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in metal houses, behind hanging cloth

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This past spring I traveled to Bangladesh, not as a photographer, but as a graduate student researching arsenic contamination of the country's groundwater.

Drinking and cooking with arsenic-laced water can cause cancer and other diseases. Yet most people in Bangladesh use well water to avoid bacterial disease from surface waters. This situation makes for a public health crisis, with scientists predicting that at least a third of the country is at risk of arsenic-induced illness.

With a research team of six Dhaka University students, I set out to study people's responses to this problem. We interviewed households in a hundred villages east of the capital to find out if people switch to safer water sources after they find out that their wells have unsafe arsenic levels.

Instead of interviewing men, the students primarily surveyed women, as it's the wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters of male homeowners that run the logistics of the household, including the gathering of water.

Overseeing these surveys gave me the unique opportunity to spend time with Bengali women. Even though I did not speak their language, their actions and emotions showed me so much about their day-to-day lives that I could never have studied in a textbook.

metal houses, 2005

More than a decade ago scientists realized that arsenic naturally occurs in Bangladesh's groundwater—a colorless and odorless metal that cannot be detected without a chemical test. Since the discovery, nonprofit and government groups have worked to test and label wells throughout the country to empower people to find safe water.

The well outside this woman's home was found to be relatively safe for drinking and cooking. I asked her to show me her daily ritual of collecting water and she agreed, placing all of her body weight on the well lever to release a splash of water in a ceramic container below.

It took her several minutes of repeating this motion to fill the five-gallon container, but she continued without tiring. While she worked, the children teased her, yelling “choppo, choppo!” which means “pump, pump” in Bengali. She shot them fierce looks in return, but maintained a small smile whenever I raised my camera.

On the other side of this same village, I met a family with well water high in arsenic.

At her mother's request, this young girl filled a pitcher to serve water to our field team. We awkwardly declined, asking her why they refused to find safer water.

“We don't worry. God will watch over us,” she calmly replied in guttural Bengali, further explaining that they saw no need to travel to a safe well.

Her response was a common one in our surveys as only one-third of all owners with unsafe levels of arsenic in their wells chose to switch to another well.

There are lots of reasons why people choose to use unsafe water. For some, it's a lack of knowledge about the long-term hazards of arsenic. For others, alternatives are few and far between.

This realization was very upsetting to me, yet the women I met were not visibly burdened by the threat of arsenic. Many believed that they would be treated well, regardless of the dangers in their lives. And most seemed happier among their neighbors and families than anyone I know in my home country.

The students and I received cheerful greetings in every village we visited.

Children would run up and surround us, excited to see lighter skin and hair. Older girls and women would peer at us from a distance, giggling behind curtains, metal doorways, and sagging clotheslines.

At first I was intimidated by the attention, but then one of the students explained what the women were whispering to each other.

“Amy, they are very happy because you work for them. They are interested to observe you, don't worry!”

The youngest girls that were free from household duties would stay with us the longest, running ahead of us along the dusty paths to guide us to the next house and well. At each new home, mothers treated these children as their own—shooing them when they became rowdy or wiping the dirt off their clothing before a picture.

This little one had been playing rough with some of the young boys and seemed to dominate the group. Yet the tomboy quickly faded when she suddenly appeared with beautiful flowers behind her ears.

One afternoon, I sat in the shade of the van, reviewing notes on a laptop. This drew the attention of more than twenty young girls, who had been spying from behind trees and houses.

As they pressed against the open van door, a young girl from the back of the group passed a folded piece of paper to my lap. This is what I uncovered:

It was so different from the traditional drawings I've seen children do in the U.S.

Instead of a bright yellow sun, there was a small orange-pink one.

Instead of blue sky, there was brown, orange, and purple. The trees and flowers were so detailed and larger than life. And finally, a small girl, drawn in between the walls, in what seems to have been an afterthought.

Every few minutes another drawing would appear—each one as beautiful and as carefully done as the first—until I had more than ten pictures in my lap. I had nothing to give in return, so I passed out every last paper clip, pencil, and post-it note I could find in my backpack.

While the children immediately opened up to me, the women were more skeptical.

Luckily, over time they warmed up to me and would ask (through the student translators) if I was married or had children of my own. I would shake my head no and they would look at me with down turned mouths. Others would joke and laugh, quickly handing off their bare-bottomed babies to me.

Some women would grab me with a strong hand and guide me to their homes. Inside I would sit on their wooden beds, while girls of all ages got a chance to look me over. Mothers would proudly show photos of their husbands, brothers, or sons who were working in the city. Many offered me tea or rice, each time putting their fingers to their mouths to make sure I understood.

This woman was excited to see my camera and insisted that I take her portrait. With rough-skinned hands and a harsh voice, she guided me to her preferred spot, where she adjusted her dress and posed. Afterward, she thanked me by gently rubbing my arms and hands. Then she returned to her work, crouching behind pots of boiling water, preparing rice and vegetables for her family.

Bangladesh is not as solitary as many of these pictures portray. Instead it's one of the most populated countries in the world with the equivalent of half the U.S. population in a space just smaller than Iowa.

As a result, you are never truly alone in Bangladesh. Families spend their days together, working, eating, and playing.

Women do not grow up to find work on their own, they grow to share the weight of her family—helping with the children, running the home, and taking care of their husbands.

It is so strikingly different from our culture in the U.S., where we grow up to leave our families and find a path of our own.

Maybe there is a lesson to be learned here. Returning to a lonely studio in New York City after this trip left me longing for the colors and company of this amazing country.

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