

Women still unsafe at work

Why is it taking so long to implement High Court directive to stop sexual harassment?

More than a decade ago, the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association filed a Public Interest Litigation with the High Court, requesting guidelines to protect women and girls from sexual harassment in the workplace and educational institutions. After this, the court issued a directive that, if implemented properly, could have been a landmark moment in the struggle for women's rights in Bangladesh.

The High Court directive involved forming sexual harassment complaint committees at every organisation, which would then have to submit annual compliance reports to the government on said guidelines. In a country where there are still far too many obstacles to women's economic independence, the effective operation of such committees would have made all the difference in making workplaces safer and more inclusive.

Unfortunately, as is the case with too many well-meaning directives, guidelines and policies in Bangladesh, little has been done in terms of implementation. To this day, an overwhelming majority of government and private institutions have not formed these committees, and sexual harassment complaints in the workplace and in educational institutions are still swept under the rug – if women are able to make these complaints at all.

Recently, *The Daily Star* conducted interviews of 40 women working at different organisations, and found that 70 percent of these women had either faced physical, verbal, mental or cyber abuse in their existing or former workplace at the hands of their bosses, supervisors or colleagues, or knew other female colleagues who had. Of the women interviewed, 25 percent had been harassed by their own bosses, while 40 percent had been targeted by colleagues.

And most distressing of all – the report also found that more than 70 percent of the women who had been sexually harassed had not reported it at all due to fear of repercussions. In a majority of these workplaces, there was no sexual harassment committee that they could have reported the incidents to either.

The government has, time and again, reiterated its commitment to women's emancipation, and has also expressed its pride in the role that women played in the country's development journey. Why, then, are so many women facing sexual harassment, and are not even given a space to report that abuse and demand justice? The almost non-existent system of reporting sexual harassment complaints, coupled with the stigma of reporting abuse and the economy's recent downward spiral, means that women are even more likely to keep their heads down and suffer in silence instead of speaking out and risking their livelihoods. This situation is indefensible.

The government must show their commitment to creating a harassment-free work environment and enforce the High Court directive. They should begin with their own ministries and offices, and there should also be a focal authority responsible for brushing the dust off the directive and actually implementing it.

Yet another rough landing

Biman must improve its ground handling services, hold staff to account

It is quite disappointing that Biman Bangladesh Airlines, our national flag carrier, continues to make headlines for all the wrong reasons. Many incidents relating to its inefficiency and mismanagement – from making losses year after year to owing money to different organisations; from keeping new aircrafts underutilised to stopping its flights to several destinations; from providing substandard customer services to causing callous accidents at the grounds of Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport (HSIA) – have been reported in the media this year alone, its 50th year of service. The latest incident happened on November 17 at the HSIA where a ground handling equipment of Biman hit a Gulf Air Boeing 787, damaging the main body of the aircraft and putting it out of service.

While the Biman authorities have formed a committee to investigate the incident and said they would take action against those responsible for the mishap, we wonder if doing so is enough. Shouldn't they get to the root of the problem – which has arisen from its overall inefficiency and mismanagement – by holding its higher authorities accountable and by taking steps to stop such incidents from happening again? This is not the first time something like this has happened at the HSIA. Several such incidents took place in the past due to the carelessness of Biman's ground support staff. For instance, on April 10, a Boeing 777-300ER of Biman rammed into the carrier's Boeing 737-800 while being taken into the hangar. And not only were Biman's own aircrafts damaged in such accidents. Aircrafts of other foreign carriers have also been damaged due to Biman staffers' negligence in recent years – reportedly, not so long ago, two planes of Turkish Airlines were damaged in a similar manner.

It is because of Biman's poor reputation in ground and cargo handling services that the Civil Aviation Authority of Bangladesh (CAAB) has decided to appoint an international firm at the new third terminal of the airport for the job. The questions that need to be asked here are: are Biman's ground handling staff following standard operating procedures? Do the Biman authorities provide their staff with the necessary training? In order to prevent such negligence in the future, the government must hold Biman high-ups accountable for its overall inefficiency. And since Biman's image at home and abroad is seriously being harmed because of such callousness, it urgently needs to make changes. The good news is, Biman has earned a record amount of revenue in the past couple of months. This makes us hopeful that it can actually do better if proper plans and policies are taken and implemented, and corruption, irregularities and mismanagement inside the organisation are checked.

Why do men have reservations about women's reserved seats?

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A local bus stops on the busy street of Dhaka's New Market area. Waiting commuters flock to the gate even though the bus is packed. For a woman in the city, it is a struggle to squeeze herself into the bus through the crowd. What adds to the distress is finding the seats reserved for women occupied by, most often, men.

In Dhaka, local buses are the cheapest and one of the most common ways of getting around. Each bus is supposed to have a certain number of seats allocated for women passengers, but said passengers often find men occupying those seats. Why do men do so, and why do women feel reluctant to reclaim the seats reserved for them? As part of a study, we asked a few regular commuters, both male and female, about their perspectives and experiences regarding this issue.

As per the Road Transport Act, 30 percent of the seats in the local public transportation systems in Bangladesh must be reserved for women, children, and persons with disabilities. This generally results in six reserved seats in a 27-seater bus and nine reserved seats in a 44-seater one. But in reality,

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these rules are hardly maintained. Passengers generally aren't aware of the exact number of reserved seats as it varies across buses. The sticker mentioning the number of reserved seats is often barely visible, and the correct ratio is never maintained.

The law also stipulates punishment of one-month imprisonment, a Tk5,000 fine or both for unauthorised occupation of reserved seats in public transport. But most people are not aware of this provision, and its application is almost unheard of.

When we asked male commuters why they occupied seats reserved for

women, one of the most common responses was the inadequate number of buses compared to the volume of passengers. Our respondents argued that after a tiring day at work, when a person gets on a bus after patiently waiting in a long line in Dhaka's polluted, hot and humid weather, they deserve to sit on a seat that they find



Fear of inappropriate comments often keep most women commuters from claiming the seats reserved for them in public buses.

PHOTO: STAR

empty and not leave it for a woman who just stepped in. Their viewpoint, however, was not considerate of the struggles of the woman who seemed to “just step in.”

Passengers also find the reserved seats to be at the most convenient spot – closest to the gate. Public transportation in Dhaka typically stops for a short period, and the stoppages are not adequately maintained. Most reserved seats are in the front rows and located either behind or on the left of the driver's seat. It is much easier for commuters to board and exit a crowded bus quickly if they sit in the reserved seats – which men often prioritise over women's necessities.

Whenever the reserved seats are occupied by male passengers, the female passengers rarely retaliate. Still, they generally stand close to the reserved seats. It shows that they are aware of the space they deserve but do not speak out. That's because the men rarely comply with their requests, and the bus conductors are indifferent

worth dealing with on a regular basis.

When female passengers do ask for their seats, they are met with a “gender equality” argument. Comments such as “Why do these women want equality and reserved seats at the same time” are common. Male passengers also raise the “equal fare” argument, suggesting that females should adjust to standing when all the seats are taken, just like their male counterparts.

That is not to say that men are not aware of women's vulnerabilities in public transport. The risk of sexual harassment in public transport and the discomfort of standing with a group of men is well-understood. Sadly, even that doesn't effect consideration.

It is hard to say what changes would allow female commuters to reclaim their reserved bus seats. Some argue for strict enforcement of the existing laws. However, given our patriarchal mindsets, there is a chance that women will face backlash from men if the latter are penalised. The applicability and feasibility of the law

short supply and not generate enough profit. Therefore, missing one bus would mean waiting a long time to get another. And if a woman is unable to take a women-only bus and decides to get on a regular bus, rest assured that she will face some backlash there.

The arguments by male passengers may or may not seem justified. It is, however, clear that at times of necessity, considerations of equity and empathy towards women become secondary. The societal norms and culture that allow men to occupy women's seats also prevent women from protesting and reclaiming them. The same patriarchal system gives the privilege to men to claim convenience and comfort over ensuring women's safety and security. But we should not blame only patriarchy. The limited supply of public transport also forces commuters to be competitive. Unless we bring some constructive solutions to ensure better public arrangements for both men and women, men will remain inconsiderate of the perils women face every day.

‘Hypocrite reader – my twin – my brother!’



BLOWIN' IN THE WIND
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Exactly a century ago, the English modernist poet Thomas Stearns Eliot wrote *The Waste Land*. He structured the poem as a collection of fragmented dramatic monologues, “a heap of broken images.” Waking up from the horror of the Great War, no total picture of life was available to him. He reflected on the fragmentary ruins of Europe with symptoms of death all around. For him, the once-great civilisation was dying and was guilty of ennui – a personification of apathy and inactivity. He found his fellow creatures blooming like lilacs on a graveyard who were not willing to endure the pains and efforts needed for a change. In one of the most memorable lines, Eliot quotes the French poet Charles Baudelaire to warn his readers not to think of themselves as morally superior to others. We all have our flaws, and we all have contributed to the breakdown of the system. He ends the first section by stating, “Hypocrite reader – my twin – my brother!”

I mention *The Waste Land* to reflect on the West and its hypocrisy that we have all witnessed in recent weeks. Thanks largely to the Western media, the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar has been in the eye of the storm. Ever since the Gulf state won the bid to host the biggest show on Earth, the massive moral industry has been finding

faults in the way it is organising the event. Traditional “football fortresses like Barcelona and Berlin are turning their backs on the World Cup” while “Germany, Spain, France and Belgium are refusing to show any World Cup games” (*Daily Mail*). BBC has relegated the live-streaming to a red button option. Why? They accuse the Qatari government of bribing FIFA for getting the nomination in the first place, of using migrant workers to build the infrastructure ever since the nomination, leading to the death of over 6,500 people, and of maintaining the death penalty for homosexuality.

Gianni Infantino, the president of the international football association, lashed out against the West for their hypocrisy, reminding his fellow brothers that “for what we Europeans have been doing for the last 3,000 years, we should apologise for the next 3,000 years before starting to give moral lessons to people.” Infantino reminded the press that the Western business companies who operated in Qatar had done nothing to improve the quality of the migrant workers' lives.

Western governments have continued to procure natural gas and oil from Qatar while their media outlets unleashed their political and moral bombast on human rights. Qatar's track record in exploiting

its migrant workers is no different from many parts of the world. A law enacted in 2017 to protect workers has helped little to stem the rot. Then again, when we hear that many of the construction projects were implemented by non-Qatari firms, Infantino scores a point. The expat consultants receive attractive pay packages with relocation and tax-free benefits. In contrast, migrant

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workers from Bangladesh, India, Nepal or Sri Lanka have to pay for their recruitment. Those in white collar jobs had the choice of doing something for the ones in blue collars. Our hypocritical brothers did not speak then. And they are not asking their fellow friends to hold their tongues either.

For a country like Bangladesh, which depends a lot on its migrant workers for remittance, the gala event offered an opportunity when Qatar spent over USD 229 billion to build its infrastructure. The big question will be how to reengage these workers who might be redundant now that this construction mania is over. Will the West intervene? Very unlikely so. It is the same West that lectures us on the plight of the displaced Rohingyas

in the refugee camps and has no qualms over the floating migrants in the Mediterranean. As for the LGBTQ issue, only 33 countries have legalised same-sex marriage. Why single out a nation, then?

Now that the event has tabled all its major teams, football is finally taking the centre stage. We have already seen some major upsets where former champions like Argentina and Germany have tasted defeat to their Asian counterparts. This is a perfect response to the Eurocentric and Orientalist languages that we have experienced. “The desert World Cup,” according to BBC, is “blighted by a dust storm of controversy.” Another British tabloid headlined, “Grunting camels outside England's Qatar HQ leave team facing sleepless nights.” Earlier, another news report complained that the event in Qatar “robbed us of a summer of football.” A German TV complained about the carbon footprints due to the number of air conditioners and flights bringing in visitors for the games.

Ironically, Europe depends a lot on the energy supply from Gulf states – including Qatar – to withstand the winter of discontent that is looming large due to the Russia-Ukraine war. Yet, the underlying tone of Europe has been you *cannot buy everything, not “our” football*. They probably forget that this is not UEFA; the World Cup is international. In the opening ceremony, Morgan Freeman, who narrated the segment “The Calling,” rightly reminded the crowd, “We gather here as one big tribe and Earth is the tent we all live in.”

We need a long soul-searching to set our moral standards for us, for our twins, and for our brothers (and sisters).