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Negotiating male gatekeeper violence in team-based research on Bangladeshi migrant women in Malaysia

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**ABSTRACT**

While the field of migration studies is expanding to understand the nuanced experiences of women across Asia, there has been little discussion of how these studies were conducted. This article draws on the reflective accounts of three researchers on a team project investigating the lived experiences of female Bangladeshi migrant workers in Malaysia. While the research aims centred on understanding the lives of the Bangladeshi migrant women, the team spent a significant amount of time negotiating male gatekeeper violence in the field. The article further describes the researchers' experiences of sexual harassment and intimidation, and explores these through the complex locations of the migrant workers and the female researchers in the field site. In addition, the article deals with the way in which the team's feminist research sensibilities were challenged in the context of negotiating that violence. The ethical dilemma of continuing the research in the face of persistent violence was dealt with by discussing approaches employed in managing the violence. Analysing male gatekeeper violence in the field, allowed for conversations around the intersection of migration and masculinities. This auto-ethnography reveals methodological concerns for female researchers and exposes the negotiated nature of the front line of migration research.

**PALABRAS CLAVE**

Trabajadoras migrantes mujeres bangladeshíes; violencia de guardias hombres; investigación en equipo; auto-etnografía; estrategias de manejo de violencia

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Introduction

This article reflects on the negotiation with male violence that was experienced by our research team when conducting fieldwork with Bangladeshi female migrant workers in Malaysia. Our decision to write the article using personalised accounts was paved after our all-female research team experienced multiple incidents of male gatekeeper violence in the field. In the context of this research, the gatekeepers, who are usually individuals with the power to provide access to research participants (De Laine 2000), were male migrant workers who claimed they had access to Bangladeshi female migrant workers for the purposes of research. What we eventually realised was similar to what was pointed out by Eldridge (2013) that there is never a single gatekeeper, rather the researcher must interact and negotiate with a range of actors in gatekeeping positions or claiming such a position, each of whom may direct the researcher in very different directions (in Crowhurst and Kennedy-macfoy 2013). Some were genuinely interested in facilitating access to research participants and some just wanted to exhibit male power to the researchers by making such claims. Reflexive accounts of female researchers dealing with gender-based violence in their research studies are growing in number in the literature (see, e.g. Green et al. 1993; Palmer and Thompson 2010; Presser 2005, 2007). This article adds to Sharp and Kremer’s experiences of negotiating violence ‘on topics or in settings that do not, in and of themselves, present obvious dangers’ (2006, 318). It is important to discuss gatekeeping as it deserves methodological attention. We are reminded by both Clark (2011) and Campbell et al. (2006) that a critical scholarly gap persists in the understanding of the difference between gatekeepers ‘in the book’ and gatekeepers ‘in action’. The relationship with gatekeepers is understood and experienced as often being messy, unpredictable and ever-changing (Campbell et al. 2006; Crowhurst and Kennedy-macfoy 2013; Wanat 2008). By engaging with these issues, expressions and performance of power are exposed. Moreover, through the intersectional nature of these interactions in the fieldwork where gender, class, status, ethnic origin come together to produce particular research experiences are also revealed. These experiences led us to recognise the complex locations of the male migrant workers who wanted a gatekeeping role in
the research and our own complex locations in the fieldwork. How female researchers negotiate with male violence in masculinised research settings receives very little engagement in the methods literature so instead of asking men why they engage in such violence, we chose to focus on their actions given the circumstances within which we must act as researchers. We are interested in how we, the researchers, and female migrant workers have to deal with overt sexualisation and gatekeeper violence as experienced by us in the field. Our research team was under the assumption that conducting research in Malaysia with Bangladeshi female migrant workers who are well monitored and protected (by the state and by corporations) through heightened surveillance would not be inherently risky. The article also deals with the way in which our team's feminist research sensibilities were challenged in our management of violence in the data collection process; this complements work that has explored the negotiation of difference between team members carrying out fieldwork (see Mountz et al. 2003 for more on the dynamics of research teams). Consequently, the researchers had to deal with the ethical dilemma of continuing the research. In coping with violence we put in place measures to ensure the safety of the researchers, which helped us in making the decision to move forward with the research in the face of persistent sexual harassment. This sharing provides female researchers with strategies on how to navigate violence in the field. Since the general fieldwork and migration literature contains so little advice for female researchers we must rely on the growing body of fieldwork self-reflexivity publications (Campbell et al., 2006; Clark 2011; Mügge 2013; Pastner 1982; Warren and Rasmussen 1977). This type of work has been accused of navel gazing, but we show that it is valuable for female researchers searching for guidance and examples to overcome gendered researcher vulnerability.

The article will first review the context of our study: a globalising South-East Asia to which Bangladeshis are increasingly moving for work. The Malaysian fieldwork site in which the informants lived and worked will be detailed, and this description will reveal the role of Bangladeshi migrant men in Bangladeshi women's everyday lives. We then describe three encounters of violence during fieldwork: Shanthi details her experience of a Bangladeshi male gatekeeper's aggressive behaviour in her office, Rayhena reviews her experience of being stalked by a male gatekeeper and Kabita shares her experience of dealing with sexual harassment in the field. Following this, we will reflectively evaluate the way in which we managed our team's feminist research principles while dealing with both the realities of male violence and our desire for participant access. Our negotiation with male violence in the research and our collaborative reflections as to why this violence was overpowering led us to write this auto-ethnography to add to both contemporary studies on the everyday lives of migrants and to also deal with methodological and ethical concerns in migration research.

Bangladeshi women and men migrating for work

The context of this article is a globalising Asia in which men and women move with greater fluidity and frequency than in decades past (Douglass 2006; Yeoh, Huang, and Devasahayam 2004). While studies on male Bangladeshi migrants across South-East Asia have flourished (see Abdul-Aziz 2001; Chin 2003; Dannecker 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Gurowitz 2000; Rahman 2009; Rahman and Fee 2005; Rudnick 2009, 2011), there has been less research on the experiences of female Bangladeshi migrants in the region (notable exceptions are Dannecker 2005a, 2005b; Rudnick 2009 in Malaysia; Rozario 2007 in the Asia-Pacific). The increased visibility of Bangladeshi male populations in South-East Asia, in particular, has been met with lively public discussion about their impact on local culture and their legal status (Rahman 2009; Rahman and Fee 2005). Social anxieties around migrant bodies in South-East Asia have resulted in various policies such as marriage restrictions and attempts to control the behaviour of migrant workers throughout South-East Asia, notably in Singapore, Brunei and Malaysia (Chee, Yeoh, and Shuib 2012; Yeoh, Huang, and Devasahayam 2004).

Unlike female migrants in other labour surplus countries, Bangladeshi female migrants make up a low proportion of labour migrants in South-East Asia and, indeed, across the globe. Of the almost 400,000 Bangladeshi workers who have travelled overseas for work, only 3% are women (Belanger and Rahman 2013). Bangladeshi women's poor migration participation has been due to policies that discourage
female labour migration and the cultural stigmatisation of women who challenge traditional gender roles and migrate transnationally for work. Barriers erected to prevent women from pursuing overseas work, however, have been distinctly classist (Oishi 2005).

Drawing on Oishi's (2005) review of migrant worker movements from Bangladesh, we see that unskilled female Bangladeshi workers have been at the centre of a multitude of Bangladeshi state policies barring women from transnational work. While skilled workers such as nurses were once able to move into host countries predominantly in the Middle East, various bans on semiskilled and unskilled female workers were introduced from the late 1970s to the 2000s, with various reiterations of the bans including conditions like an over-35 age requirement, permission of a male guardian and spousal accompaniment of female workers. In spite of these restrictions, more than 5000 women took up schemes to migrate to work in Malaysia in the 1990s. At the time, women entering Malaysia predominantly worked in the textile and export sectors. According to the Bangladeshi Embassy in Malaysia, in 2012, there were almost 2000 female workers from Bangladesh, most of whom were between the ages of 20 and 35.

While gendered migration policies have kept Bangladeshi women away from transnational migration for work, the small number of Bangladeshi women who work in Malaysia can also be attributed to gender and cultural norms of women's paid public work in Bangladesh (Belanger and Rahman 2013; Kabeer, Mahmud, and Tasneem 2011). Numerous studies of female Bangladeshi factory workers have revealed how accusations of loose morals can come from both men and women who view public work outside of the home as immoral and dangerous (Kabeer 2001; Rozario 2007), but that men working in public are spared from such accusations (Oishi 2005). Thus, for many Bangladeshi women working outside of the home, employment must be anchored to honour, which includes dressing honourably, keeping faith, practicing modesty and financially supporting the family. The ability to practice modesty in one's public employment, however, is complicated by the nature of the work. Associations with men, physical movements and dress are problematic for women participating in different types of work.

Migrating to Malaysia for work, thus, is an extraordinary transgression for Bangladeshi women (see also Belanger and Rahman 2013), and the difficulties of leaving home are heightened by the issues the women face in Malaysia. Once in Malaysia, many Bangladeshi women find it difficult to adjust to their new working life as examined by both Dannecker (2005a, 2005b, 2006) and Rudnick's (2009, 2011) research on female Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia. They revealed how female Bangladeshi women struggle with new duties and lifestyles. In particular, they have discussed women's transition from a purdah observing society to one in which purdah is not fastidiously practiced by most. Dannecker and Rudnick have also discussed the way in which women negotiate multiple levels of surveillance in their everyday lives. Women's activities are thwarted by local Bangladeshi men and men who gossip about their public behaviours and employers engage in surveillance. As a research team, we were prepared for women to detail how the strict surveillance had made certain aspects of relationships awkward to manage; we did not anticipate male violence, considering that the space was so well monitored.

The fieldwork site

The team experienced violence in the field on numerous occasions. One of the most important factors that contributed to this was the remoteness of the fieldwork site. Through contacts, we had become aware of a large number of Bangladeshi women (more than 700) working for Company X. Fieldwork with Bangladeshi female respondents began in June 2012 at Company X's large export-oriented compound on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. Company X was a very successful local company that shipped its products around the world. The compound was comprised of many factories, as well as buildings devoted to Company X's management and some non-production services. The entire area was approximately 2 km², and a main road cut across the compound, dividing the space into two halves.

The compound's remoteness to other communities and businesses made the fieldwork site quite isolated. The compound was bordered by thoroughfares and park tracts on two ends. There was hardly any interaction with local populations, who worked and lived almost a kilometre away. Outside of a handful of local families living in bungalows within the compound, and a handful of shops along the
thoroughfare, the space was an island of migrant workers, most of whom were Bangladeshi. There was little vegetation inside the compound, as most of the area had been stripped of trees to make room for the factories and homes; thus, the space was very dusty and hot. When describing the space to colleagues, we sometimes depicted images of a cowboy town, deserted in the noon sun. In addition to factories, the compound also contained employee quarters built for the purpose of housing its staff. These quarters were situated in the centre of the compound, with the women's quarters in the middle of the 2 km² area. The women's quarters were situated on an area of about 0.5 km², and consisted of more than 30 bungalow homes that were surrounded by 10-foot walls and CCTV surveillance. More than 1500 women lived in these quarters – half of them Bangladeshi. Close to the women's quarters were the hostels in which the working men stayed. These hostels were not gated. The main activity zone directly in front of the women's hostel consisted of a handful of shops, mosques (masjids) and telephone facilities. The shops included small food stalls (warung) that sold foods that were familiar to the majority migrant working population – jhalmuri for Bangladeshis, dhalbhat for Nepalese and nasi goreng for Indonesians. These shops provided a clear indication of the cultural breakdown of the workers at Company X. There were obvious enterprises catering specifically to the Bangladeshi population (with signs and advertising in Bengali) – including, among other things, a barber shop. Evident from the shops was that the majority of workers who worked for Company X were Bangladeshi followed by Nepalese and Indonesians.

The isolated setting provided a different living situation from that of many Bangladeshi migrant workers in Kuala Lumpur (KL), a context that we, the researchers, were familiar with. Our site at Company X was similar to the isolated male factory quarters described by Rahman and Fee (2005) and Kitiarsa (2008) in Singapore. However, our field site was different from the previously mentioned sites, as it was home to an almost 40% female working population, most of whom lived onsite in guarded hostels. While public discourse in South-East Asia views Bangladeshi male bodies with suspicion, Company X's compound revealed concerns about female mobility, which many Bangladeshi women in our research read positively as a paternalistic protective measure.

Even though our fieldwork site was highly monitored, we were still confident that we could approach several participants for our research. Rayhena a Bangladeshi graduate student and Kabita a Canadian Bengali academic felt that their position as Bengali-speaking women gave them a sense of shared cultural roots to venture into data collection with the Bangladeshi women. While class was an important difference between the participant group and the researchers, the team felt that by having similar language and cultural backgrounds, they could better engage with participants on the ground, many of whom did not speak English or Malay. Initially, we felt that once we got to know some of the women, we would be able to source safer spaces to conduct in-depth interviews.

We quickly found out that the women had little leisure time, and only a small portion of that time was spent in the public areas of the compound. Women's reduced leisure time was entirely related to their long working hours. Company X operated two shifts – a morning shift and an evening shift – both lasting 12 hours. The company operated seven days a week and workers had to work six days a week. The 24-hours work cycle meant that there were very few people out and about in the compound during the day and women were not very visible.

For female workers, shift changes were facilitated by the company. Men and women would start to mill about the main area of the compound at about half an hour before the change. During this time, some women would go outside of their quarters to buy snacks and to talk to their friends. The company buses would stop directly in front of the women's quarters. Hundreds of women would disembark the bus after having completed a 12-h shift. They were always exhausted and eager to get some rest. Behind the gates, hundreds of women would wait to get on the bus to start their shift. The exchange between the morning shift and the evening shift workers was very quick; within 5 min of the bus arriving, all of the workers going to work would be on the bus being transported a few hundred metres to the factory, while the workers returning from work would hurry into the compound to rest. During shift changes, hundreds of men would gather around the women's compound to observe, catch a glimpse of the women, speak to them and pass messages to them. The atmosphere during the shift change
was very animated, with (mostly) Bangladeshi men gathering around the shops across the road, as well as lingering in front of the female quarters to try to speak to the women. After the bus left, the men would make their way on foot or by bicycle to the factory to start their shift, as the company did not provide transportation services for men.

The physical segregation between men and women, the eagerness for mixed-sex interactions – particularly from men – and women’s long shifts and little leisure time meant that our initial plan to ‘hang out at the warungs’ and meet women proved to be problematic right from the start. Our plans for recruitment were also hindered by Bangladeshi men’s desire to gate-keep access to the Bangladeshi women. We found out later that most men’s assertions of having access to female peers were false.

**Negotiating with male violence in the research**

Our first few attempts to speak with women – although briefly, as the women were mostly exhausted after a long day of work – resulted in some connections and exchanges of contact information. Following up on these contacts, however, was not as successful. After spending several days in the field, we were told by the women that they could not participate, as they had heard from different sources that we ‘might be traffickers’. We of course understood their fear, particularly in the context of being new and alone in Malaysia. We heard concerns about trafficking from women throughout the project. We discovered that the source of the fear was the discourse of trafficking that had been repeated by many actors, including the state, families, and male and female migrants in Malaysia. Most women were friendly and some expressed their disappointment in not being able to communicate with us, but they reminded us that their families would not approve of them participating, given the risks of trafficking in Malaysia.

We tried other approaches to recruit women, including hanging around at the warungs across the women’s quarters. Our first few attempts at using this strategy were not very successful, as the team was instead approached by numerous men. Some men leered at us and engaged in sexual harassment, including covertly taking photos of us, making sexualised comments and groping their own bodies. Female researchers have reported sufficient instances of sexual hustling or sexist treatment to merit acknowledgement of this problem in the fieldwork instructional literature however some guidance on how to deal with it is beginning to emerge (Gailey and Prohaska 2011; Gurney 1985; Mügge 2013; Papanek 1964; Pastner 1982). The team’s familiarity with this type of behaviour, particularly in a South Asian research context, meant that we did not react with alarm, but with frustration and anger. This familiarity with sexual harassment of different team members who had come across similar types of behaviours when conducting fieldwork in India and Bangladesh meant that the researchers were aware and had some experience on how to ensure safety when faced with sexual hustling and were not completely naïve.

At the warungs, the team also met a handful of men who did not engage in harassing behaviour, and who were interested in the project and expressed their desire to support it. Some of these men wanted us to know that they would be able to ‘hand women over’ to be interviewed. Many of these initial conversations with some of the men revealed that their eagerness to claim that they could provide access to the women was closely related to their self-perceived lack of power and respect in Malaysia. As described by R.R:

> We work here so hard but you know this country is so bad, we get no respect here, the Malays, the Indonesians and Indians all get more respect than us … you know that this is a really bad country for ladies, they use ladies. When ladies work here … Bangladeshi ladies, they turn bad when here, I know so many of them … I know all of them I can introduce you to all of them. Tell me when you are here next, I can deliver them right to you, they listen to me.

In this context, R.R described his struggles with gaining respect in a nation where he perceived his masculinity was being threatened by other, more established, migrant and local men. As one of the more recent groups of migrants to the county, many Bangladeshis felt that they were at the bottom of the working order, and indeed they were treated as such, with lower pay and privileges compared to some Indian and Indonesian workers. One way in which R.R tried to re-assert his masculine power in this space was by defaming fellow migrant women from Bangladesh.
We read R.R.’s ability to ’hand over women’ for interviews as a way for him to project a sense of control and power over women in a context of self-perceived powerlessness. Bangladeshi working women in Malaysia challenge the norm by revealing the male (i.e. husbands’ and fathers’) inability to provide for their families. The men-as-breadwinner narrative continues to justify male control over women despite high levels of male unemployment and women working publicly in Bangladesh. Moreover, women working publicly in Malaysia make the men-as-breadwinner failure visible on an international scale. Women’s work in Malaysia also transgresses purdah and other elements of male control, challenging normative gender roles within a foreign land. By projecting a sense of control over the women, the men tried to salvage a normative sense of male power in this foreign landscape where neither locals nor female peers gave them respect. Many men acted with confidence and authority, as C.J. did: ’just tell when and where you want them to be; I can get them to you’. The team initially felt that the field site must have operated like a typical Bangladeshi rural field site, in which men often controlled access to women (Naved et al. 2007; Rahman 2011). Given the difficulties we were having in our recruitment, we looked forward to working with the men to recruit participants for our research.

Accepting R.R.’s as well as J.J.’s (a local shopkeeper) offers to help, we continued to make contact with gatekeepers in order to organise different meetings with female workers. Calls were left unanswered or resulted in discussions that led us nowhere. Face-to-face negotiations with the men did not lead to set meetings to interview any of the women, nor did they lead to contacts with interested women. After three failed attempts, we began to suspect that the men were not as close to the Bangladeshi women as they had initially claimed. These encounters with so-called male gatekeepers continued throughout the fieldwork, even after the men revealed that they could not actually introduce us to women. This is best described by an incident Shanthi faced with M.L.:

On 13 March 2013, M.L. visited me in my office at the University of Malaya. One of the research assistants in the project chauffeured him to my office and back again. He came to my office and he sat in front of my work desk with a sense of authority. This meeting was one in which M.L. negotiated with me for a payment to be made to him if he were to get us access to the women. He also wanted a letter on university letterhead mentioning his help in the research process. M.L.’s sense of power was rather overwhelming for me, and he made sure that his words and physical mannerisms reinforced his importance in my office. This was a rather strange encounter, as, in most of our everyday encounters with migrant workers, they were humble and subordinate in nature. In this case, the tables were turned. M.L. was ’delivering’ a product that he felt he had control and a sense of ownership over. As we were working with female Bangladeshi women, his ownership also allotted him a sense of control over the research process. In spite of my position as a Malaysian-Indian academic (which, in the Bangladeshi context, creates distance), M.L. seemed to negate these differences and our class dynamics were overshadowed by his patriarchal power. However, I must also admit that my reading of this event must have been informed by my own class position. During the meeting, M.L. repeatedly mentioned that he was very busy, as he was a successful entrepreneur. Since he was taking time out of his business, we offered him an incentive to assist us in the research process. He balked at the suggested need for and amount of the incentive, saying he could easily earn that token money in two hours of work. Interestingly, M.L. was not the gatekeeper to women in the community; rather, he introduced us to S.S., who introduced us to M.M., who proved to be a genuine gatekeeper to the women.

We read M.L.’s assertion of power at Shanthi’s office within the context of Bangladeshi male migration and poor status in Malaysia. M.L.’s interaction with Shanthi reveals a calculated performance that helped him maintain a familiar sense of gendered power over women. While we do not completely discount that M.L. might have felt intimidated when meeting Shanthi, his performance certainly did not show this. We understand that, by chauffeuring him to the office, we further empowered him to act aggressively in Shanthi’s office space.

The spatial element of this exchange also reveals M.L.’s assertion of power. M.L. argued with Shanthi not in the field site, but at the university – the researchers’ work site. Gatekeepers can project a sense of power in the field, for they give researchers access to that field; but, here, M.L. was projecting this sense of power in the researcher’s space. Shanthi’s patient listening and entertainment of his forceful requests added weight to M.L.’s performance as an important man. The reality was that M.L. was not the powerful gatekeeper he presented himself to be, and he could not ‘deliver’ a single female participant whom he claimed to know personally. His false assertions initially irritated us, particularly because they delayed the research process. As a South Asian looking woman, Shanthi entertained his bargaining for
a letter and a larger incentive. By not arguing back, Shanthi reinforced the projection of his powerful male position. In reality, none of the women we spoke with knew of him, but this did not stop M.L. from violently approaching Rayhena months after this incident to demand that he be given control of any incentives we were to offer women: ‘you have to give the money to me to distribute, how dare give it to them without consulting me!’

Another contradiction we read carefully was M.L.’s assertion of being a successful entrepreneur balking at the need for an incentive, but spending much of his time in the office trying to secure a larger incentive. We read this exchange through a lens of a difficult migration experience. M.L. was an illegal migrant, and his income was dependent on insecure means. His small shop in the isolated fieldwork site was dependent on Company X’s factory workers, and it had little scope to develop outside of this. The shop could be shut down at any time, and we were also aware that he was providing consistent bribes to the police and local power-makers to maintain his shop. A generous incentive was more than desired, and his forceful arguing over the amount reflected his insecure financial position. While Shanthi’s incident with M.L. reflects his desire to highlight his control over the Bangladeshi women and to reassert his position as an important man, it did not veer into long-lasting violence. Within the research process, it was Rayhena who faced long-term violence that disturbed both her work space and her personal space.

In June 2012 we first went into the field to see how we could recruit our participants and to become familiar with the area women were living and working in. The men I noticed were Bangladeshi from rural areas, with distinctive accents. I knew they would recognise that I was from the city and was upper class, based on both my outfit (sala-warkameez) and accent. I was prepared for some distance between us because of class divisions. It surprised me, then, to see so many men gathering around me and engaging in conversation, which is considered very personal and outside of the norm in a Bangladeshi context. I attributed their eagerness to being lonely in Malaysia. In the field, I explained the research process and described my position as a research assistant. Some men had helpful tips on how to meet women and some volunteered to be gatekeepers. One man was particularly well-informed and I suggested that we exchange phone numbers. This conversation was overheard by other men. Within one hour of leaving the field site the phone calls began, not from the man I gave my number to, but from R.R., who had overheard me. R.R called me more than 12 times that day. This is a behaviour that I am aware of in Bangladesh, as it is quite common for men to harass women to show that they are interested in them. I thought that once R.R. realised that I was married and once my husband answered his calls he would cease phoning. This was not the case, as R.R. began to call more than 20 times a day, sometimes at 2.00 am. I often did not take his calls and oftentimes my husband would answer his calls. I was both annoyed with his behaviour and scared that it might escalate to physical confrontations. My husband and I tried different strategies to end the calling, including becoming angry, reasoning and listening patiently. After a few days of this behaviour, I considered changing my SIM card to avoid harassment, but after discussions with the research team I decided that it would be important to keep the SIM, as tracking this harassment would lead to good insight into the insecurity Bangladeshi women experience in Malaysia, and also provide a log, if incidents were to escalate to physical violence. R.R. called for several months, speaking often randomly about his day, asking if I was eating and engaging in other conversations that would be considered within the realm of Bangladeshi courtship discussions. While I understood that picking up his calls would encourage him, I also found that, by not answering, the calls became more persistent. It was only when I went into the field with my husband several months into fieldwork, and after my husband made a point of addressing me as his marital partner in front of R.R., that the phone calls stopped.

The harassment Rayhena experienced was very intense over several months, and we read R.R.’s persistence through the lens of culturally specific communication and male privilege. Harassment is a familiar narrative in many South Asian courtship experiences, and is particularly felt by women. Scholarship suggests that courtship-related harassment, including persistent communication and motiveless gift giving, can be an appropriate way to express romantic desire in some South Asian communities (Sodhi and Verma 2003). This type of harassment is also a dominant display of male heterosexual power. We join Kabeer (2014) in suggesting that one of the reasons sexual violence was used by men in this research was to challenge their marginal status in which many women were seen to be moving ahead, which threatened their sense of normative masculinity. Similarly, Rayhena’s independent movements in the field site, her higher class status through both her urban Bangladeshi roots and her occupation in Malaysia at the time, drastically contradicted the realities of Bangladeshi male workers at Company X.
We read R.R.’s violence as a way for him to re-assert his male power in a migrant context in which class differences between Bangladeshis were exemplified.

While the researchers in this project were familiar with the realities of sexual harassment, R.R.’s persistent communication, and even communication with Rayhena’s husband (who was, at times, very sharp with his words), reveals a desperation for regular communication with others. While R.R. never became vulgar in his communications, and talked about mundane things like his work day, his persistence allowed him to engage in a familiar performance of power over women. We also read that R.R. held hope that Rayhena was not, in fact, married, and it was only when he saw Rayhena’s husband in the field that his hope was disrupted. The phone stalking ended when Rayhena’s husband entered the field. Perhaps this is R.R.’s recognition of a familiar patriarchal value of a woman’s position in a marriage and the rights of the husband to his wife. By bringing her husband to the field Rayhena used patriarchy to counter male violence.

The final incident of violence we discuss in this article reveals that many male migrants were eager for sexual contact and publically exhibited it as a male privilege. This incident was experienced by Kabita, and occurred in the presence of other team members:

In July 2012, the research team set out on a field visit to further investigate how we could meet women and build rapport with them. It became obvious that we would have to potentially rent a room for an extended period of time to conduct ethnographic research in the field. I went with our team, consisting of myself and assistants Rayhena and Kerina. At the warungs, I asked several men about the possibility of ethnographic research and all responded in the positive. Some men suggested renting a hotel room nearby, as finding an available room might prove tricky. Other men suggested that renting an entire home for a three-month period would be more cost effective. Approaching a man older than the previous respondents – possibly in his mid-50s – I was hoping for one last opinion on the subject. We were no longer in the café, but, rather, in the car ready to leave. As I had previously done with other men, I explained to him the project and the research assistants’ role in collecting data. He asked how long we needed the room and then proceeded to rub his penis with his hands. I started laughing as he continued to rub his penis in my face. The man remained unphased; Rayhena, however, was not laughing and sharply turned to me to say we were leaving, and Kerina put the car into gear and we drove off.

Sexual harassment is a normative experience for many South Asian women, and many South Asian women read the nuances of harassment in different ways. Some harassment is read as a misguided attempt at romance. Other gestures of sexual harassment are read as displays of both power and attraction and can also be interpreted as symbols to initiate sexual bargaining. A group of strange women approaching a man and speaking to him was, indeed, very much out of place in normal daytime practice at Company X (sex workers did frequent the space, but were found mostly in the evenings) and was read by the men as permission for sexual access. Rather, men were used to being ignored by the Bangladeshi women on the ground. In fact, many female peers went out of their way to avoid the men, both out of cultural habit and as a means of disassociating from this population while in Malaysia. Avoidance is the most likely strategy these women use to counter being sexualised.

**Feminist team research as negotiation**

As a research team conducting fieldwork with female Bangladeshi workers leading transnational lives, we grappled with various forms of power dynamics both within the research team and between the researchers and the field. The irony is that, although our interest was in female Bangladeshi workers, we had to deal with Bangladeshi men to gain access to the women. Through this team auto-ethnography, we have been able to illustrate substantive problems in the fieldwork that provoked us to reflect upon our methods to situate knowledge production within relations saturated with power (Katz 1992; cited in Mountz et al. 2003). We have reflected on these relationships to take stock of the research process and to be transparent about the difficulties of doing research and our roles and assumptions about the field, and to ‘see accountably’ our research practice (Haraway 1991; Visweswaran 1994; cited in Mountz et al. 2003).

Being honest about our research practice meant looking critically at our own behaviours, our own fears and our own ethical negotiations during research. As Punch described, ‘researchers may not wish
to be perceived as cowardly, even if their fears are warranted, and researchers are also prepared to take a multitude of risks for “good data” (Punch 2012, 88). This desire for ‘good data’ often sees female researchers negotiating in different ways with their feminist principles and those of their team mates. During the course of the fieldwork, our team debated our research principles on numerous occasions. For example, Kabita tolerated men taking photos of her body and rubbing their genitals in her face in order to take part in the data collection process; she did not see this as a great risk and accepted it as a condition of the field. Rayhena, on the other hand, during many moments in the research process, felt very uncomfortable and, indeed, at risk. She felt this, in particular, during the stalking incidents.

As a team, deciding how to move forward with research in the face of violence meant compromising and negotiating our individual research principles. For example, in dealing with the stalking incident, Rayhena made it clear that she wished to continue fieldwork because she was in the process of applying for graduate school overseas and the research experience would be very useful for that. Though she was frustrated and upset that her home life was being disrupted, she did not want to risk project incompletion, as this would have affected her desire to continue her studies. Kabita tried to speak to the harasser to stop his behaviour and Shanthi discussed the possibility of having a local NGO manage the harasser on the ground, but neither of these solutions reduced the harassment. As a team, we decided to move forward with data collection in spite of Rayhena’s experience of harassment.

It was during fieldwork debriefs that we were able to see a strong set of data emerge to show a variety of gendered relations within Bangladeshi migrant working communities. This excited the entire team, but it was easy for Kabita and Shanthi to be excited about the fieldwork as it was Rayhena who faced the brunt of the harassment. The senior positions of Kabita and Shanthi also meant that many debrief discussions reviewed their own histories of fieldwork. These discussions were littered with different examples of bargaining with men, and it was clear that both Kabita and Shanthi accepted that harassment and violence were part of the fieldwork. While it may be the case that fieldwork in patriarchal spaces subjects female researchers to violence, such discussions are easy to have if one’s life isn’t disrupted by telephone stalking. As a team, we struggled to reach a consensus about which – and, more importantly, whose – feminist principles should be observed during the fieldwork process. While it is important to acknowledge Rayhena’s free will in conducting fieldwork and collecting data, it is equally important to acknowledge that Kabita and Shanthi knowingly tolerated a colleague’s harassment for the sake of ‘good data’.

Thus, the data collected should be presented and understood as contextual. The context here is not just the context of the field site, but also that of the team, itself. The issues in the research process and the field expose encounters besieged in rather discursively disarrayed power (i.e. between members of the research team, between the researchers and the gatekeepers, between the gatekeepers and the female Bangladeshi workers, between the Bangladeshi men in the field site and the women being interviewed, and between these men and the researchers). Following Mountz et al. (2003), we have tried to show that data was collected through these discursively muddled power relationships. This auto-ethnography demonstrates the challenges raised by Mountz, Miyares, Wright and Bailey in the relationships between the research processes, the politics in the field, the politics of the research team and the broader geopolitical and neo-liberal context in which these processes unfold. Researchers engaged in team field research rarely publicly mention the role of power and emotion in the field. We credit our level of tolerance to our role as anthropologists and ethnographers, which requires us to blend in and accept local ways of being; however, this tolerance paradoxically co-exists with our role as feminist researchers interested in challenging and unpacking these forms of patriarchal power dynamics.

We do hope that these reflections on experiences of harassment and team research have exposed some of the complexities that researchers often neglect. It is important for us to remind ourselves that, behind the clean presentation of data production is a murky process inundated with a diversity of power relationships (Haraway 1991; Latour 1987; Visweswaran 1994; cited in Mountz et al. 2003).

### Moving forward with the research and strategies employed to manage the violence

As feminists the three of us have strong feelings towards sexual harassment in our everyday lives with no tolerance for it. We also had many discussions about how walking away from the field site would
mean surrendering and ‘accepting defeat to patriarchy’. As fieldworkers we were all determined and stubborn in a way that often does not mirror our experiences in the everyday. We moved forward with the research by employing strategies to manage the violence and efforts were taken to ensure the safety of the researchers, especially the safety of Rayhena. Rayhena’s insistence to continue with the research was accepted under the condition that she never enters the field site alone. A chauffeured car, with female drivers and research assistants were provided to Rayhena throughout the research process, but post-violence exist strategies were proposed, which included safe phrases such as ‘we better get going before the traffic jam starts’ as a prod to leave the field site. Rayhena was also accompanied by her husband into the field on a few occasions post-violence, and as detailed it was his presence in the field that ended the phone stalking. Rayhena used patriarchal power hierarchies to fight off patriarchy by introducing her husband to the field site.

Despite all these challenges we were successful in navigating access difficulties in the research. As we eventually realised ML was not the gatekeeper rather he introduced us to SS who was also unsuccessful in his gatekeeping role. SS later introduced us to MM who proved to be a genuine gatekeeper who the Bangladeshi migrant women trusted and he was respected like a village headman. However, conducting the interviews with the Bangladeshi women proved to be rather difficult for we needed a safe space to speak with them, in the context of a masculinised research setting, this was not very easy. We decided to manage our vulnerability by developing more structured ways of engaging with the gatekeepers and the other men in the field site as was done by Lin (2002) in her work on the educational system in the prisons by adopting a professional demeanour. Interviews with the women were conducted with appointments being made for each interview session to suit the convenience of the women but also to ensure safety for both the researchers and the research participants. Some female researchers sometimes emphasise feminine behaviour if it serves the data collection process (Mazzei and O’Brien 2009) but in our case emphasising feminine attributes was a liability. Rather we continuously reaffirmed our outsider role, and similar to Lin (2002) never talking about our personal life. Most of the Bangladeshi women did not want to go far from the field site so we conducted the interviews in the car with the engine and air-conditioning running. Inevitably a group of men would gather around our car ogling at the women in the car. We had to constantly search for safer places to conduct the interviews. On a few occasions the researchers took the women on a drive around the field site while conducting the interview in the back seat to avoid the male gaze.

Another strategy employed was to conduct the interview at a table placed underneath a tree in a field opposite a Malay warung nearby the female hostel not too far from a mosque in the field site which the Bangladeshi and Indonesian male migrant workers go to for their Friday prayers. This space near the Malay warung close to a mosque felt safe for women as it was frequented by their supervisors and other female workers. In our fieldwork preparation we would have never chosen such an outdoor space, as it was very public. Women in the field were keen to speak in this type of space, as it kept men ‘better behaved’ and made any form of sexual hustling become clearly visible to onlookers. Thus, the publicness of the space provided the protection to both the researchers and the participants. Considerations of privacy for the women were not important which is at odds with our initial project design where we viewed privacy for participants in interviews to be the best ethical way forward. Our learnings remind us that negotiating ethics on the ground is a dynamic process, which need to respond to cultural and gendered realities that are not always fixed.

**Conclusion**

This article contributes to a recent and growing body of literature exploring the dynamics of feminist team research and the way in which male violence is negotiated in the field. We used three fieldwork situations to illustrate the dilemma faced when feminist principles clash with field site experiences. Experiences of such a clash led us to reflect upon a tension that exists in feminist team research. The tension between our feminist principles and our academic goals to produce reliable knowledge led us to write this article as an auto-ethnography of the data collection process. In responding to that tension
as feminist researchers, we incorporated reflexivity in order to be accountable and transparent about our research practices, even if our feminist sensibilities were, at times, compromised. Through this auto-ethnography, we have critically examined our experiences with violence from male gatekeepers. We have shown that the role and influence of gatekeepers in migration research needs to be explored in relation to their control and provision of access to researchers, and, in the context of this study, in relation to the harassment and violence they subjected the researchers to. Furthermore, how female researchers negotiate male violence in the research process deserves methodological attention for it impacts on the approaches employed for data collection and has implications for the management of research ethics that arises out of such a context. Our experiences suggest that relationships with gatekeepers are multifaceted and carry unexpected repercussions for the researcher and the research. This article has argued that access is a continually negotiated process imbued with multidimensional power flows – between the researcher and the gatekeeper, between the team members and their feminist principles in the research process, and between the researchers and the research subjects. The research process described in this auto-ethnography reveals localised socially rooted power relationships, conditions and practices in the field site. At the same time, it tells us that the process of conducting research can illuminate underlying social conditions such as male gatekeepers’ need to reassert masculine power, which is a symptom of a sense of powerlessness. In adopting a critical reflexive perspective, we propose that the position of the researcher and of other actors in the fieldwork be thoughtfully understood, in order to reveal the negotiated nature of the front line of research. This negotiation of positions is related to the complex process by which ‘difference’ is constructed, and to the dynamic configurations of objects and subjects in fieldwork. Positions, intersections and negotiations permeate the emotional and rational processes in the migration research endeavour.

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