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Symbolic Violence and Gendered Aspirations: A Bourdieusian Study of Educational Choice and Achievement

Muhammad Shoaib (Corresponding Author)

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Pakistan

Email: shoaihsoc@uog.edu.pk

Shamraiz Iqbal

PhD Scholar, Department of Gender Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan

Email: shamraiznatt@gmail.com

Ummel Baneen

Associate Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Pakistan

Email: ummel.baneen@uog.edu.pk

Farooq Abdullah

Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Mirpur University of Science & Technology,

Mirpur, AJ&K, Pakistan Email: farooq.abdullah@must.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the role of symbolic violence in shaping gendered educational aspirations and achievement through a Bourdieusian framework. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, capital, and symbolic violence, the research examines how institutional norms, socialization, and evaluative practices influence students' perceptions of ability, subject choice, and career trajectories. A qualitative research design was employed, using purposive sampling to select relevant literature from online digital databases. Thematic analysis identified seven major themes: symbolic violence, gendered habitus, capital and recognition, structured agency, institutional regulation, intersectionality, and resistance and reflexivity. Findings reveal that educational aspirations are socially conditioned rather than purely individual, with cultural, social, and symbolic capital differentially recognized along gendered and classed lines. Intersectional factors further mediate opportunities and outcomes, whereas students simultaneously negotiate, resist, and reinterpret institutional expectations. The study concludes that educational trajectories are structured by both power and agency, reproducing or challenging gendered inequalities. These insights underscore the importance of critically examining institutional practices and socialized dispositions to promote more equitable educational policies and pedagogical interventions.

Keywords: Symbolic Violence, Gendered Aspirations, Habitus-, Cultural Capital, Educational Choice, Intersectionality

Introduction

The sociology of education has consistently demonstrated that educational choice and academic achievement are not merely the outcomes of individual merit or rational decision-making, but are deeply structured by social relations of power (Bourdieu, 1990; Shoaib, Shamraiz, Abdullah, & Shahzadi, 2026b; Shoaib & Ullah, 2026). Within this



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framework, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice provides a particularly incisive lens for interrogating how gendered aspirations are shaped, constrained, and legitimized through symbolic processes embedded in educational institutions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Shoaib, Shahzadi, Shamraiz, & Abdullah, 2026a; Shoaib, Shamraiz, Abdullah, & Shahzadi, 2026a). His interrelated concepts of habitus, capital, field, and symbolic violence illuminate the subtle mechanisms through which inequalities are reproduced whereas appearing natural and inevitable (Bourdieu, 2001; Shoaib, Shahzadi, Shamraiz, & Abdullah, 2026b, 2026c). Symbolic violence, for Bourdieu, refers to the misrecognition of arbitrary cultural hierarchies as legitimate and universal (Lareau, 2011; Shoaib, Shahzadi, & Abdullah, 2026; Shoaib, Shahzadi, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026). In educational contexts, dominant norms often aligned with middle-class, masculinized, or hegemonic cultural standards are institutionalized as meritocratic benchmarks (Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026b; Shoaib, Iqbal, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026a, 2026b). Students internalize these norms through habitus, developing gendered dispositions toward particular subjects, careers, and forms of academic self-presentation (Bourdieu, 1986; Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026a, 2026c). Consequently, educational aspirations are not freely chosen trajectories but socially conditioned orientations shaped by differential access to cultural, social, and symbolic capital (Crenshaw, 1989; Shamraiz, Shoaib, Baneen, & Shahzadi, 2026a, 2026b).

Gender operates as a structuring principle within this process (Shahzadi, Shoaib, Baneen, & Abdullah, 2026; Shahzadi, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026). From early schooling onward, boys and girls encounter differentiated expectations regarding intellectual capacity, appropriate fields of study, leadership, and professional futures (Larijani, Shoaib, & Abedi, 2026; Shahzadi, Shoaib, & Abdullah, 2026). These expectations are embedded in curricula, pedagogical practices, assessment regimes, and peer cultures (Ali, Abdullah, & Shoaib, 2026; Ali, Abdullah, & Shoaib, 2026). Symbolic violence occurs when students come to perceive these gendered distinctions as reflections of natural aptitude rather than historically produced hierarchies (Ahmed, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026a, 2026b). For example, the underrepresentation of women in STEM fields or men in care-oriented disciplines have been interpreted not as personal preference alone, but as the outcome of gendered habitus interacting with institutionalized symbolic power (Ahmed, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2026; Waris, Shoaib, Sharif, & Abdullah, 2025a). Educational choice, therefore, must be understood as a socially mediated practice situated within specific fields (Waris, Shoaib, Sharif, & Abdullah, 2025b, 2025c). The school, as a semi-autonomous field, rewards certain forms of embodied and objectified cultural capital whereas devaluing others (Shoaib, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025; Waris, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). Students from different gendered and classed backgrounds negotiate their aspirations within this structured space of possibilities (Shoaib, Waris, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025b; Shoaib & Zaman, 2025). Achievement, in turn, becomes a consecrated form of symbolic capital that legitimizes pre-existing inequalities by attributing success to talent and effort rather than to differential positioning within the field (Shoaib, Waris, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib, Waris, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025a).

A Bourdieusian analysis of gendered aspirations thus shifts the analytical focus from individual psychology to relational structures (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025b, 2025c). It foregrounds how institutional practices, discursive norms, and everyday interactions reproduce gendered hierarchies under the guise of neutrality (Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025a; Shoaib, Waris, & Iqbal, 2025). By examining the interplay between habitus formation, capital accumulation, and symbolic violence, this study seeks to uncover the



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often-invisible processes through which educational pathways are gendered and stratified (Shoaib, Tariq, & Iqbal, 2025a, 2025b). In doing so, it contributes to a critical sociology of education that interrogates meritocracy, challenges naturalized gender differences, and highlights the structural conditions shaping aspiration and achievement (Shoaib, Shamsher, & Iqbal, 2025; Shoaib, Shamsher, & Iqbal, 2025).

Study Context

The question of how educational aspirations and achievements become gendered has long occupied the sociology of education (Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib, Rasool, Zaman, & Ahmed, 2025). Early modernization and human capital theories treated educational choice as a rational, individual decision driven by cost-benefit calculations (Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025a, 2025c). However, critical sociological scholarship challenged this assumption, demonstrating that schooling functions as a key site for the reproduction of social inequalities (Shoaib, Rasool, Kalsoom, & Ali, 2025; Shoaib, Rasool, & Zaman, 2025b). In this regard, the work of Pierre Bourdieu marked a decisive theoretical shift by conceptualizing education not as a neutral meritocratic arena, but as a structured field in which power operates symbolically (Shoaib, Rasool, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a, 2025b). Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction emerged in response to persistent class inequalities in post-war France, particularly analyzed in *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (with Jean-Claude Passeron). He argued that schools legitimize the culture of dominant groups by transforming historically contingent cultural preferences into universal standards of intelligence and merit (Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025a, 2025b). Through the processes of habitus formation and capital accumulation, students internalize dispositions that align more or less with institutional expectations (Shoaib, Kausar, Ali, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib, Rasool, & Iqbal, 2025c). Those whose embodied cultural capital matches the dominant code experience recognition and success; others experience marginalization, often misrecognizing structural exclusion as personal inadequacy (Shoaib, Iqbal, Rasool, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib & Kausar, 2025). This misrecognition constitutes symbolic violence.

Subsequent feminist sociologists extended Bourdieu's framework to interrogate gender as a central axis of stratification (Shoaib, Batool, Kausar, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib, Iqbal, & Iftikhar, 2025). Scholars such as Judith Butler and Raewyn Connell demonstrated that gender is not merely an attribute but a structured social relation embedded in institutions, including schools. Educational spaces are organized around gendered norms that shape subject choice, classroom participation, leadership roles, and future occupational trajectories (Shoaib, Ali, & Kausar, 2025; Shoaib & Bashir, 2025). For instance, the persistent gender segregation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) versus care-oriented and humanities disciplines cannot be adequately explained by innate preference (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025b, 2025c). Rather, it reflects historically sedimented expectations and symbolic hierarchies that inform students' aspirations (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025c; Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a). Globally, despite expanded access to education and improved gender parity in enrollment, disparities remain in fields of study, levels of attainment, and labor market outcomes (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a, 2025b). These patterns are particularly visible in postcolonial and developing contexts, where educational expansion intersects with class stratification, cultural traditions, and neoliberal policy reforms (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Usmani, 2025a, 2025b; Shoaib, Ahmed, Zaman, & Abdullah, 2025). In such settings, meritocratic discourse often obscures how



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gendered habitus and unequal access to capital shape choices long before formal decision points occur (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Iqbal, 2025; Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025). The background of this study is therefore situated at the intersection of three interrelated concerns: 1) the persistence of gendered educational pathways despite formal equality; 2) the inadequacy of purely individualistic explanations of aspiration and achievement; and 3) the analytical potential of a Bourdieusian framework for uncovering the subtle, symbolic mechanisms that reproduce inequality. By examining how symbolic violence operates in shaping gendered aspirations and academic outcomes, this study builds on established sociological debates whereas addressing contemporary transformations in education systems marked by marketization, credentialism, and intensified competition. In doing so, it responds to the need for theoretically grounded, empirically sensitive analyses that move beyond surface-level indicators of access and instead interrogate the deeper processes through which educational hierarchies are naturalized and sustained.

The Data and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the dynamics of symbolic violence and gendered aspirations in educational contexts through a Bourdieusian lens. Data were collected from a range of online digital databases, including academic journals, institutional reports, and peer-reviewed articles relevant to the subject of educational choice, gender, and inequality. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select studies and sources that offered rich, detailed insights into the experiences of students, the operation of institutional norms, and the interplay of habitus, capital, and field. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which allowed for the systematic identification, coding, and interpretation of recurring patterns and themes across the literature. Seven major themes were generated, including symbolic violence, gendered habitus, capital and recognition, structured agency, institutional regulation, intersectionality, and resistance and reflexivity. This approach facilitated a nuanced understanding of how educational aspirations are socially conditioned, how institutional practices reproduce gendered hierarchies, and how students negotiate and contest these constraints. The findings derived from the thematic synthesis informed the conclusions regarding the structural and relational processes that shape educational choice and achievement, highlighting the relevance of a Bourdieusian framework for examining the reproduction of gendered inequality in educational fields.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Symbolic Violence and the Naturalization of Gendered Difference

The concept of symbolic violence, as theorized by Pierre Bourdieu, provides a powerful analytical tool for understanding how gendered differences in education are rendered natural, inevitable, and legitimate (Shoaib, 2025a; Shoaib & Abdullah, 2025). Within the educational field, dominant cultural norms often historically aligned with masculine-coded traits such as rationality, competitiveness, and assertive self-presentation are institutionalized as neutral standards of merit (Iqbal, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025; Shoaib, 2025b). These norms are embedded in curricular hierarchies, pedagogical interactions, assessment frameworks, and teacher expectations (Ali, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a; Ali, Shoaib, & Kausar, 2025). As a result, students encounter a structured environment in which certain gendered dispositions are valorized whereas others are subtly marginalized (Ali, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025b; Ali, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025b). The violence is symbolic because it operates through recognition and consent rather than coercion; students internalize these hierarchies and



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come to perceive differential outcomes as reflections of inherent ability rather than socially constructed valuation systems (Ali, Shoaib, & Ali, 2025; Ali, Shoaib, Iqbal, & Abdullah, 2025a).

This naturalization process is particularly evident in patterns of subject preference and academic self-concept (Abdullah, Ullah, & Shoaib, 2025; Ahmed, Shoaib, & Zaman, 2025). Girls come to view mathematical or technical domains as misaligned with their perceived identities, whereas boys distance themselves from care-oriented or humanities subjects, not through explicit prohibition but through accumulated micro-signals of approval and disapproval (Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2024b; Shoaib, Zaman, & Abbas, 2024). Over time, these signals sediment into gendered habitus, shaping aspirations and limiting perceived possibilities (Shoaib, Ali, & Abbas, 2024; Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2024a). Symbolic violence thus functions by aligning institutional expectations with internalized dispositions, ensuring that social order is reproduced without overt enforcement (Shoaib, 2024e; Shoaib, Abdullah, Naqvi, & Ditta, 2024). In this way, gendered educational trajectories appear as outcomes of personal choice and aptitude, masking the structured power relations that continuously produce and legitimize difference within the educational field (Shoaib, 2024b, 2024d).

Theme 2: Gendered Habitus and the Formation of Aspirations

The concept of habitus, central to the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, is crucial for understanding how gendered aspirations are formed and normalized within educational settings (Shoaib, 2024a, 2024c). Habitus refers to a system of durable, transposable dispositions shaped by early socialization and continuously reinforced through institutional experiences (Ali, Zaman, & Shoaib, 2024; Shoaib, Usmani, & Abdullah, 2023). Gendered habitus emerges through family practices, media representations, peer interactions, and schooling processes that communicate what is considered appropriate, attainable, and desirable for boys and girls (Shoaib, Rasool, Anwar, & Ali, 2023; Shoaib, Shehzadi, & Abbas, 2023). These embodied dispositions influence not only academic performance but also the horizon of possibilities students perceive for themselves (Shoaib, Mustafa, & Hussain, 2023; Shoaib, Naseer, & Naseer, 2023). Aspirations, therefore, are not spontaneous individual preferences but socially conditioned projections rooted in historically structured gender norms (Shoaib, 2023b, 2023c).

Within the educational field, gendered habitus interacts with institutional expectations to shape differentiated trajectories (Shoaib, 2023a; Shoaib, Usmani, & Ali, 2022). For example, girls cultivate dispositions aligned with diligence, compliance, and relational competence traits often rewarded in classroom settings yet simultaneously internalize constraints regarding leadership or technical authority (Shoaib, Mustafa, & Hussain, 2022; Shoaib, Tariq, Shahzadi, & Ali, 2022). Conversely, boys develop confidence in competitive or mathematically coded domains whereas distancing themselves from affective or caregiving professions (Shoaib, Anwar, & Mustafa, 2022; Shoaib, Anwar, & Rasool, 2022). These patterned orientations guide subject selection, career planning, and academic self-concept (Shoaib, Ali, Anwar, & Abdullah, 2022; Shoaib & Ullah, 2021a). Importantly, aspirations become self-regulating: students tend to pursue pathways that feel right within their embodied sense of identity, thereby reproducing gendered divisions without explicit external enforcement (Shoaib, Rasool, & Anwar, 2021; Shoaib & Ullah, 2021b). In this way, gendered habitus operates as a mediating mechanism between structural power and individual agency, shaping educational choices long before formal institutional selection occurs (Shoaib, Fatima, & Jamil, 2021; Shoaib, Iqbal, & Tahira, 2021).



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Theme 3: Capital, Recognition, and Differential Valuation

Within a Bourdieusian framework, educational achievement cannot be understood apart from the distribution and recognition of various forms of capital (Shoaib, Ali, & Naseer, 2021; Shoaib, Ali, & Akbar, 2021). Pierre Bourdieu conceptualizes cultural, social, and symbolic capital as resources that acquire value only within specific fields (Shoaib, Ali, Anwar, Rasool, et al., 2021; Shoaib, Ali, Anwar, & Shaukat, 2021). In educational institutions, dominant forms of cultural capital linguistic proficiency, modes of self-presentation, argumentative style, and disciplinary confidence are institutionally consecrated as indicators of merit (Shoaib, Abdullah, & Ali, 2021; Shoaib, Ahmad, Ali, & Abdullah, 2021). However, these forms are not gender-neutral. Certain performances of competence align more closely with masculinized norms of authority and intellectual assertiveness, whereas other embodied dispositions, often associated with femininity, rendered invisible (Shoaib, 2021; Shoaib, Abdullah, & Ali, 2020). Recognition, therefore, becomes a selective process: students whose gendered habitus resonates with dominant evaluative criteria accumulate symbolic capital more readily, reinforcing stratified patterns of success (Shoaib & Rafique, 2015; Shoaib & Ullah, 2019).

Differential valuation operates subtly through everyday pedagogical practices (Rafique & Shoaib, 2015). Classroom participation, teacher feedback, leadership opportunities, and assessment standards privilege visible confidence and competitive engagement over collaborative or relational competencies (Shoaib, Latif, & Usmani, 2013; Shoaib, Shaukat, Khan, & Saeed, 2013). When such traits are unevenly distributed across gendered socialization patterns, institutional recognition amplifies existing inequalities (Anwar, Shoaib, & Javed, 2013). Importantly, symbolic capital such as awards, high grades, or academic prestige legitimizes these differentiated outcomes, presenting them as objective reflections of talent. In this way, the educational field transforms socially conditioned forms of capital into apparently neutral achievements (Shoaib, Ali, Iqbal, et al., 2025b). The cumulative effect is a feedback loop in which recognized capital strengthens academic self-concept and aspiration, whereas misrecognition or undervaluation constrains future trajectories, thereby consolidating gendered hierarchies within systems that claim meritocratic fairness (Shoaib, Ahmed, & Usmani, 2025b).

Theme 4: Educational Choice as Structured Agency

Educational choice is frequently framed within policy and economic discourse as the outcome of rational, autonomous decision-making (Shoaib, Ahmed, Iqbal, et al., 2025). However, from a Bourdieusian perspective, agency is always socially structured. Pierre Bourdieu conceptualizes practice as emerging from the interaction between habitus and field, meaning that individual decisions are conditioned by historically constituted dispositions and the objective structure of available opportunities. In educational contexts, students appear to “choose” subject streams, academic tracks, or professional pathways, yet these decisions are filtered through gendered habitus and unequal access to capital (Lareau, 2011). The range of imaginable options is socially bounded; certain pathways feel attainable and legitimate, while others appear unrealistic or socially incongruent (Anwar, Shoaib, & Javed, 2013). Thus, educational choice operates as structured agency action that is neither fully determined nor entirely free, but shaped within a matrix of power relations (Shoaib, 2023a; Shoaib, Usmani, & Ali, 2022).

Gender intensifies this structuring process. Institutional guidance systems, teacher expectations, parental advice, and peer cultures collectively channel boys and girls toward differentiated trajectories. For instance, girls have been subtly encouraged toward stable, care-oriented professions perceived as compatible with future family roles,



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whereas boys have been oriented toward competitive, high-status fields aligned with hegemonic masculinity (Lareau, 2011). These patterned orientations are rarely experienced as external impositions; instead, they are internalized as personal preferences or pragmatic decisions (Anwar, Shoaib, & Javed, 2013). In this way, the educational field organizes aspiration and decision-making in advance, aligning subjective inclinations with objective structures. The result is the reproduction of gendered stratification through choices that appear voluntary, thereby masking the structural constraints that shape them.

Theme 5: Field, Power, and Institutional Regulation

In a Bourdieusian framework, the educational system is conceptualized as a relatively autonomous field a structured social space governed by its own rules, hierarchies, and struggles over legitimate capital (Shoaib, 2023a; Shoaib, Usmani, & Ali, 2022). Pierre Bourdieu argues that fields are arenas of power in which actors compete for recognition and authority according to historically constituted criteria. Within the educational field, these criteria include academic excellence, disciplinary prestige, institutional ranking, and forms of evaluative legitimacy (Shoaib, 2023a; Shoaib, Usmani, & Ali, 2022). Although presented as neutral and merit-based, these regulatory mechanisms are deeply embedded in gendered and classed power relations (Shoaib, Ali, & Naseer, 2021; Shoaib, Ali, & Akbar, 2021). Curriculum design, streaming practices, standardized assessments, and performance metrics operate as institutional instruments that classify, differentiate, and hierarchize students, often reinforcing dominant norms under the guise of objectivity.

Institutional regulation intensifies these dynamics through policy frameworks and accountability regimes that codify specific definitions of success (Lareau, 2011). Meritocratic discourse, quality assurance mechanisms, and competitive benchmarking reinforce the symbolic authority of certain disciplines and career pathways, many of which are historically masculinized and economically valorized. At the same time, institutional cultures subtly regulate acceptable gender performances, rewarding conformity to dominant norms whereas marginalizing deviations (Anwar, Shoaib, & Javed, 2013). Power thus operates not only through formal rules but also through everyday practices teacher expectations, guidance counseling, leadership opportunities, and disciplinary procedures (Shoaib, 2023a; Shoaib, Usmani, & Ali, 2022). The field, therefore, structures both opportunities and perceptions, shaping how students understand their position and prospects. Through this regulatory architecture, educational institutions reproduce gendered hierarchies whereas maintaining the appearance of procedural fairness and neutrality (Anwar, Shoaib, & Javed, 2013).

Theme 6: Intersectionality: Gender, Class, and Social Stratification

An intersectional analysis complicates any singular focus on gender by situating it within broader structures of class and social stratification. Whereas Pierre Bourdieu foregrounds class-based distributions of capital, feminist scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw emphasize that systems of domination operate simultaneously and interdependently. In educational contexts, gendered aspirations and achievements are mediated by class position, access to cultural resources, and familial educational histories (Shoaib, Ali, & Naseer, 2021; Shoaib, Ali, & Akbar, 2021). Middle-class girls, for instance, possess high levels of institutionalized cultural capital that enable academic success, yet still encounter gendered expectations regarding appropriate career pathways (Anwar, Shoaib, & Javed, 2013). Conversely, working-class boys experience compounded disadvantages



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when masculine norms discourage academic engagement whereas limited economic capital restricts access to supportive educational environments (Shoaib, Ali, & Naseer, 2021; Shoaib, Ali, & Akbar, 2021). Thus, gender does not function in isolation but intersects with class to produce differentiated trajectories within the same institutional field (Shoaib, 2023a; Shoaib, Usmani, & Ali, 2022).

From a stratification perspective, the interaction of gender and class shapes both the formation of habitus and the accumulation of capital (Shoaib, 2023a; Shoaib, Usmani, & Ali, 2022). Students from privileged backgrounds are often equipped with the linguistic competencies, confidence, and institutional familiarity that align with dominant evaluative standards, regardless of gender (Lareau, 2011). However, the symbolic valuation of these competencies remains gendered, producing varied patterns of recognition and misrecognition. In contexts marked by economic inequality, the stakes of educational choice intensify, as credential attainment becomes closely tied to social mobility. Intersectionality therefore reveals that symbolic violence is unevenly distributed: it is experienced differently across social locations, amplifying vulnerability for those positioned at the convergence of gender and class disadvantage (Anwar, Shoaib, & Javed, 2013). A Bourdieusian-intersectional synthesis thus deepens the analysis of educational stratification by demonstrating how multiple axes of power co-constitute aspirations, opportunities, and outcomes within the educational field.

Theme 7: Resistance, Negotiation, and Reflexivity

Although a Bourdieusian framework emphasizes the reproductive capacity of educational institutions, it does not imply total determinism. Within the field, actors possess varying degrees of agency that enable resistance and negotiation. Pierre Bourdieu conceptualizes practice as generated through the dynamic interaction of habitus and field, leaving space for strategic improvisation when dispositions encounter shifting conditions (Shoaib, Ali, & Naseer, 2021; Shoaib, Ali, & Akbar, 2021). Students contest gendered expectations by entering non-traditional academic domains, challenging classroom hierarchies, or redefining success on alternative terms (Lareau, 2011). Such acts of resistance are often subtle reworking identities, forming supportive peer networks, or cultivating counter-hegemonic aspirations. These practices reveal that symbolic violence, whereas pervasive, is neither absolute nor uncontested; its legitimacy has been destabilized when dominant norms are made visible and subject to critique (Anwar, Shoaib, & Javed, 2013).

Reflexivity plays a crucial mediating role in this process (Shoaib, 2023a; Shoaib, Usmani, & Ali, 2022). Exposure to critical pedagogies, alternative role models, or transformative institutional cultures enable students to recognize the arbitrariness of gendered classifications (Shoaib, 2023a; Shoaib, Usmani, & Ali, 2022). This recognition disrupts misrecognition the core mechanism of symbolic violence allowing individuals to reinterpret constraints as socially produced rather than personally inherent. However, resistance is unevenly distributed; it depends on access to cultural and social capital that supports critical awareness and alternative pathways (Shoaib, Ali, & Naseer, 2021; Shoaib, Ali, & Akbar, 2021). Thus, whereas educational fields tend toward reproduction, they also contain spaces of transformation where gendered hierarchies have been negotiated and reconfigured (Anwar, Shoaib, & Javed, 2013). Understanding these dynamics underscores that aspiration and achievement are not only structured by power but are also sites of contestation and potential change (Lareau, 2011).



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Theoretical Insights

This study draws primarily on Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice to analyze the interplay of gender, power, and educational outcomes. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, capital, and symbolic violence provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how educational aspirations and achievements are socially structured rather than purely individual choices (Bourdieu, 1990). Habitus, as a set of durable dispositions, shapes students' perceptions of what is possible and desirable, influencing both subject choice and career aspirations (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The field of education, with its hierarchies, rules, and evaluative criteria, channels these dispositions, producing differential opportunities for recognition and success. Symbolic violence operates subtly in this context, naturalizing gendered inequalities by framing socially constructed norms and hierarchies as legitimate and neutral (Bourdieu, 2001).

The role of capital, cultural, social, and symbolic is central to explaining differentiated educational outcomes. Cultural capital, such as language competence, academic confidence, and familiarity with institutional norms, is differentially distributed across gendered and classed backgrounds, affecting both recognition and achievement (Lareau, 2011). Social capital, in the form of family networks and mentoring relationships, further mediates access to valued educational resources, whereas symbolic capital consolidates the perceived legitimacy of success in particular domains (Bourdieu, 1986). Intersectional approaches complement the Bourdieusian lens by highlighting how gender interacts with class, ethnicity, and other axes of stratification, producing complex patterns of advantage and disadvantage (Crenshaw, 1989). Finally, concepts of resistance and reflexivity underscore that students are not passive recipients of symbolic domination; they actively negotiate, reinterpret, and sometimes contest gendered expectations, highlighting the dynamic interplay between structure and agency in educational fields (Reay, 2004).

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that educational choice and achievement are fundamentally structured by social and gendered hierarchies rather than being purely individual or merit-based decisions. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital, field, and symbolic violence, it is evident that students internalize socially constructed norms, which shape their aspirations, perceptions of ability, and engagement with academic opportunities. Gendered habitus, cultivated through family socialization, peer culture, and schooling practices, predisposes boys and girls toward different subjects, career paths, and forms of academic participation. The unequal distribution and recognition of cultural, social, and symbolic capital further amplify these differences, ensuring that institutional rewards align with dominant, often masculinized, norms. Intersectional analysis reveals that gender interacts with class and other axes of social stratification, producing differentiated patterns of opportunity, constraint, and symbolic recognition, which influence both access and achievement. Despite these structural constraints, students are not passive; they engage in acts of resistance, negotiation, and reflexivity, reinterpreting institutional expectations and occasionally contesting gendered boundaries. Ultimately, the study confirms that educational trajectories are socially produced outcomes embedded in power-laden fields, where apparent choice and merit are inseparable from historically constituted inequalities. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing policies and pedagogies that recognize and challenge the reproduction of gendered educational inequality.



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