

SEXUAL HARASSMENT



ILLUSTRATION: INAN ANJUM SIBUN

Why do many women shun shared motorbikes?

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Sahera Khatun Shimul, a young working woman, has to travel from Dhanmondi to Khilgaon regularly to attend her office. A client relations executive, she also has to travel frequently within the city to meet her clients. For Shimul, getting around in a ridesharing motorbike is the only feasible option, one she uses regularly.

Unfortunately, Shimul's experience while using these services even forced her to think about leaving her job. "Many motorbike drivers drive roughly and press the brakes so hard that I fall on his body. Most of the times I can easily understand that they do it intentionally and unnecessarily just to create physical contact. Some of them even take a needlessly longer route. Many of them don't have any sense of manner and etiquette. If I protest against their rough

driving, they use abusive words because they know that I shall not be able to argue with him on a crowded, busy road," she says.

Although motorbike ridesharing services have gained surging popularity in Dhaka in the last couple of years, these companies are still struggling to solve one basic issue—how to provide a safe trip to their customers, particularly females. Motorbike ridesharing services are still particularly inaccessible to many female commuters. Although many women are using shared motorbikes to move around, they do not have as easy an experience as their male counterparts. Like Shimul's, we have received many reports of sexual harassment, stalking, and use of abusive and provocative words, from women who use motorbikes through ridesharing apps.

Parisa Kabir, a university student, has

also been subjected to abusive words from motorbike riders frequently. "I am a bit overweight compared to most Bangladeshi women. Because of this, I get insulted frequently by motorbike riders," she says. "After seeing me, many of them refuse to take me, cancel the ride, and make comments about my body. Today, a rider told me, 'You should marry and ride your husband's bike. Otherwise please reduce your body weight.'"

Nusrat Jahan, a school teacher, also frequently uses motorbike sharing services to reach her school on time. Besides rough driving, she faced another form of harassment. Several riders stalked her for months and used to send abusive messages on her phone and through WhatsApp. She says, "I did not want to use ridesharing services because I knew my phone number would become available to many unknown people. However, when I did not find any alternative and started using the services, my apprehensions became reality. I started getting calls and offensive messages from unknown numbers. I realised that these numbers belonged to motorbike drivers with whom I commuted. One of them went as far as sending me offensive proposals and photos. I contacted the company and sent his contact and the photos he sent. It has

Silence of the ridesharing companies after the filing of complaints is one of the most common objections shared by female users of ridesharing services.

been three months and I am still waiting to know what steps they have taken."

Many female passengers said they prefer to sit side-saddle while riding motorbikes. But the drivers urge them to hold onto them and if they refuse, the drivers drive so roughly that they do not find any alternative to holding on to them to maintain balance.

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