

After page 3

"We have to sit side-saddle because our attire does not allow us to sit on the motorbike comfortably. This is why I always request the drivers to go slowly and carefully. But, very few pay heed to my request," says Jahan.

Silence of the ridesharing companies after the filing of complaints is one of the most common objections shared by female users of ridesharing services. Ridesharing companies claimed that they take immediate action and introduced various features to prevent such incidents. For instance, they have introduced a "live location sharing" feature through which a passenger can share her location with her friends and family members, in-app safety toolkit, emergency hotline number, and round-the-clock in-app customer support to ensure safety of their customers.

Maliha M Quadir, a prominent female entrepreneur and managing director of Shohoz, says, "We take immediate action against our partners (drivers) if we get complaints of sexual harassment or assault. However, in some cases, we can do nothing more than blocking their account and removing them from our platform, because they are not our employees."

"The motorbike drivers are also entrepreneurs and they should be aware that if their passengers are not satisfied with their service, they will lose

their business," adds Quadir. She also requests female passengers to take some precautionary measures such as sitting carefully on the bike, wearing helmets, and checking the registration number of the bike with the number showing in the app.

To ensure safety and comfort of female commuters, one ridesharing company, Obhai, introduced a motorbike sharing service exclusively for female passengers, Obon, where only female motorbike drivers can register to share their bikes. However, this company is also struggling to make any impact on this prevalence of cyber and sexual harassment via ridesharing apps.

"More than 600 female bikers have registered with our company," says Syed Fakruddin, assistant manager at Obhai. "However, very few of them drive their bikes on a regular basis. They too don't feel safe while riding bikes on the busy streets of Dhaka. Bus drivers and helpers often harass them. Maybe our society is still not ready to accept female bikers. But we are trying to increase the number of female bikers by offering them financial assistance and driving training." It is not just female commuters who are affected, but drivers too—meaning that the most obvious solution to the problems facing female commuters is rendered useless.

Rowshon Akhter Urmee, manager, gender justice and diversity department of Brac, believes introducing technology

and registering more female drivers will help solve this crisis. "When a motorbike driver insults a female passenger, he actually practices hegemonic masculinity, which means, he thinks he is superior to that woman only because of his male identity. He does not consider that the woman may have better education and economic background. This hegemonic masculinity is practiced in all parts of our society," she says.

"The ridesharing companies must provide behavioural training to their driver-partners to break this hegemony if they want to make their services accessible to women. They also need to monitor their driver-partners' attitudes to assess effectiveness of their training. The behavioural training has to be a continuous process, just one training at the beginning of the service can hardly make any impact."

App-based motorbike sharing services have become one of the most important modes of transportation for millions in cities due to its cost and time efficiency. Its rapid expansion and escalating importance in Bangladesh's urban lifestyle require that that this new, tech-based transport sector take immediate and pragmatic measures to make their services accessible, safe, and comfortable for female passengers.

Md Shahnawaz Khan Chandan can be contacted at shahnawaz.khan@thedailystar.net



It is not just female commuters who are affected, but female drivers too—meaning that the most obvious solution to the problems facing female commuters is rendered useless.

PHOTO: MD. RAHAT KABIR