Female drivers often become a spectacle, being at the receiving end of unwanted attention, commentary, and even intimidation. While the scenario is relatively better in certain affluent regions inside Dhaka, challenges are far more harrowing in other parts of the country.
PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

The challenges female drivers face in Bangladesh

In addition to all these setbacks, female drivers are constantly required to be on guard for their safety. For instance, the absence of proper parking spaces often creates significant security concerns for female drivers. Many hesitate to park in isolated areas, fearing harassment or worse. A great number of female drivers also refrain from using ride-sharing services like Uber as a source of possible income.

PUNOMI RAHMAN TITIR

Picture this: a woman steers her way through gridlocked Dhaka traffic as ripples of turning heads follow in her wake. Curious glances, some fleeting and others lingering, turn instinctively — a few drawn from admiration, others laced with scepticism. The hum of engines and the cacophony of honking horns momentarily seem to pause as passing drivers, pedestrians, and rickshaw pullers steal a glance, as though the sight of a woman in control of the wheel is something otherworldly, something to behold.

This is a stark reality that countless women in Bangladesh encounter every day. Despite an increasing number of female drivers gaining visibility over time, the streets still prevalently reflect a scene of male dominance. For many women, driving is not just about navigating the roads, but the need to overcome pervasive societal biases while grappling with safety concerns.

Bushra Tabassum, a senior HR executive at an IT firm, has been behind the wheel for the past seven years. She acknowledges the common assumption that female drivers are incompetent, which initially unsettled her. "People are adamant that women are bad drivers," she says. "But I've learned to disregard it. Even my own friends doubted my abilities before witnessing my driving firsthand."

Bushra recounts facing a constant barrage of unfair accusations on the road. "Accidents often result in immediate blame being directed towards me, regardless of culpability," she says. "But I always speak up and confront any attempt to shift responsibility, be it from a male driver or a rickshaw puller."

However, for many, such has not been the case.

Despite holding a driver's license since 2016, Rebeka Tanji Tania, Assistant Professor of Computer Science and Engineering at BGMEA University of Fashion & Technology (BUFT), still struggles to muster the confidence to drive on her own. "Navigating the roads alongside male drivers requires being loud, assertive, and ready to defend oneself against unwarranted blame. In our country, traffic regulations are loosely implemented, and everyone drives however they please. Male drivers can easily assert control on the streets by shouting or swearing to tackle directed accusations because people are so used to it. But for me, that isn't quite the option," she speculates on her hesitancy.

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"While driving inside Cumilla district, I noticed that autorickshaw drivers would pause in the middle of the road, eventually leading to clogged traffic. They would blatantly stare at me in disbelief, that a woman is capable of steering the wheel, and even female passengers shared the same incredulous gaze. I have had similar experiences while driving in Mohammadpur as well," Mahamuda Peya, a former employee of bKash and British American Tobacco, shares.

In Bangladesh, the lack of road safety awareness poses risks to all drivers, but for women, the challenges are amplified. Women are generally considered safer drivers than men, based on the ratio of road accidents accounted for by either group. However, the constant scrutiny that they encounter from outsiders plays as an external factor in interrupting their concentration while driving.

Sarmily Sarker, Professor of Fashion Design at BUFT, has been driving in Bangladesh and abroad for almost a decade. Her endeavour began with riding a bicycle, then switching to a scooter during her student years, before she eventually bought a car. Reflecting on the erratic nature of Dhaka's streets, she states, "People are remarkably unbothered about road safety. For instance, when I'm driving at high speed, pedestrians often raise a hand at the last moment and step onto the road, expecting traffic to pause instantaneously. It is incredibly difficult to halt on such short notice, and if an accident occurs, the blame inevitably falls on the driver. But people don't seem to realise the nuances."

In addition to all these setbacks, female drivers are constantly required to be on guard for their safety. For instance, the absence of proper parking spaces often creates significant security concerns for female drivers. Many hesitate to park in isolated areas, fearing harassment or worse. A great number of female drivers also refrain from using ride-sharing services like Uber as a source of possible income.

"Some areas are unsafe to go to alone, and people always try to create more problems for female drivers," Bushra laments. She recalls a distressing experience: "One day, I was driving amidst heavy rainfall, and a car in front of me suddenly hit brakes. A man stepped out of the vehicle and tried to get inside my car. Since I was alone, I didn't take any risks. He lingered outside for a while, but I quickly drove away."

Similarly, Peya also recounts having to endure several unfortunate occurrences where she was subjected to verbal persecution by the mass public. Remembering one such incident, she says, "While reversing out of a parking space, my car once crashed into another. Within minutes, a crowd gathered, and a group of bikers began insisting that the female driver's license be checked."

She continues, "As the damage was significant on both ends, the police soon intervened. I refused to resolve because I was not at fault and demanded compensation. What shocked me most was that the officer reviewed the man's driving license immediately upon arrival, yet before that, the mob had only pressured me to show mine. I stood my ground and made it clear that they had no authority to demand my license. If I had to show mine, then so should the other person."

The rise in mob violence and frequent attacks on women heightens fears for female drivers. While speaking to our respondents, we found some of them expressing grave concern over the worsening state of public security in the country. Following recent events, many women consider themselves prone to rising threats of violence, further marginalising them. On top of that, frequent incidents of mugging and robbery flag them as easy targets and further fuel their unease about driving alone.

Such concerns are not unfounded. Women on the road continue to face an uphill battle, from deep-seated negative mindsets to pressing security threats. While their presence behind the wheel is gradually increasing, the truth is that female drivers regularly continue to face a myriad of issues. Their experiences vastly differ from that of their male counterparts, and almost never in a positive way. Therefore, without improvised law and order and discernible changes in societal attitude, female drivers are constrained to battle against the challenges that continue to encumber them.

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Nostalgia, memory, and the appeal of physical media in a digital world

As time moved on, cassettes and CDs took over, filling shelves and car dashboards, making music portable and personal. Letters and postcards, meanwhile, carried handwritten warmth, connecting hearts across distances in a way no text message ever could.

OHONA ANJUM

When cleaning my room, I often find myself stumbling across little pieces of my childhood.

A dusty DVD, faded Eid card, old diaries filled with doodles and half-written thoughts, and a broken video game controller. Each one pulls me into a daydream. I get caught up going through them all, flipping through the pages of my diaries, reading old notes, and wondering where all the time went.

Back then, I loved collecting these things. Now, however, it feels like they have been quietly collecting pieces of me all these years.

I've been writing since I was a child, so naturally, my shelves and drawers became an archive of my past life, filled with friends, stories, and memories like nothing else. I didn't realise it at the time, but this personal collection became the driveway of my life. The place where I first understood that I wanted to be a writer. Every scrap of paper, every diary entry, and every little keepsake was a reflection of how much I loved telling stories.

Looking back, it feels like those objects were not clutter but a foundation for the person I've grown into.

In an increasingly digital world, the tactile experience of holding a cherished piece of physical media is an art form in and of itself. There's something uniquely grounding about having an object in your hands that carries and tells a story – a piece of the past that feels alive. Decades ago, physical media was not an option; it was the heart of how people engaged with art, music, and literature. Vinyl records were household staples during the 70s and 80s. Dropping the needle onto a record offered an experience – a moment of ritual that brought sound and soul together.

As time moved on, cassettes and CDs took over, filling shelves and car dashboards, making music portable and personal. Letters and postcards, meanwhile, carried handwritten warmth, connecting hearts across distances in a way no text message ever could.

ILLUSTRATION: ADRITA ZAIMA ISLAM

Growing up, I often stumbled across pieces of this world tucked away in the corners of my family's archives. Old CDs of Tagore's songs. Books from my uncles' childhoods, their pages filled with pencil marks. Letters were my favorites – carefully folded and yellowed with age, but bursting with the warmth from a time I had only heard about in stories.

These objects became bridges to a past I felt connected to, even if I hadn't lived it. Even films had a different magic back then. VHS tapes and DVDs became prized possessions, with carefully curated collections lining living rooms. Watching a movie was about choosing a beloved film from your collection, placing it in the player, and enjoying the experience with intention.

To many, collections are personal archives. They are reflections of tastes and values, and, to this day, the beauty of those tangible experiences remains.

But with the rise of digital media, much of this culture has shifted. The convenience of streaming services and e-books has made physical media feel obsolete to some. Yet, there's a growing realisation that something gets lost in the process. Digital files lack the warmth of a handwritten letter, the joy of finding a rare vinyl in a second-hand shop, or the nostalgia of flipping through an old photo album. Physical media brings a sense of grounding in a world that often feels too fast and intangible.

Ohona Anjum *writes, rhymes, and studies English literature.*

Mindless littering and our inability to keep our streets clean

Teaching someone the collective responsibility of keeping a city clean feels like trying to empty the Buriganga with a teacup. The response is always the same, a phrase that makes me angry—Everyone else does it. As if filth were a democracy, as if participation were mandatory.

AZRA HUMAYRA

Stuck in traffic, my uncle—a brilliant doctor, whose mind expands well beyond my reach—recently returned from a medical course in Singapore and leaned back in his seat, speaking about the city-state's stringent laws. Singapore, he said, functioned like a well-oiled machine. No one littered there; the mere thought of tossing a wrapper on the ground came with the consequence of a thousand-dollar fine. He spoke with the kind of reverence usually reserved for holy sites. And then, mid-sentence, without so much as a pause, he rolled down the window and flung something out onto the Dhaka streets. I blinked. Had I imagined it? The irony hung between us. Perhaps it was habit, muscle memory, or the subconscious override of years spent knowing there was no price to pay for carelessness.

Such is the case with the people of Bangladesh. One afternoon on my university bus, I watched a girl unwrap a snack, eat it, then—without hesitation, without even a flicker of awareness—crumple the

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

empty packet and toss it out the window. The motion was instinctual, as if the streets of Dhaka were nothing more than an extension of the bin, she didn't feel the need to use. I couldn't help myself—I asked if she thought what she had just done was right. She looked startled, mumbled an apology, but I knew, with absolute certainty, that the city would see more litter from her hands. A good education, it turns out, does little to correct bad habits.

The streets would absorb it all, as they always did, as if this was simply how things were meant to be.

It's a subtle kind of disillusionment—watching children toss wrappers onto the street while their parents, unfazed, look straight ahead. There's no reprimand, no moment of correction, because, of course, the parents do the same. I try to be a nuisance about it, a small disruption in the rhythm of their indifference, but I rarely succeed. Teaching someone the collective responsibility of keeping a city clean feels like trying to empty the Buriganga with a teacup. The response is always the same, a phrase that makes me angry—Everyone else does it. As if filth were a democracy, as if participation were mandatory.

If everyone is complicit in turning the streets into a wasteland, why rush to add to the ruin? My bag, overstuffed with receipts, wrappers, and the occasional stray bottle cap, resents me for making it double as a dustbin. But I carry my trash like a quiet rebellion, a small defiance against the tide of indifference. At least the streets have no reason to curse my name.

"The people of this country will never change," someone declares, punctuating the thought with a spit onto the pavement. The irony is almost too perfect. It's astonishing—the ease with which people refuse to alter the smallest of habits while demanding transformation on a grand scale. Some, in a feat of mental gymnastics, even absolve themselves entirely saying, at least this gives the cleaners something to do. As if the dignity of labour must include scraping their discarded wrappers off the asphalt. As if cleaners have nothing more pressing to tend to than the trail of thoughtlessness left in their wake.

"Everyone else is doing it"—the easiest excuse for avoiding responsibility. It suggests that if enough people do something wrong, it somehow stops being wrong. But litter doesn't disappear just because many hands have thrown it; it piles up, choking drains, cluttering streets, and making the city harder to live in. If anything, seeing others litter should make us more determined not to. The excuse also shifts blame onto an invisible crowd, as if the problem exists in the abstract, never in the individual act of tossing a wrapper onto the pavement. Change has to start somewhere, and refusing to contribute to the mess is as good a place as any.

Before praising the spotless streets of some distant, developed nation, perhaps the better question would be to ask: What am I doing to keep my own streets clean? It's easy to admire discipline from afar, to romanticise the strict fines and civic responsibility of another country, but the real work begins with the smallest, most inconvenient choices. Even if your bag groans under the weight of stray wrappers and receipts, even if you become that insufferable person who points out every careless toss, it's worth it. My family rolls their eyes at me, sighs when I refuse to let things slide, but they litter less. And in a city where change feels impossible, even the smallest shift feels like a big win.

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