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Imagining a women-friendly city

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While science fiction novels have moved on to imagining lunar cities where people travel on hoverboards, Bangladeshi women can still barely imagine a place where half of its population isn't constantly discriminated against. No one here dreams of hoverboards—they just want good buses they can get on without being groped or having their wallets stolen.

"Our cities—and its infrastructure—were not designed with women and girls in mind. They were not designed by women either. There is a clear lack of understanding of their needs," said Farah Kabir, the country director of ActionAid. "Whenever there is gender-based violence, the onus is on women, as to why they were at a certain place at a certain time."

A 2017 poll by the Thomson Reuters Foundation listed Dhaka as the seventh worst megacity for women. Experts in women's issues were asked to rank cities according to the risks women faced—of sexual violence and harassment and harmful cultural practices—and the extent to which they had access to healthcare and economic opportunities.

Dhaka was listed as the third most dangerous city in the world when it came to cultural practices,

and the fourth worst in terms of sexual violence faced by women.

Experiences shared by female commuters who either walk or use public transport shed light on the level of discrimination and harassment women suffer on a regular basis.

"Wherever I go, there are boys making inappropriate comments about how I dress. The roads aren't safe after dark. We girls have no freedom," said Brishti Akhter, a 16-year-old schoolgirl from Ashulia. Her mother is an RMG worker, so Brishti often has to move around by herself during the day.

Nazifa Raidah, a first-year student of Independent University of Bangladesh, who frequently has to commute long distances on a bike, reiterated how difficult it is for single women to navigate the streets of Dhaka.

"There is a preconceived idea here that women aren't supposed to stay out. Female bikers and drivers face incredulity and lack of patience from those on the streets," she said.

Moving around is notoriously difficult in Bangladesh's traffic-congested cities. "Public transportation isn't female-friendly. Even if I use a ride-sharing app, I'm always alert because I can't fully trust the driver.

I never fall asleep during the ride and constantly share my location with family and close friends," said Anupoma Joyee, a young barrister

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working at a law firm in Dhaka, who often returns home late after work.

The answer to women demanding safer public transport has been to create female-only bus services with limited routes. There now exists multiple women-only services on motorbike ride-sharing apps as well.

Most of the efforts that have gone into making the city more women-friendly, focused on making special arrangements that isolate them, rather than making the system inclusive enough to accept them, say urban planners.

"Segregation cannot be the answer, as it may only worsen the situation by marginalising one group. Inclusion is always better," said Homaira Zaman, an architect and senior lecturer at Bangladesh University.

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STAR WEEKEND

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