Online grooming and the fight to protect our children

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Grooming of minors by paedophilic adults seems to be an overlooked yet pressing societal anomaly, especially with children's increased access to the internet. Despite their fair share of boons, social media platforms and messaging apps harbour a safe haven for predators that prey on innocent victims and exploit their trust in the most sinister ways. We have periodically seen incidents happen across Bangladesh that raise concern over this issue.

Grooming is a calculated process through which predators establish emotional connections with minors, often masquerading as a friend, mentor or admirer. Through the art of deception and sophisticated manipulation tactics, the child—who, more often than not, is a female—is moulded to be a puppet, dancing to the tunes of the puppet-master, driving the child to think and act in ways that serve the evil purpose of her groomer—usually male. The defenceless victim is made to believe that her predator is a chivalrous knight in shining armour, saving her, the damsel in distress, from difficult circumstances with the purest of intentions. These predicaments could be the feeling of being unloved at home due to the birth of a younger sibling or due to parents' outbursts, anger management issues, and harsh punishment methods. They can also be the feeling of inadequacy at school or deep-rooted insecurities, the feeling of loneliness due to not having friends as a result of being a victim of bullies, etc, all of which are significant challenges in a child's life, making them more vulnerable and therefore an easy target.

In most cases, victims are led to believe that they are engaging in consensual relationships, often under false promises of marriage. The victim is made to keep the predator's paedophilic conduct a secret, because the world will supposedly conspire against them and tear them apart. In other cases, these deviants may threaten or gaslight their victims into silence who are unable to recognise the abuse for what it is. Since minors cannot legally consent, such exploitation constitutes a grave violation of their rights. Tragically, many victims don't come forward due to fear, shame or trauma, allowing the cycle of abuse to continue unchecked.

It is high time for parents to take an active role in protecting their children from the predators that lurk in the shadows of a virtual realm, and this can only be ensured through frank, open, and non-judgemental communication, giving children a safe space to share uncomfortable encounters and educating them on the dangers of interacting with strangers on the internet. Needless to say, implementing reasonable restrictions on the usage of social media and signing them up for after-school programmes and extracurricular activities or helping them pick up new hobbies can help mitigate exposure to potential threats.

FILE VISUAL: **MAHIYA TABASSUM**

Instead of focusing on symptomatic treatment, it is important to eliminate the root cause of the ailment itself. These are medical terms, but I like to view the crisis as an epidemic. Sustainable change would require changing systems. Stakeholders would need to partner up to make changes in policies, procedures and existing social structures. This would necessitate a commitment to eliminating obstacles that come in the way of the well-being of pre-teens and teenagers who are prone to becoming prey to predators. It is important for stakeholders to empathise with children who have been through the ordeal, and to be aware that something has gone fundamentally wrong for some children to have been pushed into a scary rabbit hole. It would require competence to assess problematic patterns, based on qualitative and quantitative data as well as through observation, that have led to this crisis. These sensibilities will allow advocates to initiate a journey towards common, action-oriented goals. The co-labouring process of stakeholders will also allow the identification of the loopholes in the school system and curriculum, so that immediate preventive measures can be taken.

During goal-setting, perhaps the following can be taken into consideration: i) schools should integrate age-appropriate education on cybersecurity, consent, grooming awareness, etc into the curriculum; ii) the education ministry can source materials (printed or audio-visual) on the topic, which schools can use effectively; iii) stakeholders should plan and execute campaigns at school premises, which must include the involvement of parents, e.g. organising workshops for parents, where they are educated on how to speak to children about predators and how to detect the red flags; and iv) regular monitoring of the effect of the implemented programmes can be done through feedback loops from teachers, parents, and student surveys conducted by school authorities.

We must stop pointing fingers at child victims and shaming them, which worsens the problem by enabling paedophiles and predators. In fact, when we as a society shift the blame to the reprehensible groomers, victims will feel less ashamed or afraid to report their abusers. Survivors may then have the courage to speak as ambassadors at school premises, during various awareness campaigns. Besides punishing the perpetrators to ensure justice, it is important to root out the problem through the joint efforts of parents, educators, school administrators, the education ministry, other stakeholders, and the community at large, so that together, we can build a protective environment where children can grow without the looming threat of exploitation.

To solve Dhaka's commuting crisis, prioritise improving public transport

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The challenges that commuters face while travelling in Dhaka is nothing new. With nearly 2.4 crore of residents, the city has been experiencing crippling traffic that caused a loss of more than 80 lakh work hours daily in 2023. It also costs commuters an average of $4 daily in lost productivity and exacerbates air pollution, posing significant public health risks. The issue stems from a significant gap between an underfunded public transport system and the soaring number of private vehicles. The elevated Dhaka metro rail transports about three lakh passengers daily, but this capacity is inadequate for the overall demand, underscoring the urgent need to enhance public transport infrastructure in the capital city. The current piecemeal solutions have failed to rectify this imbalance.

Dhaka's commuting crisis stems from an overreliance on private vehicles and a lack of awareness about rail-based public transport. A city its size should allocate 25 percent of its land to roads, but it only dedicates seven to eight percent, with a mere three percent for public and heavy vehicles. This discrepancy leads to severe mobility challenges. The rising number of private vehicles exacerbates the problem. In 2024, Dhaka recorded 62.6 lakh vehicles, including 45.8 lakh motorcycles, while only 1,516 new buses were registered during the same time frame. This imbalance has led to chronic traffic congestion, with vehicle speeds plummeting to just seven kilometres per hour.

The public transport system suffers from inefficiencies primarily due to a limited coverage that leaves many peripheral neighbourhoods without direct bus access. The Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) indicates that Dhaka needs 7,043 buses and minibuses on 110 routes, but only 4,500 are operational—two-thirds of the required fleet. This gap leads to longer wait times as buses operate irregularly. Furthermore, the ageing and poorly maintained buses have frequent breakdowns and delays. Bus stops and terminals are often in disrepair and lack basic amenities, undermining service reliability and safety.

The rise in private vehicle ownership is fuelled by economic growth, urbanisation, and cultural shifts favouring personal transport. As car ownership rises, Dhaka's limited road infrastructure struggles to accommodate the increasing number of vehicles, leading to chronic congestion. Commuters spend 46 minutes every two hours daily in traffic. This inefficiency worsens environmental issues, too, as idling vehicles contribute to air pollution and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

Dhaka's public transport infrastructure inadequacy is exacerbated by poor integration of land use planning and transport development. Transport authorities like the Dhaka Transport Coordination Authority (DTCA) and the BRTA deal with challenges such as insufficient staffing, lack of skilled personnel, and poor inter-agency coordination. These systemic issues hinder effective decision-making and the implementation of essential transport projects. Additionally, vested interest groups influence the allocation of funds, leading to inadequate investment in public transport. Resources are often dispersed, resulting in fragmented development efforts that fail to address the city's comprehensive transport needs. Ongoing mass transit projects such as the Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) and Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) have not kept pace with population growth and traffic demands, continuing the reliance on private vehicles. Current policies also fail to address the environmental impacts of rising vehicle emissions and air pollution, and measures are lacking to mitigate these challenges.

From a social welfare standpoint, public transport offers affordable mobility for all, reducing income and location-based disparities. This aligns with redistributive policy theories as investing in public transport can yield greater societal benefits than prioritising private vehicle ownership. Public transport systems are also more efficient, accommodating more passengers per vehicle, thus decreasing the number of vehicles on the road and enhancing travel efficiency. It generally costs less than owning a private vehicle, which involves expenses like fuel, maintenance, and parking. For many low-income households, public transport is a less burdensome option for daily commutes, leading to an improved quality of life and greater economic stability.

Public transport is vital for promoting environmental responsibility as well. By reducing the number of private vehicles, it helps lower traffic congestion, pollution levels, and carbon footprints. With the adoption of eco-friendly technologies, such as electric buses and trains, modern public transport systems are further minimising their environmental impact.

Significant improvements to the public transport system are essential for reducing car ownership and usage in Dhaka. Model predictions indicate that households with two cars could see ownership decline by 5.88 percent and usage decrease by 15.22 percent, resulting in a 15 percent reduction in emissions and fuel consumption. To achieve this, Dhaka must prioritise investment in a robust public transport system, expand operational routes to alleviate pressure on the system, and reduce reliance on private vehicles. A comprehensive study to identify underserved areas and expand service accordingly can significantly improve accessibility.

The Institute for Transport and Development Policy recommends upgrading the bus fleet and infrastructure to enhance accessibility, traffic flow, and emissions reduction. Introducing newer, more efficient vehicles can improve reliability and safety, while dedicated bus lanes, improved bus stops, and better traffic management systems can streamline operations and encourage public transport use. Policies to discourage private vehicle use are equally critical. Implementing congestion pricing, as successfully demonstrated in cities like London, Stockholm, and Singapore, can mitigate traffic by imposing fees on vehicles in high-demand areas.

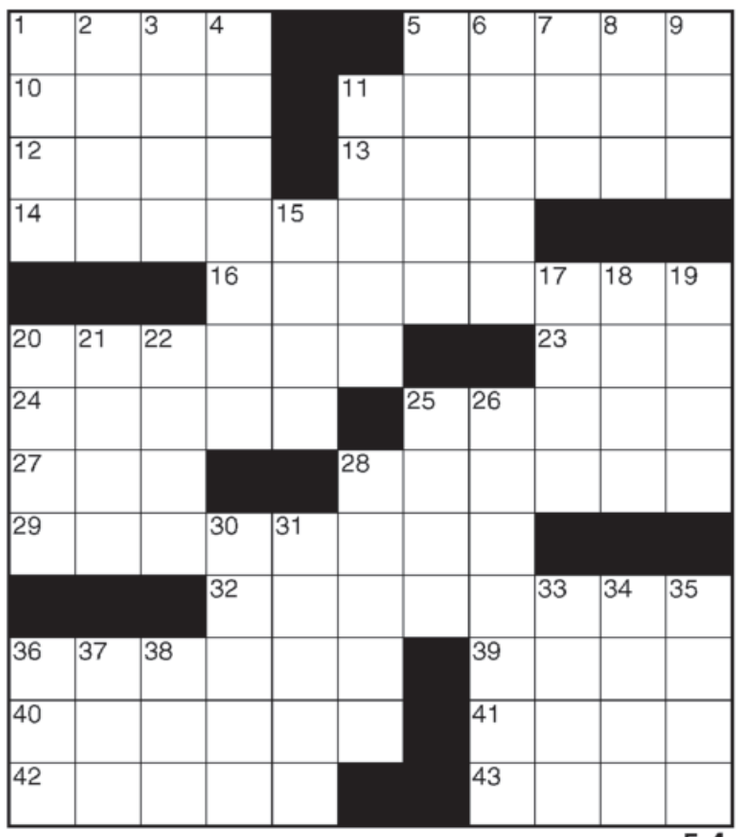
Public awareness campaigns are vital for shifting perceptions of public transportation. Many commuters in Dhaka view buses as unreliable and overcrowded. Highlighting the economic and environmental benefits of an improved system can encourage greater public transport usage and reduce dependency on private vehicles.

Addressing Dhaka's public transport challenges requires a comprehensive approach that emphasises coordinated planning, institutional capacity-building, and increased investment in infrastructure. By prioritising public transportation, upgrading infrastructure, and regulating private vehicle use, the city can develop a more equitable, efficient, and sustainable transportation system. Future road network performance can be further enhanced through initiatives like updating and implementing the Strategic Transport Plan (STP) for the Greater Dhaka Area (GDA).

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Running pros
5 Low card
10 Overlook
11 Sanity
12 Doll cry
13 Brought in
14 "Please explain"
16 Subtle pitch
20 Shows pride
23 Homer's bartending pal
24 Pens for hens
25 Relinquish
27 In the past
28 Horse restraint
29 Libertine
32 Battery
36 Second drink
39 District
40 Ring islands
41 Alley targets
42 Price additions
43 "Get lost!"

DOWN
1 Splendor
2 General Bradley
3 Peru's capital
4 Doesn't go to bed
5 Inflicted
6 Some nobles
7 SEALS org.
8 Runner Sebastian
9 Cut off
11 Sailing hazards
15 Nursery group
17 Give off
18 Valentine word
19 Lewd look
20 Surgery memento
21 Forum wear
22 Corner piece
25 Mural spot
26 WHAT THIS CLUE IS IN
28 Shoe parts
30 Submit taxes online
31 Ship bodies
33 Rocker Clapton
34 Dunham of "Girls"
35 Final
36 Informer
37 Letter after zeta
38 Sly one



5-4

FRIDAY'S ANSWERS

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