CAF America's Voices of Diaspora interview series presents diasporans living in the US and Canada who share their views on heritage, culture, and being part of a diaspora group.

**CAF America:** What does it mean to you to be a member of the Bangladeshi Diaspora?

**Jannatun Nabila:** To me it really means a home away from home. What's unique about the Bangladeshi Diaspora in particular is its power and capability to create a sense of community, belonging, and a feeling of home away from home for the Bengali-American residents living here in the U.S. I think that the diaspora may serve as a sanctuary for some. For others, it may mean that as they transition into a new life away from home, the diaspora helps strike a balance between the cultures and values of our new, adopted home - the US - contrasted to our roots in Bangladesh. My family and I moved from Bangladesh when I was six, but I still remember that sense of community, that sense of belonging, and the family gatherings I grew up with. They are considered sacred and are highly valued in our culture.

**CAF America:** That sounds nice! How do you engage with your culture and heritage here, in the United States?

**JN:** Thankfully, our culture and heritage can cross borders into new countries and communities relatively easily. I think that Bengali heritage here is deeply rooted in adopting many of the same traditions and practices valued back at home. We often have gatherings that bring together families, friends, neighbors and colleagues in their best traditional attire around a lot of homemade food, including biryani and pulao. These gathering create the best opportunity for us to catch up on not only what's going on in everyone's lives here, but also on the latest news from our family and friends in Bangladesh. I personally stay connected to my heritage and my culture by being present at these occasions, and participating in these traditions.

Of course weddings, graduations, and new additions to the family translate into even more vibrant occasions and even more lively parties. These events are full of life, energy, and color. I'm most passionate about this aspect of Bangladeshi culture, because I really strive and aim to bring that kind of energy into my life overall. I try to welcome every day with the same level of excitement, energy, and enthusiasm.

**Jannatun Nabila is a Grants Associate at the Citi Foundation. She is responsible for grants administration, focusing on due diligence and grantee reporting, ensuring compliance with Foundation requirements, and assisting with the Foundation’s accounting and tax processes.**

Prior to joining the Foundation, Jannatun worked at the Mertz Gilmore Foundation, where she provided programmatic support to two grantmaking portfolios.

**Jannatun holds a BA from New York University.**
Also, it’s important to note that the sense of community and belonging isn’t contained to family gatherings. For example, in New York, several neighborhoods around the city serve the local Bangladeshi community by operating grocery stores, restaurants, bakeries, and shopping centers central to the needs of the Bangladeshi home. Moreover, if an individual is located in a city that doesn’t have the same networks available to them, there are also a number of Bengali-language newspapers that are easily circulated.

**CAF America:** How about Bangladesh? Do you have close ties back to your home community? Do you know if other members of the Bangladeshi diaspora remain closely connected with their family and friends in Bangladesh?

**JN:** Yes. I think I would feel comfortable speaking not only on behalf of myself, but also the Bangladeshi diaspora, in that we all keep close ties with our home community in Bangladesh. Many of us have relatives who still reside, work, and raise families in Bangladesh. My parents, along with my aunts, uncles, and cousins keep in touch regularly with our relatives back home, so we still hear about what’s going on in their lives. It doesn't feel like we're on separate continents. Because family is so important to our heritage and our culture, it's not difficult to keep close ties with our community. Technology has made it a lot easier, and I would say that our ties now are stronger than they have ever been.

**CAF America:** Does this communication also extend to what's happening locally?

**JN:** It does. The conversation is not just limited to their immediate lives. Because our ties are so strong, the conversations do not revolve only around an individual family, but are also focused on what’s going on with the community, and the town or the city as a whole. Many of us are connected with people in Bangladesh working in the NGO and in the social impact sector. Personally, some of my closest family members are working in fields like microfinance, youth development, economic prosperity, and women’s health. Those living back home are aware of the most pressing issues impeding progress and work to address these barriers. They continue to keep us updated and keep us abreast of what's going on in the country, so we're able to bring more awareness to it and help.

**CAF America:** Next, could you share with us your opinion on how the Bangladeshi diaspora can contribute to the development of Bangladesh?

**JN:** While the Bangladeshi diaspora creates a safe space, and a sanctuary for Bangladeshi-Americans like myself living here, we have a responsibility to acknowledge our roots, and contribute to the development, prosperity, and health of Bangladesh, overall. The best way that the diaspora can contribute is by educating everyone about the work of our family, friends, and neighbors back home. We can bring awareness to their living conditions, and ultimately activate and empower ourselves and our network to give back and to strengthen the country that many of us call home. What I most appreciate about the diaspora is its ability to inspire so many people to create a sense of community across time zones and countries. I believe that it is now time for the diaspora to expand its impact by catalyzing its power for the development and prosperity of Bangladesh. “Because family is so important to our heritage and our culture, it's not difficult to keep close ties with our community. If anything, technology has made it a lot easier, and I would say that our ties now are stronger than they have ever been.”
CAF America: As a young professional, do you have an advantage that you might be able to utilize to advance this cause?

JN: That's a really good question. We feel the responsibility to give back to our home country. I think that many members of the diaspora who are my age share the same sentiment. I believe that so far the effort has been a bit disjointed. That's why I love CAF America's Diaspora Gives Bangladesh, because I feel that it centralizes the need and the solution into one resource, easily available online. Many of my peers are more willing to take action if it can be done online on their iPad or their phone. So I believe that sharing a resource like diagives.org is what is needed to activate them as philanthropists. People are aware of the areas where help is needed. The issue is that there hasn't been a central effort to mobilize the diaspora, until now. I think that a program like Diaspora Gives Bangladesh is making this easier.

CAF America: As we discuss how the diaspora can affect change, what role can diaspora philanthropy play?

JN: I think that the diaspora can lead to impactful, meaningful, and long-lasting change. In my experience, the philanthropic efforts of the Bangladeshi diaspora have been contained to helping immediate members of our own community. For example, I've seen many mosques help families overcome loss and get back on their feet. Although helping our local community is wonderful, I do believe the diaspora also has to embrace philanthropy on a larger scale to broadly influence and lead systemic change. That means empathizing with the local Bangladeshi families going through floods during the monsoon season, living without access to proper medical care, or facing imminent poverty and economic stagnancy. The root of the diaspora, the community's philanthropic fervor, must expand beyond borders and touch Bangladeshi families on the ground.

The Diaspora Gives Bangladesh program makes this significantly easier for our community. It eliminates the need for us to scout and try to vet local organizations ourselves to ensure our philanthropy is making a real difference. This giving platform is something that the diaspora and our community needs because although we are aware of the issues and what's going on in our communities back at home, we haven't had a clear path or guide. We haven't had a concrete initiative to mobilize us. With diagives.org we have a reliable solution to support the work of charitable organizations in our home communities. It's easily accessible and shareable with multiple stakeholders who can use the platform to learn about and donate to organizations in Bangladesh. So I feel that the Diaspora Gives Bangladesh program will help make a big difference for the community.

CAF America: Thank you Jannatun for being a Diaspora Ambassador and for sharing some of your personal thoughts on this important topic.