

## Exploring Extracurricular Activities in Bangladesh: Access, Gender Disparities, and Shifts in Online Engagement

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study investigates the accessibility, gender disparities, and preferences related to extracurricular activities (ECAs) among students in Bangladesh. Utilizing a survey conducted with middle school, high school, and undergraduate students, we explore the challenges faced by urban versus rural students, the specific barriers encountered by female students, and the preferences for online versus offline ECAs. The results reveal significant disparities, with rural students and female participants facing considerable obstacles in accessing ECA opportunities. A strong preference for online ECAs is evident, although awareness of existing platforms facilitating ECA opportunities is limited. The findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to improve ECA accessibility, promote gender equality, and enhance the visibility of ECA resources. This study provides actionable recommendations to foster a more inclusive environment for ECA participation, ultimately contributing to the holistic development of students across Bangladesh.

### **KEYWORDS**

Extracurricular Activities, Accessibility, Urban-Rural Disparities, Gender-Specific Challenges, Online vs. Offline Preferences, Bangladeshi Students, Educational Equity, Student Development, Digital Learning, Policy Interventions

### **INTRODUCTION**

Extracurricular activities (ECAs) play a pivotal role in the holistic development of students, providing them with opportunities to develop critical skills, explore personal interests, and enhance their academic and career prospects [1,2]. In the context of Bangladesh, ECAs encompass a wide range of activities, including Olympiads, competitions, volunteering, and various clubs and societies. Despite their recognized benefits, access to ECAs is often unevenly distributed, influenced by factors such as

geographic location, gender, and the availability of information and resources.

Urban areas, particularly Dhaka, tend to offer a more diverse and accessible array of ECA opportunities compared to rural regions. This urban-rural divide poses significant challenges for students outside major cities, limiting their exposure to and participation in these valuable activities [3]. Additionally, gender disparities further complicate the landscape of ECA engagement in Bangladesh. Female students frequently encounter unique barriers, including lack of family support, security

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concerns, and social stigma, which hinder their ability to participate fully in ECAs [4-6].

Another dimension influencing ECA participation is the mode of delivery—online versus offline. The increasing digitalization of education and extracurricular activities presents both opportunities and challenges [7,8]. While online platforms can potentially bridge the gap for students in remote areas, preferences and accessibility issues vary widely among different demographics [9].

This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the accessibility and participation in ECAs among Bangladeshi students, focusing on urban versus rural disparities, gender-related challenges, and preferences for online versus offline activities. By leveraging survey data, we seek to highlight the existing barriers and propose actionable recommendations to enhance ECA participation across diverse segments of the student population. The ultimate goal is to foster a more inclusive environment where all students, regardless of their location or gender, can benefit from the enriching experiences that ECAs offer.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Extracurricular activities (ECAs) are widely recognized for their substantial impact on students' personal, academic, and professional development. The existing literature highlights various dimensions of ECA engagement, including their benefits, accessibility challenges, and the influence of socio-demographic factors. This review synthesizes relevant research on the significance of ECAs, urban-rural disparities, gender disparities, and the role of online versus offline activities.

ECAs provide students with opportunities to develop soft skills such as leadership, teamwork, and time management, which are crucial for personal growth and future career success [2,10]. Participation in ECAs has been linked to

improved academic performance, higher self-esteem, and better social integration [11]. Moreover, involvement in ECAs is often a key component of university applications, enhancing students' prospects for higher education [12].

The geographic location of students significantly affects their access to ECAs. Studies have shown that students in urban areas have more opportunities to participate in a variety of ECAs compared to their rural counterparts [13]. Urban centers, such as Dhaka in Bangladesh, typically host more competitions, workshops, and organized events, creating an uneven playing field for students in remote areas. This urban-rural divide is exacerbated by factors such as limited transportation, lack of awareness, and fewer resources in rural schools [14].

Gender disparities in ECA participation are well-documented, with female students often facing more significant barriers than males. Research indicates that societal norms and expectations play a crucial role in limiting female participation in ECAs [4-6,15]. In Bangladesh, cultural constraints, security concerns, and lack of family support are prominent issues that restrict female students' involvement in extracurricular activities [16]. Studies have also highlighted the importance of creating safe and supportive environments to encourage female participation [17].

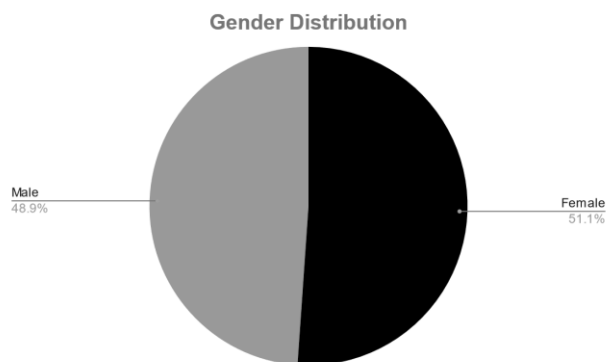
The advent of digital technology has transformed the landscape of ECAs, with online platforms offering new opportunities for engagement [9]. Online ECAs can potentially mitigate some accessibility issues faced by students in rural areas, providing them with access to competitions, courses, and collaborative projects that were previously out of reach [7]. However, the effectiveness of online ECAs depends on factors such as internet accessibility, digital literacy, and student preferences [11].

While some students and educators view online ECAs as a valuable supplement to traditional offline activities, others argue that they cannot fully replicate the hands-on experiences and social interactions that offline ECAs provide [18].

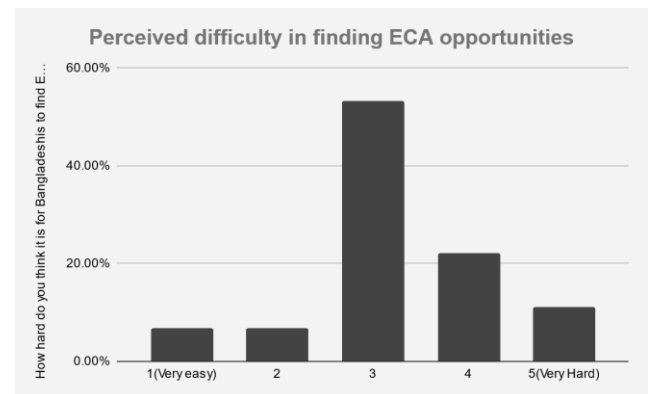
The literature underscores the multifaceted benefits of ECAs while highlighting significant disparities in access and participation. Urban-rural and gender disparities present substantial challenges that need to be addressed to ensure equitable access to ECAs for all students. Additionally, the evolving landscape of online ECAs offers both opportunities and challenges, necessitating further exploration to optimize their effectiveness. This study builds on these insights to provide a comprehensive analysis of ECA participation in Bangladesh, aiming to inform policy and practice to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for student development.

## **RESULTS**

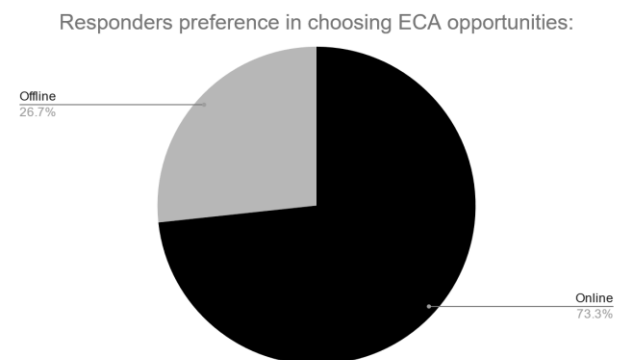
The gender distribution in this study was fairly balanced, with 51.1% females and 48.9% males.



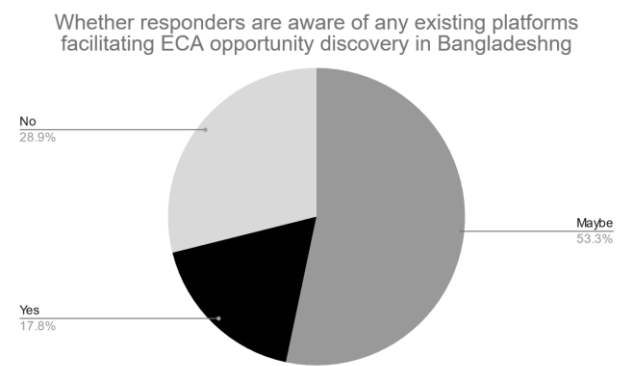
When asked about the perceived difficulty in finding ECA opportunities among Bangladeshis. The majority (53.3%) considered it moderately challenging, with only 6.7% finding it very easy, and 22.2% rating it as very hard.



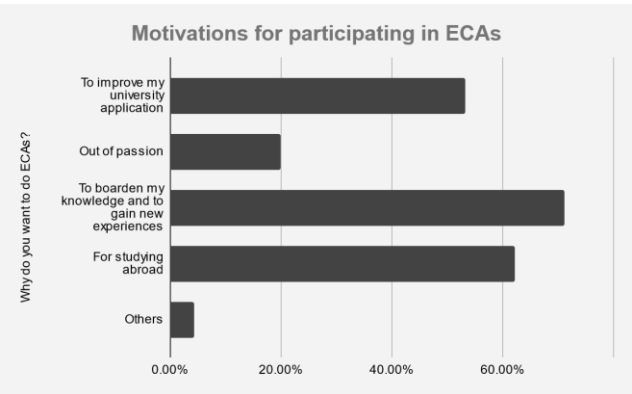
When it comes to preferences for online or offline ECA opportunities, a significant majority (73.3%) expressed a preference for online engagements, while 26.7% still favored offline engagements.



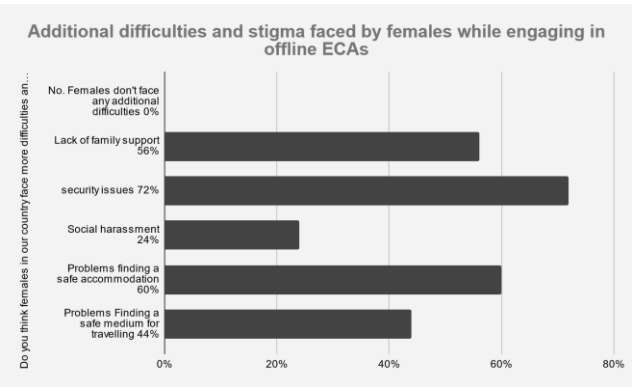
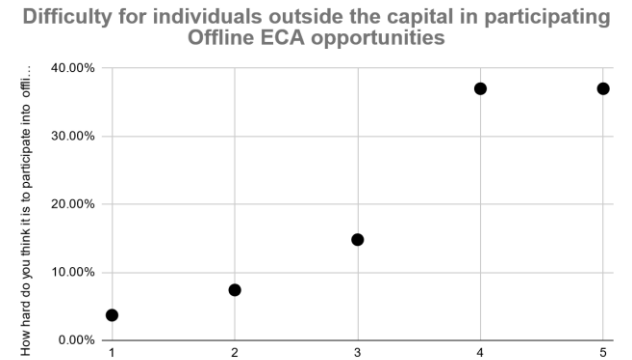
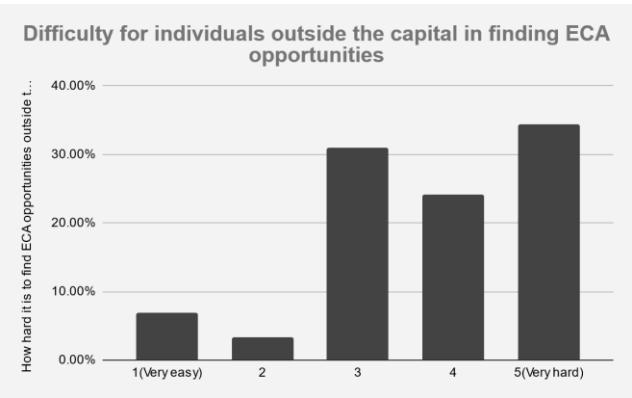
Regarding the existence of platforms facilitating ECA opportunity discovery in Bangladesh, responses varied. While 17.8% of participants acknowledged the presence of such platforms, a higher proportion (28.9%) believed there were none. The majority (53.3%) were uncertain about the existence of accessible platforms.



When asked about their Motivations for participating in ECAs, most of the participants (71.1%) expressed their desire to broaden their knowledge and gain new experiences, recognizing the value of ECAs in personal growth. Additionally, 62.2% viewed ECAs as a means to enhance their prospects of studying abroad. Furthermore, 53.3% sought ECAs to improve their university applications, while 20% expressed engaging out of pure passion.



When asked about the difficulty for individuals outside the capital, Dhaka in finding ECA opportunities, The responders indicated that 34.5% found it very hard, highlighting the challenges faced by those residing outside the capital city. Similarly, when considering participation in national Olympiads, workshops, and offline opportunities, 37% rated it as very hard, indicating limited accessibility for those residing outside the capital, Dhaka.



A gender-specific question was included for female respondents, focusing on the additional difficulties and stigma they may face while engaging in ECAs. The findings demonstrated that a majority of female respondents perceived specific challenges. Security issues (72%), problems finding safe accommodations (60%), and a lack of family support (56%) were among the difficulties cited. Additionally, social harassment (24%) and challenges

finding safe transportation options (44%) were identified as obstacles for females participating in ECAs.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Participants***

The study participants consisted of a sample of Bangladeshi youth selected through convenience sampling. The inclusion criteria for this study were middle school, high school, and undergraduate students enrolled in educational institutions in Bangladesh who were able to provide informed consent. Participants voluntarily participated in the survey, ensuring a diverse range of responses from different educational levels and backgrounds.

### ***Survey Instrument***

A structured survey questionnaire was developed to collect data on various aspects related to extracurricular activities (ECAs). The questionnaire comprised multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions designed to gather comprehensive information. The survey instrument included items to capture:

- Demographic information (e.g., gender)
- Perceived difficulty of finding ECA opportunities
- Preferences for online or offline ECAs
- Awareness of platforms that facilitate ECA opportunities
- Motivations for engaging in ECAs
- Difficulties faced by individuals outside the capital, Dhaka
- Gender-specific challenges, particularly for female students

The survey was meticulously designed to ensure clarity and relevance of the questions to the study objectives.

### ***Data Collection***

The data collection process involved distributing the survey questionnaire through an online platform. Participants received clear instructions on how to complete the

questionnaire and were given sufficient time to respond. The online distribution ensured wide reach and convenience for participants to respond at their own pace[18]. Confidentiality and anonymity were rigorously maintained throughout the data collection process to encourage honest and unbiased responses. The online platform also allowed for efficient data management and analysis.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

Ethical guidelines were strictly followed throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their participation. The consent process included detailed information about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the participants' rights to decline or withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. No identifying information was collected or included in the analysis or reporting.

The data were used solely for research purposes, adhering to ethical standards to protect participants' privacy. The study complied with the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration of 2013 as suggested by the World Medical Association. This included ensuring that participants' rights and well-being were prioritized, and ethical issues such as data confidentiality and the right to withdraw were clearly communicated and respected.[19]

## **DISCUSSION**

The findings from this study highlight several critical issues regarding the accessibility and participation in extracurricular activities (ECAs) among students in Bangladesh, revealing significant urban-rural disparities, gender-specific challenges, and a marked preference for online ECAs.

The results demonstrate a considerable disparity in ECA accessibility between students in urban areas, particularly

Dhaka, and those in rural regions. Over 58.5% of respondents outside Dhaka rated the difficulty of finding and participating in ECAs as "hard" or "very hard." This urban-rural divide is consistent with previous research indicating that rural students face limited opportunities due to inadequate infrastructure, lack of awareness, and fewer resources [20][14]. Addressing these disparities requires concerted efforts from policymakers and educational institutions to develop and promote ECA opportunities in rural areas, including improving transportation, creating awareness campaigns, and leveraging technology to bridge the gap.

A significant majority of students (73.3%) expressed a preference for online ECAs. This preference aligns with the growing trend towards digital learning and remote engagement, which offers flexibility and accessibility, particularly for students in remote areas [7][9]. However, the effectiveness of online ECAs depends on factors such as internet accessibility and digital literacy. While online ECAs can mitigate some of the barriers faced by rural students, it is essential to ensure that these digital platforms are user-friendly and accessible to all students. Additionally, educational institutions should consider hybrid models that combine the benefits of both online and offline ECAs to provide comprehensive and inclusive opportunities.

The survey revealed that 53.3% of participants were uncertain about the existence of platforms that facilitate ECA opportunities, and 28.9% believed no such platforms exist. This lack of awareness indicates a need for better communication and promotion of existing resources. Educational institutions, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and policymakers should collaborate to enhance the visibility and usability of platforms that help students find ECA opportunities. Developing a centralized,

accessible, and widely promoted platform could significantly improve students' ability to engage in ECAs [21-23].

The primary motivations for engaging in ECAs were to broaden knowledge and gain new experiences (71.1%), support university applications (53.3%), and prepare for studying abroad (62.2%). These motivations underscore the perceived value of ECAs in enhancing academic and career prospects. Educational institutions should recognize these motivations and provide structured guidance and support to help students leverage their ECA experiences effectively.

Female students reported facing substantial challenges in participating in ECAs, including security issues (72%), lack of family support (56%), and problems finding safe accommodation (60%). These barriers reflect deep-rooted societal and cultural norms that hinder female participation in extracurricular activities [24][25]. Addressing these gender-specific challenges requires a multi-faceted approach, including increasing family and community support, ensuring safe and secure environments for female students, and promoting gender equality through policy and educational reforms.

The findings of this study shed light on the current landscape of extracurricular activities (ECAs) among Bangladeshi students, revealing insights into accessibility, gender disparities, and preferences for online versus offline engagement. The discussion synthesizes key findings and offers interpretations, implications, and potential avenues for future research.

Future research should continue to explore these themes, incorporating larger and more diverse samples to validate and extend the findings. Additionally, longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into the long-term impacts of

improved ECA accessibility on students' development and success. This research contributes to the broader discourse on educational equity and underscores the importance of inclusive practices in enhancing student outcomes.

Overall, this study contributes to the existing literature on ECAs in Bangladesh and provides valuable insights for

policymakers, educators, and stakeholders. By addressing the identified challenges and leveraging opportunities, it is possible to create a more inclusive and supportive environment that fosters the holistic development of all students, irrespective of their background or circumstances.

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