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## Cool Yourself and Be Strong: Emotional Fixes in the Work of Bangladeshi Marriage Advisers

*Building on Andrea Pia's notion of the ethical fix, this article shows how emotional fixes are used to bring emotions into balance at a feminist nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Promoting a noninterventionist stance in which its advisers do not directly tell their clients what to do, the NGO provides legal advice and counseling to women facing problems in their marriages. Emotional fixes include building clients' inner strength, cooling emotions, and shaming abusive husbands. These fixes enable the advisers to reconcile what appears from the outside to be contradictory positions: feminism, on the one hand, and adherence to hierarchical kinship norms, on the other. This means that more intractable issues are avoided and the potentially contradictory ethical stances of the advisers are obscured. Client emotions are malleable and fluid, and injunctions by advisers for clients to cultivate particular states, such as 'coolness' can work in a range of ways. While the antipolitics of the emotional fix can cut both ways—concealing both emancipatory and conservative politics - like Pia's ethical fix the emotional fix itself remains piecemeal and fragile. [Bangladesh, marriage advisers, emotions, ethical fix]*

The mediation has been running for an hour when Seema finally loses her temper.<sup>1</sup> Until now, she has been sitting quietly as her mother-in-law speaks. The other participants listen respectfully: the mother-in-law's brother, nodding with encouragement; Seema's pious father, gazing at the floor. Seated behind her desk, Advocate Santi is glancing at the case file. Meanwhile, Tuno, Seema's estranged husband, jiggles his foot and frowns. Earlier, as Santi read out Seema's complaint, he leapt to his feet, his face contorting as he said in English that he "needed air." Now, he looks ready to weep. In the background, phones ring and staff mill around, oblivious to the emotional stew of tension, fury, and pain that emanates from the meeting.

It is a familiar scene at Women's Rights, the human rights NGO in Dhaka where I was researching divorce and marriage mediation. These mediation sessions are known as *sal-lish*, after traditional forms of dispute settlement in which elders make judgements on local disputes. Fieldwork took place in the first three months of 2020, a project which built upon previous research trips in 2018 and 2019 and long term research in Bangladesh which dates back to the late 1980s. Offering free legal advice, counselling and mediation for women experiencing marital problems, the tears and devastation of their clients are par for the course for the female lawyers and counselors who work at WR. And now, despite her early

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attempts at decorum, Seema can bear it no more. Her mother-in-law is lying, she yells. She is “ninety percent responsible for the break-up of the marriage!” Advocate Santi glares at Seema and snaps that she must cool down, saying, “What kind of woman raises her voice in this way?”

Santi’s treatment of Seema surprised me. Why, I wondered, would a feminist lawyer scold her client like this? Was she not supposed to support her? After the sallish, Santi explained to me that she had instructed Seema to control her temper, so that Santi could better help her negotiate the divorce settlement. If Seema acted in a “hot” or disrespectful way, her in-laws could use her conduct as an excuse to wriggle out of their obligations. If, however, she behaved as a calm and dutiful daughter-in-law, they might be persuaded to honor the terms laid out in the *kabin nama* (Muslim marriage contract) and pay Seema’s *mehr*, the amount of money a wife can claim in divorce, as stated on the *kabin nama*.<sup>2</sup>

As this interaction implies, along with dispensing legal information and mediating between couples, advisers at WR engage in substantial emotions work: disciplining and controlling the emotions of their clients, tutoring them in the cultivation of appropriate emotional states, and—as I shall show—working on their own emotions in order to carry out their roles effectively. They never instructed their clients what decisions to take, they told me, neither persuading women to leave nor stay in their marriages. This stance was evident at the thirty or so legal advice sessions I observed, the counseling sessions I sat in on, and the multiple sallish I attended and contrasts with practices in India, where anthropologists have observed how advisers predominantly aim at reconciling unhappy couples (Basu 2015; Grover 2011; Kowalski 2016; Lemons 2016, 2019; Vatuk 2017).

In what follows, I show how what I term “emotional fixes” aim at bringing emotions and behavior into balance at WR while enabling advisers to avoid telling clients what practical action to take, instructing them instead on how to manage their emotions, encouraging “coolness,” and discouraging the *garam* of *raag* (heat of anger). As I show, focusing on emotions means that more intractable issues of what to do are obscured, for emotions are malleable and fluid, and advisers’ injunctions to clients to cultivate or discipline them can be put to work in various ways. Later in the article, I describe emotional fixes that evoke three states: *sokti* (strength), *thanda* (coolness), and *sharom* (shame). In these fixes, underlying and sometimes contradictory ethics are obscured. By advising their clients to be cool and to cultivate their inner strength, for example, advisers can both support women to dutifully endure unhappy marriages and assist them in leaving whilst not giving explicit counsel on whether to stay or go. Meanwhile, by fixing shame on a violent husband, feminist justice is attempted for a wife with few options. First, however, I consider how the concept of an emotional fix might lead to new insights into the work of marriage advisers.

### **Kinship, Change, and Marital Advice in South Asia**

As anthropologists have noted, norms and practices of kinship and conjugality are changing across South Asia, particularly in urban areas (cf. Bhandari and Titzman 2017; Palriwala and Kaura 2014). In Bangladesh, rapid economic growth has been accompanied by urbanization and high rates of urban and international migration. Large numbers of women now work in garment factories. The extent of these changes vary among regions as well as rural and urban areas. One constant has been that younger women’s levels of literacy and ages at marriage have increased everywhere (Amin and Das 2013). While most marriages are arranged in rural areas, ideals of love and companionship are widespread among younger people (Del Franco 2014; Rao 2012). Amin and Das (2013) report that 45 percent of rural teenage girls have no say in their marriages, whereas young women in urban areas are significantly more likely to choose their own spouse. The data collected at WR

supports this:<sup>3</sup> Thirty-five percent of all WR cases were reported by clients to be “love” marriages. Meanwhile, divorce rates have risen steeply in Bangladesh, doubling from 2006 to 2016. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, in 2006 the divorce rate was 0.6 per one thousand of the population, which increased to 1.1 in 2016 (cited in Afroz 2019). Interestingly, figures indicate that the divorce rate is slightly higher in rural areas than in urban areas (263). Despite the rise in divorce rates, it is still strongly stigmatized, especially for women.

The work of the WR advisers thus takes place within a context of both change and continuity, in which ideals of companionate conjugality are increasing, women are entering the workforce, and love marriages are on the rise in cities, yet countervailing discourses of women’s subservience, purity, and shame remain powerful (Naher 2010; Rozario 2006). Situated in a liminal zone between the law and the intimate lives of their clients, the organization is one of a handful of legal rights NGOs in Dhaka, with a clientele ranging from urban middle-class women who are college graduates to new and often destitute migrants with little education. While most marital disputes are settled by families or, particularly in rural areas, *sallish* (informal councils involving elders and/or local chairman), WR’s appeal to its urban clientele is that it is pro-woman and free. The organization sees thousands of clients a year, from all classes and religious backgrounds (though data from the case files shows that 97 percent are Muslim). While the majority (66 percent) came from very low to mid-income households earning less than 30,000 taka a month (approx. US\$350) 15 percent were relatively wealthy, with household incomes of over 50,000 taka a month (about US\$580). Abandonment, domestic violence, dowry demands, and husbands taking second wives or having affairs were the main complaints documented in the case files and featured in the sessions that I observed. Most women arrived with their parents or other natal kin for support, others alone or with friends. Some were shocked and distraught, having just discovered an affair or second wife or having received a petition for divorce. Others were returning amid long-running problems: ongoing domestic violence, the slow realization that an absent husband was never coming back (Gardner 2022) or yet another dowry demand made by the husband or his family.

Established in 1986 by a leading Bangladeshi feminist, WR is funded by Western donors who work within international discourses of “gender and development.” It is also strongly influenced by therapeutic models of conflict resolution and counseling, with senior legal advocates and counselors trained in India in International Transactional Analysis, an innovative approach to rights work initiated by the organization’s founding leader in the 1990s. In line with this training and WR policy, advisers utilize therapeutic methods of open-ended questions and active listening, avoiding telling women what to do about their marital situations, asking instead: *Apni ki korte chan?* (What do you want to do?).

Advisers at WR are similar in many ways to marriage advisers in India, where, as in Bangladesh, family life has become a site for state and NGO intervention. In India, however, anthropologists have described how marriage advisers largely uphold patriarchal norms, despite the program’s apparent commitment to women’s rights (Basu 2015; Grover 2011; Kowalski 2016; Lemons, 2019, 2016; Vatuk 2017). In Kolkata family courts, for instance, while mediation has been promoted as upholding gender justice, marriage counselors pride themselves on reconciling couples, even if it means women returning to unhappy marriages (Basu 2015, 101–103). Lemons suggests that advisers in Delhi who work in the Mahila Panchayat, an arbitration center set up as part of India’s alternative dispute resolution structure, use the concept of livability in seeking solutions. While their remit is to “stand up for women,” advisers are keenly aware that seeking independence from kinship may not be possible for their clients. They therefore tutor family members in kin-work

and advocate for reconciliation and livable kin relations (Lemons 2016). In a similar vein, Kowalski (2016) describes how family counselors in Jaipur advocate for women to stay in their families, demonstrating through their use of the idiom of *seva* (duty, devotion) how women's rights and well-being can be secured *within* families.

Kowalski's insistence that in Jaipur "kinship does not stand in opposition to gender" (2016, 65) is an important corrective to Western feminist analyses, which locate women's subordination as arising within marriage and families. In the cases I observed at WR, women sought to maintain their *sansar* (domestic unit, marriage) even in the face of violence, infidelity, and abandonment out of fear that outside the *sansar*, their fate may be even worse. However, in contrast to the advisers described by Kowalski (2016) and Lemons (2016) WR advisers appreciate the value of the *sansar* but also actively support women who chose to leave their marriages, informing them of their legal rights to divorce, negotiating financial settlements, arranging for short-term shelter if violence is involved, and working with natal kin to provide alternative arrangements for although usual for divorced or separated women to return to their natal family, this is not always guaranteed (Chaudhry 2019). As I will show, one of the ways in which the advisers occupy this fraught territory of simultaneous adherence to Bangladeshi kinship norms and support for gender equality is via the emotional fix. Indeed, where the advisers are prescriptive is in the management of their clients' emotions, particularly those emotions which in the advisers' view, are undesirable and undermine the behavior and relationships they hope to engender. Hotheadness, immoderate temper, and passion are to be curbed, while coolheadedness and strength are encouraged. I next consider the emotional fix in more detail.

### **Ethical and Emotional Fixes: The Negotiations and Compromises of Advice Work**

As my opening vignette describes, Advocate Santi's mediation between Seema and her in-laws appeared to me, if not to her, as contradicting her feminist principles. Rather than defending Seema against a husband who was accused of sexual abuse, revenge porn, and drug addiction, Santi scolded her client for losing her temper. Yet by reigning in Seema's outburst and appearing to be on Tuno's side, Santi was hoping to clear the way for a favorable divorce settlement. This ability to move between positions (feminist lawyer aiming to uphold women's rights and enforcer of gendered kinship hierarchies) involves a dexterity that is characteristic of advice work. As anthropologists have shown, advisers and officials in a variety of settings are adept at navigating the jagged edges and irreconcilable ethics of the domains they move between (cf. James and Koch 2022). Like these advisers, the advocates and counselors at WR carry out discursive and practical balancing acts. Situated in a feminist NGO that is dependent on diminishing international funds, they must satisfy the demands of Western donors for programs that deliver women's "empowerment," avoid being closed by an increasingly oppressive state, and dodge the censure of religious groups that decry NGOs working to empower women as un-Islamic (Karim 2004; Naher 2010; Shehabuddin 1999). Meanwhile, as noted above, their clientele range from highly educated and cosmopolitan women to illiterate, extremely poor and to believing in *jadu* (black magic). The advisers are thus skilled translators and negotiators whose navigation of interest groups and competing discourses is fraught with difficulty.

How might the strategies that advisers and other officials use to navigate the divergent and often contradictory ethical domains in which they operate be theorized? In his work on Chinese functionaries whose job is to provide scarce water to rural communities, Andrea Pia describes 'ethical fixes', which are temporary, personally and reflectively contrived organized series of behind-the-curtain technico-legal or administrative actions that patiently "tinker . towards practical solutions" (Pia 2017, 9). Pia describes how the Chinese water

officials, in enacting their ethical fixes, strategize to provide enough water for their clients while adhering to the official water management policy, thus squaring their ethical commitments to both the state and locals. The technical solutions that Pia describes are, of course, quite different from the relationship advice offered by feminist lawyers and counselors in South Asia. However, solutions that are “temporary, personally contrived” (Pia, 2017:9) and paper over systemic contradictions feature large in the latter’s work. This is illustrated by the insightful work of Lemons (2016) and Kowalski (2016) who, as discussed above, show how their interlocutors in North India tutored their clients in kin-work and the values of devotion and care so as to offer viable solutions while simultaneously working within a setting that advocates for “gender rights.” The work at WR is similar. Yet rather than enlisting kinship norms or social values to produce working solutions, in Dhaka I observed how advisers focused on the emotions of their clients. This allowed them to avoid prescriptive advice about what action should be taken, instead instructing clients on how to feel and behave. In instructing Seema to be quiet and to cool down, for example, Advocate Santi was simultaneously signaling her support of gendered- and age-specific norms of appropriate female behavior (Seema being a calm and emotionally controlled junior wife) and working toward the feminist goal of negotiating a beneficial financial settlement for her client. Drawing from Pia’s ethical fix, I suggest that this form of work can be understood as an *emotional fix*: a “meets all needs” solution that is temporary and contingent, and which, by appealing to affect rather than action, simultaneously offers transformation and a reinforcement of the dominant social order.

One reason that emotional fixes are so efficacious is that emotions inhabit a slippery domain between interiority and exteriority and collective ethics. Abu-Lughod and Lutz (199) describe them as a discourse bound up in relations of power. Sara Ahmed argues that emotions “do” things by circulating in “emotional economies” that “stick” to particular bodies, working in a performative loop to make them subject to hatred or shame, happiness, or fear (Ahmed 2014: 4). Yet, while being active, discursive, and located in power relations, emotions also reside in bodies and consist of physical sensations and one’s internal, psychic world. They are both social constructs and exist beyond language. They thus form a bridge between sensations, bodily experiences, and thought/meaning (Leavitt 1996, 515).

The extent to which emotions are culturally constructed, or indeed available, for ethnographic study has been much debated within anthropology (cf. Beattie 2005). Beattie suggests that rather than getting caught in these theoretical conundrums, anthropologists should focus on “emotions practices” that depend on where interlocutors are situated and what is expected of them (35). If emotions work is theorised as a socially located practice aimed at influencing behavior within culturally specific ethical framings the emotional fix can be understood as primarily concerned with influencing how people respond to their situations and regulating their behaviors in the context of normative moral codes. The emotional fix is thus simultaneously an ethical fix, for the behavior that it seeks to fix is framed by ethics. In Seema’s case, these ethics are those of Bengali kinship involving gendered and age-specific hierarchies and norms of duty and obedience. Unlike water supply and bureaucracy, as in Pia’s example, the emotional fix here involves tutoring people to control their feelings and to express themselves in particular ways. Moreover, by appearing to index interiority (that is, how one feels), the broader politics are left submerged. Indeed, emotional fixes involve a blurring of discursive and ethical foundations so as to appear as apolitical. And just as the emotional fix obfuscates, enabling advisers to avoid telling their clients what action to take, its blurry nature means it is highly malleable, working for divergent political agendas even as it obscures them. Emotional fixes are thus highly

efficacious in the politically fraught and emotionally intense setting of the WR offices. I now return to there.

### Emotions Work at WR

While the lawyers at WR primarily offered information about legal processes and mediation for couples, the counselor aimed at helping clients deal with emotional and relational issues. Counseling sessions took place in quiet offices, with the counselor giving full attention to her clients. The sessions that I observed involved women speaking of their problems, sometimes for many hours at a time, while the counselor occasionally asked gentle questions, suggested medication, or tutored the client in developing desirable emotions. These were largely presented as elements of the self that could be worked on and managed rather than searched for and examined, as in Western therapeutic traditions (Ánanson 2007). Rather than focusing on the genealogy of emotions, the counseling that I observed at WR involved tutoring clients in how dispositions such as strength and coolness could be cultivated and how others such as *raag* and *mata goram* (hotheadedness) could be curbed. This partly reflects South Asian theories of humors, in which heat and cold, associated with food types, physical conditions, and emotions, are balanced (Lambert 1996). In rural Sylhet, for example, people suffering from *mata goram* or an associated condition of *mata gorai* (literally, wandering head; or dizziness, often used to describe what the West glosses as stress) are treated by a cooling herbal concoction placed on their head (Gardner 1995). Anger, a manifestation of overheating, is thus equated with being out of balance both physically and psychically. While *goram* (heat) and *raag* are largely seen as negative states that need to be controlled, as I show later, in some situations the advisers' consciously draw on *raag* to engender their work.

The WR legal aid offices contrast with the quiet and private counseling rooms. The lawyers work in an open plan setting, with desks piled high with files. At times, it becomes hectic. If at one desk a woman is speaking quietly of her troubles, at the next a couple is arguing fiercely, or a baby is crying. Meanwhile, phones ring incessantly and people come and go, occasionally stopping by to listen in or comment on a session. In the first meeting with clients, lawyers listen to what are often lengthy accounts of betrayal, brutality, and heartbreak. Husbands have had affairs, are violent, or have taken a second wife (21 percent of the 206 files reviewed featured polygamy). Sometimes the men have disappeared. Demands for money are common. In telling their stories, women often weep as the lawyers ask questions, explain their legal options, take phone calls, and if the story goes on too long, push them to come to the point.

After taking the client's details, the lawyer opens a file. Some of these files are pitifully thin; this usually means that a client cannot supply her husband's address or the case was dropped (Gardner 2022). Others are thicker with the documentation of many mediation sessions, photocopies of Police General Diary (or GD, a record of complaints) entries and medical reports, copies of *kabin nama*, affidavits, and so on. The most important document, however, is the written *obhiyog* (complaint) that forms the basis of the case. The lawyers are highly skilled at turning women's emotive, repetitive, and nonlinear narratives into neutral legal language of the *obhiyog*, with legally irrelevant details omitted and formal phrasing replacing the woman's spoken words. For example, beatings, rape, sexual abuse, and other forms of violence are glossed as "torture" and the narrator as "victim." These traumatic and upsetting stories featuring anger, heartbreak, abuse, and violence are smoothed or flattened, and thus bought into balance via the bureaucratic technology of the *obhiyog*.

After the *obhiyog* is complete, a pro-forma letter is sent to the husband, inviting him to the offices to hear the complaint. If he agrees to mediation, a date is arranged for the

first *sallish*. This often involves extended family as well as the couple. Each stage of this process has the potential to be highly emotional, even explosive. The advocates sometimes offer sympathy, but not always. Women can be chastised, especially if they have done something that the lawyer disapproves of, such as agreeing to be a man's second wife or marrying without a *kabin nama*, the Islamic marriage document which allows a woman to claim her *mehr* at divorce. And while the lawyers treat the husbands politely, they harshly reprimand them if they become aggressive.

As this short account implies, various forms of emotions work take place at WR. These arise from and replicate a series of crosscutting discourses concerning Bengali theories of emotional and physical balance expressed through notions of *thanda* and *garam*, norms of respectable family life, class hierarchies, Bangladeshi law, and the globalized ideals of gender and development. I next consider these discourses and the emotions that they evoke in more detail.

### *Strength and Duty: Feminism and Femininity at WR*

Partly drawing from international discourses of gender and development and funded by Western donors, WR is situated in a long history of feminist activism in Bangladesh (Nazneen, Sultan, and Hossain 2011; Shehabuddin 2021). WR places gender justice squarely within the domestic domain and takes an explicitly feminist stance by offering information on women's marital rights; mediating divorce settlements; offering shelter for victims of domestic abuse; and campaigning against gender violence, child marriage, and polygyny. For example, WR never works with traditional *sallish*, which tend to be strongly patriarchal, and it turns away women who are second or third wives due to the NGO's stance against polygyny. The WR lawyers, all middle-class, urban women, each told me that they were motivated to join WR by their feminist principles, usually joining the organization after working for private law practices. Several had received gender awareness training and were conversant in the discourses of international gender and development (cf. Nazneen, Hossain, and Sultan 2011). Placing their feminism at the center of their work, the advocates explained how they were motivated by anger at the situation of women in Bangladesh. Here, Advocate Joyoti describes (in English) how her feminism was informed by her anger at the harassment of women:

From the outset I've seen how women are undermined and are in very dangerous situation so though I am a very little person, I have a duty to do something for my family and for my society. . . . in our country every girl has to live with sexual harassment, eve teasing [public sexual harassment], in the road, in the market, all over. It burns me. So since I was a student, I felt really angry and wanted to do something. . . . I'm a very strong person, I'm strong-minded and I'm rebellious.

Here, feminist anger is corralled for political change. Joyoti describes this as a burning sensation that propelled her into action. Other advocates also described how cultivating their righteous anger was useful for their work. For example, Joyoti told me that she was not good at holding *sallish*, whereas her colleague Jeba was brilliant at it because of her ability to channel anger into robust mediation. The other advocates jokingly described Jeba as a *bhagha* (tiger) with *anek raag* (a lot of anger).

A second element in Joyoti's accounting is *dayitba* (duty). Joyoti says, "I have a duty to do something for myself and my family." Other advocates echoed Joyoti's commitment to helping abused Bangladeshi women. For example, Santi comments:

I think that in Bangladesh, women are very vulnerable, they have nowhere to go for help. [This organization] helps disenfranchised women and children so I wanted to work for them. . . . I think I am a strong feminist because in Bangladesh women can't take any decisions alone, but I am able to take my own decisions.

Both Joyoti and Santi stressed that they were not "extreme feminists," stating that men and women are equal but not the same, and each acknowledging that most Bangladeshi women are not able to act independently from their families. All of the advisers highly valued their roles as wives and mothers, recognizing that as professional women with supportive husbands, they had more autonomy than many of their clients. In our discussions, they did not present their feminism as contradictory to their devotion to their families and husbands. Indeed, the qualities of devotion, strength, and duty were in play in both domains.

Both Joyoti and Santi described the equality they enjoyed in their respective marriages, yet they also embraced their domestic roles and embodied what Hussein (2017) describes as Bangladeshi "middle-class respectable femininity." Being dutiful, caring, and prioritizing the needs of others is core to the role of the Bengali *bhodramohila* (respectable middle-class woman). This stretches back to the period of colonialism, when women were expected to acquire education and cultural refinement but stay within the private sphere. In contemporary Dhaka, Hussein describes how younger middle-class women maintain these caring family roles while juggling professional careers. Like these women, WR advisers worked "a double shift": during the day they were in their professional roles as lawyers or counselors, and in the evenings and weekends, they were mothers, wives, and daughters or daughters-in-law. Love for one's family, a sense of social duty, the ability to bear *kostor* (hardship, or suffering) and inner *sokti* were all qualities that the women valued and implored their clients to cultivate.

The WR office was a sociable space in which the advisers' domesticity was re-enacted. Their convivial shared meals seemed to me to create a buffer from the turbulent emotions of their clients, returning them to calm and good cheer: a collective emotional fix that made their work do-able. Food played a central role in this. During the first hours of the morning when few clients attended, the advisers would share *nastar* (breakfast, snacks) featuring dishes such as *pitha* (traditional Bengali cakes made with rice flour) or *ruti* (bread) that they had made at home. At lunch, they unpacked their tiffin tins on Santi's desk, spreading out an array of rice, biryani, curries, and pickles. Conversation revolved around food: how each dish had been prepared; the regional varieties of pickles or fish; the prices of vegetables, fish, or meat. Clothes were also discussed, with one adviser regularly bringing bags of ready-made *shalwar kameez* to the office to sell to the other advisers. Another adviser often brought her toddler into the office, so that she could breastfeed him.

If the office was a space for recreating the norms of middle-class feminine respectability, it was also one in which kinship and class hierarchies were reproduced. Low-income clients, many of whom came from nearby *bastees* (slums), referred to the lawyers as 'ma'am' and often seemed intimidated by them, sitting meekly before their desks and saying little. I noticed that middle-class clients were given more time to speak before being prompted to get to the point with the question, "What do you want to do?" They



also seemed more likely to be referred to counseling. Kinship hierarchies were also maintained (Basu 2015, 122–23). During *sallish*, parents and parents-in-law were treated as respected elders, allowed to speak freely and were never reprimanded, at least not if they were middle-class. In one case, a husband and wife were negotiating with the man's parents about splitting the family home to create a separate apartment for themselves. It was only after the husband's overbearing mother left the meeting that Santi tactfully mentioned to the father that he needed to control his wife's hot temper, an interesting contrast with her treatment of Seema.

Kinship hierarchies were also maintained by clients being told to *shoman deyn* (show respect) to their elders. Seema experienced this during her *sallish*. When Rasheeda asked for help in claiming maintenance support from her migrant husband, Santi contacted Rasheeda's mother-in-law, putting the call on speaker. The mother-in-law swore on Allah's name that she had no idea where her son was. Her mother-in-law was a liar, Rasheeda retorted, cursing under her breath. This evoked a fierce scolding from a fieldworker who had been listening in.

To sum up, emotions work is central to the practices of WR advisers, who move seamlessly between their Bangladeshi feminist ethics and their *bhodramohila* identities, upholding family ideals and the norms of feminine domesticity as well as the ethics of gender equity. As I have suggested, one way in which this ethical coherence is made possible is that emotions work, and the emotional fixes it engenders, involve a blurring of political positioning and a rebalancing of extreme emotions. For example, while the emotional fix of shared tiffin in the office restores calm to the advisers after their meetings with overheated clients, it also rebalances the feminist ethics of WR with *bhodramohila* norms. I now turn to two examples of the emotional fix. First: the cultivation of strength and coolness. This attempts to fix the devastation of marriage trouble and helps make the advisers' work possible. Second, "fixing of shame" on a husband in order to deal with the intractable problem of ongoing domestic violence.

### *Emotional Fixes: Cultivating Solti and Thanda*

At WR, *solti* is a core disposition that advisers tutored their clients in to find to offer strategies for insoluble problems. In her counseling session, for example, Rubi, a divorced woman, complained of physical pain and insomnia. She left her abusive husband five years ago but had lost custody of her daughter in the process, and she struggled with grief and depression. To help develop her *solti*, the counselor had asked Rubi to create a list of qualities that she valued in herself, and now the counselor asked her to read it out loud. Rubi read that she was intelligent, sociable, hard-working, and helpful. The counselor instructed Rubi to pin the list up at home to continue cultivating *solti* and then led her through a breathing exercise. After the exercise, Rubi reported to the counselor that she felt stronger and was now "cooler."

Like strength, coolness was invoked as a way of controlling hot emotions that were seen as disruptive and unhelpful. As noted earlier, in Bangladesh emotional states are customarily treated as interdependent with bodily humors, temperature, food, and the circulation of other substances. At WR, these ideas translate into frequent injunctions for people to cool down. For example, during a legal session in which a woman raged over her husband's affair, she was advised to wait to take action because her current hot state might lead her to behave in ways she would later regret. Once she was cool, she was told, she would be stronger. In another case, a woman described discovering her husband's affair after seeing pictures of his lover on his phone. She said she was experiencing *beshi* (a lot) of stress.

No one could understand how much she was suffering, Advocate Hasina told her kindly, advising her to have counseling so that she could *thanda kore* (cool down).

In these examples, the emotional fixes suggested by the advisers reinforce Bengali ideals of quietude and emotional control in the face of adversity. This helps women either to stay in their marriages or tolerate being divorced, as in Rubi's case. *Sokti* and forbearance are qualities the advisers also cultivated in themselves in order to perform their work in a gender rights NGO. Advocate Santi, who sees her role in mediations as both counsellor and lawyer explained:

Because... I am a counselor, I know how to control myself, but I still sometimes feel upset because both parties are sometimes crazy and shout, and we have to control them. We have to be strong here. If I'm not strong, then I can't conduct the mediations.

I observed Advocate Naseem preside over a large *sallish* with heated negotiations concerning a divorce settlement. It was attended by at least twenty people on the husband's side, while the young wife was flanked only by lawyers. The meeting lasted for nearly three hours. Naseem was ultimately victorious—she had brokered an excellent deal for her client and prevented the case from going to the Family Court, a process that would have dragged on for years. After the husband's party left, Naseem shook with emotion. She had found the *sallish* deeply stressful, she told me, but she was successful due to her *sokti*.

As these examples show, *sokti* can be put to multiple uses by advisers: generated for fighting feminist battles; taught to divorced women who have to forge lives as single women, and advised for wives who must endure the infidelities of their husbands in order to maintain their *sansar*. *Sokti*'s slipperiness—there are many ways in which one (whether client or adviser) must be strong and many ways one needs strength—allows advisers to move seamlessly among positions according to context.

In the next example, the emotions work of Jeba include drawing on her righteous feminist anger, which she puts to use against the perpetrator of domestic violence. It also involves cultivating the power of *sharam* via shaming the violent husband. This was helped by the role that class plays: Mobed was cast into the role of the lower-class, uneducated man for whom shame and subservience is an expected response when in front of an upper-middle-class, highly educated 'ma'am' like Jeba (see also Peletz 1994). Their story follows.

### *Female Fury and Male Shame*

In a long-running case, three *sallish* were held for Salina and Mobed, who was routinely violent, failed to provide Salina with financial support, and had a dubious record of rough behavior with their baby daughter. Salina had been staying in the WR shelter after a fight with Mobed. She did not even glance up as Mobed and his mother arrived for the meeting. He was in a sorry state, emaciated by his regular *yaba* habit (*yaba* is a combination of methamphetamine and caffeine that is widespread across South and South-East Asia). Mobed slouched in his chair, staring at the floor as Advocate Jeba berated him. Listing his many transgressions, Jeba repeatedly asked, "*Tumar sharam nai?*" (Aren't you ashamed?, using the informal *tumi* for "you," which implies inferior status). Mobed frowned and held his head in his hands as Jeba mocked his mumbled promises to get a regular job and scolded him that he had no idea how to be a good husband. Marriage wasn't just for sex, she said; he could get that for 20 taka (about US\$0.20). She told him that he was a worthless loser; if he were a member of *her* family, she would pour boiling oil over him!

On and on went the lecture. When Salina mentioned that Mobed had once forced a chili into the baby's mouth as a joke, the office staff who were listening in shouted that he could be prosecuted for child abuse. Earlier, he had attempted to take the baby from Salina's arms, but the child screamed. This explained why the little girl was so afraid of him. As he left the office with the eyes of the WR staff on his retreating back, it seemed to me that he had been thoroughly shamed.

Eventually, however, Salina returned to her *sansar*. Despite staff contacting numerous relatives (and encouraging her plans to earn income via her tailoring skills), there was nowhere for her and the baby to live. Despite the violence, Salina had little choice but to stay in her marriage. In the contract that Jeba drew up at the final *sallish* Mobed promised to provide Salina with regular money and to use birth control, the latter a clause that Jeba insisted on. The agreement stated that the couple would strive to resolve their problems. Given that Salina and her baby were regular visitors to the WR shelter the advisers told me it was unlikely that these good intentions would last. But the couple signed the document, and Mobed's mother added her thumb print.

Jeba's emotional fix appeared to have some effect, because Mobed seemed to me to be considerably cowed as he signed the agreement. Jeba's lecturing and mockery of him at the *sallish* allowed Salina to take the moral high ground. She listed his failings and spelled out her demands—enough money to buy soap figured large. But afterward, the WR staff rolled their eyes. In a few months Salina would be back, they told me, weeping and bruised after another fight. Within Bangladesh, *sharam* is an emotion that, in Ahmed's (2014) formulation, predominantly 'sticks' onto female bodies because it is associated with Islamic notions of *pardah* (veiling) and female sexual purity. Ahmed comments that shame "can be described as an intense and painful sensation that is bound up with how the self feels about itself" (103). Shame is "the affective cost of not following the scripts of normative existence" (107). In Mobed's case, however, I wondered how effective Jeba's attempt to evoke his shame had been in the longer term. As noted above, the normative gendered orders were upended at the *sallish*, with Jeba forcefully drawing on righteous anger and Mobed slumped with his head down. Mobed had failed to follow the normative script of a good husband, and his shaming temporarily created a rebalancing of power between him and Salina, who insisted on staying in the shelter with their baby for an extra week to teach him a "lesson." The hierarchies of class were powerfully at play in the offices and the bureaucratic-quasi-legal setting may have contributed to Mobed's response. However it seemed unlikely that the shame would continue to stick to Mobed after he left the WR office. Instead, the emotional fix would be temporal and contextual. Like the strength that Ruba was attempting to cultivate, emotions such as shame can be fleeting. They may also stick to some people more easily than to others, according to class as well as gendered positions. In the context of the WR office, Mobed was easily shamed. Outside, this effect is likely to have worn off. We are thus returned to the temporary solutions offered by Pia's ethical fixes (Pia, 2017). Here though, the fix attempted a temporary rebalancing of emotions, rather than Chinese water supply, and the problem faced by the advisers was how to assist a client enduring the routine violence of a drug-addicted man.

## Conclusion

As scholarship has shown, emotions are profoundly political (Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990; Ahmed 2014). Managing and disciplining emotions are thus important strategies in mediating conflict or coping with the fallout of complex social changes. Yet while emotions are embedded in discursive regimes, their slippery positioning between collective ethics and interior feelings means that their political foundations are easily concealed or blurred.

To this extent, emotional fixes are a form of antipolitics in that they make the political disappear while remaining profoundly political. Dana Becker, referring to the feminized therapeutic culture in the United States, argues that the privileging of emotions for women is antifeminist for “If we continue fervently to privilege the inner world we will be less likely to ferment trouble outside it” (Becker 2005, 5). But if emotions work obfuscates politics, then the *types* of politics being concealed must be specified. In contrast to therapy in the United States, the antipolitics of emotional fixes at WR can be both repressive *and* emancipatory. This is because, on the one hand, the fix conceals the politics of conservative patriarchy, while, on the other, Bangladeshi feminist aspirations of equality and rights are hidden under injunctions to be strong or calm—or in Mobed’s case, ashamed. Emotional fixes can thus be highly efficacious in the challenging work of the WR advisers, allowing them to conceal their political positions.

This is not to say, however, that fixes always work. As Pia (2017) argued in the context of China, the ethical fix of water officials is piecemeal and temporary. Emotional fixes are even more fragile; emotions routinely fail to do as directed and they can subvert, disobey, and resist attempted fixes. A few days after her final sallah, I met Seema for coffee. She was still so rankled from the scolding Santi had given her that she was considering going elsewhere for mediation. Meanwhile, Ruba, the divorcee, still struggles with despair and her mental health. As for Mobed and Salina, even as they were signing the brokered agreement, the advisers at WR were shaking their heads in the knowledge that Salina would soon be back. Thus, the emotional fixes of the WR advisers allows them to maneuver through complex ethical terrain by restoring balance between divergent ethics and emotional states, yet these fixes are rarely wholly successful. This returns this article to advisers described elsewhere by anthropologists. Working to satisfy contradictory diktats, balancing needs with ideals, and moving between worlds, advisers are skilled shape-shifters well versed in the art of compromise. They know through bitter experience that the outcomes of their work are uneven, sometimes even the opposite of what they intended. But ultimately, like the advisers at WR—dedicated feminists and devoted mothers and wives—they continue to attempt fixes and carry on.

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### Notes

1. All names have been changed in order to preserve the anonymity of my interlocutors. Permission to publish their stories was granted by all the individuals whose cases I observed at WR, including husbands and wider family members during sallah.
2. In Dhaka, this is colloquially termed kabin.
3. This was drawn from a cross section of 216 case files going back to 2009, so it is not statistically rigorous but gives an idea of trends.

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