

I was returning to work after having lunch with a couple of colleagues. It was a short distance and we decided to walk. All of a sudden, someone's leg almost got entangled in mine. I half-turned to see a man in a *lungi* and an open shirt. Disentangling his leg from mine, I felt his hand run up my hip and towards his mouth where he touched it in the gesture of a 'salaam'. As he walked on ahead of me, I saw him turn around several times to stare at me with yellow, disturbing eyes. I can still feel his hand on my body. The picture of him looking at me the way he did still floats uncomfortably in front of my eyes, making me feel sick."

This is not the first time she has felt this way, says Shaila Ahmed (not her real name). Yet she has lived most of her 22 years in a more or less sheltered environment. "I don't know how women who have to be out on the street every day deal with it," she says. "And I was with two other people, one a man. I can't imagine how much worse it could've been if I'd been alone."

Two days prior to the incident above, Shaila was again out with another female colleague, waiting for a CNG scooter. Two men passing by kept saying, "SubhanAllah, look at what God has made! He has done a good job!"

"It's funny," says Shaila, "how in both incidents the men used religious expressions and the name of God with such sleazy connotations."

Women from a more advantageous social background, with private cars and other such facilities, still have it relatively easy. Most, however, do not. They travel to and from work and other places alone in rickshaws, CNG scooters and even local buses. Some, like many garment factory workers and part-time domestic help, walk. All of them have to deal with men -- from the rickshawpuller or bus helper to the fellow passenger or the random man on the street -- harassing them. Those who work in offices often have to spend their days in the company of male colleagues who often create an uncomfortable environment for women by making either outright or indirectly filthy comments and gestures toward them.

"Why should women even have men staring at them?" asks Shaila, "Let alone making dirty comments and feeling them up. They are not animals on display in a zoo. These men do have mothers and sisters and wives and daughters; it's not like they've never seen a woman before."

Shaila's experiences are far from rare. Women are continually harassed on as well as off the street. But as common as these occurrences may be, it usually takes women a few minutes to recover from the shock of being touched or even spoken to in a dirty manner by strange men on the street or colleagues at work. When they do, it is usually too late

Out on the Street

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do anything. Even if they respond quickly with a rebuke or even a slap, there is always the possibility of the man denying the allegation and challenging them even more rudely. Either way, it is the women who are left struggling to recover from such disquieting incidents.

Religion, along with power -- whether derived from social position or simply that of being a man -- seem always to be used, directly or indirectly, against women. Where, in truth, claim some men, religion actually says that women should be placed on a pedestal.

Instead of dwelling on theory, Shaila tries to push aside the incident into the dark box in her mind already holding similar experiences. As she struggles to deal with the unsettling look of those yellow eyes and the touch that still sends ugly shivers up her body, she can only hope to be more prepared and less shaken the next time she steps out. ■