

# **Unpacking the motivation behind pursuing competitive exam (CSS): Exploring the interplay between intrinsic motivation, extrinsic rewards and societal pressure**

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## **Abstract**

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Competitive examinations have become a defining feature of academic and professional pathways for many individuals in Pakistan. This study investigates the motivations driving young adults in Lahore to pursue the Central Superior Services (CSS) examination, despite already possessing professional degrees. Using a quantitative design, data were collected from 40 respondents through a structured questionnaire. The analysis explores the interaction between intrinsic motivation, extrinsic rewards, and societal pressure, framed within Social Learning Theory and Social Cognitive Theory. Results indicate that intrinsic motivation is the strongest predictor of exam preparation (36.1%), followed by extrinsic rewards (27.8%) and societal pressure (25%). These findings suggest that although external influences shape decision-making, intrinsic motivation remains the dominant factor behind aspirants' sustained commitment to CSS preparation.

**Keywords:** Competitive exams, intrinsic motivation, extrinsic rewards, societal pressure, motivations



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## INTRODUCTION

Competitive examinations such as the Central Superior Services (CSS) exam represent one of Pakistan's most prestigious pathways into bureaucratic and administrative positions. Administered by the Federal Public Service Commission (FPSC), CSS is widely perceived as a gateway to job security, social prestige, and stable income—particularly in a developing country where employment opportunities and financial stability remain uncertain. Many young individuals, despite holding professional degrees in fields such as engineering, business, law, or medicine, increasingly shift their career aspirations toward civil services.

This trend raises important questions regarding the motivations behind this transition. Why do candidates invest substantial time, effort, and financial resources in preparing for a highly competitive exam, especially when the likelihood of success is limited? This study seeks to address this gap by examining the intrinsic, extrinsic, and socio-cultural drivers influencing CSS aspirants' decisions. Using a quantitative approach, data were collected from 40 individuals preparing for the exam to provide insights into the factors that shape their long-term career preferences and preparation strategies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on motivations for pursuing competitive careers has been well documented in psychology and sociology, though studies in the Pakistani context remain limited. Intrinsic motivation, defined as engagement in an activity for inherent satisfaction, forms a central component of Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (1985). Their work identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as key psychological needs that enhance intrinsic motivation. Studies show that intrinsically motivated individuals demonstrate greater persistence and resilience during competitive exam preparation (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). Similarly, Imran and Khoso (2017) argue that aspirants motivated by self-actualization and societal contribution perform better and are more committed than those driven by external factors.

In contrast, Bandura (1986) suggests that extrinsic rewards—financial or social—may undermine intrinsic motivation, especially when rewards become the primary driver. Deci et al. (1999) further conclude that tangible, expected rewards can diminish intrinsic interest, which is relevant in the context of competitive examinations that offer clear material incentives and social prestige.

Social norms also significantly influence career decisions in Pakistan. Studies show that familial expectations and societal perceptions portray civil services as an “ideal profession” (Ali, 2018; Qureshi, 2021). Hussain (2020) notes that professionals from prestigious academic backgrounds frequently shift to administrative careers, reflecting the cultural valuation of government authority and prestige. Together, these findings highlight the interplay of personal aspirations, social pressures, and structural incentives in shaping career motivations—an interplay this study examines in the CSS context.

## METHODOLOGY

A quantitative research method was employed to investigate the motivations of CSS aspirants in Lahore. The target population comprised individuals aged 18–33 currently preparing for the exam. A structured questionnaire containing 18 items was administered to 40 respondents, primarily undergraduates and recent graduates, most of whom were unemployed. The study aimed to:

1. Identify the motivations behind pursuing CSS.
2. Examine intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors.
3. Explore the role of societal and familial expectations in decision-making.
4. Assess how these motivational dimensions interact to influence long-term career choices.

### **Research Objectives**

The main objectives of the study are:

- To identify the motivation behind pursuit of Civil Service exams
- To identify the intrinsic and extrinsic motivators behind pursuit of Civil Service exams
- To explore the influence of societal pressure or family expectations on decision making of aspirants
- To access how these factors interact and affect the overall career choices of candidates

### **Theoretical Framework**

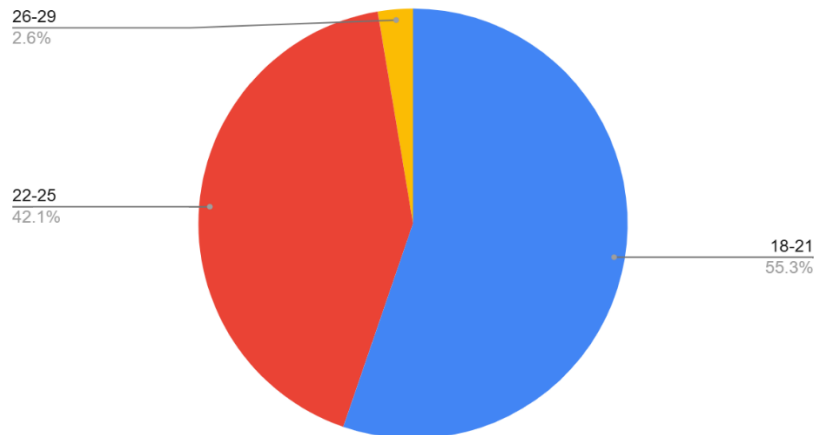
This study draws on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Social Cognitive Theory to explain the motivational dynamics behind CSS preparation. SDT distinguishes between intrinsic motivation—engaging in an activity for personal fulfillment—and extrinsic motivation, driven by external rewards such as financial security or social prestige. The theory identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as key psychological needs that sustain long-term motivation. Aspirants who perceive CSS preparation as aligned with their personal values and autonomy are more likely to remain committed despite challenges.

Complementing this, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (1986) emphasizes the influence of social norms, observational learning, and self-efficacy in shaping behavior. In Pakistan's collectivist culture, family expectations, societal approval, and role modeling significantly impact career decisions. Individuals who observe successful civil servants or receive social reinforcement may internalize CSS as a desirable and attainable goal. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework to interpret both internal and external drivers influencing CSS aspirants.

### **FINDINGS**

**Q1:**

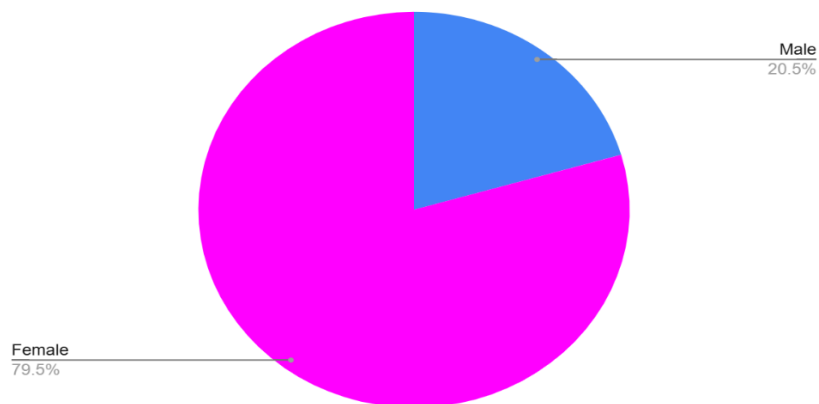
**Count of Age group**



The findings of the survey show that most of the respondents, which represent 55.3%, fall in the age bracket of 18-21. Whereas, 42.1% is between the ages of 22 and 25. While, 2.6% of the respondents are aged between 26-39 years, representing the remaining portion of the surveyed population.

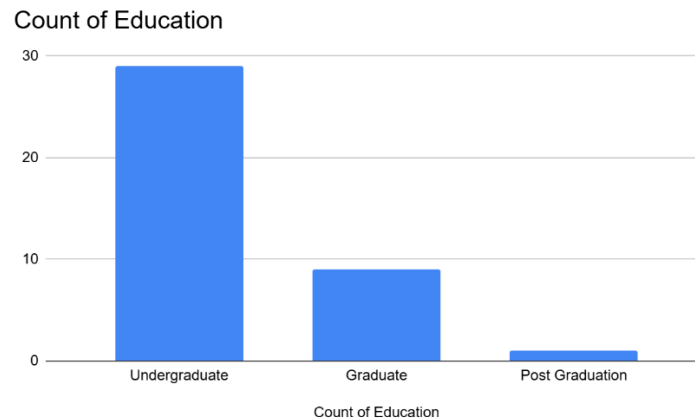
## Q2.

**Count of Gender**



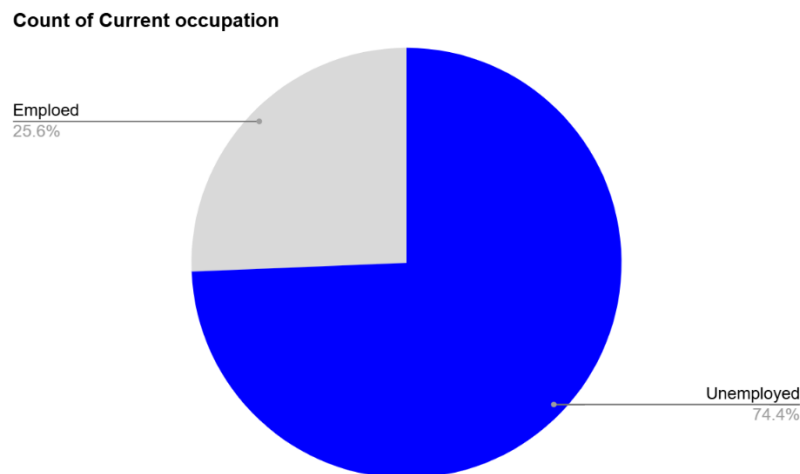
The graph shows a largest percentage of female participants (**79.5%**) compared to male participants (**20.5%**). This gender distribution highlights strong female interest in pursuing competitive exams like CSS among Lahore-based aspirants.

## Q3.



A significant proportion of respondents are **undergraduates** account for nearly **74.4%**, while **23.1%** participants are **graduated**, with a smaller portion of **post graduate** students with make up **2.6%** of total proportion

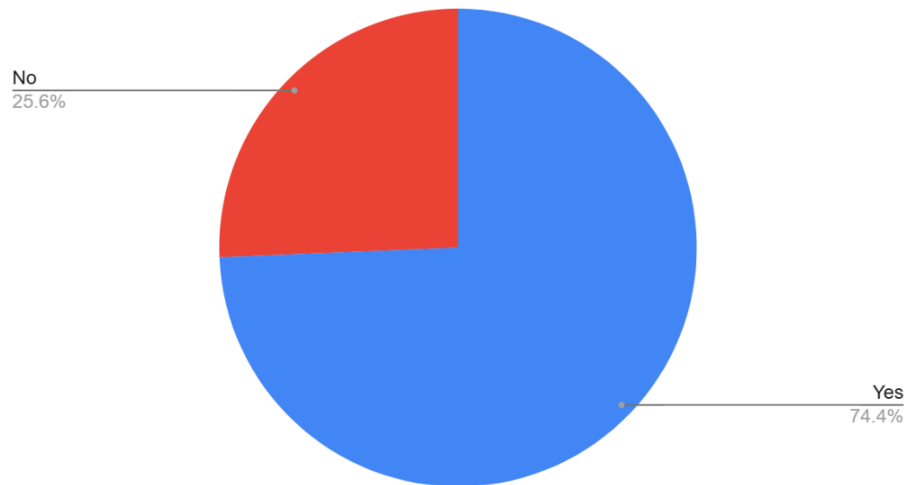
**Q4.**



Survey results indicates that the most of the respondents **74.4 percent** were **unemployed**, with a smaller proportion **25.6 percent** were **employed**.

**Q5.**

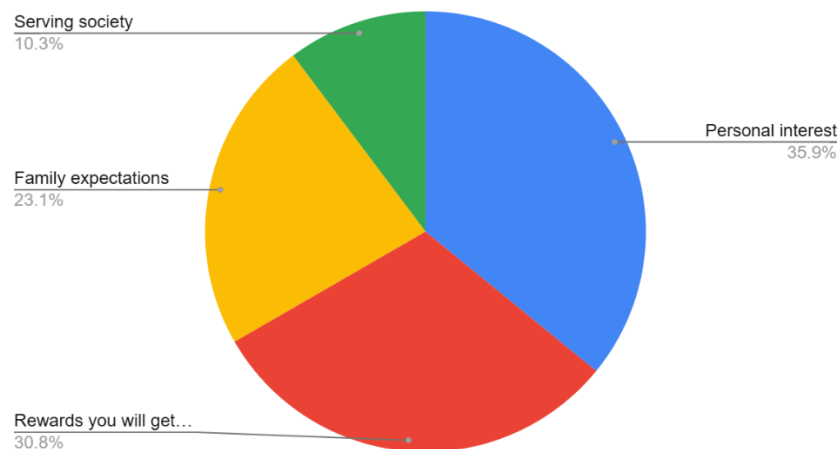
### Have you ever think you will start preparation for CSS in future?



The survey reveals that a **larger proportion (74.4%)** of respondents showed interest in preparing for the **CSS exam** in the future, while a **smaller portion (25.6%)** have not. This reflects significant interest in pursuing CSS among the surveyed individuals, reflecting either personal aspirations or external influences motivating them toward this competitive examination.

### Q6.

#### If yes, then what drives you to pursue competition exam?

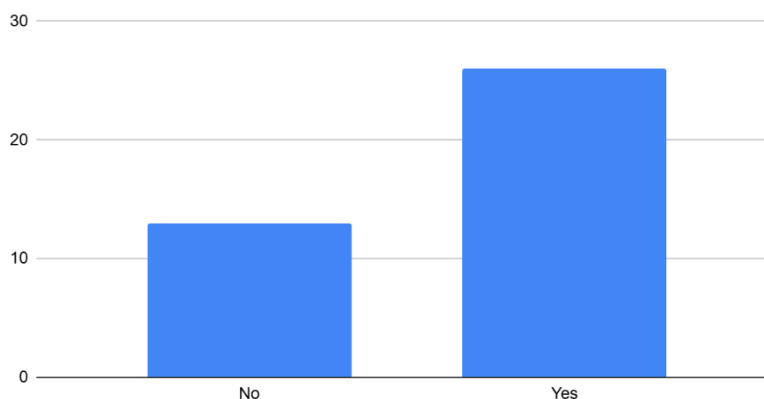


The survey results identify varied reasons for CSS preparation, with **intrinsic motivation** being the most **dominant factor (35.9%)**. **Extrinsic motivations** are also a significant driving factor, such as expected **rewards account for 30.8%** and **family pressure (23.1%)**. Interestingly, a lesser

but significant percentage (10.3%) mention serving society as their reason, reflecting a combination of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors driving candidates' choices.

**Q7.**

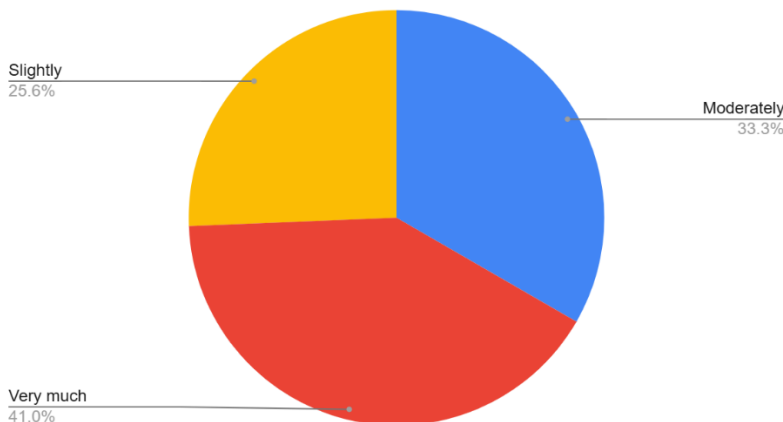
**Do you start preparation because your inner-self wants you to have a name in society?**



This bar chart shows a clear division in motivations, with a larger number of respondents indicating they do not prepare for CSS to **gain societal recognition (66.7%)** or improving social reputation, while a smaller portion acknowledges this as a motivating factor (**33.3%**). It shows that while social prestige influences some candidates, but it's not the dominant driver for most aspirants.

**Q8.**

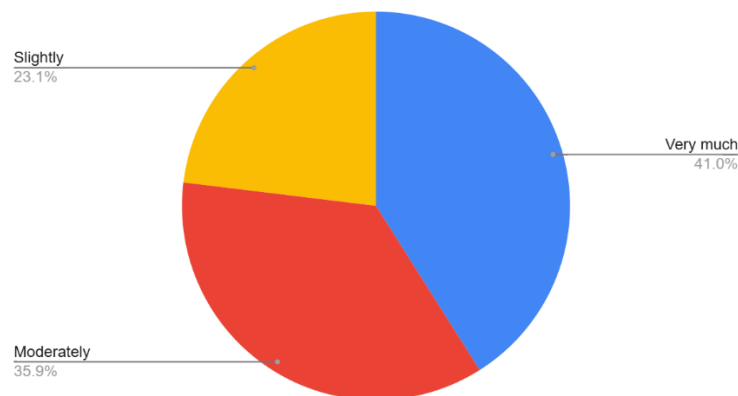
**How much do you feel passionate for preparation of exam?**



The questionnaire results reveal enthusiasm for CSS exam preparation, with the majority of respondents (41%) reporting they feel "very much" passionate about their studies. A significant portion (33.3%) expressed moderate passion, while a smaller group (25.6%) felt slightly passionate. These results depicts that most of the CSS aspirants are highly motivated, which likely contributes to their sustained preparation efforts.

**Q9.**

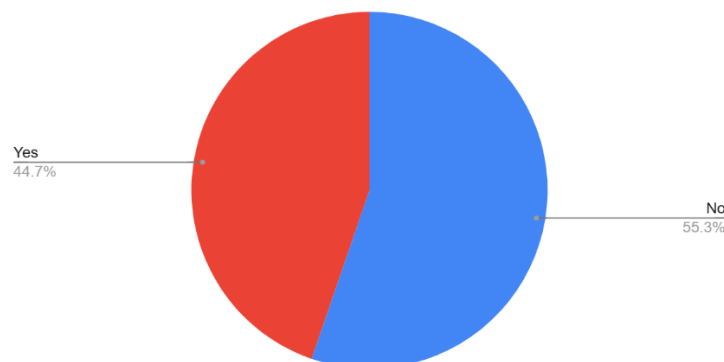
**How much you will enjoy the process of competitive exam?**



The data directs that most CSS aspirants anticipate enjoyment from the preparation process, with 41% expecting to enjoy it "very much" and 35.9% enjoying it "moderately". Only 23.1% responds they enjoy it "slightly". It suggests that the majority of candidates find intrinsic satisfaction in the learning journey itself, beyond just the outcome of the exam.

**Q10.**

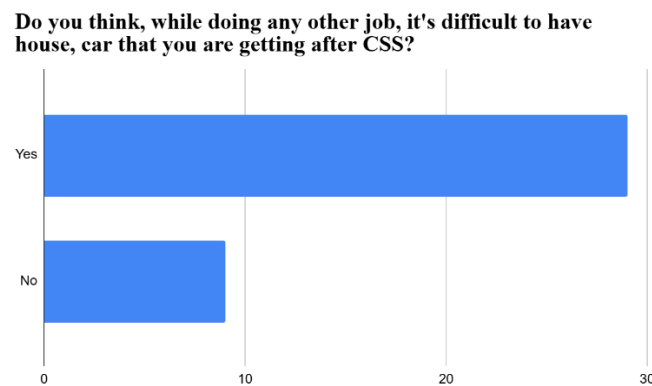
**Have you started preparation for CSS exam, because of the rewards you will get after passing the exam?**





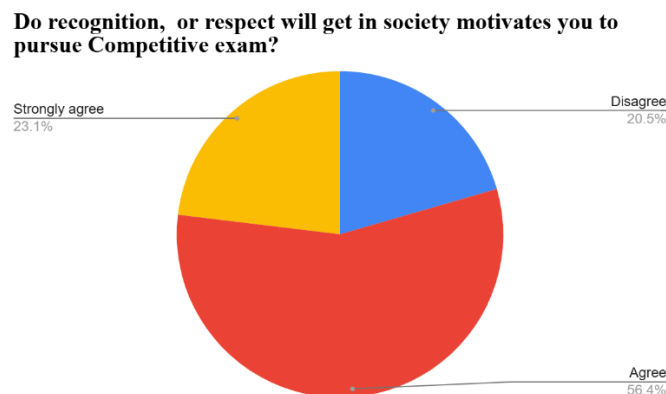
The results present a split in motivations, with **55.3%** of respondents showing they did not start CSS preparation for **rewards** they got after the recruitment, while **44.7%** acknowledged rewards are more important for them, so they started preparation keeping in view rewards. The findings highlight the complex interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivators in competitive exam preparation.

#### Q11.



The bar chart reveals a significant perception among respondents, with a **majority (76.3%)** believing that achieving financial stability (house, car) would be more difficult through other jobs compared to CSS. The smaller proportion (**23.6%**) suggests only a minority oppose this viewpoint. It indicates that aspirants largely see CSS as a pathway to better financial security and lifestyle benefits compared to alternative career options.

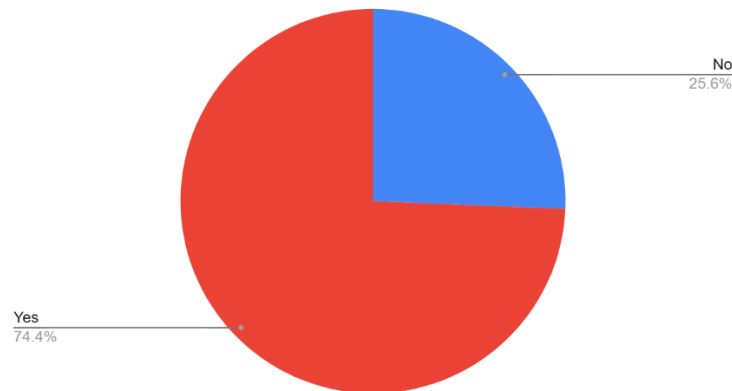
#### Q12.



The results demonstrate that societal recognition serves as a **key motivator** for CSS aspirants, with a combined **79.5%** agreeing (**56.4%**) or **strongly agreeing (23.1%)** that respect and status influence their exam pursuit, while, **20.5% disagree**.

**Q13.**

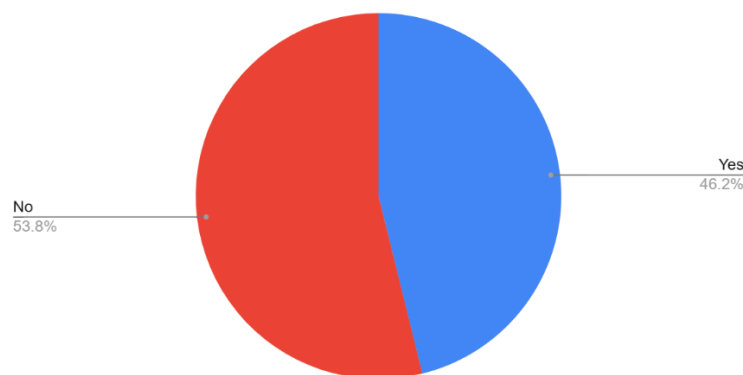
**Does gaining societal status is one of the motivation behind exam?**



These findings reveal a strong consensus, with **74.4%** of respondents agreeing with **societal status** as a motivating factor for pursuing the CSS exam, while only **25.6% reject** this notion.

**Q14.**

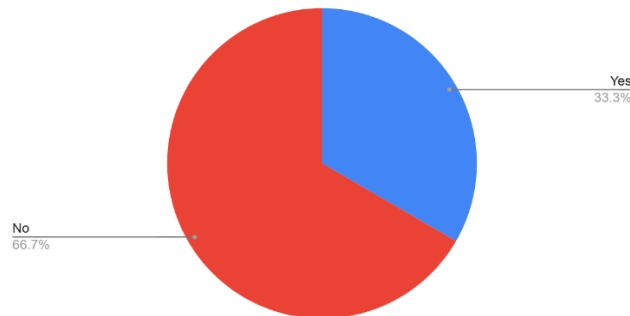
**Today, if you get to know, policy get changed, after passing exam you will only get a job without any other extrinsic reward, will...**



The results show a revealing divide in commitment levels, with **53.8%** of aspirants stating they would **discontinue CSS preparation** if extrinsic rewards were removed, while **46.2%** would persist despite policy changes.

Q15.

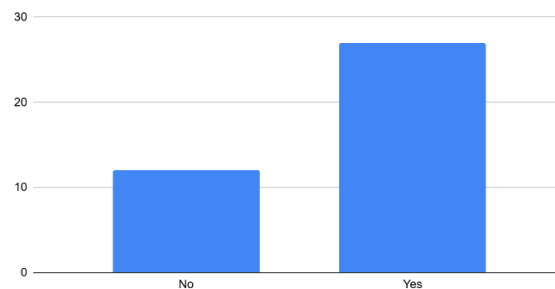
Have you started preparation for CSS because your family wants you to do?



The pie chart shows family influence plays a notable role in aspirant’s decision making, with **66.7%** of respondents revealing they did not start preparation due to family pressure, while **33.3%** confirm family expectations as a factor.

Q16.

Have you started preparation because you want to give your family a good life and good financial status?



The bar graph shows a strong familial motivation among CSS aspirants, with the **"Yes" bar** representing those preparing to improve their family's financial status, accounts for **69.3%** was significantly taller than the **"No" bar**, which accounts for **30.7%**.

### Conclusion:

This study demonstrates that CSS aspirations are shaped by a complex interplay of intrinsic motivation, extrinsic incentives, and socio-cultural pressures. Personal interest and intellectual engagement emerged as primary motivators, reflecting strong intrinsic commitment among many aspirants. At the same time, financial incentives, job security, and the prestige associated with civil services significantly influenced decision-making, especially in Pakistan’s uncertain economic environment.

Family expectations and societal recognition further contributed to aspirants' motivations, though these influences varied in intensity. The findings reveal that CSS preparation represents both a personal ambition and a socially reinforced career pathway—an intersection that shapes candidates' long-term commitment, resilience, and expectations. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing career counseling initiatives and supporting more informed decision-making among future aspirants.

### **Recommendations**

The study recommends that policymakers strengthen career counseling programs to broaden students' awareness of diverse professional pathways. CSS preparation academies should incorporate motivational and psychological support components to help aspirants balance intrinsic and extrinsic expectations. At a broader societal level, there is a need to diversify perceptions of prestige and success beyond a limited set of professions, which may reduce the pressure on individuals to conform to socially valorized career choices.

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