

# women as developers

Research Proposal by Mira Meegens





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Women's Involvement in Housing Initiatives on Financial Sustainability, Resident Satisfaction, and Community Cohesion in Sylhet, Bangladesh.

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Cover: Original picture taken by Nienke Keulen - Edited by Author

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Photo 1: Woman in Informal Settlement next to the plot by Nynke Keulen

# introduction

Bangladesh, known for its high population density of over 172 million people<sup>1</sup>, faces a significant gender imbalance. In the 2022 census, there were 50.43% women and 49.51% men<sup>2</sup>, giving women a slight numerical advantage. However, women are noticeably absent from public streets, where men dominate. This leads to questions about where women are, what activities they are involved in, their safety outdoors, and why they are not visible on the streets.

The status of women's rights in Bangladesh has changed over the years — a 1973 article labeled Bangladeshi women as some of the most oppressed globally due to glaring gender disparities<sup>3</sup>. While there has been some progress, women in Bangladesh still encounter substantial challenges. They often find themselves confined to domestic roles, burdened with household chores and childcare. Additionally, they are more likely to experience poverty, illiteracy, and violence compared to men<sup>3</sup>. Purdah, a cultural practice entrenched in Bangladesh, is pivotal in shaping women's lives. It restricts their movement and visibility, affecting access to education, employment, and healthcare. Despite these challenges, women in Bangladesh are challenging Purdah norms, advocating for the right to move freely and fully participate in public life<sup>4</sup>. This societal shift is mirrored in the architectural transformations influenced by women migrants.

The influence of women migrants on architectural transformations is visible in their daily lives. They adapt their homes to reflect their cultural preferences and practical needs, combining traditional and modern architectural elements. Their influence extends beyond their homes to participating in designing and constructing buildings for their communities, challenging conventional architectural norms. Moreover, women contribute to architectural changes through activism and advocacy<sup>5</sup>. They work to ensure that new housing developments are affordable and accessible to all residents, regardless of income or immigration status. Their advocacy promotes discussions about inclusivity and social fairness, fostering more equitable architectural developments.

The journey of women in Bangladesh and women migrants globally represents a continuous endeavor for gender parity and a substantial presence in both the public and private domains. While challenges punctuate this path, women persist in making a lasting impact on architectural developments and the societies they integrate into.

1. "Bangladesh Population (2023) - Worldometer," n.d., <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/bangladesh-population/>.

2. "2023 State of the World Population Report 'The 8 Billion Question: Too Many or Too Few?'," UNFPA Bangladesh, May 10, 2023, <https://bangladesh.unfpa.org/en/news/2023-state-world-population-report-8-billion-question-too-many-or-too-few%E2%80%9D#:~:text=The%20SWP%20reports%20that%20the,includin%20reaping%20the%20gender%20dividend.>

3. Ruby Rohrlich-Leavitt, *Women Cross-Culturally: Change and Challenge* (Walter de Gruyter, 1975), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110818567>.

4. Hanna Papanek, "Purdah: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 15, no. 3 (June 1, 1973): 289–325, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s001041750000712x>.

5. Mahila Housing Trust, "Grassroots Development Organization and NGO | Mahila Housing Trust," September 30, 2023, <https://www.mahilahousingtrust.org/>.



Sylhet is a division in northeastern Bangladesh, bordering India to the north and east. The area is a significant hub for migration, both within Bangladesh and internationally. Sylheti migrants come from various backgrounds, including Bengali, Assamese, and Khasi. The migration of women from Sylhet is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. Women migrate for various reasons, including to pursue education, employment, and marriage. They also migrate to escape poverty and violence. Women face several challenges, including discrimination, racism, and exploitation. However, they are resilient and resourceful and contribute significantly to their communities<sup>6</sup>.

The location, see Photo 2, situated in the heart of Sylhet city, stands out for its rich cultural diversity within proximity. It can be subdivided into distinct segments, encompassing middle-class housing blocks, a Manipuri community characterized by low-rise buildings, and a slum settlement. What is particularly striking about this area is the coexistence of various income levels, housing typologies, and cultures.

A common theme emerged during conversations with the residents: a deficiency of courtyards or semi-private spaces in nearly all residences. Additionally, a noticeable gender disparity was observed. Men predominantly frequented the streets, but upon entering certain sub-neighborhoods, women became more prominent. This spatial division underscored a clear contrast in the living patterns of men and women. The Manipuri community, in particular, appeared to offer more spatial freedom to women, whereas, in the slum areas, women were primarily encountered within their dwellings or in the immediate vicinity.

6. Iqbal Ahmed Chowdhury et al., "Internal Migration and Socio-Economic Status of Migrants: A Study in Sylhet City, Bangladesh," *American Journal of Human Ecology* 1, no. 4 (December 6, 2012): 123–33, <https://doi.org/10.11634/216796221504183>.

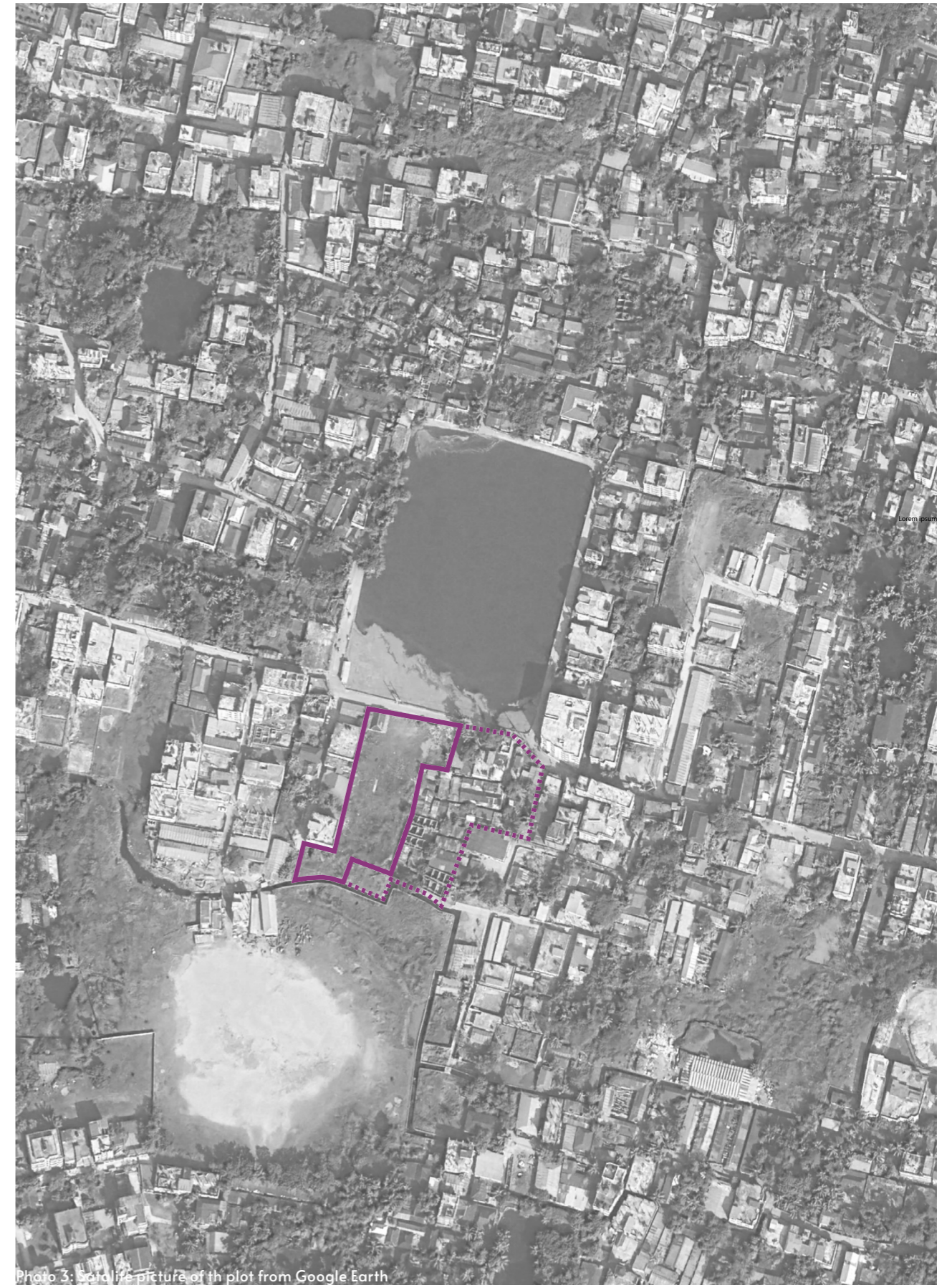


Photo 3: Satellite picture of the plot from Google Earth





Photo 2: Woman in Manipuri Settlement next to the plot by Nynke Keulen

# problem

Despite a nominal numerical advantage in the population, women's physical presence in public spaces is conspicuously low. This imbalance raises critical questions regarding the whereabouts of women, their activities, safety concerns, and the underlying reasons for their minimal visibility on the streets.

The gender dynamics in Bangladesh portray a historical and ongoing struggle for women's rights. Although improvements over the years have been made, women have encountered significant challenges. They are often confined to domestic roles, burdened with household chores, and face higher instances of poverty, illiteracy, and violence compared to men. The cultural practice of Purdah further restricts their movement and visibility, impacting their access to education, employment, and healthcare. Regardless of a push against these norms, women's mobility remains constrained.

Moreover, the influence of women migrants in architectural transformations reflects their adaptation of spaces to align with cultural preferences and practical needs. However, a noticeable absence of semi-private areas or courtyards in residences and the spatial disparity between genders in different sub-neighborhoods highlights the differential spatial patterns experienced by men and women. The Manipuri community offers more spatial freedom to women. In contrast, in the slum areas, women are primarily confined within their dwellings or immediate vicinity, further emphasizing the disparity in spatial access based on societal segments.

The problem statement is embedded in the societal, cultural, and spatial dynamics of the Sylhet region, indicating a need to address the gender imbalance and spatial disparities experienced by women. This encompasses the challenges within domestic spheres and the broader societal and architectural constraints that limit women's visibility and mobility in public spaces. There is a pressing need to explore and understand the reasons behind this disparity and to propose measures that could empower women to have equal spatial access and participation in both public and private domains, thereby fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.



# question

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Sylhet, Bangladesh, boasts a diverse cultural landscape but grapples with pronounced spatial separations and gender discrepancies. Moreover, the absence of sufficient semi-private spaces in most residences is apparent. These circumstances underscore the necessity for housing initiatives tailored to accommodate women's needs and foster more unified communities. If these initiatives were exclusively led by women, would there be a discernible distinction compared to constructions approached from a male perspective? This led to the following question:

*“How can the involvement of women in planning and executing housing initiatives in Sylhet, Bangladesh, affect financial sustainability, resident satisfaction, and community cohesion?”*

Exploring the effectiveness of housing projects involves delving into financial management, resident happiness, and community cohesion. Understanding how women oversee these projects financially and handle resources is crucial, unveiling diverse approaches and shedding light on their distinctive leadership styles. This exploration offers insights into what truly thrives in these initiatives, emphasizing both genders' unique strategies in steering these endeavors.

Analyzing how women navigate housing projects concerning financial management, resource allocation, and sustainability provides valuable perspectives into their techniques. This investigation unveils women's nuanced strategies in spearheading these initiatives, enriching our understanding of effective project management and leadership dynamics. Ultimately, this exploration illuminates how gender influences the outcomes of these projects, offering valuable insights for future endeavors. Considering these insights prompts a critical question:

*“How do women in leadership roles manage finances, resources, and sustainability uniquely within housing projects?”*

Studying gender-driven design preferences in housing projects reveals unique methods adopted by women, emphasizing elements tailored to enhance residents' well-being. This investigation is fundamental in understanding how these variations notably influence comfort, convenience, and overall satisfaction within living spaces. Appreciating these distinctions provides crucial perspectives on the profound impact of gender-specific designs on residents' experiences. This comprehension becomes the bedrock for

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constructing inclusive, fulfilling environments, meeting diverse needs, and nurturing a sense of belonging and contentment among inhabitants. Amidst this exploration, the following emerges:

*“How do design choices shaped by women affect residents' comfort, convenience, and satisfaction, and what distinct features women integrate into housing initiatives to enhance resident well-being?”*

Exploring community cohesion in women-led housing projects is vital, shedding light on women's unique approaches to fostering robust social connections. Understanding these differences emphasizes how gendered leadership shapes community dynamics, offering valuable insights into effective community-building strategies. Investigating women-led initiatives reveals distinct methods of nurturing strong ties, offering valuable lessons in fostering cohesive residential communities. This exploration unveils crucial nuances in leadership styles, offering valuable guidance for creating thriving communities within residential areas. Considering these observations, the following two questions arise:

*“What methods do women-led housing initiatives use to establish a stronger community bonds and social networks?”*

Additionally,

*“In what manner do spaces crafted by women-led initiatives foster a feeling of belonging and inclusivity within the community while accounting for possible cultural or societal impacts?”*



# framework

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The theoretical framework, centered on exploring the impact of gender-specific leadership in housing initiatives in Sylhet, Bangladesh, becomes critical due to limited site access. It encompasses three primary sections. The focus lies in exploring the impact of women-led projects on financial happiness, resident satisfaction, and community cohesion compared to projects led by men.

## Financial happiness:

Investigating how women and men manage finances, allocate resources, and sustain housing projects differently.

## Resident Satisfaction:

Understanding the effects of gender-influenced design choices on residents' comfort, convenience, and satisfaction highlight unique elements women integrate to enhance well-being.

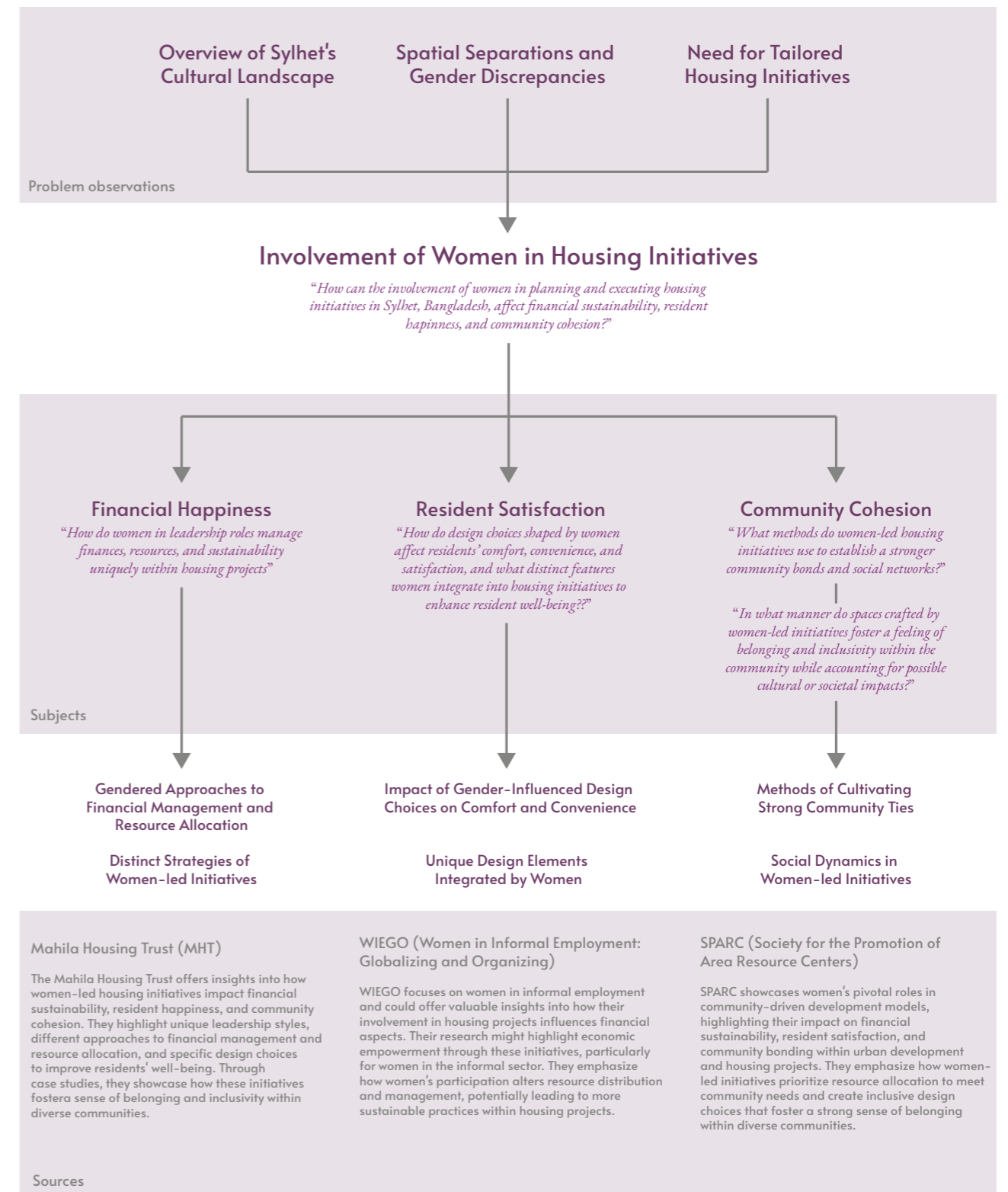
## Community Cohesion:

Analyzing methods employed by women-led initiatives in fostering stronger community bonds and social networks compared to male-led projects, exploring how spaces created by women promote inclusivity and a sense of belonging.

The framework introduces a systematic structure that integrates case studies as a pivotal source of information. Within this framework, three prominent organizations—Mahila Housing Trust, WIEGO, and SPARC—are enlisted to unveil comprehensive insights into the distinctive roles played by women in crafting housing initiatives in Sylhet. This approach aims to delve deeply into the nuanced aspects of women's contributions, emphasizing their unique impact on creating inclusive, sustainable, and community-focused housing projects in the region. By harnessing the expertise and experiences of these organizations, the framework seeks to uncover a rich understanding of how women's involvement shapes and enriches housing endeavors in Sylhet, fostering more resilient and interconnected communities.

# diagram

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# methodology

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The research methodology involves qualitative and quantitative research methods, utilizing various techniques such as interviews, observations, and data analysis.

## Literature Review:

Due to the limited duration of the field trip, literature sources will bridge the knowledge gap. For a comprehensive understanding of current housing needs for women in Sylhet, Bangladesh, scholarly essays, journal articles, news sources, and academic books detailing women's societal roles in Bangladesh, along with insights into women in architecture and urban planning, gender dynamics in spatial planning (particularly in Bangladesh), and the influence of migration on architectural changes and community dynamics will be employed.

## Site Visits and Observations:

Throughout the field trip, we explored housing initiatives within and around Sylhet, conducting on-site interviews with residents and stakeholders to assess the projects' influence on the community. The trip encompassed comprehensive physical, social, and political documentation through diverse multimedia, including videos, photographs, sketches, and interviews.

## Case Study of Similar Projects:

Three key organizations—Mahila Housing Trust, WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing), and SPARC (Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers)—significantly contribute to unraveling the distinct roles women play in shaping housing initiatives in Sylhet. Mahila Housing Trust offers a comprehensive perspective on women's involvement in housing endeavors, showcasing their multifaceted impact. Their research and case studies illuminate how women's leadership influences financial sustainability, resident well-being, and community inclusivity, highlighting unique approaches in financial management and design prioritization that enhance living spaces. WIEGO, focusing on women in informal employment, provides valuable insights into the economic empowerment resulting from their engagement in housing projects, particularly for women in the informal sector. Their emphasis on resource allocation and management showcases potential pathways for more sustainable practices within housing initiatives. SPARC, known for community-driven development, underscores women's significant roles in these projects. Their studies emphasize how women-led initiatives prioritize resource allocation, impacting project success, and delve into the cultural aspects of design choices that foster inclusivity

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and community belonging. Through case studies, SPARC demonstrates the profound impact of women-led community-focused initiatives in fostering inclusivity and a sense of belonging across diverse communities.

## Collaborative Engagement:

Engage in collaborative partnerships with local experts like Tashin, leveraging their expertise to navigate cultural intricacies and streamline interviews or site visits in Sylhet. Their profound insights and extensive networks hold the potential to enrich and facilitate the research process greatly.

This methodology blends varied viewpoints, guaranteeing an extensive investigation into the elements impacting the housing requirements for women in Sylhet. The ultimate goal is to facilitate the creation of housing solutions that are more inclusive and precisely tailored to address the diverse societal needs within the region.



# relevance

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This study delves into the effects of female participation in organizing and implementing housing projects in Sylhet, Bangladesh. It focuses on assessing the influence of this involvement on three key aspects: financial happiness, the contentment of residents, and cohesion within the community. The primary objective is to gain insights into how the distinct viewpoints and methodologies of women contribute to creating housing solutions that are more comprehensive and fair. Additionally, the research investigates how women in leadership roles can cultivate tighter community ties, enrich social connections, and foster a more profound sense of belonging among community members. The study highlights the invaluable impact of women's engagement in shaping holistic and harmonious living environments.

This research carries considerable weight as it addresses the prevalent issue of women being underrepresented in architecture, planning fields, and living conditions. It focuses explicitly on rectifying the oversight concerning the distinct requirements of women in housing design. Additionally, it contributes to the continual growth of gender and space studies, challenging established assumptions about space utilization and perception between men and women. Ultimately, the aim is to broaden outlooks and bridge the existing disparities in meeting diverse gender needs within architectural and planning frameworks.

This research's findings could significantly impact the design and development of housing projects in Sylhet and other parts of Bangladesh. By understanding the unique contributions of women to housing initiatives, policymakers, and planners can develop more inclusive and equitable housing solutions that meet the needs of all residents.

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