

Don't rub AGAINST ME

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Since my student days, I've been a regular commuter on public buses in Dhaka city. When I was in college, the money that my father sent every month was barely enough to cover my tuition and living costs—400 taka CNG rides on a regular basis was a luxury I simply could not afford. Even today, in my job as a reporter, I resort to buses when I have to travel far, except in case of emergencies—I'm unable to spend one-third of my salary on CNG fares or ride-sharing every day. I give this disclaimer for those who don't think twice before exclaiming boorishly: "If you must whine about public transport [because, apparently, protesting sexual assault is tantamount to "whining"], why don't you just use private transport?"

For the last few weeks, I've been telling anyone who'd listen about how the Dolonchapa female-only bus service has changed my life. Since my circle is very small, I want to share the same story, in a nutshell, for you too. For the last month, I've been exclusively using the female-only private bus service to reach my Farmgate office from Mirpur every day. The Dolonchapa app allows me to track the location of the buses and get on one nearest to me, at my convenience. The conductors of these buses are female as well and so, these days, I need not worry about the hands of male conductors grazing my back intentionally in the guise of helping me get on the bus. Neither am I apprehensive about someone grabbing my hip during the mad rush to get on a bus during rush hour. I can use public transport without being in constant fear of being touched, squeezed, nudged—in other words, harassed—with impunity.

But let's put aside this new-found boon in my life. Today, I want to say something to those who felt insulted with the "audacity" of women sporting a T-shirt stating "Don't rub against me" (*Ga Gheshe Daraben na*). After all, dear brothers, I know you. You were my travel companions on public buses—I had to deal with you, and the traumatic memories of your unwanted groping, every day. Forget about standing too close, you are the manly men who find sexist pleasure in fondling a woman's butt on a crowded bus (and yes, we can tell the difference between an accidental graze and a deliberate and perverted squeeze). You are the men oozing with fragile masculinity who scan a woman's body every chance you get to "discover" what you call the "mountains" (*pahar porbot*) under a woman's scarf. When a woman fails to keep her balance while trying to juggle her bags and scarf, you are the red-blooded hyenas who laugh at her shamelessly. You, the lionhearted leeches who take advantage of "hard brakes" to shove your elbows at women's breasts while descending from buses, are the ones who verbally abuse female bike-riders. You are the contemptible creep who stare at female-only buses in hopes of seeing something unusual that you can make fun of; some of you even quarrel with female conductors to allow you to get on the

female-only buses.

I know your masculinity is the repository of your power. When women commuters raise their voices to protest against you, you start berating their family backgrounds; some of you roar, "Do you know who I am?" in an attempt to silence us. A large number of people of your gender start mansplaining, and essentially normalising, the harassment: "Why do women whine so much? A little tussle in local buses is inevitable. Why don't you use private cars?" If a female bike rider protests your male gaze, you shout "Aren't you ashamed to ride a bike despite being a girl? And you have the audacity to talk! Shameless woman!" If anyone writes a feature on the woes of women commuters, you get off by trolling the writer, and women in general, in the comments section. Really, who has the audacity to protest against you?

This is why the T-shirts were made—so that we could protest without having to protest every single touch, every single day. But, of course, you found a problem with that too.

Even with all your power, you will occupy the nine seats reserved for women, children and people with disabilities. When a woman asks you to vacate the seat reserved for her, you young men shamelessly demand: "Ask the women to leave the men's seats they are occupying first." But you don't know (actually, you don't want to admit) that there is nothing called "male seats" on a public bus. Except for the reserved seats, the rest are for all genders.

In 2017, the cabinet approved the draft of 'Road Transport Act-2017' prepared by the Road Transport and Highway Division. It states that if someone wrongly occupies the reserved seats for women, children and people with disabilities, he will be jailed for a month or fined Tk 5,000. And, obviously, you're too manly to spare the law either. You troll on social media, posting statuses on Facebook, such as, "Please, hang us! We will take this punishment for occupying female seats with a smile on our faces" or "Down with equal rights!"

Do you even know—or care—whether the women in your life (yes, not us *noshto* ones, but the ones you supposedly care about) undergo the same harassment while moving from one place to another on public buses (or do you still believe women's place is exclusively in the home?). According to a 2017 BRAC survey, 94 percent of women (including your mother, sisters or wives) face some form of sexual harassment on public transport. But most of them don't protest, because they can't find a reliable platform in which their concerns will be heard and addressed. Many of them are afraid that protesting might put them in further trouble and so they endure this violence every day. Maybe the female members of your family want to convey these messages to you but you have gagged their mouths. You have created, and perpetuate, a system whereby these women, too, start believing they are born to tolerate everyday injustices in silence.

But you must know too that women are indomitable. You cannot break them with your bullying and your trolling. Repress them or suppress them all you want, but they will discover their own language of protest. So, be careful, don't stand so close.