harasser. Not only was he extravagantly apologetic each time he made a move, after some time, he actually began to loudly blame the people standing in the aisle for "forcing" him to press his body so closely against hers. Needless to say, none of the blameless aisle passengers were impressed by his protestations, and neither was Polly! And she told him so in no uncertain terms, when it was time for her to get out at the relevant stop.

While most women feel inhibited in dealing with such behaviour, and avoid Polly's frank (and occasionally confrontational) approach, some are learning to fight back against the furtive pressures and frequent groping that they face in the course of an average workday on the streets of Dhaka. Sometimes, sarcasm can also produce desirable results, as in the case of a friend of a friend, Bokul. She was sitting next to a rather portly man on one occasion, when she realised that he kept his legs sufficiently widely spread apart so that each time the bus jerked or swayed he was able to press his leg against hers. After objecting a few times, she realised he was not going to take her complaints seriously. So she stood up, saying loudly "It's amazing how, even when two people are sitting in full-sized seats designed for adults, one person can manage to find a way to behave inappropriately."

The man sneered at her and said "If you're that fussy, I guess you'll just have to travel in a private car from now on." Undeterred, Bokul retorted, "I'm not the one who's so fat that I need to take up two seats, so maybe you're the one who needs a private car!" Needless to say, the man was so offended at being called fat, that he was left speechless (though being called lecherous had clearly not had any effect on him whatsoever).

If sexual harassment is relatively common, the level of misogyny evident in such public spaces is sometimes breathtaking. On one occasion, standing in the aisle of a jam-packed bus, Polly was struck by a man who loudly complained that not only was the bus too crowded, but "there's a whole bunch of women standing there, just obstructing the doorway"! As if the women commuters had deliberately clustered at the entrance to the bus for the sole purpose of preventing this "gentleman" from getting off at his stop. Polly said,."It wasn't even true that the women were all standing near the entrance, so I spoke loudly enough for the other passengers to hear and said "What kind of idiot is this? Doesn't he know how to say 'excuse me' and make his way through a crowd?!" Most of the other people just laughed, but it is really irritating when people talk like this."

Interestingly, while it is frequently possible for men misbehaving with women to get away with it (particularly since women who protest or fight back are sometimes considered to be "unfeminine"), a recent experience indicated that people are more sympathetic when such behaviour is directed towards children. An acquaintance, Khaleda, described how a male passenger loudly rebuked a woman whose baby had been crying on the bus. "It was a small child, clearly in distress, and the mother had been doing her best to calm the baby. But it didn't work. First this man loudly commented on the noise the child was making. Then suddenly he barked at her, saying 'Can't you keep the child quiet? I can't stand this noise!" She was very upset, but luckily the other passengers spoke up, saying things like 'What kind of person are you?' 'Leave them alone!' 'That's the second time you've spoken to her, why are you shouting at her? If you can't handle it, you should travel in a private car' 'Yes, this is a public bus; if the child cries, it can cry!' etc. He was really shocked, but nobody supported him, so he had to shut up!"

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While bus rides can be traumatic by the very nature of the crowds involved (because they effectively opportunities for sleazy men to misbehave), most women are aware that being in a rickshaw or an auto-rickshaw, or even a motorcycle, doesn't render you immune from obnoxious comments either. A bi-cultural European friend of mine, Annu, was recently doing field work in rura Bangladesh, riding pillion on a motorcycle as her means of transport. The driver of the motorcycle was a well-mannered young man, who was mortified at the comments thrown their way from those who (wrongly) assumed Annu couldn't understand what they were saying; she has an enviable command over the language, having grown up in West Bengal.

No doubt inspired by Annu's exotic appearance as a European woman dressed in a sari, one of the most common questions they heard from male passers-by was, "Ei bhai, kone desher mal?" ("Hey, where is that titbit from?"). While Annu brushed off the attention, her poor companion tried to comfort her, by saying rather sweetly, "Don't pay any attention to them, Apa! You know, they don't understand that if you take the 'l' off the word 'mal' it becomes 'ma'!"

Notwithstanding the occasionally humorous tenor of this article, operating within the public transport system is no joke for many women in Bangladesh. But perhaps the best method of surviving such unwanted commentary relatively unscathed was revealed by a female NGO field worker, who described how she dealt with the initial reaction of people in rural areas to the unaccustomed sight of a woman riding a motorbike. She said, "When they see me on the motorcycle, many people say nasty things. They say that I am a bad woman to be driving a motorbike by myself. But when I have the helmet on, and I am riding swiftly past them, what they say cannot hurt me the wind carries away their words..."