



WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION AND CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN CHITTAGONG DISTRICT, BANGLADESH

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Abstract:

This study has highlighted women's participation and the challenges they face in higher education in the Chittagong district. The rate of women's education at the traditional level has been analyzed. This study has highlighted how women can participate in higher education in the Chittagong district. Data has been collected from (332) female students of various colleges and universities in Chittagong district through questionnaires. Through this data collection, it is evident that most women have pursued higher education for career and social status. However, in some cases, they do not receive financial and psychological support, which decreases the rate of education. Another issue mentioned in this study is that women in higher education are facing a lack of accommodation, mental stress, insecurity in educational institutions, family obstacles, and transportation problems. However, women in higher education (97%) have agreed with the following issues. Introducing scholarships for female students in higher education, eliminating social prejudices, providing safe hostels and transportation, providing special facilities for poor and marginalized women, and increasing the number of female teachers. This study highlights the current context of women's education in the Chittagong district. The information from this study will provide significant benefits to schools, colleges, universities, and the country's education administration and policymakers.

Keywords: higher education, policy making in education, women's participation, women's education, Chittagong district

1. Introduction

According to the summary of the Population and Housing Census of Bangladesh 2022, the country has a population of 169.83 million, of whom the majority are women (Manik,

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2024). Like many developing countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, women in Bangladesh have been historically and systematically exploited by men, according to Ahmed (2004, as cited in Jahan *et al.*, 2016). Despite women's contributions to daily life, from supporting the family to economically productive activities, women continue to face discrimination due to various factors, ranging from male dominance, ethnocentrism, and ignorance of religious beliefs. According to Ahmed (2004) and Pishgahifard *et al.* (2011) (as cited in Jahan *et al.*, 2016). As a result, women are falling behind men in exercising power inside and outside the home. According to Chen *et al.* (1997), as cited in Jahan *et al.* (2016), they are becoming more socially and economically vulnerable. According to Grimes *et al.* (2006) and Miaji (2010, as cited in Jahan *et al.* 2016), if women are to be agents of change, they must have equal access to educational opportunities (Lina, 2023). However, the Industrial Revolution in the early twentieth century, after World War I and the continuous feminist movement that began in the 1930s brought women into the limelight. They were given the opportunity to educate themselves and engage in formal economic activities, enabling them to exercise power within their families and in the wider society.

According to Tong (1998), Ahmed (2004), and CWD (2007) (as cited in Jahan *et al.*, 2016), the development of a modern society depends to a large extent on the nature and quality of higher education. Therefore, the role of higher education is to prepare competent, knowledgeable, and visionary individuals to assume various higher responsibilities. It is difficult to overemphasize the growing importance of knowledge in the modern world, especially in the era of globalization and in an environment of intense competition worldwide. There is significant potential for higher education growth, especially in developing countries. According to UGC (2006), (as cited in Monem & Baniamin, 2010), in the present world, the rate of female education is increasing day by day. The rate of female education is increasing across most regions of Bangladesh.

Accordingly, although research on the rate of female education exists, research on this topic in the Chittagong district is limited. In the present world, the rate of female education is increasing day by day. The rate of female education is increasing across most regions of Bangladesh. Accordingly, although research on the rate of female education exists, research on this topic in Chittagong district is limited. Women's educational opportunities have been identified as a key factor in social change (Lina, 2023). Research by Lina (2023) has shown that educated women participate in family decision-making and can play leadership roles in society. The expansion of women's education plays a significant role in increasing economic independence and social status in South Asian countries (Islam & Karim, 2022). This study showed that social attitudes, family barriers, and financial constraints hinder women's participation in higher education (Rahman *et al.*, 2024). Although women's participation in higher education in Bangladesh is increasing, more policy initiatives are needed to maintain quality (Monem & Baniamin, 2010).

Female literacy rates in Bangladesh have been extensively studied. However, female literacy rates in “higher” education receive very little attention from researchers,

with no detailed account of the various institutional, subject-based and socio-economic factors that influence women's participation. The only worthy objective of the study is to cover these issues. The main objectives of the study are: to know about the current female participation in higher education in Chittagong district, to analyze the economic and social factors behind female participation in higher education in Chittagong district, and to identify what policy makers should do to increase female participation in higher education in Chittagong district. This study will play a special role as a resource for every government, private institution, various NGOs, families, and policymakers in the Chittagong district.

2. Methodology

This study has been conducted to understand the progress of women's higher education in Chittagong district and the challenges it faces. The objective of this study is to accurately determine the level of participation of female students in the Chittagong district. Also, to understand the financial, family, social and psychological barriers that female students face. This study has been conducted through questionnaires on female students of various colleges and universities in the Chittagong district. Data collection and analysis in this study have used both qualitative and quantitative data. A total of 332 female students participated in this study, and a focus group discussion was conducted. Each one gave their opinion, which is presented beautifully here. This study has used Microsoft Excel and Word software to analyze and present the data beautifully. The students' opinions have been analyzed through percentages, graphs and tables. Due to a lack of time, it was not possible to do this anywhere other than the city of Chittagong in the Chittagong district. Complete confidentiality was maintained throughout this study.

3. Ethical Consideration

This study was conducted in full compliance with ethical guidelines to collect data on female students' participation in higher education and the challenges they face in the Chittagong district. Before data collection, each participant was clearly informed about the study's purpose and benefits. Consent was obtained from all participants. Participants can change their opinions at any time. To maintain confidentiality, participants' personal identities were not disclosed or used outside the research. In this case, the integrity, transparency, and respect for participants throughout the research process have been maintained.

4. Results

The current rate of higher education among female students in the Chittagong district will be analyzed based on the collected data, along with its future direction.

Table 4.1: Age-based assessment of female students in higher education in Chittagong district

Age (in Years)	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents (%)
18-20	9	2.71
21-23	203	61.14
24-26	115	34.64
27+	5	1.51
Total	332	100

Table 4.1 shows that the number of female students in higher education aged 21-23 is the highest, which is 203 (61.14%). The number of female students aged 24-26 is 115 (34.64%). This is the second-highest position among higher education institutions in terms of the number of female students in the Chittagong district. The number of female students aged 18-20 is 9 (2.71%). The number of female students aged 27 or above is 5 (1.51%), the lowest here. From this result, it can be understood that the number of female students aged 21-23 is the highest in higher education in the Chittagong district. The number of female students aged 24-26 is somewhat significant in higher education. The number of female students aged 18-20 is very low, which is why most students in this age group have not yet enrolled in higher education. The number of female students aged 27 or above is also very low, which is why the rate of higher education is decreasing with age.

Figure 4.1 below clearly shows the percentage of female students in higher education in the Chittagong district by age.

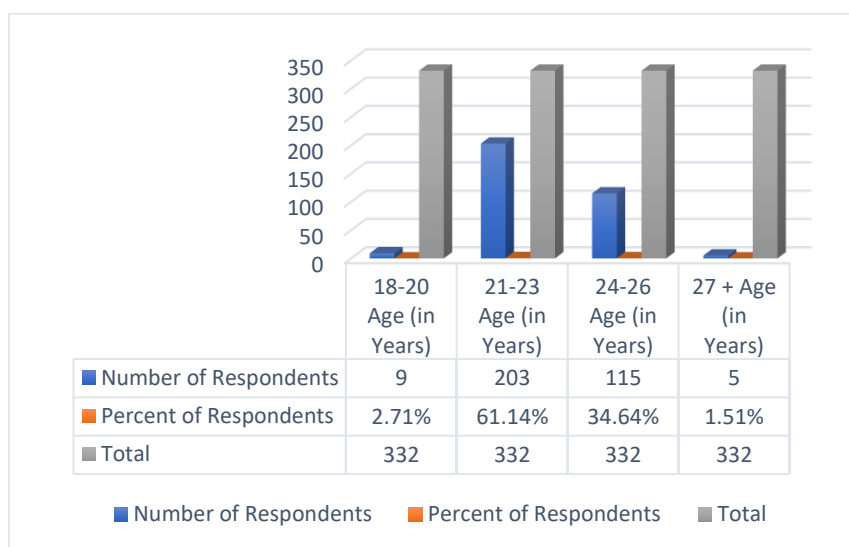


Figure 4.1: Age-based assessment of female students in higher education in Chittagong district

Table 4.2 shows that the number of female students in higher education in Chittagong district, Honours 4th year, is 110 (33%), the highest. The number of female students in higher education in the Honours 3rd year is 72 (22%), ranking third.

Table 4.2: Class-wise study of female students in Chittagong district.

Class	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents (%)
Honours 1st Year	13	4
Honours 2nd Year	49	15
Honours 3rd Year	72	22
Honours 4th Year	110	33
Masters	88	26
Total	332	100

The number of female students in higher education in Chittagong district, Honours 2nd year is 49 (15%), which is a relatively low participation of students. The number of female students in higher education in the Honours 1st year is 13 (4%), which is the lowest. And after graduation, there is Masters, here the number of female students in higher education in Chittagong district is 88 (26%), which is the second position. This result shows that the number of female students in higher education in the Chittagong district is relatively low in Honours 1st year, but from Honours 2nd year onward, it increases continuously. Even in Masters, female students are maintaining continuity in higher education. However, this indicates a positive trend for female students in higher education in the Chittagong district. It is also understood that first-year graduating students are overwhelmed by various obstacles. And later, after overcoming various obstacles, many students survive and continue their studies from the second year to the fourth year. It is clear that female students in higher education are maintaining continuity, and their participation will further accelerate in the future.

Figure 4.2 below shows the rate of female students studying higher education in the Chittagong district.

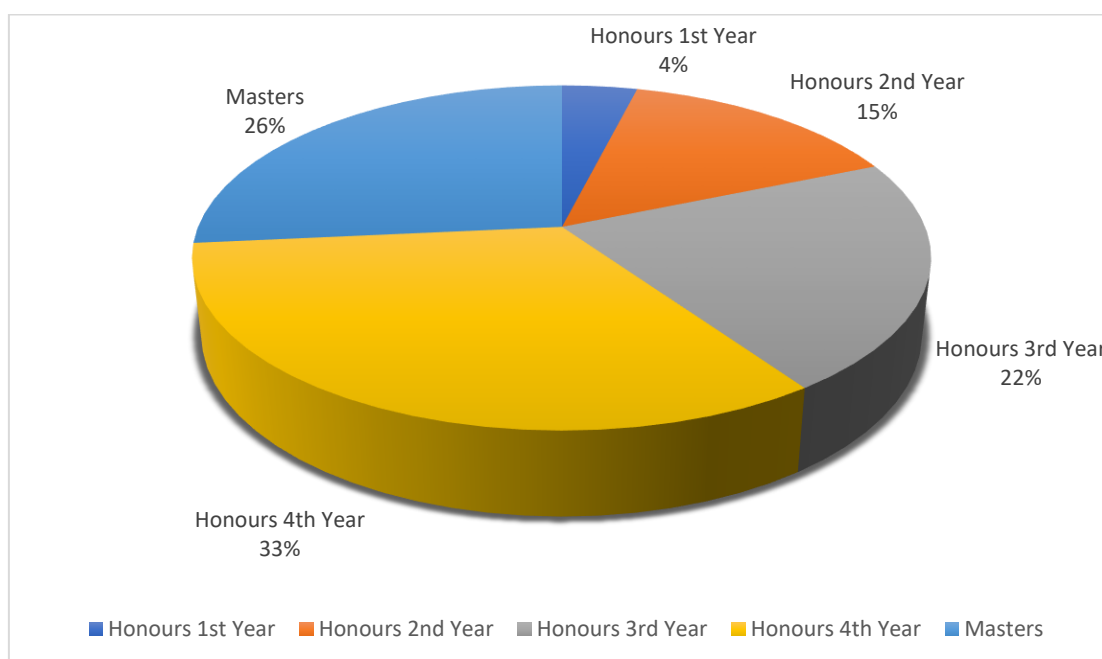


Figure 4.2: Ratio of female students studying by grade in Chittagong district

Table 4.3: Reasons for female students in Chittagong district to enroll in higher education. In Table 4.3, students gave multiple answers.

Reasons	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents (%)
To build a career	265	42.26
For social status	103	16.43
By family's wishes	73	11.64
By personal desire	176	28.07
For marriage	10	1.59
Total	627	100

Table 4.3 shows the different responses of female students towards higher education in Chittagong district. Here, one student gave more than one opinion. At this stage, most female students are expressing interest in higher education for career development, with 265 students, the highest number. 103 female students are participating in higher education for social status. Female students in the Chittagong district are interested in higher education mostly due to family wishes, which is 73. 176 are taking higher education due to personal interest, and 10 are for marriage, which is a very small number of students who have chosen higher education as a prerequisite for marriage. From these results, it can be understood that most of the female students have chosen higher education to build a career (42.26%). In the Chittagong district, female students have chosen social status over higher education (16.43%). Some are taking higher education due to family wishes (11.64%). (28.07%). Female students are pursuing higher education for personal interest and for marriage as an ideal housewife (1.59%).

The difference is shown in Figure 4.3 below.

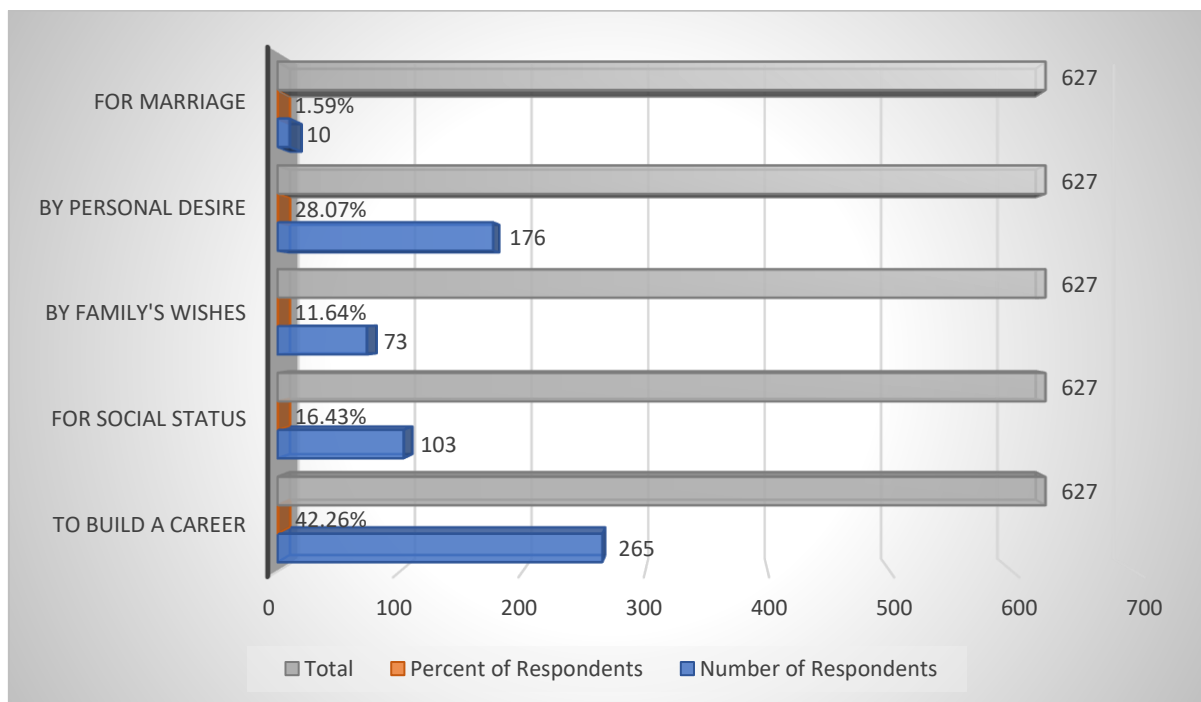


Figure 4.3: Comparative criteria for reasons for female students' admission to higher education in Chittagong district. In Figure 4.3, students gave multiple answers.

Table 4.4: The role of family in the participation of female students in higher education in Chittagong district. In Table 4.4, students gave multiple answers.

Introduction	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents (%)
Helps financially	295	50.26
Helps mentally	279	47.53
Doesn't help	13	2.21
Total	587	100

Table 4.4 shows that the family plays a very important role in female students' participation in higher education in the Chittagong district. Here, one student gave multiple opinions. At this stage, (50.26%) female students reported that their family supports them financially in pursuing higher education. And, along with this (47.53%), female students reported that their families support them mentally. Here (97.79%) female students receive support from their families in pursuing higher education. And (2.21%) female students do not receive support from their families in pursuing higher education. From this result, it can be understood that the role of the family is very important in women's higher education. Women's higher education is gradually increasing. Women are moving forward with their families' trust. However, some female students reported that their family does not support them mentally and financially, which is very limited.

Figure 4.4 below shows the role of the family behind women's higher education.

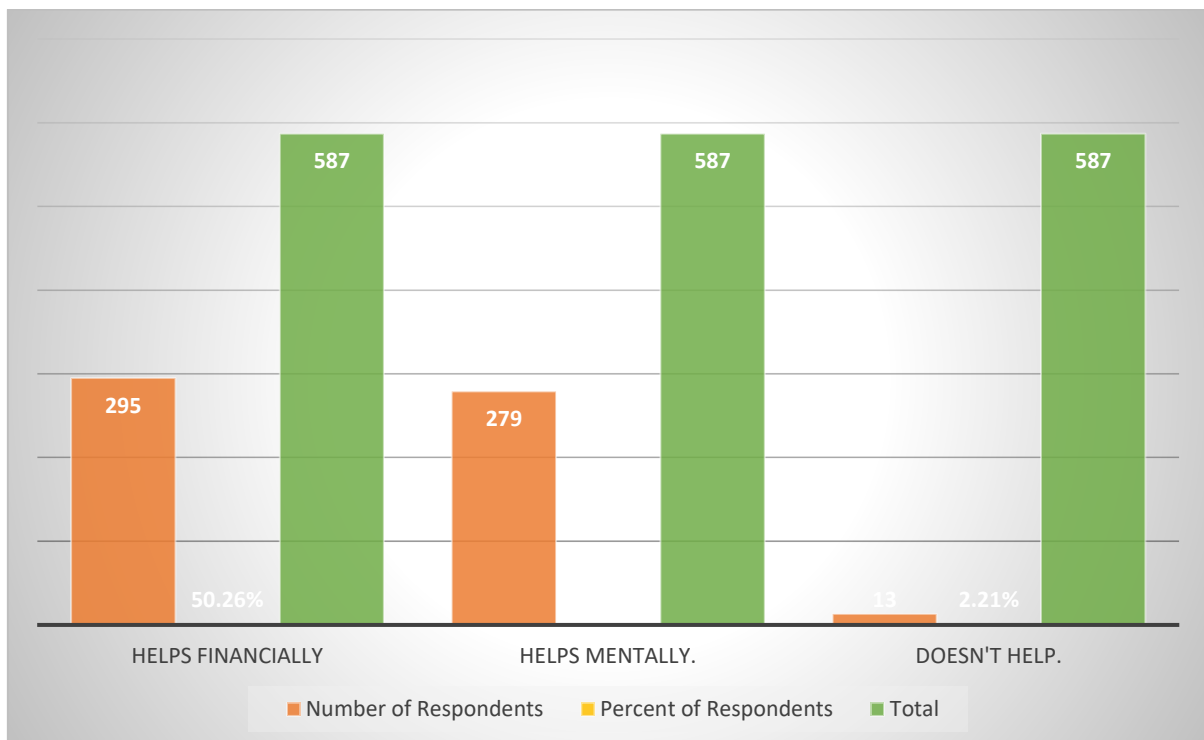


Figure 4.4: Comparison of the role of family in the participation of female students in higher education in Chittagong district. In Figure 4.4, students gave multiple answers.

Table 4.5: Status of female students in Chittagong district earnings while pursuing higher education

Response	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents (%)
Yes	45	14
No	180	54
Partial (tuition, freelancing, etc.)	107	32
Total	332	100

Table 4.5 shows the diverse picture of female students earning while pursuing higher education in the Chittagong district. (14%) of female students earn money along with their studies. (54%) of female students do not earn money along with their studies. And (32%) female students earn money partially along with their studies. This result shows that most female students do not earn money along with their studies. They are not self-sufficient to meet their own educational expenses. However, some students are able to meet their own expenses along with their studies. This creates a challenge for female students in terms of financial independence.

It is highlighted in Figure 4.5 below.

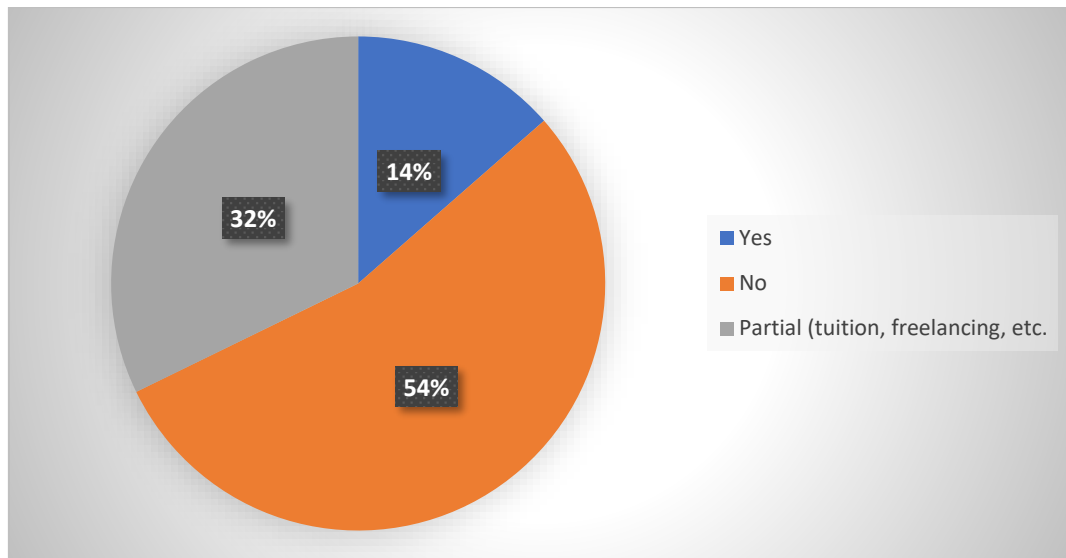


Figure 4.5: Rate of earning status of female students while pursuing higher education in the Chittagong district.

Table 4.6: The main problem of female students in Chittagong district pursuing higher education. In Table 4.6, students gave multiple answers.

Response	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents (%)
Financial problems	123	19.77
Family obstacles	25	4.02
Transportation problems	74	11.90
Lack of hostels	77	12.38
Stress	205	32.96
Educational institution environment	118	18.97
Total	622	100

Table 4.6 shows that female students in the Chittagong district are facing various problems in pursuing higher education. Here, one student gave multiple opinions. At this stage, female students (19.77%) mentioned financial problems in pursuing higher education. Family obstacles were mentioned by (4.02%) female students. Transportation problems were mentioned by (11.90%) female students. Lack of hostels (12.38%) among female students. The environment of educational institutions (18.97%), female students considered mental stress as the biggest problem in pursuing higher education, which (32.96%) female students supported. Analyzing this data, it can be understood that women face various obstacles in pursuing higher education. Due to these obstacles, female students are unable to move forward. If the crises are not resolved, women's career development will be hampered.

The criteria for this are highlighted in Figure 4.6 below.

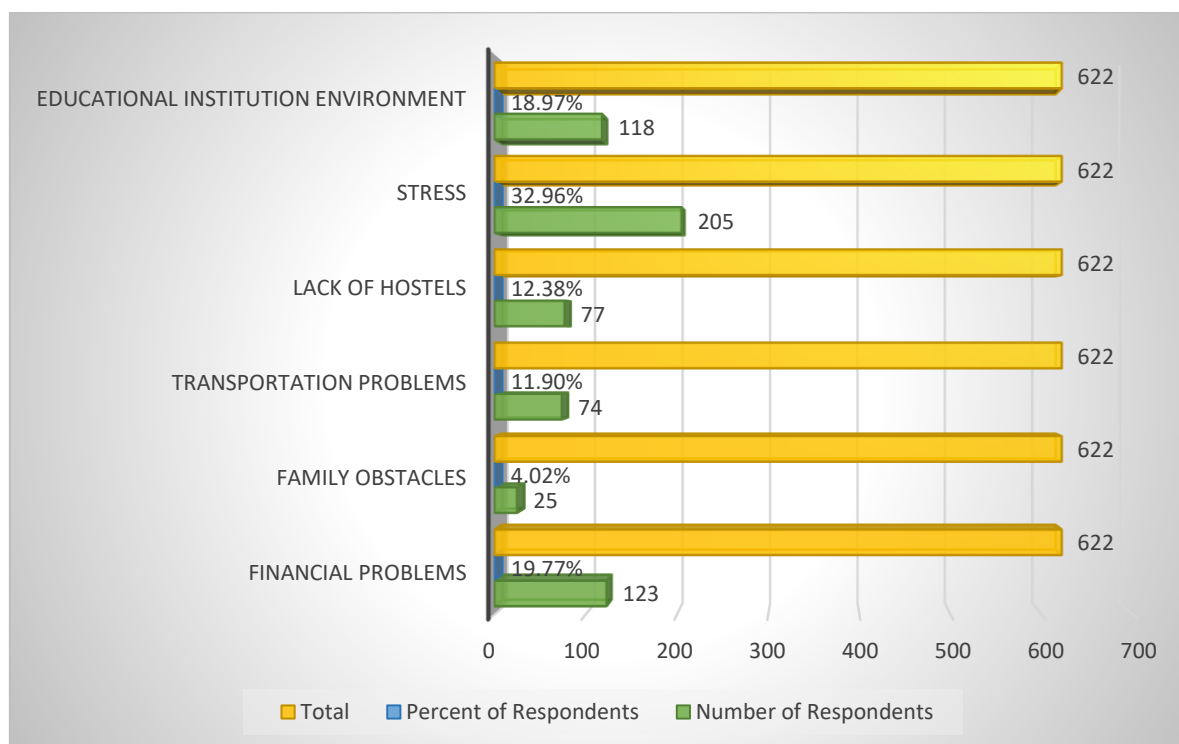


Figure 4.6: Comparative picture of the main problems of female students pursuing upper education in Chittagong district. In Figure 4.6, students gave multiple answers.

Table 4.7: Perception of safety of female students in Chittagong district

Response	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents (%)
Always safe	92	28
A little unsafe	235	71
Completely unsafe	5	1
Total	332	100

Table 4.7 shows that the safety of female students pursuing higher education in the Chittagong district has been examined. In the Chittagong district, female students (28%) always feel safe in pursuing higher education. Female students (71%) feel somewhat

unsafe. This is the key point of the study: it shows that, at this stage, students suffer from insecurity in one way or another. Female students (1%) feel completely unsafe, which is a cause for concern if it is low. This result shows that female students in the Chittagong district remain insecure about pursuing higher education. A lot of work remains to be done to ensure the safety of female students. Timely and necessary steps should be taken to eliminate this insecurity.

The safety rate for female students pursuing higher education in Chittagong district is shown in Figure 4.7 below.

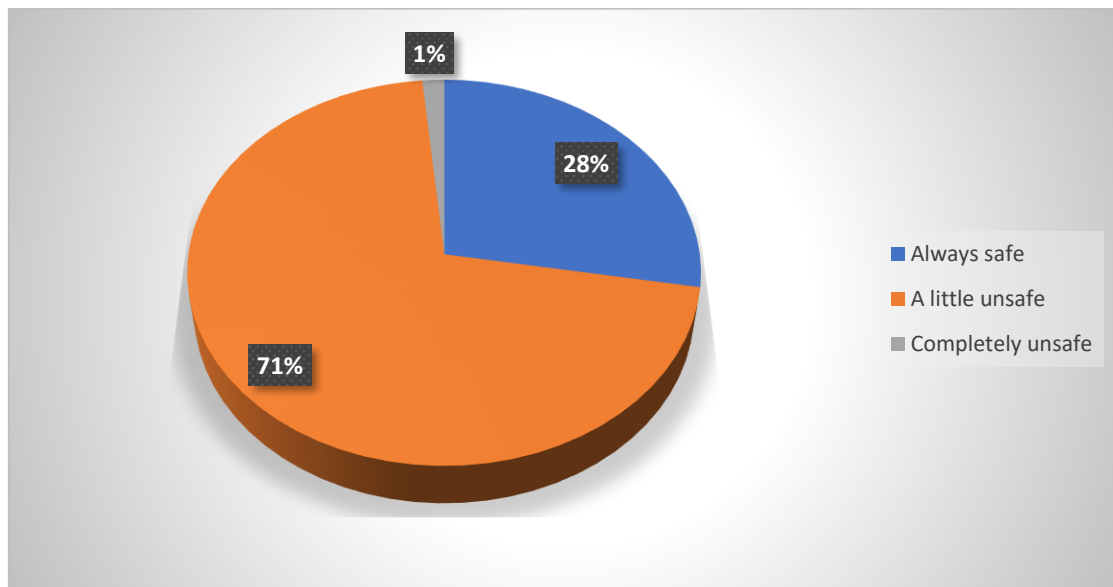


Figure 4.7: Safety ratio of female students in Chittagong district

Table 4.8: Reasons for discrimination against females students in higher education in the Chittagong district

Response	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents (%)
Yes	36	11
No	142	43
In some cases	154	46
Total	332	100

Table 4.8 shows the results of discrimination against female students studying in higher education in Chittagong district. In the Chittagong district, (11%) female students reported being discriminated against in higher education participation. (43%) female students reported that they were not discriminated against. Again (46%) female students reported that they were discriminated against in some cases, and this is the largest part of the study. From the analysis of this data, it can be understood that women are still discriminated against in higher education participation in the Chittagong district. This is the biggest problem. Some students have been directly discriminated against, while some students have been discriminated against to a lesser extent. When these two are combined, 57% (46% + 11%) of female students have faced discrimination in some way.

Discrimination against students has not yet been completely eliminated. Necessary steps should be taken to eliminate this discrimination.

The rate of discrimination is given in Figure 4.8 below.

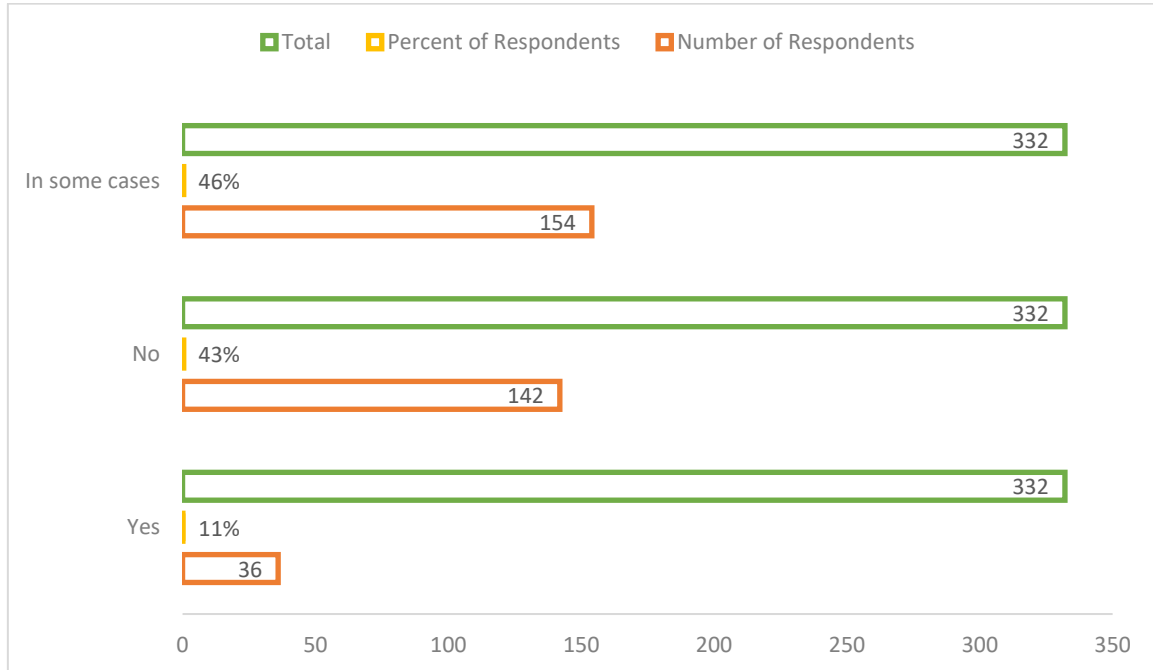


Figure 4.8: Comparative picture of discrimination faced by female students in higher education in the Chittagong district

Table 4.9: Future plans for female students in higher education in Chittagong district

Response	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents (%)
Government jobs	179	54
Private jobs	45	14
I want to be an entrepreneur	49	15
I want to start a family	15	5
Something else	44	13
Total	332	100

Table 4.9 presents a report on the future plans of female students to pursue higher education in the Chittagong district. Female students in higher education (54%) want to pursue government jobs, which is the largest group in the study. Female students are interested in private jobs (14%). Female students (15%) want to become enterpriser, female students want to start a house (5%), which is the smallest number of students expressing interest. Last but not least (13%) female students want to do something else. Analyzing this data, it can be understood that women in Bangladesh want to be economically independent. Women are now aware of their careers. Female students are now very aware of what their future will be like. This data highlights a positive aspect of female students in Bangladesh. This is clearly shown in Figure 4.9 below.

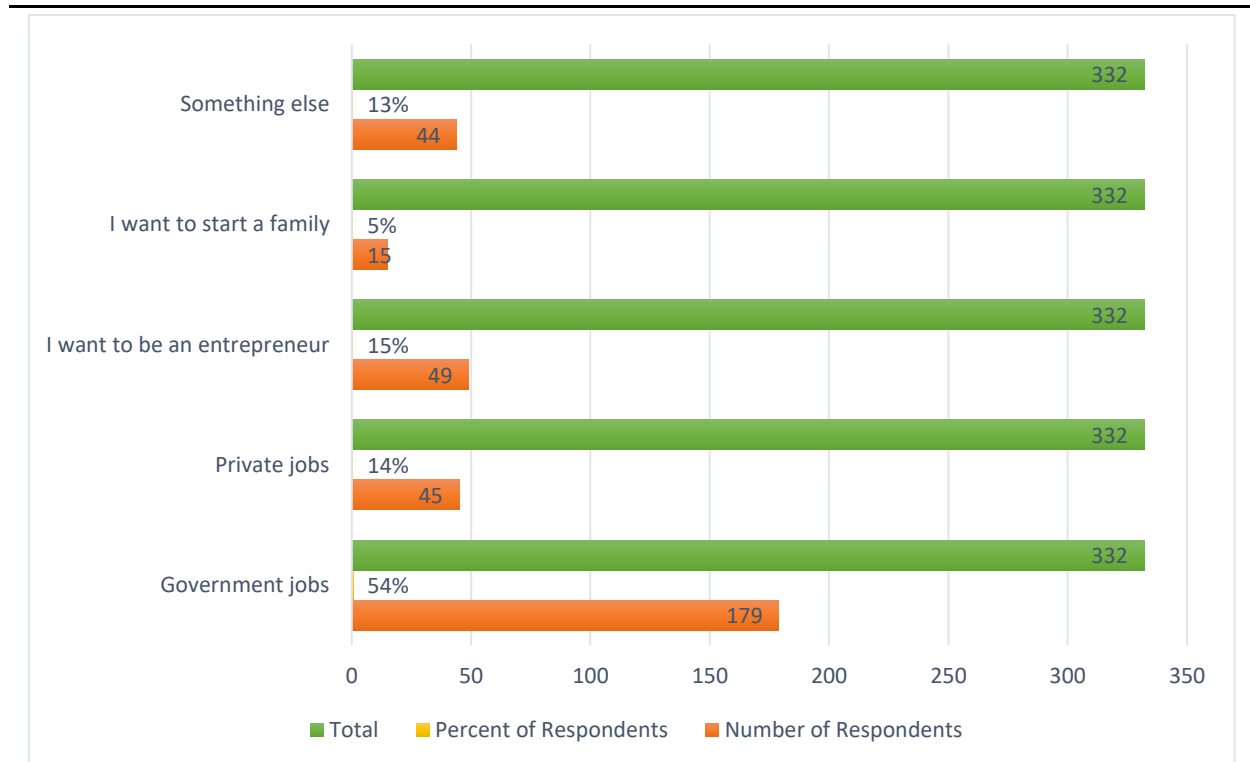


Figure 4.9: Future plans for female students in higher education in Chittagong district

Table 4.10: Confidence to continue female students in higher education in Chittagong district

Response	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents (%)
Yes	306	92
No	5	2
Uncertain	21	6
Total	332	100

Table 4.10 shows a report on the confidence of female students in the Chittagong district to pursue higher education. (92%) female students in the Chittagong district are confident in pursuing higher education. (2%) female students are not confident in pursuing higher education. And (6%) female students are still uncertain about pursuing higher education. Analyzing this data, it can be understood that female students in Bangladesh are very optimistic about pursuing their studies. Female students have started thinking about their own careers. Due to various obstacles, some students are not able to pursue their higher education. Again, some students are still in uncertainty. However, overall, the study gives a message that female students now want to build their own future by utilizing education.

The rate of confidence of female students in pursuing higher education is shown in Figure 4.10 below.

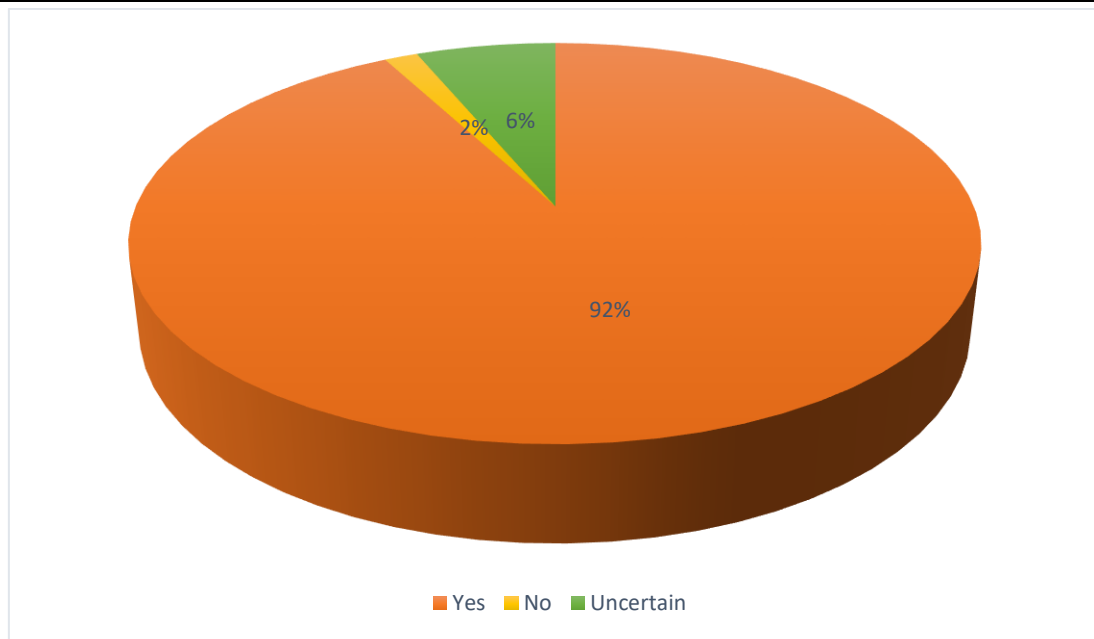


Figure 4.10: Confidence ratio of female students to continue higher education in the Chittagong district

Table 4.11: Female students agree with proposals to increase women's participation in higher education in Chittagong district

Response	Number of Respondents	Percent of Respondents (%)
Yes	321	97
No	11	3
Total	332	100

Table 4.11 shows that a report has been prepared on suggestions from female students in higher education in Chittagong district to increase their participation, along with their attitudes. The suggestions are to introduce scholarships for female students, reduce tuition fees for poor women, eliminate prevalent prejudices, provide safe hostels, and increase the number of female students. To increase the participation of women in higher education, (97%) female students agreed with these suggestions. However, (3%) female students did not agree. This result shows that female students in higher education are very conscious about their studies. A way forward for female students has emerged here. However, there are some obstacles which should be addressed appropriately; there will be disruption. If these suggestions are implemented, female students will move forward, and women's empowerment will increase. The percentages are mentioned in Figure 4.11 below.

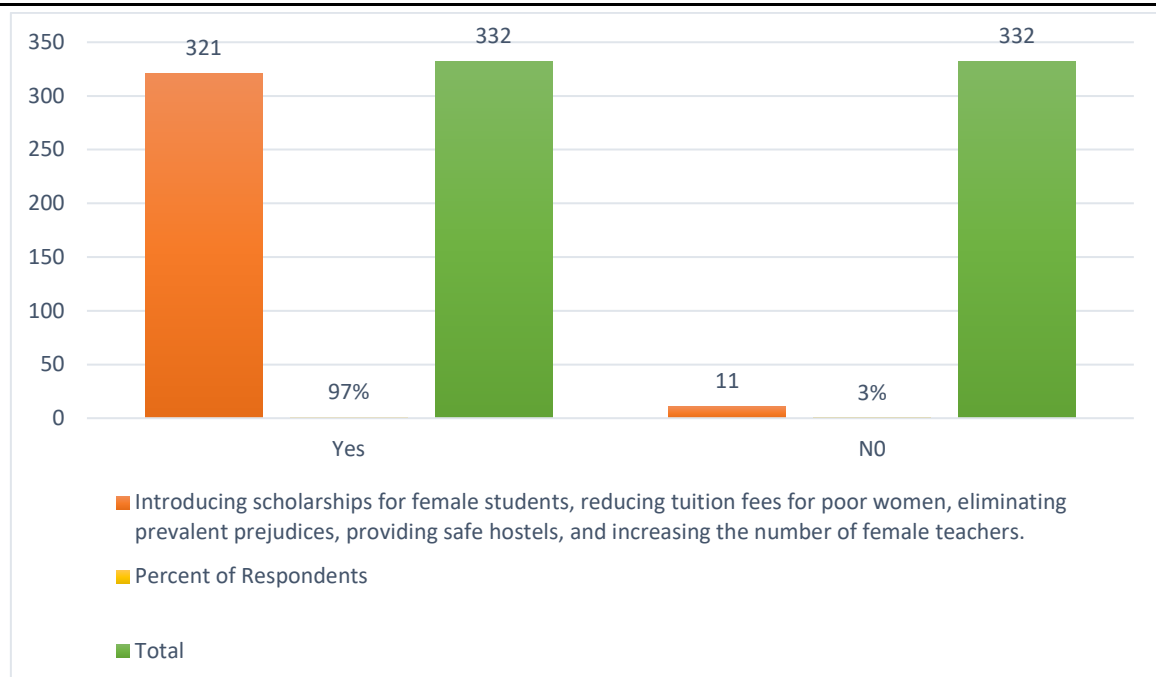


Figure 4.11: Comparative picture of female students' agreement with proposals to increase women's participation in higher education in the Chittagong district

5. Discussions

The current status of female student enrolment in higher education in Chittagong district is explored in this article. The findings reveal that the overwhelming majority of young women enter higher education when they are 21 – 23 years old. Similarly, projected according to age-specific enrolment in association with this trend, female students' participation at the tertiary level of education across Bangladesh is continually rising (Lina, 2023; Islam & Karim, 2022). An interesting trend in this study was that the number of women increased steadily from the second year Honours till Masters, providing evidence that they continued with their studies after entering despite various academic and personal challenges. showed a similar trend, according to them, women's persistence is increased after the social/cultural initial obstacle is solved (Rahman et al., 2024).

Career aspirations are highlighted as the strongest motivator for women's participation in higher education at 42.26% as an influence factor. This is supported by previous research and the increased demand among women for higher education qualifications to attain economic freedom and upward social mobility (Lina, 2023; Monem & Banyamin, 2010). The exploration suggests that particular interest (28.07) has become a significant motivator in the Chittagong quarter due to evolving gender morals and increased tone-mindfulness. This adds another dimension to the study. Stress (32.96), fiscal difficulties, hostel installations, and unsafe transportation are among the major issues linked in the study. The study highlights that women in Bangladesh are encountering challenges in their educational journey due to stress, demarcation, and mobility-related instability, which align with the findings of this study (Jahan et al., 2016). However, this study makes a novel contribution by measuring the level of insecurity

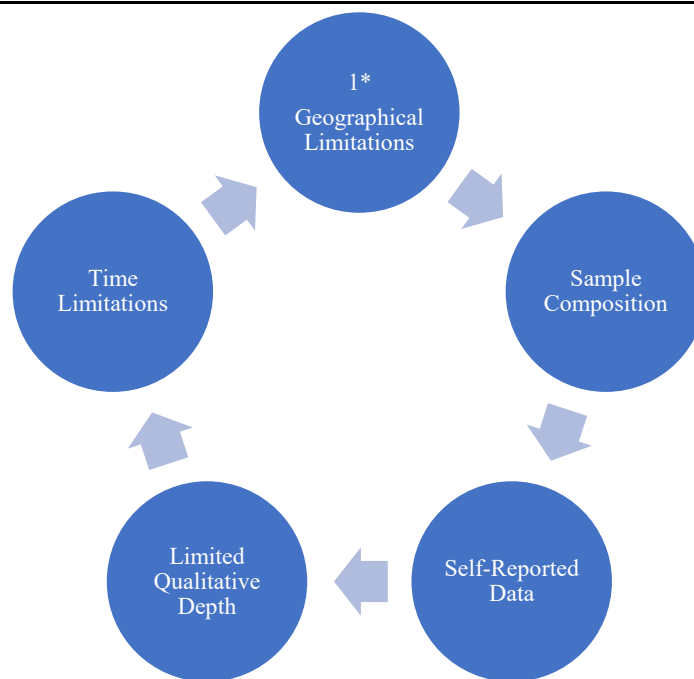
among female students – showing that 71% feel somewhat unsafe, which has strong implications for gender-sensitive policy development in Chittagong district. Another important finding is that 57% of female students have experienced direct or indirect discrimination. This finding is consistent with the arguments of Ahmed (2004) and Grimes et al. (2006). They state that patriarchal attitudes and institutional bias remain major barriers to women's education. However, the present study goes beyond previous findings by systematically categorizing the types and extent of discrimination across institutions in the district. The study also highlighted a positive aspect: 92% of female students expressed strong confidence in continuing their education, a figure higher than the national trend observed in previous studies. This optimism indicates a transformational shift in women's attitudes towards self-development and long-term career planning.

5.1 Scientific and Practical Significance

Research on women's involvement in higher education across Chittagong has been conducted, with district-specific empirical evidence available. Data on age, motivation, discrimination, security, and economic constraints can help policymakers design more targeted interventions. Additionally, demographic data is valuable for research purposes. Deeper comprehension of how stress and insecurity impact educational success - two aspects that have not been previously explored by Bangladeshi studies. 97% of female students endorse practical suggestions such as scholarships, safe transportation, hostels, and expanding the number of female faculty members. All recommendations are supported by these proposals. Educational institutions and national policymakers can benefit from the findings by developing gender-responsive strategies to improve women's access and retention in higher education.

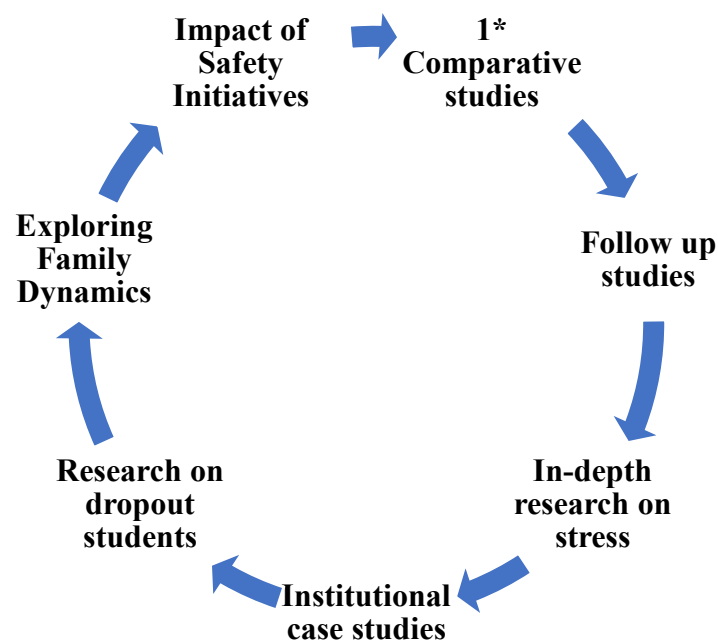
5.2 Research Limitations

Only the urban areas of the Chittagong district were analyzed due to time limitations. Not all were part of the rural and marginalized population. Selection bias was likely present because the study relied on female college and university students who had either dropped out or never enrolled. All results rely on questionnaires that they themselves fill out, and some may not be very sensitive to issues such as personal biases, emotional impact, or harassment. Despite the use of focus groups, additional FGDs or more extensive interviews could have provided greater insight into socio-cultural barriers. The study was unable to take a longitudinal approach to examine changes in motivations and barriers over time. Future research directions are unclear.



5.3 Future Research Directions

The outcomes and constraints may lead future research to concentrate on:



To compare women's participation in higher education in other districts of Bangladesh and the Chittagong district, with an emphasis on different rural areas of Bangladesh. To monitor changes in their challenges, motivations and educational attainment outcomes by combining and reviewing everything. Given that early educational stress for women remains a challenge, future research on female students could examine the causes and effects of this stress. To conduct a thorough examination

of universities and colleges to understand their institutional practices, gender policies and support systems. To gain insight into the perspectives of women dropping out of higher education, and to understand the structural patterns. Future research could explore how cultural and economic factors within the family influence female students' educational choices, given the importance of family support. To investigate how campus and cyber security and improved transportation impact female students' well-being.

6. Recommendations

- Women's access to education should address social and cultural norms, poverty, gender-based discrimination, and lack of institutional support (Reshi et al., 2022).
- Governments, NGOs, and educational institutions should collaborate to launch awareness campaigns and community engagement initiatives that promote the benefits of women's education (Hakim et al., 2024).
- Promote inclusivity in decision-making processes within households, fostering an environment where women's voices are valued (Mou, 2024).
- Education must be easy and open for women's education (Islam, 2010).
- Encouraging women to use ICT tools and the use of the internet for their day-to-day work, study and research (Mishra & Sahoo, 2020).

7. Conclusion

This study shows that women are highly interested in higher education and are quite aware. Here, they are mainly interested in higher education for career and personal reasons. Many do it for social status and family wishes. Some women are seen expressing interest in higher education for marriage. There is no alternative to higher education for women's empowerment, which will make their path in society easier. Women's higher education is most effective when their families support them financially and emotionally. It is quite easy for those who receive this support to pursue higher education. Along with pursuing higher education, some female students earn a partial income, which makes their path easier. However, this opportunity is not available to everyone, which makes it difficult. The obstacles that women face in pursuing higher education include financial and transportation issues, family constraints, a lack of accommodation, and psychological pressure. Women are increasingly focused on higher education due to greater security in educational institutions. Female students living in insecure environments in educational institutions find it difficult to pursue higher education. There is a tendency for some women to be victims of discrimination in pursuing higher education, which makes it even more difficult. To have a better future, most female students want to get government or private jobs or become entrepreneurs, which is the main goal of pursuing higher education. Along with this, uncertainty is evident among some female students. Special scholarships, reduced tuition fees, elimination of prejudice, transportation facilities, and increased numbers of female teachers: if effective steps are

taken and implemented to increase women's participation in higher education in these areas of the survey, the participation of female students in higher education will increase. This study highlights the interest of female students in higher education in Chittagong district and the obstacles they face, which, if addressed further, will increase women's participation in higher education.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

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