Transport Trials

Adventures in the Public Sphere

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March is nearly over and International Women's Day has been celebrated for another year, with many of us (rightly) spending some time assessing the progress made towards gender equality in Bangladesh, as elsewhere. But, in making that assessment - notwithstanding the flurry of activity that takes place on and around March 8th - it's worth considering some of the less tangible measures of social change that make us realise not only how far we've come, but also how far we have yet to go.

A recent discussion with an acquaintance of mine, Polly, reminded me that perhaps one of the most classic, everyday examples of the barriers that ordinary women regularly face relates to getting around in public places. As anyone who has ever had to use public transport in Bangladesh can probably vouch, the daily battles that take place on Dhaka buses can bring home all too clearly the second-class status that women "enjoy" - at least in the eyes of some. Polly herself is a regular traveller on the capital's public transport system, and has a mind-boggling range of experiences to share for it! Much of the time, she makes light of the kind of problems that she and thousands of other women face. Perhaps it is a survival strategy: after all, sometimes you have to laugh, in order not to cry.

On one such occasion, she described how the man sitting next to her used every opportunity to press his body against hers, as the bus lurched and braked its cumbersome way along the traffic-clogged streets of Dhaka. This guy was obviously an experienced and pretty shameless