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ABSTRACT

This article builds upon work which aims to 'de-exceptionalise' displacement [Cabot and Ramsey, 2021. Deexceptionalizing Displacement: An Introduction. *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, 12 (3):286–299] by describing two hitherto unresearched examples of 'unexceptional' displacement. Both involve abandonment and going missing, and both throw light on the ways in which gender, space and emplacement work together to produce particular vulnerabilities via what I have called 'spatial precarity'. In the first, lost or abandoned girls are held in a government-run Safe House on the outskirts of the city. In the second, women are displaced from their marriages when their husbands go missing. The context is a rapidly changing urban environment in which the rapacious development of property and infrastructure has led to a cityscape that is never stable. This environment, and the socio-political relations that are constitutive of it, have helped to create the conditions in which certain people get lost and others go missing, leading to highly gendered forms of displacement.

KEYWORDS Lost; Bangladesh; gender; displacement; precarity

How should we understand displacement? An emerging literature has called for it to be 'de-exceptionalised' (Cabot and Ramsey, 2021), arguing that rather than overly focussing on global spectacles of crisis, scholars of displacement should emphasise its everyday qualities, for the destabilising and violent effects of global capitalism are increasingly ubiquitous, affecting large numbers of people, not just visibly 'out of place' refugees (Cabot and Ramsey, 2021; Ramsey and Askland, 2020; Lems and Drotbhom, 2018; Ramsey, 2021; Ramsey, 2020a, 2020b; Halstead, 2020). Viewing displacement as exceptional, these authors suggest, maintains an imaginary of the world as stable and secure, naturalising sedentary populations and borders in a methodological nationalism which anthropologists have, in their rush to study spectacles of 'the migration crisis' inadvertently reproduced (Cabot, 2019). By de-exceptionalising

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displacement, we start to grasp not only the quotidian violence of capitalism, but also displacement's ontological qualities, for it is not just about movement out of place, but also movement out of time, a suspension of life (Cabot and Ramsey, 2021; Ramsey, 2021, 2020). Ramsey, for example, defines displacement as:

> a fundamental disruption to the teleology of life: an experience, whether acute or chronic, that pulls a person out of the illusory comfort of a life with stability and into a reality of a future that is not only uncertain, but which is determined by forces that are outside of their direct control. (Ramsey, 2020b: 388)

In this article, I build on these perspectives by describing two hitherto unresearched examples of 'unexceptional' displacement encountered in my recent fieldwork in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Both involve abandonment and going missing, and both throw light on the ways in which gender, space and emplacement work together to produce particular vulnerabilities. The context is a rapidly changing urban environment in which the rapacious development of property and infrastructure has led to a cityscape that is never stable. This environment, and the socio-political relations that are constitutive of it, have helped to create the conditions in which certain people get lost and others go missing, leading to highly gendered forms of displacement. Indeed, whilst Ramsey and Askland suggest that displacement involves being temporally and spatially lost, detached from one's life, with an existential sense of being 'out of place' (Ramsey and Ackland, 2020) in my examples, 'getting lost' is literal as well as metaphorical. In the first example, I describe girls who have become lost and are held in a government Safe House in the satellite city of Gazipur, for they do not know their addresses and their families are either unable, or unwilling, to find them. Some of these girls are deaf or have special learning needs, others are very young. Picked up by the police, they are held in prison-like conditions, sometimes for many years. Made legible to the authorities by getting lost, but missing from their families, these girls are seen but not heard, documented but never found.

In the second example, I describe women whose husbands have gone missing. Women in this predicament frequently visited the NGO in Dhaka[1] where I based my fieldwork in Dhaka in the first part of 2020.[2] Offering free legal advice, counselling and mediation, the NGO assists thousands of women a year in their marital problems. Many have been abandoned by husbands who have blocked them from their phones and vanished.[3] If they cannot locate their husbands the women are unable to claim their dowers, child maintenance and other support; locating them can therefore be a matter of survival. Whilst their husbands are unlikely to be lost, their left-behind wives experience the existential liminality of lives and marriages that are suspended as they search anxiously for clues as to their husbands' whereabouts.

The causes of these 'un-exceptional' forms displacement are complex. The violent exclusions and dispossessions of neo-capitalist development help set the scene (Ramsey, 2021) but other factors are also important. Gender is central, as is the physicality of gendered bodies, which are variously 'able' and dis-abled, mobile and immobilised. Space is crucial, both in terms of how it is gendered and the ways in which it is navigated. In what follows I suggest that gendered and bodily vulnerabilities produce

what I call 'spatial precarity', risks adhering to the configurement of place, emplacement and a person's relative ability to navigate social and physical space. As we shall see, in Dhaka the gendered and class-based nature of spatial precarity leads to forms of displacement that are 'hidden in plain sight'. As a result of their spatial precarity low-income girls and women become lost in space and time, suspended in a state of liminality in which either they, or the people they have lost, cannot be found. Before turning to these examples, let me explain what I mean by 'spatial precarity'.

Getting Lost, Navigation and Spatial Precarity

Whilst work which seeks to 'de-exceptionalise' displacement rightly emphasises the ontological state of getting lost, a sense of disorientation and being out of place, very little research so far has been dedicated to people who are literally lost or missing. Human geographers Parr and Fyfe are alert to the possibilities, calling for a 'geography of the missing' which focuses on the material, spatial and relational implications of 'disrupted human mobilities' (Parr and Fyfe, 2013). Going missing is fundamentally entangled with the politics of recognition and visibility Parr and Fyfe argue, for 'absence is a political ascription' (Parr and Fyfe, 2013: 618). This point is particularly pertinent for lost people who do not seem to be missed or searched for. Whilst the stories of the girls in the Safe House detailed how they had got lost, it was not clear if their families had searched for them or if rather than being accidental, 'getting lost' involved them being abandoned. Meanwhile, the husbands of the abandoned wives had gone missing, but were not lost. Parr and Fyfe continue that movements of the lost are routinely overlooked by scholars of mobility, for:

> missing people have engaged in a curious form of mobility – what might be called 'stuttered' 'crisis' mobilities: 'journeys' that are often short in duration … and as a result are seemingly 'meaningless' … These journeys are undertaken for a range of barely understood reasons, perhaps .. contributing to a sense of an inauthentic mobile population and thus further accounting for its neglect. (Parr and Fyfe, 2013: 632)

This neglect of 'inauthentic' movements means that if we only focus on what is visible, some forms of displacement are likely to be overlooked. Indeed, attention to the experience of getting lost and being abandoned can help foreground questions of gender, class, age and relative able-bodiedness in the analysis of displacement. To understand this further, let us consider the opposite state to losing one's way: navigation. Vigh describes this as the means by which we adapt to change, strategizing and moving forward (2009) Situating the concept in the ethnographic context of Bissau, in which uncertainty, conflict and poverty mean that one has to constantly adapt and be alert to danger as well as possibility, for Vigh navigation is summed up by the phrase *dubriagem,* in which people are constantly reactive and vigilant, a state that is embodied by a sequence of jabbing physical movements akin to shadow boxing. Navigation is thus 'moving within a moving environment'. As Vigh explains:

> Because navigation designates motion within motion, it forces us, in a social perspective, to consider the relation between the environment people move in and how the environment

> itself moves them, before, after and during an act. Social navigation, in this manner, adds an extra dimension to practice as we become able to focus on the way people's movement in their social environments is constantly attuned and adjusted to the unfolding of the environment itself and the effect this has on possible positions and trajectories. (2009: 425)

Conceptualising navigation as 'motion within motion' is useful, for it draws attention to the way in which movement is simultaneously social and physical, based in and guided by an environment which is constantly changing. As Vigh also points out, successful navigation of risky environments depends on what equipment we start out with (2009: 430). Clearly age, gender, class and bodily capacities contribute to this navigational 'equipment'. In my cases the dis-abled and gendered bodies of the lost girls affected their ability not only to navigate social relationships but also the city-scape of Dhaka, In contrast, the lost husbands of the abandoned wives seemed to have excellent navigational skills, thus furthering the risks of abandonment for their wives.

Vigh's work on navigation thus contributes to the concept of spatial precarity in several ways. Firstly, it points to the 'motion within motion' of lives led in a constantly changing environment. Secondly, it prompts questions regarding peoples' varying capacities to navigate. Thirdly, it encourages us to consider the types of terrain involved. Dhaka is a mega-city of over twenty million people, one of the most crowded places in the world and ranked the seventh least liveable city in the world in 2021.[4] In many ways the city is the quintessential materialisation of neoliberal capitalism in post-colonial South Asia, in which endemic poverty co-exists with the frenzied commodification of property, a place where rubble piles up around the spectacle of development (Gordillo, 2014; Harms, 2016). It is also an environment in which, as Riaz shows, democracy is 'backsliding' (Riaz, 2021) and corruption, violence and human trafficking are routine. As I shall suggest, this environment of ruination, rubble and economic development has led to particular risks for my interlocutors.

This leads me to the obvious point that space is always bound up in social relations. As feminist geographers have shown, geography matters to the construction of gender, existing in a dialogic relationship with it (Massey, 1994). Put simply, how we interact and make meaning across space and place depends upon who we are, which in turn shapes space and place. In Dhaka, women are emplaced in certain ways – expected to be confined to the home, for example. The city is also shaped by class, and in turn, produces particular constellations of economic inequality. The poor, for example, are confined to slums that are hidden from view between high rise buildings and prevented from entering gated communities, whilst rickshaw drivers are barred from larger roads. In sum, appreciating how space is socially and materially constituted helps us to see how the risks and uncertainties it poses depends on who people are, how they are emplaced and their relative navigational capacities. Spatial precarity can therefore be defined as a vulnerability that arises from the entanglement of risky geographies, tenuous emplacement and relative navigational skills. As we shall see, its effects can cut two ways, both for those who get lost and those who go missing.

Getting Lost and Researching the Lost

Whilst as anthropologists we may hope to 'lose ourselves' in the field, this is hardly the same as researching 'the lost'. The ethnography that follows is unavoidably fragmented, for so much is missing. Had the lost husbands really vanished, and if so, why? I could only guess. Had the girls in Gazipur become lost in the ways that they described or were there darker, untold stories? Perhaps they had run away, been trafficked, or suffered some other unspeakable trauma. Relying on snatched interviews and hurried accounts given in crowded legal aid clinics or the Safe House, my research into lost people evoked ethnographic scraps rather than a coherent whole. In some instances, spoken communication was impossible for the girls were deaf, had learning difficulties or had been rendered speechless (see Mehta, 2018). Profoundly unheard, these girls were initially easy to overlook, excluded from interviews and conversations, lost to the research. In finding my way through these shadows I had to rely on other types of information: alert to silences and silencing, muteness and the politics of listening.

It was however no coincidence that my research in Dhaka led me to the lost. If fieldwork is supposed to bring emplaced understanding, in Dhaka I was confronted by the impossibility of ever gaining full knowledge of my location. Indeed, just as the deltaic geography of Bangladesh means that its landscape is continually changing (Samadar, 1999) so too is the cityscape of Dhaka's high rises, flyovers, streets and alleys, reminding me of Sopranzetti's description of an equally vast and chaotic Bangkok as a 'palimpset', a document that has been written and written over many times, leaving ghost-like traces of what was there before (Sopranzetti, 2018). In earlier research in rural Sylhet I was initially asked 'where / what country are you from?' ('*tumar desh kortay?*') and later, 'where is your home?' (*tumar bari kortay?*) a semantic shift which implied that I lived in a *bari* (a homestead) and was therefore placed within local idioms of kinship and belonging. In a month or so I had surveyed the village, met most of its inhabitants and was interconnected via my host family into dense familial networks which centred around easily mapped clusters of households.

Many years later in Dhaka, the social and physical landscape was radically different. I was there to study marital problems and divorce and my primary research site was the feminist legal rights NGO office in central Dhaka where I observed over thirty legal advice meetings and mediations (*salish*), sat in on counselling sessions, attended clinics and workshops, became friendly with the feminist lawyers and counsellors and with the help of a research assistant analysed historical case files.[5] Yet whilst most of my fieldwork was based at the NGO, I was often on the brink of getting lost, not in the methodological sense of cultural immersion but literally, for I found even the few square miles of Dhaka where I was living challenging to navigate. Intent on walking, I explored routes between my lodgings and the NGO offices two miles away in a residential area, which, like many others across the city, was organised in a grid of 'blocks'. Through my walks I hoped to orientate myself in the bewildering urban environment, with its rapidly changing landscape of building sites and road works, the constantly sprouting tower blocks and the *still* under construction Metro,

which for years has inched leadenly forward, churning up the roads and causing even more chaos. The city was unrecognisable from my earliest visits in the late 1980s, when a five-mile trip into the centre from the well-heeled neighbourhood of Ghulshan took thirty minutes in a puttering auto-rickshaw. Now staying there was not only out of my budget but completely impractical. Even in an Uber it might take hours to reach 'downtown' districts, for the traffic is routinely gridlocked, the World Bank-funded flyovers appearing like mirages through the thickly roiling smog.

So how to find my way? If I stuck to the Mirpur Road, with its thundering traffic and choking pollution and carefully noted the landmarks, after a few attempts I successfully located the office. But crossing the road at its intersections was alarming and even where pavements existed they were frequently shared with zooming motorbikes. I, therefore, mapped a less toxic route that involved traversing the back streets. It appeared straightforward on Google Maps but even after weeks of practice I became disorientated. Asking for 'Block B' was complicated by the existence of several, disconnected 'Block Bs' and it was only a month into my fieldwork that I learnt that the NGO had moved but not changed the address on their business cards. The point is not that I have a bad sense of direction (which may be true) but that in the densely populated and continually changing Dhaka topography, it is easy to get lost. Even the NGO Director joked that she could never find the office. For me, the risks were minimal for I had a mobile and enough cash to ensure that whatever the eventuality, I always got home. As we will shortly see, this is not the case for people with fewer resources.

As this implies my research into the lost was always shaped by my privilege and the relative powerlessness of many of my interlocutors.[6] Whilst I was able to build lasting relationships with the lawyers and advisors at the NGO, as well as the middle class divorced women I interviewed, this was not the case with most clients in the advice sessions and mediations I sat in on, who gave their permission for me to listen in and take notes, after I had explained that I would change their details. Many of the women seemed to welcome the extra attention; indeed, it is normal in the clinics and offices of the NGO for office staff to listen in to on-going cases, often interjecting with remarks or advice.

The question of informed consent was more problematic in the Safe House, where the girls I met were incarcerated. In the Kolkata prison where Mehta researched Bangladeshi women who had illegally crossed the Indian border, she notes how some were initially coerced by prison guards into being interviewed by her, reciting fixed narratives or remaining monosyllabic and only relaxing when her research site shifted from a dingy school room to the shade of a mango tree (Mehta, 2018). In the Safe House, I did not directly speak to or interview any of the girls, as I was accompanying NGO workers whose work I was observing. I did, however, sit in on their interviews with a paralegal and asked their permission to take notes and write about them, which they gave, often enthusiastically. In this context, the girls were extremely keen to speak to the paralegal, since it was only through her that their cases were investigated and their families traced. Noting the skill of their embroidery, the paralegal had arranged for a few girls to get transferred to an orphanage where they would receive training in sewing and some hope of an eventual job, for the Safe House offered no

programme of education. As a guest of the NGO, I was unable to stay beyond the timings of their visits or develop relationships with the Safe House staff or the girls and any plans for further visits were made impossible by the pandemic. What follows is therefore a fleeting glimpse, a brief ethnographic snippet, captured 'on the fly'. Yet despite the gaps in my knowledge, and the ethical questions raised by researching young people who, like Metha's incarcerated interlocutors, were not able to give full consent (Mehta, 2018) I believe it is important to write about the girls I met in the Safe House. To overlook them would be to neglect important insights into how gender, age, poverty and disability can produce distinctive forms of displacement and abandonment in cities like Dhaka; as usual, the abandoned and lost would remain out of sight and out of mind.

I shall return to the Safe House shortly. For now, let us turn to two major factors which contribute to spatial precarity in Dhaka. The first involves gendered ideals of emplacement; the second, the transitory nature of the urban landscape and its population.

Gender, Emplacement and Unfixity

If spatial precarity arises from the entanglement of unstable geographies and the ability to navigate space, understanding how someone is emplaced is key to appreciating their relative precarity. In Bangladesh for the majority Muslim population, norms of purdah (the veil) and sexual purity have conventionally contributed to women being emplaced within the home (Kotalova, 1993; Mehta, 2018; Hossain, 2017). To be sure, these norms are far from fixed. Over recent decades Bangladesh's rapid economic development has involved large numbers of women entering the work force, primarily as garment factory workers[7] but also in other forms of manufacturing and labouring, as well as white-collar employment. Meanwhile, the country has outpaced India and Pakistan in many indices of gender equality,[8] leading to a new narrative of Bangladesh as a development success story and what Naomi Hossain refers to as 'a fairy tale of female empowerment that has helped amplify and reinforce powerful messages about the essential rightness of global capitalist development' (Hossain, 2017: 2). Fairy tales aside, women's increasing presence in work-places and educational institutions has been countered by forms of Islamicisation that push in the opposite direction, appearing in the guise of fatwas and violence against women and feminist NGOs by Islamicists (cf Shehabuddin, 1999; Karim, 2004), plus a growing piety movement and use of burqas, niqab and other forms of veiling by women in public (Naher, 2010; Hussain, 2010; Rozario, 2006). Indeed, the emplacement of women in the domestic domain and their visibility in public space are at the centre of fierce debates concerning Islam, democracy and the Bangladeshi state (Shehabbudin, 1999).

Whilst emplacement is thus variable, affected by history, age and social class, it remains the case that according to prevalent norms in Bangladesh, women's place is still predominantly in the home. For most girls, sexual governance starts at puberty when parents start monitoring their daughter's movements, in some cases preventing them from continuing their studies past Class Ten (aged seventeen). This is a time

which was described to me as 'very dangerous' due to the temptations of girls falling in love with an unsuitable boy and eloping. Research suggests that the value put on sexual purity leads some parents to arrange marriages as soon as their daughter has finished school, since the older the bride, the more dowry must be paid (Huda, 2006).[9] Whilst many middle-class young women go to university where relationships with the opposite sex are commonplace and often lead to 'love cum arranged marriages' (Rozario, 2012) couples are never allowed to openly live together before marriage. Once married, a woman conventionally moves to her in-laws' house where she takes on a new identity as a '*bau*' (wife).

Amongst middle-class women, religious piety combines with norms of what Hussein terms 'respectable middle-class femininity' in which even if they are working outside ~~it~~ the domestic sphere, women's identity and self-value are fundamentally tied up with their homes, marriages and families (Hussein, 2017). Just as teenage girls should be at home with a male guardian, in order to be respectable women have to be married; only the most cosmopolitan and radical elite women can *not* be married. Divorced women face considerable stigma (see also Ahkter and Begum, 2012). Practically, they struggle to secure a mortgage or rent an apartment without a male guardian. Crucially, whilst many women work the majority whose cases I observed relied upon their husbands' wages. As the divorced women, I got to know explained, to remain respectable and secure, women need a 'guardian': a father, husband or some other senior male and they need to be emplaced within the home.

Material and economic conditions in Dhaka mean however that 'staying in place' can be challenging for the city's poorest inhabitants. Constantly cleared to make way for property development, the *bastees* (slums) and squatter settlements which house millions of the city's residents are highly insecure, with fires that destroy thousands of homes a routine occurrence.[10] Here, Gordillo's concept of 'rubble' is apposite: ruins overlie the previous ruination, and from this strata of rubble new structures emerge (Gordillo, 2014). The 'rubble-lands' of Dhaka thus refers not only to physical rubble, waste and rubbish (of which Dhaka is full) but to the insecurity of material structures and pathways through them. Even if the *bastees* remain, their inhabitants frequently shift around. A lawyer at the NGO described the organisation's poorer clients as a 'floating population' without regular jobs or homes to tether them. Many are recent migrants who continue to have close links with their villages. This enables some men to duplicitously keep one wife in the city and another in the village, a situation I heard of many times.

What this adds up to is a context in which women and girls are supposed to be emplaced in the domestic domain and dependent upon a male guardian, alongside an urban geography and political economy in which people 'float', moving between insecure livelihoods and low-income housing. For the very poor, many of whom have had no or very little education, knowledge of maps and geography is also limited, especially for women. As Mehta reports from the prison in Kolkata where she did fieldwork, the majority of her Bangladeshi interlocuters, all young women, had little or no understanding of Bangladesh's geography, its separation from India or the polico-legal importance of the border (Mehta, 2018: 53–91). The dangers –

and opportunities for those who wish to take advantage of the women's vulnerabilities – are legion. Let us now turn to the first form of spatial precarity: getting lost.

Runaways, Victims and Lost Girls

Lost girls, and sometimes children, regularly appeared at the NGO offices or Police Victim Support Centre (VSC) where the organisation held weekly clinics. Funded by Western donors, the VSC was part of a national network of victim support cells, crisis centres and shelters run by the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs.[11] According to the lawyers running the clinic at the VSO, these services suffered from a lack of co-ordination and had no national or even city-wide data base. This means that if someone goes missing there is no centralised agency where records of lost and found people are kept. In Dhaka, a handful of NGOs run legal advice clinics and offer support and shelter for victims of domestic violence. Women escaping domestic violence may get referred to these via the VSC, a national help-line run by the government or helplines run by a small group of NGOs working in this area in Dhaka.[12] Meanwhile a range of NGOs run orphanages for children and teenagers.[13] Classified as 'victims', since they had been referred by the VSC, many of these lost children were disorientated and inchoate. One was a boy of about eight who slurred his words, dribbled and seemed drugged. The NGO lawyer documented his details but the child was unable to supply an address, only the name of his father and siblings. He had been on a bus, he said, but that was as far as his story went. If the parents were not found he would be taken to a children's home I was told. This was a likely outcome since police stations rarely communicate with each other and there is no national data base of missing people. In another instance, a young woman who had been brought to the NGO office by the police via the VCS was interviewed by a lawyer and counsellor. She too seemed dazed, telling an incoherent story of a work picnic, a bus ride to a place on the outskirts of the city. The consensus in the office was that, as the police report put it, the girl was 'mentally incapacitated'. Eventually, she remembered the name of the factory where she worked and was taken back.

Some of the lost girls were runaways who had been picked up by the police. The priority for the NGO staff was to return these girls to their homes. Given the dangers of rape, trafficking[14] or organ theft, this is hardly surprising (see Bhattacharyya, 2017; Mehta, 2018) but there may be violence and abuse closer to home. As research into street children in Bangladesh shows, many are victims of familial sexual and physical abuse (Conticini and Hulme, 2007). One girl housed at the NGO shelter was unable, or unwilling, to speak. Without knowing her address nothing could be done the lawyers said. Then suddenly there was a breakthrough when another girl identified her. After a few phone calls, the NGO was able to trace her family. It transpired that she was adopted and, though they had not reported her missing, the father was summoned to collect her. This was great news, I was told by Advocate Hasina, a rare instance of a happy ending. I was not so sure. Observing the girl's body language as she sat beside her father, I was troubled by her fearful

demeanour. Hasina treated him as the respectable gent he presented as, with his neatly pressed Punjabi shirt and oiled hair, but the girl's anguished expression told another story. Leaning away from him, her arms clenched around her thin waist, she refused to look up or speak, reminding me of Veena Das's description of mute and traumatised victims of violence as people 'who withdrew their voice to protect it' (Das, 2006: 8).

Like the young Bangladeshi women found crying or asking for directions in India (Mehta, 2018) girls who are found roaming the streets in Dhaka are likely to be picked up by the police. Whilst in India these 'illegals' are arrested, in Dhaka lost or runaway girls are sent to the Victim Support Centre, for as young women they are explicitly 'out of place'. Some end up in a government-run 'Safe House' in Gazipur a forbidding institution in which teenage girls are held either until their families are found or they have reached the age of eighteen. The unluckiest are wholly dislodged from their homes, identities and families. Made legible to the state by their embodied 'out of placeness', some remain in the Safe House for years. Even if their families are traced, they cannot leave until they have proved that they are related at the Family Court and a date for 'the hand-over' is set. What started as 'disrupted mobility' (Parr and Fyfe, 20133), an out of control wandering in an unknown place, has ended in blocked mobility: being held behind bars in a secure facility which is guarded by a chowkidar on the gate and police-women inside, for girls out of place must be held securely until they can be relocated to their families. Here we see how the state and its officials reinforce the patriarchal family and its norms of emplacement: girls who have become untethered from their homes must be placed in an institution which supposedly protects them, just as the family should. As Veena Das argues with reference to the return of 'abducted' women in post-Partition India, the state and the authority of patriarchal fathers and husbands are coterminous, for 'the state is the medium for re-establishing the authority of the husband / father' (Das, 2006: 36). In this case, some of the girls – particularly those who are disabled – have most likely been abandoned by their families.

Conditions in the Safe House are deplorable. Sleeping on the floor in bare dorms which are locked from the outside, when I visited in the winter months the girls complained of the lack of blankets, dirt and cold water. Their diet is meagre and they are only allowed out for a short time each day to eat and 'play'. There is no programme of training or education at the Safe House. When I visited the NGO's paralegal was attempting to get one girl transferred to a children's home where she would be educated. She also took pictures of another girl who she was trying to place with an employer as a servant. During my visits there were thirty girls living in the Safe House; of these, ten were 'marriage victims' (young women who had eloped and now were unable to return to their families, discussed in another paper) six were lost and the rest had learning disabilities, were mentally ill or mute. Overseen by a 'Director' who was overheard remarking that the girls deserved such sparse conditions, and several bored-looking police women, it is not surprising that in the past, attempts have been made to escape.[15] What follows are extracts from my notes (taken during a workshop run by the NGO).

– Santi is twelve. She was visiting her older sister with her brothers from another district. She was supposed to meet the brothers outside a shop but they never showed. When she went to look for them she became disorientated and never found her way back. Eventually, she was taken in by the police and is now at the Safe House. She has been here for seven months. At first, she couldn't remember her address but then it came back to her and the NGO fieldworker was able to locate her family. Her mother came to fetch her, in floods of tears. But Santi cannot return home yet, for the courts have to 'release' her to her parents, which could take months.
– Shuli is fifteen and has been in the Safe House for over a year. She has never been to school but has learnt to sign with the five deaf girls who share her dorm. She doesn't know her address; all she can say is that she comes from Jatra Bari in Mymensingh. Her father is a labourer; she doesn't know where her grandparents live. Her nana (maternal grandfather) took her to a house in Dhaka where she was working as a servant but one day she went outside and got lost. She wants to go home but without an address or the name of a school, the NGO cannot help.
– Joyoti is 15. She was working in the Danish biscuit factory on Chittagong Road and living in Bo Bazar with her family. On the way to work she fainted. The police arrived but when they asked for her parents' names she was too scared to tell them so they brought her to the Safe House. She says that if she could get to Kajpur Bridge she could find her way home but the MS lawyer says that until a fieldworker can locate her parents she has to stay at the Safe House.

These cases demonstrate how gender, class and economic development have contributed to the girls' spatial precarity and displacement. Joyoti and Shuli are recent arrivals in Dhaka and child labourers, one working as a servant, one in a factory. With no education, Shuli did not know her address and was unable to supply the name of a school. Living as a servant in her employer's house, she lacked both local knowledge and a phone. Whilst Joyoti would have been able to find her way home after her fainting fit, her fear of the police, deeply rooted for the poor, prevented her from giving her parents' names so she was taken to the Safe House. There may be details missing from these accounts or they may be untrue. For example, it is possible that Shuli ran away or something else happened that she was not willing to share. As with all the stories I heard at The Safe House it was clear that searching for 'the truth' was methodologically mistaken (see Mehta, 2018). Rather, even if performed as a linear narrative to be recounted to an audience of NGO and Safe House staff, policewomen and an uneasy foreign anthropologist, the girls' stories consisted of fragmented memories and experiences that may be too traumatic to be spoken of, embodied instead in their muteness, downward glances and weeping.[16]

The next case is even more opaque. Told during a workshop conducted by the NGO in which the assembled girls were instructed to stand and give their details, the young person concerned seemed confused and told multiple versions of their story, to the laughter of their audience. Tuno was dressed as a boy with short hair and trousers and a distinctly non-feminine stance: standing with hands behind her back and legs apart. After

amused questioning by the NGO lawyer, she confirmed with a bright smile that she was a girl. She seemed confused, grinning and laughing for no obvious reason. She was ten years old, she said. Or was it twenty? Her mother died and her father married many different women, who beat her, so she ran away. The story is increasingly hard to follow. She was working in a house as a servant but got dismissed; she caught a bus and asked some people on it if she could work for them. She was in love with a boy but he loved a girl so she transferred her affections to the girl, started to dress as a boy and took a new name. The lawyer asks for her address, telling her that without it she can't go home, get an education or marry, but Tuno just gazes at her, grinning. At the back of the hall, a girl with learning difficulties is shouting that her father is a policeman and she gets beaten, but no-one pays her any attention since she is '*beshi* mental' (very mental).

Out of place, in dress as well as geographical location, Tuno's story is impossible to pin down. Was she ten or twenty? No-one knew, or really cared, since like the shouting girl she was deemed 'mental'. Yet unlike the other inhabitants of the Safe House Tuno seemed happy. Could it be that running away, getting lost, had enabled her to assume a non-binary identity, and that in a sense she had found herself? Without knowing more, I am lost in Tuno's story.

Six of the girls at the Safe House were deaf. Only Shuli was able to communicate with them, having learnt to sign during her long incarceration. These girls were not asked to share their stories during the workshop, and when I met them during my first visit they were unable to answer the questions put to them via Shuli by the NGO paralegal. Instead, they sobbed, covering their faces with their saris. Since they could not write, they were unable to communicate with the various officials; whether or not their families were searching for them was unknown. What *is* clear is that the spatial precarity of deaf children in cities such as Dhaka is extreme. Unable to ask for directions and non-literate, it would not have taken much for them to get lost. Without co-ordinated police stations, national registers of missing people and, crucially, being missed, it seemed unlikely that they would ever be found.

Recent migration to a vast, teeming city, working in factories or the homes of strangers, living in squatter settlements where there are no road names or house numbers, illiteracy and fear: all of these factors contribute to the spatial precarity of teenage girls who, once lost, are in danger of permanent displacement from their lives. If they are lucky they will remember enough for NGOs to help them find their way home, if they have one. If not, or they are deaf, mentally ill or have learning difficulties, they can only wait and hope that their family will search for and find them. Their dispossession is thus absolute: becoming dislodged from their homes, and possibly abandoned by their families, they have lost everything.

Dhaka's unnavigability is clearly perilous for some people. But it offers different prospects for others. Let turn to the missing husbands.

Missing Husbands

January 2020: Jeba carefully unwraps the package of belongings that she has tied into the ends of her frayed *orna*[17]: a few betel nut leaves smeared with lime, a worn NGO

business card and a small plastic box. Opening the latter, she spreads its contents before us as evidence of her husband's many affairs: eight SIM cards, each representing a different woman. Weeping bitterly, she tells Advocate Hasina of her troubled marriage. Arranged when she was twelve, her husband never showed her any love and has constantly 'tortured' her with abuse and affairs. Now he has upped and left for his home district of Barisal with another woman. Since leaving he has not been in contact and, with three daughters to support, she faces a dire situation. Though she ekes out a living selling vegetables on the street, she desperately needs him to pay maintenance. Unfortunately, there is little Hasina can do to, for Jeba has neither proof of her marriage: a *kabin namar* (marriage document) nor an address for her husband. Despite their eighteen-year marriage she never went to his village and has no idea where it is. How will she survive without her husband? She sobs. How will her children eat?

Jeba's predicament was shared by many of the NGO's clients, who like her faced being displaced from the all-important role of being a wife and from the financial settlement and maintenance that they are entitled to under Shariah Law. Of the case files we analysed,[18] 40% involved abandonment. In research carried out by Akter and Begum, 45% of divorced women in their study had been abandoned, a result of what these authors see as 'male whim without any accountability to anybody' (Akter and Begum, 2012: 647). Though sometimes the wives knew where their husbands were, many did not. With no address or the name of a village, the NGO could not write to request that they attend mediation, the first step in reconciliation or a divorce settlement.[19] Nearly half of the 206 cases we analysed had led to no further action either because the clients did not know where their husbands were or because they did not respond to the letter. Akhter and Begum note that abandonment often results from 'hasty' marriages in which very little is known about the groom (2012). Certainly, in the urban context where there are no pre-existing links between families, where people move frequently between the city and the village and where there is little accountability, there is vastly more risk of a husband going missing. Take the following case:

> Seema meekly takes her seat at Advocate Shuli's desk. She is very thin, very young and approximately five months pregnant. She tells us that she married a man she met in Dhaka who left her after a week. She was married before, in Barisal, for about three years (she doesn't know how long for and doesn't know her age as 'we don't count') but he died suddenly, she doesn't know what of. After that she came to Dhaka. She worked in a hospital, fetching tea and cleaning up. Her father is dead, her mother ill. She says she met her second husband at a milad (prayer event), but after a week he disappeared and has blocked her calls. In answer to Shuli's requests for addresses and phone numbers she hands over her phone. The only clue is a photograph of a road sign.

At the NGO two female fieldworkers are employed to track down husbands and the families of lost girls. Yet despite their skills, without an address, village or *thana* (administrative district) there is little they can do. Advice sessions therefore often involve trawling through potential leads. Mobile phones play an important role in many of the cases enabling husbands to be in touch with other women but also as sources of evidence and clues for finding them.

Whereas Seema thought that her husband was in Barisal in other instances the men had completely vanished. This may be unintentional. One young woman told a detailed story which culminated in the disappearance of her husband, last seen being dragged away by the police. He was her second husband and the relationship was far from happy for it turned out that he already had two wives and was a drug dealer, information she wasn't aware of when they married. He had been missing for two years, but without a death certificate she was unable to claim on his estate. Advocate Fatema advised her to contact the union Chairman, telling me later that the husband had probably absconded to escape criminal charges. Given the alarming rise of forced disappearance in Bangladesh over recent years I was not so sure, though these cases largely involve the political opposition rather than criminals.[20]

In another case, it was unclear whether the husband had indeed vanished or his whereabouts were known by his family. Whatever, the NGO was unable to locate him:

> A client arrives with a partial address written on a scrap of paper. Hasina can't decipher it so gets the fieldworkers to look. It's the name of her in-laws' village but without the post office and thana (administrative district) nothing can be done, to Hasina's irritation. The client has a child and has only been to the village once. Her husband left her years ago and has married again but she wants to trace him in order to get financial support. All she can supply is her mother in law's phone number. Hasina calls and speaks to the mother in law who says she has no idea where her son has gone. She had two sons but neither send any support, she swears on God's name. Hasina asks for the chairman's name and what union they are in but the mother in law claims not to know. No-one knows where her son is, she declares, nothing can be done. So that seems to be that – no address, no contact, no hope of mediation or financial settlement.

As these cases imply, the category of 'missing husband' has specific social and economic implications for the women they leave behind. By being unable to locate their husbands women become displaced from their role as wives and the financial claims and social capital this involves. Like other displaced people, they are suspended in time and place, with no forwards motion (Ramsey, 2020). Here, 'spatial precarity' involves a married woman's vulnerability to losing the relationship and role upon which so much depends, a riskiness increased by the urban milieu, the transience of much of the city's population, her inability to produce documentation or addresses, which is related to social class, level of education and gender and her husband's navigational skills, which allow him to manoeuvre successfully across social and physical space and out of her life.

Whilst the lost girls and abandoned wives face different problems, in both cases the interwoven processes of abandonment and spatial precarity have produced an 'unexceptional' displacement that is easy to overlook. For the girls, their gendered emplacement, the physical environment of Dhaka, their inability to navigate, the lack of joined-up data bases or police action on missing people and, in some cases, their family's inaction, has led them, tragically, to the dismal incarceration of the Safe House. Here, they are immobilised, their lives suspended, until they are old enough to leave. Girls with disabilities such as deafness or learning difficulties are likely to pass into other institutions, or even stay put; several of the inhabitants of

the Safe house looked to me as if they were in their late twenties or older, bringing to mind Biehl's 'zones of abandonment' (Biehl, 2005). The abandoned wives are displaced in a different way. The navigational know how of their husbands has enabled them to disappear into the city scape, perhaps to another neighbourhood or their home village, where a first or second wife is installed. Here, the women's spatial precarity involves the opportunities offered by Dhaka's rubble-lands for those with navigational know-how to slip away without trace, versus their lack of geographical knowledge. Whilst marriage was supposed to bring them security, these women have discovered too late how just how flimsy their emplacement is. Meanwhile, it is their missing husbands' geographical finesse, their *ability* to navigate space, that allows them to disappear.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that attention to lost, abandoned and missing people brings new perspectives for the anthropological study of displacement. Arising from dislocated, stuttered or seemingly meaningless movements (Parr and Fyfe, 2013), the journeys they take are largely hidden from the research gaze. As my material shows, being lost and/or abandoned is, in cities such as Dhaka, commonplace if one is poor and female, and, as I discovered during my fieldwork, the fallout is part of the everyday case load of NGOs that offer legal advice and support. For those affected, their displacement is clearly disastrous, but to date, there is virtually no research into these processes. Yet by ignoring those who are lost and abandoned we fail to grasp the full implications of the relationship between space, emplacement and navigational capacity and thus overlook forms of displacement that whilst unexceptional, are hard to spot.

To be sure, researching the lost is methodologically challenging. But even if my ethnographic examples are fragmented and fractured, when gathered together, like mugshots, maps and aerial photographs pinned on a police investigative board, we begin to see a pattern. This is that different kinds of people have varying levels of vulnerability to what I have called 'spatial precarity': a state in which unstable geographies poses both profound risks to some people. In both forms of spatial precarity discussed here, gender and class play a central role. Lower class married women in Dhaka risk becoming displaced from their married lives by the disappearance of their husbands. Meanwhile, young girls, often new to the city, uneducated, perhaps with disabilities, face the horrifying risk of slipping out of their lives, through the hands of the state and into the desolate dorms of the Safe House. In both cases, spatial precarity is compounded by patriarchal kinship norms which are enacted both within intimate domains and by the state. Both discipline women and girls who are out of place, punishing divorced or abandoned women by stigmatising them and relocating out of place girls into penal institutions such as the Safe House even whilst documenting them as 'victims'.

Finding the lost as an object of ethnographic study thus brings new insights to the processes of displacement. To date, this has largely been described in South Asia in terms of the loss of homes, land or resources via land-grabbing, agri-business, mining, construction

and so on (cf. Gardner and Geharz, 2016). Noting that Bangladesh is a 'displacement epicentre', Feldman and Geisler argue that it takes two forms: 'ex-situ', in which land is directly expropriated and the displaced forced to leave and 'in-situ', in which over time land becomes uninhabitable and unusable, what they refer to as: 'the slow-motion loss of entitlements, social exclusion and alienation from (the individual's) rights and identities' (Feldman and Geisler, 2012: 974). In the examples I have discussed we can make a similar distinction. Spatial precarity can lead either to catastrophic, ex-situ displacement or a form which is slower, more insidious and in-situ. Gazipur's lost girls, who have been abruptly and traumatically dislodged from their lives are in the first category. The wives of missing husbands, whose search may continue for years, are examples of the second. For both groups, their predicament is profoundly linked to the material displacements described by Feldman and Geisler, a by-product of rapid neo-liberal capitalist development, which across the Global South leaves vast tracts of rubble in its wake. As Gordillo notes: 'The destruction of space under capitalism is the most devasting ever created' (Gordillo, 2014: 81).

It is in this landscape of rubble that the forms of loss that I describe in this paper take place. Indeed, my ethnography shows that 'rubble' can be thought of in terms of social relations as well as material substance, for as industrialisation and urban development in Bangladesh have transformed the once rural landscape, many of the old forms of emplaced connection have crumbled. The poor in Bangladesh has never been secure, but their movement into the slums of Dhaka brings new risks. Marriages take place without knowledge of the in-laws, family networks have loosened and the village elders, who might once have held bad behaviour to account, are far away. Meanwhile, homes get razed by developers, and livelihoods are perilous: a bash to his vehicle in the crazy traffic can mean a rickshaw driver loses everything. Indebtedness, drugs or despair gives men plenty of reasons to disappear as does the prospect of a new relationship. Meanwhile, all it takes is a wrong turn, and the servant girl or factory worker, recently arrived from the village, becomes disorientated and lost. The families of some desperately search for, and eventually find them. Others, as we have seen, are less fortunate.

Notes

1. As with all interlocutors in this paper, I have anonymised the name of the NGO in order to maintain confidentiality.
2. My fieldwork was interrupted by the COVID pandemic. It built on previous trips in 2018 and 2019, as well as long term fieldwork in Bangladesh carried out since the late 1980s.
3. See also Lemons (2019: 89).
4. See https://www.cftw.org/blogs/post/The-Worlds-Most-Livable-and-Unlivable-Cities (accessed 18th February 2022).
5. With thanks to Fatema Kaberee Jeba and the Anthropology Department, Dhaka University to whom I am indebted.
6. The research was funded by the LSE's RIIF fund and approved by its Ethics Committee. It was also approved by the ethics committee of the NGO that I worked with in Dhaka. I am extremely grateful to both organisations. I have also been trained in research methodologies and safeguarding issues involved in research with children.

7. For discussion, see Kabeer (2002); Ward et al. (2004); Hossain (2012).
8. For discussion on improving indices of gender equality and the relationship between economic growth and women's 'empowerment' in Bangladesh, see: Nazneen, Hossain and Sultan (2011); Kabeer, Huq and Mahmud (2014).
9. The average age of first marriage in 2018 was 18.3 years for women (source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics: http://bbs.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/bbs.portal.gov.bd/page/6a40a397_6ef7_48a3_80b3_78b8d1223e3f/SVRS_Report_2018_29-05-2019%28Final%29.pdf; accessed 15th June 2020).
10. For example, a huge fire in August 2019 made thousands of people homeless: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-49382682#:~:text=A%20massive%20fire%20has%20swept,helped%20the%20flames%20to%20spread.&text=There%20is%20no%20word%20on%20the%20cause%20of%20the%20fire. (accessed 30th June 2020); a similar fire broke out in March 2020: https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2020-03-11/bangladesh-slum-fire-leaves-many-people-homeless (accessed 30th June 2020).
11. Unfortunately information on the numbers of shelters is not in the public domain (UK Home Office Country Policy and Information Note, 2020).
12. The UK Home Office Country Policy and Information Note 2020 notes that most women don't know about these services and the supply of shelters is grossly inadequate given the extent of domestic violence in the country https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/896259/BGD-Women-GBV-CPIN-v3.0__June_2020_.pdf (accessed 25/02/22).
13. It is not possible to ascertain the exact numbers of these orphanages.
14. NGOs estimate that between 10-15,000 women and children are trafficked to India every year (Mehta, 2018: 6).
15. As reported in the Dhaka media in 2018. I have not reproduced the citation as this reveals the name and location of the Safe House.
16. See Nayanake Mookherjee's important account of the testimonials of birongona in Bangladesh (Mookherjee, 2015); also Metha (2018) on the stilted accounts of incarcerated Bangladeshi women in Kolkata.
17. Long scarf used to cover a woman's chest and head.
18. We analysed 216 cases in total, taken from a cross section of months from 2016 to 2019.
19. Within Muslim marriages the *mehr* is the fixed amount of money a woman receives upon divorce or death of her husband. Paid either as 'prompt mehr' at the start of the marriage or 'deferred mehr' at divorce or the death of the husband, some commentators have likened the mehr to a 'pre-nup' (Ambrus, Field and Torero, 2010).
20. Approximately 500 people have been forcibly 'disappeared' since 2009. See https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/long-wait-families-bangladesh-forced-disappearance-victims-190525203617471.html (accessed 1st July 2020). See also: https://www.hrw.org/report/2017/07/06/we-dont-have-him/secret-detentions-and-enforced-disappearances-bangladesh (accessed 1st July 2020). The UK Country of Origin Report 2020 also reports an alarming rise in disappearances: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/921445/Bangladesh-Political_parties_and_affiliation-CPIN.pdf (accessed February 18 2022).

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