

Chapter 4

Women's Commuting Environment in Public Buses in Dhaka City: A Case of Men's Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The constitution of Bangladesh aims to ensure a discrimination free world guaranteeing women equal access to political and public life. The ratification of CEDAW, adaptation of both MDG and SDG by the government also promote this goal. Dhaka requires an efficient transportation system to ensure the freedom of mobility for all. However, the public buses of Dhaka are insecure, unreliable, congested and unsafe. As a result, the women and children suffer the most while boarding a bus. They have to face both physical and emotional pain. This consequently restricts women's mobility rights. As men are responsible for creating a gender insensitive commuting environment inside public buses, their perceptions on the fact is to be explored. This chapter with the help of the researcher's research data (for Masters' thesis) from 2015-2016, highlights on men's perceptions of commuting environment women experience in public buses in Dhaka city. How these perceptions are shaped as an outcome of hegemonic masculinity is also analysed in this chapter using Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity.

INTRODUCTION

A city transport system that can offer its residents a safe, affordable, quick, comfortable, reliable and sustainable access to their destinations (e.g.; jobs, education, recreation and such other needs) can be entitled as an effective one. Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh is one of the fastest growing megacities of the world. The current population of the city is twelve million and is expected to grow around 20 million in 2020, transforming it into the third largest city (in terms of population) in the world (World Bank, 2007). This enormous growth has led to increasing demand for the public transportation system.

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However, any experience of travelling on a public bus in Dhaka has never been a delightful experience for a woman. Buses as modes of public transport are considered as insecure, unreliable, congested and unsafe. To demonstrate the questionable situation of bus services, Hasnine (2011, p. 218) claims, “the environment of public transport in Dhaka City is characterized by traffic congestion and delays, inadequate traffic management, unaffordable and inaccessible public transport for majority of the people”. Because of unsatisfactory bus services, inter-city travelling has become no less than a nightmare for the travellers of Dhaka city. Nevertheless, the women and children are the ones who suffer the most while boarding a bus. They have to go through both physical and emotional pains as a part of their everyday experience of commuting environment which hampers the mobility rights women are entitled with. As men are the one primary responsible (in form of both bus staffs and male commuters) for creating a gender insensitive commuting environment inside public uses, their perception of the fact is to be explored. As a result, this chapter intends to shed light on men's perceptions of commuting environment accessible to women inside public buses in Dhaka city.

The constitution of Bangladesh and its ratification of the Convention of the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against women (CEDAW) offer women equal access to public spheres irrespective of their age, class, sex and religion. Article 27, 28 (1,2,3,4) and 29 (1) of the constitution of Bangladesh ensures free and equal access to women in public and social spheres (Mahtab 2012). CEDAW promotes a discrimination-free world for women guarantying their equal access in political and public life. Besides that, the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) goal 3 (promote gender equality and empower women) as well as recently adopted Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) goal 5 (achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) both promote removing mobility constraints by ensuring safe and reliable transport system for women to ensure the mobility rights of women.

Dhaka's transport scenario has been deteriorating visibly under fast growing population over the last few years. Buses being the most easily accessible and cheapest means of transportation in the city, both male and female commuters¹ use it for travelling from one place to another. It is worth noting that the labour force participation and the percentage of female education is gradually increasing in Bangladesh. From 2002-03, only 10.3 million women participated in the labour force, by 2010 this figure reached to 17.2 million (Labor Force Survey 2010). The literacy rate of 15-24-year-old women is currently 78.86% (Bangladesh Planning Commission 2014). Therefore, economic and educational participation of women are considered as indicators of women's socio-economic empowerment. Hannan (2007) highlighted the need to have equal access to urban facilities (transportation, sanitation, water etc.) to ensure equality and empowerment of women. Employed women use buses to have a convenient and comfortable journey to their jobs. In addition, students of schools, colleges and universities travel from one corner of the city to the other in buses to attain a better quality of education. However, the nature of commuting offered by public buses for women today remains questionable. The commuting environment of buses is very often defined as unsafe, unreliable, congested and prone to incidents of sexual harassment. “Women bus riders have long endured groping and verbal abuse every day” (Rahman, 2010, p.18).

This study aims specifically to establish the link between gendered space and women-friendly commuting by shedding light on the perceptions of male bus commuters of Dhaka. The study endeavours to understand how common men perceive women's commuting experience in public buses in Dhaka by interviewing the male travellers, drivers and helpers of public buses of the Dhaka city. Analyzing scholars' views (eg; Connell 2005, Imtiaz 2014, Messerschmidt 1999) on hegemonic masculinity, this paper also aims to explain how male perceptions on commuting environment are encouraged and shaped by the ideology of hegemonic masculinity. In other words, this study is designed to have an analytical

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