Educated Girls, Absent Grooms, and Runaway Brides: Narrating Social Change in Rural Bangladesh

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Abstract: This article explores the folk legend as one articulation of the social control of women in rural Bangladesh. Stories and legends emerged when women were interviewed about the effects of men leaving the village for wage-based jobs in cities and abroad. Interviews were analyzed via immersion, theme generation, and open coding (MARSHALL & ROSSMAN, 2006) with a focus on women's own narratives and meaning-making, which allowed for these stories to be understood as significant components of people's everyday realities (GUBRIUM & HOLSTEIN, 2009). These stories are consistent with GOLDSTEIN's (2004) definition of a legend: they are not personal stories yet they are not completely impersonal (friend-of-a-friend subject), they take on a believe-it-or-not tone, and telling them presents minimal risk to the narrator. Like other folk legends, these stories act as a means to reinforce the social order during a time of social change. As other research has shown (COONTZ, 1999; COOPER, LINSTROTH & CHAITLIN, 2009; GREENE, 1991; MADRIZ, 1997), stories as social control mechanisms focus specifically and uniquely on women during times of social change. Respondents discuss "accidents" and "scandals" that occur when women do not adhere to marriage customs or the traditional dichotomy of public and domestic spheres.

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1. Introduction

This article explores the folk legend as one articulation of social control during a time of unprecedented male labor migration in rural Bangladesh. The stories discussed here emerged during interviews with women in rural Bangladesh about the social effects of men leaving the village and traveling to cities and abroad in search of jobs. Like other folk legends, these stories are a means of social control that reinforce the social order. They have arisen at a time when gender

roles are shifting on multiple fronts as men are increasingly absent from village life due to labor out-migration and as rural schools are for the first time seeing high enrollment among village girls. [1]

The absence of male household members necessitates a shift in household division of labor because women must take on many responsibilities left behind by their brothers, brothers-in-law, and husbands. Likewise, the increase in education among Bangladeshi girls signals the potential for further rearrangements of the gendered division of labor. Changes in the gendered division of labor are causing social strain, which respondents express through stories that position women as bodies that need to be controlled and, without heavy supervision, will stray from homes, husbands, and family. These stories serve as a means to maintain restrictions on women's movements. Respondents' stories, insofar as they indicate places of strain on the normative social fabric, also indicate a concurrent resistance to gendered norms through a reimagining and renegotiating of the gender order. [2]

This research asks how people use stories to deal, at the local level, with the changes brought about by a globalizing labor market. While these stories are a creative means of reinforcing social norms during times of change, they also reveal one way that economic change and development is gendered in its consequences. Rather than discuss labor migration in terms of concerns about men who leave the village, respondents spoke of young women's actions as the negative consequence of recent social and economic change. While stories of male labor migrants hailed young men for supporting, even saving, their families, stories that circulated about women warned of young women and girls who strayed from domestic spheres, acted out, and abandoned husbands. Similarly, although the international community, the government, and most local families tout the necessity of sending girls to school, which is viewed as a hallmark of positive rural development, it is the educated girls who face increased scrutiny in terms of their social status, virtue, and potential as a good bride. Other researchers (BACK, 1995; GOLDSTEIN, 2004) have previously demonstrated myths and legends are a means of dealing with contradictions that arise between traditional beliefs and shifting or new contemporary practices. The narratives presented below show that the particular way these stories deal with the contradictions brought about by economic development is gendered, placing the onus of cultural preservation upon the backs of women. [3]

I begin with a brief description of the study site and the social elements in place there, including a discussion of purdah as a local practice salient to the stories women told. This is followed by a review of the literature on myths and legends. After a description of the study methods employed, I present three spheres where conflict over social change has arisen: educating girls, male labor migration, and arranged marriages. In each of these social spheres I show how the concerns over social change are gendered and, therefore, articulated as concerns over what constitutes appropriate behavior among women. [4]

2. Background

The specific site for this study is Matlab, Bangladesh, a rural district in central Bangladesh made up of nearly four hundred small villages. Matlab is an ideal place to observe emerging stories about social change as local residents raise concerns about many "traditional" cultural practices that have to be maintained in the face of what they describe as substantial social change. One of the most striking aspects of these changes has been the recent entry of village men into the global labor market. Men leave their village in search of paid employment in urban centers such as Dhaka or Chittagong, or in other countries, including Malaysia, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates, and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The number of labor migrants who go abroad increases each year; in 2007, roughly 830,000 men left Bangladesh for work abroad (ASFAR, 2009). Researchers at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies estimated in 2009 that 5.39 million Bangladeshis were working abroad (ibid.). By 2012, that number topped seven million (INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION, 2012). The end result is that men of employment age are leaving rural villages at rates previously unheard of. [5]

The stories presented in this article have arisen in a context where normative family arrangements have been disrupted by male labor out-migration. Men from rural Bangladesh began seeking work in urban areas in the mid-1970s during the turbulent postwar period, which was marked by famine and economic strife (FELDMAN & McCARTHY, 1983; SIKDER, 2008); however, the large waves of men leaving villages today is a new phenomenon necessitated by the growing economic strain of development and globalization, encouraged by national and international labor policy (ASFAR, 2009). The vast majority (more than 97%) of labor migrants are men due to gendered state policies and sociocultural norms that place sons and husbands as responsible for the financial security of a household (BELANGER & RAHMAN, 2013). [6]

Social norms in the study area are based on patrilineal and patrilocal family structures as well as on Islamic ideology. The majority of marriages are arranged by the brides' and grooms' parents after they negotiate a dowry. Availability of jobs for women is increasing, but women are not entering the labor market en masse due to cultural norms of female claustration, or purdah, and an emphasis on women's involvement in household-based production, child-rearing, and elder care. Fertility rates in Matlab have shrunk tremendously, from approximately seven children per woman in the 1960s to an average of 2.6 children per woman in 2011 (ALAM, RAZZAQUE & STREATFIELD, 2013). The population has experienced a decrease in acute illness and mortality coupled with an increase in chronic disease and an aging population (ibid.). Education levels have risen, especially for girls who are now receiving more education than boys overall. This is partly due to government programs that promote educating girls (ASADULLAH & CHAUDHURY, 2009) and partly because the wage-based jobs young men can get require very little education (ASFAR, 2009). [7]

2.1 Purdah: One component of a complex system

The normative social practice of *purdah* is an important contextual element for understanding the legends and stories presented in this article. *Purdah*, also referred to as the veil or curtain, is the practice of female claustration for the purposes of assuring modesty (PAPANEK, 1973). Most commonly associated with the practice of Islam in the Middle East, *purdah* is observed among many people throughout the world, including parts of Africa, Asia, and the West, among Muslims as well as Hindus (DE SOUZA, 2004; PAPANEK, 1973; PASTNER, 1974; ROZARIO, 2006; SECHZER, 2004). While wearing a veil in the form of burkha or other covering is "its most obvious manifestation to the casual observer" (WHITE, 1977, p.31), *purdah* is more appropriately described as a set of limitations on women's public movement. The practice is based on notions of modesty as well as the idea that honor and shame exist at the family level and are not simply attached to an individual (DE SOUZA, 2004; PASTNER, 1974). Individuals have reputations, but ultimately the honor or shame experienced in one's lifetime is always bound to and intertwined with that of family members. [8]

Purdah in Bangladesh is part of a social pattern of masculine dominance that is internalized by both men and women (FELDMAN & McCARTHY, 1983). Respondents consistently referred to observance of *purdah* as indicative of their relationship with Allah, demonstrating that, for them, *purdah* is religiously justified as part of Islamic principles. It is most typically expressed through the exclusion of women from public spaces, modest clothing norms for women (including optional use of hijab or burkha), and a strict division of labor based on gender. [9]

Respondents described *purdah* in terms of spatial demarcations of "inside" and "outside," which constructs public places as masculine space where men can venture and private/domestic spheres as feminine space where women and young children mostly remain. In contemporary rural Bangladesh, women who enter public space too frequently risk their reputations as they risk being seen by unknown and potentially harmful men. Readers must be careful, however, not to equate *purdah* with the broader structural patterns of women's social subordination[1]. *Purdah* is one expression of this pattern[2]; therefore, its elimination does not represent a dismantling of women's oppression or patriarchy as a whole. I include this discussion of *purdah* because it is salient to understanding how the stories I heard construct an outwardly, misbehaving woman whose actions contradict the rules of *purdah*. [10]

As a practice, *purdah* can affect family honor and status in multiple ways. First, veiling women in public space is one way families protect women from the male gaze and from threats to their purity. This is particularly tied to the coding of public space as masculine space. Because public areas are the domain of men, women should only enter public places with appropriate escorts and wearing

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1   Indeed, the subordination of women is not specific to Bangladesh or South Asia.

2   Other expressions of women's social subordination include women's lack of control over household decision-making and household income, even when women are themselves earning this income (see, for example, CHOWDHURY, 2010).

appropriate coverings. Second, Bangladeshi families with lower socioeconomic standing can signal relatively higher social status through *purdah*. Preventing female family members from performing work outside of the home signals that any extra income the women could provide is not necessary and that their modesty and safety remain intact and guarded by their family members (ibid.). Finally, maintaining girls' purity and signaling family status through *purdah* both serve to improve a young woman's position on the marriage market, helping her parents and relatives to find for her a suitable groom from a good family. [11]

3. Narrating Social Change

Popular stories and legends develop during times of social change and uncertainty and serve as a socially acceptable—even socially embraced—outlet for expressing fear or confusion. Like other research on legends and myths (BACK, 1995; GOLDSTEIN, 2004), I am not concerned with establishing whether respondents' stories are fictional; the goal is to examine these stories in terms of the social context in which they have arisen. In her work detailing the social meanings of folk tales about HIV/AIDS, GOLDSTEIN describes legends as a particular kind of story that is

> "... not personal since they tend to be stories about what happened to someone else. The risk of telling was minimal because the narratives take a 'believe it or not' position, opening up discussion but not really requiring that one reveal one's own stance in relation to the narrative's truth or falsity. [Legends] were not completely distanced either; they brought the issue closely into the teller's sphere through the legend's characteristic 'friend of a friend' protagonist. These stories did not happen to the teller or even to anyone the teller knows. Rather, they happened to the friend of someone with whom the teller was familiar—close enough for concern, distanced enough for comfort. Legends put the issue out there, created dialogue, but allowed the teller to mask personal fear or curiosity" (2004, pp.8-9) [12]

BACK (1995) analyzes popular myths in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe as cautionary tales about the appropriate boundaries of science and scientific knowledge. Although BACK uses the term *myths*, his point is valid for legends as well because both are means of storying social uncertainty and concern. BACK writes that myths are "expressions of unsolvable conflicts within society. Their currency shows how important these concerns are and which aspects are crucial to the emotions aroused by the conflict" (p.328). As I show below, the stories about educated girls and runaway brides in rural Bangladesh are also symptomatic of unsolvable conflict that arises during a period of significant social change. [13]

In her examination of short stories in popular Tamil magazines, WOLF writes that stories are "... constructions of reality using available cultural and social material, but ordering and presenting versions of this material in accordance with certain ideologies and constraints" (1991, p.WS-71). Other researchers have also found that stories reflect collective values and are an important mechanism of cultural reproduction (IMADA & YUSSEN, 2012). WOLF takes this further, arguing that a

story "neither merely reflects nor arises from society" (1991, p.WS-71). Instead, she says, the relationship is the inverse; stories are constructions of reality and, therefore, are a powerful method of social control; so powerful that they can either create social change or prevent it. [14]

In addition to being expressions of fear and confusion during times of social change, legends are expressions of the social order and can be tools for controlling specific groups or populations. This is particularly the case for women, whose behavior and bodies are frequently the sites of disciplinary action and social control (BARTKY, 2003). Other researchers have found stories and legends about shameful behavior and conclude that these stories exist to serve as lessons about gendered ideals of appropriate feminine bodies and behaviors (COOPER, LINSTROTH & CHAITLIN, 2009; MADRIZ, 1997; WOLF, 1991). In her study of women's conceptions of "ideal" criminals and victims, MADRIZ (1997) shows how stereotypes perpetuated through images and stories reinforce ideologies that serve as means of social control over women. MADRIZ argues that the messages women receive about victimization contain an implicit code of behavior, including rules about proper clothing, appropriate relationships with men, and careful maintenance of the public/private dichotomy in the name of safety. [15]

Nostalgic stories also impart lessons about appropriate behaviors and cultural ideals but, instead of using shame, they do so using nostalgia and glorification of a "mythical past." Like legends, nostalgic narratives have different effects on men and women (GREENE, 1991); this is particularly true of nostalgic longings for a "wholesome" past that center on contrasting "traditional" ideals (not historical realities) with how contemporary women behave (COONTZ, 1999). The idea is that women in the past were virtuous participants in a stable, peaceful society while contemporary women represent a threat to stability and happiness by not acting in accordance with traditional ideals. COOPER et al. (2009) agree that women, particularly young women, are often the object of cultural messages for the purposes of social control. They argue that this is because women "are frequently imagined as the keepers of a family's or society's future and its honor" (§1). [16]

4. Methods

The stories presented in this article were collected via interviews that took place during the fall and winter of 2011. These data were part of a larger dissertation project that was ethnographic in nature, using observation, spontaneous informal interviews, and two sets of semi-structured interviews across an eleven-month period. The larger research project sought to understand recent changes in gender roles and family dynamics amid economic change in Matlab. [17]

The data for this article come from a set of thirty semi-structured field interviews with women drawn purposively from a larger sample of households in the villages of Matlab. In order to include responses from women across generations, the interview sample was stratified to include at least ten women from each of three

age categories: 20-34 years, 35-49 years, and 50-64 years. An effort was also
made to purposively sample women from families where most men had migrated
for labor as well as several women from families where no men had migrated.
Additionally, I included women of any marital status (unmarried, married,
widowed, separated). [18]

Interviews were conducted by a pair of interviewers: one *bideshi,*[3] non-native
beginning Bangla speaker and one Bangladeshi, native/fluent Bangla speaker
from Dhaka. All interviews took place in or around respondents' homes, which
presented unique challenges in terms of timing and privacy. Women's household
labor is an important part of daily life in Matlab so care was taken not to disrupt
cooking, handicrafts, agricultural work, childcare, elder care, or any other
activities that women needed to complete during the day. Interviews were often
conducted around cooking fires, in central yard areas, or in the only room of a
single-room dwelling. Between their work and the communal nature of
households, it was not only impossible to interview some woman in private, it also
would have been a social anomaly to attempt to isolate them for the purpose of
an interview. In an effort to be more accommodating and less disruptive,
interviews were allowed to shift from one-on-one conversations to group
conversations as people entered and exited the setting on their own. The
occasional addition of other women during interviews enhanced discussions in
unanticipated ways, including allowing elaborations and arguments to arise
around certain topics that might not have otherwise come to pass during a one-
on-one interview. This fluid approach to interviewing was consistent with the
researcher's orientation to data collection as an active social process (GUBRIUM
& HOLSTEIN, 1995). [19]

Interviews lasted between one and three hours and were intended to capture
respondents' personal experiences and beliefs about family, marriage, labor
migration, child-rearing, fertility decisions, and health. All interviews were initially
semi-structured with a list of broad questions and potential probes; however, in
order to ensure that respondents' own going concerns emerged in the
conversation, interviews were allowed to be active according to the methodology
described by GUBRIUM and HOLSTEIN (1995) in "The Active Interview." This
approach encourages the researcher to view interviewing as a living, co-
construction that occurs between interviewer and respondent around a subject or
topic. Theoretically, the active interview understands reality not as a truth that
exists objectively in the world, but as something that is constantly under
construction and assembled through conversation and narrative (ibid.). This
method is particularly useful for accessing and understanding the stories people
tell about their social world. In this case, the reality of women's lives and the
social norms they navigate daily are part of a process of creation and
reinforcement through the narratives or stories they tell about the social world,
including the tensions or anxieties they experience in the face of social change.
Story-telling and narrative accounts are a matter of work in that respondents do
not just purvey information but are actively engaged in shaping reality as they

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3   *Bideshi* is a Bangla term that translates directly to "foreigner" but often implies a white
    Westerner.

describe it (GUBRIUM & HOLSTEIN, 2009). Through interviews, respondents' attitudes and beliefs about work, gender, health, marriage, purdah, education, and male labor out-migration were explored by focusing on local members' own meaning making processes and their own everyday going concerns (GUBRIUM & HOLSTEIN, 2000). [20]

With permission, all interviews were recorded using a small digital voice recorder. Recorded interviews were transcribed and translated into English for analysis. My approach to analysis relies on data immersion and, therefore, exists at the editing/immersive end of CRABTREE and MILLER's (1992) continuum of analysis strategies. Such strategies are closely allied with, though not identical to, grounded theory methods (MARSHALL & ROSSMAN, 2006). [21]

While immersive analysis occurs iteratively at nearly every stage of a qualitative project, the bulk of coding and analyses of interview transcripts was handled using NVivo 9 software. The analytic procedure followed MARSHALL and ROSSMAN's (2006, p.156) seven phases of analysis, which I outline below relating each phase to the findings presented for this article.

1. Organizing the data: Data were first organized as part of the processes of transcription and translation then again as transcribed interviews were uploaded to and categorized within the NVivo 9 software.
2. Immersion in the data: Immersion occurred both at the field site and through the reading and re-reading of interview transcripts.
3. Generating categories and themes: Specific to these data, a topic emerged regarding the socially appropriate activities for women and the spaces where these activities should take place.
4. Coding the data: All instances where people discussed socially appropriate activities and spaces for women were coded and patterns among these discussions were noted and recorded. During coding, a pattern emerged with respondents frequently discussing the inappropriate actions of girls and young women in the village, particularly the activities of new brides.
5. Offering interpretations: Taken together, all excerpts that mentioned appropriate activities and spaces for women illuminated a tension between normative ideas of domestic/feminine spaces and new ideas about girls' education and women's labor.
6. Searching for analytic understandings: When understood in terms of the ongoing tension between normative and new beliefs, it became clear that suspicions about girls' behaviors at school and stories about runaway brides were articulations of this tension and, thus, these stories or legends emerged as one way in which this tension was made legible.
7. Writing to present the study. [22]

It is important to note that these phases did not occur in strict chronological order but are the categories of analytical activity that took place for the completion of this research. [23]

5. Unsolvable Social Conflicts

The runaway bride and other stories have emerged as "expressions of unsolvable conflicts within society" at a time of significant social change (BACK, 1995, p.328). These changes include a rapid shift from agriculture to wage-based labor, the spread of formal education, male labor migration, and fertility decline (ASADULLAH & CHAUDHURY, 2009; ASFAR, 2009; ALAM et al., 2013). People are grappling with questions of how cultural norms can remain intact while economic and household structures are shifting dramatically. In a sense, the stories themselves provide a solution to maintaining the gender order in the absence of men. The lessons they offer, including peoples' accounts of how to prevent "scandals," act as a means of social control. [24]

Residents of the study area frequently discussed tensions between long-standing cultural norms (which some call "traditions") and contemporary social and economic demands. These tensions are often couched in terms of the dichotomy between public and private/domestic spaces, centering on the fact that "good" girls and "good" brides remain within domestic spheres and attached to family members. Respondents' reflections on changing social norms and renegotiations of the public-private dichotomy occurred multiple times in every interview, making the practice of *purdah* particularly salient to the discussion. [25]

In what follows, I examine three areas where social change is articulated in terms of conflicts between old and new ways of life: girls' education, male labor migration, and arranged marriage. Each of these areas demonstrates not only that stories are means for coping with social change, but that the social control and discipline they impose is specifically focused on women's behaviors. [26]

5.1 The trouble with educating girls

Over the last two decades, education for girls has increased tremendously. Parents in rural Bangladesh take advantage of the mostly-free education available to girls because an educated daughter can improve the status of the family in several aspects. First, an educated daughter can help the family in practical ways through her literacy, numeracy, and English skills. Second, an educated daughter can do better on the arranged-marriage market by fetching a higher status groom. Marrying well will improve the status of a woman's natal family. This is supported by interview data that show most mothers hope to find a bride for their son who is educated because an educated daughter-in-law can do many important things like read family letters, read the Koran (*Qur'an*), and teach her children to count. In many ways, the educated girl is a "good" girl who makes a "good" bride. [27]

While most respondents agree that girls must be educated, a tension exists between maintaining *purdah* and allowing girls to attend school. This social tension is most evident in the extreme case of taunting and "eve teasing"[4] that

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4   Eve teasing is a local euphemism for sexual harassment, usually perpetrated by groups of boys or young men on the street. Eve teasing can include sexual comments, name-calling, and

girls and young women face while walking to and from school. Despite social pressure to keep girls and women in *purdah*, parents with no sons, only daughters, continue to negotiate current gender norms to ensure future financial security. Some families have already eschewed the norms of claustration to allow women in the household to enter the paid labor force. Although an increasing number of families in the study area ask female family members to work for wages, social acceptance of women as earners is not widespread. [28]

One story in particular indicates the tensions surrounding women as wage-earners. Because economic strain and male labor out-migration is caused, in large part, by a lack of jobs available to men in the village, some see educated women entering the labor force as the *cause* of economic problems rather than a strategy to overcome family poverty. Himani[5], a 47-year-old mother of three sons (ages 18, 23, and 28 years), demonstrates how young women are blamed for the lack of jobs available to men.

> "Interviewer: Have you ever heard anyone say bad things about girls who work outside the home?
>
> Himani: No, not specifically like that, but we hear other things.
>
> Interviewer: What have you heard?
>
> Himani: We have heard that as girls are entering into the job sector, boys remain unemployed, which people do not like.
>
> Interviewer: Ohhhh (nodding slowly) ... you mean boys are not getting the jobs because the girls are taking their opportunities! Ahhh ... So that is ... jealousy?
>
> Himani: (Laughing) Yes ... jealousy ... hahaha!" [29]

In the exchange above, Himani was somewhat hesitant to tell the interviewer—a young woman with a master's degree and a good job[6]—that people in the village think women are taking the good jobs away from men. The assumption that educated women are out-competing men for jobs surfaced in two interviews. It is possible that more respondents felt this way or had heard this explanation but were reluctant to say so to young, educated women who are seen as having a "good job." [30]

The suspicion that "boys are not getting the jobs because the girls are taking their opportunities" is a perception not supported in reality. This misconception demonstrates how social control is focused disproportionately on women: rather

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inappropriate jokes. It can also be used to refer to acts of sexual assault including a girl or woman having her scarf or other clothing pulled away, witnessing a male expose himself, and unwanted physical contact such as embracing, shoving, or slapping (MIA, 2010). At times, this teasing has reached traumatic levels, which was the case in 2010 when fourteen girls and women in Dhaka, Bangladesh committed suicide during the first four months of that year as a direct result of eve teasing (ibid.). Girls and women in the study area also experience public sexual harassment by boys and men, especially while walking to and from school.

5 The names of all respondents have been replaced with pseudonyms.

6 Based on interview responses, a "good job" is understood to mean a stable, wage-based or salaried job in a non-agricultural sector that requires at least a minimal level of formal education.

than addressing the structural problems that lead to a lack of labor opportunities for men, blame is cast on women who enter the public sphere to earn wages. It is true that women's participation in the workforce has increased, but most of the increase occurs in the fishing and agricultural sectors. Inclusive of all sectors, women's labor participation is growing steadily, but a wide gender gap in employment still exists (WORLD BANK, 2008). In fact, women's participation in non-agricultural labor momentarily decreased by 12% between 2000 and 2006, while men's participation in non-agricultural labor increased 41% during the same period (JAIM & HOSSAIN, 2011).Women's participation in agricultural labor has increased considerably (from 48% of the total agricultural workforce in 1999 to 68% in 2006), which has been attributed to rural women taking on the agricultural work left behind by men who are leaving to work in other sectors (ibid.). The idea that young women are taking job opportunities away from men is a clear example of how women bear the brunt of social change. This mirrors COOPER et al.'s (2009) findings regarding the effects of immigration on women from Cuba and Haiti: because we collectively imagine young women as the keepers of society's future, women are the object of cultural messages for the purposes of social control. [31]

Tension between the normative practice of *purdah* and the emerging desire to educate girls is also evident during the arranged marriage process. In this sense, the good/educated girl does not always make for a good bride. The following conversation between two women, 25-year-old Nazia and her middle-aged neighbor, demonstrates the increased questioning that girls with more education encounter during the arrangement of their marriage.

> "Interviewer: What kinds of things do people want to know about a potential bride for their son?
>
> Nazia: Potential brides are asked to talk about their parents; what's their name and who they are. If their grandfather and grandmother are alive, they ask about them as well. All members of the boy's household ask around about the girl. They ask other people around the area about the girl, to see if they know anything.
>
> Nazia's neighbor: She is asked about whether she prays namaz[7] or not, whether she keeps fasting during Ramadan or not. They ask if she studied Arabic or not. Even sometimes they ask the girl in a separate room if she has any other choice [for her groom] or if she's had an affair [relationship with a boy] or not. Nowadays, this question is asked directly to the girl.
>
> Nazia: (confused) I wasn't asked this question.
>
> Nazia's neighbor: If you had studied up to a certain level, you would have been asked. I wasn't asked this question either. Today it's common that educated girls are asked this question. This is an era when people have mobile phones. Since my daughter is studying in college, I gave her a mobile phone. But how can I know what she does with the mobile phone when I'm not looking? If any parent is asked about their daughter, would they say that his or her daughter is bad? No! That's why girls are asked this question directly, in a separate room, just so we can get the real truth

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7   Ritualistic, daily prayer in Islam.

from her. Parents don't always know what happens while their daughters are at school." [32]

Parents of the groom must weigh their preference for an educated daughter-in-law against their wish to have a daughter-in-law who has adhered to the principles of *purdah*. The situation is further complicated by the limited availability of education at near-by schools. Some villages do not have schools that teach beyond the primary school level, so parents who want their daughter to receive more education must permit her to travel outside of their village. The result is that marriage arrangements for educated girls often entail an intense scrutiny of their past behaviors and relationships. [33]

5.2 Grooms and fathers revered

The above-mentioned articulations of girls' behaviors and concerns over their purity contrast with how respondents talk about young men. Young men who travel to urban areas or go abroad for work are held in the highest esteem, while young women who work outside the local area face criticism. Moreover, it is clear that in terms of rising tensions over new social arrangements, much of the blame is placed on young women. Just as Himani pointed out how women are being blamed for men's unemployment, Peara shows us that women who leave the local area for work are also blamed for the social consequences they encounter while outside of the home.

> "Interviewer: Is it acceptable for girls to take a job outside of this village, maybe in a town far away or in the capital city?
>
> Peara: No one will speak about it positively.
>
> Interviewer: Why? What will people say about it?
>
> Peara: Society will speak badly about it. Girls who do that will act in an outward manner. If they come out from their home too much, they might act experienced after being around men. They could even have a bad accident. [Use of 'accident' here is understood to imply assault or rape.]
>
> Interviewer: I see. What else?
>
> Peara: Girls can run away with a boy. A girl could marry a boy without even informing her family." [34]

In contrast, young men who go abroad for work are very desirable on the marriage market because they can make more money than men who work in the village. The conundrum is that parents want to continue to have a relationship with their daughter so the ideal groom lives nearby. But the groom's income is ultimately the deciding factor. Young men who work abroad are paid much higher wages than men in the village, so, in the end, the young man who lives abroad is viewed as the most desirable groom.

> "Interviewer: Do people looking for a husband for their daughter prefer a groom who has left the village for work?

> Lutfa: Yes, they do. If workers go farther away, they can earn more money. In order to earn more money, people are going to Japan, London, Korea, and many other places. The farther they go, the more money they can earn ... And parents looking for a groom for their daughter prefer the boy who has more money." [35]

Even as a father, the man who works outside of the village is heralded as an ideal parent. This is largely due to the primary role of the father as economic contributor. Traditionally, Bangladeshi fathers have several responsibilities toward their children, which include shopping for children's food and clothes, over-seeing their studies, disciplining children, and being the main person responsible for arranging children's marriages. However, men who are abroad relinquish most of these responsibilities to their wives as they focus on earning an income to send home. Asha, whose husband spent more than twenty years in Saudi Arabia with biennial visits home, said the following:

> "Interviewer: What happens to children if their father works outside, leaving home? Has it any effects, bad or good, on his children?
>
> Asha: A father's responsibility is to earn money, to monitor whether the children study hard, and to choose a good teacher for his children. If it's necessary, the father will send more money for their education so that his children's academic performance does not drop. But a father can perform his responsibilities properly from abroad as long as the mother is in the country taking care of the rest." [36]

It is likely that as more men travel abroad in search of better wages, the definition of fathering will become narrower and more closely aligned with his ability to contribute economically. [37]

5.3 Runaway brides

To my surprise, all women were enthusiastic about the positive consequences of male labor out-migration. I had hypothesized that respondents would express 1. uncertainty about changes in family structure while men are abroad or 2. worry about the potential for cultural transmission of outside norms or customs upon men's return. With very few exceptions, respondents extolled men's labor migration for the financial benefits provided to individual families and the village as a whole. To delve further into this phenomenon, I decided to probe for the specific effects labor migration has on a migrant's parents, children, and wives. Some respondents suggested that women whose husbands were abroad were lonely, but quickly pointed out that the joint family structure helps mitigate their loneliness. In a later interview, the following was shared by Ishrat, a woman in her fifties whose husband was not a labor migrant but whose son went to Dhaka for work:

> "Ishrat: (lowering her voice) Many women whose husbands are working abroad have fled with their lovers.
>
> Interviewer: When her husband works outside of the village?
>
> Ishrat: Hmm! [yes!]

> Interviewer: When does it occur? Is it the women whose husbands work in Dhaka or women whose husbands are working abroad?
>
> Ishrat: Both! Even women who have two or three children and her husband is working nearby but outside this village have run away with another man!
>
> Interviewer: (incredulous) If her husband only works just outside the village?!
>
> Ishrat: Hmm!! [yes!!]" [38]

In another interview, Rashida told a similar story, adding that a runaway bride sometimes steals from her husband's family.

> "Rashida: Most parents prefer their daughter to marry a groom who works abroad. But many girls prefer others ... There are several cases where the wife has left her family, even abandoning her children. That's why some parents don't prefer men who are working abroad.
>
> Interviewer: Really? Women leave their family?
>
> Rashida: Yes, they leave the family and take all the gold and other valuables with them!
>
> Interviewer: Really!?!?
>
> Rashida: Yeah! Abandoning children, like her age (indicating a small girl beside her). These women leave their family, taking all the gold, ornaments (jewelry), and other valuable things they've got!
>
> Interviewer: Why do they leave?
>
> Rashida: Since the husband is not here, if they meet someone more handsome they leave with bag and baggage. There is one woman I heard about who left her family, abandoning three children.
>
> Interviewer: She did?
>
> Rashida: (nodding) Yes!" [39]

These stories of runaway brides fit GOLDSTEIN's (2004) definition of a legend. The narrator takes a "believe it or not" position, changing her tone to reflect a gossip-style familiarity. The narratives are, as GOLDSTEIN describes them, stories about what happened to someone else. The narrator describes events that are cause for personal concern while still distancing herself from a protagonist. The truth or falsity of the story is not debated; rather, the teller reveals what she has heard and allows her listener to ponder the social consequences of women abandoning their families. [40]

The legend emerges in other ways as well. The following excerpts do not represent the full story of a woman who ran away with another man, abandoning her children and stealing the family valuables, but they illustrate the assumption that brides do run away with some regularity. By providing strategies—means of social control—to prevent the situation, the excerpts below reinforce the idea that wives are apt to run away unless they are carefully watched. [41]

Farsi is a young woman who was still attending college despite being newly married to a police officer and pregnant with her first child. Reflecting on the wives of male labor migrants, Farsi explains that husbands must check on their wives or else they could wind up a cuckold:

> "Interviewer: Do you think men's leaving the village for work has any effects on their wives?
>
> Farsi: Yes. Sometimes wives have an extra marital relation with another person. This kind of thing can happen you know!
>
> Interviewer: Why does this happen?
>
> Farsi: If the husband stays at home, he can check on his wife. If he stays away, he cannot. Sometime husbands even stay abroad for three, four, five years on end. If he doesn't communicate with his wife regularly, then sometimes she has an extra marital relation with another man." [42]

Husbands are not the only ones responsible for checking up on wives. The mother-in-law is also responsible for preventing her daughter-in-law from having an affair while her son is working abroad. This is consistent with the structure and hierarchy of a joint family in South Asia wherein the mother-in-law has authority over her daughters-in-law (FELDMAN & McCARTHY, 1983; SINGH, 1980). In the following exchange, twenty-nine year old Beauty first distances herself from the wives of labor migrants before explaining who should keep a watchful eye on the migrant's wife.

> "Interviewer: Do you think that a man's leaving the village for work has any effect on his wife?
>
> Beauty: Their wives know about it, how should I know!?!
>
> Interviewer: Of course. Okay then do you think men's leaving the village for work has any effect on their parents?
>
> Beauty: In that case, when their son is away, the responsibility is on the daughter-in-law to take care of her father-in-law and mother-in-law. Also, the mother-in-law needs to watch her daughter-in-law so that she can't have any extra-marital relations!" [43]

Farsi, Beauty, and other young respondents explain that husbands and mothers-in-law must keep an eye on young women in order to prevent them from running off or having an affair with another man. Khala, Peara, and Shoomi—all older women—said that another way to prevent a young bride from running away is to ask for her opinion and her consent in choosing a groom. This is an interesting suggestion coming from older respondents as it is a break with long-standing practices in the arranged marriage process. Below are Khala, Peara, and Shoomi's explanations of why it is now a good idea to ask for the bride's consent when choosing a groom. First, Khala tells a story that explains how miserable her niece was after her parents didn't listen to her protests when arranging her marriage. Khala also describes the amount of shame involved for both the bride and groom when a marriage does not work out.

> "Khala: Today girls should be asked for their consent. Otherwise there is huge chance of a bad incident happening. Have you heard anything about this?
>
> Interviewer: That a bad incident might happen?
>
> Khala: Yes.
>
> Interviewer: What kind of incident might happen if one doesn't ask for the girl's consent?
>
> Khala: This story happened not too long ago. One of my nieces—my sister's daughter—got married ... ohhh ... about one year ago. But after her marriage she refused to be with her husband. We started noticing things when my sister came to visit us at our house. We noticed her reluctant and distant attitude toward my niece. My sister always kept a distance from my niece, who moved around without wearing any veil. Later I learned that just a few days before this visit, my niece had gone back to her mother's house and was refusing to stay at her husband's house. Before her marriage, my niece disapproved of the proposal, even threatened to commit suicide, but her parents didn't listen to her. No. They forced the girl to marry. This is the incident. My niece was ashamed. She was even afraid to face my daughters-in-law. The groom decided to marry again and this time he gave one lakh taka[8] to the girl's father! The new bride is also from the same village as my niece." [44]

In another comment on seeking the bride's consent, Peara explains that parents should ask their daughter's opinion even though this was not customary in the past. She also describes the dissolution of a marriage as shameful and calls it a "scandal."

> "Peara: You see, nowadays it is important to know about the girl's preference.
>
> Interviewer: Why do you think so?
>
> Peara: At the present time, it is necessary to ask the girl's opinion and take her consent. That way she can also share whether she has another choice [of groom]. Otherwise, if she doesn't like the groom, she might not continue her life with her husband after her marriage. Won't it be a scandal! That's why it's important to take the girl's consent when arranging her marriage. But no one practiced this custom [of getting the girl's consent] in the past." [45]

Social change surrounding girls' education and entrance into public space necessitate adjustments in the arranged marriage system. Respondents believe that as girls become more educated and have experiences outside of the domestic sphere, they develop more opinions about the outside world. This includes opinions about gender roles, how to run a household, and what characteristics one should look for in an ideal groom. [46]

Some respondents believe that asking a girl to help choose her groom can prevent an extra-marital affair. By shifting the burden of the decision onto the girl, her parents cannot be blamed if the marriage fails.

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8 One lakh is equal to 100,000 Bangladeshi taka, which is approximately $1,300 USD. This represents an enormous amount of money in the form of bride-price (the reverse of dowry) and was probably necessary to convince the new bride's father to allow his daughter to marry a man who had already been married.

"Interviewer: Do you think it is important for a girl to get the opportunity to consent to her groom?

Shoomi: Yes, it is wise. If she can have the opportunity to choose him, then later no one can blame the parents if anything goes wrong." [47]

All of this focus on brides who run away begs the question of whether grooms might run off as well. Although I met several women who were living back at their father's house because they had been abandoned by husbands, there was no story, no legend, which circulated about runaway grooms. The women simply told us they had been abandoned by their husband who went to work, stopped answering his mobile phone, and never came back. While the wife of a labor migrant might express fear that her husband could run off with another woman, male labor migrants are generally not the subject of legends about extra-marital affairs or runaway spouses. [48]

As Rashida discussed young brides who run away with other men, I became curious about the one-sidedness of this story. I asked whether she thought only young women committed this act.

"Interviewer: Does this happen only with brides or with both brides and grooms?

Rashida: Both, but our society doesn't blame the boys." [49]

Her response echoes the overall structure of all the legends we heard: Men and boys might behave the same way, but the social control is focused on women and girls. Women are disproportionately the targets of social imagery because of their important role in the socialization of children and their ties to the domestic sphere where family values are maintained. A society that wants to maintain customs in the face of economic or social change will tell a story about the importance of traditional values, family life, marriage, and child-rearing. Frequently, this story is one that shames women's nontraditional behavior in particular. [50]

6. Conclusion

The legend of the runaway bride is a story about unnamed women who run away with another man while their husbands are abroad, working hard to send a remittance home. It is not a story that gives a negative opinion of male labor migration in general, nor does it communicate the loneliness that women sometimes feel while husbands and sons are abroad for long periods of time. In fact, all discussions of men who migrate were overwhelmingly positive and questions about loneliness were met with responses about how parents and children are enough to keep migrants' wives company. [51]

Stories about girls who act "in an outward manner" and the legend of a bride who runs off with her lover are tales about two contemporary social concerns: 1. maintaining marriages under new conditions where husbands are far away for long periods of time and 2. maintaining the public/private dichotomy in a new situation where young women are leaving the house to go to school, the market,

and to conduct other kinds of household business normally taken care of by husbands and sons. The legend focuses on women and makes claims about the parameters of respectable gendered behavior. [52]

The stories told about young women in rural Bangladesh are important cultural products that have emerged as a reaction to changing social arrangements. The exodus of men from village households necessitates a re-negotiation of gender roles within families. Increasingly, men's wages are not enough to meet families' economic needs, necessitating, in some cases, the movement of girls and women beyond traditional boundaries of the domestic sphere into the labor force. Widespread acceptance of education for girls has also caused social tension. In all cases, the gendered division of public and domestic space is being strained. Respondents' stories reflect the salience of maintaining public-domestic boundaries via *purdah* to their everyday lives as well as their concerns about whether or how to maintain *purdah* as social and economic structures change around them. It is clear that women's safety, status, and potential on the marriage market still rely on the dichotomy between public and domestic spheres, but growing acceptance of girls' education and wage-based employment contradict this dichotomy. [53]

Stories about runaway brides and scandals involving young women have emerged as one mechanism of social control in the context of changing norms. These stories come complete with anecdotes about how to control young women and who is responsible for preventing women's misbehavior. As other research has shown (COONTZ, 1999; COOPER et al., 2009; GREENE, 1991; MADRIZ, 1997), social control mechanisms focus specifically and uniquely on women during times of social change. This is likely the case because society imagines women as the custodian of cultural values due to their role in the socialization of children and their ties to the domestic sphere where marriage practices and family values are maintained. [54]

In the context of rural development and a globalizing labor market, it is important to look at how social and economic changes have gendered consequences. Through the rigor of qualitative social research performed at the local site, we can better see the complexities of social change. For example, while improving formal education for girls may be a positive thing overall, it is important to keep in mind that the benefits of education do not come without social costs for girls. Likewise, the benefits of a higher remittance sent from husbands working abroad back to wives in the village may afford the family economic security, but at the same time the absence of men from village life carries consequences for their wives and daughters. Ethnography, as a method attuned to talk and other forms of social practice, provides an opportunity to understand and reflect on the connections between shifting social structures and lived experiences. [55]

Acknowledgments

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9   ICDDR,B is the official name of a non-governmental research center in Bangladesh, formerly called the International Centre for Diarrheal Disease Research, Bangladesh. The institution now uses only the acronym.

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