



One of the major challenges that I face regularly is that I find perfectly fit men sitting in the designated seats for women and for people with disabilities. On some lucky days I find men who get up from the reserved seats after requesting them just once.

One day, I had to beg a man to get up so that this elderly woman could sit in the designated seat, and after much pleading he moved, grunting, "Why do women get out! Why do buses take women in?"

Just to make it clear about why we need designated seats for women: because women are not seen as equal as men in the first place for which there is a need for reinforcement to give space to women for traveling.

In Bangladesh, women in general do not yet have equal access to transportation as men, for which we are still fighting for our rights. Travelling by bus for people with disabilities or for pregnant women will be close to riding in hell.

What can the government do about it? What I ask for is not much-just strict monitoring by bus conductor so that men do not take up reserved seats for women, and that people should not be taken in on the bus when there are no available numbers of seats! Rarely would you see a bus with available seats.

On majority of the days the buses are already packed, and you have the option of either getting on the bus, or waiting for another bus which would most likely be also packed. This leads to my second request to the government: could we have more public buses that come in frequently so that people do not have to jammed in one bus like a chicken coop?

Perhaps, it is too much to ask for in this man's world! What can you do as a woman? Stop going out? Certainly not - you wipe your fears and go on. You speak up and demand your rights, because if you do not, then you lose, and so do countless women. You have to keep on facing these everyday battles with calm perseverance and tenacity.

Another challenge that I find the most difficult to fight is inappropriate staring of men. It seems as if being a woman and having a body is of outmost sin. Is not wearing a full length dress with a scarf not good enough? I even tried out the *abayah* to prevent men from staring at my skin and body parts, but it did not work because then they stared at my lips, especially if I wore lipstick.

I started wearing a face mask to prevent men from staring at my lips and making me feel sick in my stomach. It is simply embarrassing to speak out against a man staring at you inappropriately! I cannot handle it so I hide as

much as I can.

Sometimes I wish I was invisible. After I started wearing the face masks, they started staring at my eyes, particularly if I put on eye makeup. I started reading books in order to prevent myself from finding out someone is staring at my eye or the little skin that shows from my palm and feet. It makes me angry and I feel like screaming.

I observed that many women wear full *abayas* with face masks and I wonder if they do so because of similar experiences. What I experience should not happen. My elder, female cousin told me to stare right back at the man who keeps staring at you. I tried that, and then one day I asked the man staring at me at a bus stand, "What are you staring at?" and he continued staring, and other men laughed! I felt like ripping my skin and body apart. My question is: what is happening to the world over here?

I really do not know how you could prevent men from staring at you, or following you after you get down from the bus. It happened to me thrice. One man followed me for ten minutes, and I took a detour in a shop and then I lost sight of him and walked to my destination. Then another day, one man kept on staring at me and followed me, and I walked in the opposite direction, and stood beside a family waiting at the bus stop. I felt terror. Sheer undying terror. The third time, the guy asked me where I lived after following me for a few minutes, and when I did not answer, he stopped following me. I feel scared to travel alone as a woman in Dhaka city, and I do not know how this could be changed, given the political situation of the country.

As a woman, you have to take safety precautions. Try traveling with friends or colleagues, and avoid traveling at night. Carry pepper spray and have GPS on if you feel unsafe while waiting for a bus. Often times it helps standing beside people with kids because chances are they will not harass you. Wear face mask if you find men staring at you, and read books to distract yourself from their piercing looks.

I would recommend seeking help from other women when you find yourself in an uncomfortable situation, and I am sure you would find help. It hurts me to tell women to take safety precautions, because it becomes apparent how unsafe this city is for women. However, you have to do this to be safe, and advocate for a gender-bias free society.

I do want to clarify that not all men behave like this, but it only takes one man to make a woman feel threatened. Such predators are always going to be around, and as women we have to not give up, raise awareness and advocate for an environment safe for women commuters.



Perhaps one day you would be able to travel in Dhaka without the need to demand for your designated seat as a woman. Perhaps there would not be any need of designated seats for women as the culture would be such that it will be assumed that women have equal number of seats just as men. Perhaps women will travel without fear of physical harassment, inappropriate staring and psychological trauma. Perhaps it will not be a sin to be a woman.

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