

**Design Within a Patriarchal Society:  
Opportunities and Challenges in Designing for Rural Women in Bangladesh**  
**Sharifa Sultana, François Guimbretière, Phoebe Sengers, Nicola Dell**

**Reviewed by: Rishabh Devgon**

**Critical Review:**

Sharifa Sultana et al. [1] present an empirical study about the challenges and opportunities for design among low-income rural women in Bangladesh. The work positions itself at the intersection of HCI4D and feminist HCI. The paper delves into various systemic problems that are culturally and traditionally entangled with patriarchy. The paper acts as a fundamental background to anyone choosing to design for the highlighted stakeholders. I find this paper exceptionally well written, honest and valiant in its approach because it does not downplay or appropriate the issues highlighted but instead examines them head-on. The paper acts as a memoir that propounds the stark dissimilarity between the global North and the Global South's state of affairs.

The paper also made use of participant quotes very well that provided direct evidence and support to the claims made in this literature. The paper has also very effectively portrayed its objectives with the use of sections and subsections that are very relevant and tie up well with each other. The study was novel in its approach because it investigated a significantly marginalised population which was otherwise overlooked in studies about the Global South. Furthermore, this paper is extremely important as it provides a means for designers to create interventions by establishing the “Design within Patriarchy” framework. This provides a deep understanding of the ecology of the stakeholders, and delves into each of Bardzell’s values in the feminist HCI lens. I personally found the core ideas echoed within the framework proposed by the authors significant and relevant. Each of the concept reflected in this research is well explained and reasonably justified.

I personally really enjoyed reading this paper because it provided designers with an approach to empathise with this user group without pitying them. It reflects on the innate assets and self-advocacy within this community despite external factors. The proposed framework is mature and practical in its approach while simultaneously not being reductionist in its nature. The authors have documented their own reservations, ethical dilemmas, along with and limitations of the approach through internal discourse in the relevant sections. It is a methodology for development within the current social structures with a focus on shifting the existing social structures and paradigms prevalent in such communities towards more egalitarian or equitable systems.

I found the methodology of the paper exceptionally well structured and robust in its approach. The researchers conducted an in-depth qualitative analysis with 50 semi-structured interviews, 49 participant observations and 12 Focus group discussions spanning 80 participants. A total of

90 women participated in the study, which I felt was a pretty substantial number and thus noteworthy. The data obtained was analysed using thematic analysis. The authors have also done an outstanding job in providing their positionality and stance towards the concerned issues. A commendable highlight of the study was that it was IRB approved, and thus it was verified by the board members as not posing a significant risk to the human subjects. They have established how they secured an “insider perspective”. Since the study and interaction with the locals were conducted in their native language, i.e., Bengali, the participants must have been the most comfortable. However, claiming an insider perspective may be a bit of a stretch, given the author’s obviously privileged background in contrast to the local community.

If I had to make changes to the methodology adopted, I would sample a more diverse and stratified population from different localities within Bangladesh. Providing a strict selection criteria could have also benefited the methodology of the study. Since the participants are already very vulnerable, perhaps some financial incentives could have also been provided as a relief for the time spent participating in the study. I found an issue with the writing style in the “Understanding Rural Women’s Lives” section, where the lives were categorised based on marital status. However, especially from a feminist perspective, this seems like a backward step. The study did uncover plenty of vital points, but it could have also further included issues that are unique to women, like menstruation and pregnancy.

## **References:**

1. Sharifa Sultana, François Guimbretière, Phoebe Sengers, and Nicola Dell. 2018. Design Within a Patriarchal Society: Opportunities and Challenges in Designing for Rural Women in Bangladesh. In *Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (CHI '18), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3173574.3174110>