

Book Review: Village Ties: Women, NGOs, and Informal Institutions in Rural Bangladesh by Nayma Qayum

In Village Ties: Women, NGOs, and Informal Institutions in Rural Bangladesh, Nayma Qayum explores the role of non-governmental organisations in involving women in the political and development process in rural Bangladesh. This book contributes to scholarship that attends to ordinary people's lived experiences to understand how marginalised communities solve political and social problems, finds Ritwika Patgiri.

Village Ties: Women, NGOs, and Informal Institutions in Rural Bangladesh. Nayma Qayum. Rutgers University Press. 2021.

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At Independence, Bangladesh was one of the poorest countries of South Asia, poorer than both India and Pakistan, the two countries with which it shares its legacies and history. Bangladesh celebrated 50 years of its independence in 2021, becoming a curious case for all development economists. The country saw a massive famine in 1974, but its growth from then on is indeed miraculous. It is now one of the [world's fastest-growing](#) countries with an average life expectancy higher than India and Pakistan.

But what this story often misses out is the role of women in this development. 'When poor women from the global South make headlines, it is often as oppressed victims rather than inspiring readers' (7). Nayma Qayum's *Village Ties* starts with this very sentence, setting off her attempt to explore the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in involving women in the political and development process.

Qayum focuses on Polli Shomaj (PS), which translates to rural society, a rural civil society organisation implemented by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC). Polli Shomaj has been described as a platform that enables the rural poor to raise their voice, gain better access to locally available NGO resources, address systematic inequities, take collective action against exploitation and social injustice and play a more active civic role. The PS women have defied stereotypes of rural poor women of the Global South, the image that looks at them as 'backward', 'isolated', 'helpless', 'oppressed' and needing to be 'liberated'. The book narrates how these PS women can change politics, what development for women really means and how neoliberal notions of development do not always give the complete picture.

The book poses two important questions at the beginning – first, if development programmes can bring about institutional change in the rural Global South; and second, if these programmes can shift the relationships between women, the state and society. The book argues that while neoliberal development focuses on the individual, programmes focused on the collective (like PS) can lead to institutional change if they encourage decision-making, target anti-oppression as a goal and are embedded in the community (8). PS is explored as an alternative to the neoliberal development model in challenging the injustices prevailing in society.

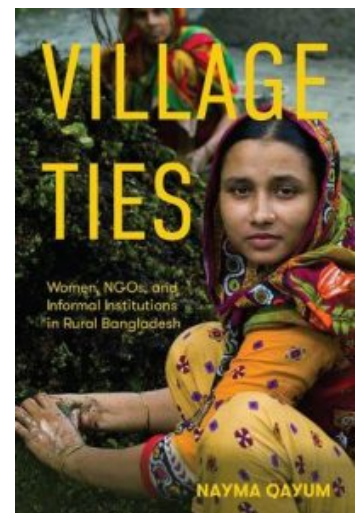




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The book admits that NGOs have played a complicated role in the development of Bangladesh. While NGOs can work as agents of neoliberal development, they can also provide critical services in the absence of the state. There is also a third way they function, a position in between in a world faced with the challenges of globalisation, neoliberalism and patriarchy, which Qayum focuses on (9).

Starting with a gendered history of Bangladesh and the context that gave rise to the emergence of PS, the book notes how women's movements in the country, which were once tied to nationalist movements, have now become NGO-ised over time. The Bangladesh government's aid-based development strategy has largely seen women as welfare recipients, but the subsequent NGO-isation has shifted the focus from 'collective mobilization' to 'service delivery'. This includes a shift from civic awareness and women's mobilisation to service delivery like microfinance (34). Women's need to break away from patriarchal norms has only recently become part of the development story.

Qayum further looks at the role of informal institutions around gender and how these institutions affect everyday lives. By looking at both formal and informal institutions, Qayum also focuses on the networks that women in rural Bangladesh embrace. The role of networks in development theory is a recent field of study. While Qayum mentions that her book adds to the literature on informal institutions and feminist institutionalism, it is worth noting that Qayum has also highlighted the role of the networks that PS members have built. Personal networks have helped PS members create an organisational infrastructure that members can navigate as they mobilise.

The book also highlights the role of PS members in battling social evils like dowry, child marriage and violence against women. In rural Bangladesh, legal issues regarding these often get resolved using a combination of formal and informal rules, sometimes so complex and overlapping that it is difficult to differentiate between formal and informal institutions. Informal institutions exist alongside formal institutions, which may not always be undesirable. For instance, in Chapter Five Qayum discusses how women can initiate divorce based on Muslim law, but rarely do so.

PS groups often negotiate with the state and society to enact institutional change. PS members further increase women's access to the law in times of legal disputes, even though gender-related matters are quite complex (for instance, a woman seeking a divorce but not specifying anything about domestic violence). PS groups play a community leadership role in bringing justice to women and connecting poor people to the informal legal system. The access to *shailish* that PS groups seek to mobilise for the women provides them protection and an opportunity to access laws that align with formal rules.

The book's last chapter looks at women's representation in local governments in Bangladesh and how PS has changed this. PS groups play a major role in campaigning and, hence, in local governments. Qayum notes that South Asian countries have had histories of women leaders, but women's participation in politics vanishes when looking beyond the elites. Women's lack of representation in politics in these countries is tied to their role in the community (132). There are also added questions about honour and reputation, which women are often considered the defenders of. Few women can campaign at night or even visit public spaces, which are often male-dominated.

Qayum shows that PS groups choose a range of candidates to represent them. They are members of an NGO (mostly BRAC), are embedded in the community, have leadership qualities or are educated. The candidates may not necessarily be poor but are connected to both elites and village community groups. Thus, these candidates' choices can be exclusionary to 'ordinary' women. While PS groups mobilise candidates to push past gendered institutions, they exclude women who do not possess these attributes.

Qayum's book uses mixed methods with quasi-experimental research. The book explores the role of a platform that mobilises and empowers rural women by providing them agency and access. At the same time, this mobilisation and empowerment work in multiple ways. While PS groups can push a mother not to marry off her daughter at a young age, there is also a chance of the mother not having the agency within the family to push for this despite being convinced by PS members. The book contributes to the emerging literature that studies ordinary people's lives through their lived experiences by discussing how marginalised people solve political and social problems. As the book makes clear, rural societies in the Global South are changing and transforming – the role of women and women's groups in these societies are evolving too.

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