

“No one is safe in a public bus”: Debunking the Gender Myths of Sexual Harassment in Public Transports of Bangladesh

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Abstract

Sexual harassment (SH) remains a constant threat in public transports of Bangladesh with overwhelming costs at individual, social, and national levels. By employing an intricate gender and intersectional lens, this study has delved into the narratives of men and women to explore their multidimensional experiences of SH in public buses of Dhaka city. Drawing findings from four FGDs, the study grapples with a nuanced understanding of SH through challenging the dominant “male perpetrator-female victim” paradigm of gender violence. The findings encapsulate that multiple structures of power inequalities shape victim-perpetrator relationships in the specific context of public bus where gender interacts with other social markers (age, attire, religion, education, and disability) to bolster harassment within and across gender lines. Although the frequency of physical, sexual, and verbal abuse is higher against women, men’s experiences in these regards are far more complex due to the inadequate cultural understanding on “violence against men”. A range of visible and invisible structural factors including patriarchal values, gender norms, flawed legal system, poor transportation infrastructure and urban management exacerbate gender-specific risks of SH in public transports. This article contributes to the existing body of knowledge on SH, as well as, informs appropriate policy measures and interventions to foster transportation justice for everyone.

Keywords: gender, intersectionality, sexual harassment, public bus, male victims.

1. Point of Departure

Public transport is an essential contributing factor to economic sustainability, easy mobility, accessibility, affordability, and most importantly connectivity in the context of any country. Bangladesh, located in South-Asia, is one of the most densely populated countries in the world while Dhaka, the country's capital is one of the fastest-growing megacities (Yasir et al., 2022). Transport environment in this city is characterized by congestion and delays, inadequate traffic management, high accident rates, increasing air pollution problems, transport crisis, and unaffordable and inaccessible public transport for many people (Rahman, 2007). Dhaka's population, which has grown exponentially over decades, primarily relies on public transportation for daily commutes (Rahman, 2010). "Public transport" in Bangladesh comprises a wide variety of modes including road, railway, air and water means (Islam and Hoque, 2020). Dhaka city is inhabited by more than 20 million people (BBS, 2022), predominantly representing the middle and lower income groups, where public bus has emerged as the most popular mode of transportation due to its cheap fares, high passenger capacity, and wider availability than other vehicles (Mahmud and Haque, 2008). People of different age, gender, religion, and occupational groups use public buses on daily basis for educational, work, recreational, and other purposes (Rahman, 2010; Sajin, 2021).

Despite the huge importance of public transport in everyday city life, gender violence remains a constant threat, with negative effects looming on the physical and psychological safety of passengers and staff (Kabir and Islam, 2023). Public buses offer cheaper rides, but are less regulated, and potentially a dangerous place for sexual harassment (SH) (King et al., 2021). SH is a specific form of gender violence that includes any unwanted act that disturbs a person, such as unwanted touches, facial expressions, or the use of verbal or non-verbal acts that offend a person (Ford and Ivancic, 2020). SH can be more pervasive when the transport is moving making it difficult for the victim to flee or escape (Islam and Hoque, 2020). It can be occurred against any person, irrespective of age, gender, and other social identities (Khan and Halder, 2022). SH is a blatant manifestation of gender discrimination that affects men and women differently (Belanter et al 2020). There is a wide array of existing research documenting how SH is likely to cause long term moral, psychological, and physical damages to victims, eventually hampering their daily activities, fundamental rights, human agency, and capabilities to fully participate in public life (Athuman, 2023; Ball and Wesson, 2017; Gautam et al., 2019; Pina et al., 2009; Tripathi et al., 2017; Willness et al., 2007).

SH has become an integral problem in public spheres of Bangladeshi society, including educational institutions, workplaces, streets, shopping malls, digital media, and transports (Azad 2019; Yasir et al., 2022). Its alarming spike in public transports (especially rape and assault) has attracted immense media attention generating a newfound interest among academicians and development thinkers to research this topic (Bailey, 2023). Over the years, a range of studies have clearly captured the widespread prevalence, deep-seated factors, and multidimensional outcomes of SH against women in public buses of Bangladesh (Azad 2019; Dipu and Ferdous, 2019; Haque and Akter, 2022; Kabir and Islam, 2023; Khan and Halder, 2022; King et al., 2021; Mazumder and Pokharel, 2018; Mozammel and Sumi, 2019; Rahmna, 2010; Yasir et al., 2022; Zinia et al., 2021). These studies indicate, more than

90% women and girls face SH on a public transit, in forms of physical, sexual, or verbal acts, by men of all ages. By enforcing such narrative, they reproduce the dominant paradigm of male perpetrators and female victims in gender violence research. Informed by the essentialist notions of gender, they reduce gender-based violence to a unidimensional act of male violence on female body or sexuality, without attention to how violence can be perpetrated within as well as across gender lines (i.e. by both males and females on both males and females). To our knowledge, only Khan (2017) points out an upward trend of SH against men in the form of “adam-teasing” in public spheres of Bangladesh.

Western studies have grappled with more complex scenarios of gender violence in public sphere (not limited to transportation), moving beyond the notions of male perpetrators and female victims (Dunne et al., 2006; Leach et al., 2014). Berdahl, et al, (1996) pioneered in discovering that, with women’s growing power to influence or dominate men, the occurrence of SH against males has climbed. Stemple et al. (2014) observed similar patterns in public spheres of United States and detected how reliance on gender stereotypes, outdated definitions, and methodological biases perpetuate misperceptions about men’s victimization. Male victims face additional challenges than female victims in voicing out their problems due to social attitudes and stereotypes of masculinity (Malik and Nadda, 2019). Men with hyper-masculine attitudes are less likely to admit their victimization, especially in case of male-male violence (Stockdale et al., 2004). Lack of understanding on female-to-male and male-to-male harassment can create overwhelming costs at individual, familial, and societal levels (Spencer and Barnett, 2011).

In light of above discussion, our study considers SH in public transport as a form of gender violence rooted in complex gender dynamics. By considering gender as a fluid concept, we will present the multidimensionality of SH experiences drawing on primary data from focused group discussions. Public transportation is a critical area of development and social justice, with varying consequences for men, women, and wider society. Yet, SH in this domain remains one of the least reported forms crimes in Bangladesh (Yasir, et al., 2022). This pronounced culture of silence is only likely to soar the violence prevalence in future. Victims (irrespective of age or gender) who are left without proper help or rehabilitation are likely to turn aggressive in personal lives, a threatening condition for everyone around them (Malik and Nadda, 2019; Spencer and Barnett, 2011; Stemple et al., 2014). Lack of evidence and contextual understanding on how gender and other social identities intersect with each other and lead to multidimensional victimhood for both men and women are hampering our pathways towards effective policy interventions and implementation. This study tends to fill this gap by capturing the unheard voices of not only women but also men from different social groups. The outcomes will help to foster transportation justice and the rights of everyone to travel safely on public buses.

2. Conceptual Preview

Farley (1978) and MacKinnon (1979) pioneered the usage of the term “sexual harassment” in feminist scholarship of gender violence. The early contributions from Fitzgerald and colleagues (1997) define SH as an unwanted sex-related behavior, appraised by the victims (mainly women) as offensive, exceeding their resources, and menacing their wellbeing. Berdahl (2007)’s latest perspective suggests SH as a range of behaviors that

derogate, demean, degrade, or humiliate women based on their sex. The initial academic works on SH were either gender blind or women focused; reinforcing the notions on how men assert power over women's mind and body through sexual violence. (Laniya 2005; Macmillan et al., 2000; Tuerkheimer, 1997).

The tripartite model, introduced in the mid-1990s, provided a leading breakthrough in the academic field of SH. The model articulates that any person can become a victim of SH due to their gender identity (Gelfand et al., 1995), and further states that SH consists of three intertwined but distinct phenomena: unwanted sexual attention, sexual coercion, and gender harassment (Cortina et al., 2020; Fitzgerald et al., 1997). (i) Unwanted sexual attention incorporates verbal/non-verbal sexual behaviors and advances, sexual touching, or sexualized jokes; (ii) sexual coercion refers to sexual coercion or rape; and (iii) gender harassment means hostile behaviors that insults people because of their gender (not only women). This model argues that gender harassment is the most common yet overlooked form of SH (Cortina et al., 2020). Moreover, Waldo et al. (1998) divided the acts of gender harassment in three categories; lewd comments, enforcement of traditional gender roles, and negative gender-related remarks.

There is a great deal of contestations and controversies regarding what constitute the acts of SH (Yagil et al., 2006; Novik et al., 2011). What behaviours can be termed as SH depends on how they are experienced or perceived by the victims and the context in which the behaviour takes place (Esacove, 1998; Fairchild, 2010; Katz et al., 1996; Yagil et al., 2006). The nature of interaction and relationship between a victim and perpetrator can also influence the interpretations of what behaviour constitute the acts of SH (Bursik and Geftter, 2011). The motivations of the perpetrators can widely vary, ranging from an intended compliment to a more purposeful attempt to harm or intimidate a person based on their gender identity (Kissling, 1991). Studies emerging from western countries (Armstrong et al., 2018; Dawson et al., 2024; Kelsey and Lexi, 2021; O'Connell, 2019) strongly advocate for the inclusion of intersectional lens in defining the term SH, because it helps to problematize how violence occurs within or across gender lines, intersecting with other social identities (age, class, religion etc.). Singular gender lens lacks the nuance in exploring how overlapping structures of power inequalities lead to multidimensionality of violence (Boyle and McKinzie, 2018).

Based on the above underpinnings, our study considers public transport as a gendered space with high risk of SH. We conceptualize SH as any behavior (i) that occurs due to one's gender and other social identities, (ii) that is perceived by individuals as unwanted and unpleasant, (iii) that causes them to feel harassed, humiliated or threatened, (iv) that creates hostile environment for them in public transport.

3. SH in Public Transports: Global Snippets

In the context of Bangladesh, Khairuzzaman (2019) postulates that many women endure sexual abuse and harassment at some point of their lives. The country has gradually become a vulnerable region to gender-based violence, especially in public places, which negatively affects the income and educational opportunities of women (Rahman, 2010). The national survey on violence against women (2015) indicates that 21% of women consider public transportation as unsafe and risky for sexual assault (BBS, 2016). An Action Aid

survey revealed 84% of Bangladeshi women experience staring, deliberate touching, groping, and sexual comments while travelling on public vehicles (Mazumder and Pokharel, 2018). A more recent survey across different districts of Bangladesh found that 90% of women and girls encounter SH while commuting in public vehicles (Ferdous and Dipu, 2019).

Existing studies worldwide predominantly portray women as victims, but, SH against men in public transportation is not unheard of (Gordon and Roger, 1989). A New Delhi (India) survey projected high prevalence of SH against both men and women. Yet, SH is considered as the major threat to women's safety in developing countries including India, where women need to rely more on public transport than men due to lack of affordability of private transports (Need to make public transport, 2017). A survey in India's Chennai disclosed that 30% of women experience various forms of abuse in public transport, including inappropriate touching, stalking, sexual comments, or being asked for sexual favour (Valan, 2020). Similar situations have been observed in other South Asian countries (Yasir et al., 2022). For example, a Nepalese study conducted in Kathmandu valley attests that 219 out of 280 female participants admitted to have faced harassment on public transits (Gautam et al., 2019). Another survey originating from Kathmandu reveals, 97% women encounter at least one or more incidents of SH during daily commutes, hinting at a ubiquitous nature of gender violence in public vehicles of Nepal (Neupane and Chesney-Lind, 2014). Similarly, a survey conducted in Pakistan's Lahore encapsulate that 77% of women face harassment in public transits and 14% of them face it on a regular basis (Awan, 2020).

The harassment scenario on public transportation is not very different in more developed countries either. About 39% of Indonesian women admitted to face regular occurrence of SH on public transports in the capital city of Jakarta (Kirchhoff et al., 2007). In Japan, middle-aged working women or students are most susceptible to this kind of harassment (Burgess and Horii, 2012). In South Korea' Seoul, the experiences of SH become more pervasive in jam-packed transports when passenger's mobility is limited (Kim et al., 2020). In recent years, Hong Kong has seen an unprecedented spike in the cases of transport assaults (Yasir et al., 2022). A study in Turkey's Istanbul discovered a wide range of negative incidents faced by passengers who regularly commute by public transports, varying from discrimination, harassment, to physical assault (Shakibaei and Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2022). A survey conducted in another European city (London) unveil that 32% of women face regular occurrence of SH, with 19% of them encountering direct physical assault on public transportation (Foundation, 2022). The harassment scenario on public transportation is also worsening across the American continents. A survey conducted on public transportation in Bogotá (capital of Colombia) revealed 84% of women have been harassed at some point, leading the city to be named as most dangerous place to travel alone after evening, especially for women (Quinones, 2020). While in the United States, the most prevalent forms of harassment on public transportation encompass groping, unwanted touch, stalking, and accosting (Hsu, 2011).

Drawing on the review of existing literature, it can be inferred that SH in public transportation is a common problem all across the world. Existing research however homogenizes the term gender with women, by over-emphasizing the gender dynamics of women's SH experiences, and totally disregarding men's experiences of victimization. To fill in this gap, our study tends to capture the gendered experiences of SH of both male and

female commuters to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the problem and break the myths associated with sexual violence.

4. Research Method, Process, & Ethics

This study has been designed by employing qualitative research methodology which provides important insights into the subjective experiences of violence and a greater understanding of the context associated with it (Testa et al., 2011). In Bangladesh, existing research on SH heavily centres around quantitative inquiry i.e. mostly survey (Azad 2019; Haque and Akter, 2022; Kabir and Islam, 2023; USAID, 2015; Yasir et al., 2022), with fewer instances of qualitative studies (Dipu and Ferdous, 2019; King et al., 2021; Rahman, 2010; Zinia et al., 2021). Even the most detailed and carefully designed surveys fail to capture the contours of acts of violence – the intentions, emotions, resistance, and chain of events rooted in power dynamics and social norms (Heslop et al., 2019). Quantitative data can help to apprehend the broader trends, patterns, and prevalence (Shayestefar et al., 2023), but, researching gender violence requires subtle analysis of personal stories, experiences, and observations about the experiences of others (Hardesty, et al., 2019). Therefore, qualitative methods deem more appropriate for this research, which enable participants to share individual stories with close attention to local context and circumstances where the act of violence takes place.

Focused group discussion (FGD) has been used to acquire detailed information from study participants. It is a participatory method, extremely useful for generating rich and diverse information from a selected group of individuals with similar or divergent background (Neville, 2007). The participants have been selected through purposive sampling; a time and cost effective technique helping to make the most out of a small population of interest (Campbell et al., 2020). Males and females who live in Dhaka and have been travelling in public bus for at least one year were the target population. Due to time and resource constraints, the study area was kept limited to Dhaka city, the place of residence of both researchers. We purposively approached the participants who use public bus for daily commutes, since it is the most widely used mode of transportation in Dhaka city. One year of commuting experiences was set as a selection criterion for a more detailed understanding of SH experiences.

Table 1: Detailed information on focused groups

No	Type of Participants	Age range (years)	Family income (BDT)	Number of participants	Place of FGD	Duration (minutes)
FGD 1	Female university students (public and private)	18-25	20,000-1,00,000	06	TSC Auditorium, University of Dhaka	120
FGD 2	Working women (different professions)	25-50	25,000-1,00,000	06	Local café	100
FGD 3	Working men (different professions) and male university students (public and private)	18-50	15,000-1,00,000	08	TSC Auditorium, University of Dhaka	130
FGD 4	Male bus drivers and helpers	20-40	20,000-50,000	05	Office of a local bus drivers' association	60

Source: Collected from field work

The search for participants was initiated by the second author, who regularly commutes in public buses. During her daily trips, she initiated informal conversations with male and female passengers to acquire initial information about their lives, commuting experiences, and observations. Later, she shared the research topic and objectives with specific co-passengers who fulfilled the selection criteria. Those who showed interest to participate in the study were forwarded an official invitation for FGD. In this way, the authors reached to 20 participants for first three FGDs (table 1). Two focused groups were formed exclusively with women and one exclusively with men. We preferred not to mix participants of different genders in the same group, because it is considered culturally inappropriate in Bangladesh to share violence related experiences in front of people from opposite gender. Throughout the participant recruitment process, special attention was paid to

ensuring diversity in each group. Finally, a fourth FGD (table 1) was conducted with bus drivers and helpers who are important stakeholders in everyday commute journeys of both men and women. They were contacted through a local association of bus drivers, and five were purposively selected based on their working experiences, age, and other characteristics. We were analyzing the findings alongside conducting FGDs allowing us to identify the commonalities and differences of men and women's life experiences. After reaching the saturation point (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), we stopped collecting further data.

FGDs were conducted at mutually preferred time and places by the participants (table 1). Since all of them were above the age of 18, direct consent was taken from them in written form before the discussion started. We initiated FGDs with a couple of predetermined questions, followed by encouraging free discussions among group members through active participation. Later, the participants influenced each other through their answers and encouraged more active interaction among themselves. Each group discussion was recorded with full consent. Besides, we took detailed hand notes during and after FGDs enabling us to find new lines of inquiry.

Maintaining the moral code of ethics is a major obligation for researchers when human beings are involved (Sarantakos, 2005). Ethics include maintaining privacy, anonymity and confidentiality of participants, obtaining their informed consent, respecting their well-being, and minimizing any potential harm on their lives from participating in the study (Sanjari, et al., 2014). Since SH is an extremely sensitive issue, we assured our participants their contributions will be kept anonymous and the research would not cause any harm to them. We also clarified they were totally free to withdraw from conversation if they felt uncomfortable. We were extremely careful about not re-instigating any traumatic memory of the victims. By following Oakley's (1981) "participatory model", we shared our own experiences of abuse and harassment in public spaces during the FGDs, which helped us to build rapport, increase reciprocity, neutralize the perceived power hierarchies, and obtain more authentic information.

However, neutralizing the power imbalances among FGD participants was a major challenge, since the more vocal, aged, and professionally successful individuals constantly tried to affect the direction and outcomes of discussions. Although, FGD helps to break ice on sensitive subject matters like SH, we noticed that not every participant was equally willing to interact during the discussions. The presence of complete strangers might have discouraged some participants from sharing their real experiences, opinions, and information on personal lives. Thus, we closely observed the facial expressions and physical movements of each participant, besides recording their responses, for the purpose of data triangulation.

Finally, thematic data analysis method (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to define raw data thematically, split them into small units, and analyse the categorized themes in light of research objective. To gain familiarity with the data, we got involved with transcribing the interviews, and paid close attention to the similarities and dissimilarities across the transcripts. Finally, the entire data set was reviewed to ensure that research objectives and the richness of data were properly reflected in the data structure. Extensive secondary literature (journal articles, book chapters, GO/NGO reports, working papers) was also reviewed to gain a better understanding of the research context and strengthening analysis.

5. Multidimensionality of SH: Gender and Intersectional Perspectives

Consistent with existing literature, both physical and non-physical acts of harassment were found to be common against female passengers (Azad 2019; Dipu and Ferdous, 2019; Haque and Akter, 2022; King et al., 2021; Mazumder and Pokharel, 2018; Mosha et al, 2022; Yasir et al., 2022; Zinia et al., 2021). Physical acts included grabbing, pressing, touching, approaching hand from back seat to touch waist or chest, passengers in adjacent seats trying to touch women's chest (Mozammel and Sumi, 2019; Rahmna, 2010). One working woman stated in this regard:

One day while returning from office in the evening, I rode on a public bus and suddenly felt a hand was approaching towards my chest. I shouted and made that person leave the transport with the help of other passengers. After returning to home, I started feeling horrible. I took shower for four times and had nightmares about that incident making me feel emotionally vulnerable [FGD-02].

Field data reflects, particular group of people can have more engagement with particular acts of violence in particular context. In case of SH through physical acts, bus conductors comprise the bulk of all offenders, trying to touch women sexually when they get in or off the bus (Kabir and Islam, 2023; King et al., 2021). Secondly, office going men around 30-45 years of age in formal attires, so called “gentlemen”, seemingly educated, with a perverted nature in the disguise of a middle-class men are also involved with unwanted touching inside bus (Azad 2019; Haque and Akter, 2022). Thirdly, some men in disguise of mentally disabled, beggars, or petty venders try to touch women inappropriately in public transports. Men as old as 60 years of age can also perpetrate unwanted physical acts, as narrated by a working woman:

Recently, I was going to my office in a bus. That day, I saw two vacant seats one next to a young man, and another around a 60-year-old man. I thought I would be safer beside the uncle, so I sat next to him. Suddenly, I noticed that he tried to push me and touch my chest. He was almost of my father's age and yet he tried to abuse me [FGD-02].

Field findings corroborate that women with disability are most vulnerable to SH in a moving transport, consistent with previous studies (Khan and Halder, 2022; King et al., 2021). Women without any disability can protect themselves through jumping out of moving transport amid potential risk of violence. This is difficult for women with physical, mobility, vision, or hearing impairments. So, having a narrowed option of protest and rescue, disability itself is a reason that encourages men to harass.

Our study sets the pathway for debunking the myth of women being the only group of SH victims in public transports. Although frequency of SH against women is apparently higher, men's experiences of SH were noted as far more acute due to the dearth of cultural understanding on “violence against men”. During FGDs, male participants hesitantly voiced out about their experiences of SH, especially in the hands of transgender community. Bus

drivers and helpers particularly were at higher risk of physical harassment by transgenders, especially when they denied to give the demanded amount of money. Unwanted sexual touches (often on male genitals) made men feel uncomfortable and embarrassed, as narrated by a bus driver:

We are not humans, and anyone can do anything to us. The transgender people touch us inappropriately but we cannot protest. We cannot do anything for ourselves [FGD-04]

A male student added in this regard:

One day I was in a bus around 11:00 in the morning and the number of passengers was average. Suddenly a transgender got into the bus and started asking for money. S/he came to me and was about to offer me a kiss. It was so embarrassing for me. Women can shout for help, but being a man, I couldn't utter a single word. I knew nobody would believe me. Rather I would become a laughing-stock [FGD-03].

Although, transgender groups perpetuate majority of physical (sexual) acts against men, women can also enact such acts, as narrated by a male passenger:

One day, when I was travelling in a public bus, a burqa clad woman with vibrant makeup also rode it. Though there were many empty seats, she stood beside my seat by saying that she was going to get down at the nearest stoppage. Suddenly she started rubbing my shoulder in a very uncomfortable way, and started smiling. I requested her to move her hand very politely. She immediately apologized but later repeated the same act. I could not say much, because she was a woman that too in a burqa. There was no way people would support me over a Muslim woman in traditional attire. I silently changed my seat. You see!! No one is safe in a public bus [FGD-03].

This narrative deconstructs the notion of male violence on female body or sexuality, and provides an insight that the victim perpetrator relationships in the context of physical violence is shaped and negotiated by the fluid notion of gendered body, and how it interacts with other power structures of society. The understanding of SH is shaped by the context (physical space) where it takes places. Transgender groups or a burqa clad women, are often marginalized in other public spheres of society, but, they appear to be more powerful in the gendered space of public bus. The same markers (religious attire or physical orientation) that subjugate them at other spheres of society, warrant immense power to them inside the unequal domain of public bus.

On the other hand, female participants implied that the frequency of physical acts is higher, although, the intensity of nonphysical acts is more dangerous and persistent, also found by (Azad 2019; Dipu and Ferdous, 2019; Haque and Akter, 2022; King et al., 2021). They are way too ambiguous to be captured like-unwanted staring, moving tongue in a perverted way, raising eyebrows, perverted smile, unwanted blinking of eyes, pointing at sexual organ through eyes perverted smiling, whistling, etc. Nonphysical harassment cannot be resisted in strong manner due to its invisible nature, encouraging more numbers of

perpetrators to engage in them (Mazumder and Pokharel, 2018; Yasir et al., 2022; Zinia et al., 2021). Perpetrators need an ambient environment to initiate physical harassment (crowd or seating in the next seat), but, they need only a pair of eyes to inflict nonphysical acts, as reflected in the narrative of a female student:

One morning, when I sat on the reserved seat for women beside the driver's podium, I noticed that the driver adjusted his right looking glass to check out my chest. He was continuously smiling and staring at my chest. Though I was wearing a stole, I still felt extremely uncomfortable and helpless [FGD-01].

One working woman shared her observations in this regard:

When school girls travel in buses, I notice some greedy eyes luring at them; like cunning foxes watching their prey. It seems like adult men \ are digging the bodies of young girls through their eyes. But school girls are too naïve to notice anything. They keep laughing and talking [FGD-02].

Even the traffic police, passersby/pedestrians, or passengers from other bus or vehicles enact non-physical SH against women, as narrated by a victim:

One day, my bus was stuck at traffic jam for half an hour. Suddenly I noticed a patrolling police was staring and smiling at me in a perverted way. He kept doing it for the whole time when I was stuck in traffic jam. I felt so uncomfortable that I could not concentrate on my work for the rest of the day [FGD-02]

Verbal abuse was reported as the most prevalent form of non-physical violence in public transport (Azad 2019; Dipu and Ferdous, 2019; Haque and Akter, 2022; King et al., 2021; Mazumder and Pokharel, 2018; Yasir et al., 2022; Zinia et al., 2021). For example, women often confronted demeaning remarks in accessing public bus during peak hours, when the bus staff showed reluctance in taking women in their bus. Female participants explained that most men hold on to patriarchal beliefs – viewing women's participation in public sphere as social evils that challenge family honor and masculinity. Thus, SH in public sphere, could stem from the refusal of men to accept the change in gender power dynamics in society, also reflected (Banks, 2013, Mareah, 2008; Sangari, 2002). Middle aged men use degrading words to humiliate women both directly and indirectly. They either use harsh words against women to segregate them from public transport in broader term from public place or scold bus driver and helpers with slangs for taking women in public bus, addressing those women but in an indirect way. Young adolescent boys, specially who are addicted to drugs and pornography also enact verbal abuse, especially through the use of sexualized jokes, slangs, or curse words.

Verbal abuse through sexually objectifying comments, songs, whistling by men was mentioned as common, also reflected in (Mazumder and Pokharel, 2018; Yasir et al., 2022;). One of the university girls stated that-

I am a bit obese. One day I took a bus while returning from university. I had to stand between the seats because there was no place to sit. Suddenly a man from behind commented on my body type with a sexually objectifying remark [FGD-01]

A working woman shared similar experiences in this regard:

Once travelling on a bus, I saw a girl with a period stain on her uniform. She was standing near the door. Suddenly I heard a group of middle-aged men passing judgmental comments on her. I immediately left my seat for the girl [FGD 02]

A new line of exploration revealed by this study is intra-group dynamics of SH taking place within the gendered space of public vehicles, hardly found in existing literature. Women might not inflict physical violence against each other, but those belonging to older age, powerful social background, and religiously majority groups perpetuate verbal abuse against presumably weaker groups in the form of character assassination and moral policing. Older women, often pass undesirable comments on young women's clothing, as narrated by a university student:

Once when I was going to university wearing a pair of jeans and a shirt. An aunty from bus gave me unsolicited advice on how to protect my chastity. She added, as long as my body parts are covered, I will be safe. I should at least wear a scarf and hip down dress to protect my body and dignity [FGD-01].

A working woman from a religiously minority group shared her experiences in this regard:

I am a Hindu. I need to spend the time of Maghrib Azan in public bus while returning from office. One day an elderly woman from my adjacent seat started yelling at me. She asked, why I was outside of my home during evening with open hair? And, why I was not respecting their religious teachings by listening to music during Azan? I did not utter a single word and simply turned off the music. She was older than me and a Muslim. No one in the bus would support me over her. Being a religious minority, I was only concerned about my safety at that point [FGD-02].

Men also suffer from verbal abuse in public transport, by both male and female perpetrators. Verbal fights, quarrelers, heated arguments, and exchange of slangs among male passengers, or passengers and helpers, were noted as common, a way to vent frustration after hectic days, long bus rides, and lack of space to stand or seat properly. The field findings however encapsulate evidence on women's acute verbal abuse against men considered unimaginable in a patriarchal country like Bangladesh. For example, the infrastructure of public transport is highly congested and the use of frequent brakes often causes men's unwanted incumbent on women. Being inconsiderate of infrastructural limitations, women often show a deliberate tendency to verbally accuse men (often use slangs) of their involuntary acts, indisputably an act of harassment against man. One male victim added in this regard:

Recently while returning to home, I was standing on a bus beside a woman. When the helper started to collect fare, I had to shove my body on the women, that was not

deliberate. But the woman started yelling at me. Every day, men also encounter unwanted touches from random women during hard brakes. But they are always held responsible for such acts, even when they have no voluntary involvement with it. In such cases, women get harassed once and men get harassed twice [FGD-03].

In sum, the section has outlined that public bus is a gendered space where different power structures (e.g. gender, age, religion, disability, attires) intersect with each other resulting in complex dimensions of victim-perpetrator relationships, which trigger diverse SH experiences both across and within gender groups. SH acts are not unilineal, thus, no mythical or generalized inference can be drawn about “who is a victim”, “who is a perpetrator”, and “what behaviours constitute SH”.

6. Gendered Inner-Workings of SH

This section will outline how a range of structural and infrastructural limitations trigger gender specific risks of SH in public transports of Dhaka city.

6.1 Crushing Effects of Patriarchy on Men and Women

Patriarchy is a system of social structures which puts men above women (Walby, 1996). Chowdhury (2009) denotes patriarchy and gender norms as the root causes of SH in Bangladesh. Evolving in patriarchy, our society represents discriminatory attitudes towards women, and SH in public transport is a tool to reinforce those practices. The public sphere of Bangladesh for a really long time was the uncontested regime of men’s power and domination. The scenario is changing gradually with women’s growing participation and achievements in social, economic, and political spheres. Many men deny to accept this shifting power dynamics, and use violence as a weapon to regain patriarchal control (Mareah, 2008; Walby, 1996). Field findings resonate that, SH against in public transport is simply an act of men’s retaliation against women, regaining control over their mobility, and impeding their life opportunities. A working woman added in this regard:

Most men have an antagonistic mindset towards women. Their attitude is like why women would go to office or university. They should stay at home and raise a family. They like to show power and make women feel afraid of them. They want to make us feel less worthy or equal to them [FGD-02].

Another working woman added:

My office ends at 5:00 in the evening which is one of the peak hours for bus rides. During that time, many drivers and helpers don’t want to let me ride their vehicles, even when there is enough space for one person. They verbally attack me by saying, respectable women don’t ride an over-crowded bus [FGD-02]

Field findings also encapsulate that not every man intends to dominate women or hold negative perceptions about them. Their social background plays a big role in shaping their

mindsets, leading to heterogeneous perceptions about “why women are more likely to suffer from SH in public spheres”. The bus drivers and helpers (lower level of education and social standings) solely blamed women for their own victimization, which is a blatant manifestation of traditional patriarchal ideology. One of them implied that modern women don’t possess the right set of ethics, values, and modesty, as narrated below:

Now women are going to offices and educational institutions, where they interact with me, learn bad things, make boyfriends, and do illicit activities. The whole generation of women has forgone religious values and modesty. They don’t wear socially approved and decent cloths. They try to ride an over-crowded bus in jeans and shirt even when we forbid it. By wearing revealing clothes, they actually invite men harass them. Sometimes, it seems like some of them enjoy being harassed. What can we do? [FGD-04]

Contrary to this, most of the working men and male students (higher level of education and social standings) agreed that SH has no direct connection with women's clothing. One of them elaborated in this regard:

A pervert is a pervert. He can be seduced by anything, anyone like dog, or even a cat. It has nothing to do with how women look or dress [FGD-03]

The core causes of SH are also rooted in the education system of patriarchal society (Haque and Akter, 2022). Field findings denote that, the absence of comprehensive sex education results in false masculine attitudes, sexual frustrations, and fictitious notion of pleasure in boys and men, leading them to commit violence in public transport, also reflected in (Fariha 2021; Fariha and Banu, 2024). Men can also commit harassment in a desperate attempt to embrace “hegemonic masculinity”¹ through refusal of effeminacy. Nahar et al., (2013) argues that patriarchal structures foster myths around masculinity, giving men and boys a sense of entitlement to commit violence. It was inferred by Anwary (2015) that Bangladeshi men try to validate their hyper masculine identities through committing SH.

One of the shocking revelation of our study has been, how the crushing effects of patriarchy equally harm men. Male narratives of victimization from previous section delineate, men can’t protest against SH, irrespective of the type of acts they face. Patriarchal beliefs, masculine stereotypes, and the prejudices about men’s victimization restrain them from protesting against SH (Malik and Nadda, 2019; Stockdale et al., 2004). In Bangladesh, men’s victimization to women is considered as their failure to conform to dominant masculine values while men’s victimization to third gender groups is denoted as a social taboo, with subtle elements of religiously prohibited same-sex sexual practices, and a looming threat to men’s heteronormative identities. In sum, the profound silence around men’s victimization leads to continued perpetuation of SH against them in public transportation.

¹ Connell elaborated on hegemonic masculinity as one which reinforces certain traits in men to uphold the hierarchy (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

6.2 Gender Blind Infrastructure

Poor transportation planning and management was identified a major cause of SH in the public transport, also reflected in (Logan, 2015; Quinones, 2020). Dhaka's bus services are not sufficient to bridge the gap between supply and demand. Poor service quality, inadequate institutional arrangements, and lack of regulation mechanisms allow bus staff to take more passengers than the actual capacity, leading to over-crowded use of public transports (Sajin, 2021). Buses overloaded with passengers and inadequate inner-space to move freely result in both wanted and unwanted acts of harassment in urban transportation. Poor urban planning and management also contribute to the high likelihood of SH on transport (Logan, 2015). Not only buses, but also the city roads and lanes, at times lack proper lightning facilities especially after evening, allowing perpetrators an amenable environment to constitute abusive acts, also found in (Azad 2019; Dipu and Ferdous, 2019; Haque and Akter, 2022).

SH in public bus also has a temporal dimension (King et al., 2021). Filed findings attest that, buses are likely to be jam-packed during peak hours (8am-10am and 5pm-7:00pm) when office/school hours begin or end. These are the optimum time slots for violence due to the abundance of potential victims (Mazumder and Pokharel, 2018). When a bus is jam-packed, it becomes tenacious for women to get into the bus, and people including the bus helpers take advantage of the situation to initiate SH, as reflected in the narrative of a university girl:

Once, during peak hours, when I was trying to get in a bus, the door was overcrowded and I felt a person continuously touching on my belly. I shouted but couldn't spot him amid the overcrowded situation. I somehow managed to notice him wearing a blue sleeve, but after getting inside the bus, I could not trace him anymore [FGD-01].

Field data further unveils that, crimes like rape or sexual assault happen either during late night and early morning, when the number of passengers is really low, as well as, there are no adequate facilities for lighting or close-circuit cameras. Besides, due to the unbearable traffic conditions of Dhaka city, the drivers need to use brakes too often allowing the perpetrators to take advantage of the situation and lain on a woman's body. Filed narratives reflect, when the roads are filled with traffic congestion, the likelihood of SH increases, including passengers from other buses inflicting non-physical acts of violence (e.g. sexual stares, hand gestures, winking, peaking) targeted at female passengers. Moreover, fare collection is one of the major slots prescribing compatible environment for SH since helpers/conductors need to move through the narrow spaces of bus allowing them to touch the body parts of passengers. The unbearable traffic situations also encourage drivers to take alternative (unsafe) routes triggering the risk of SH, or even rape, also found by (King et al., 2021; USAID, 2015).

Previous section has outlined how overcrowded bus environment can be risky for male passengers, because either they suffer from unwanted touches, or end up inflicting unintended physical contact on others. Male participants elaborated that, buses can shake too much when they move across the damaged city roads. During such times, men

unintentionally trip over women. They also need to shove their bodies on others (including women) during fare collection or entering/exiting the bus. In such situations, women can show verbal aggression being convinced by the overarching narrative that “all men are predators”. Insufficient urban planning, poor transport management, and inadequate bus structures altogether create gender specific challenges for men and women.

6.3 Gender Imbalanced Legal System

The legal system of Bangladesh, in the domain of gender violence, entirely centers around the dominant paradigm of male perpetrators and female victims. Existing laws on SH reduce the acts of harassment to an offense against woman or children’s modesty, with no mention of adult men (Emon and Halder, 2022). Non-explicitly sexual forms of gender harassment are also not well covered in existing legislations. Section 10 of the Prevention of Repression on Women and Children Act (Amended, 2003) criminalizes sexual touching of woman or child without consent (Khan, 2015). Moreover, Section 354 and 509 of Bangladesh Penal Code, states that whoever assaults or uses criminal force to outrage a woman’s modesty will be punished (Haque and Akter, 2022). Field findings unravel that, implementation of such provisions is actually difficult in case of SH in public transports. The plaintiff needs to prove the offence with solid evidence or witness, which can be tough when SH takes place in a moving vehicle and through non-physical acts. Besides, the incidents of SH happens so rapidly that the identification of perpetrators becomes arduous. The overcrowded nature of bus, poor lightening, lack of close-circuit cameras, and non-cooperation from bystanders make the process of collecting evidence or witness more strenuous.

The effectiveness of gender violence related laws in Bangladesh gets constantly undermined by social attitudes and beliefs (Siddiqi, 2003). Research participants revealed that unequal cultural norms and values, victim-blaming, widespread impunity, under-developed and cumbersome judicial systems are some explicit barriers to legal implementation. Even when victims present concrete evidence in courts, the legal system cumber to function effectively due to socio-cultural and infrastructural barriers (Momen, 2014). Hence, women feel discouraged to file complaints, narrated by a victim of SH in public bus:

Even if I file a legal complaint, what good will it do? We all know how useless our legal system is? In my lifetime, I have never heard anyone obtaining justice after going to court. Filing a report will only waste my time, energy, and money, without any effective return. The court, society, and even I have accepted that when I am on a public bus, I will face harassment. It has become a culture. There is no point of protesting [FGD-02].

In the similar vein, majority of female victims reported that they remain silent in response to SH. This no-protest mindset is translated into a license for perpetrators to do whatever they want. Eventually, the practice of SH gets normalized as a daily occurrence (Mahtab and Fariha, 2022).

As mentioned above, the situation is far more bleak for male victims. Male children (below 18) are at least eligible to file complaints under Prevention of Repression on Women and Children Act (Emon and Halder, 2022). Adult men are neither considered nor covered as victims in the existing legal frameworks, catering to the dominant stereotypes of men don't need legal protection. Past evidence documents that when male victims tried to legally report their sexual offence, police officers encouraged them to file complaints under Section 377 of Penal Code², a legal provision criminalizing homosexuality, that is not application in case of men's sexual victimization (Fariha, 2021). The fear of stigmatization and shaming further deter male victims from reporting their SH.

7. Conclusion & Ways Forward

Public transportation is essential for the social, cultural, and economic advancement of a developing country like Bangladesh. With growing urbanization, rural to urban migration, and shifts from agricultural to industrialized society, more and more people are becoming reliant on public transportation for their daily affairs. SH however remains a constant threat in this domain with potential negative effects for individual, social, and national well-being (Kabir and Islam, 2023). Such awareness has led to a growing interest among academicians to investigate the phenomenon of SH in the context of public transportation of Bangladesh. Their studies however lack multidimensional analysis on gender violence and keep reinforcing the quintessential notions of male perpetrators and female victims. They fail to offer deep insights on SH within intra-gender groups, men's victimization, or women's violent behaviours (Khan and Halder, 2022; Mazumder and Pokharel, 2018; Rahmna, 2010; Yasir et al., 2022). Against this backdrop, this study has employed a qualitative research methodology to examine the lived experiences of both men and women who travel regularly in public buses, the most widely used mode of public vehicle in Dhaka city. By applying an intersectional lens, the study has offered a nuanced analysis of SH through unveiling how multiple structures of power inequalities shape victim-perpetrator interactions where gender collide with other social markers (age, attire, religion, education, and disability) to trigger violent acts within and across gender lines. King et al., (2021) and Lubitow et al., (2020) also applied intersectional lens to understand SH experiences on public transports in Poland and South Korea, and observed similar situations there which justifies the use of an intersectional approach to our research in Bangladesh. This study has argued that public buses are gendered spaces, (re)shaped by complex power relations rooted in the everyday interactions among passengers, staff, or bystanders. Thus, the underlying dynamics of SH in public transports are different from any other public sphere. For example, the same markers (religious attire or physical orientation) that subjugate women or transgender people at other spheres of society, allow them to harass men within the domain of public bus, without much resistance. SH acts therefore cannot be generalized into any single category. The answers to "who is a victim", "who is a perpetrator", and "what behaviours constitute SH" are rooted in the very interaction patters, power practices, and inner environment of public bus.

² 'Section 377: Unnatural offences: Whoever voluntary has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with man, woman, or animal, shall be punished

Reproducing similarities with previous studies (Azad 2019; Dipu and Ferdous, 2019; Haque and Akter, 2022; Mazumder and Pokharel, 2018; Mosha et al, 2022; Zinia et al., 2021), our research has discovered that SH in public transport can take place through both physical and non-physical acts manifested in physical, sexual, and verbal abuse. The prevalence of such acts (especially non-physical) are apparently higher against women, but, men's experiences of SH are far more complex due to a deep-seated culture of silence around "violence against men". Our findings have also unraveled a range of visible and invisible structures that bolster the gender-specific risks of SH for everyone within a public bus. In a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, both men and women can endorse discriminatory gender norms (for example: women should wear socially approved body-covered clothes or women shouldn't work in public sphere) that soar the risk of SH against particularly against young students or working women. Patriarchal values and hyper-masculine stereotypes also sustain the perpetuation of SH against men through denying them any space to open up about their victimization (Fariha, 2021). Poor transportation system and urban management further heighten the susceptibility of both intended and unintended forms of harassment against men and women. On top of it, the gender-imbalanced legal system, revolving around the male perpetrator-female victim paradigm, offers no available legal resort to male victims (Emon and Halder, 2022). Although, existing legal frameworks offer some protection to women, in reality, their effectiveness is heavily undermined by socio-cultural factors (Siddiqi, 2003). All these overarching factors keep reproducing a dangerous environment inside public bus, where anybody can fall victim to SH on a daily basis.

To our knowledge, this is the first study in the context of Bangladesh, which has applied an intersectional approach to move beyond the essentialist notions of male perpetrators and female victims in the context of SH, and foreground a detailed analysis on the multidimensional facets of gender violence in public transportation settings. Thus, it not only contributes to the existing body of knowledge on SH but also informs appropriate policy measures and interventions to foster transportation justice for everyone. We hereby conclude by saying, when gender interacts with other structures of social inequality, it leads to complex patterns of gender violence which are both difficult to map out and to address. Thus, government needs to adapt and implement gender-transformative approaches and socially-inclusive tailored policies to ensure everyone's rights to travel safely in public transports. More importantly, the country needs integrated efforts at all levels to ensure transportation justice for its citizens, including improved environmental design, safety measures, behavioral interventions, gender-specific accommodations, technology-based solutions, and legal measures. The society needs to listen to victim's stories and help them fight SH, instead of victim-blaming or re-instigating further trauma or stigma. Better educational efforts are also the prerequisite in shaping young people's perceptions on violence, gender, and social justice, that will be beneficial in preventing SH in long run. Finally, further comprehensive research is required to understand the severity of SH in public transports, with equal focus on gender and intersectional approaches, to better inform policies and greater implementation of laws.

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