

Women's safety in public transport: A case for the would-be city father

ZAM Khairuzzaman

In Dhaka, a woman travelling—whether walking on the street or using public transportation—faces a near-constant threat of sexual harassment. For the most marginalised women, this threat is even more acute and influences their daily movements: how they choose to travel, at what time of day, and with whom. A woman's ability to move freely and safely in her city has important implications for gender equity as a whole.

In cities all over the country, many girls and women feel unsafe being alone in the street. At some point in their life, many have had to, or will have to, face sexual harassment, abuse and violence, solely because they are women. Violence against women and girls cuts across lines of income, class, race, ethnic group, and residence. Physical, sexual and psychological violence can be a daily feature of women's interactions in their neighbourhoods, on public transport, in workplaces, schools, sports clubs, colleges, hospitals, and in social institutions. Unsafe spaces abound in cities and surrounding areas—deserted streets, dark lanes, isolated bus stops, or public toilets.

Urban environments offer greater anonymity to the perpetrators of violence against women and girls. Although not all women have been attacked or raped, all have most likely felt a sense of unease at some point.

In Dhaka, many women may have to restrict their movements or activities because they feel unsafe. The fear or threat of violence is an effective way of controlling women's activities. Fear and feeling unsafe are major obstacles to the empowerment of women.

Public transport networks must minimise the chances of women being threatened and attacked. Adequate lighting in housing areas and inner cities is also essential.

Recently, according to press reports, the ruling Awami League-nominated candidate for Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) mayoral by-polls, Atiqul Islam, has unveiled his election manifesto. He has promised to work to ensure a modern and active city if the people elect him in the upcoming DNCC by-polls scheduled to be held on February 28.

One of the promises of the ruling party-nominated candidate is that he would introduce franchise-based transport system on all DNCC roads. Any discussion on the reform of the transport system must include issues of safety for the women travellers. It can be recalled that 94 percent of women commuting in public transport have faced harassment in verbal, physical, and other forms in Dhaka city and elsewhere, according to a study conducted last year by BRAC.

The study titled “Roads Free from Sexual Harassment and Crash for Women”, conducted with assistance from BRAC University, also mentioned factors including lax implementation of laws, excessive crowds in the buses and weak or no monitoring (such as absence of close circuit cameras) as the major causes behind sexual harassment in roads and public transport especially in the buses.

In terms of localities, the study covered women from low- and lower-middle-income backgrounds in urban, peri-urban and rural areas, who commute by public transport and on foot to go to workplace and other destinations. The geographic areas covered in the research are Gazipur, Dhaka and Birulia of Savar Upazila in Dhaka district.

According to the research, 35 percent of respondents using public transport said they faced sexual harassment from males belonging to the age group of 19-35 years. Around 59 percent faced such harassment from the males who are 26-40 years old. The forms of sexual harassment experienced by the respondents included deliberate touching of the victim's chest and other parts of the body, pinching, standing too close to the victim and pushing, touching of hair of the victim, putting hand on their shoulder, touching their private parts, etc.

People who sexually harass women come from various tiers of society, age groups, and geographical areas, unveiling the pervasiveness and epidemic nature of this problem. Many women are forced to use public transportation due to the lack of options, leaving them susceptible to harassment.

So, the transport system must change. Cities can and should take on the responsibility of making their public transportation system safer for women. BNP has boycotted the DNCC by-polls, but others who remain in the mayoral race must pledge to work on the transport system once and if elected.

Awami League's Atiqul Islam, being a candidate of the ruling party, should especially come forward in this regard and incorporate women's safety in his election manifesto. There needs to be political will to drive real change in the transport sector. A safe city is a just city. This has particular relevance for women. Buses remain especially crucial to women belonging to lower middle class and poor women. Women have a much more varied pattern of movement like taking their kids to the doctor some mornings, then bring them to school before they go to work. Women use public transport more often. So unsafe transport not only causes them to change their modes of movement, it also reduces how many trips they make. This insecurity reduces household income, as inadequate transportation bars women from accessing their full educational and employment opportunities.

Women split their time between work and family commitments like taking care of children and elderly parents. The would-be city father should recognise this and take a plan to improve women's access to public transport. Women's safety and ease of movement should be the priority. Gender mainstreaming should become a force to reshape Dhaka city.