

UP AND UP, EVERY YEAR

Three brothers look at the posh neighbourhood across the lake from their shanty in Karail slum in Banani. Their family of five live in a room of a two-storey tin-built house. Their parents pay Tk 4,000 in rent. PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON

ROBIN GAZI

Kamrunnahar had moved into a third floor flat in Goran with her husband and three daughters in 1998. It was and still is a dark and tiny two-bedroom flat.

The neighbourhood is not something special. Goran, near Bashabo, has a history of flooding and waterlogging and the local young hooligans tend to stalk young girls, especially the school-goers, on a regular basis.

A noisy three-wheeler stop, a kitchen market spilling over the bottom step, and shoulder-to-shoulder buildings did not make the flat a pleasant place for living. It was not the flat she had dreamed of raising her children in.

Kamrunnahar had been shifting homes ever since she got married.

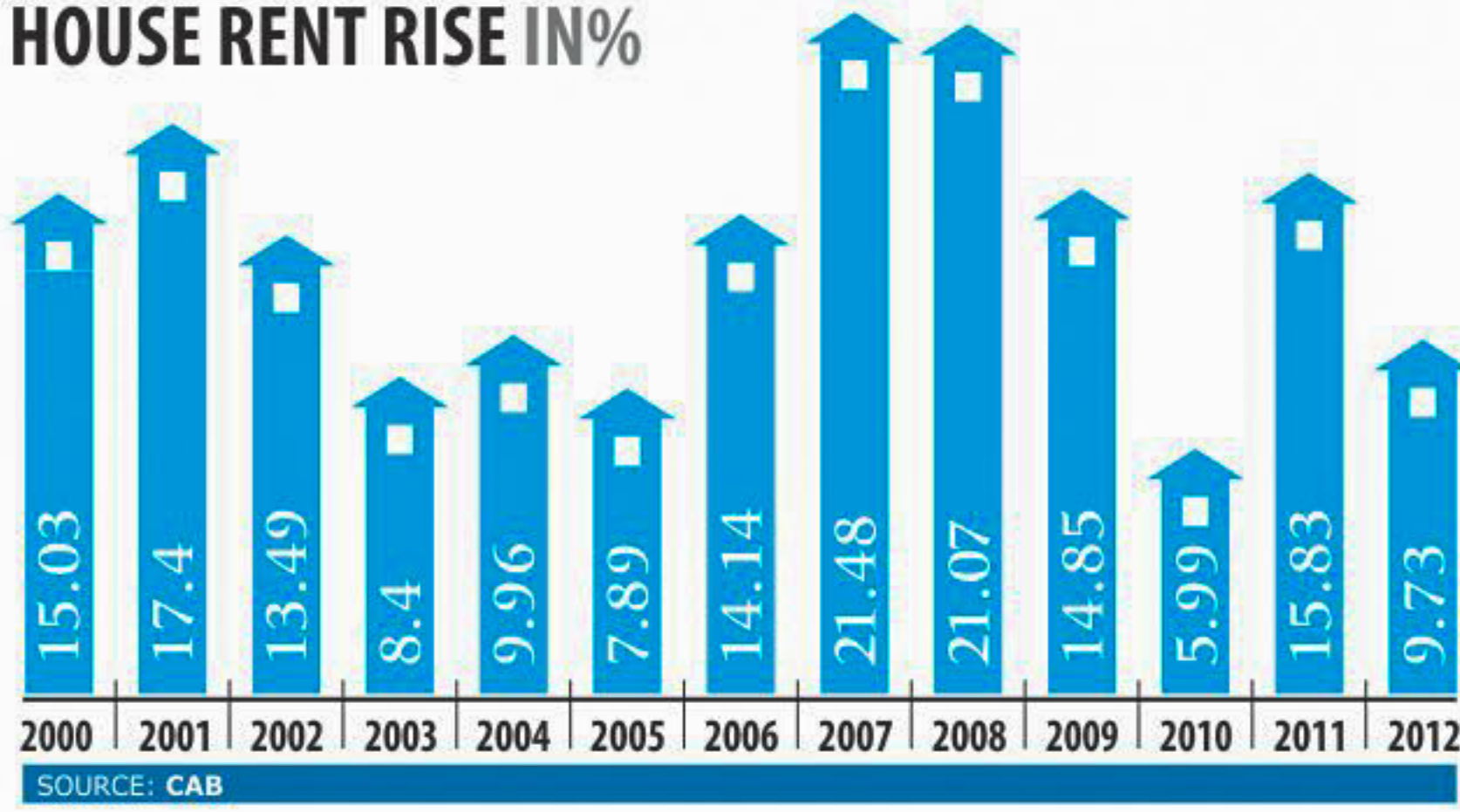
Protective of her children's privacy and tired of the burglaries she was a victim of, Kamrunnahar figured the cheaper ground-floor flats would not do anymore. She needed to be higher up in the building. Hence, the Tk 3,400 rent a month had to be spent.

In 1998, Tk 3,400 was a burden and it became more so when her husband died two years later and she had to support the family with her boutique business.

By that time, however, the rent had gone up to Tk 4,000. It went up every year. It was Tk 200 or Tk 300 a year at first, then it became Tk 500 a year and then Tk 1,000 a year. She now pays a staggering Tk 11,000 with the promise that come next year there would be another hike. And the rent does not include the utilities.

Kamrunnahar is not complaining. Even though she now pays over three

HOUSE RENT RISE IN%



times the rent she started out with, she says she is lucky as her landlord is a nice person. Landlords of neighbouring buildings increase rent Tk 1,000 to Tk 3,000 every year, she said.

Tashmin Jahan got married in 1999 and rented a two-bedroom flat in Rajabazar, which unlike Goran is almost at the centre of Dhaka. She needed to stay in a flat at the heart of

Dhaka because her journalist husband zips around the capital a lot for his work.

The newly-wed couple started to struggle within months as the Tk 5,000 rent was very high for a couple living on one pay check.

Within a year, she had no choice but to move north to Kazipara where she got a similar flat for Tk 4,500. But the landlord kept increasing the rent every year and whenever she protested the response was the usual: "If you can't, then vacate." New tenants always promise more rent than the old tenants do.

Tashmin had to move her family again, even further north at Mirpur-11½, where she got a flat for Tk 5,500 in 2006. It was just like the other flats she had been living in.

But her dream of living in peace did not materialise. The rent continued to climb every year. She finally

left the flat in 2012 when the landlord was asking for an astonishing Tk 13,000 a month, utilities excluded. She moved into a flat less than half the size of her previous flat.

Kamrunnahar and Tashmin's cases are not exceptional. They represent the middle class that go through this ordeal in Dhaka regularly. Some give in and pay the high rent while others move further and further away from the city centre and into smaller and smaller yet homes.

As for the landlords, the reasons for increasing rent are typical -- price hike of essentials, increasing property value and better civic amenities -- but most asked-to-leave tenants feel they are being evicted so that the landlord can give the house to better off people.

Rent increases every year, even though the law says rent can only be hiked every two years.

No room for women?



TRIBENI CHAKMA

It's an uphill task for single women, who want to live on their own or with siblings or friends, to find a home in the capital. Almost always, the first criterion to rent a house is that you must have a family. Some house owners would even decline to rent out their houses to young, childless couples.

This is discrimination. But such discrimination is pervasive, so much so that it is all evident in most of the to-let notices across the city.

Not that single girls have no place to live. They do manage to find a room or two for themselves. But when they do, they cannot invite their friends of the opposite sex.

Take Sabnam (her real name withheld), a print media journalist who lives with her siblings in the city. Before she could find one, she spent months looking for a house at Rajabazar, Indira road, Jahanara Garden, Monipuripara and Tejgunipara.

She had to face unwanted questions from house owners such as who would pay the rent -- she or her father -- or when she would return home at night. These were already embarrassing questions, but she really was floored when one owner told her that he would rent out his house to her family but not if she were a television journalist.

Failing in all her efforts, she was forced to bring her parents to find one for her and her siblings.

But more often than not, owners would not pay attention even if you told them that you would bring your parents from the village. And although some house owners are indeed willing to rent out their houses to single girls, they cannot often do so in the face of objections from other tenants, who have families.

Then there is the mistreatment: many house owners would misbehave if you are late from work or if you invite guests. Not to mention the unjustifiable yearly rent hike and the advance money of even up to three months. Examples of such exploitation and abuse are not a rarity.



The price of being a bachelor

MARTIN SWAPAN PANDEY

Born in a large family, he always wanted to be out of it, to live on his own, away from his folks. "One day, when I grow up," he would whisper to himself from time to time. His day came eventually when the family decided to send him to Dhaka for studies after he passed his SSC examination from a school in the south. He was mad with joy. He called it bliss. This was after all a dream come true. But that was then. Sixteen years ago.

Today, he knows by heart how hard it can get to live in the capital when one does not have a family. "This house is only for families; we don't let it to bachelors," he has heard the house owners say perhaps 100 times over. And he does not like the way building owners say it.

During his college years, he often wondered if there was any law to regulate

house rent. Now he knows that there is. He also used to wonder if the law had such discriminatory provisions. Now he knows there is none.

A service holder in a private firm, he currently lives with his siblings in a two-bedroom flat in Rajabazar. The flat has a common dining and living room and he pays Tk 20,000 in monthly rent, utility bills of another Tk 2,000 or so excluded. That's the price you pay when you are a bachelor.

"But you don't pay the price if you don't get a house at all. And finding one is never easy," he says.

Before he rented the house, he spent weeks searching for one, knocking on house owners' doors and calling the numbers on the to-let notices. At times, the communications would not last more than a few seconds. "Bachelor? Sorry." Sometimes the phone would be hung up

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Weeks went by; the month was nearing its end. He was in desperate need of a place to live for he would have to vacate the previous house by that month. It was the 26th or 27th of the month when he met his "saviour". Saviour he was, for he agreed to let his house to a bachelor: two months' advance, Tk 20,000 in monthly

rent, water bill included but gas and electricity bill excluded. Everything was verbal, no agreement was done. But that was all right.

But things were not all right after he moved in. The house owner started charging for all the three utilities -- water, gas and power. That was not to be. When he pointed this out and reminded the owner of their conversation that the rent included the water bill, the owner said he could not remember because he let different flats to different people on different conditions.

On his insistence that he clearly remembers their earlier conversation, the owner said: "Okay. Let's fix it like this. You pay for the water bill, and I will take care of the gas bill."

He agreed and thought of the plight of the other millions living away from families for work or for study.



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