PLATFORM - A Journal of Management & Humanities

DOI: https://doi.org/10.61762/pjmhvol9iss1art002

Received: 26 February 2026, Revised: 5 May 2026, Accepted: 15 May 2026, Published: 30 June 2026, Publisher: UTP Press, Creative Commons: CC BY 4.0

FROM LEDGERS TO LEADERSHIP: HOW WOMEN IN ACCOUNTING SHAPE A MORE EQUAL AND SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Nikhil Chandra Shil*, Jeba Fariya

Department of Business Administration, East West University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

*E-mail: nikhil@ewubd.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper develops a conceptual framework to explain women's participation in the accounting and finance sectors, examining how tertiary education, professional certification, occupational diversity, and religious perspectives shape progress toward gender equality, with particular relevance to Bangladesh and comparable developing-country contexts. The study adopts a conceptual methodology based on a systematic synthesis of published empirical and theoretical literature. Drawing on prior research findings, sectoral analyses, and interdisciplinary insights, the paper integrates evidence to construct a coherent framework that captures the structural, cultural, and institutional determinants of women's participation and advancement. Bangladesh is used as an illustrative context to ground and interpret the synthesised evidence. The synthesis of existing studies indicates that, despite rising female participation, significant barriers persist. These include socio-cultural expectations, organisational biases, and institutional constraints that limit women's progression into senior and leadership roles. The analysis further highlights that religious and societal norms play a critical mediating role, suggesting that gender-equality initiatives must be contextually aligned to be effective and sustainable. The paper contributes by consolidating dispersed empirical insights into an integrated conceptual framework that links gender, professional development, and socio-religious context. It moves beyond single-country or purely empirical analyses by offering a generalisable model applicable to similar socio-economic environments. The proposed framework provides a foundation for future empirical testing and comparative research. It offers practical guidance for policymakers, educators, and professional bodies to design context-sensitive interventions that support women's advancement in accounting and finance, while identifying key directions for further scholarly inquiry.

Keywords: *Women, accounting, gender equality, sustainable development goals, leadership*

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the accounting profession, like many fields within finance and economics, has been shaped by gendered divisions of labour, where social norms defined "appropriate" roles for men and women. As a result, women were systematically excluded from accounting education and practice, not due to lack of ability but because of entrenched socio-cultural and institutional barriers (Haynes, 2017; Komori, 2020). Although the past few decades have witnessed a substantial rise in women's participation in accounting globally, this numerical progress has not translated into equitable representation in leadership and decision-making roles (Khlif & Achek, 2017; Dambrin & Lambert, 2012). Recent global evidence suggests that women now constitute a significant proportion of the accounting workforce, often approaching parity at entry and mid-career levels (IFAC, 2023). However, a persistent "leaky pipeline" continues to characterise the profession, with women disproportionately underrepresented in senior leadership positions such as partners, chief financial officers, and board members (Broadbent et al., 2018; Kyriacou, 2021). This pattern is even more pronounced in developing economies, where gender disparities intersect with socio-economic constraints, institutional weaknesses, and cultural expectations (World Bank, 2023; IMF, 2023).

In the context of Bangladesh, these challenges are further intensified by deeply embedded socio-cultural and religious norms that influence women's educational choices, career trajectories, and professional advancement. Despite notable progress in female literacy and labour force participation, women remain underrepresented in professional accounting bodies and leadership roles (Lisa et al., 2025). For instance, women account for a small minority of members in professional accounting institutions, reflecting structural barriers that begin at the educational level and persist throughout career progression. Gendered expectations regarding family responsibilities, early marriage, and occupational segregation continue to constrain women's entry into and retention within the accounting profession (Hossain & Tisdell, 2005; Sultana, 2021). Education plays a critical gatekeeping role in shaping access to the accounting profession. While female enrollment in higher education has increased in Bangladesh, participation in accounting, finance, and other quantitatively oriented disciplines remains uneven due to persistent stereotypes and socio-cultural biases (Asadullah & Chaudhury, 2015; UNESCO, 2022). These early disparities contribute to a restricted pipeline of women entering professional certification programs such as chartered accountancy, where demanding training structures often conflict with societal expectations surrounding women's roles in family and caregiving (Annisette & Trivedi, 2013).

Beyond structural and educational barriers, religious and cultural contexts also play a significant role in shaping workplace norms and career outcomes. While religion does not inherently restrict women's participation in professional life, its interpretation within specific socio-cultural settings can influence gender roles and organisational practices (Syed & Van Buren, 2014). In many cases, subtle forms of social regulation, rather than formal prohibitions, affect women's mobility, professional visibility, and leadership opportunities, particularly in conservative or patriarchal environments (Metcalfe, 2011). Against this backdrop, a critical research problem emerges: despite growing participation of women in accounting, there remains a lack of integrated understanding of how educational pathways, professional structures, and socio-religious contexts interact to shape women's career progression, particularly in developing-country settings such as Bangladesh. Existing studies tend to examine these factors in isolation, resulting in fragmented insights that limit both theoretical advancement and policy relevance.

To address this gap, this paper adopts a conceptual approach, synthesising evidence from published empirical and theoretical studies to develop a comprehensive framework for understanding women's participation in accounting and finance. Bangladesh is used as an illustrative context to ground the analysis, but the framework is intended to offer broader applicability to similar socio-economic and cultural environments. By integrating perspectives on education, professional development, organisational practices, and socio-religious influences, the study seeks to advance a more holistic understanding of gender inequality in accounting. Positioned within the broader agenda of the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 5) (Gender Equality), this paper contributes to ongoing debates on inclusive professional development and equitable labour market participation. It aims not only to consolidate existing knowledge but also to provide a foundation for future empirical research and policy interventions that can support women's advancement in accounting and finance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on women's participation in accounting highlights a persistent paradox: while female entry into the profession has increased globally, structural inequalities continue to restrict their advancement into leadership roles. This section synthesises prior research by integrating global evidence with the specific socio-economic and cultural realities of Bangladesh, with particular attention to education, professional structures, organisational barriers, and broader institutional frameworks such as the UN SDG 5.

Participation Trends and the Pipeline Challenge

Globally, women have made significant inroads into the accounting profession, increasingly occupying technical and mid-level managerial roles (Haynes, 2017; Khlif & Achek, 2017). However, this growth has been uneven across regions, with South Asia, particularly Bangladesh, exhibiting persistent gender imbalances in leadership and decision-making positions (Lisa et al., 2025). In Bangladesh, improvements in female literacy, reaching over 71% in recent years (World Bank, 2023), have not translated into proportional representation in

accounting and finance. The literature identifies a critical "pipeline problem," where women's participation declines at successive stages of education and professional development. Socio-cultural norms often discourage women from pursuing quantitatively intensive fields such as accounting and finance, steering them instead toward traditionally "acceptable" disciplines (Asadullah & Chaudhury, 2015; UNESCO, 2022). As a result, the pool of women entering professional accounting pathways remains disproportionately small. Even among those who pursue accounting education, progression into professional certification remains limited. Evidence from Bangladesh shows that women constitute only a small fraction of members in professional bodies such as the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Bangladesh, highlighting the structural narrowing of the pipeline at advanced stages of qualification (ICAB, 2023). This pattern reflects broader global trends where entry-level parity does not translate into senior-level representation (IFAC, 2023).

Structural and Professional Barriers to Advancement

The literature consistently emphasises that underrepresentation is not a function of capability but of systemic and institutional barriers embedded within professional structures. Accounting qualifications typically require prolonged training, demanding work schedules, and workplace integration, which often conflict with gendered expectations surrounding marriage, motherhood, and caregiving (Annisette & Trivedi, 2013).

In the Bangladeshi context, these pressures are intensified by limited institutional support and gender-insensitive work environments. Studies indicate that many women either delay or abandon professional qualifications due to competing domestic responsibilities and a lack of family or organisational support (Sultana, 2021). The persistence of male-dominated workplace cultures further exacerbates these challenges, creating environments that are often unaccommodating to women's participation and advancement. Historical accounts from early female professionals in Bangladesh's accounting sector reveal that women were frequently treated as exceptions rather than equals, reflecting deeply embedded organisational biases. While attitudes have gradually evolved, the literature suggests that remnants of such exclusionary practices continue to influence hiring, promotion, and task allocation (Lisa et al., 2025).

Organisational Inequality: Glass Ceiling and Tokenism

The persistence of gender inequality in accounting has been widely explained through the theoretical lenses of the glass ceiling and tokenism. The glass ceiling refers to invisible barriers that prevent women from advancing to senior leadership positions despite possessing the necessary qualifications and experience (Cotter et al., 2001; Dambrin & Lambert, 2012). In accounting firms, this manifests in restricted access to leadership roles, client-facing opportunities, and strategic decision-making positions.

Tokenism theory (Kanter, 1977) further explains how women in male-dominated professions are often symbolically included but remain marginalised in terms of influence. In developing contexts such as Bangladesh, women's representation in leadership is sometimes confined to family-owned enterprises, where leadership roles are shaped by ownership structures rather than merit-based progression. This limits broader institutional change and reinforces the perception of women as peripheral participants in the profession.

Together, these frameworks highlight that increasing numerical representation alone is insufficient; meaningful inclusion requires transformation of organisational norms and power structures.

Work–Life Constraints and the "Leaky Pipeline"

The concept of the "leaky pipeline" is central to understanding women's attrition from the accounting profession (Kyriacou, 2021). Research shows that women are more likely than men to exit professional career tracks at mid-career stages, particularly due to work–life conflicts and inadequate institutional support. Postpartum challenges represent a critical but often overlooked dimension of this issue. Limited maternity leave, absence of childcare support, and inflexible working arrangements significantly constrain women's ability to sustain continuous career progression (Lewis et al., 2017). In Bangladesh, where gender-responsive labour policies are still evolving, these constraints are particularly acute, contributing to high attrition rates

among qualified female professionals (Sultana, 2021). These dynamics illustrate how organisational inflexibility, combined with societal expectations of caregiving, systematically disadvantages women in long-term career advancement.

Gender Pay Gap and Economic Inequality

The gender pay gap remains a persistent feature of the accounting profession across both developed and developing economies. Empirical studies show that women earn less than men even when controlling for education, experience, and job roles (Blau & Kahn, 2017). In accounting, this disparity is linked to occupational segregation, limited access to high-paying specialisations, and slower promotion trajectories (Khlif & Achek, 2017).

In Bangladesh, educational disparities and restricted access to advanced professional qualifications further exacerbate income inequality. Limited participation in elite certification pathways reduces women's bargaining power and restricts their access to leadership roles, reinforcing cumulative disadvantage over time (Hossain & Tisdell, 2005).

Socio-Cultural and Religious Influences

A critical dimension of the literature emphasises the role of socio-cultural and religious norms in shaping women's professional participation. While religion itself does not inherently restrict women's economic roles, its interpretation within specific cultural contexts often reinforces traditional gender expectations (Syed & Van Buren, 2014; Metcalfe, 2011). In Bangladesh, societal expectations surrounding women's roles in family and community life influence educational choices, career aspirations, and workplace participation. These influences are often indirect, operating through social norms rather than formal restrictions, yet they significantly affect women's mobility, visibility, and leadership opportunities (Lisa et al., 2025).

Women in Leadership and Development Outcomes

Despite these barriers, a substantial body of research highlights the positive impact of women's participation in leadership roles. Gender-diverse leadership has been associated with improved financial performance, stronger corporate governance, and more inclusive decision-making processes (Post & Byron, 2015; OECD, 2022). From a macroeconomic perspective, increasing women's participation in financial decision-making contributes to broader development outcomes, including economic growth and social inclusion (World Bank, 2023). However, global statistics reveal persistent underrepresentation: women occupy only a small proportion of CEO, board chair, and high-level financial governance roles worldwide, reflecting a systemic leadership gap that mirrors the Bangladeshi context (IMF, 2023).

Research Gaps and Conceptual Contribution

Although the literature provides extensive insights into gender inequality in accounting, several important gaps remain. First, much of the existing research is concentrated in Western contexts, limiting its applicability to developing countries with distinct socio-cultural and institutional dynamics (Haynes, 2017). Second, prior studies often examine educational, organisational, and cultural factors in isolation, resulting in a fragmented understanding.

There is a notable lack of integrative, framework-based research that connects these dimensions, particularly within the context of Bangladesh's accounting profession. Moreover, the interaction between socio-religious norms and professional structures remains underexplored.

Addressing these gaps, the present study adopts a conceptual synthesis approach, drawing on published empirical research to develop a comprehensive framework that explains women's participation in accounting. By linking educational pathways, professional requirements, organisational practices, and socio-cultural influences, the study contributes to a more holistic understanding of gender inequality. It provides a foundation for future empirical research and policy development.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Approach

This study adopts a conceptual research design, grounded in a qualitative and interpretive approach. Unlike empirical studies that rely on primary data collection, conceptual research seeks to advance

theory by synthesising and critically evaluating existing knowledge (Jaakkola, 2020). In this context, the study integrates insights from prior empirical and theoretical literature to develop a comprehensive understanding of women's participation in the accounting profession.

A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate given the complex and socially embedded nature of gender inequality, which is shaped by cultural norms, institutional structures, and organisational practices (Haynes, 2017). The study moves beyond descriptive review by engaging in thematic synthesis, identifying patterns, relationships, and underlying mechanisms that explain persistent gender disparities in accounting, especially within developing-country contexts such as Bangladesh.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The study relies exclusively on secondary data sources, drawing from a wide range of published materials. These include peer-reviewed academic journal articles in accounting, gender studies, and organisational research; reports from international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and UN Women; publications from professional accounting bodies such as ICAB and IFAC; government and policy reports; and selected industry reports and credible institutional analyses.

The literature selection prioritises works published between 2014 and 2024, ensuring contemporary relevance while incorporating foundational theories where necessary. Additional emphasis is placed on studies focusing on South Asia and comparable developing economies to maintain contextual relevance.

Search Strategy

A structured keyword-based search strategy was employed across academic databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, JSTOR, and SpringerLink. Key search terms included combinations of women in accounting, gender equality in finance, the accounting profession in Bangladesh, glass ceiling in accounting, tokenism in the workplace, gender, and female leadership in accounting firms. Boolean operators (AND, OR) and filters for peer-reviewed publications, subject area, and geographic focus were applied to refine results. This approach ensured a systematic yet flexible coverage of interdisciplinary literature.

Analytical Strategy

The study employs thematic analysis, following the principles outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). A deductive approach is used, guided by established theoretical constructs such as glass ceiling, tokenism, and gendered organisational structures. The analysis involves:

1. Identification of recurring themes across the literature
2. Categorisation of barriers and enabling factors affecting women's participation
3. Comparative synthesis between the global and Bangladeshi contexts
4. Integration of findings into a conceptual framework

Key analytical themes include educational access and pipeline constraints, professional and institutional barriers, organisational culture and leadership dynamics, work–life balance and career continuity, and socio-cultural and religious influences. This method enables the study to move from fragmented empirical findings toward a coherent explanatory framework.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

The theoretical foundation of this study draws upon multiple established frameworks to analyse the barriers women face in accessing and advancing within the accounting profession. These theories provide a lens through which gender dynamics, organisational culture, and systemic inequality can be better understood in both global and Bangladeshi contexts.

Theoretical Frameworks

Agency Theory and Gendered Leadership

Among various theories the study is based on, agency theory is very prominent. This theory explores the relationship between principals (e.g., board of directors) and agents (e.g., management) and how goal alignment and monitoring affect performance. In the context of gender, appointing women to top executive roles often raises questions about how the management team will respond, whether they will align with or resist female leadership. If management harbours traditional or patriarchal biases, this misalignment may hinder organisational performance and internal coordination (Salisa, 2024). Thus, organisational success in such

contexts hinges not just on competence but on cultural and gender acceptance within the firm.

Tokenism Theory

Tokenism theory (Kanter, 1977) posits that minority groups in organisations, be it by gender, ethnicity, or religion, are often symbolically included without meaningful influence. In corporate accounting, female representation on boards or executive teams is still alarmingly low in many developing economies, including Bangladesh. Women appointed to strategic roles are often treated as "tokens" rather than leaders, with limited decision-making power or influence (Ciappei, 2023). Unless female representation reaches a critical mass, these women remain marginalised, reinforcing stereotypes rather than dismantling them.

Glass Ceiling Effect

The glass ceiling refers to the invisible yet impenetrable barrier that prevents women from ascending to top-tier positions despite having qualifications and experience. While women are increasingly hired at entry and mid-levels in accounting, they often face stagnation in their career paths due to institutional biases and male-dominated decision-making hierarchies (Cimirotić, 2017; Bloch, 2020). This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in patriarchal societies, where leadership is subconsciously coded as male, and women are rarely considered suitable for strategic roles.

Gender Stereotypes and Workplace Segregation

Gender-based stereotypes continue to influence recruitment, team assignment, and promotion practices. Roles requiring leadership, fieldwork, or technical expertise are still perceived as "male work," while women are often relegated to supporting roles (Heilman, 2024). This cultural mindset limits women's visibility in strategic tasks such as audits or client management, denying them critical growth opportunities. Addressing these stereotypes is essential to creating an equitable organisational culture that nurtures leadership across genders.

Upper Echelons Theory

The Upper Echelons Theory (Hambrick & Mason, 1984) suggests that the characteristics of top executives, such as their values, experiences, and demographics, shape the strategic direction of an organisation. When more women are present in the upper echelon, the organisation benefits from diverse perspectives, inclusive decision-making, and improved ethical governance (Chen, 2019). In accounting firms, integrating gender diversity into top leadership can enhance performance and innovation, while also signalling a commitment to gender equity.

Together, these theories provide a multi-level explanation linking individual experiences, organisational structures, and broader societal norms.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is anchored in SDG 5, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. This goal is particularly relevant in the accounting profession, where female participation remains disproportionately low in leadership and decision-making roles.

This study proposes that systemic barriers (Tokenism, Glass Ceiling, Stereotyping) hinder women's progression in accounting careers despite growing entry-level participation. These barriers are rooted in cultural norms and institutional inertia, which contradict the goals outlined in SDG 5. At the same time, the presence of women in leadership, when authentically supported, enhances firm performance, ethical standards, and governance. Thus, bridging the gap between policy intentions and workplace realities is essential to ensuring that gender equality is not just symbolic but structural.

By integrating various theories and aligning them with the objectives of SG 5 (Figure 1), the study offers a robust framework to understand why gender gaps persist in accounting professions and how systemic reforms can contribute to sustainable gender equality. The conceptual framework serves as both a diagnostic and a prescriptive tool for researchers, policymakers, and institutions seeking to foster genuine empowerment for women in strategic financial sectors. The framework posits that increased entry-level participation alone is insufficient to achieve gender equality. Instead, outcomes are mediated by structural and cultural barriers that shape career trajectories. Without addressing these systemic constraints, women's

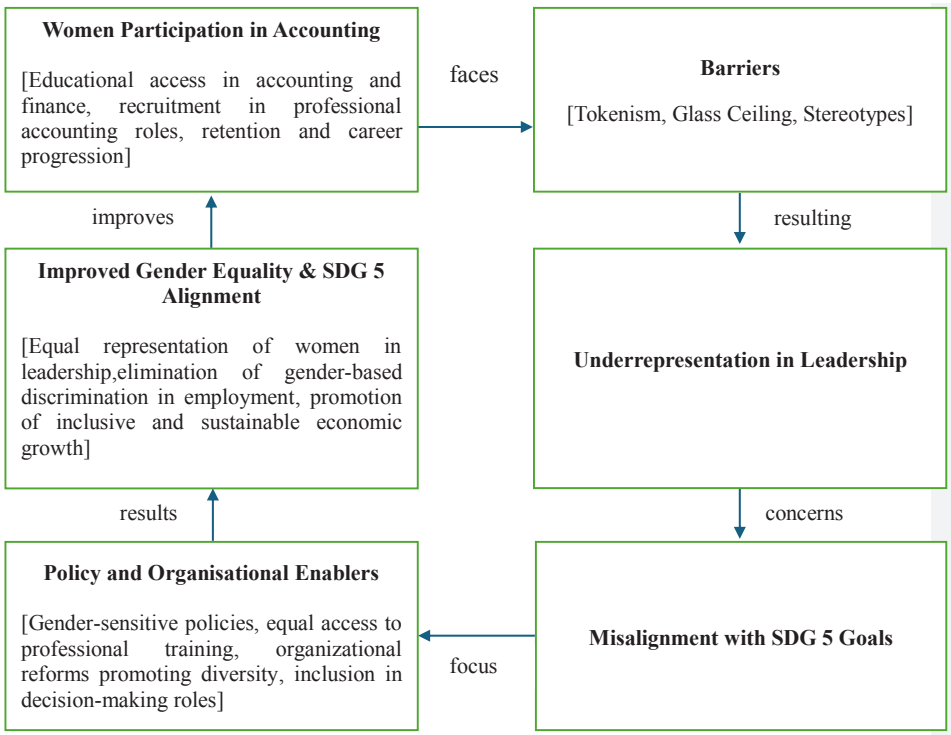


Figure 1 Integrated theoretical and conceptual framework of the study

representation will remain concentrated at lower levels, reinforcing inequality.

Conversely, when institutional reforms, supportive policies, and cultural shifts align, women's advancement into leadership roles can generate positive organisational and developmental outcomes, creating a reinforcing cycle of inclusion. The proposed framework makes three key contributions: integration, contextualisation and future research direction. It synthesises fragmented literature into a unified model linking education, profession, organisation, and culture (integration). It situates global theories within the specific realities of Bangladesh and similar developing economies (contextualization). It provides a foundation for empirical testing, enabling future studies to operationalise variables and examine causal relationships (future research direction).

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

This section presents the findings derived from a thematic synthesis of published literature, consistent with the conceptual methodology outlined earlier. Using a deductive thematic approach, the analysis is structured around the core dimensions of the conceptual framework: (i) educational pipeline, (ii) organisational and structural barriers, (iii) socio-cultural constraints, and (iv) career outcomes and broader impacts. The findings highlight how these dimensions interact to shape women's participation in accounting, particularly in Bangladesh, while drawing comparisons with global benchmarks.

Educational Pipeline and Entry Barriers

The literature consistently identifies education as a critical determinant of women's entry into the accounting profession. While Bangladesh has achieved notable progress in female literacy (World Bank, 2023), access to discipline-specific opportunities remains uneven. Gendered perceptions continue to influence educational choices, with women often steered away from accounting and finance toward less quantitative fields (Asadullah & Chaudhury, 2015; UNESCO, 2022). This phenomenon contributes to a pipeline constraint, where the proportion of women declines at higher stages of specialisation. Globally, similar patterns are observed, although less pronounced in developed economies where institutional support systems are stronger (IFAC, 2023). In Bangladesh, financial barriers further exacerbate the issue, as professional accounting qualifications (e.g., CA, ACCA, CMA) require significant

investment in time and resources (Hossain & Tisdell, 2005).

Compared to OECD countries, where gender parity in tertiary education is largely achieved, Bangladesh lags in translating educational access into professional representation, indicating that access alone is insufficient without structural and cultural alignment (OECD, 2022).

Organisational Structures and Workplace Realities

A central finding across the literature is that women who enter the accounting profession face systemic organisational barriers that limit their progression. Evidence from Bangladesh shows that women constitute a very small proportion of professional accounting bodies, with representation in leadership positions remaining particularly low (ICAB, 2023).

This reflects broader global patterns where women are concentrated in entry- and mid-level roles but underrepresented in senior leadership (Kyriacou, 2021). The persistence of tokenism (Kanter, 1977) is evident in many organisations, where women are present but excluded from strategic decision-making. Similarly, workplace cultures often remain male-dominated, reinforcing informal networks that disadvantage women (Broadbent et al., 2018).

Infrastructure-related challenges, such as inadequate workplace facilities, further highlight the lack of gender-sensitive organisational design. While such issues are less documented in developed contexts, they remain relevant in developing economies, indicating disparities in institutional readiness for inclusion.

Career Progression, Glass Ceiling, and Leadership Gap

The analysis strongly supports the persistence of the glass ceiling effect, where women face invisible barriers to advancement despite comparable qualifications (Cotter et al., 2001; Dambrin & Lambert, 2012). In Bangladesh, this is reflected in the disproportionately low number of women in senior accounting roles and leadership positions within firms.

Globally, the trend is similar: women occupy a minority of CEO and board-level positions, with representation particularly low in Asia (IMF, 2023). Comparative benchmarks indicate that while countries like the UK have made progress through policy interventions (e.g., board diversity targets), developing economies lag due to weaker regulatory enforcement and cultural constraints.

The literature also highlights the striver syndrome, where women must exert greater effort to achieve recognition equivalent to their male counterparts. This aligns with findings on performance bias and unequal evaluation standards in professional settings (Heilman, 2012).

Importantly, studies demonstrate that gender-diverse leadership enhances organisational outcomes, including financial performance, governance quality, and innovation (Post & Byron, 2015; OECD, 2022). This underscores that the leadership gap is not only an equity issue but also an economic inefficiency.

Work–Life Constraints and the Leaky Pipeline

The leaky pipeline remains a defining feature of women's careers in accounting. The analysis reveals that career interruptions related to marriage, motherhood, and caregiving significantly affect women's long-term progression (Kyriacou, 2021).

In Bangladesh, these challenges are intensified by limited institutional support, including inadequate maternity policies and a lack of childcare facilities (Sultana, 2021). Even in developed countries, women experience slower career progression post-maternity, indicating that this is a global structural issue, albeit more pronounced in developing contexts (Blau & Kahn, 2017).

The findings suggest that organisational expectations of constant availability disproportionately disadvantage women, reinforcing attrition at mid-career levels and reducing the pool of candidates for leadership roles.

Socio-Cultural and Religious Influences

A key theme emerging from the analysis is the role of socio-cultural and religious norms in shaping women's participation. While formal restrictions are limited in Bangladesh, informal expectations regarding

gender roles significantly influence career choices and progression (Syed & Van Buren, 2014).

These norms often prioritise women's roles in family and caregiving, limiting their mobility and professional engagement. Importantly, the literature distinguishes between religious doctrine and cultural interpretation, emphasising that many constraints attributed to religion are in fact socially constructed (Metcalfe, 2011).

Compared to Western contexts where institutional reforms have partially mitigated such barriers, South Asian societies continue to experience stronger cultural influences, making context-sensitive policy interventions essential.

Gender Pay Gap and Economic Inequality

The analysis confirms that the gender pay gap remains a persistent issue within the accounting profession. Global data indicate that women earn less than men across most economies, with variations in magnitude (Blau & Kahn, 2017). In the USA, women earns 83% relative to men, which is 65% in South Korea and 88% in OECD countries (on average).

In Bangladesh, while comprehensive sector-specific data are limited, the literature suggests that wage disparities are driven by occupational segregation, limited access to leadership roles, and lower participation in high-paying specialisations (Khlif & Achek, 2017).

These findings highlight that income inequality is not an isolated issue but a cumulative outcome of disparities across education, employment, and organisational advancement.

Broader Impacts: Organisational and Developmental Outcomes

The literature strongly supports the argument that gender equality in accounting has multidimensional benefits. At the organisational level, gender diversity enhances decision-making quality, ethical standards, and corporate governance (Post & Byron, 2015).

At the macro level, women's participation in financial decision-making contributes to economic growth, poverty reduction, and social inclusion (World Bank, 2023). These outcomes align with the objectives of United Nations SDG 5, as well as related goals such as quality education and reduced inequalities.

The findings suggest that gender equality is not merely a social objective but a strategic imperative for sustainable development.

Synthesis of Findings

Bringing these themes together, the analysis reveals a layered set of challenges that women face across the professional lifecycle in accounting. Educational and socio-cultural factors constrain entry into the field, while progression is further hindered by organisational barriers such as tokenism and glass ceiling effects. Retention remains affected by work–life conflicts and institutional limitations, with the cumulative outcomes reflected in persistent leadership gaps, pay disparities, and underrepresentation in decision-making roles.

These findings validate the proposed conceptual framework, demonstrating that gender inequality in accounting is systemic, multi-layered, and context-dependent. Addressing it requires coordinated interventions across education systems, professional bodies, organisational practices, and societal norms.

DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine women's participation in the accounting profession through a conceptual lens, with particular reference to Bangladesh and the broader ambitions of SDG 5. The findings reveal a persistent disconnect between increasing numerical participation and substantive gender equality, reinforcing a central argument in the literature: representation does not automatically translate into empowerment (Kanter, 1977; Haynes, 2017).

Current State: Progress without Parity

The current state of women's participation in accounting can best be described as incremental progress constrained by structural inertia. While educational attainment among women has improved significantly, this has not translated into proportional representation in professional accounting roles or leadership positions. This misalignment reflects what prior studies describe as the "pipeline paradox," where entry-level gains fail to sustain upward mobility (Kyriacou, 2021).

Seminal work by Rosabeth Moss Kanter on tokenism remains highly relevant in explaining this phenomenon. Women's increased presence in organisations often leads to symbolic inclusion rather than genuine influence, particularly when their representation remains below a critical threshold. Similarly, the enduring relevance of the glass ceiling concept (Cotter et al., 2001) is evident in the Bangladeshi context, where women's progression into senior roles remains disproportionately low despite comparable qualifications.

The findings also resonate with Eagly and Wood's (2012) Social Role Theory, which explains how deeply embedded societal expectations continue to shape career choices and organisational behaviour. In South Asia, accounting and finance are still implicitly coded as masculine domains, limiting women's participation at the point of entry and reinforcing occupational segregation.

Importantly, these barriers are not confined to organisational settings but are embedded within interconnected systems of education, family structures, and cultural norms. This aligns with broader critiques in gender and accounting research that emphasise the need to move beyond firm-level analysis toward systemic and institutional explanations (Broadbent et al., 2018).

Interpreting the Findings Through the Conceptual Framework

The integrated conceptual framework developed in this study provides a useful lens for interpreting these dynamics. The findings confirm that gender inequality in accounting is multi-layered, operating across three interrelated pillars:

1. Entry and Pipeline Constraints: Educational access alone is insufficient when societal norms discourage women from pursuing accounting and finance. This supports prior findings that gendered educational pathways significantly shape professional outcomes (Asadullah & Chaudhury, 2015).
2. Structural and Organisational Barriers: Tokenism, glass ceiling effects, and gendered workplace cultures continue to restrict career advancement. These barriers are reinforced by organisational practices that privilege continuous, uninterrupted career trajectories, often incompatible with women's lived realities (Acker, 1990).
3. Contextual and Socio-Cultural Moderators: Cultural expectations, religious interpretations, and family responsibilities act as powerful mediating forces. As highlighted in cross-cultural studies (Metcalfe, 2011; Syed & Van Buren, 2014), these factors shape both individual aspirations and institutional responses, particularly in developing economies.

Together, these pillars illustrate that gender inequality is not the result of isolated factors but rather the outcome of interacting systems of constraint, validating the need for a holistic and integrative analytical approach.

The Limits of Current Interventions

The discussion also highlights the limitations of existing interventions aimed at promoting gender equality. Programs focused on skill development and employment access, such as those implemented by organisations like BRAC, have made meaningful contributions to women's economic participation. However, their impact remains constrained by structural and cultural barriers that operate beyond the scope of such initiatives.

Similarly, organisational policies such as flexible working arrangements and maternity benefits, while important, often fail to address deeper issues such as career penalties associated with motherhood, limited access to leadership pipelines, and the absence of gender-sensitive performance evaluation systems (Lewis et al., 2017).

This reflects a broader critique in the literature that diversity initiatives often focus on surface-level inclusion rather than transformational change (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). Without addressing underlying power structures and cultural norms, such interventions risk reinforcing tokenism rather than dismantling inequality.

Future Directions: Toward Structural and Context-Sensitive Reform

The findings point to several important directions for future research and policy. Firstly, it mentions a shift from participation to progression. Future efforts must

move beyond increasing female entry into accounting toward ensuring sustained career advancement and leadership representation. This requires longitudinal research examining career trajectories and attrition patterns. Secondly, it looks into the integration of socio-cultural context into policy design. Policies aimed at gender equality must be context-sensitive, acknowledging the role of family dynamics, religious norms, and societal expectations. Generic, globally derived models may have limited effectiveness in settings like Bangladesh. Thirdly, it demands institutional reform within the profession. Professional accounting bodies and firms must adopt structural reforms, including transparent promotion criteria, mentorship programs, and leadership development pathways specifically designed for women. Fourthly, it highlights expanding the research agenda. There is a need for more empirically grounded studies in developing-country contexts, particularly those that examine the interaction between gender, profession, and socio-cultural environment. The conceptual framework proposed in this study provides a foundation for such future research.

Broader Implications: Gender Equality as a Systemic Imperative

Ultimately, the discussion reinforces that gender equality in accounting is not merely a sectoral issue but a systemic development challenge. Increasing women's participation in financial decision-making has implications for corporate governance, economic growth, and social equity (Post & Byron, 2015; World Bank, 2023).

The persistence of gender disparities, despite policy commitments and development initiatives, suggests that achieving SDG 5 requires more than incremental change. It demands a reconfiguration of institutional structures, organisational practices, and societal norms.

In this regard, the accounting profession serves as both a microcosm and a catalyst, a field where inequalities are reproduced, but also one where meaningful transformation can generate far-reaching economic and social benefits.

CONCLUSION

This study conceptually examines women's participation in the accounting profession in Bangladesh, focusing on how educational pathways, organisational structures, and socio-cultural dynamics shape progress toward gender equality within the broader agenda of SDG 5. Using a qualitative, literature-driven methodology, it synthesises evidence through thematic analysis and established theoretical lenses—Tokenism Theory, Glass Ceiling Theory, Social Role Theory, and Agency Theory—to reveal how gender inequality is reproduced across multiple interconnected levels. Its primary contribution is an integrative, context-sensitive conceptualisation of gender inequality, proposing a multi-level framework highlighting critical intervention points across the professional lifecycle, from educational entry to leadership advancement, situated within Bangladesh's socio-economic realities rather than the Western corporate contexts dominating existing literature. Limitations include reliance on secondary data, restricted generalisability beyond Bangladesh, absence of empirical testing, and a sector-specific scope that does not fully capture dynamics in adjacent professional fields. These limitations point to future research avenues, including longitudinal empirical studies using primary data, evaluations of gender-focused interventions, comparative cross-regional analyses, and intersectional lenses considering class, geography, and socio-religious context. In conclusion, achieving gender equality in accounting requires structural transformation across educational, organisational, and societal domains, demanding coordinated efforts from policymakers, educational institutions, professional bodies, and organisations to address visible and underlying barriers, making gender-inclusive participation in accounting a prerequisite for sustainable and inclusive development toward the 2030 Agenda.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors appreciate the valuable feedback from two anonymous reviewers and the Editor of the journal for their helpful suggestions which improved the paper's quality.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no potential conflict of interest among authors in this study.

ETHICAL CLEARANCE

This study is based solely on secondary data and published literature and did not involve human participants or animals. Therefore, ethical approval was not required.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTION

Nikhil Chandra Shil conceptualised the study, analysed the data, reviewed and edited the manuscript critically for intellectual content. Jeba Fariya collected the data and drafted the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

REFERENCES

Acker, J. (1990). Hierarchies, jobs, bodies: A theory of gendered organizations. *Gender & Society*, 4(2), 139-158. https://doi.org/10.1177/089124390004002002

Ahmed, S. (2019). Gender diversity and firm performance: Evidence from Bangladesh. *Journal of Business Studies*, 40(1), 45–62.

Akter, S. (2018). Gender disparity in accounting education in South Asia. *Asian Journal of Accounting Research*, 3(2), 123–135.

Annisette, M., & Trivedi, U. (2013). The intersectionality of gender and race in the accounting profession. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 24(6), 456-470.

Asadullah, M.N., & Chaudhury, N. (2015). Reverse gender gap in schooling in Bangladesh: Insights from urban and rural areas. *World Development, 76*, 225-241. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.07.008

Blau, F.D., & Kahn, L.M. (2017). The gender wage gap: Extent, trends, and explanations. *Journal of Economic Literature*, *55*(3), 789-865.

Bloch, F. (2020). Gender equality and leadership barriers in organizations. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 41*(6), 567-582.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101.

Broadbent, J., Kirkham, L., & Woodhams, C. (2018). Gendered accountancy profession: Evidence and analysis. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 31(6), 1653-1670.

Chen, J. (2019). Gender diversity and corporate governance: Evidence from emerging markets. *Corporate Governance Journal*, 19(3), 456-472.

Ciappei, C. (2023). Gender diversity and ethical leadership in accounting. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 185(2), 345-360.

Cimirotić, R. (2017). Glass ceiling effect in financial institutions. *Economic Research Journal*, 30(1), 120-135.

Cotter, D.A., Hermsen, J.M., Ovadia, S., & Vanneman, R. (2001). The glass ceiling effect. *Social Forces*, 80(2), 655-681.

Dambrin, C., & Lambert, C. (2012). Who is she and who are we? A reflexive journey in research into the rarity of women in the highest ranks of accountancy. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, *23*(1), 1-16.

Eagly, A. H., & Wood, W. (2012). Social role theory. In P. A. M. Van Lange, A. W. Kruglanski, & E. T. Higgins (Eds.), *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 458–476). Sage.

Ely, R.J., & Meyerson, D.E. (2000). Theories of gender in organizations. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 22, 103-151.

Hambrick, D.C., & Mason, P.A. (1984). Upper echelons: The organization as a reflection of its top managers. *Academy of Management Review*, 9(2), 193-206.

Haynes, K. (2017). Accounting as gendering and gendered: A review of 25 years of critical accounting research on gender. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, *43*, 110–124.

Heilman, M.E. (2024). Gender stereotypes and workplace bias. Annual Review of Organizational Psychology, 11, 45-68.

Heilman, M. E. (2012). Gender stereotypes and workplace bias. Research in Organizational Behavior, 32, 113-135.

Hossain, M., & Tisdell, C. (2005). Closing the gender gap in Bangladesh. Journal of International Development, *17*(4), 439-454.

International Federation of Accountants. (2023). *Global accountancy profession statistics*. IFAC.

International Monetary Fund. (2023). *Gender and finance leadership report*. IMF.

Kanter, R. M. (1977). *Men and women of the corporation*. Basic Books.

Khlif, H., & Achek, I. (2017). Gender in accounting research: A review and synthesis. *Journal of Accounting Literature*, 39, 1-23.

Komori, N. (2020). Gender and accounting in global contexts. *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, 86, 101-115.

Kyriacou, O. (2021). Women in accounting: A global perspective. *Accounting Forum*, 45(2), 125-145.

Lewis, S., Anderson, D., Lyonette, C., Payne, N., & Wood, S. (2017). Public sector austerity and women's work-life balance. *Work, Employment and Society*, 31(1), 42–59.

Lisa, I. S., Uddin, M. N., Khan, M. J. R., Shimu, N. J., & Hushen, M. A. (2025). Gender-Based Obstacles in the Accounting Profession: A Study of Women's Experiences in Bangladesh. *International Journal of Latest Technology in Engineering, Management & Applied Science*, *14*(10), 1053–1061. https://doi.org/10.51583/IJLTEMAS.2025.1410000128

Metcalfe, B. D. (2011). Women, management and globalization in the Middle East. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 83(1), 85-100.

OECD. (2022). *Gender equality in leadership and corporate governance*. OECD Publishing.

Post, C., & Byron, K. (2015). Women on boards and firm financial performance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 58(5), 1546-1571.

Salisa, R. (2024). Agency theory and gender dynamics in leadership. *Corporate Governance Review*, 32(2), 145-160.

Sultana, N. (2021). Gender inequality in professional employment in Bangladesh. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, *49*(3), 211-228.

Syed, J., & Van Buren, H. (2014). Global business norms and Islamic perspectives. *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 24(4), 567-597.

UNESCO. (2022). *Global education monitoring report-Gender report: Deepening the debate on those still left behind*. UNESCO.

World Bank. (2023). *World development indicators*. https://data.worldbank.org

World Bank Group. (n.d.). *Women in accounting case studies*. World Bank Publications.