

## SUBMITTED VERSION

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## **‘Co-creating Meeting Spaces’: Doing Ethnographic Fieldwork with Marginalized Women in Bangladesh**

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## **‘Co-creating Meeting Spaces’: Doing Ethnographic Fieldwork with Marginalized Women in Bangladesh**

The effort to work with stigmatized and socially vulnerable women holds particular challenges for feminist researchers attempting to engage in critical and reflexive fieldwork. Primarily drawing from ethnographic research with women experiencing homelessness within a train station in Dhaka, Bangladesh, this paper explores the particular challenges of engaging with women whose lives have been shaped by shame, stigma and violence—and who are understandably distrustful of outsiders asking questions. It presents some of the finer interpersonal measures and considerations for respectfully and sensitively working with such ‘hard to reach’ women where the potential for ‘insider’ research is limited. Building upon fieldwork insights, we advance the importance of fostering ‘co-creating meeting spaces’. This terminology flags the shared process between researchers and interlocutors to co-create the physical and emotional spaces that enable conversations, based on trust and mutual respect, to occur. As an approach, rather than a prescriptive set of fieldwork methods, the act of co-creating meeting spaces encourages researchers engaged in prolonged fieldwork to lean into the surprising moments of encounter, sharing, and tentative alliances that emerge and are created between researchers and interlocutors who hold distinct but equally significant power dynamics in the research endeavor. The approach offers a means of grappling with the messy, difficult, and slow process of navigating and (re)negotiating the physical and emotional spaces that are apt to emerge when working with women whose everyday resilience in the face of adversity is based upon their self-reliance and guardedness against unreliable others.

Keywords: feminist ethnography; fieldwork; gender; homelessness; vulnerable populations

### **Introduction**

Researchers confront many challenges when attempting to design and carry out fieldwork with women that are economically marginalized and socially vulnerable (Skeggs 2007; Smith 1987; Davies 2008; Davis and Craven 2016). The possible

decisions about how to appropriately and ethically engage this heterogeneous demographic are numerous, and they are apt to vary and change once research designs are tested in the course of ethnographic fieldwork (Ali 2015; Sultana 2007; Fonow and Cook 1991). This common place knowledge about the needs-based adaptive nature of fieldwork is well established in existing literature (Billo and Hiemstra 2013; Mikkelsen 2005). It stems, in part, from the work of feminist scholars who are adamant that good research has to include ‘women’s voices’ in ways that are substantive rather than performative—which requires moving beyond the ‘add women and stir’ approach to participatory methods (Cornwall 2003, 1338). Aware of these concerns, early career scholars often have a sense that their research practices and methods will evolve when they are tested in real-world scenarios, but they have little preparation for how they can approach such evolutions prior to the commencement of fieldwork.

Our suggestion is that, rather than aiming to trial predetermined methods upfront, researchers can first focus on fostering the basis for sharing, exchange, and respect that is needed for collaborations to succeed. Towards that end, this article contributes by emphasizing the value of ‘co-creating meeting spaces’ with women. As will be explained, co-creating meeting spaces requires researchers to consider how to engage in a process with interlocutors to create physical and emotional meeting spaces that enable conversations, based on trust and mutual respect, to occur. It is a process that requires a navigation and negotiation of the biases and assumptions among researcher(s) and interlocutor(s) that are shaped by the cultural, social, political, geographical and historical spaces that they inhabit.

By space we defer to Massey’s (2005) definition of space, as a product of inter-relationality that is multiplicitous and always under construction. This approach invites us to think of space as a ‘capacity’ to novel becomings and possibilities (Jiménez 2003,

142). By using such definitions, we highlight the co-constructed fluidities and affective resonances of space for all parties involved in the research process. When applied to spaces of encounter in ethnographic fieldwork, this definition also allows us to underscore how the development of meeting spaces is not a one-off effort that can be folded into the category of ‘developing rapport’.

Stated differently, we assert that developing trusting and truly collaborative relationships with marginalized women is not the linear ‘rapport-building process’ that is optimistically discussed in research handbooks (Dickson-Swift et al. 2007). While trust is essential within any researcher-participant relationship, it is even more crucial (and yet difficult to develop) when working with populations who have experienced repeated and ongoing loss (Conticini and Hulme 2007). The kinds of collaborative physical and emotional meeting spaces that we discuss require constant negotiation over time, particularly if one is working with populations whose life lessons have taught them to be sceptical and distrustful as a means of survival.

In our discussion of the value we see in co-creating meeting spaces, we attend to the sources of power held by all parties involved in the fieldwork process. Our efforts build upon pre-existing reflections on ethnographic fieldwork which highlight the imbalanced power differentials between the researcher and the people being researched (Davies 2008, 61). Of late, scholars are also apt to suggest that the subjects of research are also holders of power—even if they are socially marginalized. At the very least, women who hold precarious social and economic positions retain a source of power at the corporeal level. This can include things as basic as a right to refuse discussion and participation in the research project—which is an act that we empirically highlight in this text—as well as the embodied political struggles for autonomy and social rights that they enact on a daily basis (Harcourt and Escobar 2002, 8).

Power relationships inform relations and dynamics between researcher(s) and interlocutor(s) that are not fixed and static. Rather, they involve multiplex negotiations and dynamics that can be negotiated and created throughout fieldwork interactions (Chacko 2004). The resulting scenarios are likely to lead to surprising moments of exchange and negotiation, as is explained by drawing from the first author's experiences of working with homeless women living in a train station in Bangladesh.

At the outset, we wish to clarify that our intention is not to reinvent the proverbial wheel of fieldwork. A long line of existing scholarship has dealt intensively with the question of what a feminist approach to ethnography might involve (Abu-Lughod 1990; Enslin 1994; Collins 1997; Ortner 1972; Skeggs 2007; Stacey 1994; Visweswaran 1994, 1997). This has solidified into a sizeable literature on feminist ethnography that we engage throughout the course of this paper (Davis and Craven 2016). As for what constitutes feminism, we defer to the definition given by Donna Haraway, who writes: 'Feminism is about a critical vision consequent upon a critical positioning in inhomogeneous gendered social space' (1991, 195). We do this while acknowledging Beverley Skeggs' caution that when it comes to feminist ethnography 'there is no one feminism' nor one approach to ethnography (2007, 426). This point reminds us that a 'multitude of different routings, objects, and enquiry' can be fitted into the space of feminist ethnography (Skeggs 2007, 426).

We also note that leading scholars have convincingly made calls for feminist ethnographers to become, in Ruth Behar's (1996) words, 'vulnerable observers.' These are thinking-feeling observers of the physical and emotional worlds that our interlocutors inhabit. Such efforts build upon the insights of intellectual trailblazers such as Donna Haraway, who since the early 1990s, has called for scholars to recognize and value women's situated knowledges (1991, 188). This call inspires a politics based on

epistemologies of ‘location, positioning, and situating’ where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard in order to ‘make rational knowledge claims’ (Haraway 1991, 195). As Haraway explains, ‘these are claims on people’s lives; the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity’(Ibid.). Empirically, acknowledgements of women’s situated knowledges have resulted in specific studies that generate significant conceptual insights, including Wendy Harcourt and Arturo Escobar’s work on *Women and the Politics of Place* (Harcourt and Escobar 2002, 2005). They emphasize how women create possibilities for ‘being-in-place’ and ‘being-in-networks’ that are ‘place-based’ (2005, 2-3). This emphasis on being-in-place with women includes an implicit acknowledgment of the value of approaching women in the places where they live, and in ways that make sense to their complex lived realities.

While efforts to approximate women’s situated knowledge(s) may already entail an implicit or explicit attempt to meet women ‘halfway’ in the fieldwork process (March 2002), we nonetheless feel that further underscoring the utility of this approach is merited. In particular, we seek to highlight how such efforts become especially important, and especially complicated, when researchers attempt to work with some of society’s most highly marginalized and vulnerable populations. In drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with women experiencing homelessness, this paper explores the particular challenges of engaging with women whose lives have been shaped by shame, stigma, and violence; and as such are understandably distrustful of outsiders asking questions, irrespective of if they are a woman and from the region or not. It is an effort to present some of the finer interpersonal measures and considerations for respectfully and sensitively working with such ‘hard to reach’ women where the potential for ‘insider’ research is limited.

By ‘hard to reach’ we refer to the complexities and challenges faced by both the researcher and interlocutors in order for meeting spaces to be co-created. We suggest that this approach may be particularly useful for ethnographers who are neither full nor partial ‘insiders’ to the socio-cultural or geographical contexts in which they are conducting research. The approach is especially apt for those working with women whose life experiences are uncommon to most researchers and whose hardships have taught them to be distrustful of others, regardless of background. While women experiencing homelessness are the demographic of focus for this text, we contend that similar considerations for ethnographically co-creating meeting spaces with women can be applied to other similarly vulnerable groups. As will be later demonstrated, for instance, the approach was successfully utilized in work with Rohingya women living in a refugee camp in Bangladesh.

### ***Developing and co-creating meeting spaces***

The value of focusing on co-creating meeting spaces is underscored by our collective experience of methods that have failed to appropriately meet women where they are at physically and emotionally. When working on two distinct projects, for instance, both authors rather optimistically tried to implement a particular method known as ‘photo voice’ in an effort to do collaborative storytelling with socially marginalized women (McIntyre 2003; Morello, Lingafelter, and Leavitt 1998). In each case, these measures failed resoundingly when working with low-income women who have little formal education. Whether the camera utilized was disposable or digital, the imposition of such a technology among women who did not have pre-existing skills and capacities with this equipment created problems for researchers and interlocutors alike. Our interlocutors were particularly embarrassed to demonstrate their unfamiliarity with the cameras and we, in turn, were upset to learn that the imposition of this technology made

women feel instantly self-conscious. In instances where ‘rapport’ had been building between researcher and interlocutor, the appearance of cameras for collaborative use had the opposite effect to that which was desired; instead of providing pathways to co-conspiracy in the acquisition of knowledge, they drove a wedge between the ‘learned’ researcher and the ‘innocent’ or ‘simple’ women with whom we worked (words that were used by our female interlocutors when explaining their hesitation to engage in the photo voice method).

In retrospect, it should have been obvious to us in advance of our research that specific methodological tools like photo voice were not appropriate for our respective studies. While such methods work well with tech-savvy populations and the new generation of ‘digital natives’ that populate the world, they are not well suited to work with groups of people who have been socially and structurally marginalized (Prensky 2001). Having done two very different projects—one with homeless women in a train station in Dhaka (first author) and another with illiterate and semi-literate rural women from the Indian Himalayas (second author)—we should have focused our pre-fieldwork efforts on thinking of how to enter into and engage with women’s everyday lives in more subtle and less intrusive ways. While the specifics of how we eventually achieved our respective points of entry differed, the commonality was on finding strong interpersonal means of showing respect, demonstrating humility, establishing trust, and creating physical and emotional spaces to foster mutual understanding.

The challenges we faced are not unique. As Kathleen O’Reilly (2007) has pointed out, even programs created with the stated aim of improving gender inequity and inclusion often fail to adequately treat women with true respect and deference. This can include the female fieldworkers who are tasked with working alongside women as potential program participants—fieldworkers who end up using methods of interaction

designed to ‘lecture, not to listen’ (O’Reilly 2007, 619). The aim of her scholarship is to upset the assumption that by simply being a woman from the same region, that is possible for women fieldworkers to make women’s participation possible (O’Reilly 2007). As scholars working in the anthropology of development, we agree with such criticisms based on our observations of how practitioners have attempted to work with our interlocutors. It is for this reason that we argue there is utility for both academic researchers and development fieldworkers to adopt the approach to ethnographically meeting women that we suggest, especially when the target population can be classified as vulnerable. To explain in further detail, we focus on the first author’s ethnographic experiences and methodological positionings.

The ethnographic fieldwork explored within this paper was conducted over a period of ten months, during 2014 – 2015, in a large train station in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Initial interviews with women focused on exploring women’s everyday lives, with subsequent interviews exploring life histories and everyday lives in greater detail (Mayock and Sheridan 2012; De Certeau 1984). A total of 93 recorded interviews and discussions were conducted with over 40 women who currently or had previously lived in the station, and field notes made of more than 70 additional interactions, observations, un-recorded conversations, and participatory exercises conducted with women. Over the course of fieldwork, a small group of approximately eight long-term residents of the train station became the key informants of the study, simply by virtue of being ‘more willing’ to engage in re-occurring conversations and interactions with the researcher (Davies 2008, 81).

‘The station,’ as this paper will refer to the field site, was one of eleven major homeless population concentrations within Dhaka (Uddin et al. 2009). Female residents living in this location were reported as having ‘the hardest lives of women in Dhaka’

(Homelessness Project Coordinator). Two young women, Silvia and Shaoli, assisted the first author in conducting, translating and transcribing the interviews throughout fieldwork. Silvia assisted the first author from September 2014 till January 2015 and Shaoli from January till August 2015. Their observations and learning experiences were influential to the methodological insights of the study.

<Insert Figure 1 here>

Figure 1: A station platform where interviews with women often occurred.

Photographer: Tarannum Ali Nibir.

### ***Gendered homelessness in Bangladesh***

Dhaka has a homeless population of approximately 53,000 and on any given day between 200 to 400 of them reside in the railway station that is the focus of this study (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics 2014). In vernacular Bengali, these populations are referred to as ‘street dwellers’ to connote the absence of shelter and their occupation of public spaces. This terminology is particularly shameful for homeless women given the gendered norms and cultural expectations for women to be householders in Bangladesh. The sense of shame and stigma is compounded when women are forced to occupy a space as public and high-traffic as a railway station. Life in its many functions and forms is visibly performed here, including income generation, eating, sitting, washing, toileting, conversations and arguments, as well as sleeping.

Stated differently, the everyday lives of homeless women living in public spaces subvert dominant social and cultural practices for women within Bangladesh, who have traditionally been regulated to the private sphere where their bodies can be protected and their honor maintained (Kabeer 1988; Bandyopadhyay and Khan 2003). As Watson and Austerberry (1986, 96-7) argue:

Homeless women's bodies...represent a challenge to the feminine body...by sleeping on the street...[they] challenge the public/private boundary...the [private] sphere associated with feminine domesticity and sexuality [seeps] in to the public in a disruptive and threatening [way].

Women's homelessness in Bangladesh is conflated with a range of narratives that attribute moral blame to women and/or their families. The narratives include aspersions that such women are illegitimate and 'unwanted' children, unfaithful to their spouses, and/or practicing sex workers. Indeed the phrase *rastar mohila* (woman of the street) is used interchangeably to refer to either a homeless woman and/or a sex worker. Ghafur (2002, 23) discusses that to live on the streets as a woman in Bangladesh, whatever social-identity one has is erased 'to the extent of becoming a pariah in the eyes of society.' In addition, women have to contend with the 'taint' of the station. This taint is associated with drug selling, sex work, and crime—all of which are superimposed onto, and reinforcing of, the stigma of pre-existing narratives of what it means to be a *rastar mohila* (Wacquant 2008). As Pia, a young woman who had lived in the station for nine months explained:

They (the public) say we are bad girls (sex workers). We feel awful when we hear these things [but] there is nothing we can do. Because of our life in the streets they are able to say such things to us. Because we argue and fight with people...we get up to mischief, mix with guys, because of all that, many people think we are bad.

According to such accounts, women transgress social, cultural and spatial norms by virtue of living on the streets. Importantly, women were not treated in a way that enabled them to create and maintain strong social networks with people outside of the station who did not share the same stigma; they were not, in other words, 'treated as a dignified being whose worth is equal to that of others' (Nussbaum 2001, 79). Women discussed being 'treated worse than dogs,' which in urban Bangladesh are untouchable

animals that are often viewed as unfavorable, dirty ‘pests’—and are handled with contempt and physical violence.

### **Meeting women in the station**

The first author’s starting day in the station is illustrative of some of the difficulties that one encounters when attempting to work with socially stigmatized and physically vulnerable populations. While she had prior experience engaging in research with ‘urban poor’ women when conducting research with a Bangladeshi non-governmental organization (NGO) from 2011-2012, many of her encounters were brief in nature. The dearth of in-depth insights into the experiences of the homeless population within the academic literature (Ahmed et al. 2011; Ghafur 2002; Koehlmoos et al. 2009; Uddin et al. 2009) led Shoshannah to embark upon a long-term ethnographic project to do what NGO and government employees could not do: spend a prolonged period of time meeting women on a regular basis where they live in order to understand in more nuanced detail their everyday challenges, vulnerabilities, and adaptive capabilities. Even though Shoshannah had experience conducting research, it only nominally prepared her for the challenges and access issues that her ethnographic fieldwork posed. The first time Shoshannah visited the station, she instantly felt herself and Silvia, her research assistant, to stand out conspicuously as they moved around their chosen field site. For her part, Shoshannah was a young white woman with short blonde hair. And while Silvia was Bangladeshi, her attire and comportment marked her as educated and lower-middle class.

Despite sticking out, Shoshannah and Silvia did their best to introduce themselves to the women they met in the station. After some time, they met a woman named Shanta sitting at the entrance to the station platforms. She had a ragged red *orna* (scarf) tied around her body and was chewing *paan* (beetle nut). As they approached

Shanta who sat next to a group of women, she stood up and yelled, 'Hey! You want to know how we all sell our vaginas? You want me to tell you about that? .... No? Well, you can go f\*ck off.' Silvia was mortified as she translated the words to Shoshannah. This led to a discussion, prompted by Silvia, about whether or not to leave the station in response to this statement. Shoshannah insisted that they remain, as to leave so quickly would show them to be thin-skinned. After some time, they sat with another woman more willing to speak and conducted a disjointed and messy interview; the content of which was as superficial as anything Shoshannah had gathered when working for her past NGO employer.

A week later, the two researchers had a conversation with a staff member from a local homeless service who had significantly more experience working with women in the station. Among several topics, they discussed how difficult it was to talk to women. Encouraging them, the staff member reflected:

Definitely they will talk. Not today though... Only after talking to them for a long time, after listening to them, gaining their trust [will they talk]... I have [had] to sit with them and try to mix with them, then suddenly they will reveal these things. They will speak... But I have to be at the same level with them.

Theoretically, they knew that sitting with women, being 'at their level', and developing relationships and trust was going to be critical to the fieldwork; they just weren't sure how or when that was going to happen.

The freedom that Shoshannah experienced in being able to easily approach women within the train station was what made women adept at fiercely protecting their spaces, privacy and stories. When Shoshannah first approached women and explained why she wished to speak with them, it was not uncommon for women to suddenly stand up and leave, whilst others would immediately comment on the perceived

‘pointlessness’ of the research and their perception that ‘nothing would change.’ A few women would agree to a conversation, yet these initial interactions tended to only gain superficial and seemingly contradictory information. Shoshannah had the sense that crucial details were being omitted or that perhaps she was being out-right lied to, which was later verified through conversations with homeless shelter program staff, as well as through observations and conversations with women throughout fieldwork.

A few months and numerous visits later, Shoshannah had established that, if nothing else, she was only going to keep coming back to the station. She felt like she had ‘accomplished’ very little by way of in-depth conversations that extended beyond superficial encounters and fleeting conversations but she was determined to continue with the fieldwork.

One morning, the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 2014, Silvia and Shoshannah were chatting to one of the women, Jorina, a person with whom they had started to establish a tenuous connection through providing first aid to her daughter. A few other women including Shanta approached, silently observing the interaction. Shoshannah turned and, like numerous other times, asked if anyone would like to sit and talk with her. To her surprise, they agreed and someone offered to get a mat. As the woman left, the other women began to sit on the dirt. Not wanting to appear precious, Shoshannah removed her shoes and sat on them, asking Silvia, to do likewise. Shanta suddenly exclaimed, ‘You’ll get filthy—filthy and dirty!’ Shoshannah smiled and asked Silvia to tell her that this is why people wash clothes, a comment that made the group laugh. Shanta clarified her statement, explaining, ‘What I’m saying is that we aren’t clean, we live in the streets, what difference does it make if we get dirty or not, but you shouldn’t get dirty.’

‘Why?’ Shoshannah asked.

‘Why?’ Shanta replied, ‘because the people of Bangladesh hate us, because we are from the streets. They wouldn’t ever sit like this...’

It was apparent that the ‘dirt and filth’ Shanta referred to was less a concern for Shoshannah and Silvia’s clothes, and rather the shame and stigma associated with sitting beside these women. Whilst Shoshannah and Silvia had sat with women numerous times before, this occasion was particularly important, because it was the first time women had invited them to do so. Shanta was warning Shoshannah that she was at a critical turning point, where the act of sitting was to renegotiate her own sources of vulnerability and power. Yet in doing so, this act also challenged women’s understandings, preconceptions and views of who Shoshannah was and perhaps most importantly, how she viewed them and her motives for being there.

Shanta’s earlier statement of unwelcome, asking if Shoshannah wanted to write about how they ‘sold their vaginas,’ exemplified the default explanation women held of the agendas and intentions of those who dared to ask about their lives. The station dwellers were very familiar with *bideshi*’s (foreigners), local journalists or members of the public, who, as Shanta later explained, ‘speak ill of us and abuse us’ and had airs indicating they were ‘proud of themselves [for not being like us].’ In particular, journalists were renowned for coming to the station and, within their interactions or subsequent portrayals of station dwellers lives, only served to further perpetuate the dominant, demeaning, and stigmatizing narratives surrounding who station women are, why they were there, and what their experiences were. It made sense, then, that women would attempt to resist engaging with a strange young *bideshi* (foreigner) and her Bengali assistant in both overt and subversive ways. The refusals to talk, the lies, or the half-truths and omissions within initial conversations were a way for women to exert their power in an attempt to re-negotiate the stigma associated with how *they*

understood the researcher's, as well as their own, positionality and agenda ( Rayburn and Guittar 2013).

It was the power Shoshannah held outside the station—derived from material wealth, education level, nationality, skin color and social status—which rendered her largely powerless to navigate the complexity of the historical, temporal and social space within. Lammers (2007, 102), discussing the multidimensionality of power within her cross-cultural work with refugees' remarks:

Power springs from many sources: power that comes from wealth or status, physical power, creative power, the power of personality, intellectual power, the power (or ability) to have rewarding relationships with others, to love and be loved.

The sources of power that held true for Shoshannah outside of the station, as well as the narratives the station population held of her and the potentiality of the research project, had to be re-negotiated with the women of the station if meaningful interactions and data collection could occur. Importantly, it was the ability to develop relationships and trust, the co-creation of physical and emotional meeting spaces, which re-negotiated these forms of power that facilitated the more intimate and detailed discussions.

We contend that this experience holds vital insights. The act of attending to emotional space extends beyond a recognition of embodied 'felt geography(ies)' (Davidson and Milligan 2004, 523) and the place of emotions within fieldwork and writing (Bondi 2012). Rather, it involves a repeated showing-up to women's physical and emotional spaces of vulnerability while 'attend[ing] to the evershifting social landscapes in which we [are] embedded' (Laliberté and Schurr 2016, 74). Since emotions are embodied experiences of social relations (Ahmed 2004), creating emotional meeting spaces requires all parties to undertake the navigation of emotional

and relational readiness so that—when the time is right—painful and difficult topics can be discussed.

### **Co-creating physical and emotional meeting spaces**

Learning how to co-create meeting spaces with women within the station was a slow and often messy process, reflecting the violence, precarity and uncertainty that pervaded women's lives. This learning required Shoshannah to engage and embrace the precarious temporariness of the everyday, to be reactive, and to have her routines and emotions shaped by the space and events that unfolded (cf. Checker, Davis, and Schuller 2014, 408). Rather, the extent to which women trusted, divulged intimate details, and wished to spend time with Shoshannah was variable and dependent on numerous factors. These factors included women's energy levels, their pre-existing commitments, and perhaps most crucially, the extent to which women could do the emotional work of being patient with questions and divulging details of their difficult lives.

As such, the success of the fieldwork was founded upon engaging in a shared process, between the researcher, research assistant and interlocutors, to explore, negotiate, maintain, and re-negotiate the physical and emotional spaces for conversations and shared experiences to occur. Likewise, within a discussion of relationality within qualitative interviewing, Hoskins and White (2013, 186) discuss the metaphor of research and participant 'exploring something together... (to) metaphorically hold it in both of their hands, pass it back and forth, turn it, feel it, sense it and make sense of it'. Co-creating these spaces in ways that were new—and often initially uncomfortable—was essential to creating the physical and emotional capacity to meet.

Over the remainder of fieldwork, it slowly became more normal for a woman to approach Shoshannah and invite her to sit with them. Being invited to sit and being shown hospitality was a subtle, but important shift in the power dynamic; an indicator that women were not only welcoming Shoshannah into their physical space, but also that of an opening into their inevitably painful life histories. Women who offered Shoshannah a brick or a cement bag (typically used by street dwellers to sleep on) almost inevitably preceded an interview where women were willing to discuss the painful realities of their histories.

<Insert Figure 2 here>

Figure 2: A woman sitting on a cement bag typically used for sleeping and repurposed to create a physical meeting space during interviews. Photographer: Tarannum Ali Nibir.

About four months into fieldwork and many conversations later, Shoshannah and Silvia were informally talking with Shanta about friendship. Shanta was telling them that she did not have any friends that she could confide in, and then commented how different their interactions had been from anything she had previously experienced. When Silvia asked why this was, Shanta explained,

There are people, they say that we live in the streets and we cannot be spoken to...but you come and sit beside us. We are happy with that, happy that someone comes to us and we can talk to each other. That's a big deal really...I like it...the way [Shoshannah] comes and draws us close...If we take a shower today we won't get water to shower for the next seven days...Someone from a good family would not come here and sit to talk to us. Take yourself [Silvia] for example. You are sitting here only because she is here. Would you sit here otherwise? You would walk right by us. You would say you have nothing to talk about with us... I just like the way she

comes and hugs us, even though we are so dirty. She is not disgusted by us... We sit on the ground and she also sits on the ground. We get pleasure and love from her... There is no feeling of superiority within.

In Shanta's explanation, the 'friendship' that had been developed was built through the seemingly simple gestures of 'sitting beside', having physical contact such as hugs goodbye or holding hands during discussions (when initiated by the woman), as well as treating women as having inherent worth as equals. It is noteworthy that these types of practices (holding hands, hugging, and sitting on cement bags during conversations) were less common amongst women outside of interactions with Shoshannah. As such, these 'connections and unexpected openings' (Haraway 1991, 196) represented the co-creation of physical and emotional meeting spaces within the station wherein intimate conversations and interactions between the researchers and women were able to occur.

The co-creation of meeting spaces involves a shift from an understanding of the social scientist as 'guest and then host to the worlds of their informants' (Candea and Da Col 2012, Siv), where power is viewed as being held by the researcher or the interlocutor at discrete periods throughout the research process. It has been acknowledged that researchers 'chang[e] things by just being there [with participants]', that our presence, 'affects peoples lives' (Rodriquez in Davis and Craven 2016, 77), and that interlocutors have the power 'to shape and control the ethnographer and ethnographic encounter' (Kondo 1986, 80), or that fieldwork can be a 'process of transformation' for the researcher (Ali 2015, 785). Co-creating meeting spaces, particularly with those who may not have previously engaged in a prolonged ethnographic research project, is thus a process of negotiating and re-negotiating the multiple and shifting temporal, social and geographical spaces that emerge throughout the research process, and which enables new and unexpected meeting points to emerge

that are ‘creat[ed] and imagin[ed]’ together with our interlocutors (Geertz 1973, 23; Conquergood 1991).

### **Navigating emotional spaces**

Half way through fieldwork, a new fieldwork assistant, Shaoli, joined Shoshannah in the station. Shoshannah’s first research assistant, Silvia, was getting married and she was hesitant to continue visiting the station to work with women around stigmatized topics such as sex work. Shaoli was an upper-middle class young woman, in the fourth year of an undergraduate law degree. Shoshannah was initially concerned about Shaoli’s ‘modern’ attire (jeans, a *camiz* or traditional dress and scarf) and how this would be received by the women. Yet, the first morning of fieldwork demonstrated that Shaoli’s ability to empathetically engage and to co-create emotional meeting spaces with women was far more important than her clothing. In a country where clothing marked and divided class and social status, the women of the station had instead learnt that appearances were often deceiving. As Jorina explained to Shoshannah one morning in the middle of 2015, ‘it is not written on people’s bodies whether they are good or bad, you have to understand from their behavior.’

<Insert Figure 3 here>

Figure 3: Portrait of a women living in the station. Artist: Md. Ruhul Abdin

During Shaoli’s first interview in the station with a woman, Raika, an increasingly confusing and contradictory narrative around the woman’s life history and experiences within the station emerged. Raika had smudged kohl around her eyes, hair escaping from a roughly done braid, and deep, thick ‘slashing’ (self-harm) scars traversing her arms, with a more recent cut curling around one side of her neck.

Jewelry, makeup, and the presence of recent self-harm scars were often indicators of women who currently engaged in sex work. Raika didn't appear too forthcoming, and Shoshannah wondered how the interview would go. Sensing her hesitation, another woman prompted Raika by saying,

Say [your story] the way I said [mine], as simple as water. Say that you stay here because you have no place else to go. Even after getting beaten you choose to stay here and don't go to your parent's house. You don't want to face them with the cuts you made out of stubbornness and you also know that they would not allow you in their house.

Following this comment, the interview took quick dives into some quite horrific details of the woman's life history. It appeared that the earlier contradictions were Raika's attempts to omit or gloss over painful, difficult memories.

That afternoon, Shoshannah and Shaoli unpacked the complexity of engaging with the women living in the train station and contemplated the techniques that could be used to navigate experiences of trauma and loss within women's narratives. They discussed how the re-telling of life histories were almost inevitably difficult for women, and that discussing 'why' women experienced homelessness was often the most sensitive topic. It was within these stories that the loss and pain was often deepest. 'As a general rule,' Shoshannah reflected,

The simpler the story it is, the less amount of pain and hurt a woman discusses, they're the times when I suspect something's being hidden. For example, Raika wanted to tell us a narrative about her family loving her as well as the 'freedom' and positives of the station – but this didn't fit with the other stories she shared. Our job is to find out why. Is this really her reality; was it once her reality; or it because she's hiding something else? The first step is working out if the women is going to be willing to talk, the second step is figuring out how to be with her to get there. Sometimes that's not possible, and that has to be ok (paraphrased from fieldnotes).

Reflections about how to engage with women in sensitive ways were ongoing discussions between Shoshannah and Shaoli that continued beyond fieldwork itself. Following fieldwork, Shoshannah kept in contact with Shaoli, checking translations, sharing emergent ideas and theories as she conducted data analysis and wrote up her results. In turn, Shaoli shared her experiences of continuing to engage in qualitative research outside of her formal employment in a large NGO within their legal and compliance department.

In 2018, Shaoli was involved in a project interviewing Rohingya women living in the refugee camps in Cox Bazaar, Bangladesh about their experiences of sexual violence. Shaoli reflected with Shoshannah on how fieldwork in the Dhaka station had informed her own emergent research practices. Shaoli stressed the importance of ‘allowing women to invite [her] in’ as one of the key principals that guided her research interactions, such as asking women where they would like to sit to talk, and accepting the tea and biscuits offered to her. It followed then that this principle would also guide how Shaoli conducted and navigated painful topics within interviews.

Shaoli discussed the difference between her own approach and that of other data-collectors on the project, who she observed had acted more like ‘reporters ... with a checklist... wanting to first know all the tiny details about the attacks and their village.’ This approach did not seem intuitive to Shaoli, who felt that a structured and chronological approach to exploring women’s experiences of trauma within interviews was counter-productive. Instead, she attempted to understand women ‘where they were.’ Shaoli encouraged her team to ask women about their current living situation, some of the everyday challenges they faced, and then started to move into potentially more difficult topics such as how many of their family members were currently in Bangladesh and only then segueing into family and life in Myanmar (their home

country). When a woman began ‘giving’ details, Shaoli discussed ‘using’ these to open a conversation, asking women to fill a ‘gap’ she had identified. She reflected:

It’s not [the women’s] job to tell us a nice, complete story, it’s up to us to work out how it all fits in together... kind of like a jigsaw puzzle... [as well as] ...what’s important to them. These [topics of sexual assault] are really hard things to talk about, women have to feel like they want to give you this [pause] gift of their stories (paraphrased from a phone conversation).

Shaoli’s understandings of encounters with women being much like a jigsaw puzzle is an (albeit imperfect) metaphor for the kind of work researchers must undertake when engaging with vulnerable populations on sensitive topics. In particular, the willingness of the researcher to sit for long periods of time, to see what pieces emerge, and to look at an event or narrative from different angles to see how they fit together is crucial. Yet, these jigsaw puzzles of women’s narratives are often incomplete, unable to be fully told and ‘solved.’ Likewise, Malkki (1995, 51) comments of her work with refugees:

The success of the fieldwork hinged not so much on a determination to ferret out ‘the facts’ as on a willingness to leave some stones unturned, to listen to what my informants deemed important, and to demonstrate my trustworthiness by not prying where I was not wanted.

The success of Shaoli’s approach was a deepening of the initial meeting spaces that had been created with women in the station. This work had to be done by the interlocutor as well as the interviewer within these interactions and conversations (McQueeney and Lavelle 2017; Lammers 2007). Shaoli and Shoshannah’s willingness to sit with women was a means to fostering the sensitive discussions that were to follow; it was an initial marker that perhaps they were willing to navigate the painful, difficult realities of their life histories, where ‘leaning in [to the topic being explored] needs to be a collaborative effort’ (Hoskins and White 2013, 185). The act of sitting was

more about creating the possibility for women to share their life experiences than it was about the ‘emotional work’ of ‘inducing or inhibiting feelings’ so as to render them ‘appropriate’ to the situation at hand (Hochschild 1979, 551; 2012). While one could say that this work was about building empathy (Zembylas 2013; Holland and Throop 2008), or ‘finding common ground’ (Chacko 2004, 61), we would emphasize that it was more about negotiating women’s readiness for empathetic exchange. The difference is one of means versus ends.

The deeper insights gathered about women’s lives often came from sitting with women multiple times, not asking about women’s life histories on a first meeting. This process allowed a relationship to develop, where women felt that they were first and foremost a human worthy of love, respect and care and *then* a research participant. The research insights emerged from the telling and retelling of events, the development of a relationship, and the understanding of a women’s emplacement and positionality within the station. These were not topics divulged or explored lightly by women and required sensitivity and a proceeding with caution, balanced with an openness to listen without judgement on the part of the researchers.

### **Concluding remarks on co-creating meeting spaces**

Co-created meeting spaces can foster small, surprising, and emergent moments of encounter. Although they do not necessarily entail grand gestures, new methods or prescriptive strategies, they do involve the co-creation of opportunities wherein trust and mutual respect can be fostered. For Shoshannah and Shaoli, the co-creation of physical and emotional meeting spaces involved, at the outset, through being invited to sit beside women on shoes, cement bags, and bricks on the ground. This propelled their efforts to demonstrate to women that they, as co-conspirators, were willing to reconfigure the seemingly insurmountable social narratives and stigma surrounding

their lives. As the relationships matured, the co-creation of emotional meeting spaces also meant taking time to piece together the jigsaw puzzle of women's narratives, as, and when, women were ready to share and explore their stories.

The kinds of efforts that we highlight require a continued self-reflection of, and attention to, the power differentials that manifest within fieldwork (Davies 2008, 61-2; Smith 1987). After all, the aim of ethnographic fieldwork is to do ethnography *with*, not *of* the people with whom we work. This changes the nature of fieldwork because it 'alters the power relations' and 'changes the hierarchies of observer and observed into more of a partnership' (Conquergood 1992, 87; drawing from Fabian 1990). Such observations propel conversations about the relationship between power and performance in ethnographic fieldwork that are being enlivened by post-colonial feminist research. When it comes to working with highly marginalized populations, however, there are limits to the scope of participation and emancipation that ethnographers would potentially like to see achieved through their work. Whilst the creation of an empowering 'safe' space may not be realistic within many research encounters, particularly with the more vulnerable groups in society such as low-income women, researchers who engage in prolonged fieldwork do have the privilege to (re)navigate the boundaries between the 'self' and 'other,' co-creating moments of encounter, sharing, and tentative alliance (Ghorashi 2010; Collins 1991). Such relationships are further strengthened through a 'leaning in' process wherein researchers and interlocutors sit side-by-side to explore a topic together (Lippke and Tanggaard 2014). So, while the co-created spaces that are fostered through ethnographic fieldwork may not actively solve problems, they are at least a step toward understanding the nature of those problems in ways that are potentially more revealing of their profundity.

By necessity, the co-creation of physical and emotional meeting spaces is a delicate and oftentimes slow process. Despite the difficulty, the approach offers researchers—and particularly the novice researcher—a means of grappling with the distrustful nature of the initial relationships developed with marginalized and vulnerable populations, as well as the messy and fragmented narratives that inevitably emerge within fieldwork encounters. The approach asks us, first and foremost, to forge scope for the women with whom we interact to invite us to the metaphorical sharing table. The approach also asks us to shift from a preoccupation on the number of interviews or interactions, and from a concern for the verifiable accuracy or coherency of an interlocutor's narrative. Rather, the approach encourages a listening to, and an honoring of, the narratives and experiences that emerge when interlocutors have been part of the process of establishing the physical and emotional space(s) for exchange. The co-creation of meeting spaces also focuses on the need to develop a degree of trust, however tentative, as well as mutual respect. A resulting benefit for all parties is a means through which encounter, sharing, and the development of shared understanding can occur.

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