

# Understanding the Challenges for Bangladeshi Women to Participate in #MeToo Movement

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A series of events in October 2017 led to the initiation of an unprecedented global feminist movement over various social media platforms, where using the hashtag #MeToo (or some variants of it), women across the world publicly shared their untold stories of being sexually harassed. We conducted an anonymous online survey (n=180) and an interview study (n=30) to understand the participation of Bangladeshi women in this movement. Our study concurs that while Bangladeshi women, who are regular users of social media, supported the spirit of this movement; did not participate in it, even though they had many bitter experiences. Our analysis shows that their non-participation was largely influenced by a cultural difference, patriarchy, perceived futility and lack of hope, and a reliance on alternatives. We discuss how our findings of women's use of technology platforms, which is conditioned and limited by male-dominated and conservative Bangladeshi society, relates to the broader issues in feminism that the GROUP community is interested in.

CCS Concepts: • **Human centered computing** → **Social networks**

**KEYWORDS:** Feminism; Social Media; Social Justice; HCI4D; ICTD

## ACM Reference format:

Aparna Moitra, Naeemul Hassan, Manash Kumar Mandal, Mansurul Bhuiyan and Syed Ishtiaque Ahmed. 2019. Understanding the Challenges for Bangladeshi Women to Participate in #MeToo Movement. In *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, Vol. 4, No. GROUP, Article 15, January 2020. ACM, New York, NY, USA. 25 Pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3375195>.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

“I was 16. My middle-aged male boss harassed me. I never talk about it. He wasn't the last.”

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2573-0142/2020/January- ART15 \$15.00

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This and many such tweets started to explode the Twitter news-feed soon after actress Alyssa Milano encouraged spreading the #MeToo phrase as part of an awareness campaign in order to reveal the ubiquity of sexual harassment, tweeting: *“If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘Me too’ as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem”* on October 15, 2017 [1]. Sexual harassment is bullying or coercion of a sexual nature or the unwelcome or inappropriate promise of rewards in exchange for sexual favors [2]. This is a serious offense that causes several negative impacts on the victims’ physical, psychological, and social health [3], [4]. Unfortunately, the prevalence of sexual harassment is very high across the globe and women are the principal victims of it [2], [5].

The origin of #MeToo, however, dates back to 2006 when social activist Tarana Burke launched a grassroots level campaign for “empowering through empathy” for the women of color within her community [6]. Milano’s call for sharing harassment experiences with #MeToo hashtag that followed her own allegation against Harvey Weinstein, an American film producer, for sexually abusing her [7] took the original movement to a whole new level and millions of women around the world started participating. Before this, a few other hashtags were also used for similar purposes<sup>1</sup>, including #MyHarveyWeinstein, #YouOkSis, and #SurvivorPrivilege. However, none of them could create such a massive movement on the social media.

Within 24 hours of Milano’s tweet, there were more than 4.5 million posts on different social network platforms with hashtag #MeToo (or some variants of it) [8]. She received more than 70 thousand replies to her tweet on Twitter [9] in one day. The hashtag quickly became viral and in the next few days, there were millions of posts on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media where survivors of sexual harassment of different age groups, different colours, across the world were sharing their experiences of being harassed at their home; at their workplace; at public places; and on social network platforms, revealing the name of their harassers, accusing institutions of not being strict about harassment, and reflecting on different laws and policies. While the majority of the victims were women, there were also victims of other genders. These hashtagged posts were also shared, re-posted, and re-tweeted. Moreover, many other users joined this movement by posting with this hashtag to show their support for the cause. The silence around sexual harassment was broken, and the tabooed topics of “sex” and “harassment” were widely discussed across the world.

The #MeToo movement on social media is hence considered revolutionary as millions of women across the globe used these platforms available at their disposal to share their bitter experiences and make their voices heard. Such voluntary and spontaneous participation of women in breaking down a silence that had long been suppressing them was unprecedented in the history. Through the social media posts of these women, we could know information about sexual harassment that was never disclosed before. We could also learn the context, emotion, and repercussions around sexual harassment which would be hard to access otherwise.

While many women across the world participated in this movement, many others did not, or could not, especially in Bangladesh, where sexual harassment is a severe problem nation-wide. Various studies and records demonstrate that each year in Bangladesh several women are sexually harassed both within and outside their homes – at workplace, in public transport, etc. [10], [11], [12], [13]. In fact, there has been a steady rise in the reported incidents of sexual harassment of women each year from 2013-2017 [10]. However, most incidents of sexual harassment remain unreported [14] as many women do not talk about the sexual harassment

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/10/16>

that they experience [15]. A similar scenario was reflected in their social media participation where women chose not to share their harassment stories on social media platforms, resulting in their nonparticipation in the #MeToo movement in Bangladesh [16], [17]. To place this in a broader context, according to the Internet World Stats 2018, around 80 Million people in Bangladesh have access to the internet [18]. In terms of their social media usage, it is reported that of the 32 Million people in Bangladesh that are on Facebook, approximately 23 Million identify as men and 8 Million identify as women [19], with Dhaka being reported as the city having the second highest number of active Facebook users in the world [20]. Yet among them there was a relative lack of women sharing their harassment stories on social media as part of the #MeToo movement. This can be attributed to the issues of “sex” being a tabooed topic in South Asia which makes talking about sexual harassment an act of immodesty and makes it harder for women to speak out against it [21]. Even if women contemplate sharing their stories, there are issues of individual privacy with women’s digital activity being closely monitored by social relations due to shared devices [22] as well as the threats of intimidation and online abuse such as cyberstalking, impersonation and leaking of personal content non-consensually [23].

We find it important to understand the nature, cause, and impact of such silence in Bangladesh. Therefore, in order to understand the reasons behind non-participation of Bangladeshi women in the #MeToo movement, we conducted an anonymous online survey with 180 women and in-person interviews with 30 women. The findings from our survey revealed that while a clear majority of women, who are regular users of social media and had many bitter experiences, supported the spirit of this movement; they chose not to participate in it. Analyzing the in-person interviews we found that many women supported the cause of the movement, however their non-participation was largely influenced by a cultural difference, patriarchy, perceived futility and lack of hope, and a reliance on long-term socialization alternatives. Our paper discusses these findings from the angle of computing against sexual harassment; gender-imposed limits to participation [24] where even though access is available, the use of the platform can be forcibly shaped according to the gender norms [15] further rendering the women vulnerable to be teased, harassed and/or objectified [25], [26]; and Computing for South Asian Women. Finally, we share alternative solutions for designing successful feminist movements in the context of South Asian countries like Bangladesh. We highlight that the violence against women in the Indian subcontinent is still perpetuating in spite of all these initiatives and many ICT tools working towards tackling the issue, rendering them ineffective at various scales [15]. Hence, it has become important to understand why fundamentally the mode and media of these movements are deviating from the spirit of a spontaneous participation in the context of South Asia. This paper aims to make a contribution to that area.

We understand that the objective of many online movements like #MeToo goes far beyond the interest of the comparatively privileged groups, and to the interest of people who are not possibly connected to social media. While we acknowledge the importance of accounting for those voices that are not heard over social media, in this paper, we limit our focus to the Bangladeshi women who have access to social media platforms and are technologically savvy to participate in such movements but could not or choose not to engage with such movements. By doing this we intend to explore the larger tensions in GROUP and related communities around socio-cultural norms and women’s participation on social media platforms regarding issues of sexual harassment. We would also like to acknowledge that a major limitation of our present work stems from the exclusion of gender non-conforming people, which we intend to address in our future work.

## 2 BACKGROUND AND RELATED WORK

### 2.1 Sexual Harassment and Computing

Various studies conducted across the world have found sexual harassment to be a pervasive issue, of which women are principal victims. According to the UN Women and World Health Organization (WHO), 35 percent (almost one in every three) of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or sexual violence by a non-partner at some point in their lives [27]. In the United States, while a 2017 survey reports that one-fifth of American adults have experienced sexual harassment at their workplace [28], findings from another survey reveal that 81 percent American women have experienced some form of sexual harassment [29]. The situation has been found to be similarly alarming in the UK [30]. The national crime statistics agency of France published a report in December 2017 that said more than 220 thousand women were harassed in the public transport facilities of the country [31].

In most places in the Indian subcontinent, “sex” is a tabooed topic, and talking about sexual harassment is hence seen as an act of immodesty [21]. Therefore, such statistics are often hard to get in many places in Africa and Asia as many women do not talk about the sexual harassment that they experience [15] or report it, often due to cultural reasons, or a lack of awareness about the reporting procedures or the fear of repercussions [32], [33]. This is further compounded by the strong patriarchal culture [34] in the Indian subcontinent and the Middle-East [35], where women often depend on men for most things needed for their living including foods, shelter, education, transportation, and health [36], [37], [38], [39], [40], [41]. Moreover, this makes it challenging to find a solution because most incidents of sexual harassment remain unreported [14]. Yet several studies and anecdotal evidence demonstrate the wide prevalence and severity of sexual harassment [42], [43], [44], [33] in these continents, as well.

Sexual harassment is also rampant in online spaces. In their study, Sambasivan, Batool, Ahmed, et al. [23] elaborate upon the different kinds of online abuses women and gender non-conforming people face, such as, cyberstalking where the internet is used to identify and target victims; impersonation; and practices of leaking personal content non-consensually (e.g. doxxing, revenge porn, etc.). Further, various studies [45], [15] have shown that the use of anonymous social media for alleviating the issues of identity-based harassment are quite counterproductive, as they hide the identities of senders making it easier for them to anonymously shame and harass victims, who are mostly women. Thus, the internet is often used as a tool for harassing women, making them more vulnerable to stereotyping, aggressive behavior, issues with interpersonal relationships and mental health issues [45].

### 2.2 Feminism in Personal and Social Computing

Feminist activists, researchers, artists, and scholars have long been trying to break this silence of women about sexual harassment. There have been many demonstrations on the street and on the news, radio, and television media by the feminist activists that depict the severity of sexual harassment, and the gender-politics related to it [46]. With the advancement of information and communication technologies, people have now many effective means of communication including mobile phone and internet. Researchers have tried to leverage them to design different communication platforms for women to report abuses, get safety information, combat harassment, and share their opinions with others. For example, Hollaback! is a smartphone application that allows the users to take pictures of the harassers and post the pictures on social

media to shame them [47]. Women can also report harassment through Harassmap, an application that shows an interactive map of sexual harassment to the users [48]. Safetipin is another mobile phone application with which users can mark the unsafe places, and it also informs a user if they enter into an unsafe place [49]. On the other hand, Circle of 6<sup>2</sup> helps users find other trusted women to accompany them while traveling. In Bangladesh, Protibadi, a mobile application was deployed that allowed women to anonymously report harassment, provided an interactive harassment map, and allowed the users to participate in a discussion around harassment anonymously [15]. All these applications have been proven to be effective to some extent and could help some women break the silence and raise their voice against sexual harassment. Recently, a group of researchers has worked on automating the tracking of sexual violence reports from social media which can potentially help the coalitions working on sexual violence in supporting the victims [50]. Currently, these coalitions depend on victim's self-reports to them before they can provide them with any support, but not all the victims reporting incidences on social media would want to be contacted by such coalitions. Therefore, it is important to note that most of the success we have learned about these systems has come from the West. These systems have encountered challenges in the Global South because of the larger social, cultural, and political issues due to which many women do not feel comfortable in using such platforms to talk about sexual harassment. Therefore, these issues just cannot be fully mitigated only by easy, accessible, ubiquitous, and intelligent applications and communication tools [24]. Moreover, without the spontaneous participation of all women, getting relevant information to improve the design of an effective technology remains challenging as well.

### 2.3 Social Media Movements and their Limits

Several studies [51] have been conducted to analyze the role social media played in many recent political movements around the world including Arab Spring, Shahbag movement, Brazilian protest, and Brexit. Researchers have found that social media helped the organization of these movements [52] by quickly disseminating information and strengthened solidarity by propagating emotion [53]. Conversely, due to the amplifying potential of these social media platforms, the protestors (who were the users of these platforms) exploited all these platforms at their disposal to make their voices heard [54]. Such movements brought to the fore the commonly shared values [55] of the protesting communities and many social leaders were born [56]. A big and important part of these movements took place in the streets, and people's participation on social media played a crucial role in making the protest stronger. However, social media platforms are not immune to the politics of power [57] as they function within a social system where existing socio-cultural power structures exert control over how the platform is used, thus influencing people's participation on it [58], [59]. Alternately, this can also be explained by Berlin's [60] conceptualization of negative freedom and positive freedom – where the former implies the theoretical freedom from constraint and interference, and the latter implies what one can actually do – in this case even if the platform is available to the people, whether they can actually participate without interference or not.

Other movements on social media differ in nature from the above-mentioned political movements. For example, activism around climate change on social media is often targeted to aware and educate people of the potential harm of a policy, law, or technology [61]. #blacklivesmatter, a hashtag movement on social media to protest racial discrimination and

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.circleof6app.com>

violence against the African-American communities, has been acting as a powerful tool to put a surveillance upon the police actions and government decisions in the United States [62]. Such movements that are targeted to a long-term social change put surveillance over the society around an issue, educate people of their concerns, keep people aware of new incidents relevant to the movement, and develop a community that furthers the movement both in the ‘virtual’ and ‘real’ worlds. We believe that the online feminist #MeToo movement falls under this category of long-term social media movements.

Women’s voices in the Global South have historically been under-represented as a result of which these women face many layers of resistance that they have not yet overcome [63]. Postcolonial scholars have long been critical of the way history is constructed by the writings of the privileged communities. While the proliferation and democratization of social media has provided women in the Global South with a platform to raise their voice and express their opinions, yet there are gender-imposed limits to their participation [24] where even though access is available, the use of the platform can be forcibly shaped according to the gender norms further rendering the women vulnerable to be teased, harassed and/or objectified [23], [25], [26]. For example, Ahmed et al.’s [15] study on *Protibadi* found that women’s use of technology is both conditioned and limited within the male-dominated and conservative Bangladeshi society. Various studies have recorded the reasons for non-participation of online communities on social media. For instance, Baumer, et al. [64] found that privacy; data use and misuse; declining productivity; waste of time; addiction and withdrawal; and social and institutional pressures were the motivations behind people with internet access to discontinue their use of social media platforms like Facebook. Similarly, Guha, et al. [65] reported that experiences of embarrassment [66], [67], loss of face [67], regret [68], bullying [69], addiction [70], and inadvertent social consequences [71] led to users’ consideration of social media non-use. However, none of these studies have discussed these reasons in context of sexual harassment which is categorically different than general considerations of non-use or non-participation in online communities. Our study intends to fill this gap by outlining the experiences and motivations of Bangladeshi women – having internet access, access to social media platform, and the skill to use it – for not participating in the #MeToo movement.

A major critique of the #MeToo movement stems from its class bias. Globally and in India (where this movement picked up in late 2018), only the stories of urban, educated, privileged and articulate women have surfaced [72], [73]. The exclusion of experiences of women belonging to the underprivileged sections – who are not connected to social media platforms – has rendered this movement elitist in nature [74]. However, given the vulnerability of these women even if systems are put in place to share their harassment experiences online, due to cultural reasons, fear of retaliation and lack of adequate support systems these women are unlikely to share their stories [15], [32].

## 2.4 South Asian Feminism and Post-Colonial Computing

The utopian ideas of ‘global sisterhood’ propagated by Western feminism are found to be inappropriate within the South Asian context to address its diverse contextual realities and local issues [75], [76]. Moreover, Western feminism is rejected in the South Asian region for pursuing an anti-colonial stand owing to their long and painful colonial past [75], [77]. As the West designated the status of women to be the symbol of ‘progressiveness’ or ‘backwardness’ of a society, there was an increased push towards preserving the realm of tradition from Western colonial intervention leading to different and differently valid ideas of feminism in the Global

South [78], [79]. Post-colonial scholar, Gayatri Spivak, famously asked, “*Can the subaltern speak?*” to emphasize on the constraints that keep a woman silent in such contexts [80].

Thus, South Asian feminism spells out the need for a different approach where feminism doesn't derive its concepts from a single theoretical framework, as pushed by Western feminism, but is cognizant of the differences and diversities within various contexts characterizing the region. Transnational feminism is among one of the key approaches within South Asian feminism which promotes sensitivity towards diversity by encouraging comparisons between multiple, overlapping and discrete oppressions rather than constructing a theory of hegemonic oppression under a unified category of gender [81]. Resisting any colonial intrusion of a foreign culture, it draws its strength from the diverse global voices and argues towards accepting more diverse means and methods of expressing feminism that are in keeping with the local culture [82].

Often technologies are designed in the West and are based on foreign assumptions. In their recent work, Ismail and Kumar [78] critique the current conceptualizations of Feminist HCI as being rooted in western capitalist notions of feminism. They render them inadequate to capture the perspectives and experiences of women and marginalized communities across many parts of Global South where, as per Mohanty [79], different and valid ideas of feminism may be appropriate. A case in point can be the initiatives (discussed in Section 2.2) [47], [48] for countering sexual harassment that have originated in the West and don't work well within the South Asian context [15]. Postcolonial computing recognizes this challenge that the ‘global’ deployment of a Western technology does not only end up being futile in making effective changes in the local communities but also contributes to the creation of a cultural imperialism [83], [84]. Therefore, postcolonial computing is particularly relevant within the context of South Asian Feminism because it emphasizes on the need for “*discourse centered on the questions of power, authority, legitimacy, participation, and intelligibility in the contexts of cultural encounter, particularly in the context of contemporary globalization*” [84].

The #MeToo movement which started with the foreign assumption that women will publicly speak up about their harassment on social media to highlight the pervasiveness of the issue and protest against it in Bangladesh [16], [17], serves as an example. Due to cultural differences many women chose not to participate in the movement and those who chose to speak publicly were in turn harassed for going against the local culture and propagating Western values [16], [17], [24]. This failure of #MeToo reassures the postcolonial computing argument and emphasizes on culturally embedded strategies to fight.

An extension of User-centric design, *Communitization* or Community-centric design has become a very popular mode of designing culturally appropriate systems or appropriating available technologies as per the local context [84], [85] can be employed in this case. Researchers further need to balance postcolonialism and feminism by accounting for complex identities [86] in terms of gender, class, caste, religion, race within the South Asian context to factor in various “processes of differentiation and systems of domination” in designing for these intersections [87].

### 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

We used a mix-method approach for this study. We first conducted an anonymous online survey to gauge the awareness and perceptions of Bangladeshi women about the #MeToo movement. We used the survey to understand the main challenges around this problem, which then helped us narrow down critical points for a detailed inquiry to be conducted via semi-structured

interviews. A total of 180 women voluntarily took this survey. In order to further our understanding of the challenges that women faced in participating in this online movement, we then conducted a semi-structured, in-person interview with 30 women. Both the survey and interviews were conducted in Bengali, the native language of the women who formed the sample for this study. The data was translated by the members of our research team and we used the grounded theory methodology [88] for data analysis. The sampling strategy for both these methods is discussed as follows.

### 3.1 Online Survey

We designed a short survey questionnaire having 5 questions using Google Form<sup>3</sup> and shared that with an assorted set of Facebook users. Barring the first author, all the other authors of this paper shared this google form on their Facebook statuses and requested the women in their network to take the survey and share it further. A total of 180 women took the survey. We feel that because the survey was shared by people in their networks whom the women participants found trustworthy, they took the survey and shared with/forwarded to others. Their participation was voluntary and anonymous. While we understand that it is hard to be certain of the identities of the women taking this survey, we believe that this uncertainty is a trade-off for anonymity as participants in these contexts are also scared to reveal their identity.

In terms of the demography of survey participants, majority women were within the age range of 21–30 years, had completed their Bachelors or had a higher degree and were mostly students or were working as salaried employees.

We purposely targeted women users of Facebook in Bangladesh for two reasons – a) we specifically wanted to study the participation of Bangladeshi women having access<sup>4</sup> to social media platforms who were capable of participating in online movements (i.e. who were technologically savvy) and; b) because the movement was active on Facebook and it was easier to recruit participants anonymously and voluntarily to determine their awareness and perceptions about the movement.

The survey questions have been provided in the next section. The response options for the survey questions were determined upon consultation with subject-matter experts and the survey was then piloted for its responses among a smaller test sample.

### 3.2 In-person Interview

With the survey data helping us outline the main challenges around the issue of awareness and perceptions of Bangladeshi women about the #MeToo movement, we conducted semi-structured, in-person interviews with adult female Facebook users in Dhaka, Bangladesh in order to gain a deeper understanding of their (non) participation in this movement.

We used the snowball sampling technique [89] for recruiting our interview participants. We started by interviewing participants within our social network first, and then we recruited more participants following the suggestions of our already interviewed participants. We stopped interviewing when we reached a theoretical saturation after interviewing a total of 30 women. It should be noted that the women who were interviewed were recruited separately and were not a

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<sup>3</sup> <https://goo.gl/forms/BJ0lsOsgWBpwtEoi2>

<sup>4</sup> Those women who have active accounts on social media platforms, visit them on a daily basis to scroll through the posts and consume content and/or create/share content themselves

subset of the women who took the anonymous online survey on Facebook. A separate sample was selected for these interviews to honor the anonymity clause in the survey.

Our interview schedule comprised of 15 questions around the participants' demographic information, use of social media, opinions about sexual harassment, and online protests. Since sexual harassment is a tabooed topic in Bangladesh, we refrained from asking any direct question regarding our participants' experience with it. We simply asked them if they participated in any feminist movement on Facebook, and solicited their opinions and experiences around such online feminist movement on social media. In order to further make the interviewees feel comfortable in talking about sexual harassment, we employed women interviewers for this study.

Our participants were within the age range of 20-45 years, all of them had graduated high-school. Around 18 women were undergraduate students, 6 of them had graduated college and were working/employed, and the remaining 6 women had graduated from college and were homemakers. Their participation in this study was voluntary. All the interviews were audio recorded upon the consent of the participants. The audio recordings were later translated and transcribed by the members of our research team. Data analysis was done iteratively using grounded theory methodology [88]. We began the initial coding [90] of our data by engaging in line-by-line coding and followed it up with incident-to-incident coding. Finally, in order to sift through our entire data and categorize it incisively and completely we practiced focused coding [90].

## 4 FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY

### 4.1 Awareness and Perceptions of Participants about the #MeToo Movement

To gauge Bangladeshi women's awareness, involvement and perceptions about the efficacy of such a movement, we conducted an online survey among them. The details of the survey process have been described in the previous section. We asked 4 close-ended and 1 (optional) open-ended questions in the survey. English translations of the questions are provided below-

Q1 Are you aware of the recent #MeToo movement in the social media?

Q2 Have you ever been sexually harassed?

Q3 [Q2 == YES] Did you share your harassment experience in the social media?

Q4 [Q2 == YES & Q3 == YES] Why did you share in the social media?

Q4 [Q2 == YES & Q3 == NO] Why didn't you share in the social media?

Q5 [OPTIONAL] What are your comments on the usefulness of movements like #MeToo in solving the sexual harassment problem for women in Bangladesh?

Among the 180 survey participants, about three-fourths (134 women) were aware of the #MeToo movement in the social media. So, it can be reasonably claimed that there was some awareness of #MeToo movement among the women of Bangladesh who are active on Facebook. In response to the second question, a total of 137 participants claimed to have been sexually harassed. Figure 1 and 2 portray the distribution of study participants across age and occupation categories, respectively, who reported to be sexually harassed/not sexually harassed.

While figure 1 portrays that more women between the age groups of 21-35 years reported to be sexually harassed, figure 2 demonstrates that these women were mostly students, service holders/working women and housewives.

However, of the 137 participants who claimed to have been sexually harassed, less than one-third of them, that is, 24% women shared their experience on social media during the #MeToo movement while the majority around 76% women, didn't share their experiences. 17 students, 12

service holders, 2 home-makers and 1 business woman within the age range of 21-35 years were among those who reported sharing their experience on social media during the #MeToo movement. We think that this might be the case because younger women are more active on social media.

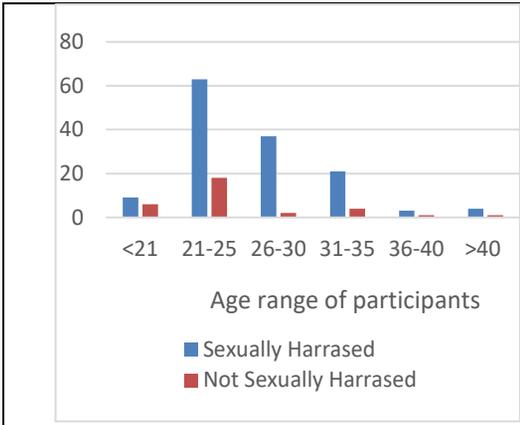


Fig. 1. Distribution of Participants across age

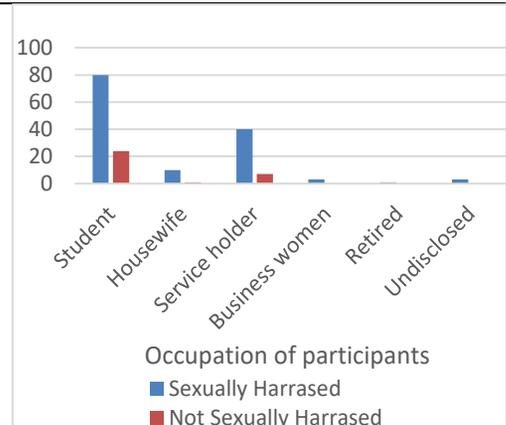


Fig. 2. Distribution of Participants across occupation

### 4.2 Why Share

Responses to the fourth question reveal the intention of the participants behind sharing their sexual harassment experiences over social media during the movement. We provided a number of possible responses for question 4, based on our pilot. The participants could select multiple responses or provide their own answer in case the provided responses were not reflecting their intention. Table 1 shows frequency of the responses selected by the participants.

Table 1. Women’s reasons behind sharing their sexual harassment experience during the #MeToo movement

Reasons for sharing	Frequency	
Harasser will think of being socially humiliated before committing such a crime	8	14%
Everyone will understand how much pain a woman goes through because of harassment	9	16%
I just wanted to make other women aware of such situations	1	2%
I see this as an exercise in the freedom of expression of women	9	16%
I felt good after sharing	3	6%
The harasser may get punished according to the law	4	7%
To socially humiliate the harasser	4	7%
The other women who were sexually harassed would also find the courage to share their stories and protest	18	32%

The most common reason behind sharing harassment experience during the movement appeared to be that the other women who were sexually harassed would get the courage to protest against sexual harassment. Some participants also saw this as an opportunity to exercise

their freedom of expression, make others understand the pain and anguish they feel due to it, and create an environment of humiliation for the harassers. Only 4 participants selected the “To socially humiliate the harasser” or “The harasser may get punished according to the law” option indicating that the sexually harassed women in Bangladesh have low confidence that the harasser will be humiliated socially or be brought under the book.

### 4.3 Why Not Share

Responses to the alternate version of question 4 revealed the mindset of the majority participants who were sexually harassed but didn’t share their experience over social media during the #MeToo movement. Table 2 shows the frequency of reasons behind not sharing sexual harassment experiences.

Table 2. Women’s reasons behind not sharing their sexual harassment experience during the #MeToo movement

Reasons for not sharing	Frequency	
How many should I write about?	1	1%
I am having a writer’s block	1	1%
I am not very vocal or active on social media	1	1%
I couldn't find time to share	2	2%
I didn't want to be labeled	1	1%
I don't feel comfortable about sharing these things on social media	41	31%
I don't think any good will come out of sharing these experiences	34	27%
I don't want to remember that episode	24	19%
I have relatives, friends on social media; I don't want them to know	16	12%
I thought everyone already knows	1	1%
I want to share. I am waiting for the right time	1	1%
My family doesn't want me to share such incidences on social media	4	3%

The participants could select multiple reasons if those were appropriate for them. About 30% of the participants (41 women) who claimed to have been sexually harassed didn’t feel comfortable about sharing their harassment experience on social media. 25% (34 women) believed that no good would come out of sharing those experiences over social media, and 18% (24 women) shared that they didn’t want to remember that incident. This again shows the frustration of the victims. Besides these reasons, 19% of the victims didn’t share their stories either because of family pressure or they didn’t want their relatives or friends to know.

### 4.4 Efficacy of Online Feminist Movements

112 (62%) participants responded to the optional and open-ended Q5 that sought participants’ comments on the usefulness of movements like #MeToo in solving the sexual harassment problem for women in Bangladesh. Overall, the responses demonstrated the frustration of participants about the situation of sexual harassment. We found that 41 responses were pessimistic, 21 were optimistic, and the rest were loosely related to these opinions. Most of the pessimistic responses expressed that – i) a social movement like #MeToo is not going to change anything, ii) the laws need to be more strictly enforced, iii) mentality of the men needs to be changed, and so on. Ten participants expressed that such a social movement will not affect the

status quo of Bangladesh. Among the optimistic responses, the most common theme was that such a movement will help in increasing Bangladeshi people's awareness about the pervasiveness of sexual harassment in the country.

The survey data just provided us with an overview of the perception of the sample of 180 Bangladeshi women about the #MeToo movement as due to the online nature of the survey, we could not elicit detailed responses. Therefore, in order to have a deeper understanding of the sexual harassment situation, we conducted in-person interviews with 30 women. The next section discusses the interview findings.

## 5 FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

As previously discussed, talking openly about sexual harassment is taboo, therefore, we indirectly asked the interview participants about their participation in any feminist movement on Facebook, and their opinions and experiences around such online feminist movement on social media. As our interview participants shared the details of their involvement and experience in different online feminist movements, we found that only two of our thirty participants actively participated in the #MeToo movement by publicly sharing their harassment stories. Following themes emerged from our interview data that provide us with significant insights as to why despite having access to social media platforms, reason and ability to participate in the global feminist online #MeToo movement, most Bangladeshi women chose not to engage with it.

### 5.1 Solidarity

All the women that we interviewed expressed their solidarity with the global movement against sexual violence and #MeToo movement and shared that such reporting was necessary for letting people know about the challenges women face in their everyday life. Nine of our participants believed that such initiatives not only create a social awareness but also work towards supporting other women who have encountered harassment. One of them said,

“Since now we have Facebook, we can share our stories with others. We can listen to others' stories. I can connect my experiences with other people's experiences. So, I know that I am not the only person who has been suffering from a bad memory. This makes me feel much better. I know other women will also agree with me on this.”  
(student, 25 years)

Besides showing interest in supporting other victims, our participants felt that expressing anger is cathartic and, therefore, comforts a victim. One of them said,

“These incidents remain seated inside you. You cannot get rid of them. They keep coming in your dreams. When you are allowed to talk about this, you can let them go, at least to some extent. When you talk dirty about that person (perpetrator), that is not really a revenge, but it still gives you a little self-respect that you can talk against what they did.” (housewife, 30 years)

All our participants supported the movement that in their words, “*women of outside world*” are doing. They opined that such movement was long due to emancipate women from the physical and mental harassment perpetrated by men. They all welcomed this movement and said that more and more female voices should be raised.

## 5.2 Cultural Difference

While being supportive of the #MeToo movement, most of our participants did not participate in this movement citing cultural differences. As many as 12 women reported that they did not find this movement to be culturally appropriate in the Bangladeshi society. Their responses highlighted how talking about sex in public is not culturally appreciated in Bangladesh. One of them said,

“It is not about women actually. Even men do not talk about their sexual experiences in public. That is not our norm here.” (bank officer, 32 years)

A similar sentiment was shared by the other participants, as well. For example, one of our participants is a 36-year-old woman who worked in a Bank as a cashier. She was harassed by her immediate boss in her office. She shared her experiences with a couple of her female colleagues, and discovered that some of them also had similar experiences with her boss. She then reached out to a senior female officer of her office who held a higher position than her immediate boss. That lady took the issue seriously and informed the Bank authorities. Later, our participant was placed in a different group, and the accused was let off with a warning. Our participant believes that her boss deserved a more severe punishment than the warning. However, she does not believe that she should talk about that openly, especially on a public forum.

In a follow-up question, we asked our participants if they were inspired seeing so many women participating in the #MeToo movement and disclosing many hidden crimes by men. While the response varied in a range from ‘definitely yes’ to ‘maybe’, our participants repeatedly reminded us of the cultural difference. For example, one of our participants said,

“Yes, I am inspired. I also feel like I should talk. I should let the world know we live among some heinous beasts. I also think the culprits should be punished. I think it is my responsibility to do something so that another innocent girl does not get molested tomorrow. ... But I also have to keep in mind that it is Bangladesh. I need to take my step keeping in mind the cultural differences. If I take a wrong step, I will do more harm than good. Shouting in public maybe counter-productive here, both for you and the women you try to help... Not all the battlefields are same.” (homemaker, 33 years)

Another participant said,

“Things are not the same here. I take my kids to their school every day. I need to meet hundreds of other parents and answer thousands of questions. If I make myself a ‘weirdo’<sup>5</sup>, my kids will suffer in the society. It is not that you cannot protest, it is just you do not do that in public in Bangladesh. It is not (a practice of) our culture.” (homemaker, 31 years)

All the participants shared the sentiment that describing sexual harassment incidents in public is not aligned with the typical Bangladeshi culture. Some of them said that there is no single Bangladeshi culture, and many Bangladeshis practice many things that others do not. However, the typical Bangladeshi culture does not allow men and women to talk about sexual harassment in public. Although some of them (eight women) did not like this part of the culture and believed that the culture needs to be changed, yet they agreed that a protest through a

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<sup>5</sup> A person whose behavior is strange, different from the norm

public announcement of harassment is not going to change anything in the present-day culture of Bangladesh.

### 5.3 Social Resistance

Ten out of thirty interview participants told us that they did not share their harassment incidents over social media because of a range of social constraints and bindings. For instance, one of our participants is a 29-year-old housewife, who lives with her in-laws in Dhaka. Her in-laws are very conservative and our participant needs to conduct herself as per the rules of the family in her communications both inside and outside their house. She said that her in-laws are connected to her on Facebook, and if she shares something that is objectionable to her in-laws, they tell her to remove it. She has been told to behave 'in a decent and polite way' on Facebook. In their day-to-day conversations at home, her in-laws often criticize women who use 'foul words' or discuss 'private matters' on Facebook. So, our participant thinks that if she shares her harassment incidents on Facebook, her in-laws will not be happy with that. She said,

"Once I shared a post of another woman. The post was about gender equality and why a woman should be allowed to wear whatever she wants. My father-in-law saw that post. Later that day, at our dinner table, he raised this discussion. He was explaining why the women who talk about such 'nasty' things publicly are bad, and why we all should ignore them. It was clearly meant to be a signal to me. I never have shared any such post since, let alone talking about those by myself." (homemaker, 29 years)

Such social constraints do not only come from in-laws. Three of our participants said that their own family (parents in two cases and elder brother in one case) suggested them not to make any 'feminist' post on Facebook. Four of our participants faced similar obstacles coming from their workplaces. One such participant said,

"A few of my office colleagues were gossiping about Facebook shares. They all were criticizing the women who talk 'nasty' stuff online. One of them mentioned a post where a woman probably discussed about her past abusive relationship with her ex-husband. My colleague called her 'shameless'. Others also agreed. They all said that that woman must have had some faults and she was using Facebook to get attention of other men. ... So, I know I will be a topic of their gossip if I post something from my experience. Although I know, even within those women (her colleagues), many have abusive relations with their husbands. They shared that with me in private conversations. But they don't like talking about it publicly." (bank officer, 31 years)

Apart from such social constraints that our participants have faced within their family, friends, and workplaces, they also reported observing other women facing resistance online from unknown people. Three of our participants mentioned that they have seen incidences where women talked about their experiences of sexual harassment in a public post and many unknown people started 'analyzing the dress and character of the victims'. One of our participants described an incident where a woman posted on Facebook that she had been touched in a public bus and some people started asking 'where' and 'how did she feel'. For this reason, many of our participants did not feel it 'safe' to share their harassment experience online.

#### 5.4 Perceived Futility and Lack of Hope

Twenty of our participants believed it to be pointless to share their harassment stories in public, because ‘nobody cares’. They explained why they think such a movement will not bring much change to the widespread misogyny in the Bangladeshi society. One of them told us,

“In America, when some women told in public how they were harassed by a man, other people supported those women. Even people from media, government, and non-profits offered their help. The culprits were caught and punished. That happened because their society does not want such a thing to exist. Also, the culprits were punished because the law-enforcing agencies are honest and effective. In Bangladesh, neither the society nor the Police will help you. So, all you will bring for you is an additional shame if you share your harassment online in public.” (student, 23 years)

The responses of these participants expressed their deep frustration regarding this issue. Several of them mentioned different rape incidents that took place in different parts of the country. They told us how there were big social media campaigns against those rape cases, but the perpetrators were not punished. One of our participants said,

“Show me one case where such social campaign could help punish one rapist or one harasser in Bangladesh. Then what is the point of shouting there?” (student, 27 years)

Our participants are not only hopeless regarding the punishment of the harasser, they also believe that the harassers will not be ashamed by such public announcement of their crimes. One of our participants said,

“Shaming? Do you think they will feel ashamed? Those people are not like that. They don’t have any shame. You are wrong if you think shaming will work on them. Many of them boast of how many women they harassed in their life. The pain of those women will only entertain them. They are just some beasts.” (bank officer, 31 years)

Likewise, many of our participants believe that such men take pride in harassing women and a public announcement will only help in their publicity.

#### 5.5 Alternatives

It was evident that our interview participants were supportive of the spirit of the #MeToo movement, but they did not (or could not) participate in the movement because of many social and cultural reasons. We asked them, how then, they could envision a change in the mindset of Bangladeshi communities toward women. They suggested various alternatives, foremost among them was by bringing cultural change within their households. For instance, ten of our participants said that the women should focus on teaching their children how to respect women and should themselves respect and support women in their families. One of them said,

“If you are a good mother, it is your responsibility to teach your son how to treat a woman. You should teach them that women were not born to be their slave. You should not make your son ‘more special’ than your daughter. When your son weds, make sure he does not demand dowry. Be nice to your daughter-in-law. That will begin the change. You know what, discrimination starts at that point - right in the family!” (homemaker, 30 years)

The second issue that our participants stressed on was stigma. Twelve of our participants said that single and independent women are not ‘taken positively’ in Bangladeshi society, which should be fixed by the women themselves. One of them said,

“Just think about divorce. If you have an abusive husband, you are still supposed to be with him. If a divorce happens, it is always the wife’s fault! After your divorce, it is so hard for you even to rent a house in Dhaka city. No landlord thinks you would be ‘safe’ for them. Women landlord should start breaking this trend. They should welcome more single women. There is no alternative.” (student, 28 years)

All our participants also believed that increased participation of women in law enforcement agencies could improve the situation. They believed that there should be an increased quota for women police officers and that more women should join the police force, especially to handle women’s cases as the victims would feel more comfortable that way. Similarly, one participant believed that women should also focus on education and getting prestigious jobs in the society as this would automatically elevate their social respect. One of them said,

“As you know, harassment is often about power. You will hear more stories of boss harassing the subordinates than the other way around. Now, how many bosses are female here in Bangladesh? You see? That is why we need to educate our daughters so that they get into powerful positions.” (homemaker, 38 years)

Thus, the study participants advocated for women to aim for greater educational qualifications and prestigious jobs in socially powerful positions to serve as role models and propagate this trend for future generations.

## 6 DISCUSSION

In this paper, we set out to determine Bangladeshi women’s participation in the global online feminist movement, #MeToo, and from the initial online surveys found that despite being aware of the movement, having bitter experiences of being harassed, and the access and ability to use social media platforms, many women chose not to participate in this movement. The in-person interviews provided us with the various socio-cultural reasons for their non-participation. In this section, we discuss the learnings emanating from this study and its implications for GROUP and related communities.

### 6.1 Computing against Sexual Harassment

As we have seen from our data, #MeToo had a limited success in Bangladesh. This points out how the problem of sexual harassment is complicated with many local social, cultural and political factors as ‘publicly talking about sex’ is not acceptable there. Therefore, while many women expressed their solidarity with the movement in their interviews, they chose not to engage with it as it was thought to be culturally inappropriate [16], [17].

In our study, we were also able to identify how ‘silence’ is created around the issue of sexual violence. Our participants reported being silenced in both ‘overt’ and ‘covert’ ways by family, friends, and hostile strangers alike. For instance, some of the participants reported being pressured in overt ways by their immediate family for not sharing any ‘feminist’ posts online, and were also intimidated when they observed that the women who talked about their experiences of sexual harassment in a public post, were trolled online. Likewise, a few of our

participants also shared being covertly told off by family and friends for sharing public posts of sexual harassment and being schooled on what is expected of 'women of good character'. This resonates with Berlin's [60] two concepts of liberty as even though the women have access to social media platforms and skill required for sharing incidents related to harassment as part of their negative freedom; they don't have the positive freedom, that is, the ability to actually post their own harassment stories or even share other public posts due to the social norms.

Another prominent takeaway from our study is the fundamental problem with social computing research that solely depends on 'available data' and does not look at the politics involved in the creation of data. If we go by the lack of posts online on social media, it may appear that there are fairly limited incidents to be shared in Bangladesh, however as our surveys and interviews portray, women have many bitter experiences but it is just not culturally acceptable to share them online.

## 6.2 Limitations of Social Media due to Gender-Imposed Limits

Social media platforms offer equal opportunity, freedom to raise any proposal, and fairness with which each proposal is treated giving it full and equal consideration. This not only enables the voice amplification of marginalized communities but also accelerates the delivery of social justice to them. However, in our study, we found that while many women had an equal opportunity to raise their issues, they felt that they did not possess the freedom to raise their voice as well as their issues would not be considered in a fair manner. Women felt that they were more likely to be punished for their participation than rewarded for sharing their bitter experiences [16].

For instance, we observed that men (father-in-law, father, brother) manipulated women's (daughter-in-law, daughter, sister) participation with the objective of 'educating' them that publicly participating in an online feminist movement is 'bad'/socially unacceptable, and informed them on 'how to behave in a decent way' on social media platforms. So much so that the women who dared to show courage by publicly sharing their stories on social media were *trolled* [91] or made to feel uncomfortable by unknown men. These men tried to control these women's behavior by openly shaming them and/or asking them inappropriate questions with sexual innuendo, and in process intimidating other women who were contemplating participation in the movement.

These findings join the ongoing discourse around the biased impact of social media in public life. Our findings align with Andrade and Urquhart [57], Orlikowski [58], and Gillespie [59] to reiterate that power dynamics within a social context influences the use of technology/social media platforms to benefit/help only those in positions of power and influence. This works in two ways. First, it enables such people to restrict the activities that are contrary to their views and threaten their power [16], [17]; and second, it favors the survivors of sexual harassment in those cases where their social influence is greater than or at par with the accused [7]. In our study, we observed that there were gender-imposed limits to women's participation [24] in the #MeToo movement, where even though many women had access to social media platform and the skill to use it; their ability to use the platform for participating in the movement was forcibly shaped according to the gender norms [15]. Thus, owing to the prevailing patriarchal attitudes of bearing social/familial ridicule, being vulnerable to be teased, harassed and/or objectified [23], [25], [26], women chose not to participate in it.

### 6.3 South Asian Women and Computing

Our study also contributes to further the understanding of South Asian women's use of computing, as an understudied area in the existing literature. Our findings reiterated the fault in the Western assumption with which the #MeToo movement was started – that women will publicly speak up about their harassment on social media – yet, owing to cultural differences, many women chose not to participate in the movement in Bangladesh in spite of having bitter experiences. We now discuss how our findings support some of the major issues mentioned by South Asian feminists.

First, in line with the post-colonial sentiment, the movement is seen as going against the local culture by propagating Western values of openly talking about 'sex' in Bangladesh which results in policing and silencing of women who even remotely consider aligning with the movement [17], [24]. While the participants agreed with the spirit of the movement as they had many bitter experiences to share, they noted that women living in Western societies chose to publicly speak up on social media platforms because they have support systems in place and their context is rewarding of this act. Therefore, while the study participants expressed their solidarity with the purpose of the #MeToo movement, they didn't identify with it as their own.

Second, when enquired about their lack of participation in the #MeToo movement, many interview participants implied that due to lack of such support systems in Bangladesh, posting on social media wasn't their preferred way of protesting [16], [17]. Instead, they sought to work towards longer-term alternatives of sensitizing their families, enabling more female role models, creating better support systems etc. This aligns with the concept of transnational feminism which promotes the use of diverse means and methods to express feminism in keeping with the local culture [82].

This demonstrates how the global spread of a movement that started in the West ended up being futile in making effective changes locally in Bangladesh.

### 6.4 Alternatives

“Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign. But stories can also be used to empower, and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people. But stories can also repair that broken dignity.” – Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie<sup>6</sup>

Although we find a number of computing interventions to help women in South Asian countries with their health [92] and job [93], not much work has been done for the women in South Asian countries to support their voice through computing. This study also calls for the attention of the designers to design a safe and effective alternative for the women to talk/speak up and share their stories. Postcolonial computing emphasizes on culturally embedded strategies to design appropriate solutions or appropriating available technologies as per the local context [84], [85]. A previous design intervention in Bangladesh, called “Protibadi” [15] – an anonymous platform for women to raise their voice against sexual harassment – turned out to be mostly futile because of an attack on the anonymous posts by both males and females indicating that anonymous applications that hide the identities of the senders are more capable of harassing women [94]. Therefore, alternative solutions need to be designed in Bangladesh for appropriating social media platforms according to the local context while accounting for complex,

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story?utm\\_campaign=tedsread&utm\\_medium=referral&utm\\_source=tedcomshare](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?utm_campaign=tedsread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare)

intersectional identities [86], [87], [40]. This needs to be done in a way such that the design does not challenge the status quo by imposing unwelcome values but includes diverse stakeholder groups (irrespective of their agendas) in the conversation about women's well-being [40] and supports women in the struggles that they choose to engage in [95]. Sultana et al. [63] suggest that an initiative should be built by the local women from within their culturally situated positions and not from outside.

One way to do this could be by creating online safe spaces such as closed groups. These groups can then be made to collaborate with offline entities working on this issue such as local grassroots organizations or activists working in this domain. These groups can also act as support systems when a victim complains of sexual harassment. A case in point could be the grassroots organizing attempting to expose rampant sexual harassment, assault and exploitation that women working in the Bangladeshi textile industry face [32], [96]. However, these organizations and women activists operate under dangerous conditions as they receive rape and death threats for upsetting the status quo [32]. Very recently, some feminist groups on Facebook have stepped forward in Bangladesh to support the voice of women being harassed (see [97], for example). These groups allow women to raise their voice as a voice of the whole community and the entire group combats any attack on any such voice. We believe that similarly social media movements need to be grounded into offline movements or organizations already working on this issue at the grassroots level. Another initiative in India is the “#MeTooIndia” Twitter handle where a journalist is curating the #MeToo sexual harassment survivor stories (anonymizing the victim/survivors' identity) while providing a follow-up and a support system to those who seek justice [98]. For designing similar culturally appropriate systems in different contexts, the designers may need to work with the local women's organizations and other key stakeholders, understand their cultural values, social constraints, and try to organize women with similar mentalities in a group to raise their voices. Partnerships with such local groups of women may help them strengthen their voices and get them heard within a wider community. While a lot of participation/action research has been carried out with women in this space [99], yet with respect to South Asian Women, such initiatives are still in their nascent stages [100], [87], [101], [41]. It is important to note despite such initiatives, violence against women is still perpetuating in the Indian subcontinent, rendering these ICT tools ineffective at various scales [15].

This solution thus needs better implementation of existing policy and legal frameworks to deal with the issue of harassment to set strict precedents, in case a victim of sexual harassment decides to go through the process of seeking justice. A strict implementation of laws is currently absent in South Asian countries like Bangladesh [16], [17], [100] and India [102]. Many organizations in South Asia work with different stakeholders to impart gender sensitization training and also provide legal and emotional assistance to the survivor, for instance, connecting them to the relevant resource persons such as lawyers in case they choose to go through the judicial proceedings, therapist, etc. [98], [103], [104]. Therefore, in order for this solution to work, designers need to similarly identify and create an offline network of stakeholders working at the grassroots level.

Awareness and education are also needed for this solution to work. More women need to be empowered with an education and a job. As many of our participants said, such efforts will uplift the status of women in the society and provide for role models. This will lead to more women in positions of power and a shift in the societal mindset. Also, more policy level interventions are needed to ensure fair participation of women in computing-related education and research [24]. Sultana, et al. [100] share a number of government and non-government initiatives in Bangladesh that have started to teach women programming. We believe that local

women designers can design better solutions in this domain as they understand the challenges and the stakes. It is only when women trust such a solution, that it can work.

Finally, viewing the issue from “feminist solidarities for comparative research, design and practice” perspective, future work can further engage in finding “commonalities across differences” and gather learnings from “the sites of more and less privileges” to explore more ideas as alternatives [105].

## 6 CONCLUSION AND LIMITATIONS

This study was initiated with the objective of understanding the reasons behind non-participation of Bangladeshi women in the #MeToo movement. An anonymous online survey with 180 women and in-person interviews with 30 women were conducted for this study. The findings from our survey revealed that while a clear majority of women, who are regular users of social media and had many bitter experiences, supported the spirit of this movement, they chose not to participate in it. Analyzing the in-person interviews we found that many women supported the cause of the movement, however, their non-participation was largely influenced by a cultural difference, patriarchy, perceived futility and lack of hope, and a reliance on long-term socialization alternatives. We discuss these findings in the light of computing against sexual harassment identifying how ‘silence’ is created around the issue of sexual violence in Bangladesh and its repercussions on computing research that solely depends on ‘available data’. We also discuss our findings from the angle of gender-imposed limits to women’s participation while outlining how postcolonial sentiment affects computing for South Asian women and the relevance of local means and methods for expressing feminism. We finally share ideas for designing an alternative solution for enabling women to speak up against harassment, seek justice and initiate a long-term shift in societal mindset.

A bias that reflects in our study is that most of our study participants are female students. This is reflective of the demography of women internet users in Bangladesh that is dominated by educated young women. Hence, most women who took the anonymous online survey identified as students. We refrain from making any generalized claim from our study and we do not (and should not) claim that the findings from the young female students represent those of the entire population of female Internet users of Bangladesh. Instead, we emphasize on the objective of strength of qualitative studies to develop deep understanding of several critical challenges that many Bangladeshi women face in their everyday life and how those result into their non-participation in a global online movement. At the same time, we should also note that 12 of our 30 interview participants (40%) were not students. Another limitation of our work stems from the exclusion of gender non-conforming people, which we intend to address in our future work.

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Received June 2019; revised October 2019; accepted November 2019