

Press Release

Date: 3 June, 2022

Subject: "Harassment in Public Transport in Dhaka; Impact on the Mental Health of Adolescent Girls and Young Women"

On Friday, June 3, 2022, we welcome the esteemed guests and everyone present at this press conference organized by Aachol Foundation. The focus of today's conference is: "Harassment in Public Transport in Dhaka; Its Impact on the Mental Health of Adolescent Girls and Young Women," based on the results of a recent survey. The virtual press conference is being attended by Dr. Mohammad Ismail Hossain, Professor and Head of the Department of Social Work at Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST), Barrister Shaikh Mahdi from the Dhaka Lawyers Association, and Tanseen Roz, Founder President of Aachol Foundation.

About Aachol Foundation:

Aachol Foundation was established on April 25, 2019, with a group of dedicated and energetic young volunteers, to raise awareness about mental health, promote development, and help the youth adapt to various stages of life. We believe that personal effort must be complemented by the collective effort of family, loved ones, and the environment. Thus, Aachol Foundation has been relentlessly working toward creating a generation that is well-informed and conscious about mental health. Our research and analysis team regularly conducts surveys and studies on various issues. The current research focuses on the harassment of adolescent girls and young women in public transport.

Research Purpose:

Previously, when examining the causes behind mental health issues among women, a national survey found that 45.27% of women in Bangladesh suffer from mental health problems due to sexual harassment in public transport. Following this, Aachol Foundation conducted a survey specifically in Dhaka, focusing on adolescent girls and young women. Our goal was to investigate the types of harassment they face in public transport and how it affects their mental health. The study included commonly used modes of transport in Dhaka such as buses, trains, lagunas, and ride-sharing services. A combination of online and offline methods was used to collect the data, with participants from areas such as Azimpur, Mirpur, Gulshan, Banani, Dhanmondi, and Baridhara.

Survey Demographics:

A total of 805 participants took part in the survey. Among them, 68.4% were young women aged 19-24, 13.2% were aged 13-18, 12.5% were aged 25-30, and 5.8% were aged 31-35. Most participants were students (86.09%), with 69.07% attending university, 12.80% in college, and 4.22% in school. Additionally, 7.70% were working women, and 4.35% were housewives.

Survey Findings:

According to the survey, 63.4% of the participants reported spending at least 3 to 4 hours daily in public transport, while 32.5% spent 1 to 2 hours, and 24.7% spent less than 1 hour. Among the most commonly used modes of transport, 84.10% traveled by bus, 4.58% by train, 1.53% by ride-sharing, and 3.27% by CNG.

Harassment Statistics:

The survey found that 63.4% of adolescent girls and young women had experienced some form of harassment in public transport in the past six months. Among them, 46.5% reported having been sexually harassed. Other forms of harassment included verbal abuse (15.3%), social discrimination (15.2%), gender discrimination (14.9%), and body-shaming (8.2%).

Sources of Harassment:

75% of women who experienced sexual harassment in public transport said that they were harassed by other passengers. 20.4% reported harassment by the helpers (conductor or bus staff), 3% by hawkers, and 1.6% by drivers. The largest factor contributing to the lack of safety in public transport was the behavior of fellow passengers.

Harassment by Age Group:

When asked about the perpetrators' age, 61.7% of the participants stated that they were harassed by individuals aged between 40 and 49, while 36.3% reported harassment by teenagers and young men (ages 13-29).

Inappropriate Touching and Other Harassment:

60.9% of women reported being touched by the helpers despite their resistance while boarding or alighting from buses. 24.6% stated that they had been inappropriately touched at least three times in the past six months. Furthermore, 11.9% of participants reported being touched inappropriately by passengers. Many women also experienced other forms of harassment such as intentional body contact, deliberate brushing, and inappropriate comments.

Impact of Crowding:

The survey found that harassment was more prevalent when there was light crowding (32.8%) and excessive crowding (27.2%) in public transport. 22.9% of women were harassed while seated, and 11.3% reported harassment during boarding or alighting.

Women's Silence After Harassment:

After experiencing harassment, 34.8% of the women remained silent due to fear, while 20.4% avoided taking the same public transport again. Only 0.5% of the victims took legal action, and 4.2% reached out for help from fellow passengers. The data reflects a general trend of silence and inaction when it comes to addressing harassment.

Social Indifference and Support for Perpetrators:

In response to how others acted during incidents of harassment, 36.9% of respondents stated that fellow passengers ignored the situation, while 2% reported that other passengers supported the perpetrators. When asked about their willingness to help other women facing harassment, 14.2% said they would avoid getting involved due to fear of trouble, and 33.5% didn't know how to help. However, 14.7% felt that other passengers should assist the victim.

Impact on Mental Health:

The collected data indicates that 21.2% of women experienced trauma after being sexually harassed in public transport. 29.4% reported that public transport had become a source of fear for them. Additionally, 16.4% experienced feelings of inferiority, and 13.8% suffered from depression.

Need for Women-Centered Services:

Regarding the support received after harassment, 57% of women reported that no one in the public transport came to their aid, while 43% received help from others. Despite 62.4% of the participants being aware of helpline services, only 2.5% actually sought help. 97.6% of the participants agreed that the number of women-only buses should be increased in Dhaka, and 94% believed that the number of reserved seats for women should also be increased.

Remarks by Tanseen Roz (Founder, Aachol Foundation):

Tanseen Roz stated, "Harassment and violence against women is increasing day by day, whether it is in the home, on the streets, or in public transport." He further emphasized, "As young women begin to play an important role in the country's social and economic sectors, sexual harassment and other forms of harassment will hinder their contributions." Regarding the mental health effects of such harassment, Tanseen said, "We have seen that when young women face harassment in public transport, their motivation to work decreases, and their depression increases, which can even lead to suicidal thoughts."

Proposed Solutions:

To address this issue, Aachol Foundation has made the following recommendations:

1. Take steps to ensure that no more passengers than the seating capacity are allowed in public transport.
2. Install CCTV cameras to monitor both staff and passengers.
3. Place informational leaflets in buses warning against sexual harassment.
4. Increase the number of reserved seats for women based on demand.
5. Create separate transportation options for women and increase their numbers.
6. Make nameplates mandatory for bus helpers, supervisors, and drivers.
7. Hold bus staff accountable for harassment incidents.
8. Ensure swift legal action and a fair investigation into incidents of harassment.
9. Conduct regular anti-harassment training for bus staff through counseling.
10. Ensure quick trials and justice in cases of sexual harassment, possibly through mobile courts.

Conclusion:

Tanseen Roz concluded by stating, "We must remember that this country belongs equally to men and women. Therefore, everyone must play an active role in creating a safe society, state, and environment for both men and women."

Dr. Mohammad Ismail Hossain, Professor at SUST also emphasized that to tackle this social problem effectively, there needs to be a shift in societal values, with stronger legal enforcement and social movements to protect women's rights and ensure safety in public spaces.

Samira Akter Siam, General Secretary of Aachol Foundation added, "Insecurity in public transport is a major concern for women. The harassment that occurs often leads to severe mental health consequences. We all need to unite against this harassment and ensure the safety of women."

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