

Empowerment through engagement: assessing the female university students' involvement in volunteering activities

Empowerment
through
engagement

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to identify how the involvement of female university students in volunteer organisations is contributing to their self-empowerment in Bangladesh.

Design/methodology/approach – A cross-sectional study with a qualitative approach was conducted. A total of 20 in-depth interviews with female student volunteers, two focus group discussions with student members of the volunteer organisation and ten key informant interviews with academics, gender experts and high-level representatives of civil society organisations were conducted. The data were collected from eight purposively selected universities in Dhaka. The data were collected between 1 January 2023 and 23 March 2023.

Findings – The inter-organisational environment appears to be supportive and welcoming, despite the fact that some male colleagues belittle women with insulting comments. Female students are predominantly involved in public presentation activities and their advice is rarely considered. To reach a top position, they have to show more commitment than their male colleagues. Subjective prejudices discourage women from taking on positions of responsibility. Participation in voluntary organisations strengthens the self-confidence, critical thinking, networking and social capital of female students, making it easier for them to gain employment. These factors contribute to the empowerment of female students.

Originality/value – This study is an excellent empirical document that establishes a link between the empowerment of female students and their participation in voluntary activities. The recommendations of this study pave the way for future research in different countries on how volunteering helps young people, especially female students, to shape their future by taking on social responsibility alongside their academic activities.

Keywords Women empowerment, Volunteering activities, Qualitative insights, Skill development, Public policy

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

Women make up more than half of the world's population, but they own less than one per cent of its wealth (UNWOMEN, 2023). In all occupied countries, women are considered second-class citizens (Hossain, 2020; Cameron, 2017). Women are severely underrepresented as decision-makers at all levels, including in their homes and in the public sector. Gender inequality costs the economy 15% of its GDP (UNWOMEN, 2023). Ensuring women's freedoms is critical not only to achieving gender parity but also to achieving a variety of global development goals. Empowered women promote the well-being and growth of their families, communities and nations, which in turn has a positive impact on others. The United Nations supports the equal representation of women in all spheres of life, with a focus on leadership, security, equality and empowerment. The United Nations formulated the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to protect and empower women around the world (Byrnes & Freeman, 2012). As a ratified member of CEDAW, the government of Bangladesh has taken serious initiatives to ensure gender equality through women empowerment. Bangladesh has enshrined women's equality in the supreme law of the land. Articles 19, 28 and 29 of the Constitution guarantee gender equality, active participation in public or private life and access to all levels of employment opportunities (Halim, 1998). In addition to the government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), multinational organisations and voluntary organisations are also committed to women's rights and participation in decision-making.

However, volunteering is considered the fourth cornerstone of sustainable development, one of the main objectives of which is women's empowerment (Paine, Allum, Beswick, & Lough, 2020). Volunteering is a powerful way to transform society through a sense of engagement that enables women to gain knowledge, skills and awareness of their rights (Sundholm, 2018). Involvement in volunteer organisations removes stress, problems and difficulties in the community and helps develop strategic leadership, self-determination and critical thinking (Teshome, Zenebe, Metaferia, & Biadgilign, 2012). Volunteers do not always just provide services; occasionally they also work to build their social, human, physical or cultural capital. In addition, volunteering provides women with the opportunity to positively impact their communities and build their self-esteem and agency, which helps them take control of their choices. Amongst the volunteers recognised by the United Nations in Bangladesh, 43% of volunteers are women (UN VOLUNTEERS, 2022). This shows that women are the most important and key stakeholders of volunteer organisations in Bangladesh. It is crucial to understand how volunteering impacts the empowerment of women, including female students, and how it can be used to advance women's rights and gender equality without adequate empirical evidence. The aim of this study is to find out how the involvement of female university students in voluntary organisations contributes to their empowerment in Bangladesh.

Literature review

The empowerment of women is one of the most important instruments for ensuring sustainable development. Empowerment is referred to as the degree of control a person has over external matters relevant to her well-being, improving the ability to make strategic life choices, changing power relations to be less controlling and more productive (Ullah, 2003). Zizah (2018) notes that Algerian women are perceived negatively when working in volunteer organisations. Policymakers and development workers who work there try to create a favourable environment to encourage them. In another study, Saleh and Almawaly (2011) recommend developing and implementing the right plans and policies to support women's effective volunteering and point out that women's participation in volunteer organisations is a must. Afif (2010) stated that the situation in Saudi Arabia is much better as women and men

trust each other and there are no social barriers that prevent women from participating in volunteer activities. Taniguchi (2006) notes that the volunteering sector is incredibly gender segregated. Women are more likely to volunteer in the social and health sectors, whilst men are often found in political, economic and scientific fields. He also notes that women's leadership in voluntary organisations is still somewhat limited across different sectors. Lewis (2015a, b) found that in the Kenyan city of Mombasa, more men are represented in local volunteer groups, whilst there is a more balanced participation in established NGOs, suggesting that women find opportunities to volunteer in well-established organisations. In another study conducted in the Kenyan town of Korogocho, Lewis concludes that formal volunteer programmes have a greater potential to change normative gender roles than informal volunteering, whilst in informal groups men are considered more dominant, stronger and more effective. Even development organisations use women in their health-related initiatives without considering that this could reinforce gender stereotypes (Lewis, 2015a, b).

In Tanzania, volunteer organisations are not as discriminatory as in Kenya. Cultural factors that hinder women's progress are losing their dominance, but it can be difficult for women to adapt to the changes (Hotay, Mokaya, & Ghamunga, 2021). In North British Columbia in the USA, women are more evenly represented in the third sector than in the private sector. Women outnumber men in paid positions, lower management, professional roles and volunteering. Although men still hold a significant proportion of senior positions, the gender pay gap is comparatively smaller for women in senior positions in third sector organisations (Teasdale, McKay, Phillimore, & Teasdale, 2011). But they are lonely because they lack peer support and collaboration. They face a glass ceiling when it comes to opening certain doors (Smith, 2018). In Malaysia, young people, both men and women, engage in a variety of volunteer activities to enhance their personal development. These programmes, which are predominantly initiated and implemented by government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), aim to raise a morally upright and physically resilient youth cohort to build a solid foundation for the nation's future (Sahimi, Suandi, Ismail, & Hamzah, 2018). The presence of good governance and commitment to democracy has been identified as an important catalyst that motivates male and female youth to engage in volunteerism, which ultimately leads to their empowerment as active citizens in Vietnam (Eapro, 2008). From the experiences of Southeast Asian countries, it can be concluded that promoting youth volunteerism, regardless of gender, is a means to promote holistic national development (Ullah, Alkaff, Lee, Chatteraj, & Ferdous, 2023; Rahim, 2021).

Theoretical framework

Youth empowerment is theorised as a collective effort to change society (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Messias, & McLoughlin, 2012). This theory defines empowerment as the ability to change the norms, values, perceptions, policies and structures of the organisation and society. Critical youth empowerment was developed from the analysis of four different empowerment models, namely the Adolescent Empowerment Cycle (Chinman & Linney, 1998), the Youth Development and Empowerment Programme Model (Kim, Crutchfield, Williams, & Hepler, 1998), the Transactional Partnering Model (Cargo, 2003) and the Empowerment Education Model (Freire, 2009). This model describes empowerment as a combination of six dimensions. These dimensions are used to structure the process of empowering women through volunteer organizations. A welcoming and safe environment refers to a warm state where women are treated with respect, have the freedom to be creative, learn new skills and take on challenges (Ewertson, 2014). Meaningful participation and engagement focus on genuine contributions that allow for learning important leadership skills, new knowledge, self-identity and participatory skills such as organising, planning and oral and written communication

(Ullah & Alkaff, 2018; Pearrow, 2008; Htet, 2022). Equitable power sharing between men and women refers to the ability to determine and lead important actions (Messias, Fore, McLoughlin, & Parra-Medina, 2005). Participation in the critical reflection of interpersonal and socio-political processes illustrates women's growing understanding of social, institutional and administrative structures by participating in the evaluation of resources and the management of difficult situations (Pearrow, 2008). Participation in socio-political processes to effect change involves the ability to address the structures, procedures, social values and practices underlying the problems (Kope & Arellano, 2016; Jennings *et al.*, 2012). Integrated empowerment at the individual and community levels brings with it the opportunity for growth at both the individual and community levels. Change at the individual and community levels is necessary for critical social empowerment by strengthening people's ability to contribute to social change and collaborate with others. Below Figure 1 will portrait the graphical representation of the theoretical framework for better understanding.

Methodology

An exploratory qualitative cross-sectional research design was used to conduct the study. Kope and Arellano (2016) and Pearrow (2008) used a qualitative research design to investigate empowerment through a youth programme. An exploratory qualitative design is characterised by the fact that it provides a more accurate and insightful interpretation of the problem, allows for a deeper understanding of the subject matter and delves into the research topic in a variety of ways (Swedberg, 2020). The study area was selected through purposive sampling from four public (University of Dhaka, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, Sher E Bangla Agriculture University and Dhaka Medical University) and four private universities (North South University, BRAC University, East-West University and Daffodil University) in Dhaka district to get a holistic view of the study topic. In-depth interviews (IDI), focus group discussions (FGD) and key informant interviews (KII) were used to collect primary data to achieve the objective of the study as conducting an interview is a very well organised method to delve deep into the lives of even complete strangers and collect the data and information required for the research. The IDI was collected from 20 female

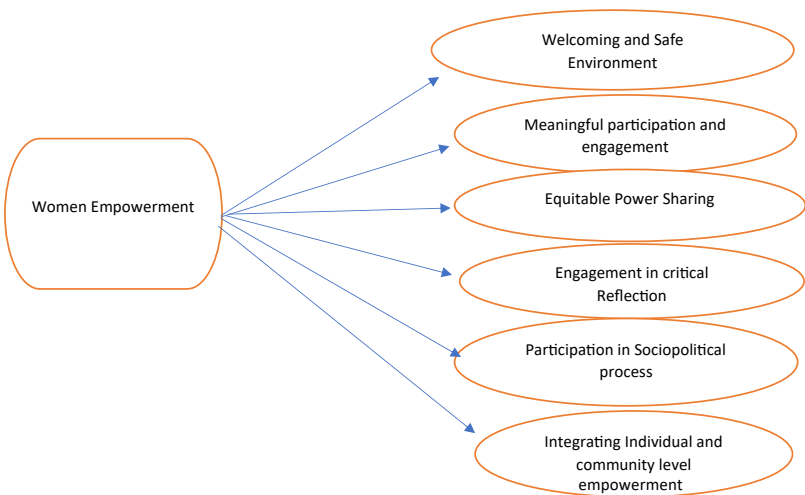


Figure 1.
Critical social theory of
youth empowerment

Source(s): Adopted from Jennings *et al.* (2012)

university students involved in different voluntary organisations in Bangladesh using purposive sampling. In order to obtain detailed information from the respondents about their experiences in a volunteer organisation, two FGDs were conducted with eight participants each who were working in different volunteer organisations at that time. Ten KIs were conducted with academics, gender experts and high-level representatives of civil society organisations. Purposive selection was used, which is commonly used in qualitative research to identify and select participants who have a wealth of relevant information on a research interest in women's empowerment (Palinkas *et al.*, 2015).

Based on the theoretical framework, a semi-structured interview guide was developed and used for the IDI, KII and FGD. The entire data collection took place from 1 January 2023 to 23 March 2023. The existing literature review served as the basis for the topic in order to process the data obtained through the interviews. Content analysis was used to collect secondary data from publications such as books, journals, government reports on women's development and the United Nations website on volunteering. Once the data was collected, it was organised and coded according to the topic and concepts before being processed based on its applicability to the research question. The dataset and information recorded on the research topic address these themes to varying degrees. Key findings were interpreted conclusively based on inductive thematic analysis. Ethical concerns and human rights were safeguarded through the use of anonymity in the study.

Findings and discussion

The empowerment of women is achieved through a series of endeavours. The presence of favourable factors encourages women's participation in the transformation of society, which ultimately leads to their empowerment, whilst some critical factors make it difficult for women to develop their qualities in society (Hora, 2014). This event on women students' empowerment through their participation in volunteer organisations at educational institutions in Bangladesh can be better understood by categorising the responses and examining them using the theoretical framework established in the previous section.

Welcoming and safe environment

A welcoming and inclusive space is a prerequisite for personal growth in an organisation that promotes women's empowerment (James & Etim, 1999). First-hand data shows mixed reactions to the environment of volunteer organisations. Most interviews defined a safe, supportive and harassment-free environment, where women can achieve higher positions through their dedication and commitment to the organisation. The opinions of the respondents present a lesser gender gap within the voluntary organizations and colleagues have mutual respect. In this regard, a respondent stated,

Volunteer organizations exhibit an internal environment and organizational culture that fosters inclusivity and openness to individuals from diverse backgrounds. Historically, these organizations were predominantly staffed by males. However, there has been a shift in recent times, as individuals of all genders who possess an interest in engaging in volunteer work are now actively participating and making valuable contributions to society, in accordance with their respective abilities. Recruitment and talent management strategies have also gone through significant changes to encourage female applicants to get involve in volunteer activities (IDI 1, 10th April 2023)

Yet some respondents accused the environment, at least to some extent, sexist and existence of nepotism. Domination exists in the means of jokes and comments. In this context, one respondent expressed her views in that way,

Sexism is everywhere. Sexism is mostly dominant in the patriarchal society. Patriarchy enforces sexist attitude in the society. Voluntary organization is not out of that. Being habitants of a

patriarchal society, women must face sexist jokes and comments in their workstation which demotivate them to participate in the voluntary organization. (KII 2, 15th April 2023)

Bangladesh has a masculine culture that promotes male dominance in every social and organisational structure (Hofstede, 2016). This reinforces sexism in the society where women are sexually harassed. Sexism also holds women back from equal opportunities in education and employment (Saad, 2022). To change the prevailing cultural norms, it is imperative to create an inclusive environment that fosters a sense of camaraderie where everyone has the opportunity to participate freely and contribute to collective endeavours based on their individual merit. Such an atmosphere can empower women to confront and challenge the existing power dynamics and social conventions that perpetuate gender inequalities (Gruber et al., 2021). Therefore, creating and maintaining a welcoming and safe environment should be a priority for volunteer organisations seeking to empower women in Bangladesh and beyond (Joseph, 2020).

Meaningful participation and engagement

Meaningful participation and engagement is determined by the extent to which women are in key positions, can make organisational decisions and actively participate in the organisational process (Tanwir & Safdar, 2013). Most of the respondents are involved in decorative activities within their respective volunteer organisations. Women are offered sedentary jobs where decorating events and anchoring is the usual role of them in volunteer organisations. The suggestions of female students in the organisation of events are rarely implemented. In some cases, female students are involved in decision-making under the supervision of the volunteer organisations' advisors. On the other hand, in a few organisations, men and women play an equal role at the top decision-making level. In order to meet donor requirements, some organisations appoint a female student to a leadership position. In this sense one respondent said that,

Subjective discrimination of female student is responsible for their less important role in a voluntary organization. They are skeptical and less confident about themselves which demotivate them to take important role in the voluntary organization. Sometimes they get the top position in organization just because their father or brother or family status is higher than the other competing candidates within the organization. (KII 4, 15th April, 2023)

But in some cases, a student finds herself in a top position because she has put in tremendous effort and merit and has the freedom to make any decision for the good of the organisation. They have access to the organisation's resources to take initiatives. The determination of the most important activities is influenced by their opinion. Confident and motivated female students enjoy more rights and freedom in deciding the main tasks of the volunteer organisations in Bangladesh. A strong interest in participating in the volunteer services influences their active involvement in the organisational activities (Kope & Arellano, 2016). Active participation in decision-making, organising events and taking on various tasks enable female students to develop their voice, self-identity and leadership skills (Buisson, Clement, & Leder, 2022). According to a study conducted in Cambodia, empowerment is seen as a way to contribute to being respected by others, which does not always have to conform to conventional gender roles (Doneys, Doane, & Norm, 2020). This dimension of empowerment enables female students to overcome traditional gender roles and gain confidence in their abilities.

Equitable power sharing between men and women

The equitable distribution of power between men and women in volunteer organisations is a crucial dimension that contributes to the empowerment of female students (Cadesky,

Baillie Smith, & Thomas, 2019). This study found that most volunteer organisation decisions are still controlled by the male members of the organisation, which reduces the share of female students in decision-making. Top positions are awarded based on loyalty rather than quality, which contributes to a weak representation of female students. In some cases, female students are appointed to an important position without having a specific task in order to avoid criticism from the founders. Decisions are imposed on female members whilst they are reversed for male members. The phenomenon of male dominance manifests itself not only in the form of power dynamics but also through the manifestation of a superiority complex. Few responses represent an equal distribution of power and authority between men and women within volunteer organisations. In this regard, one female respondent expressed that,

We have comparatively lower voice in the key decision-making positions than our male colleagues because they have higher social capital, better access to information and resources, more active hours in organizations work and a more assertive mindset in difficult times. Our risk aversion mindset, weak psychological position and narrow scope for socialization are responsible for our weak contribution. (IDI 9, 15th April 2023).

Equitable power sharing is in line with feminist theories of empowerment that advocate for gender equality and the redistribution of power (Allen, 2022; Cornwall, 2016). In volunteer organisations in Bangladesh, the emphasis on shared leadership and decision-making processes reflects a commitment to challenging traditional gender roles and encouraging the active participation of female students in shaping organisational outcomes (Schwindt-Bayer & Senk, 2020). According to a study conducted in Indonesia, it was observed that the level of participation of female students is influenced by their involvement in decision-making processes (Sidiq *et al.*, 2020). These comparative studies provide additional evidence of the positive relationship between equitable power distribution and women's empowerment.

Engagement in critical reflection on interpersonal and sociopolitical processes

The act of critically reflecting on interpersonal and socio-political processes plays a crucial role in promoting the empowerment of women. This engagement enables women to question and challenge existing norms, values and power dynamics, as Timor-Shlevin, Aharon, Segev, Mazor and Ishai (2022) emphasise. Our study has shown that women are now being recognised for the efforts they are making to change oppressive social norms and structures. The socio-cultural dimension influences people's attitudes towards accepting something new in society. In order to bring about change, everyone involved must feel the urge and the logic of change. Through their voluntary work, female students have successfully educated society about why such changes are necessary in the various population groups. In this context, one KII participant opined that,

Female students have the potential to serve as catalysts for sustainable change owing to their inherent qualities of quiet and calm characteristics. Participation in volunteer organizations contributes to the enhancement of their socio-political standing within society, while their unwavering dedication and perseverance establish them as catalysts for constructive change in the pursuit of a more developed society (KII 5, 15th April 2023)

By participating in the volunteer organisation, students become extroverted, learn new topics and perspectives, become familiar with interpersonal and relational skills that help them think critically about all issues and make wise decisions. By critically examining social structures and interpersonal relationships, women can gain a deeper understanding of the causes of gender inequality and work towards eliminating them. Engaging in critical reflection leads to a greater awareness of gender inequalities and a desire for social

change (Leggett, 2020). This understanding empowers them to challenge and change these systems on both an individual and societal level. To further promote women's empowerment, voluntary organisations can create spaces for social dialogue, provide educational opportunities to improve critical thinking skills and encourage women to reflect on their own experiences in a broader social context.

Participation in sociopolitical processes to effect change

Participation in socio-political processes is a key dimension of women's empowerment (Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019), as it enables them to actively participate in solving social problems, advocate for their rights and combat gender inequalities. This dimension emphasises the importance of women's participation in socio-political processes to address the underlying structures and practises that hinder women's empowerment. By engaging in collective efforts for social change, women can have a significant impact on reshaping the socio-political landscape and creating a more equitable society.

In this context, a female volunteer commented as follows, "Although it is a very difficult task to change the entire society, women advocates have succeeded in bringing about some changes, especially in terms of women's active participation in politics and business, the massive increase of female students in primary and secondary education, the prevention of child marriages, the promotion of women towards self-reliance and property rights." (FGD 2, 12 April 2023).

Active participation in socio-political processes enables women to address gender inequalities, advocate for gender-equitable policies and challenge discriminatory norms (Azizuddin & Shamsuzzoha, 2023). Through political activism, lobbying and community mobilisation, women can challenge discriminatory practises, influence policy and bring about social change. Voluntary organisations can play an important role in facilitating women's participation in socio-political processes by providing training, resources and platforms for the collective (Evans & Nambiar, 2013). By empowering female students to be active agents of change, voluntary organisations contribute to the overall empowerment of women in Bangladesh.

Integrated individual and community level empowerment

Integrated individual and community empowerment is the most important dimension of women's empowerment through voluntary organisations. It encompasses personal growth and broader impact on the communities they serve (Soares *et al.*, 2015). By empowering women on both levels, volunteer organisations create a ripple effect of positive change that goes beyond individual experiences (Rothman, De Vijlder, Schalk, & Van Regenmortel, 2019). The findings suggest that involvement in volunteer organisations has led to developmental outcomes at an individual level, such as increased self-efficacy, self-confidence and positive identity development. In this sense, one interviewee commented as follows: "Getting involved in a volunteer organisation was one of the best decisions I could have made. It provides social capital that can be used to strengthen the voice of women's equality in society. It also ensures access to resources and improves women's decision-making skills." (FGD 1, 10 April 2023).

Volunteer organisations also contribute to community empowerment by addressing social issues, promoting social awareness and enabling positive change within their respective communities. Volunteers often share the knowledge and experience they have gained during their involvement with an organisation, fostering a culture of increased participation in social work among newcomers. The research also found that women's social capital was strengthened through engagement in volunteering, increasing their access to resources and creating opportunities for personal and professional growth.

The results of this study suggest that engagement in volunteering has the potential to improve the mental and physical well-being of female students, whilst mitigating feelings of social isolation and increasing social support. A study examining the impact of volunteering on women's empowerment found that women who volunteer in non-profit organisations have a higher self-esteem, more social support and more civic engagement than women who do not participate in such activities (Jenkinson *et al.*, 2013).

Conclusion

The active participation of women in voluntary organisations has played a crucial role in promoting their self-determination. It contributes to the development of their cognitive skills, which is crucial for facilitating effective decision-making processes. The acquisition of self-efficacy and self-confidence is facilitated by the experience of confronting difficult circumstances. Building social capital is facilitated through active participation in voluntary organisations. Women gain access to financial resources that contribute to the development of their self-confidence in overcoming challenges. Participation in voluntary organisations facilitates women's understanding of the functioning of the socio-political system within society. The development of leadership skills is facilitated by active participation in voluntary organisations. However, it can be argued that these concerns are influenced by the prevailing patriarchal and sexist ideology within the organisation. Patriarchal characteristics continue to exert significant influence on top positions and key decision-making processes. To encourage greater participation of women in social activities, voluntary organisations have adopted policies to recruit volunteers and held competitions to motivate and hunt female talent from various educational institutions to counter gender discrimination. The key informants believe that this is essential to address and overcome the following challenges. Researchers and advocates of women's empowerment can use this study as a basis for conducting more comprehensive research. This study represents a groundbreaking contribution to the field as it focuses on a topic of great importance: the promotion of gender equality in society, which is in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). There is a need for additional research to uncover unexplored dimensions of women's empowerment. The study has successfully achieved its objective by providing clear evidence of how participation in voluntary organisations contributes to women's empowerment. The study was conducted on a small scale and relied exclusively on qualitative methods, mainly due to limited time and financial resources.

This study is a critical examination of the transformative role of volunteering for female university students in Asia. It explores the many ways in which participation in volunteer activities in educational institutions promotes the empowerment of female students. In addition to the immediate benefits of skills development and community impact, the study also explores the impact on gender equality and social change. Understanding the dynamics of female engagement in volunteering in the specific socio-cultural context of South and Southeast Asia is critical for developing targeted interventions and policies that empower women's agency and leadership. The findings of this research have the potential to inform educational strategies, empower women and contribute to a broader societal progress in the region.

The implication of empowerment through volunteering in educational institutions in Southeast Asia is profound and multi-faceted. By fostering a culture of volunteerism, educational institutions empower their students to actively contribute to community development and social change. This engagement not only instils a sense of responsibility and civic duty but also enhances students' leadership skills, teamwork and cultural awareness. In the context of Southeast Asia, where diverse communities co-exist, volunteering becomes a powerful tool to promote understanding and unity amongst students from different

backgrounds. Such initiatives contribute to the development of a socially conscious and compassionate generation that is able to tackle regional challenges together. The long-term impact goes beyond the individual student by influencing societal attitudes towards service and fostering a culture of collective empowerment through education and volunteerism.

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