

HOW LONG TILL THE ROADS ARE SAFE FOR GIRLS?

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It's 2017. Women have gone on to make colossal contributions to all spheres of life and continue to do so every day, every minute. Yet, in an era when more women hold positions of power, many still struggle to find their place in public transportation, especially in a country like ours.

Young women today don't have the luxury to brood over prejudices and sit at home doing nothing. She has to

times it backfires.

There are also instances when girls become the subject of unsolicited video recordings. Nazifa Raidah, for whom life has always been about running from classes to debates, talks about one such experience: "Once I was filmed by an older man sitting next to me, and even though I 'created a scene', most people defended the man, justifying his behaviour as 'male instinct'." She had started using buses from an early age and had learned to remain vigilant, but

Some women prefer driving their own cars. That would not seem like a problem at all, but apart from unnecessary stares from almost every male driver on the road, female drivers also face active harassment. Besides trailing them on the road, male drivers often honk at them unnecessarily and make crude gestures.

Rubayat Hassan Mahia, a public university student, rides her own scooter but not without woes. After fighting bat-

les with her own family in order to get a scooter, she has to struggle every day on the streets for acceptance. "Motorcyclists deliberately gain on me at a fast and threatening speed, overwhelming me to a point of slowing down. They make it seem like they are about to push me from behind or get me off my path but usually the whole stunt is executed to make a fool out of me. It seems to hurt the male ego every time I overtake a bike, following which he'll

make sure to surpass me immediately adding a smile of taunting victory," Mahia explains with a smile. One of the best things about her scooter, according to her, is her helmet, which apart from adding a layer of safety against accidents also blocks unwanted and vulgar comments.

Ellen Hussain, an

WOMEN'S SAFETY IN PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Women's travel patterns are different from that of men

More dependent on public transport, especially when part of the lower income strata

The difficulty faced by women with regard to their mobility causes social exclusion affecting all aspects of their lives – particularly education and



1. More CCTV cameras: Video-operated supervision might not help victims at the time of the incident, so better lighting and increased patrolling can reassure commuting women.

2. Operating special ladies buses and introducing 'She Taxis': Currently, only the (BRTC) provides special service for women during peak hours.

Major commercial companies could take responsibilities of the whole transportation sector.

3. Creation of more safety apps: Dhaka, for now, has one, Daak. It is a community-powered mobile application. Once you have the app installed on your mobile phone, you can send text messages to your trusted ones, and also to nearby app users for help. The most interesting feature of Daak is that it works without an Internet connection.

4. Design is key: More women should be a part of transportation planning and research. While designing transportation projects, gender specific analysis should be conducted; one must include gender indicators, monitor and assess before and after the policy change.

5. Looking beyond segregation: Segregation is only a temporary solution to the problem; it doesn't alter the harasser's

GROPING.
IT'S A CRIME.

study or work hard, and has to set out every day for her destination no matter the extent of hindrance before her.

Many young women, particularly university students, regularly take buses due to them being an inexpensive mode of transport, but end up paying a higher price altogether. Too many harassment incidents go unreported every day. SHOUT reached out to female students and some were kind enough to be vocal about their appalling experiences.

Nawar Fairouz, currently studying in a private university, had to reluctantly rely on buses before she moved closer to her institute. She not only had to endure uncomfortable gawking but also had to tolerate physical harassment on a regular basis. "Each bus ride forced me to conclude that sharp objects are needed to keep the perverts away. I felt like people could grope me at free will," shares Nawar. To defend herself, she has started to carry a small knife, displaying it on purpose to keep harassers at bay.

There are countless girls and women who endure inappropriate fondling while standing in packed buses which normally do not have more than six seats allotted for females. And no matter how one reacts to it, whether by staying quiet or by remonstrating strongly against it, nothing seems to improve the situation. Sometimes speaking out may induce support from other commuters, but at

incidents like these never cease to happen despite all precautions.

Reeda Rahman, another university student, regularly hears opinions on her choice of clothing from complete strangers on the bus. "I chose to confront a man one day, who had been ogling at me, demanding to know what his problem was. He had the audacity to reply 'chehara ta bhallagse', and this generated a string of chuckles. I felt too outnumbered to continue protesting," she says. "Harassment does not always come from men. Once a hijra, who had gotten on the bus to collect money, commented on my 'inappropriate sense of dressing' only because I had refused to pay," Reeda adds.

Rickshaws are not safe either for the solo female rider. Rickshaws are not allowed to travel on various main roads which cause rickshaw pullers to take alternative routes – often dark, narrow alleys attracting muggers. Because women carry handbags, which are easy to pull, they are often seized from rickshaws. These have often led to the victims falling off rickshaws causing serious injuries.

CNG-driven auto rickshaws have their disadvantages too. There have been many cases of CNG drivers being insolent and perverted. Many of the girls we spoke to have at least once caught the drivers adjusting their mirrors repeatedly in order to get a better view of the passengers.

IF IT'S UNWANTED, IT'S HARASSMENT.

JUST BECAUSE I MOVE THROUGH A Public SPACE DOES NOT MEAN THAT MY BODY IS A Public SPACE



A-level candidate, recently had her post regarding a traumatic experience while travelling go viral over the internet, and with good reason. She had used a renowned local bike ride-sharing service for a quick commute only to be left disturbed from the whole experience. She says, "From the moment I had mounted the bike, he kept on asking me to hold him tight as it was unsafe. At one point, he started to ask me personal questions and if he could take me out on dates. I felt helpless as it was my first time on a bike. I did not dare protest against it as I felt that he could have steered the bike anywhere he pleased and who knew what sort of perversion awaited me if he did?" Although, the company had immediately fired the rider, Ellen does not venture out by herself anymore as this incident had left her and her family with trust issues, dread and a constant paranoia.

As we continue to wait for a legal system that protects girls and women from transportation woes, it's important to discuss and undertake effective measures. Here are a few possible solutions, as suggested by the interviewees:

state of mind. We need to address the root cause of sexual harassment and violence. Creating awareness and giving self-help training to all are essential.

No matter how many seats are allotted for women or how many videos of creepy predators are uploaded on the internet, these wretched conditions will not improve as long as the misogynistic establishment is not replaced with a liberating and empowering one.

