The Importance of Indifference and Uninvolvement:
Household Influence on the Education and Aspirations of Female Pakistani College Students

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ABSTRACT

Households matter. Scholars have found an overwhelmingly positive relationship between household involvement and student educational and aspirational outcomes (Gorard and See 2013; Erdem and Kaya 2020). However, most investigations of this relationship have occurred within a Western context. This study seeks to test this theory within the context of Pakistan. It aims to examine the influence of households on low-income female Pakistani college students' educational and occupational journeys. The study uses semi-structured interviews with 46 students from Karachi, Pakistan to identify the sources of influence in their academic lives and future aspirations. Through a grounded theory approach, the analysis of the data reveals that households play a central role in the lives of all students. However, household involvement is not always considered beneficial for students. The students who feel most confident about their educational attainment and future aspirations are those who belong to households that are largely indifferent and uninvolved in their lives. The indifference of their households provides students with the freedom and flexibility to explore and pursue their dreams without having to adapt to social expectations or pressures. The benefit of household involvement is dependent on households' alignment with student aspirations and on having the social and cultural capital to be able to appropriately guide them. Involved households that are misaligned with student aspirations or lack the capital required to provide informed advice may produce additional barriers to the attainment of student education and aspirations. This study therefore complicates previous findings by concluding that the impact of parental involvement is context-dependent; it can be beneficial or detrimental depending on the alignment with student aspirations and the household's ability to provide appropriate guidance.

Introduction

Households play an essential role in shaping a child's educational journey and future aspirations. Across the globe, scholars have drawn a strong relationship between parental involvement and support and a child's academic outcomes (Boonk, Gijselaers, Ritzen & Brand-Gruwel, 2018; Epstein, 1991; Roy and Giraldo-García, 2018). Studies have found this relationship to be largely positive (Dotterer & Wehrspann, 2016; Durand, 2011; Gordon & Cui, 2012; Gubbins & Otero, 2016; Manolitsis, Georgiou & Tziraki, 2013; Phillipson & Phillipson, 2012). Parents who are involved in the academics and aspirations of their children have better educational outcomes. This includes a higher likelihood of academic engagement, achievement, and completion (Barnard 2004).

Levels of involvement vary across households of different income levels. Studies indicate that lower-income parents are typically less involved in their children's academic experience and the development of their occupational aspirations (de Carvalho 2001; Lareau 2003; Calarco 2018). The gap in parental involvement

between low- and high-income families likely leads to significant educational differences, with less involved parents being a limiting factor for low-income students (Lareau 2003).

Despite this overwhelmingly positive association between parental involvement and student learning outcomes, the generalizability of this claim is disputed (Gorard and See 2013; Erdem and Kaya 2020). Parental involvement in the life of a student can take many forms and can produce multiple kinds of outcomes (Erdem and Kaya 2020). Involvement can look different across ethnic, income, and gendered backgrounds (Deng et al. 2012). For example, parental involvement may be direct, such as helping with homework, or indirect, such as encouraging educational goals. These forms vary by family dynamics, resources, and priorities, influencing the nature and level of support.

There is limited scholarship on how the diverse types of household involvement can impact student academic achievement and whether the outcome is always positive. Moreover, available scholarship is largely based in Western contexts and cannot speak to the manifestations of household involvement in the lives of students across the globe. My study seeks to evaluate the relationship between household involvement and student academic achievement and aspirational development in light of the experiences of low-income female Pakistani college students.

Literature Review

Supportive social environments have been shown to have a significant impact on the likelihood of a student transitioning to post-secondary education. Such environments are characterized by a close alignment of parents' and students' goals (Kim and Schneider 2005), parental support, and belief in the students' capabilities academically and occupationally (Smith-Maddox 2000, Yang 2017). A child's aspirations are closely tied to the household environment and attitudes (Rashid 2005). How a child understands the role of their education and future career is shaped by their early household socialization. For instance, some children may view their education as crucial for becoming a future breadwinner and aim for high-income careers, while others may see education as a selfish endeavour, hesitating to develop their aspirations. These views are primarily shaped by the household's attitudes toward education and career pursuits.

Parental involvement in a child's education is strongly correlated with higher educational and occupational outcomes (Dotterer & Wehrspann, 2016; Durand, 2011; Gordon & Cui, 2012; Gubbins & Otero, 2016; Manolitsis, Georgiou & Tziraki, 2013; Phillipson & Phillipson, 2012). Studies have found that high parental involvement in a child's education was significantly linked with lower rates of high school dropout, increased on-time high school completion, and the highest grade completed (Barnard 2004). These benefits are suggested to persist long-term and support the academic and career success of the child. The positive effect of parental involvement on academic attainment has been noted to hold regardless of socioeconomic background (Axford et. al 2019). However, parental involvement varies with socioeconomic factors. Lower-income families often face barriers such as time constraints, work schedules, and childcare issues, alongside ethnicity, language, and cultural barriers (Lott 2001). Household net worth also influences parental aspirations for children's education, with better economic circumstances increasing aspirations for both girls and boys (Deng et al. 2012). Since parental aspirations are a key predictor of children's educational attainment (Lareau 2003; Zhang, Kao, & Hannum, 2007; Calarco 2018; Erdem and Kaya 2020), low-income households are at greater risk of lower educational achievement and aspirational development.

Additionally, there is a difference in parental beliefs about their role in their children's academic learning across various socioeconomic backgrounds (de Carvalho 2001; Lareau 2003; Calarco 2018). Parents from middle- and high-income families believe it is part of their role as parents to help the child with their homework, be in communication with teachers, and take an active role in the child's aspirations. Parents of lower-income families have a less hands-on role in their children's education and adopt a "natural growth" parenting style, which includes a lower involvement in children's educational attainment and occupational aspirations (Lareau 2003). Sociologists have noted that these structural barriers, coupled with differences in attitudes and parenting styles, can lead to a gap in children's educational and career outcomes, disadvantaging lower-income students whose parents are less involved in their education (de Carvalho 2001; Lareau 2003; Calarco 2018).

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While there is an ongoing effort to design educational interventions encouraging low-income parents to engage more in their children's education, it is important to consider that scholars have disputed the generalizability of the positive relationship between parental involvement and student outcomes, suggesting that different forms of involvement may produce varying results (Gorard and See 2013; Erdem and Kaya 2020).

Context

In Pakistan, the out-of-school rate for women in higher secondary education 74.8% (PIE & PAGE 2024). A study found that of the few girls who are enrolled, only one in ten will complete their higher secondary education. (PM&DC 2017). The percentage is even lower for women belonging to lower-income households. Students belonging to the poorest quartile households are twice as likely to be out of school as those from the richest quartile (ASER 2015).

Pakistan's female enrolment is inadequate and even falls significantly behind neighbouring South Asian countries as well as other low-middle-income countries around the world (Asian Development Bank 2019). The learning poverty score for children in Pakistan was calculated as 77%, compared to 58% for Bangladesh and 56% for India (Barón et al. 2024).

The women of low-income households who do make it to the college level, despite all odds, thereby comprise a minority group within the country.

Methods & Methodology

The data utilized in this study come from 46 interviews with low-income female college students in Karachi, Pakistan. The study aimed to identify the sources of influence in their academic lives and future aspirations and understand the extent to which they considered these influences as beneficial or detrimental to their academic and occupational aspirations and journeys.

Recruitment was facilitated through outreach to a purposive selection of educational institutions in Karachi to capture a range of college environments. I approached colleges representing three categories: public, private, and public–private partnerships, identified through local education networks and publicly available listings. College administrators were contacted to share study information, and flyers were distributed digitally. Students who self-identified as female and low-income were invited to participate. A total of 50 students responded; of which 46 met the qualifying criteria. The final participants in this study, aged 16 to 20, came from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including Sindhi, Pathan, Punjabi, Muhajir, and Siraiki, and resided in Karachi. They represented a range of household types, from dual-income to single-income families, with parents working in occupations as varied as rickshaw driving, school teaching, and informal or unstable employment. Students most commonly follow Pre-Medical, Pre-Engineering, or Computer Science tracks. Representing just 2.7% of Pakistani females who reach college, these students were proud of their academic achievements. Of the 46 interviewed, 44 expressed a strong and concrete desire to continue their education and pursue a career despite the challenges they faced.

The semi-structured interview guide focused on students' professional and academic aspirations and their development. It was developed based on a review of relevant literature and an understanding of the local context. For each of the 46 participants, we scheduled a one-on-one conversation on either the phone or a WhatsApp voice call. We began with basic information on their households and demographics, following a detailed discussion of their academic journeys and occupational aspirations. Each interview was about an hour long.

After transcribing the findings, I adopted a Grounded Theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967) in my data coding and analysis to have the authenticity of the participants' narratives directly inform the findings and discussion. Grounded theory is best described as a research methodology wherein the development of theories is based (or 'grounded') in data. It employs inductive coding of data refers to a close reading of the text to derive concepts, themes, or a model from it (Thomas 2006). Strauss and Corbin (1998) describe it as:

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"The researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data" (p. 12). The purpose of choosing this methodology was to approach the data without the constraints of a pre-existing framework and instead allow the data to inform the themes, concepts, and structure of my findings. Given that this is an exploratory study to understand the experiences of the participants, this was thereby an appropriate methodology.

In line with the Grounded Theory methodology, data collection, coding, and analyses were cyclical and simultaneous. As I completed and transcribed interviews, I continually returned to the data to identify relevant and recurring themes. I arranged these themes to reflect broader areas of interest, such as factors influencing aspiration development or the role of marriage in the lives of participants. These broad themes were then linked to one another to identify how they came together to inform the participants' educational attainment and occupational aspirations.

To ensure rigour, I applied the constant comparative method throughout coding, repeatedly comparing data within and across interviews to refine categories. I kept reflexive memos to document analytic decisions, emerging insights, and potential biases. Credibility was strengthened through peer debriefing, where emerging codes and themes were discussed with academic colleagues for feedback and refinement. Finally, I incorporated rich participant quotes and contextual details to provide thick description and support transferability.

There are some limitations to the research methodology and methods used in this study. The sample size, while providing rich qualitative data, may not be large enough to generalize the findings to all low-income female college students in Karachi or other similar contexts. Additionally, the study's focus on participants currently enrolled in college excludes the perspectives of those who have dropped out, which could provide valuable insights into the barriers faced by low-income female students in Karachi.

This study has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Stanford University. To ensure the confidentiality of the students' identities, pseudonyms have been utilised.

Findings

Every participant in the study specifically identified multiple ways in which their households had shaped the decisions they made, perceptions they developed, or opportunities that were available to them.

Their experiences could be understood across two dimensions of the household: attitude and behaviour. Household attitudes towards participants' education are the general views they maintain about their child's education. Household behaviours refer to the level of involvement of household members in the educational and occupational decisions of a student. These two dimensions come together to determine the experience of the participant. When mapping these two elements together, we identify multiple categories of student experiences.

Table 1

A matrix of household influence on students' education and aspirations as determined by household attitudes and behaviours

Household Behaviour	Household Attitudes		
	Supportive	*Indifferent*	*Unsupportive*
Involved	Follow household aspirations	Follow their own aspirations	No educational attainment
Uninvolved	Follow own aspirations	Follow own aspirations	Outcome uncertain (high risk)

These categories can be further grouped into two. The first group of students is those who can explore and pursue their interests and make their own educational and occupational decisions. The second group of students does not feel confident in being able to achieve their personal aspirations. The following section will detail these experiences.

Following their Dreams

Students who strongly believe that they will be able to complete their education and follow their occupational aspirations belong to one of three households: Uninvolved-Supportive, Involved-Indifferent, and Uninvolved-Indifferent.

Table 2
A matrix of household influence on students' education and aspirations as determined by household attitude and behaviours. Highlighted categories identify the households which allow students to follow their own aspirations.

Household Behaviour	Household Attitudes		
	Supportive	*Indifferent*	*Unsupportive*
Involved	Follow household aspirations	Follow their own aspirations	No educational attainment
Uninvolved	Follow own aspirations	Follow own aspirations	Outcome uncertain (high risk)

Uninvolved-Supportive

When households are supportive of a child's education and aspirations but do not involve themselves in the decision-making process itself, children can freely develop their aspirations in a secure and supported environment. This allows them to take risks and experiment with different aspirations without the fear of failure or household abandonment.

Shanzeh is an example of a student belonging to an Uninvolved-Supportive household. Despite being the first educated individual in her household, Shanzeh has found nothing but support from her household members. Her mother works full-time trying to make ends meet and when Shanzeh offered to drop out of school to get a job and contribute to the household finances, her mother responded by telling her to prioritize her education, after which she is welcome to work as much as she wants. She shares the story of when her aunt brought a marriage proposal to her house, Shanzeh's father opposed it and said that his priority was his daughter's education and that she would not even consider marrying into a household where her education would be compromised. She says:

> **Shanzeh:** If you have your family's support, then you don't care about what others say...whatever my Aunt says, my Dad tells me (to take it) in one ear and out the other ear, (he says) I am with you, do whatever you want to do.

Shanzeh and her sister discuss their dreams and motivate one another to pursue their passions. She has the freedom to become the person she wants to become within the protection and comfort of a safe and supportive household environment. Her household is not involved in the decisions she makes, only offering advice when requested and entrusting the girls to make their own decisions without the expectation of consultation.

Students in this category have the freedom to make their own decisions but expressed a desire to have more readily available sources of information and guidance to support them in making informed and holistic decisions about their futures.

Uninvolved-Indifferent

Some households are indifferent to the decisions their child is making and uninvolved in the process of the decision-making itself. At first, this may seem like an unlikely group to create an environment where students can follow their aspirations as previous scholarship on educational attainment and aspiration development of students has indicated that high levels of involvement and support are beneficial for a child. However, we find that Uninvolved-Indifferent households can provide the kind of environment where students

can navigate their lives independently. For students who are often the first in their immediate vicinity to pursue higher education and are highly motivated and academically strong, this independence translates into developing aspirations that are aligned with their needs and wants.

For example, when asked about her household's involvement in her academic life, Alizeh stated: "No one supported me very much, nor did they demotivate me…(in our household) whatever people want to do, they do it themselves, and I wanted to study.". Alizeh's household did not have any concerns with her pursuing an education as long as it did not interfere with her household chores. She narrates the story of getting admitted into her first-choice college which was at a distance from her house:

> **Alizeh:** My mother told me: (get admitted) into another college (which is closer to our house) so that you continue doing your chores because I won't do them (for you). (In response), I said (to my mother): yes that's fine, I will (attend my first choice college but) I will come (home) and do my chores. Upon hearing this, my mother said okay, take (admission in your first-choice college)…I would come home and do my household chores, and (go to) college, too.

Alizeh's personal dedication to the pursuit of academics and a career is what pushes her towards excelling at school and investing time in the exploration of future occupational endeavours. The members of her household neither support her in these decisions nor do they stand in her way. Instead, they maintain their distance and let Alizeh carve her own future as long as the decisions of the child do not impact the rest of the household adversely (such as asking for funds or forgetting to do chores).

The Uninvolved-Indifferent model provides students with the ability to make their own decisions and shape their own futures. However, because households are not highly supportive of a student's academic endeavours, students sometimes find themselves feeling lost and demotivated. If their households do not see any particular difference between their choice to attend school or to drop out, at low moments in their academic careers (like failing an exam), students may find themselves feeling alone and confused about why they chose the difficult path of academic and occupational attainment.

Involved-Indifferent

The Involved-Indifferent model entails that households are involved in the student's life and decisions while remaining indifferent towards their pursuit of education. Households see themselves as a stakeholder in the decision-making process without having any strong views on what the outcome is. Students can pursue their aspirations because while they have individuals within their households who want to engage in discussions about their future, they retain the independence they require to be able to pursue their aspirations.

This category of household is most common when elder siblings are involved in the life of the student. These siblings, having had some experience in making similar decisions about academics and occupations, want to be involved in their younger sibling's decisions and offer their guidance. However, they are not invested in the outcome and maintain indifference to the decisions the student makes. For example, Minahil speaks of being the first female engineer in the family. She shares the role of her brother, who is only a year apart from her in age, in talking her through major life decisions and future plans:

> **Minahil:** We frequently discuss our future plans with one another…we commonly take each other's suggestions but he doesn't give me serious suggestions (about my future career).

While Minahil's brother is involved in her decision-making process, he is indifferent to whether Minahil will end up pursuing Engineering or not, sometimes even taking it in jest. Thus, while this scenario may not be ideal for Minahil, her household does not pose an obstacle to the pursuit of her dreams.

This category can be tricky to navigate for students. When households are involved without truly caring about the outcome, they may provide advice that is not well thought out. Given that the advice is coming from a household member, participants may be inclined to follow the advice. When this advice is not coming from a place of information, interest, or particular care, it could lead to a student choosing a path that is not suited

for them. To avoid such mishaps, students must have multiple sources of guidance available to them so that they base their decisions on more than just the advice of their households.

Not Following their Dreams

The second group of students is those whose household environments make it difficult for them to follow their own aspirations, which includes: Involved-Supportive, Uninvolved-Unsupportive, and Involved-Unsupportive.

Table 3
A matrix of household influence on students' education and aspirations as determined by household attitude and behaviours. Highlighted categories identify the households which make it difficult for students to follow their own aspirations.

Household Behaviour	Household Attitudes		
	Supportive	*Indifferent*	*Unsupportive*
Involved	Follow household aspirations	Follow their own aspirations	No educational attainment
Uninvolved	Follow own aspirations	Follow own aspirations	Outcome uncertain (high risk)

Involved-Supportive

For children who belong to households that are highly supportive of their educational attainment and career goals, we assume that this would translate into the child being able to pursue their aspirations without fail. An involved and supportive household is often cited as one of the greatest determinants of a child achieving their educational and occupational aspirations. However, the experiences of the participants in this study state otherwise.

We find that for students who have supportive and involved households, the aspirations of their households often supersede their own aspirations. When households become involved in the decision-making of a child while being invested in the outcome (e.g., career attainment), the child may be pressured into pursuing a path chosen for them by their household members. This can be particularly problematic for children belonging to low-income households wherein they are the first to be pursuing a college education. In such cases, advice or pressure from household members to pursue particular pathways or make certain decisions may be ill-informed or based on heresy as the household members themselves lack the social and cultural capital to be able to give holistic and timely aspirational advice. In this way, their heavy involvement in a child's life can do more harm than good by pushing them towards decisions that may not suit the child.

Within the group of students who belong to Involved-Supportive households, there are two observable trends. The first trend is where the household identifies an educational or occupational field that they believe is beneficial for the aspirer and tells them to pursue it. This decision of what is beneficial for the participant is based on several factors, of which the leading factor is financial and job security. Rohah's dream has always been to become a Navy Officer. Since childhood, this dream has persisted. Specifically, Rohah wants to become a captain and take the responsibility of protecting her nation. Due to health constraints, Rohah has decided not to pursue her dream but is uncertain of what she should do instead. Her elder sister has told her to become an "IT specialist". Rohah thinks that she may pursue this dream because she believes her sister knows best for her. When asked if she was interested in becoming an IT specialist, Rohah responded: "somewhat." Perhaps, she thinks, if she performs well in the IT field, she can become a team leader; she explains that this might make the position of an IT specialist similar to a Navy Officer. When Rohah's sister recommended the occupation to her, she did not take Rohah's skills or interests into account. Instead, she recommended to her a position which she believed to be lucrative or worth pursuing. Thus, the recommendation was not tailored to Rohah specifically but was a general piece of advice.

The other observable trend within Involved-Supportive households is the inheritance of aspirations.

These aspirations are inherited by participants from household members, most commonly one's parents. The participant's parents once held these aspirations for themselves and, having been unable to personally achieve them, they now ascribe them to their children. These aspirations stem from an understanding of what the collective requires. For example, the parents decide that one of the five daughters must become a doctor. It does not matter which of the daughters pursues this dream, but one of them must satisfy the collective desire for a doctor in the family. Aaeza shares that her mother has always wanted her to be a nurse. This is a professional Aaeza is not interested in, nor does she feel that she is capable of pursuing it. However, since she could not achieve this dream, she now hopes that one of her two daughters will achieve it for her. Aaeza tells her mother: "Make the younger (sister) a nurse". While Aaeza's younger sister dreams of becoming a pilot, Aaeza explains that her sister would agree to become a nurse to fulfil her mom's dream. It does not matter whether Aaeza becomes a nurse or not, as long as her younger sister pursues the field. For Aaeza's mother, one of the children must inherit her dream and succeed in it.

The risk of having Involved-Supportive households is the common mismatch between the interests and abilities of the student and the journey which is decided for them. While they may have good intentions, having someone else decide your future path can be a risky endeavour that may lead students to embark on a journey that they are not passionate about or fit for. Students have to, willingly or unwillingly, pursue a path that was chosen for them, not chosen by them.

Uninvolved-Unsupportive

Uninvolved-Unsupportive households are those that are against the notion of their child pursuing academic or career aspirations but are not involved actively enough in the life of the student to be able to act against their current pursuits of education. My research finds that for students who belong to households that are unsupportive of their academic and career pursuits, having an uninvolved household is the lesser of two evils.

If the household is unsupportive but does not involve themselves in the matter of the child, the chance of them actively forbidding an education for their child is less likely. This is simply because they do not know what is happening in the child's life: whether they're going to school, applying to college, or planning for a career. If they knew, they would be against it. However, since they are so distanced from the child's dreams, they are often left in the dark and not provided with the opportunity to actively resist the child's pursuits. For a child belonging to an Unsupportive-Indifferent household, their household's lack of involvement results in them being able to slip through the cracks and achieve feats that may not have been permitted to achieve had their household been highly involved in their lives. Students use their household' diverted attention as a cover under which they can attain their dreams silently. Students may be attending school, signing up for scholarships, or joining internships without their parent's knowledge or approval.

It is not only the act of forbidding that can be harmful to students but the fear of it that students within this group carry with them. This fear of having to give up their dreams suddenly and without notice can cause mental stress, fatigue, and hopelessness. Emaan narrates her anxieties about being the youngest and only educated female in her family:

> **Emaan:** All (my sisters) are married, if they weren't, perhaps I'd be saved. (Now) I'm the only sacrificial goat left. In some ways, my mother's worry (about me remaining unmarried) is valid, she worries a lot about me, but it makes me very angry sometimes, and sometimes I also become rude (to her).

Emaan's father passed away when she was in her early teens and her mother worries about raising her daughters on such a tight budget. While Emaan empathizes with her mother's concerns, understanding that her mother only wants the best for her, she constantly worries about how she's going to convince her mother that marriage is not the only option available. There are days when the fear of having to see all her dreams come to a sudden end paralyzes her. She is unable to study because, at the back of her mind, she fears that none of her dreams will ever come true. It all feels like a useless effort towards an unachievable goal.

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And yet, Emaan, and many like her, persist. Despite the high risk and accompanying mental stress, it can be argued that having Unsupportive-Uninvolved households, is more beneficial for students than having Unsupportive-Involved households. Many of the students who made it to college are here because of the lack of involvement of their parents. While their academic and occupational journeys may be high-risk as they move ahead in their lives, securing a college degree is an achievement that cannot be taken away from them. This college degree serves as a source of support and comfort for students and qualifies them to apply for positions that those without a college degree could not do. Whether they gained this college degree because of their parents, or despite them, the existence of a college degree in and of itself holds value and opens doors of opportunity for the students. While this group of students may be pulled away from their dreams, their current achievements will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

Involved-Unsupportive

When households are openly unsupportive and highly involved in the life of their child, educational outcomes and the development of aspirations are a bleak picture. Household pressure coupled with their level of control over the student can result in much difficulty and loss for the student and their dreams. The household decides that they do not allow the student to continue further (household attitude) and then assert their power to ensure that their demand is met through their involvement in the child's life (household behaviour). An example of this household dynamic is Kinza. Kinza's parents decided that, in the middle of her education, she was to drop everything and marry a man many years her senior. Not only was Kinza excelling in her academics at the time with great dreams of continuing her education further, but she was also in a relationship with her classmate at the time whom she had planned to marry years into the future. Neither of these arguments was enough to convince Kinza's parents. As I write this, Kinza is married to the man of her parent's choice. At the time of the interview, Kinza explained that while she realized she had no say in the matter, she put forth a demand before she got married: the demand to continue her education. Both her parents and her husband consented to this clause. There is no information on whether this demand was upheld after the marriage, but Kinza's heartbreak- at the loss of her education, career, and the man she was in love with- is a direct consequence of her Involved-Unsupportive household. This is the only category of the six which suggests that the student is unlikely to pursue their educational and occupational aspirations. The involvement of the household puts action behind the emotion of unsupportiveness. This action is a barrier that many students struggle to overcome.

Discussion

Household dynamics have an impact on the educational and occupational trajectories of students. In particular, the household attitude (supportive, indifferent, and unsupportive) and household behaviour (involved or uninvolved) towards a child's educational endeavours and occupational aspirations can be crucial in determining the course of the student's life. An analysis of the data reveals two major trends in the impact of household dynamics on a child's educational attainment and occupational aspirations: the benefit of uninvolved households and the importance of indifference.

Benefit of Uninvolvement

Belonging to an uninvolved household is more favourable to the participants in this study than belonging to an involved household, regardless of the attitude of the household (supportive, indifferent, or unsupportive). As highlighted in Table 3, the highest likelihood of a child pursuing their personal aspirations is when their household is uninvolved. This lies in contrast to previous scholarship which emphasises the importance of household involvement in a child's education and aspirational development.

However, there are two limitations of this previous literature about their understanding of the benefit of involved households. The first limitation is that the literature assumes that all involved households are supportive of their child's pursuits. As showcased earlier, this is not always the case. Some households may be unsupportive of their child's pursuit of education and development of occupational aspirations. If a child belongs to an unsupportive household, their success may depend on their household remaining uninvolved in

their lives. If these households were to be involved in their child's life, as explained earlier in the Involved-Unsupportive category, the child would be faced with continual roadblocks and restrictions to achieving educational attainment.

The second limitation is that previous scholarship has been largely limited to studying parents who have the necessary socio-cultural capital to be able to be involved in the lives of their children advantageously. My study investigates the influence of households that lack educational experience and social and cultural capital. As discussed in the Involved-Supportive category earlier, the study finds that when supportive parents lack the necessary educational skills and capital, they may give their children counterproductive advice. In this way, their heavy involvement in a child's life can do more harm than good. This prompts us to reconsider the generalizability of the claim that household involvement is always beneficial in the life of a student.

Importance of Indifference

In Table 2, we note that the highest guarantee of a student being able to follow their dreams and complete their education is when a household adopts an indifferent attitude towards their education. In previous scholarship, household indifference has often been associated with low educational outcomes for students (de Carvalho 2001; Lareau 2003; Calarco 2018). The argument has been that when households are invested in and supportive of the life of a student, this translates into the student excelling in their academic endeavours and going on to pursue their occupational aspirations. In contrast, when households are indifferent, the student may be less motivated or feel less supported in this pursuit.

However, this argument is not generalizable across all contexts. For the highly motivated students who belong to low-income households in this study, having their households be indifferent to their decisions and outcomes can help ensure that there are no barriers to them achieving their goals. Household indifference provides the freedom these students require to be able to develop and pursue their dreams. Their household's indifference allows them to avoid the stress or pressure of making the "right" or "acceptable" choices. This empowers them to be able to make decisions about their future that they believe are best suited to their own goals and aspirations, without worrying about additional stakeholders. In contrast, as Table 2 indicates, children of supportive households are more likely to achieve their educational attainment and develop their own aspirations if the household is largely uninvolved.

If households are supportive but decide to remain highly involved in the decisions of a student, it can add layers of expectations and anxiety for students as they navigate their futures. While supportive households may be well-intended, their lack of indifference may create additional barriers for students. In the case of unsupportive households, a lack of indifference can prove to be a barrier to students' aspirations. For students who belong to unsupportive households, the prospects of them pursuing an education followed by a career are low and risky. An active lack of support can be more damaging to a student's aspirations than indifference.

Thus, while previous research has largely considered household involvement as universally beneficial, the findings indicate that the benefits of such involvement are context dependent. For low-income female students in Pakistan, the alignment between household involvement and the students' own aspirations plays a crucial role in determining whether this involvement is beneficial or detrimental. Moreover, when households lack the social capital to offer relevant and supportive guidance, their involvement can inadvertently hinder students' progress by imposing constraints and pressures that do not align with the students' goals. This is particularly common in cases where students are first-generation college attendees, navigating uncharted academic and career paths. This study thereby challenges the prevailing notion that all household involvement is inherently positive, emphasising how indifference and uninvolvement can be beneficial for students in particular contexts.

Reflections and Implications for Practice

The findings of this study reveal that while households being largely indifferent or uninvolved in their daughters' educational and occupational journeys may sometimes allow students to pursue their aspirations freely, this situation is far from ideal. Students are acutely aware of the lack of mentorship in their lives and often struggle to navigate critical decisions, such as applying to universities or jobs and planning their futures, largely on their own. Unlike middle- and upper-class peers whose social capital connects them with resources

and guidance, low-income female students in Karachi must search for answers online or rely on fragmented advice from distant acquaintances. Educators can address this gap by creating mentorship programs within schools and colleges, pairing students with teachers, alumni, or peers who can provide tailored guidance, encouragement, and culturally relevant advice. For those in the "following their dreams" group, such mentorship provides practical information and emotional support, reinforcing a sense of belonging. For those in the "other dreams" group (e.g. studying under household pressure or facing the threat of curtailed education) mentors can also help families understand alternative pathways, provide household counselling to address cultural or financial concerns, and guide students in balancing expectations with their personal goals.

Financial aid is the structural concern shared by every participant. Students' educational and occupational aspirations meet a paywall that neither motivation nor academic excellence alone can overcome. Many are competing for a handful of scholarships, and without accessible, need-based financial support specifically for low-income women, their journeys risk ending prematurely. Policymakers and educational institutions must prioritise expanding scholarship programs and designing funding models tailored to the realities of low-income households. Families, meanwhile, play a critical role in offering emotional backing and openness to alternative pathways, even when financial contributions are not possible.

Conclusion

Households matter; they influence student experiences and outcomes. Regardless of the type of household one is raised in, it shapes the way they approach, experience, and attain their education and occupational aspirations. While previous literature has emphasised the need for household involvement in a child's education and aspirations, it has not accounted for situations where household involvement can be harmful to the student.

In this study, we find that having households that are largely uninvolved and indifferent can be beneficial for students in particular contexts. When participants are low-income and often amongst the first in their households to attend college, their households may be uninformed (i.e. not have the social capital to be able to offer informed and effective advice on academic or career paths) or unsupportive of their pursuits. The involvement of such households in the educational and occupational decision-making of students could result in additional pressure on the student and the perpetuation of misinformation and myths about career paths. This could compromise the future and aspirations of high-achieving, motivated students, such as the participants in this study. In contrast, low levels of household involvement can translate into freedom for students. Students can make decisions about their future with comparative ease to those who have household pressure or involvement. They can decide what is best for their skills and interests without having to constantly adjust to the expectations of those around them.

These findings complicate our understanding of the role of households in aiding a child's journey towards academic and occupational achievement and caution us from making overgeneralized statements about the benefit of household involvement and investment in the academic and aspirational lives of students. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' model when it comes to households, and educators and policymakers must recognise this diversity of experience and environment when designing and recommending educational interventions.

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