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From Educational Choice to the Production of Possibility: Gendered Trajectories in Education

R. Lebyed^{1*}

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ABSTRACT

Before students choose between educational paths, some paths must first become imaginable. Studies of educational inequality have often focused on how students make choices within unequal social structures. However, this view can overlook an earlier question: the conditions under which some educational paths become imaginable, while others never appear as real possibilities in the first place. This article explores this issue through the idea of the feminized field of possibility, understood as a socially shaped horizon that influences how female students see their future educational options. The study is based on mixed-methods research carried out in secondary schools in Fez in 2025. It combines questionnaire data from 120 female students with 18 semi-structured interviews. Across both types of data, many students reported that they had never seriously thought about selective tracks such as medicine or engineering, even before making any clear decision or comparison. These findings suggest that educational inequality is not only about access or academic performance. It is also about what students can imagine as possible for themselves. By focusing on this level, the study adds to discussions in sociology of education about aspiration, agency, and how educational paths are socially shaped.

INTRODUCTION

Educational inequality is commonly examined through differences in academic achievement, access to educational resources, or unequal outcomes within the school system (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Boudon, 1974). A large body of research has shown how these inequalities are reproduced through mechanisms related to social background, institutional selection, and educational orientation. Much of this work, however, approaches inequality from within an already existing field of possibilities, focusing mainly on how students choose between options that are presumed to be available and recognizable from the outset.

Several sociological and feminist perspectives have offered important insights into this process. The work of Pierre Bourdieu draws attention to the internalization of social limits within dispositions and expectations, while Judith Butler emphasizes the social conditions that determine what becomes recognizable or intelligible in the first place (Bourdieu, 1984; Butler, 1990, 1993). Related discussions on aspiration, agency, and future imagination have also suggested that the ability to project oneself into futures is unevenly distributed. In this context, Arjun Appadurai introduced the idea of the “capacity to aspire” (Appadurai, 2004), whereas Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius developed the notion of “possible selves” to describe how individuals imagine future versions of themselves (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Yet these approaches continue, in different ways, to concentrate on aspirations, preferences, or decisions that are already articulated within a recognizable horizon of possibility. Less attention has been paid to

an earlier moment: the formation of that horizon itself. Put differently, before students evaluate alternatives or develop aspirations, certain educational trajectories must first become imaginable as realistic possibilities, while others may never enter the field of consideration at all. The issue, therefore, is not only that some options are rejected after evaluation, but also that some trajectories remain absent from the outset.

This study develops its argument from that observation. It starts from the assumption that gender inequality operates not only through unequal opportunities or institutional barriers, but also through processes that shape what can be imagined as attainable in the first place. Some trajectories are not excluded after comparison or deliberation; rather, they disappear before they are seriously considered. This points to a level of analysis that precedes educational choice itself.

The study therefore asks the following question: how are the boundaries of possible educational trajectories socially produced for female students, not only through the unequal distribution of opportunities, but also through the shaping of what becomes conceivable as a possible future?

To explore this issue, the article introduces the concept of the feminized field of possibility. The concept refers not to an essential characteristic of femininity, but to a socially structured horizon within which certain trajectories appear attainable, appropriate, or realistic for female students, while others remain distant or difficult to imagine. The objective is thus to shift attention from choice alone toward the social conditions that make some choices possible in the first place.

¹ Department of Sociology, Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah University, Fez, Morocco

* Corresponding author's email: rachid.lebyed@usmba.ac.ma

Empirically, the analysis draws on a mixed-methods study conducted in secondary schools in Fez in 2025, combining quantitative and qualitative data to examine both declared educational trajectories and the limits of perceived possibility. By doing so, the study seeks to broaden existing understandings of educational inequality beyond disparities in access, emphasizing also the unequal distribution of imaginable futures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

From Choice to the Conditions of Possibility

This section reviews major sociological approaches to educational inequality and educational choice, with particular attention to the limits of existing perspectives in explaining how certain educational trajectories become imaginable while others remain outside the field of consideration. It also reflects the analytical direction of the present study, which emerged from an interest in understanding not only how students choose between available options, but also how some possibilities fail to appear as realistic choices from the outset.

Educational Choice and Inequality: Rational and Strategic Approaches

The sociology of education has extensively studied educational choice as a key mechanism through which inequality is produced and reproduced (Boudon, 1974; Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997). Early rational and strategic approaches explain educational decisions as the outcome of individual calculations made within structurally differentiated contexts. In this line of thought, Raymond Boudon conceptualizes educational choice as the result of actors evaluating costs, benefits, and risks associated with different educational trajectories (Boudon, 1974). From this perspective, variations in educational pathways are largely interpreted through differences in social position, which shape how individuals perceive available opportunities and constraints.

More recent work has expanded this framework by incorporating notions such as aspirations, expectations, and imagined futures, highlighting that educational decisions are not purely instrumental but also shaped by socially constructed perceptions of what is desirable or achievable. Research on middle-class families' educational strategies further shows how social class shapes the perceived range of legitimate or realistic academic choices, beyond simple cost-benefit calculation (Ball, 2003). This is particularly visible in studies of gendered educational trajectories, especially in relation to participation in selective scientific and technical fields (e.g., Reay, 2004; Archer *et al.*, 2012)

However, despite this conceptual expansion, these approaches often continue to assume that the set of alternatives is already given and recognizable, with choice operating through the evaluation of pre-existing options.

Internalized Limits and the Social Structuring of Expectations

In contrast to rationalist accounts, structural approaches-

most notably associated with Pierre Bourdieu-emphasize how social constraints are internalized through durable dispositions (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1990). Through concepts such as habitus and cultural capital, this perspective shows that educational practices are not simply the result of conscious decision-making but are guided by embodied orientations that define what appears "natural," "realistic," or "appropriate" for individuals in specific social positions.

Within this framework, educational expectations are not neutral projections into the future, but socially structured anticipations shaped by unequal distributions of cultural resources (Bourdieu, 1986). School institutions also play a decisive role in this process, as guidance practices and evaluation systems contribute to reinforcing certain trajectories while limiting others. Research on gendered educational pathways into fields such as science and engineering further demonstrates how these mechanisms operate both explicitly and implicitly through institutional messages and evaluative norms (e.g., Reay, 2001; Archer *et al.*, 2012).

Nevertheless, while this perspective provides a strong account of how expectations are socially formed, it remains largely focused on how individuals orient themselves within an already constituted field of possibilities, rather than on how that field itself becomes defined and bounded.

Intelligibility, Recognition, and the Limits of the Thinkable

A further line of inquiry shifts attention toward the symbolic and normative conditions that make certain trajectories intelligible in the first place. In this context, Judith Butler argues that possibility is not only a matter of access or disposition, but also of recognition within dominant normative frameworks that define what counts as a viable or livable life (Butler, 1990; Butler, 1993).

Applied to education, this perspective suggests that the issue is not only whether certain academic tracks are formally accessible, but whether they can be meaningfully imagined as compatible with one's social identity and available self-understandings. As a result, some pathways may remain institutionally open while simultaneously appearing socially distant or personally unthinkable for certain groups of students.

Although this approach highlights the symbolic dimension of inequality, it does not always fully specify how such horizons of intelligibility are produced within concrete educational settings, nor how certain options may fail to emerge even at the level of everyday consideration.

The Missing Level: The Production of Possibility

Despite their differences, the approaches reviewed above converge on a common analytical point: they primarily examine how students interpret, evaluate, or position themselves within a set of educational options that are already defined in advance (Boudon, 1974; Bourdieu, 1984). While this has generated important insights into mechanisms of inequality, it also leaves relatively less

explored the question of how the field of possibilities itself takes shape.

This raises a complementary line of inquiry: how is the set of available educational options socially produced in the first place? Put differently, how do certain trajectories come to exist as visible and thinkable alternatives, while others remain outside the horizon of consideration altogether?

The notion of “production of possibility” refers to this prior level of analysis. It focuses on the processes through which the boundaries of what can be imagined, projected, or considered as a realistic future are established. This level precedes evaluation and decision-making, suggesting that choice is already structured before it becomes an object of individual reflection.

Rather than positioning itself in opposition to existing frameworks, this perspective extends them by shifting attention toward the conditions under which the field of possibilities is constituted and maintained.

Toward a Feminized Field of Possibility

Building on this analytical gap, this study introduces the concept of the feminized field of possibility as a way of examining how the production of possibility operates in gendered educational contexts. The term “feminized” is not used in an essential or biological sense, but rather to describe a socially constructed horizon shaped by gendered expectations, norms, and representations that influence what is perceived as suitable or attainable for female students (Bourdieu, 2001; Butler, 1990; Akter *et al.*, 2025)

This concept does not seek to replace established notions such as aspiration, agency, or opportunity. Instead, it complements them by drawing attention to a more fundamental level: the point at which certain trajectories fail to emerge as conceivable options at all. From this perspective, absence is not interpreted simply as lack of interest or motivation, but as a possible outcome of social processes that delimit what can be imagined.

At the same time, the concept does not assume uniform experiences among female students. On the contrary, it allows for the examination of variation within the field of possibility itself, shaped by factors such as cultural capital, school guidance practices, and educational streaming (Bourdieu, 1984; Reay, 2004). It is therefore intended as a focused analytical tool, aimed at capturing a specific dimension of inequality without claiming to explain its totality.

Methodologically, the study adopts a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative data to analyze both declared educational choices and the underlying boundaries of perceived possibility. This approach makes it possible to investigate forms of inequality that operate prior to explicit decision-making.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Methodological Positioning

This study is grounded in a sociological approach that

moves beyond the analysis of educational choices as observable decisions, toward an examination of the social conditions that shape what becomes a possible choice in the first place (Bourdieu, 1984; Boudon, 1974). In line with this objective, a mixed-methods design was adopted, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to capture two complementary dimensions: patterns of declared educational choices and the boundaries of perceived possibility. This design follows an explanatory sequential logic, in which quantitative findings help identify general patterns while qualitative data subsequently allow for a deeper contextual understanding of these patterns (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

This combination is not merely technical but analytically driven by the nature of the research problem. While quantitative data allow for the identification of distributional patterns, they remain limited in capturing what is not considered at all. Conversely, qualitative data provides access to meanings and representations but require contextualization through broader structural indicators in order to avoid isolated interpretation.

Research Setting and Sample

The study was conducted in Fez between March and June 2025, across four public secondary schools selected to reflect socio-spatial variation between urban and semi-urban contexts. Access to these institutions was obtained through formal authorization from the Regional Directorate of the Ministry of Education in Fez, as well as approval from school administrations.

The research relied on a dual sample:

- Quantitative sample (N = 120 students): selected purposively to ensure variation in academic streams and socio-economic backgrounds, with the aim of capturing patterns of declared educational choices.

- Qualitative sample (N = 18 interviews): selected using a maximum variation strategy (Patton, 2002) in order to capture differences in representations of possibility rather than simply differences in chosen trajectories. Both the quantitative and qualitative samples were composed exclusively of female students (N = 120 and N = 18 respectively). This choice was made deliberately, given the study’s specific focus on examining the internal mechanisms through which the field of educational possibility is shaped for girls, rather than on producing a direct statistical comparison between male and female students.

This sampling strategy does not aim at statistical representativeness, but rather at analytical diversity consistent with the theoretical objectives of the study.

Data Collection Instruments

Questionnaire

A structured questionnaire composed of 42 items was developed and organized into four sections:

1. Socio-demographic characteristics (10 items)
2. Academic trajectory and guidance (9 items)
3. Declared study choices (11 items)

4. Perceived field of possibilities (12 items)

A five-point Likert scale (1–5), ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree,” was used alongside closed and open-ended questions.

The section on perceived possibilities was specifically designed to move beyond declared choices by capturing:

- Whether certain educational paths were ever considered
- The extent to which students could imagine themselves within those trajectories
- The reasons for exclusion, whether explicit or implicit

Examples of items include:

- “Have you ever considered pursuing studies in an engineering school?”
- “To what extent do you see yourself as capable of succeeding in a selective scientific track?”

Semi-Structured Interviews

A total of 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted, each lasting between 35 and 60 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with participants’ consent.

The interviews focused on reconstructing decision-making processes from the perspective of lived experience, with particular attention to moments where certain educational trajectories did not emerge as choices at all. This approach made it possible to identify discursive patterns that do not necessarily express rejection, but rather the absence of certain options from the field of consideration—either through prior self-positioning or through an inability to imagine alternative trajectories.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using an integrative approach

combining quantitative and qualitative methods.

- Quantitative analysis: conducted using SPSS (version 26), including descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) and cross-tabulations to examine relationships between consideration of study paths and variables such as academic stream and parental educational level. The Chi-square test was used to assess statistical significance ($p < 0.05$) (Field, 2018).

- Qualitative analysis: thematic analysis was conducted through iterative coding of interview transcripts, followed by the construction of analytical categories related to the boundaries of possibility, including absence of consideration and pre-emptive exclusion (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These categories were interpreted as indicators of underlying social mechanisms shaping the field of possibilities.

The integration of both approaches enabled a shift from describing educational choices to analyzing the conditions that structure what can emerge as a choice.

Limitations

This study is subject to several methodological limitations. First, the difficulty of directly capturing what is not considered as a possibility required reliance on indirect indicators derived from self-reported data and discourse. Second, the geographically bound nature of the sample limits the extent to which findings can be generalized beyond the studied context (Yin, 2018).

Finally, the analysis of “absence” inevitably involves interpretive judgment, which may be influenced by the theoretical framework guiding the study, particularly when attributing meaning to what is not explicitly stated by participants (Maxwell, 2013).

Table 1: Distribution of Declared Study Choices (N = 120)

Study Path	N	%
Humanities / Law / Economics	55	45,8%
Paramedical / Teaching	38	31,7%
Scientific and Technical (non-selective)	18	15%
Selective Tracks (Medicine / Engineering)	9	7,5%
Total	120	100%

Source: Author’s data (2025)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Empirical Findings

This section presents the empirical findings of the study based on both quantitative and qualitative data. The results focus on patterns of declared educational choices as well as the distribution of perceived possibilities among respondents.

Distribution of Declared Study Choices

The quantitative data (N = 120) reveals variation in declared study choices among respondents. As shown in Table 1, study preferences are unevenly distributed across

Table 2: Consideration of Selective Study Tracks (N = 120)

Level of Consideration	N	%
Never considered	70	58,3%
Considered then rejected	32	26,7%
Seriously considered	18	15%
Total	120	100%

Source: Author’s data (2025)

different academic tracks.

Consideration of Selective Study Tracks

Based on a direct survey item (Q24) measuring whether respondents had considered selective academic tracks, the

Table 3: Self-Perceived Ability to Enter Selective Tracks (N = 120)

Perceived Ability	N	%
Low (1-2)	62	51,7%
Moderate (3)	34	28,3%
Hight (4-5)	24	20%
Total	120	100%

Source: Author's data (2025)

results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Consideration of Selective Study Tracks (N = 120)

Respondents were asked whether they had ever considered selective academic tracks such as medicine or engineering (Q24). The distribution of responses is presented in Table 2.

Self-Perceived Ability to Enter Selective Tracks

Respondents evaluated their perceived ability to pursue selective academic tracks using a five-point Likert scale. For analytical clarity, responses were grouped into three categories.

The responses indicate variation in how respondents assess their ability in relation to these tracks.

Cross-Tabulation Results

Cross-tabulation analysis revealed statistically significant associations between consideration of selective tracks and selected social variables.

- The proportion of respondents who reported seriously considering selective tracks increased from 9% among those from lower educational backgrounds to 28% among those from higher educational backgrounds (Chi-square, $p < 0.05$).

- A lower level of consideration was observed among students enrolled in humanities streams compared to those in scientific streams.

These results indicate that consideration of selective tracks varies across social and academic characteristics.

Recurrent Discursive Patterns in Interviews (N = 18)

The qualitative analysis identified recurrent patterns in how respondents describe their relationship to different educational trajectories. These patterns reflect variations in how certain options enter, or fail to enter, the field of consideration.

“This is not for me” – Pre-emptive Self-Exclusion

This pattern refers to statements in which respondents position certain academic tracks as incompatible with

their perceived abilities or identity, prior to any explicit evaluation.

Examples include:

- “Engineering is difficult, and I’m not that kind of person.”

- “I feel like this field is not for me from the start.”

These statements indicate a form of pre-emptive exclusion, where trajectories are filtered out before entering a formal decision-making process.

Absence of Consideration - “I never thought about it”

This pattern captures cases where certain educational trajectories do not appear at all within respondents’ field of consideration.

Examples include:

- “Honestly, I never imagined myself becoming an engineer.”

- “That idea never really came to my mind.”

Rather than expressing rejection, these statements suggest the non-emergence of certain options at the level of imagination, prior to evaluation.

Partial Consideration Followed by Exclusion

This pattern refers to trajectories that are briefly considered but subsequently rejected during an early evaluative stage.

Examples include:

- “I thought about it briefly, but I felt it was too far from me.”

- “I tried to imagine it, but I couldn’t see myself in it.”

This reflects a transition from consideration to exclusion, where evaluation occurs but is quickly resolved in favor of self-exclusion.

Analytical note:

Across all patterns, the findings suggest that differentiation occurs not only at the level of educational choice, but also prior to choice itself, in terms of whether a trajectory becomes part of the field of consideration. This indicates that exclusion may operate at multiple stages, including pre-reflective positioning, early evaluation, and post-consideration rejection.

The following section discusses these findings considering the theoretical framework.

Discussion

From Choice to the Field of Possibility

The findings of this study indicate that educational choice cannot be fully explained in terms of individual preferences, rational calculation, or responses to structural constraints alone. While the quantitative results reveal variation in declared educational trajectories, a more significant pattern concerns the unequal distribution of what is considered as a possible option in the first place. A total of 58% of respondents reported that they had never considered selective tracks, 27% had considered them before rejecting them, while 15% reported having seriously considered these tracks. This distinction points to two analytically different moments of exclusion. In the first case, the educational trajectory is present within the

field of options and is evaluated before being dismissed. In the second case, however, the trajectory does not fully enter the field of consideration, indicating a more fundamental limitation located at the level of what becomes thinkable as an option in the first place.

The qualitative data reinforces this interpretation. Recurrent statements such as “I never imagined myself becoming an engineer” or “this is not for me” suggest forms of self-positioning that operate prior to explicit evaluation. These expressions do not simply reflect weak preference but indicate that certain trajectories are excluded before they are meaningfully assessed.

From this perspective, the issue extends beyond what students choose to include, how the field of available options is constituted. This shifts the analytical focus from selection processes to the social conditions that structure the field within which selection becomes possible. Educational choice, in this sense, appears as the outcome of a deeper configuration that defines the boundaries of the possible.

Theoretical Implications: Rethinking Possibility, Aspiration, and Agency

Building on these findings, the study introduces the concept of the feminized field of possibility as an analytical tool for examining how certain educational trajectories become imaginable for female students, while others remain absent from consideration. Rather than replacing established notions such as aspiration, opportunity, or agency, this concept situates them within a prior level of analysis concerned with the formation of possibility itself.

The results suggest that inequality operates not only through differential access to educational opportunities or through processes of evaluation, but also through unequal access to what can be conceived as a viable future. As shown in the empirical findings, some trajectories are considered and subsequently rejected, while others do not enter the field of consideration at all. This distinction points to a form of inequality located at the level of cognitive and social availability.

Within this framework, aspiration can be reconsidered. Instead of reflecting a direct expression of individual desire, it appears shaped by a socially structured horizon of what is perceived as attainable. The absence of aspiration toward certain trajectories should therefore not be interpreted as a lack of ambition, but as a possible consequence of their absence from the field of imagination.

Similarly, agency cannot be reduced to the capacity to act within given constraints. It also involves the capacity to envisage alternatives beyond them. The findings indicate that this imaginative dimension of agency is itself socially structured and unequally distributed.

This interpretation resonates with the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1990), particularly regarding the internalization of social limits within dispositions, as reflected in formulations such as “this is not for me.” At

the same time, the present findings extend this perspective by highlighting not only internalized limits, but also the non-emergence of certain options altogether.

The results also engage with rational choice approaches developed by Raymond Boudon (1974), by suggesting that some trajectories do not reach the stage of explicit evaluation. In addition, they intersect with Judith Butler’s (1990, 1993) notion of intelligibility, indicating that educational trajectories differ not only in their accessibility, but also in their capacity to be recognized as meaningful and viable possibilities.

The gendered dimension of this process is reflected in the symbolic distance expressed by respondents toward certain fields of study. This distance is not solely related to academic difficulty, but also to socially structured representations of what is considered appropriate, realistic, or legitimate for female students. In this sense, the feminized field of possibility operates less through explicit exclusion than through the implicit structuring of what can be imagined.

Limits, Interpretation, and Broader Implications

Despite these contributions, the interpretation of absence remains methodologically and theoretically complex. The fact that a trajectory is not considered does not constitute direct evidence of structural exclusion; in some cases, it may reflect contingent preferences, personal interests, or situational constraints. For this reason, absence should be treated as an analytical indicator rather than a definitive outcome.

In addition, the study relies on self-reported data, which introduces interpretive limitations. Statements such as “I never thought about it” may refer to different underlying processes, including lack of exposure, implicit self-positioning, or retrospective rationalization. Consequently, the findings should be understood as reflecting the distribution of perceived possibilities rather than providing direct access to cognitive or psychological mechanisms.

Within this context, the feminized field of possibility is best understood as an analytical framework rather than a comprehensive explanatory model. Its relevance lies in identifying situations in which the absence of certain trajectories can be meaningfully related to observable social mechanisms, such as guidance practices, family expectations, or institutional tracking.

On this basis, the study contributes to extending the analysis of educational inequality by bringing into focus a dimension that often remains implicit: the unequal structuring of what can be considered as possible. This perspective suggests that inequality is not only manifested in differential outcomes or opportunities, but also in the conditions that shape the horizon within which educational trajectories become thinkable.

CONCLUSION

This study sets out to shift the analysis of gender inequality away from a focus on how students make

educational choices, toward a closer examination of the social conditions that shape what can emerge as a possible choice in the first place. The findings indicate that inequality is not only expressed through differences in selected educational trajectories, but also through differences in what becomes part of the field of consideration itself. The contrast between trajectories that were “never considered” and those that were “considered then rejected” suggests that some options remain outside the horizon of possibility from the very beginning.

Building on this, the study introduced the concept of the feminized field of possibility as an analytical tool for capturing this prior level. Rather than treating it as an additional variable, this approach reorients the analysis toward the conditions that structure the set of available alternatives. From this perspective, declared educational choices reflect not only individual preferences, but also the limits of what has become socially and subjectively imaginable.

The results further suggest that the unequal distribution of educational trajectories cannot be explained solely through differences in access, information, or individual decision-making. It also requires attention to the processes that make some paths visible and thinkable while rendering others distant or absent from consideration. In this sense, the study contributes to expanding the analysis of inequality beyond opportunities and outcomes, toward the unequal structuring of the horizon of possibility itself.

At the same time, the study opens a broader research agenda concerned with how absent possibilities can be empirically approached, particularly when they do not leave direct traces in observable choices. It also invites a rethinking of key concepts such as aspiration, agency, and choice by situating them within the conditions that make them possible. However, this contribution remains necessarily limited, as the analysis of what is not considered relies on indirect indicators and interpretive inference grounded in specific contextual mechanisms.

Overall, the study suggests that educational inequality does not only emerge now of decision-making, but may operate earlier, at the level of what individuals are able to imagine as a possible future. By bringing this dimension into focus, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how gendered educational trajectories are socially structured.

Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards in social research. Participation was voluntary, and all participants were informed about the aims and nature of the study—particularly its focus on educational choices and guidance trajectories—prior to data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Given that the research was conducted in secondary school settings, care was taken to ensure that participation or non-participation had no impact on students’ academic evaluation or educational progression.

Anonymity was ensured by avoiding the collection of directly identifying information. All data were processed in a way that prevented the identification of individual respondents, which was particularly important given the sensitivity of questions related to self-perceptions and educational exclusion. Data were treated with strict confidentiality and used exclusively for academic research purposes.

Special attention was given to the potentially sensitive nature of topics related to self-assessment and gendered representations of ability and aspiration. The research design was structured to minimize any discomfort during participation, and participants were explicitly informed of their right to skip questions or withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences.

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