersection of the four strata (for example, a high-income, single, PVTG woman living in a remote settlement; or a low-income, married, non-PVTG woman in a non-remote village). This ensured that voices which are normally muted such as single women from PVTG hamlets were represented alongside relatively better-off counterparts.

In total twenty-four (24) in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted, distributed evenly across the strata until thematic saturation was reached (i.e., no substantially new insight was emerging within a category). Each IDI lasted 60–90 minutes and was carried out in the respondent's preferred language with informed consent.

To enrich and triangulate the individual narratives, four (4) focus-group discussions (FGDs), each lasting around two hours, was facilitated. The FGDs allowed us to observe how aspirations are negotiated in group settings, how community norms enable or stifle women's goals, and how program structures can amplify individual resolve.

Overall, this stratified purposive design; **24 IDIs plus 4 FGDs, gave both depth (through life-story interviews) and breadth (through group dialogues) across the most critical dimensions of exclusion.** It positions the study to speak credibly about how intersecting social realities shape aspiration among rural women and to recommend program adaptations that are sensitive to these layers of difference.

2. Analytical Framework

This study employs a qualitative coding and narrative synthesis approach to analyse semi-structured interviews with 24 women participants from economically vulnerable groups enrolled in an Economic Inclusion Program (EIP) inspired by the Graduation Approach. The analysis is grounded in five central research questions that span aspiration levels, personal and social determinants, program influence, enabling conditions, and barriers. A combination of thematic coding, age and caste-based disaggregation, and context-based classification (remoteness, exposure level, and income performance) was used to interpret aspiration trajectories and their underlying determinants.

3. Narrative Structure:

The data comprise semi-structured life stories collected through in-depth interviews with women beneficiaries of a Graduation Approach-based Economic Inclusion Program. These interviews aimed to document trajectories across key life domains: childhood, marriage, livelihoods, community engagement, and future aspirations.

Each narrative offers insight into how structural inequality, socio-cultural norms, and life events shape women's agency. The interviews were conducted in local dialects and embedded with place-specific references such as bhattas (brick kilns), forest-based work, and livestock rearing. The language, cadence, and emotional tone of these stories add a layer of cultural authenticity, situating aspirations within deeply lived realities.

This analysis applies a discourse-analytic lens, focusing not only on the content of women's responses but also on narrative structure, emotional tone, silences, and metaphors. It considers both the overt themes and the implicit worldviews embedded in women's speech, drawing out how aspiration is shaped, constrained, and expressed in the margins.

Challenges and Limitations

While this study offers rich qualitative insights into the aspirations of highly excluded rural women, several limitations must be acknowledged:

1. **Program-Linked Sample:** All participants were engaged in a Graduation Approach-based Economic Inclusion Program. Their aspirations are shaped, at least in part, by this programmatic exposure. As a result, the findings may not reflect the perspectives of women who remain completely outside such interventions.

2. **Small and Non-Generalisable Sample:** The study used a purposive sample of 24 women and 4 FGDs to capture depth and diversity; not statistical representation. While this allowed us to explore nuanced intersections (age, caste, remoteness, marital status), the findings are not generalisable across regions or populations.

3. **Silences and Inarticulacy:** Some of the most excluded women; especially older or isolated participants; struggled to articulate their aspirations. In these cases, silence, hesitation, or emotional withdrawal were data in themselves, but interpreting these absences remains a methodological challenge.

4. **Temporal Snapshot:** Aspirations are not static. This study captures them at a single point in time, shaped by present circumstances. Without longitudinal follow-up, we cannot trace how aspirations grow, stall, or shift over time; especially in response to shocks, exposure, or life events.

5. **Gendered Perspective without Intra-Household Lens:** While focused on women, many aspirations are relational; negotiated within households. The absence of interviews with spouses, children, or in-laws limits our understanding of how intra-household dynamics enable or constrain aspiration.

6. **Translation and Interpretation Gaps:** Interviews conducted in local dialects were transcribed and translated, which may have altered emotional tone, metaphors, or cultural references. Despite efforts to retain authenticity, some narrative depth may have been unintentionally lost in translation.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis, Interpretation and Major Findings

Emerging Themes and Patterns

A. Aspirational Signals: Four Dominant Themes

1. **Livelihoods, Identity, and Economic Survival:** For most women in the study (22 out of 24), aspirations began not with abstract dreams but with the urgent, grounded desire to build a steady livelihood. Goat rearing, pig farming, kitchen gardening, or running a small kirana shop were not just economic choices; they were acts of self-determination. These women, many of whom had only ever worked as daily-wage labourers or migrated seasonally for distress work, spoke about income not in terms of "profit" but in terms of stability, dignity, and control. ***"Pehle sab kuch pati ke haath mein tha, ab main bhi thoda kama leti hoon"*** (Earlier everything was in my husband's hands, now even I earn a little), shared Hiramani (37), who had transitioned from harvesting tendu leaves to running a small vegetable stall. This shift from dependence to contribution was deeply meaningful, especially in households where men migrated or were unreliable due to alcoholism or health issues. Sohmain (53), who lives in an uphill settlement with poor soil quality, shared that goat rearing gave her not just food and income, but companionship: ***"Jab pati chala jaata hai, toh akeli nahi lagti. Bakriyan saath mein hoti hain."*** (When my husband leaves, I don't feel alone. The goats are with me.) Her story highlights how assets like goats function both as economic buffers and emotional anchors, enabling women to plan ahead and feel less invisible.

   The aspiration to own and grow assets was often described as a social leap, not just a financial one. In an FGD, one woman noted with pride: ***"Gae-bakri to sirf uchhi jaat ke paas rehta tha, ab hum log bhi apni bakri palte hai"*** (Goats used to belong only to upper castes now even we raise our own). This wasn't just a statement about livestock, it was a declaration of **social arrival**. Asset ownership symbolised an identity shift from someone who labours for others to someone who controls something of her own. Among the 24 women, all have received livestock or agricultural inputs from the program and linked these to increased visibility, a sense of agency, and the ability to contribute to family decisions.

   At the same time, the terrain of women's livelihoods remains deeply gendered and fragile. The most common income-generating tasks such as forest produce collection (like mahua or tendu leaves), seasonal farm labour, and brick kiln migration are all precarious, low-paying, and affects health and well being. Migration, especially to brick kilns in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, or Tamil Nadu, was a last resort rather than a desired opportunity. Uma recounted how she gave birth in a kiln, only stopping migration after a debilitating accident. Sumanti shared, ***"Do kilo chawal milta tha poore din ke kaam ke badle."*** (I used to get two kilos of rice for a full day's work.) These experiences underline how survival strategies are often mistaken for livelihood choices, when in reality, they reflect a lack of better options.

   Environmental and structural risks often threatened even the small gains women made. Few participants reported livestock mortality or crop failures that wiped out months of savings. Illness, both personal and within the household, routinely forced the sale of productive assets. Eight women shared that medical emergencies led them to sell their goats, often at a loss. Sadhani (54) lost a pig during an outbreak and struggled to recover, yet still aspired to expand her livestock enterprise, showing remarkable persistence. Others like Heeramani described how she now

vaccinates goats on time, sells them selectively during festivals to get better prices, and manages a kitchen garden that supplements food expenses and brings small profits: ***"Main sab samajh gayi hoon. Bina tayaari ke jaanwar mar jaaye to sab kuch chala jaata hai."*** (I've understood now, that if an animal dies without proper planning, everything is lost.)

Despite these setbacks, many women demonstrated strong adaptive strategies. 15 out of 24 had accessed SHG loans or savings to build or rebuild their livelihoods, often using this as a springboard to experiment with diversification, raising more pigs, growing crops, or starting a small business. Kalavati, who had suffered losses in pig rearing, didn't give up; instead, she started again with more planning and peer consultation. Manita (25), one of the youngest participants, spoke about using goat sales to open a small shop: ***"Bakri bech ke dukan khol li. Ab toh do rozgaar hai mere paas."*** (I sold my goat and opened a shop. Now I have two sources of income.) Her statement is as much about income as it is about imagination and agency.

Overall, what emerges is that livelihoods in these women's lives are not just about economics they are relational, gendered, and aspirational. They reflect years of accumulated precarity but also the emergence of planning, ownership, and future-thinking. For some, income is the goal; for many others, it is a means to secure dignity, escape dependency, and carve out space in household and community decisions. When supported with timely inputs whether goats, training, or credit these livelihoods evolve from coping mechanisms into pathways of possibility. In that sense, a goat is never just a goat; it's a small but potent structure of hope.

2. **Education and Aspiration: A Dream Deferred, a Dream Transferred:** Across the narratives, education surfaced as one of the most deeply held and emotionally charged aspirations. For many women, it represented not only a practical need but a symbol of everything they had been denied: dignity, mobility, and the right to imagine a different life. While most respondents had little or no formal education themselves, often dropping out due to poverty, early marriage, or the absence of nearby schools, the desire to educate their children, especially daughters, was spoken with intensity and conviction.

   Middle-aged women like Nirmala (38) and Jhumni (25) shared how their own education had been cut short, but they were determined to give their children access to what they could not have. Both emphasised sending their children to hostels or private schools in the district, even if it meant saving in small amounts or taking SHG loans. ***"Apni beti ko hostel bhejna hai, yahan kuch bhi nahi hai padhai ke liye"*** (I want to send my daughter to a hostel, there's nothing here for her education), said Nirmala. This aspiration often involved investing not just money but emotional hope, imagining a future where their children wouldn't suffer the same struggles.

   For many mothers, sons were viewed as future breadwinners, and education was seen as a route to secure, dignified employment. Several women mentioned wanting their sons to study in English-medium schools or attend colleges in nearby towns with hostels, so that ***"woh accha kama sake, hamare jaisa takleef na kare"*** (he can earn well and not struggle like we do) shared in FGD. Yet, this vision of upward mobility through education was not limited to sons alone. A growing number of women saw daughters' education as equally transformative not only as a form of empowerment, but as a way to gain respect.

   Many of these aspirations were not formed in isolation but shaped by exposure to program activities, peer discussions in small groups and SHGs, and local community events that emphasised

the value of schooling. 14 out of 24 women credited the program or peer influence for rethinking education priorities, especially when it came to hostels or sending girls in school. This is particularly striking in areas where just a generation or two earlier, sending daughters to school was unthinkable.

Still, the emotional residue of exclusion lingered. Several women spoke of dropping out of school due to shame, hunger, or the lack of even the most basic educational supplies. Lalita said, ***"Main sirf dusri tak padhi. Dusre bacchon ke ache kapde the. Hamare paas nahi the. Sharam ke maare chhod diya."*** (I studied till Class 2. The other kids had good clothes. We didn't. I left out of shame.) Sumanti added, ***"Padhai ke baare mein kaise sochti, jab roti ka intezam bhi mushkil tha"*** (How could I think about studying when we couldn't even arrange food). These narratives highlight how poverty not only deprives women of opportunities but chips away at the very self-belief needed to pursue them.

And yet, within these constraints, aspirations found a way to survive by shifting focus from self to children. Women like Gudiya recalled childhood dreams of selling bangles, becoming a teacher, or owning a shop. ***"Hum unke jaise jeena chahti thi... sab chudi bechti thi"*** (I wanted to live like them... they all sold bangles), she said, referencing the local women she admired as a child. Manita, younger and more assertive, spoke of her goal to expand goat and vegetable farming and to speak about it in meetings with pride. In her words, ***"Hum toh chahenge ki ek din samuh mein khud bataein ki hum kya kiye."*** (One day I want to speak in the group and share what I have done.)

These stories show that education, even when inaccessible, remains a living aspiration. It represents more than just formal schooling; it is a vessel for dreams deferred, a language of dignity, and a route to social mobility. Women may no longer wish for their own classrooms, but they fight often quietly, often against resistance for a better chance for their children. For them, education is the bridge between survival and transformation, the thread that ties their own silenced ambitions to a future they can still shape through others.

In this way, education becomes the emotional heart of transgenerational aspiration. It is not simply about grades or degrees it is about saying, through their children, "I too mattered. My struggle was not in vain."

3. **Personal Independence and Dignity: Claiming Space, Reclaiming Self:** Among the many aspirations voiced by participants, one of the most quietly powerful was the desire for personal independence and dignity. Though expressed by 9 out of 24 women, this theme carried a depth and intensity that cut across economic status and age, especially among younger women and those with greater exposure to programs, peer networks, or life outside their immediate community. These aspirations were often rooted not just in material need, but in emotional survival, the pursuit of autonomy, self-worth, and control over one's own life.

   Rina (30) is one such voice. After being abandoned by her husband, who remarried and left her to raise their young son alone, she made the courageous decision to open a small shop near the railway station. She didn't collapse under the weight of stigma or grief. Instead, she began to rebuild on her own terms. As the shop started doing well, and her income gave her a sense of stability, her success attracted resentment. Men from her village threatened by her visibility and independence broke her shop and warned her not to reopen there. The same men then established their own shops in the area she was forced to vacate. With no support from her in-laws and no avenue for

justice, she went back to doing daily wage work. And yet, her aspiration has not faded. Rina is now saving to open another shop again near the railway station, but this time made of concrete so it cannot be easily dismantled. ***"Hum yeh sab apne bete ke liye kar rahe hain. Humko izzat se kaam karna hai. Kuch log bolte hain galat raaste pe jaane ko, par hum dikhana chahte hain ki hum bhi kuch kar sakti hai." "Hum jab chote the to Amitabh Bachchan jesa admi se shadi karna chahte the.... lekin mere ye ho gya. Ab hum khud Amitabh Bachchan banege apne bete k liye"*** (I'm doing this for my son. I want to work with dignity. Some suggest taking the wrong path, but I want to prove that I can still stand tall on my own. When I was young, I wanted to marry a man like Amitabh Bachchan but I faced this now I will become Amitabh Bachchan for my son) Her story reveals a clear and courageous understanding that financial independence is not just about money, it is about protection, identity, and asserting her right to exist on her own terms.

For others, the idea of independence manifested in quieter but no less significant ways. Being able to visit a market, having a say in family decisions, buying something for oneself, or making choices about how to use money were all cited as moments of freedom. These small acts, often taken for granted in other contexts, marked a profound shift for women who had spent years being told where they could go, what they could do, and whom they should ask before making any move. One participant, Sukhmani, shared how earning even a small income gave her confidence to speak up in her family's decisions, including her daughter's education: ***"Pehle sunte bhi nahi the ghar mein. Ab jab se khud se paisa kamana shuru kiya hai, meri baat maante hain."*** (Earlier, no one would even listen to me at home. Now that I've started earning, they take my opinion seriously.)

This desire to be seen and heard; to move from being invisible to intentional was deeply linked to the aspiration for dignity. In contexts where patriarchy, caste norms, and economic marginality intersect to keep women confined and unheard, the wish to "be someone" was both radical and deeply personal. These aspirations were not always expressed in grand language. Sometimes they came in the form of a woman wanting to sit in a meeting and speak her mind, to wear 'laali lipstick' whenever she wants to or to wear a sari of her own choice. And yet, each of these acts represents an incremental but undeniable expansion of self.

What ties these diverse expressions together is a growing awareness among women that independence is not a privilege, but a right for all. While economic gains enable this shift, it is the emotional transformation, the quiet decision to no longer live invisibly that gives these aspirations their power. In a world where women are often taught to endure and adjust, even naming the desire for independence is a bold step. And for women like Rina, it is not just a step, it is a refusal to surrender.

4. **Social Mobility and Status Preservation:** Among the 24 women interviewed, 8 spoke clearly of aspirations shaped not only by the desire to move upward but by an equally powerful instinct to preserve their current social standing and prevent further slippage, especially through distress migration or visible poverty. Their concerns reflected an emotional economy rooted in *izzat* (dignity), community respect, and maternal responsibility. For many, aspiration was about securing a life that does not descend into greater hardship, shame, or invisibility. Ramdhari (50) expressed this with quiet resolve, saying, ***"Hum nahi chahte ki mere bacche eent bhatta jayein. Gaon mein hi kuch izzat bhara kaam ho toh behtar hota"*** (I don't want my children to end up in brick kilns. It's better if they find decent work here itself). This was not just about income, it was about holding onto a sense of rootedness, ensuring her children are not scattered across unfamiliar, exploitative spaces. The desire to avoid migration recounted by at least six women was often accompanied by

memories of injury, abandonment, or humiliation. One participant recalled her son's return from a kiln job in Tamil Nadu with a crushed hand, ending his ability to work. Another described how brick kiln migration made women vulnerable to harassment and families to deeper debt. This aspiration to preserve dignity extended into the social fabric of everyday life women frequently noted how they wanted their children to "study in uniform," "go to hostels," or "work in good places," not just to earn more but to be seen differently. In communities where visibility is tied to respect, small aesthetic markers like clean clothes, school bags, or being seen buying in the market became aspirational. ***"Doosre ke bachche sheher mein padhte hain. Hamare toh sadak mein khelte rehte hain,"*** one woman shared in FGD. (Other people's children study in the city. Ours are just playing in the streets.) Beneath this comparison lies a deeper longing to avoid being marked as the family that didn't try.

At the same time, women's social engagement and mobility remained tightly bound to their marital status, caste position, and the health of local institutions like SHGs or panchayats. Many recalled how childhood friendships, play, and shared work disappeared post-marriage, replaced by isolation and restriction. Movement to markets or maternal homes required permission or an escort. Some described loving marriages that still came with silent control, while others were more stark. ***"Mera pati doosri shaadi kar liya. Jab dukan chalne lagi, toh logon ne tod diya,"*** shared **Uma**, narrating how a young woman's attempt to run a shop independently was crushed by men who were threatened by her success. These patterns were not rare. In nine of the interviews, women disclosed abandonment, emotional neglect, or domestic violence, often coupled with a complete lack of financial or emotional support. SHG and small group spaces, where functional, were often described as lifelines. Gudiya, for instance, proudly declared, ***"Hum toh bees saal se samuh ki adhyaksha hain. Har mahine bachat karte hain, meeting lete hain, aur doosron ko samjhate hain."*** (I've been SHG president for 20 years. I save every month, lead meetings, and guide others.) For her, leadership was not just functional, it was a source of identity and pride. But for others like Sangeetha, the failure of the SHG was a turning point: ***"Samuh bandh ho gaya. Ab koi sunta nahi."*** (The group shut down. Now no one listens.) The collapse of such collective spaces left women with fewer routes to community recognition, confidence-building, or support.

Amidst all this, some women were able to navigate patriarchal settings with the support of their spouses or children. Sunita shared how her husband encouraged her to speak in public. "***Pati kehta hai jo sahi lage, bolne se mat daro.***" (My husband says if it feels right, don't be afraid to speak.) Even when she doubted herself, his encouragement helped her step into community spaces, attend meetings, and voice her views. Exposure to program events, workshops, and even small public speaking opportunities was repeatedly linked to rising confidence, with 13 out of 24 women crediting such moments for shaping their sense of self-worth. While not every woman aspired to leadership, many longed to be heard, seen, and respected. This desire, often muted, was symbolised in everyday phrases: ***"Ab toh naam hota hai samuh mein"*** (Now I have a name in the group) or ***"Log poochte hain ki hum kya sochte hain"*** (People ask what I think). These are not minor shifts; they are expressions of relational agency, where social aspiration moves from survival to symbolic participation.

In this context, social mobility is not defined solely by upward income graphs but by the ability to hold one's ground to protect dignity, refuse degradation, and remain rooted in one's community with self-respect intact

B. Pre- and Post-Marriage Aspirational Shifts

Before Marriage: Stalled Beginnings and the Absence of Imagination: When women reflected on their adolescent years, the space *before marriage* emerged as a poignant window into aspiration one filled not so much with grand dreams, but with silences, absences, and interrupted hopes. Among the 24 women interviewed, 10 explicitly recalled wanting to continue their education, usually up to secondary school or beyond. Five expressed simple desires for material stability like owning a pair of sandals, wearing clean clothes to school, or eating well. However, a striking eight women reported having had no real aspirations at all, not because they lacked the capacity to dream, but because dreaming itself felt irrelevant or unsafe.

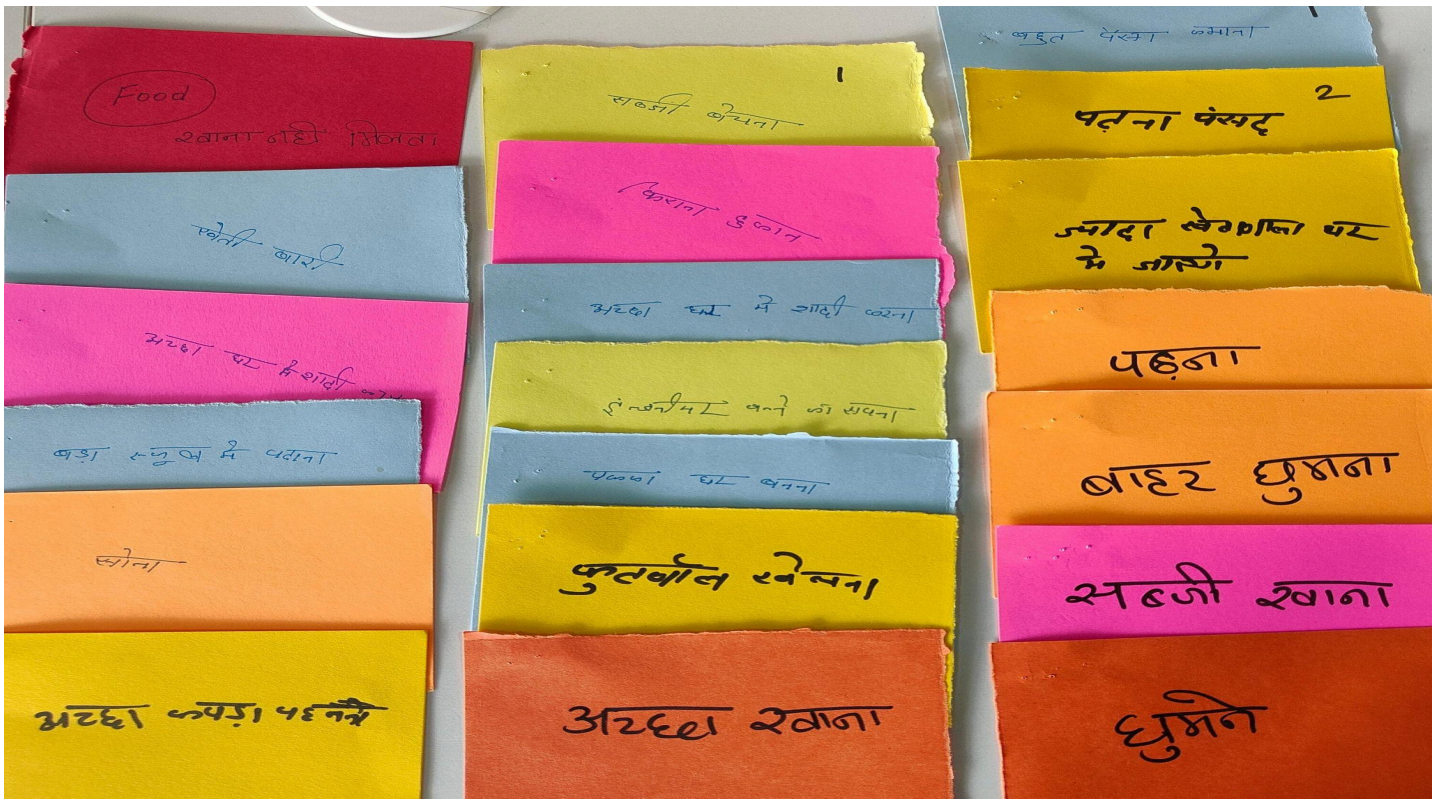
In many of these cases, early or forced marriage, chronic poverty, and limited exposure combined to create environments where the idea of imagining a future for oneself simply didn't arise. ***"Padhne ka mann tha, par ghar mein paisa nahi tha. Aur phir achanak shaadi tay ho gayi,"*** said Sumina (45). (I wanted to study, but there was no money at home. Then suddenly, my marriage was fixed.) Her words reflect a pattern repeated across many accounts where young girls' desires were quietly overruled by financial pressures, social expectations, or the urgency of honour.

For those who did express concrete ambitions, the goals were grounded in their surroundings: becoming a school teacher, opening a bangle shop, or running a tailoring business. These were not fantasies of escape but practical, community-rooted aspirations. ***"Hum chahate the ki hum chudi bechein, jaise bazaar mein auratein karti hain,"*** shared Sabita, recalling how, as a girl, she admired local women who earned while staying within acceptable norms. (I wanted to sell bangles like the women I saw in the market.) Yet most of these aspirations were quickly stalled. Thirteen women in the study were married before the age of 18, and once married, their roles and routines left little room to revisit or re-imagine those childhood dreams. Cooking, caregiving, and adjusting to in-laws replaced schoolbooks and bazaars.

Notably, two women shared how their adolescent imagination was shaped more by popular media than by real-life role models. One recalled dreaming of marrying a film hero ***"Hero jaise pati chahiye tha, jo mujhe le jaaye sheher"*** (I wanted a husband like a hero, who would take me to the city) a fantasy that soon collided with the reality of village life and patriarchal norms. This reflects how, in the absence of local examples of empowered women, even Bollywood became a surrogate curriculum for aspiration. However, the gap between mediated dreams and lived reality often led to early disillusionment.

Several participants, reflecting as adults, expressed retrospective regret for not having been able to even think about what they wanted. Sohmain (53), now a goat rearer with newfound confidence, said, ***"Tab kuch sochne ka samay hi nahi tha. Ab lagta hai kaash thoda aur padh liya hota"*** (Back then, there was no time to think. Now I feel, if only I had studied a bit more). This sense of *"not having known how to dream"* underscores how aspiration is not an innate quality, but something that must be enabled by environment, exposure, and encouragement.

What these stories reveal is that aspiration before marriage was not just about what girls wanted to become, but about whether they felt they had the right to want anything at all. The absence of aspiration was often not a lack of desire, but a symptom of deep social conditioning of being told from a young age to shrink, adjust, and expect little. In this light, the women's later-life aspirations whether to educate their daughters, start businesses, or become visible in their communities are not just economic steps forward. They are acts of reclamation. They signal that while early dreams may have been denied, they were not permanently extinguished. Through their children or through program-enabled exposure, many women are now learning to name, pursue, and even recover dreams they never got to hold as girls.



After Marriage: Recalibrated Aspirations, Relational Lives: Marriage marked as a distinct turning point in the aspirational journeys of nearly all women in the study. Where childhood dreams tended to centre around school, work, or vague images of freedom, post-marriage aspirations became deeply entangled with care work, household responsibility, and family survival. Across the narratives, there was a clear gendered recalibration of goals: women began subordinating personal ambitions to collective wellbeing, particularly that of their children. This wasn't simply resignation, it was a redirection of aspiration toward what was socially expected, emotionally meaningful, and practically possible.

Among the 24 women interviewed, 15 explicitly named their children's education, especially daughters' schooling as their foremost aspiration after marriage. Many of them had been denied education themselves and now saw this as a form of redemption or transgenerational change. Namita (35), who had dropped out from school, shared, ***"Humko padhaayi ka mauka nahi mila, par hum chahte hain meri beti college tak padhe. Hostel mein daalne ka soch rahe hain."*** (I never got the chance to study, but I want my daughter to go to college. We're thinking of putting her in a hostel.) Education was often spoken of not just as an economic tool but as a marker of dignity and status, something that could shield children from the stigma, struggle, and silence that had defined their own youth.

Economic stability was the second most common aspiration, cited by 12 women, often as a way to supplement household income, reduce dependence on spouses, or plan for children's futures. For many, livelihood efforts be it goat rearing, selling vegetables, stitching clothes, or running small shops were rooted in necessity but carried deeper symbolic weight. Lalo explained, ***"Main chhoti dukan chalati hoon. Paisa apne haath mein ho toh ghar mein baat ka wajan badhta hai."*** (I run a small shop. When you have money in your hand, your voice carries more weight at home.) Livelihood, for these women, was never just income; it was leverage, self-respect, and sometimes, protection.

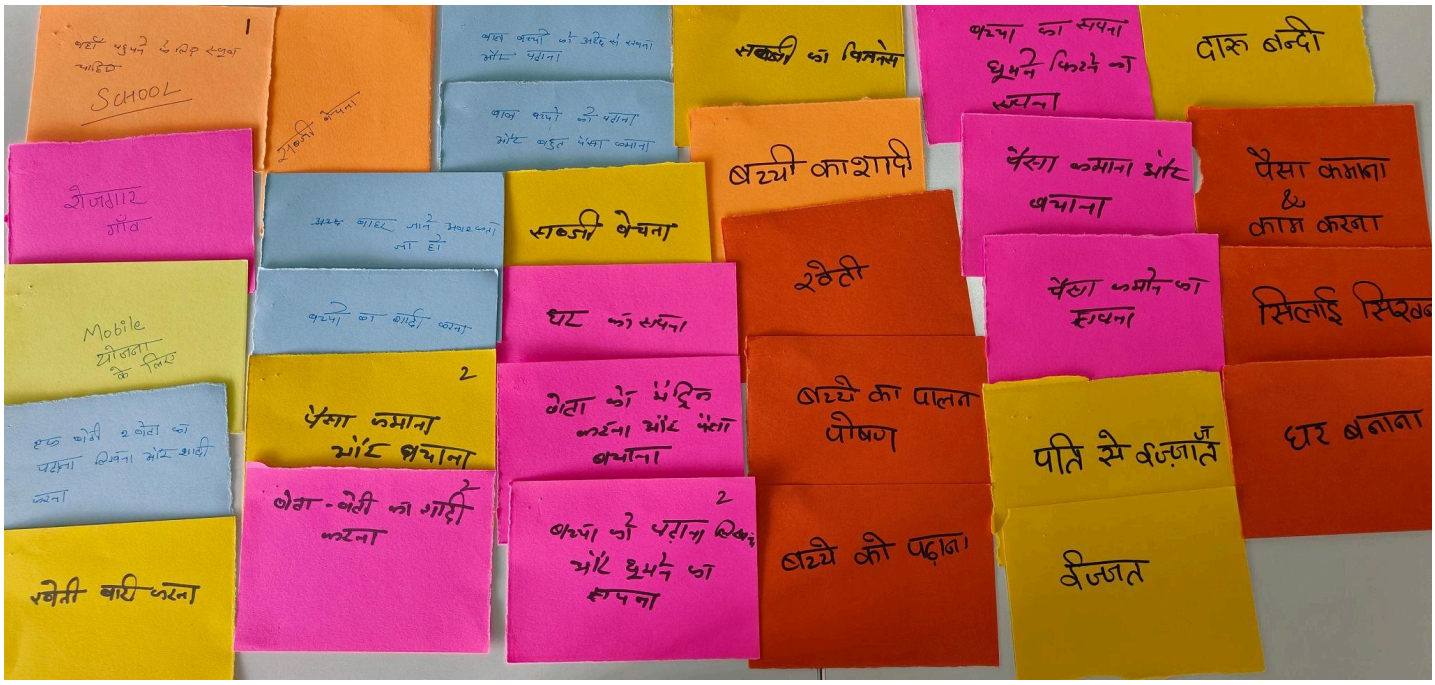
Aspirations for personal independence surfaced more selectively in about 5 out of 24 women and primarily among those who had either emotional support from their husbands or exposure through programs and peer networks. These aspirations were subtle but clear: wanting to visit the market alone, save money, speak in SHG meetings, or make small household decisions. Sunita, who described herself as "ziddi aur zyada bolne wali" (stubborn and outspoken), shared, ***"Mujhe pata hai main kya chahti hoon. Mere pati kehte hain ki bolne se mat daro."*** (I know what I want. My husband says don't be afraid to speak.) For women like her, aspiration was relational; it grew in the presence of encouragement and safety.

At the same time, this shift from self to family did not always indicate the loss of selfhood. Rather, for many women, it marked a maturing of aspiration, a kind of pride in dreaming beyond the personal. There was dignity in putting children first, in helping a spouse through financial trouble, or in lifting a household out of crisis. As Heeramani (40) put it, ***"Maine kuch bada nahi kiya, par bacchon ke liye sochti hoon. Pehle sapna dekhna bhi mushkil tha.***" (I haven't done anything big, but I dream for my children. Earlier, even dreaming felt impossible.) Her statement reflects how aspiration evolved not just in content but in orientation from self-advancement to care-driven transformation.

And yet, this transformation was not always voluntary. In several cases, women quietly acknowledged that their personal desires had been shelved, sometimes permanently. Nine participants shared how early marriage and childbearing had cut short any sense of becoming someone in their own right. ***"Khud ke liye kuch nahi socha. Ghar sambhalte sambhalte zindagi nikal gayi,"*** Sabita. (I never thought about myself. Life passed while managing the home.) These were not complaints, but quiet reckoning reminders that care and compromise, while dignified, often came at a cost.

What becomes evident is that post-marriage aspiration is not a disappearance of ambition, but a reorientation of its focus. In a context where patriarchal norms reward sacrifice and where support systems are limited, women recalibrate their dreams in ways that are socially intelligible and emotionally sustaining. They find power in caregiving, strategy in sacrifice, and meaning in shaping futures they will never fully inhabit themselves.

In this way, aspiration after marriage becomes a mirror of constrained agency but also of immense resilience. It holds both the weight of what was denied and the beauty of what was chosen. It is not just a story of what women want, but of what they are willing to fight for, within the bounds they are given.



C. Age-Based Differentiation in Aspirational Trajectories

Aspirations Across the Life Course: Shaped by Time, Responsibility, and Possibility: Aspirations are not static. They evolve with age, experience, exposure, and shifting responsibilities. Across the 24 women interviewed, a strong pattern emerged linking the nature of aspiration to a woman's stage in the life course from early adulthood to middle years and older age. While every participant navigated poverty, gender norms, and social constraint, how they imagined their futures and whose future they prioritised varied significantly with age.

Among younger women in the 25–35 age group (n=9), aspirations were the most diversified, ambitious, and outward-looking. Most wanted to expand existing livelihood activities not just for income, but as a way to build identity, agency, and local recognition. Manita (25), for instance, spoke passionately about scaling her goat and vegetable farming enterprise, but also about wanting to lead her SHG and speak in community meetings. ***"Ek din main samuh mein khud batana chahti hoon ki maine kya kiya hai"*** (One day I want to stand in the group and tell them what I've done), she said, revealing not just an economic ambition but a desire for visibility and influence. For several women in this age band, aspirations extended well beyond subsistence. They imagined running shops, mentoring peers, sending children to English-medium schools, or even becoming resource persons in their villages. Importantly, these dreams were made possible not

just by youth, but by relatively fewer caregiving burdens and early exposure to program activities. The sense of "becoming someone" remained alive and unburdened, though still constrained by caste, geography, and marriage dynamics.

In contrast, women in the 36–50 age group (n=12) exhibited layered, pragmatic, and often bittersweet aspirations. Many had married early, raised children through severe hardship, and were now beginning to consolidate livelihoods, invest in land or livestock, or save for children's higher education. Their dreams were deeply anchored in the household, yet infused with a quiet desire for personal dignity and missed opportunities. Gudiya (38), who never completed school, proudly shared how she has led her SHG for over two decades, even anchoring thrift-credit meetings and guiding younger women. ***"School toh chhoot gaya, par samuh se sab seekha"*** (I missed school, but I learned everything through the SHG), she reflected, positioning herself as a leader despite early deprivation. Similarly, Nirmala (38), who once dreamed of becoming a teacher, now runs a small grocery shop while investing heavily in her children's education, especially her daughter's hostel stay. Women in this group often took a long-term view of household security talking in terms of savings, loans and risk management. Their aspirations were practical but underscored by deep resilience and emotional intelligence. Regret was present but so was pride in how far they had come.

Older participants aged 51 and above (n=3) offered a different lens. Their aspirations were not individual but intergenerational, centering on peace, family unity, and the wellbeing of grandchildren. Sohmain (53), who lives on a remote hillside and rears goats, expressed satisfaction with the support she receives from her husband and the ability to contribute to her family's needs. ***"Ab zyada kuch chahiye nahi. Bacchon ka bhala ho, ghar mein shanti ho, bas"*** (I don't want much now. The children should do well, and the home should be peaceful that's enough), she said. For these women, personal dreams had long been folded into family responsibilities, and what remained was the desire to maintain dignity, transmit values, and ensure that the next generation had it easier. Their reflections were often less about ambition and more about completion, a sense that the most they could do was done.

Together, these patterns reveal that aspirations are not fixed traits, but shifting constructs deeply influenced by life-stage, caregiving roles, social position, and cumulative experience. Younger women, energized by exposure and mobility, often dreamt of transformation; middle-aged women balanced future planning with emotional reckoning; older women prioritised stability and intergenerational progress. Importantly, across every group, women's aspirations were relational. They did not imagine futures in isolation but through their roles as mothers, workers, wives, and community members. Their dreams were shaped as much by what they had lived through as by what they hoped to prevent for those who followed.

In this sense, the story of aspiration is also a story of time, loss, adaptation, and quiet defiance. Women are not simply dreamers; they are strategists, custodians, and builders of better futures, even when their own possibilities have been curtailed.

D. Enabling Factors Supporting Aspiration Formation: What Helps Women Imagine More?

Aspirations do not emerge in isolation; they are seeded, shaped, and sustained by social environments. For the 24 women in this study, the presence (or absence) of enabling conditions significantly influenced whether an idea remained a distant hope or took the form of concrete planning and action. Four elements stood out as particularly important: supportive family members, peer networks, asset ownership, and financial buffers. These created not just practical advantages, but emotional and psychological scaffolding, allowing women to trust in their own agency.

Among 12 women, the presence of supportive spouses or family members had a clear transformative effect. Husbands who accompanied them to markets, shared decisions about livestock or land, or simply offered verbal encouragement made a visible difference in women's confidence and initiative. Sohmain (53) credited her ability to expand goat-rearing to her husband's steady support: ***"Unhone kabhi mana nahi kiya. Bakri ke liye jungle se chara bhi laate hain"*** (He never stopped me. He even brings fodder from the forest for the goats). This kind of moral and logistical support enabled women to take risks without fear of being ridiculed or punished. In a few cases, daughters or even in-laws provided encouragement, suggesting that relational empowerment can come from multiple nodes in the household.

Peer influence was equally powerful. 13 women said they were directly inspired by watching others in their group or village succeed whether it was someone starting a shop, vaccinating goats, or speaking in a public meeting. This informal ecosystem of ***"if she can, maybe I can too"*** acted as a strong motivator. Kalavati, who had resumed pig-rearing after losing animals to disease, shared, ***"Mujhe darr lag raha tha. Par jab dekha ki doosri mahila ne dobaara shuru kiya aur fayda hua, tab himmat aayi"*** (I was scared. But when I saw another woman restart and benefit, I found courage). Exposure visits, SHG meetings, and even casual conversations during tola gatherings became sites of informal mentorship. This ripple effect of aspiration often went unspoken, but its influence was repeatedly visible in women's language and planning.

Asset ownership reported by 17 participants emerged not just as economic capital but as psychological anchoring. Whether it was goats, pigs, farmland, or a small grocery shop, having "something of one's own" gave women the legitimacy and leverage to think beyond survival. Heeramani spoke about her livestock not just as income, but as proof of capability: ***"Bakri meri zimmedari hai. Uske liye paisa banaya, becha***

bhi, aur kuch bacha ke rakh diya" (The goat is my responsibility. I saved money for it, sold it, and kept some money aside). For her and others, assets symbolised progress, a visible, touchable indicator that they were moving forward. It also changed how others in the household perceived them. In several cases, women reported being taken more seriously in family decisions after they began contributing income from assets they managed themselves.

Closely linked to asset ownership was the presence of savings or emergency buffers, mentioned by 10 women. These cushions, whether built through SHG savings, cash transfers, or previous profits allowed women to absorb shocks, take calculated risks, or experiment with enterprise. Manita, for instance, was able to sell a goat to fund her first stock of vegetables and later start a shop. "**Pehle ke paisa se dukan khola. Ab do kaam hai mere paas**" (I used earlier savings to open the shop. Now I have two sources of income). In contrast, women without savings often spoke of aspirational hesitation; they wanted to try something but couldn't afford a failure. Six women mentioned having to sell livestock prematurely to meet urgent medical needs, illustrating how easily fragile progress can unravel in the absence of buffers.

Together, these four enablers show that aspiration is not just a mental or emotional process it is deeply material and relational. It takes root when women feel supported, when they see others succeed, when they possess something to build on, and when they are not one crisis away from collapse. These factors interact: peer support may spark a dream, a husband's trust may validate it, asset ownership may operationalise it, and savings may sustain it through uncertainty.

The findings suggest that development programs must go beyond individual training or asset distribution to cultivate the ecosystem of aspiration. That includes working with families, strengthening peer collectives, institutionalizing savings mechanisms, and ensuring that women are not operating in isolation. Aspiration is not only about the desire to rise it is about knowing that you won't fall alone.

E. Barriers to Aspiration Fulfillment: When Survival Leaves No Space to Dream

While many women in the study articulated aspirations for economic progress, education, and dignity, these desires emerged in conditions that were often actively hostile to dreaming. Aspirations do not fail to form due to lack of capability but because the environment tells women they shouldn't expect more. Across the 24 participants, six recurring structural and social barriers were identified as critical deterrents to both the formation and realisation of aspirations: geographic remoteness, educational deprivation, livelihood shocks, early marriage, gendered violence, and unsupported singlehood. Each of these constraints shaped not only what women could do, but what they believed they could want.

For 15 women, geographic remoteness emerged as a powerful limiting force. Living in tolas cut off from paved roads, health centers, or secondary schools meant that even small goals like visiting a market, accessing a bank, or sending a daughter to school became logistical hurdles. ***"Bazaar jana hai toh 2 ghanta paidal chalna padta hai. Doosre logon jaise sapne dekhne ka samay nahi milta."*** (If we have to go to the market, we walk two hours. There's no time to dream like other people), said Sohmain (53), who lives on a hillside with no motorable road. In such contexts, the very act of aspiration felt like a luxury, something reserved for people with access and time, not for women whose lives were structured around survival and distance.

Educational deprivation, affecting 16 participants, further curtailed agency. Women who were illiterate or had minimal schooling found it difficult to access information, understand government entitlements, or navigate financial systems. Many spoke of feeling dependent on others, often male relatives or SHG leaders for basic tasks like reading messages, calculating prices, or filling out forms. Sumanti, who dropped out of school in Class 2, shared, *"**Sarkari yojana ka sunte hain par samajh nahi aata. Dar lagta hai ki kahin kuch galat na ho jaaye.**"* (We hear about government schemes, but don't understand them. We're afraid we'll make a mistake.) This fear of misstep combined with a lack of foundational literacy deeply impacted both the imagination and execution of goals.

Livelihood shocks, reported by 9 women, were another major setback. Goat mortality, crop failure, and illness-related asset sales often erased years of slow progress. These shocks didn't just create financial loss, they eroded confidence and deterred risk-taking. Heeramani, who had invested in goat rearing, said, ***"Ek baar bakri mar gayi thi, tab se darr lagta hai naya kaam shuru karne mein."*** (Once my goat died, I was scared to start anything new.) For women without buffers or institutional support, a single failed venture became a cautionary tale that discouraged future attempts.

Early marriage, experienced by 9 participants, often marked the end of education and the beginning of social confinement. Girls were pulled out of school to marry, relocate, and shoulder domestic duties, cutting them off from peers and mentors. Sarswati recalled, ***"Padna chahti thi par 16 saal mein shaadi ho gayi. Phir toh khana banana hi zindagi ban gaya."*** (I wanted to study, but I was married at 14. After that, life became just about cooking and caregiving.) Early marriage didn't just interrupt aspiration, it replaced it with permanent roles of obligation, before even girls had a chance to define themselves.

Violence and alcoholism, present in the lives of 7 women, had a corrosive effect on psychological resilience. Emotional abuse, physical assaults, and the unpredictability of alcoholic spouses pushed women toward despair, limiting their capacity to imagine change. One participant, Jubain, shared how her husband hits her whenever she asks money for household expenses but waste the earnings in consuming alcohol. ***"Main toh ussi k bacchon ko khana khilane, padhane k liye paise mangti hu. Abhi ye sab maar pit mein khud k liye kya sapna dekhun"*** (I ask money to feed the children and to send them to school. In this chaos, what should I dream) In such situations, the aspiration shifts from growth to simply finding peace, a stark reminder that for many women, safety is a precondition for dreaming.

Lastly, women who were single, separated, or widowed 5 in total faced an additional layer of marginalization. Without spousal support or strong kinship ties, these women encountered both economic vulnerability and social stigma. Their aspirations were often stripped down to survival goals: feeding children, staying safe, or avoiding exploitation. Rina, a single mother, spoke of declining suggestions to enter sex work to support her son: ***"Main dikhana chahti hoon ki ek aurat bina gande raste pe jaaye, kuch bana sakti hai."*** (I want to prove a woman can build something without going down the wrong path.) Her story reflects both defiance and the exhaustion of trying to survive without a social safety net.

Taken together, these barriers show that aspiration is not merely about individual mindset, it is about what the world allows women to imagine. When social norms, geography, marriage, violence, and poverty converge, they don't just restrict mobility, they hollow out the inner space where dreams might have grown. And yet, even in these constrained conditions, many women still carried flickers of hope: for their children, for a small enterprise, for a quiet life of dignity. But those flickers need wind, not walls.

If aspiration is to be taken seriously as a developmental outcome, it cannot be cultivated through motivational messaging alone. It must be protected from the conditions that erode it and supported with the systems that allow it to take root, even in the harshest soil.

F. Impact of Exposure on Aspirations: What Counts as "Exposure"? Reimagining Possibility Through Contact, Context, and Confidence

In the context of aspiration formation, exposure is not just about formal training or program attendance, it is about what women see, experience, hear, and internalize. It is the process through which imagination is activated and futures become thinkable. Exposure introduces alternative ways of being, and in doing so, it chips away at the belief that things must remain as they are. Across the 24 women in this study, varying degrees of exposure both direct and indirect had a clear and measurable impact on the shape, scale, and complexity of their aspirations.

Direct exposure included participation in SHG federation meetings, program-organized market visits, livestock management training, financial literacy sessions, or capacity-building workshops. These activities gave women structured access to new knowledge, skills, and institutional visibility. Indirect exposure, by contrast, came from witnessing a neighbour successfully rear goats, hearing a peer speak in a public meeting, or casually learning about government schemes through word of mouth. Both forms were influential, but it was the cumulative intensity of exposure frequency, diversity, and emotional impact that determined the scale of aspiration.

Women with high exposure articulated the most complex, future-oriented aspirations. They spoke not only of growing their businesses or sending children to school but also of becoming SHG leaders, mentoring others, or starting new ventures. These aspirations combined economic ambition with social confidence and vision. Manita (25) is a clear example. With early involvement in goat-rearing and consistent exposure to program activities, she now runs two small enterprises and aspires to speak in village-level meetings about her journey. ***"Main sirf paisa nahi kamaana chahti hoon. Main chahungi doosri mahilayein bhi seekhein."*** (I don't just want to earn money. I want other women to learn from me too.) For women like Manita, exposure translated into not only possibility but responsibility, a shift from private survival to public leadership.

In the moderate exposure group, women's aspirations were grounded and practical, often centering around livelihood expansion and children's education, but with less emphasis on innovation or leadership. These women had some program engagement and limited peer learning, but their reference points were narrower. Kalavati, for instance, aspired to raise more pigs and build a permanent shelter for them, having seen others do so. However, she didn't imagine training others or expanding into new sectors. For this group, the horizon of aspiration was functional rather than transformative and it reflected the limits of what had been seen or felt as possible.

The low or no exposure group, consisting of 4 women, displayed the most restricted aspirations, often limited to immediate survival goals like managing food, coping with illness, or trying to avoid debt. These

women rarely spoke of change, and when asked about the future, many said they hadn't thought about it. ***"Ab kya sochna, din toh kisi tarah nikal hi jaata hai,"*** said Sadhani (54), whose SHG had collapsed and who had never attended a program event. (What is there to think about? Somehow the day just passes.) Her words reflect a quiet resignation where the absence of exposure leads to an absence of imagination.

A parallel trend emerged when mapped against income performance. All high-income earners in the sample, those running profitable shops, selling livestock systematically, or engaging in multiple income streams had prior experience in livelihood activities and some form of early exposure. They had failed, adapted, and tried again. In contrast, all low-income earners lacked exposure to both formal training and peer models. This data suggests that aspiration is not simply driven by internal motivation or desire but by the confidence that comes from practice, trial, and visible success in others.

Exposure to failure also played a key role in aspiration-building. Women who had tried and failed lost a goat, invested poorly, or shut down a shop often displayed more resilience and planning capacity than those who had never attempted at all. Heeramani, who lost goats in her first year of rearing, spoke of how that experience taught her to plan vaccinations, keep emergency savings, and sell at seasonal price peaks. ***"Pehli baar mein nuksan hua tha. Ab har cheez soch samajh ke karti hoon."*** (I lost money the first time. Now I do everything carefully.) This suggests that exposure to risk, failure, and recovery not only builds operational skills it makes aspiration realistic, grounded, and durable.

In sum, exposure is the soil in which aspiration takes root. It feeds imagination with example, it replaces fear with familiarity, and it slowly dismantles the idea that certain lives are not meant for dreaming. Programs must treat exposure not as a one-time event, but as a sustained practice one that includes structured training, peer storytelling, mentoring opportunities, and visible women role models from within similar contexts. Because when a woman sees someone like her succeed, she begins to believe she can as well. And belief, more than anything else, is where aspiration begins.

G. Health, Loss, and Resilience: Holding On in the Face of Invisible Weight

Beneath the everyday accounts of work, caregiving, and aspiration lies a quieter, often unspoken layer of the women's lives marked by physical exhaustion, unresolved grief, and emotional endurance. Across the narratives, chronic health challenges, personal losses, and systemic neglect appeared as a constant undercurrent, shaping not only what women could do, but how they saw themselves in the world.

Almost all participants described ongoing health issues, from malnutrition and fatigue due to physical labour to reproductive complications and the absence of basic health support. Women routinely carried the physical and emotional toll of working in fields, rearing livestock, and managing households often with minimal rest, medical attention, or empathy. For those engaged in seasonal migration or brick kiln work, the physical toll was even more intense, compounded by poor nutrition and exposure to risk. Saraswati, who had lost two children and continues to suffer from uterine pain, said quietly, ***"Jeene ki ichha nahi hai...."*** (I have no desire to live.) Her voice, calm but hollow, captured the silent weight many women carry.

Loss of children, of spouses, of parents was a recurring shadow. Among the 24 participants, at least 8 spoke of the death of a close family member, and many more referred to abandonment, domestic violence, or emotional absence. These were not just tragic events, but deep turning points in women's narrative; moments when time seemed to stop, and life was restructured around survival rather than growth. Uma, whose husband migrated and eventually stopped returning, shared, ***"Dimag pe bojh lagta hai. Jaise band gayi hoon."*** (My mind feels burdened, like I'm trapped.) Such statements reveal not just sadness but

a deep emotional fatigue, the kind that restricts imagination, ambition, and even the will to participate in everyday life.

Yet, woven into these accounts of despair were also threads of quiet strength, humour, and faith. Despite systemic failures of health infrastructure, social support, and justice, most women continued to show up for life. They reared grandchildren, managed livestock, cooked for extended families, and even saved money in small, disciplined ways. Sangeetha, who struggles with frequent illness and the memory of a collapsed SHG, shrugged and said with a smile, ***"Bhagwaan pe bharosa hai. Govinda sambhal lenge."*** (I trust God. Govinda will take care of it.) Her faith wasn't naïve, it was practical. In the absence of institutional protection, religion, routine, and belief in the divine became emotional scaffolding.

Importantly, many women articulated a sense of comfort simply from being asked about their lives. In a context where their emotional realities are rarely validated, the act of listening itself emerged as a form of recognition. After a long interview, Jhumni paused and said, ***"Achha laga ki kisi ne poocha. Lagta hai sunne wala hai."*** (It felt good that someone asked. It feels like someone is listening.)

The findings suggest that resilience among these women is not the absence of suffering but the ongoing negotiation with it. It is found in small acts of agency like vaccinating goats after previous losses, starting again after a failed shop, speaking out despite trauma. It is also found in collective roles: being a grandmother, a group member, a neighbour who helps others even while hurting. This kind of resilience is messy, painful, and deeply gendered but it is also remarkable in its persistence.

Health interventions, grief support, spaces for storytelling, and social recognition are not peripheral, they are central to ensuring that women do not just cope, but slowly begin to heal and imagine again. In contexts of chronic stress, even the smallest acknowledgment can make room for aspiration.

Chapter 5: Suggestions

The findings from the aspiration narratives demonstrate that women's dreams are neither static nor homogenous. Rather, they are deeply contextual, shaped by life stage, marital status, exposure, access to assets, and the presence or absence of enabling structures. Aspirations operate simultaneously as survival strategies, expressions of dignity, and longings for transformation. These aspirations must be treated not merely as attitudinal indicators, but as dynamic processes of becoming anchored in women's everyday struggles and agency.

Based on the rich thematic landscape of the analysis, the following suggestions outline a comprehensive approach to strengthen, expand, and institutionalize the role of aspiration within programmatic and policy frameworks.

1. Designing Interventions Aligned with Life-Stage Specific Aspirational Trajectories

Aspirations are not monolithic. They evolve significantly across life stages, often reflecting the intersection of opportunity, responsibility, and accumulated constraints. Program interventions must therefore move away from a one-size-fits-all model and instead adopt an age-responsive and stage-responsive design.

Age Group	Aspirational Profile	Recommended Programmatic Strategies
Young Women (Ages 18–35)	This group exhibits ambitious, multi-layered aspirations. Their goals include entrepreneurial growth, digital literacy, leadership in SHGs, and community visibility. They tend to have more risk taking traits and are more open to new exposure.	- Deliver tailored skill-building modules in financial literacy, enterprise management, digital exposure, and SHG/small group leadership. - Form age-specific small groups or cross-age mentorship roles where younger women co-lead and learn from elderly small group members. - Facilitate goal-setting meetings that encourage both personal visioning (e.g., opening a shop) and community-oriented dreams (e.g., leading a collective).
Middle-Aged Women (Ages 36–45)	This group balances aspirations with accumulated regret, responsibility, and constrained mobility. Their goals focus on children's futures, economic security, and reclaiming missed opportunities through microenterprise.	- Offer flexible livelihood support tailored to household constraints; focus on low-hanging fruits like input-based agriculture or livestock expansion. - Link to credit + coaching models combining SHG/bank access with hands-on guidance to reduce fear of failure. - Enable peer learning exchanges across

		tolas/villages to foster motivation through visibility of local role models and success stories.
Older Women (Ages 45+)	Aspirations are largely intergenerational, focused on family harmony, grandchildren's education, and passing on values. They carry deep social capital but are less likely to pursue individual economic mobility.	- Involve them in advisory roles within small group clusters or local dispute resolution forums, recognizing their wisdom and conflict mediation skills. - Conduct "aspirational storytelling sessions" in group settings where they share life experiences and shifts across generations, fostering dignity and intergenerational dialogue.

2. Strengthening Program Design to Nurture Aspiration as a Journey, Not a One-Time Trigger

While asset transfers and small group formations have provided critical starting points, sustaining and evolving women's aspirations requires a more systemic reimagining of program design.

- Asset Distribution to Enterprise Development Ecosystems: Asset ownership alone does not guarantee mobility unless accompanied by enabling inputs such as training, veterinary care, market access, and cooperative structures. A goat or pig becomes aspirational only when it links to sustained income, social recognition, and planning ability.

    a. Facilitate livelihood graduation pathways where women can move from subsistence-level support to enterprise-building (e.g., access to local markets, knowledge of supply chain, promotion of produce).

    b. Establish mobile veterinary and agro-extension services/small business, especially in remote geographies, to reduce livestock mortality and ensure economic continuity.

- Create Aspirational Dialogues Within Small Groups: Small groups must become a platform to share success and failures and learn from those failures.

    a. Introduce aspiration reflection tools during small group meetings where members share goals, track progress, and celebrate micro-achievements.

    b. Use visual tools like aspiration trees, pictorial goal sheets, and collective visioning maps for low-literacy contexts.

- Invest in Rebuilding or Strengthening Dormant SHGs:
  Aspirational stagnation in areas with weak SHG structures indicates the critical need to revive governance, transparency, and support.

a. Collaborate with SRLMs and request them to conduct SHG health audits to identify broken groups and design customized reactivation plans.

b. Provide refresher training in governance, rotational leadership, and thrift-credit management.

3. Embedding Cross-Cutting Enablers to Translate Aspirations into Sustainable Action

Aspirations flourish in ecosystems that provide enabling material, relational, and institutional support. Several key levers can be strengthened:

- Promoting Spousal and Familial Support:
  Aspirations are relational and often negotiated within domestic power dynamics. Where women received emotional or logistical support from husbands or family members, their aspirations advanced faster and further.

  a. Introduce family-inclusive goal planning workshops, where husbands, children, and mothers-in-law are sensitized to women's aspirations.

  b. Pilot "household aspiration commitments", where families commit to supporting specific goals (e.g., opening a particular small business, etc).

- Building Resilience Buffers Through Financial Security:
  A recurring finding was that women with even minimal savings or emergency funds exhibited greater ability to plan, take risks, and recover from shocks.

  a. Expand savings-matching incentives linked to milestones (e.g., first loan repayment, child education fund, reinvestment into enterprise).

  b. Introduce risk management training, especially around shocks, livestock health, and crop planning.

- Expanding and Diversifying Exposure Channels:
  Exposure emerges as a powerful stimulant of aspiration. However, not all women access structured exposure equally.

  a. Institutionalize rotational exposure visits across villages or districts, focusing on enterprises, SHG leaders, and role models.

"Manita ne bola tha – 'Bakri bech ke dukan kholungi.' Ab uske paas do rozgaar hain." Sharing in FGD

4. Reframing Narratives: From Grand Success to Everyday Aspiration Work

Aspirations are often understood as dramatic shifts or outlier successes. However, the study reveals that most aspirations emerge in the form of micro-acts: a desire to send a daughter to school, to expand a goat

shed, to sell vegetables in the market unaccompanied. These are powerful but invisible indicators of change.

- Recognize the Daily Labor of Aspiration:
  Collect narratives that center on everyday negotiations and acts of self-assertion such as speaking in a meeting, refusing distress migration, or teaching a daughter to write.

    a. Embed these in program reporting and storytelling to validate micro-progress.

- Make Listening Part of Implementation:
  Many women explicitly valued being heard. Programs should institutionalize listening spaces.

    a. Design quarterly narrative reviews using interviews, focus group reflections, and story circles.

"Mujhe laga kisi ko farak nahi padta. Aaj laga ki meri baat bhi zaroori hai." - Jhumni

5. Addressing Systemic Barriers Through Policy Convergence and Advocacy

Several structural constraints; illiteracy, early marriage, alcoholism, remoteness cannot be addressed through economic programs. These require convergence with social protection, education, and public service delivery.

- Advocate for Inter-Departmental Coordination:
  Programs can align with:

    a. Health: reproductive care, mobile clinics, mental health.

    b. Education: second-chance learning for women, scholarships, hostel support for girls.

    c. Panchayati Raj: inclusion of SHG leaders in local planning committees.

- Mainstream Aspiration Tracking into Program M&E:
  Instead of solely measuring income change or asset use, include:

    a. Changes in aspiration content and orientation (e.g., from individual to family; from survival to influence).

    b. Participation in public life, voice in decision-making, ability to envision future goals.

    c. Tools like "aspiration ladders", participatory storytelling logs, or periodic goal journals.

6. Making Aspiration-Building a Central Programmatic Component

Women's aspirations, as revealed through the data, are not mere wishes or fantasies. They are expressions of lived experiences, shaped by everyday realities, yet tinged with hope, struggle, and imagination. They are

frequently relational; anchored in children, households, and community; and simultaneously personal, reflecting the deep inner desire for self-recognition, dignity, and direction.

However, in contexts marked by poverty, gender inequality, and limited exposure, aspiration itself is a capacity; something that must be nurtured, enabled, and structured. It is in this light that aspiration-building must be treated not as a byproduct of development but as a core intervention in economic inclusion and social transformation programs.

1. Why Aspiration-Building Matters

Aspiration is not simply a reflection of what one wants; it reflects what one believes is possible. In rural, resource-constrained contexts, aspirational ceilings are low because imaginations have long been suppressed, particularly for women. Structural barriers like early marriage, low literacy, restricted mobility, and limited representation in public life ensure that many women not only lack opportunities; but lack the belief that they are entitled to pursue them.

> ***"Bachpan se sunnte aaye the, ladki ko kya karna hai zyada padhai se?" Sharing in FGD***
> (*Since childhood, we were told, what's the use of too much education for a girl?*)

To transform such embedded narratives, programs must actively construct conditions for women to dream, articulate, and act on those dreams.

2. Designing Aspiration-Building Modules as Training Interventions

Programs need to develop structured training modules focused on aspiration building, confidence cultivation, and agency enhancement, especially integrated within SHG or small group meetings. These modules should not only help women set goals but also explore their sense of identity, purpose, and capacity for influence.

Key Components of Aspiration-Building Modules:

a. Personal Narrative and Reflection Sessions: Use storytelling and life mapping exercises where women explore their past and envision multiple futures.

b. Visual Dream Tools: Aspirational ladders, vision boards, or pictorial "Dream Trees" to help women visually express goals related to income, dignity, mobility, and education.

c. Exposure to Role Models/traits: Local women entrepreneurs, SHG leaders, or "community champions" who reflect possible versions of success.

d. Linking Goals to Action: Break big dreams into short, medium, and long-term steps with practical tracking tools.

"Sapne dikhaye the... aur yeh sikhaya ki sapne pura karne ke raste kya ho sakte hain." Sharing in FGD
(*They didn't just show us dreams... they taught us how to walk towards them.*)

e. Facilitated Peer Dialogues: Spaces where women discuss fears, failures, and breakthroughs with each other to normalize struggle and celebrate progress.

These should be delivered through community-based facilitators in local dialects, using interactive, non-text-heavy, participatory formats.

7. Embedding Gender, Confidence, and Resilience Training to Enable Aspiration Execution

Aspiration cannot translate into action unless women feel entitled to act. Confidence, decision-making ability, and ownership are core elements of what feminist economists call "internal agency" a person's belief that they have the right to choose, to say no, and to lead.

Therefore, gender training should not be a standalone session; it must be embedded across all programmatic interventions, particularly where women are expected to engage in livelihood planning, leadership, or family decision-making.

Suggested Gender and Confidence Training Module Components:

- Understanding Gender and Power

    a. Use localized stories and role-play to unpack how gender roles are constructed and enforced.

    b. Help women recognize the difference between *socially imposed limits* and *actual capability gaps*.

    c. Introduce the concept of *"self-worth"* in women's own terms.

- Agency and Decision-Making

    d. Activities where women simulate decision-making in financial, health, or mobility matters.

    e. Use case studies: e.g., choosing between spending on education vs. a household purchase, deciding to visit a market, or planning for livestock reinvestment.

    f. Explore *what stops women from making decisions* and discuss strategies to overcome these barriers.

- Building Voice and Ownership

    g. Practice articulation through small group speaking rounds, mock community meetings. Reflect on ownership not just of assets, but of dreams, time, space, and bodies.

"Pehle bolne se darr lagta tha, ab thoda bol leti hoon." - Lalo
(*Earlier, I was scared to speak. Now I speak a little.*)

- Resilience Training: Navigating Failure and Fear

    a. Women often abandon aspirations due to one failed attempt, livestock loss, or household resistance.

b. Use peer-led sessions on “failure stories” that explore how women bounced back.

c. Frame “failure” as part of learning, not as personal inadequacy.

8. Institutional Mechanisms to Sustain and Scale Aspiration-Building

Once women begin to dream and act, it is critical that programs institutionalize regular mechanisms for aspiration, articulation, review, and celebration, or else the momentum may fade.

Suggested Mechanisms:

- Quarterly Aspiration Circles: small group-level or village-level reflection spaces where women re-articulate, revise, and share their goals. Include prompts like “What changed since last time?” or “What did you do for your daughter’s dream this quarter?”

- Annual Aspirational Showcases: Community exhibitions where women display products, share stories about aspirations and identity.

- Community Facilitator Coaching: Train women facilitators not only in livelihoods but also in aspiration counselling, soft skill facilitation, and motivational scaffolding.

9. The Transformative Promise of Aspiration: Beyond Economics

Most importantly, the pursuit of aspiration itself is transformative. Even if the income does not rise dramatically, the psychological transition from passive recipients of programs to active authors of change is deeply empowering. Women begin to:

- See themselves as capable individuals.

- Invest not just in livelihood but in children’s education, household negotiation, and community leadership.

- Re-frame their relationship with the world around them.

“Main kuch kar sakti hoon, yeh maine samjha chota samuh mein baith kar.” Sharing in FGD
(*I realized I can do something, while sitting in the small group.*)

Women’s aspirations are not just about the future; they are acts of survival, resistance, and relational care in the present. Supporting these aspirations means listening more deeply, designing more flexibly, and building more inclusively. It means treating every small dream as a stepping stone in the larger arc of gender justice and economic inclusion.

By embedding aspiration-building, gender sensitization, and confidence modules within the economic inclusion landscape, programs can enable a far deeper transformation than asset ownership or income generation. They can restore what poverty and patriarchy often take away: the ability to imagine a better future and the belief that one can shape it.

Conclusion

What we hear in these women's stories is not a lack of dreams but a life lived through deferred hopes, quiet endurance, and persistent negotiation with impossibility. These are not grand declarations of ambition, but deeply personal expressions of longing; for stability, dignity, choice, and voice.

Many of them had never been asked, "What do you want?" For some, this question arrives too late; after marriage, after motherhood, after years of making do. And yet, even then, the answers are not absent. They are tucked into small sentences, everyday choices, and the courage to keep going despite hardship.

"Jeene ki ichha nahi thi. Par ab lagta hai ki kuch toh kar sakte hain." - Jubain
I didn't want to live. But now I feel like maybe I can do something.

Aspiration here is not about individual ambition as much as it is about claiming the right to imagine a different life; for oneself, for one's children, for one's community. It is shaped by everything around them: age, poverty, caste, marriage, violence, care responsibilities, and program interventions. And it evolves; what a young woman wants at 25 is not what a grandmother hopes for at 55. Yet all of these are valid, grounded, and courageous forms of dreaming.

The truth is, many women do not lack aspiration; they lack the confidence that their aspirations matter. They lack people who ask, listen, and believe. In contexts of early marriage, repeated dismissal, and silencing, even holding on to hope is a radical act.

That is why programs must go beyond counting goats and income. They must create spaces where aspiration is heard, nurtured, and protected. This is not a "soft" outcome; it is a structural one. When a woman sees someone like her succeed, when she gets the tools to plan her future, when she is encouraged to speak up in a meeting, something begins to shift inside her.

This shift is not always loud. Sometimes, it's just the decision to send a daughter to school, to ask a question at a training, to say "no" to migration, or "yes" to saving money. But in those small decisions lie the beginnings of transformation.

To center aspiration in programming is to center humanity; to acknowledge that survival is not enough, that women deserve the chance to define what a good life looks like. Aspiration is not a privilege. It is a form of agency. It is the quiet architecture of self-worth.

Let us then treat aspiration not as a distant ideal, but as a daily practice of hope. Let us invest in it; not just through assets and exposure, but through relationships, recognition, and respect.

Because when a woman begins to dream again, she is not just imagining her future; she is reclaiming herself.

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Annexure

Summary Tables

Aspirational Signals		
Economic improvement (wants to expand agri/livestock/business)	22	want to expand income through goat rearing, farming, or business.
Aspires for children's education	17	explicitly mention wanting children to study or attend school/hostel.
Personal independence/dignity	9	mention dreams of independence, dignity from earning, or escaping hardship.
Social mobility (improving status, avoiding migration)	8	want to avoid distress migration or improve social standing.

Pre-Marriage Aspiration Theme	**Number of Participants (out of 24)**	**Examples**
Education / Studying More	10	"Wanted to study more", "Could study more", "Regrets not

		studying", "Study up to Class 10"
Material Security (food, income)	5	"Basic material aspiration", "Economic security", "Food sufficiency"
Good Marriage/Emotional Security	4	"Caring, non-abusive husband", "Good marriage", "Stable family life"
Mobility/Independence	3	"Desire for mobility", "Skill-building", "Entrepreneurship", "Roam for leisure"
Entrepreneurship/Business	2	"Open a cloth shop", "Selling bangles"
No Explicit Dream/Survival Only	8	"No explicit dream", "Routine survival", "Freedom from labor", "Dreams stalled by shocks"
Other (inspired by pop culture)	2	"Wanted to marry someone like Amitabh Bachchan", "I believe in Mithunda, Govinda"

Post-Marriage Aspiration Theme	Number of Participants (out of 24)	Examples
Children's Education	15	"Educating sons/daughters", "Wants kids in hostel",

		“Determined to educate daughter”
Economic Stability/Goat Rearing	12	“Expand goat rearing”, “Grow goat business”, “Economic independence”, “Stable income locally”
Family/Children’s Wellbeing	6	“Children’s well-being”, “Avoid distress migration”, “Support grandchildren”
Independence/Dignity	5	“Wants independence”, “Dignity from earning”, “More say in family decisions”
Escape from Abuse/Peaceful Life	2	“Wants husband to recover”, “Wants peaceful life for children”

Age Group	Count
25–35	9
36–50	12
51+	3

Age Group	Personal Growth/ Independence Aspirations	Children's Education Aspirations	Economic/ Livelihood Expansion	Family Dignity/ Security
25–35	7/9	8/9	9/9	6/9
36–50	5/12	10/12	12/12	10/12
51+	0/3	2/3	3/3	3/3

Age Group	Key Aspirational Themes	Examples from Data
25–35	- Strong focus on expanding livelihoods (goat rearing, farming, shops) - High emphasis on children's education - Personal aspirations for independence and learning	- Manita (25): Expand farming, open to SHG leadership - Jhumni (25): Kids in hostel, wants more education - Lalita (33): Hoped for education, now wants kids' well-being
36–50	- Balance between economic stability and children's education - Aspirations for asset building, local business, and avoiding migration - Regret over missed education, but focus	- Ramdhari (50): Children's well-being, avoid migration - Nirmala (38): Expand goat rearing, educate children - Gudiya (38): Economic independence,

	on children's future	dignity from earning
51+	- Focus on family dignity, peaceful life, and grandchildren's wellbeing - Less emphasis on personal growth, more on family security	- Sohmain (53): Expand goat rearing, appreciates spousal support - Sadhani (54): Raise more pigs, supports education for both genders

Enablers		
Supportive spouse/family	12	have supportive husbands or family (joint decision-making, market visits, shared income).
Peer/community support	13	mention learning from peers, SHG, or community exposure.
Savings or financial buffer	10	have some savings, pension, or emergency funds.
Asset ownership (land/livestock)	17	own livestock or land, often due to program support.

Barriers		
Remoteness/poor access	15	live in highly or moderately remote villages, limiting access to markets/services.
Early/forced marriage	9	mention early or reluctant marriage disrupting aspirations.

Health shocks/medical costs	8	faced serious illness or costly medical emergencies.
Domestic violence/alcoholism	7	report spousal alcoholism, abuse, or emotional neglect.
Livestock mortality/failed agriculture	9	suffered livestock deaths or crop failure, affecting income.
No/weak SHG or program support	6	have inactive or defunct SHGs, or lack confidence in the program.
Limited education/self-illiteracy	16	are illiterate or have only basic literacy, limiting access to information and opportunities.
Single/widowed with no support	5	are widows or single women facing stigma and lack of support.

Exposure Level	No. of Participants	Key Aspirational Patterns
High Exposure	13	Broader aspirations: want to expand business, try new livelihoods, take leadership, educate children, avoid migration.
Moderate Exposure	7	Aspirations mostly for economic improvement and children's education; some mention leadership or new skills.

Low/No Exposure	4	Aspirations limited to basic survival, security, or continuing existing activities; less mention of change or new ventures.

High Performing	15000 and above / year
Medium Performing	5000 to 14999 / year
Low Performing	4999 and below / year

Income Group	Total Participants	With Prior Experience	Without Prior Experience
High	8	8	0
Medium	7	2	5
Low	9	0	9

Program Influence		
Active SHG membership	20	have been SHG members; 6 have held leadership roles

(current or past)		(President/Secretary).
Access to SHG loan/savings	15	have used SHG loans or savings for livelihood or emergencies.
Livestock/agri support received from program	18	received goats, pigs, or agri input via program in last year or earlier.
Children in school due to program/awareness	14	have children in school, often citing program or peer influence.