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How Extracurricular Activities in Bangladeshi Universities Foster Intrinsic Motivation among Females for Leadership Roles in Diverse Career Paths

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Abstract

It is evident that women struggle to pursue diverse careers in Bangladesh, which is caused by prevailing gender norms and limited opportunities for skill development. Based on the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), we inquire if ECAs complement Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness, leading to intrinsic motivation in diverse leadership orientations. The research investigates through this mixed-method study, how Extracurricular Activities (ECAs) in the universities can create intrinsic willingness among female students to pursue a leadership role in a diverse career path. Quantitative findings show that the population of female students involved in ECAs in universities (n=58) expresses a high level of increased confidence in decision-making, skill development for contemporary work, and a strong sense of reward, which inspires them to take on diverse leadership roles. Besides, qualitative data shows us themes of empowerment, high-level agency, and the process of increased motivation in pursuing their intended professions beyond social narratives. The prime objective of this study is not to have a comparative analysis between ECA-involved and non-ECA students, but whether ECAs are a means to create intrinsic motivation among young female leaders for mitigating the gender gaps in leadership in diverse workplaces. The underlying purpose of this study is to establish how ECAs contribute to breaking professional-based gender norms in leadership roles by motivating them to engage more with ECAs to inform career decisions that match their skills and competencies.

Keywords: Extracurricular Activities; Intrinsic Motivation; Self-Determination Theory; Positive Youth Development; Female Leadership; Bangladesh

1. Introduction

Female enrollment rate in schools has drastically increased in Bangladesh in recent years (BANEBIS, 2024). Yet, women significantly lag in leadership in several sectors.

In Bangladesh, only professions like teaching and desk jobs are prescribed as female-friendly, while specialized jobs like STEM, administration, and high-level management positions in tertiary institutions are discouraged. Deep-rooted gender norms like patriarchy and social values are behind this (World Bank, 2023).

One of the crucial practices that challenge this is the existing Extracurricular Activities (ECAs) in universities. Debate clubs, community services, academic clubs, etc., work provide opportunities to go beyond the curriculum and help understand real-life career challenges in a supportive environment to grow, and this can increase the level of confidence and skills among females. Existing studies show that student leaderships positively develop youths and their later career (Hancock et al., 2012; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). However, explicit understanding of how it can motivate females intrinsically to pursue a career beyond societal influence, with self-awareness, is yet to be found.

Intrinsic motivation is the key to pursuing something that someone internally craves, over extrinsic motivations (money, material benefits). This research relates ECAs to the psychological needs associated with Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the specific competencies addressing Positive Youth Development (PYD). By following the questions:

- Do extracurricular activities (ECAs) foster intrinsic motivation among female tertiary students to take on diverse career path leadership roles in Bangladesh?
- To what level do extracurricular activities (ECAs) foster intrinsic motivation among female tertiary students to take on diverse career path leadership roles in Bangladesh?
- What specific leadership competencies and personal development linked to Positive Youth Development do female students achieve through ECAs?
- How do different types of ECAs navigate the leadership competencies, and what are the challenges they face in pursuing such actions?

A mixed method approach will answer these questions and give us a bigger picture of **How Extracurricular Activities in Bangladeshi Universities Foster Intrinsic Motivation among Females for Leadership Roles in Diverse Career Paths.**

2. Literature Review

Gender Disparities in Bangladesh are well identified by current scholars (Fahmid, 2024). There is a huge gap between the increased higher education enrolment of women and translating their skills and knowledge into professional leadership roles. Predefined career paths are often seen as an extension of 'Feminine Skills' in Bangladesh, i.e., teaching, nursing, or simple clerical jobs, while technology, finance, development jobs, high-level governance, etc., are often considered for male workers. Societal norms are often considered to create an unseen barrier to women's careers. Lack of guidance and mentorship for women generally comes from the existing patriarchal cultures. (ShesTEM, 2024; Asaduzzaman et al., 2025; ADB, n.d.).

Extracurricular Leadership is connected to positive youth results, growing leadership skills, and civic engagement (Bundick, 2011; Lerner et al., 2005). During adolescence, one may develop and thrive in skills and competence by participating in structured ECAs. Leadership potential is significant among these activities. Hancock et al. (2012) mention that youths who have strong adult mentorship for pursuing meaningful leadership roles have reportedly better leadership

traits. For females, club activities can be strongly resonating. By engaging in ECAs, young women not only thrive in skills and competencies but also grow a level of internal motivation and purpose that reflects their personal values (Denault & Guay, 2017), which may act as their training grounds, especially for people who don't engage in such fields.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is the major theory that supports us in understanding intrinsic motivation. Giving authority of designing their own project (Autonomy), exposing them to dealing with challenges (Competences), and mobilizing them in a collective support system (Relatedness), creates intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This Motivational Spillover shows that these competencies create self-drive among youths. In July 2024, female leaders showed autonomy in decision-making, with skills, and in a collective space. Ryan and Deci (2000) find that when people perceive a work inherently enjoyable, they generally tend to invest more effort and consistency, which means, if females are intrinsically motivated, they are likely to seek opportunities that align with their inner satisfaction, even in non-traditional settings, because the drive comes naturally from within. Intrinsic motivation is a game-changer for career choices.

3.   Theoretical Framework

This research is grounded in two major theories: Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Positive Youth Development (PYD).

4.1 Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Autonomy, indicating control over own decisions, Competence, portraying having the necessary skills, and finally, Relatedness, which relates to feeling valued by the surroundings, are the core components of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). When a leadership environment nurtures these traits among youths, they feel empowered and engage for the sake of the work itself (intrinsic motivation). 4.1. Self-Determination Theory (SDT). When a female student leads a club, it fosters autonomy; her project succeeds through competence; and she feels acknowledged and supported by the related peer group she works with. SDT projects a high level of sustainable motivation here through these three mechanisms.

4.2 Positive Youth Development (PYD)

Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework maps five competencies as the Five Cs: Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring (Lerner et al., 2005). PYD suggests that ECAs provide a strong foundation for these five competencies for positive youth development. A debate club builds confidence and cognitive competencies. In contrast, Community Service Clubs build caring and character. Almost all clubs form a strong connection among stakeholders. By successfully grounding our research in these frameworks, SDT focuses on the motivation mechanism, and PYD shows us the in-built characteristics of a leader developed through such interventions. A female who is intrinsically motivated feels autonomy through her work, and she continuously keeps developing competencies that drive her in informed decision-making for diverse career choices.

4.   5. Methodology

This investigation implies a mixed-method strategy. The cross-sectional survey based on quantitative data perceives the impact of ECAs, while semi-structured interviews measure the qualitative significance of personal experiences. The surveys are intended for a broad pattern, and interviews for contextual understanding.

The target population represents Female Undergraduate and Graduate Students involved in ECAs (29 from public and 29 from private), Female Young Professionals (3) who work in non-traditional sectors, and come from an ECA background, and Employers (3) who employ such professionals. We followed a snowball sampling method and considered convenience. All surveys and interviews have a qualitative section attached to the necessary questions to understand personal perspectives. All participants have a background of ECA involvement for over 2 years.

The survey instruments introduced background information and a Likert scale (1=Strongly disagree, 5=Strongly agree), grounded on SDT and PYD frameworks. Data indicates confidence, decision-making, exposure to non-traditional careers, and authentic purpose. A section integrated suggests challenges and motivations. A semi-structured interview captured motivations for joining currently male-dominated workplaces, acquired motivations to pursue self-interested careers, self-awareness of their autonomy, and existing challenges in going to such workplaces that are extracted from Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness.

The data was analyzed through descriptive statistics, numeric values of agreements for each section, and mean scores. Thematic analysis in deployed following Braun and Clarke's approach by identifying, analysing, and defining themes.

5. Findings

6.1 Survey Findings (Quantitative)

Table 01: Quantitative survey data

Construct/Perceived Outcome	N	M	SD	% Agre/Agree
Theme: SDT/PYD & Intrinsic Drive				
Intrinsic Satisfaction/Fulfillment	57	4.02	0.83	80.7
Confidence in Decision Making (Autonomy)	57	3.95	0.97	71.9
Increased Self-efficacy for Challenges (Competence)	57	3.98	0.95	82.5
Motivation/Proactivity (Autonomy)	58	3.84	1.02	79.3
Theme: Competence & Connection				
Improved Networking/Collaboration	58	4.17	0.88	84.5
Enhanced Problem-Solving/Creativitiy	57	4.00	0.87	82.5
Theme: Career Orientation & Outcome				
Exposure to Non-traditional Career Paths	58	3.90	0.89	75.9
Willingness for Non-traditional Leadership	58	3.76	1.06	74.1
Informed Career Decisions/Preparation	58	3.76	1.01	70.7
Positive Influence on Career Opportunities	57	4.02	0.83	77.2

The overall survey disclosed a strong positive response to the impact of ECA. 76% of the respondents agreed that "Participation in ECAs exposes me to career paths beyond traditional female-dominated fields," which highlights their exposure to new role models. Self-efficacy and confidence among respondents were substantially boosted as 83% agreed "ECAs have increased my confidence to take on challenges and leadership roles", 81% felt more "confident in making decisions", and 88% felt "fulfilled and satisfied", which correlates with their high intrinsic satisfaction.

Chart 01: Self-Determination Constructs
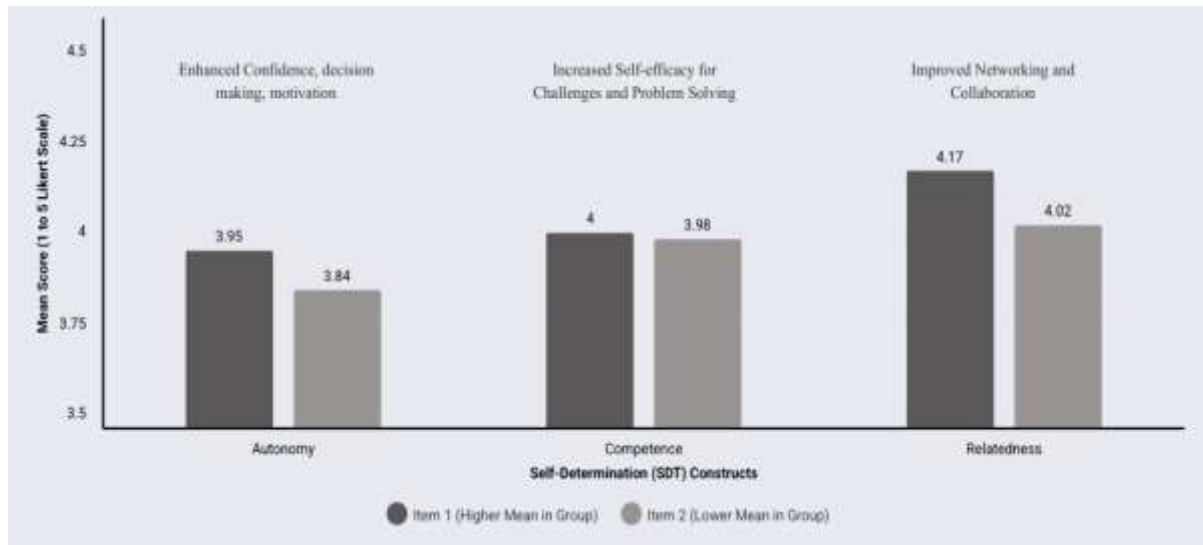
The highest agreement was with 84% respondents for "ECAs improve my networking and collaboration skills," indicating competence development. Moreover, 74% agreed, "My involvement in ECAs makes me more willing to pursue leadership roles in non-traditional careers," and 81% were confident ECA experiences would "positively influence my career opportunities," which represents how ECAs shape their career aspirations.

The open-ended responses highlighted key challenges with ECA participation, where time management and balancing academics alongside ECA commitments appeared most often. Some respondents added family and social expectations and gender biases with it. The respondents also recommended areas of improvement as they feel the necessity of mentorship, leadership training programs, structured support, and a clear pathway for diverse careers.

6.2 Qualitative Findings

Student Leaders, Young Professionals, and Employers provided valuable insights for the qualitative findings in four major aspects:

Building Competence

The interviews focused on asking questions about skill development and building confidence to master challenges. The prime indication received over the ripple effect of mastery in public speaking and project management, which also boosted self-esteem in academic and professional lives. For instance, Selina, who led a volunteer group, shared, "After organizing a charity drive that helped 200 villagers get clean water, I thought, wow, I actually did that... It made me feel like I can actually lead a project successfully."

Gaining Autonomy

For this segment, the interview questions focused on asking about freedom of choice and leadership voice. Most of the Respondents narrated ECAs as the platform they first experienced at a transformative agency. Naila, a third-year student, said, "In our entrepreneurship club... I was planning events and making key decisions. It was exhilarating to have that freedom... to try out my own ideas". This autonomy is unlike the structured settings of academics or home, allowing them fulfillment in the act of leading.

Fostering Relatedness

For this segment, the interview focused on questions regarding community belongingness and social capital. The majority of the respondents shared supportive relationships with peers, mentors, and mentees, which emerged as their long-term motivation and relatedness through exploring diverse career opportunities. Rima shared, "Our faculty advisor, who is a woman, took me under her wing. She said that I have many leadership potentials and inspired me to go on………. Her growth as a successful professor made me believe that I can also do a PhD". She found a community that provides her belonging and creates a safe space to explore her capabilities and take potential risks for a better future. Moreover, utilising the networking space, she explored diverse global opportunities for her career.

Shifting Career Aspiration and Breaking Barriers

In this segment, the interview focused on asking about career aspirations and exploration in non-traditional sectors. The majority of the respondents expressed their intrinsic motivation and confidence obtained from ECAs, which directed them towards pursuing specific non-traditional career paths, as well as supported them to overcome social barriers and family stigmas through inner leadership drives achieved from ECAs. For instance, Sara, an engineering student, shared, "I planned on a safe job, but changed my view after leading an engineering club project. Leading and accomplishing the project made me realize that I love engineering in action... Why not start my own tech firm?... It unlocked my ambition... Now I want to scope and take risks in my career because I'm internally motivated and have my own vision".

6. Discussion

The findings of the study indicate that Extracurricular Activities (ECAs) enhance intrinsic motivation among young women by fulfilling their three major psychological needs of Self-Determination Theory (SDT): Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Simultaneously, it focuses on the process of ECAs building the "5 Cs" of Positive Youth Development (PYD) (Lerner et al., 2005): Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring, which nurture a value-driven collaborative leadership.

Female respondents narrated a high level of enjoyment that fueled their continuous growth and desire to lead when the psychological needs of SDT are satisfied. Besides, they expressed gaining self-efficacy, decision-making freedom, community belongingness, supportive and mentoring relationships that boosted their confidence in their own competencies. The factors emboldened respondents to explore their uniqueness towards non-traditional career paths, nurturing confidence, exposure to role models, and resistance against gender norms and societal barriers.

7.1 Nuance of Findings and Areas for Future Inquiry

The study is limited to a small, self-selected sample and a cross-sectional design, including Student leaders, Young Professionals, and Employers, and has a limited scope of transferability. The outcome generated from this study should be considered preliminary to emphasize the importance of future rigorous research with a vast, extensive, and representative population, along with a measurable design.

7.1.1 Acknowledging the Spectrum of "Non-Traditional" Careers

About 14% of Bangladesh's STEM workforce is female (New Age BD, 2024), and the vast majority of line supervisors and chiefs are male. Women account for only 6% of line supervisors, and less

than 1% of line chiefs or higher-level managers (Menzel and Woodruff, 2021). These figures indicate male dominance in the work fields, including STEM professions, high-level managerial and governing positions, resulting in women encountering systemic biases and limited role models across different sectors. The barriers faced by women entering engineering may differ from those in, say, public service or academia. However, the common thread is that all these paths require women to contend with a lack of female role models, discriminatory social expectations, and institutional biases (New Age BD, 2024). By emphasizing the Thai spectrum, this study recognizes the need for career-specific interventions to address sector-specific limitations and barriers for women, societal resistance, and support women's entry and advancement.

7.1.2 Impact of Different Types of ECAs

Although the research referred to ECAs as a single broad construct, in practice, they represent a wide spectrum of learning and leadership experiences that shape different professional competencies and motivations of various career paths. In Bangladeshi universities, ECAs span skill-focused volunteer, Cultural, STEM, entrepreneurial, and sports.

The qualitative findings evidenced varied effects across ECAs and distinct leadership benefits where some linked to confidence and teamwork, while others boosted communication and collaboration and nurtured responsibility, ownership, and challenge readiness. Although different types of ECAs offer developing different types of leadership experiences, keeping an alignment with the career aspiration may leverage the outcome, expand the impact, and reinforce further comparative research to examine ECAs's role in career-specific pathways.

7.   Conclusion

To conclude, this study has presented strong evidence that Extracurricular Activities (ECAs) playing significant roles in building competence, autonomy, and relatedness among female students of Bangladeshi Universities, strongly grounded with Self-determination Theory (SDT) and Positive Youth Development (PYD), and fostering their intrinsic motivation for leadership roles in diverse non-traditional career paths. The findings of this study are limited to female students participating in diverse ECAs and their ignited motivation and persuasion of leadership roles through supporting ECA networks, a breeding ground that empowered them to break through social barriers, gender norms, and aspire to diverse opportunities in career journeys. Although the findings rely on a small self-selected sample, they emphasize further rigorous research to deeply understand female leadership and a gender-equal workforce in Bangladesh through nurturing potentials, ambition, and self-conception through ECA participation.

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