



# Affects and assemblages of (un)safety among female bus commuters in Dhaka

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## ABSTRACT

By examining the lived experiences of 30 female bus commuters in Dhaka using in-depth qualitative approaches, this paper argues for an enhanced understanding of socio-cognitive undercurrents of gendered mobilities. By privileging a feminist-affective lens, and tracing the emotionally and politically charged everyday negotiations of space, power struggles, (dis) comfort, and encounters between gendered bodies, the paper contends that women's agency to act and respond to harassment in public transport is contingent on multi-scalar assemblages comprising socio-technical infrastructures, lifestyles, cultural histories, personal dispositions and situated knowledge. Moreover, by applying assemblage thinking and affect theories in transport spaces, the study links discussions on gender, violence and mobility beyond the common economic tropes as is common in transport studies of the Global South.

## 1. Introduction

Navigating public buses in Dhaka is a feat in and of itself. The bus stops are undesignated and the best way to identify a bus stop is to follow the queue of people milling about creaking old busses, amidst the chaos of noise and fumes. The rickety and overcrowded state-owned Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC) buses (and a dozen more private ones)—are the lifeblood of the city. With bus horns tuned to ear-splitting frequencies, it is common to see bus drivers (all of whom are men) communicating with each other in passing through horns and slang: “*Oi madarchod Dekhos na passenger namamu*” (Hey \*\*\*\*\* , don't you see I have to drop off passengers?), a common exhibit of aggressive masculinity (Deniz et al., 2021) and an attempt to save time. The crowded vehicles are perpetually slanted, for carrying more passengers than it was originally built for<sup>1</sup>. They slow down at bus stops but never quite stop, forcing women to scurry, shove and cut others in line to scramble onto the bus.

Meera, a 40-year-old woman uses the bus for her everyday commute to work. During the early morning rush-hour, it is always a farce getting into one of the double-decker buses from Notun Bazaar to Farmgate. If she's lucky to board the bus, she eyes an empty seat near the reserved cluster of (six or nine) seats for women at the front end

of the bus. On days the seats are already taken, which is common, she prefers to stand near another female body. She describes a typical commute as being enervating on the senses, as she balances her handbag and tiffin carrier in one hand while holding on to the overhead handles with the other. Recalling her anxieties, Meera narrates “sometimes there are these office-goers dressed in proper business shirt-pant, blowing on my neck and back when I wear a blouse and sari on the bus. I cannot say anything to them. It's so frustrating. I get off at the next stop and take a rickshaw”

Meera's vignette above suggests that public transport spaces in Bangladesh remain a hostile and insecure environment for women, in which they are threatened, harassed, humiliated, and subjected to privacy violations and physical assault. Experiences of sexual harassment may range from mere inconveniences (stranger asking for her contact number or stalking) to serious sexual aggressions (groping or frotteuring). In Meera's case, the act of deliberately blowing on another passenger's body without her consent is a violation of her personal space and constitutes sexual harassment. The vignette also serves to show the kind of environment commuters routinely navigate (aggression, pushing and shoving, loud noise, overcrowding), the kind of affect it generates within the victim (anxiety, silent acceptance, frustration), and the consequent retreat or path of action (exit and opting for an expensive

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<sup>1</sup> A study released by BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD, 2020) highlighted that there are 30 buses per 100,000 people in Dhaka.

alternative mode of transport).

Analysis of gendered access to public spaces and transport finds that harassment is often exacerbated by the density of urban transport spaces and lack of gender-inclusive urban planning (Ding et al., 2020). Transport scholars have studied the linkages of gender and transport in the Global North (Loukaitou-Sideris and Fink, 2009) and Global South (Uteng and Turner, 2019), while feminist geographers have looked at women's lived experiences of harassment and their appropriation of sartorial choices to access transport in Tehran (Bagheri, 2019), Tokyo (Chowdhury, 2022), Amsterdam (Shaker, 2021) and India (Phadke et al., 2011). This has repercussions on women's access to health, education, economic resources and well-being (Uteng and Turner, 2019; Ceccato and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2020).

Through an empirical focus on sexual harassment in public mobility infrastructures in Dhaka, this article adopts a granular lens in investigating the commonplace affects that women commuters are immersed in everyday journeys and how it serves as a permanent constraint on their mobility and access to resources. What feelings and affects do their everyday travels generate? To what extent do individual actions have the power to change collective affects? What are the long-term consequences of these affects accumulating over time? Utilizing assemblage thinking (AT) to understand (un)safety, the paper argues that women's responses to harassment in public spaces are not only contingent on socio-spatial temporalities but are also shaped by different configurations of (non-human) mobility infrastructures, and (human) bodies, norms, knowledge, interpretations, identities, and their contestations.

The remainder of this paper is structured into four sections. First, the literature review frames gendered mobility in public transport and situates it within the particular social and historical context of gender inequality and the patriarchal landscape of Bangladesh. Next, we present a theoretical framework using the Deleuzian ontology of assemblages and affects (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Müller, 2015; Anderson, 2009) and offer a methodological overview of our qualitative approach. Following that, the results section accounts for commuters' embodied experiences in public transport. By tracing these powerful affective intensities in the spatial context of buses and streets of urban Dhaka, this paper brings feminist studies of sexual violence and transport in conversation with each other.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Gender, mobility and affects

Feminist researchers have long drawn attention to the gendered geographies of travel (Peters, 2013), highlighting different mobility needs, different trip patterns and modal choice preferences (Rahman et al., 2021), differences in affordability (Uteng and Turner, 2019), and most importantly the omnipresent fear of sexual violence (Talboys et al., 2017; Chowdhury, 2022). Under sexual violence, existing literature has documented the frequency and nature of sexual harassment in transport (Dhillon and Bakaya, 2014), underreporting of the issue (Ceccato and Loukaitou-Sideris, 2020; Valan, 2020), and long-term impacts (Infante-Vargas and Boyer, 2022). While the nature of harassment seems comparable, the underlying reasons for its prevalence varies across the globe. For instance, harassment in London Underground is framed as a problem of space-time (Lewis et al., 2021), whereas literature from Global South note that harassment is symptomatic of deep-rooted patriarchal structures of gendered social norms, where men have perceived dominion over public spaces (Dhillon and Bakaya, 2014).

Research studies also demonstrate how spatio-temporalities impact women's emotions and perceptions of safety. While fear of crime varies depending on gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, social and cultural contexts, certain human and non-human elements can work to intensify or reduce fear. For instance, the absence of streetlights, the presence of beggars and loud music (Irvin-Erickson et al., 2020), men urinating in public and the male gaze (masked for review) are

considered to prompt discomfort and fear for women while traveling on public transport. To counter fear, women exhibit caution and hypervigilance at all times, enacting preventive and reactive strategies to counter harassment (Phadke et al., 2011; Zahan, 2020). In the long run, concerns over sexual safety influence their travel decisions (Gopal and Shin, 2019; Bhattacharyya, 2015), foster feelings of anxiety, low self-worth (Fairchild and Rudman, 2008; Mazumder and Pokharel, 2018) and marginalize women's participation in public life. However, what remains less studied is how these everyday experiences of harassment are embodied by commuters, and embedded in cultural and social meanings, shaping future travel decisions.

Continuing in this vein of thinking, we turn to socio-cognitive studies around affects. Drawing on Sara Ahmed (2004) and Bissell's (2010) work on affects, we acknowledge that public transportation facilitates fleeting encounters that are enveloped in powerful affects. While these affects may be prepersonal (i.e. an unconscious response which precedes our conscious feelings and decisions), they are not inert and have the power to modify potential future actions. Thus when considering affects during mobility, we contend that the experience of safety in public transport warrants a door-to-door consideration, which includes navigating first and last-mile connectivity concerns, such as pedestrian bridges, and walking to and from the main modes of transport (ITF, 2019). This approach is comparable to that of Rink (2016) who writes, that mobility in the bus is essentially 'public space on the move'. Along the same line, Corner (2011, 227) proposed '*the experience of space cannot be separated from the events that happen in it; space is situated, contingent and differentiated. It is remade continuously every time it is encountered by different people, every time it is represented through another medium, every time its surroundings change, every time new affiliations are forged*'. As such, feeling safe in public spaces and public transport are not mutually exclusive, nor neatly separable from one another. We advance this concept by moving away from fixed physical characterization of space towards territorial and psycho-social processes in space placing gender, mobility and affects in conversation with each other.

### 2.2. Locating women's mobility in Dhaka

Dhaka's transport situation is similar to many other developing cities of Global South, characterized by resource constraints, traffic jam, gender-insensitive design, overcrowding and protectionist interventions (CCTV, GPS-tracking, women-only spaces). However, the context of Dhaka becomes crucial given the additional layer of social, religious and cultural restrictions inscribed around women's bodies (Mookherjee, 2015). Paradoxically, these restrictions co-exist alongside the State's agenda of placing female labor force participation at the center of nationalistic developmental ambitions. It is in this demand for women to remain in the workforce amidst a traditional social order, that one needs to take stock of their everyday mobility experiences.

As a country positioned to achieve middle-income status, Bangladesh is often lauded for its attainment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), particularly in female literacy (96% as of 2019) and women's participation in labor force (35%; BBS, 2017). Owing to women's roles in micro-credit and garment manufacturing industries, they are placed centerstage in Bangladesh's development trajectory (Kabeer, 2001, 2005). However, their participation in public life continues to be subjected to patriarchal ideologies of control through the male gaze, surveillance, moral policing, and sexual harassment (Banks, 2013; BRAC, 2018). Literature suggests that sexual harassment generally emanates from men's refusal to acknowledge the changing power structures within the household and society and is meant to maintain women's subordination (Khair, 1998). Characterized by a high prevalence of sexual violence, the capital city of Dhaka also ranks as one of the seventh most dangerous cities for women in the world (Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2017; Rahman, 2010). Recent surveys point out that 84% of women have faced harassment in public places (ActionAid International, 2016) whilst 96% of women reported being sexually harassed in public

transport (BRAC, 2018). Although definitions of harassment may vary between surveys, common interpretations include acts of deliberate touching of victim's body, hair, and private parts without consent and/or standing too close (BRAC, 2018). According to the BRAC survey, 81% of women admitted to keeping quiet during these encounters, while 79% claimed they moved away from where the harassment occurred, which helps to explain why these incidents aren't reported more often. As a gender-friendly initiative, the transport authorities introduced segregated spaces such as women-only buses and reserved six to nine seats for women in public buses. However, the intervention is commonly regarded as an 'economic loss' since there is not enough women commuters throughout the day, and 'culturally' women usually do not travel alone and are accompanied by a male escort, barring them from using women-only services (Zohir, 2003; Zolnik et al., 2018). As a result, such interventions invite further criticism and become contested spaces of hostility.

In addition to gendered violence, class inequality is another key characteristic of the urban travel experience in Dhaka. Previous studies in Bangladesh establish that public buses are typically used by lower-income male commuters, while working-class women often resort to walking, given the challenges of using public transport (unavailability, long waiting time, discomfort, overcrowding, attitudes of bus staff etc.) (Rahman, 2010; Sultana et al., 2020). A survey in 2021 found that about 45% of working women walk an average of 5 km to save money and avoid harassment (BUET, 2021), and only 25% used public buses. During COVID, those numbers shifted considerably: 81.1% of garment workers (majority of which are women) walked to workplaces, while only 7.3% used buses.

A visible majority of women in public spaces are seen to observe varying degrees of purdah/hijab (veil), arguably as a means of privatizing some of the public space and manufacturing 'respectability' to prevent harassment (Rozario, 2006). Some wear a full-body covering (burkha), and others adopt a symbolic version of 'purdah' through practices of segregation, such as not sitting beside male commuters, not boarding the bus if the women's seats are already taken, etc. This is a clear example of how socio-cultural restrictions impact women's mobility, body, comportment, and access to public spaces. Navigating this paradox of progress and conservatism, both inscribed around women's bodies, is what makes Dhaka an interesting case for studying women's mobility and access to public space.

### 3. Theoretical anchor: (un)safety as an assemblage

For a long time, feminist theorists have been interested in studying the relationship between affect and power (Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012; Ahmed, 2004, 2010; Butler, 2004). While they each draw on different theoretical models, a common thread of exploration is the way feelings are deliberated, experienced, and expressed in public spaces. Comparable research was conducted by Tironi and Palacios (2016) in Santiago and by Jarred (2022) in South Africa to study the relations between transport infrastructures, affect, and daily mobility of commuters. We build on that and extend it to include urban affects of vulnerability and resistance.

Deleuze and Guattari's *assemblage* or *agencement* has been widely used in human geography and transport to address multi-scalar configurations of affect, discourse and practice (McFarlane and Anderson, 2011; Legg, 2009; Shaker, 2021). The concept of assemblages is analytically essential to us because it attempts to capture the multiplicity of entities and agencies (technical/natural, human/non-human) engaged in manufacturing urban life. We begin with the premise that urban public transport spaces are constructed of dynamic and heterogeneous interactions between humans (differentiated by gender and social status within public transport infrastructures) and non-human elements (e.g. overcrowding, long queues, traffic, noise levels, weather) (Latour, 2005). The AT thesis submits that individuals do not act on their own, rather, their actions are the result of complex

concomitant relations among policies, people, discourses and devices (Latour, 2005). By that definition, safety assemblages are shaped by associations, norms, knowledge, interpretations, identities, technologies, negotiations, contestations, and so on.

Similarly, assemblages can comprise elements across different orders of magnitude. For example, in their study on the pharmaceuticalisation of erectile dysfunction, Fox and Ward (2008) proposed a multi-scalar assemblage that took into account men's sexual performance (micro) and the financial success of multinational pharmaceutical companies (macro). As such, our social inquiry is also open to the possibility of multi-scalar assemblages comprising of macro relations (e.g. policies of reserved seats for women) and micro-level negotiations inside the bus over reserved seats.

The conceptual model (refer to Fig. 1) was developed through an iterative process of discussion between the authors. Many of the human and non-human variables (as enlisted in Fig. 1) emerged deductively from the literature review. For instance, Zohir (2003) and Rahman (2011) have highlighted variables such as waiting time, inconsistent journey information, staff attitudes, and insecurity. These aspects guided the interview guide questions posed to the study participants and the analysis of the ensuing data. Later the diagram was revised to include variables that emerged inductively out of the interview analysis (e.g. lack of faith, awareness, past experiences, weather conditions, sweat, noise) (Fig. 2).

It is important to keep in mind that assemblages are not just theoretical constructs but are made and unmade through routinized practices (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987). That is, they are "territories" of routine behaviors that hold disparate elements together and safeguard their internal coherence (Guattari, 1995; 28). Hence, actions (agentic practices that are not a part of the routine) have the potential to disrupt (deterritorialize) an assemblage through *lines of flight*, and create a new one (McFarlane and Anderson, 2011). Our reading on feminist work on affects (Ahmed, 2004; Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012) confers that these *lines of flight* are emotional and affective encounters that have *performative* and *material* manifestations. That is, they can be performed through physical aggression, shouting, blushing, or a racing heartbeat; and materially, they transfer across bodies 'in terms of attention, arousal, interest, receptivity, stimulation, attentiveness, action, reaction, and inaction' (Clough and Jean, 2007; p.15). The social production of it is considered non-linear, for example, fear as an affect may trigger a multiple economy of affects (self-blame, anxiety, stress, dread) on not just the body experiencing it, but also other bodies, interactions, and the spatial environment. In other words, acts of resistance, or calling out perpetrators during acts of harassment has the potential to dismantle the existing assemblage of (un)safety and construct a new one.

The novelty of this paper is in its integration of two theoretical approaches to understand the complex relations of psycho-social (discursive and affective) and spatial (material) forces that co-create safety, thereby providing new insights to the theorization of feminist transport geography in a non-western context. By doing so the paper achieves the following: (i) it enhances our understanding of the power of everyday encounters; (ii) it highlights the relational power configurations (e.g. intersections of gender and class) that play out in commuting spaces; (iii) it challenges the concept of safety as a spatial unit, arguing that it is made, remade, and experienced in different intensities and experiences depending on the spatio-temporal contingencies.

### 4. Methods

The method of investigation includes a mixed qualitative approach using 30 in-depth interviews, each lasting approximately 60–90 min, and visual mapping exercises conducted between May and August 2021 in Dhaka. Since the principal author has prior work experience in a Bangladeshi NGO, we established contact with some of the NGO staff to help us circumvent gatekeepers in urban informal settlements and reach out to working-class women. Subsequently, after the first few

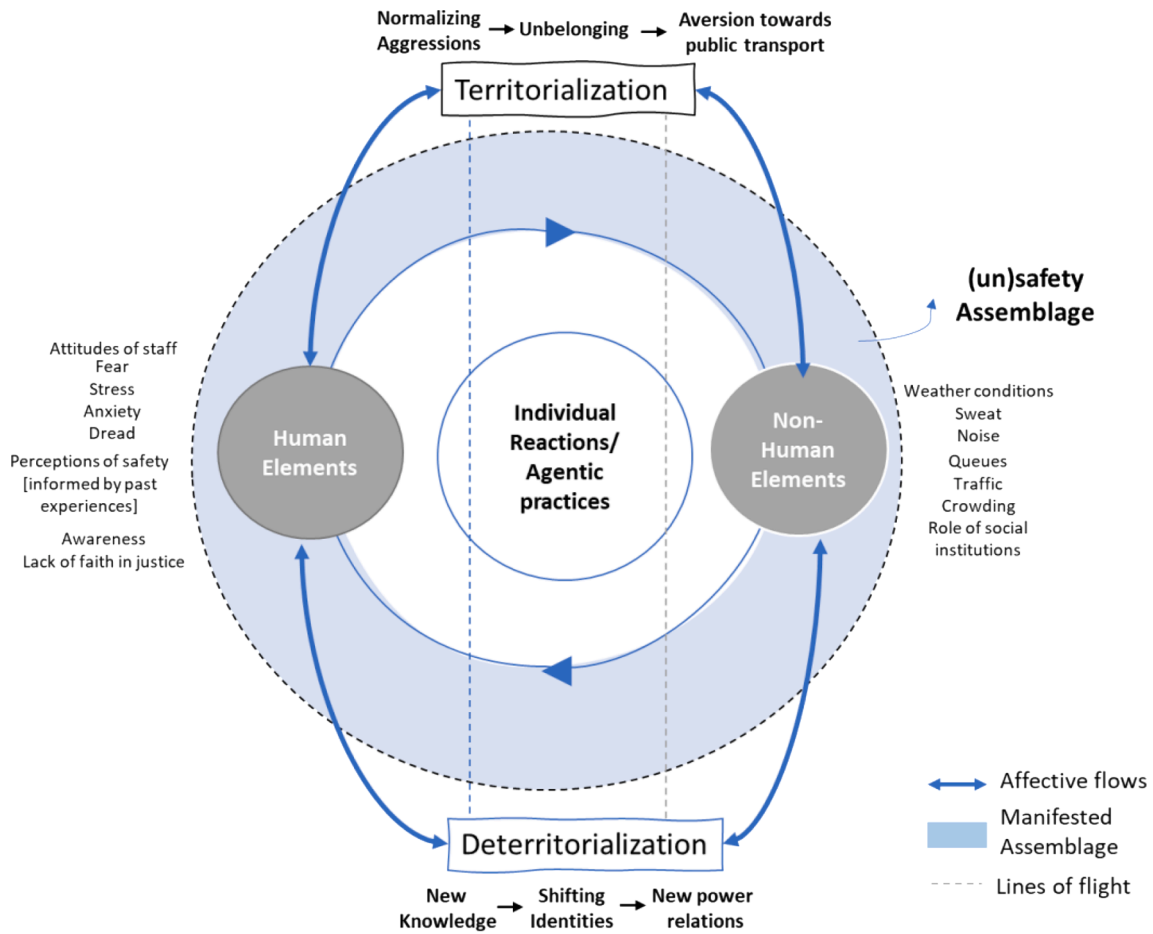
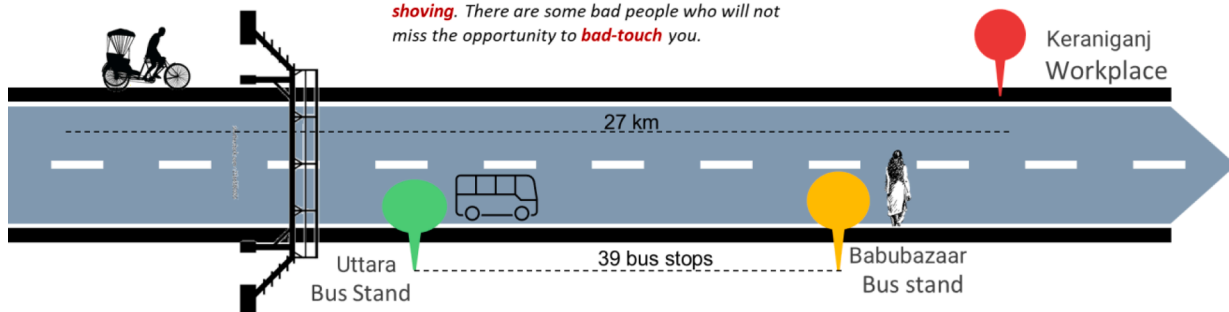


Fig. 1. Conceptual Model.

**6AM:** It usually takes me 10-20 minutes to find a rickshaw and get to the bus stand. If I'm **lucky** to find a rickshaw, then the first **argument** of the day starts with the rickshaw-puller about fares.

**9AM:** There's been many days, I **stood for 2 and a half hours in the bus, sweating, breathing in others' sweat. But that's normal.** If you must live in Dhaka, you have to accept this. If you are not financially capable of taking private transport, then you must get felt up by strangers on the bus. **It's sort of a given.**

**7AM:** Two or three times I got **hurt** while boarding the bus due to all the **pushing and shoving.** There are some bad people who will not miss the opportunity to **bad-touch** you.



**6:30AM:** Usually, I try not to look down below, because if I do and see the bus leaving, my **panic** sets in. I feel **angry at myself** then: **Was my calculation wrong? Why didn't I walk faster? How long until the next bus comes along? Should I get into another bus that at least takes me**

**8:40 AM:** I get **so frustrated** sitting on the bus for two hours. The **heat, the traffic, the horns.** All of it gives me a **migraine.** Even in traffic, they (drivers) don't switch off their engines. The fuel burns and they keep honking.

Fig. 2. Route- affect visualization.

interviews, participants were purposively selected through their own informal networks. A second round of recruitment was done through invitations to participate through popular social media channels

(Facebook and Whatsapp groups) due to COVID-19 lockdowns. The study was intended for female adults (anyone above the age of 18) who had experiences of using public transport for daily travel. A rich

diversity of participants were purposively selected from Northern (Bhashantek, Vatara, Badda, Uttara) and Southern parts of Dhaka (Shadarghat, Dhaka University, Old Dhaka). Participants pertained to different educational backgrounds and socio-economic stratas (students of public and private universities, drop-outs, informal and formal sector service holders, homemakers, old and new residents in Dhaka). The diversity in backgrounds allowed rich collection of experiences based on participants' spatio-temporal use of public (transport) spaces, differences in social capital and situated knowledge. Refer to [Table 1](#). for study participant profiles.

The interviews were conducted one-on-one between the principal author and the participant, mostly in participants' homes or in quiet community spaces. During one of the interviews in an urban slum, the room quickly got crowded with various members of the family (daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, mother) who participated intermittently in the conversation and so this was labeled as a group interview (note it was not an FGD). Some interviews were conducted in a hybrid mode, with initial introductions taking place in person, and follow-up interviews over the phone to limit physical contact for COVID. The research objective and procedures were explained before seeking informed consent from participants. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim in Bangla and then translated to English for coding. All traceable personal information were either pseudonymized or aggregated to protect participant privacy ([Hennink et al., 2011](#)).

The interviews were in-depth and semi-structured. Meaning, a topic guide was used to relate to some structure, but conversations were informal and free-flowing. The interview guide (attached as supplementary documentation) was informed by a literature review, and based on the research objective to understand participants' in-depth mobility experiences related to accessibility, affordability, availability, and acceptability of public transport. Interviews began with an open discussion of experiences of traveling in Dhaka, the challenges faced, and how women navigated them. Further along the interview, relevant probes were used to elicit specific instances of sexual harassment, how it made them feel, how they responded to it, and how they coped with it. Finally, participants reflected on if and how they felt the experience had changed them over time. The detailed interview guide has been attached

as supplementary material.

From an ethical standpoint, participants were assured that they could stop, skip questions, reschedule the conversation, or withdraw their consent from participation without explanation if questions made them feel uncomfortable. Interviews were conducted by the first author in Bangla. Analysis was an ongoing process throughout the data collection period, feeding into the interview guide for triangulation and validation, thereby taking an iterative-inductive approach ([O'Reilly, 2009](#)). After deep familiarization with the data and its context, predominant themes emerged and were thematically analyzed ([Nowell et al., 2017](#)).

Although we used household income markers and access to education, occupation, and personal vehicles to compare and contrast between participants, we observe that the demarcations between the classes are anything but clear and certain participants were hard to position on a scale of class. Objectivist markers of income are easier to place, but class is a combined phenomenon of so much more. For instance, a widowed 45-year-old woman working as domestic help borrowed money to pay school fees for her daughter's education who attends a private school typically reserved for the middle class. Or take the example of the 20-year-old woman, despite being educated at the Higher Secondary level, who had to forego tertiary education and pursue intermittent salaried work to provide for her mother's medical expenses and brother's education. Social classes are overlapping, with subtle borders, much like the "boundaries of a cloud or a forest" ([Bourdieu, 1987, p. 13](#)). And that is how we have treated them, as a heterogenous group of women compared across relational categories of income, education, access to vehicles with varying capacities for agency and thresholds for tolerance.

A limitation of this study is that the evidence focuses overwhelmingly on public bus users and their use of public spaces for first and last-mile connectivity (walking). We acknowledge that other forms of public transport such as rickshaw, autorickshaw, or local ride-sharing bikes may generate different set of assemblages and affects ([Chowdhury, 2021](#)), and that remains to be studied further.

In terms of positionality, the principal author carries a personal bias of being a cis-hetero-woman who has dealt with safety concerns and

**Table 1**  
Participant Details.

Pseudonym	Age	Marital Status	Occupation	Main mode of Transport
Sabrina	24	Single	Teacher	Rickshaw, Ride-sharing, Father's office transport
Afrin	31	Married	NGO Worker	Public Bus, Rickshaw
Prioti	24	Single	Student	Public Bus, Mother's office transport
Sharfee	30	Married	Telecommunication professional	Office transport, Rickshaw, ride-sharing
Nishita	29	Single	Student	Public bus
Tara	29	Married	Teacher	Public Bus, Father's office transport
Kranti	39	Married	Babysitter	Public bus
Farin	21	Single	Student activist	Rickshaw, Ride-sharing
Aroti	22	Single	Student entrepreneur	Public Bus, Rickshaw
Rosy	27	Single	Student, photographer	Rickshaw, Bus, Uber Moto
Auritri	28	Single	NGO worker	Rickshaw, Ride-sharing, Bus
Anjum	30	Single	Garments Worker	Bus and brother's cycle
Ishita	32	Married	IT professional	Bike and Bus
Tushi	26	Married	Fieldwork coordinator	Bus, Rickshaw
Nabila	30	Married	Journalist	Bus, Rickshaw, CNG taxi
Sonia	25	Single	Entrepreneur	Two-wheeler, Bus
Sana	28	Single	Healthcare professional	Bus, Rickshaw
Sharifa	61	Married	Homemaker	Bus, Rickshaw, Ride-sharing car
Group conversation	55,35, 18, 24	Married	1 Garments worker and 3 homemakers	Bus, Rickshaw
Naushin	30	Single	Disability activist	Bus, Rickshaw, Ride-sharing car
Maloti	29	Single	Disability activist	Rickshaw, CNG, Ride-sharing car
Nazia	46	Single	Disability activist	Rickshaw, CNG, Ride-sharing car
Trina	24	Single	Gig economy worker	Bus, Rickshaw, Ride-sharing bikes
Sufiya	49	Single	Disability activist	Family car
Nodi	21	Single	Student entrepreneur	Bus and two wheeler
Parboti	39	Widowed	Babysitter	Bus, para transit (leguna/auto)
Ashin	35	Married	Office cleaner	Walking, bus, para transit (leguna/auto)
Momtaz	41	Married	Homemaker	Walk/bus
Shuborna	45	Widowed	Office administrator	Bus, Scooter

sexual harassment growing up in Dhaka. Her personal experiences span across Dhaka streets and its public transport, which the researcher recalls being a ‘tangled web’ of dread, fear, anxiety and abuse. Her social position of being an English and Bangla-speaking, upwardly-mobile, female researcher and her affiliations with a ‘foreign’ university impressed upon participants and generated a spectrum of affects (curiosity, awe, dismissal) that permeated this research project.

## 5. Results & discussion: mobility assemblages

We divide this section into two parts, distinguishing between two kinds of experiences. The first part focuses on the everyday affective intensities that disempower female commuters. The second part explores affects that empower commuters to voice out and resist harassment. In summary, we contend that a woman’s decision to act and respond to harassment in public transport is not an instant force of action but contingent on ‘mobility assemblages’ that scaffold urban and embodied affects, socio-technical infrastructures of the city, normative sociabilities, social capital, personal dispositions and situated knowledge.

### 5.1. Affects that silence agency

Dhaka’s traffic congestion is colossal with the average driving speed being 4.5 km per hour as of 2023 (Yeung, 2023). As a result, the public buses are never on time. Every ticket counter staff mumbles the same vague response ‘anytime now’, when asked when is the next bus. Hence, long queues in front of undesignated bus stops can offer wait periods from 5 mins to 50 mins depending on traffic conditions, and time of day. Figure 2 illustrates a visual account of a working woman’s commute to work, where we observe the average commuter’s order of transportation: a rickshaw for the first-mile connection, the bus for the main route, and walking as a last-mile connection to her workplace. A one-way trip from the North to the South Dhaka takes approximately three hours. In total, she spends around six hours on the road every day for a total commute of 54 km. Important to note, her exhaustion is not limited to physical exertion only, but also the mental stress of being on constant alert to avoid ‘opportunistic touching’ and dealing with micro-aggressions in public transport. Referring to the text in bold red font (see Fig. 2), one can observe the multitude of affects that women navigate during commutes.

#### 5.1.1. *Blasé outlook*

Participants complained of the loud noise levels in public transit spaces, both inside and outside the vehicles, be it the relentless horns, loud conversations, ringing mobile phones or arguments. Disputes over reserved seats or extra fares generate an atmosphere that primes commuters to act or react with aggression. While those directly affected by it engage angrily, others exhibited indifference determined not to engage, often looking outside or plugging in earphones. This phenomenon of withdrawing from the urban environment was explained as *blasé outlook* (Simmel, 1950), or *civil inattention* which Goffman (1963) attributed to the city’s excessive stimuli. However, one could argue that people ought to have grown accustomed to cities and their stimulants by now. Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that people are selective about issues that they concern themselves with, in order to avoid mental exhaustion. For instance, when participants were asked if they ever intervened (or witnessed others intervene) in a situation where someone was being harassed, they shared “*Charging an extra fare of two taka (2cents) unites all passengers to speak up. Harassment doesn’t.*”

#### 5.1.2. *Tacit acceptance of urban aggressions*

Most of the women exhibited tacit acceptance that boarding the bus, or traversing streets would inevitably confer harassment. They treated it like it was a price to be paid for entering spaces that were not meant for them. Participants explained that they chose to focus on reaching their

destination on time and getting back home safely. Whatever happened en route was insignificant and did not merit deeper reflection.

*“It has always been about the end goal. If I have been able to board the bus, it means I would be able to reach University, which means I would be able to take the exam on time. Whatever else happened during the journey, we ignore it. Because what’s the point? What’s our alternative? I would come home exhausted. I would get angry at my mother over little things. I am telling you all this because you asked today. Otherwise, it’s very normal. Everyone travels like this.”* (Tara)

Literature on routinizing affects suggest that although affects may have originated from within the bus or a particular place in time, it has the potential to transcend boundaries (of public transport spaces) and spill over (into individuals’ private lives). Thus, routine exposure to the stream of affects (anger, shame, self-blame, fear, regret) serves to not only generate frustration but may also, as we see in Tara’s case, bring about a disposition that *normalizes* such aggressions. Owing to the deeply disempowering experiences of harassment in public spaces, this seemed to be an unhealthy coping mechanism.

The sentiment rang true across classes and education levels. Working women in formal sector jobs were of the opinion that living in the capital city, as crowded as Dhaka, came with its conditions comparing sexual harassment to *dudh-bhaat* (‘milk and rice’) referring to its triviality (a comparable English metaphor would be child’s play), urging the researcher to not make a big deal of it. This is consistent with literature that identifies *density* as an urban affect that makes the big city life ‘enchanting’ whilst overwhelming, a paradoxical appeal of urban living (Chowdhury, 2020).

#### 5.1.3. *Self-blame, fear and immobility*

The overcrowded bus during rush hour is a particular spatial temporality that allows non-confrontational acts of harassment and affords perpetrators a cloak of anonymity. The bus seats are spaced too close together for comfort, forcing passengers to be cramped into the vehicle, with little leg room. As a result, many participants, young and old, said “their knees hurt” from sitting on the bus for too long. This also means, with every brake, bodies press into one another, permitting opportunistic touching or ‘exploitation of contact’ (Goffman, 1963,143), setting off a series of charged encounters and affects, This left most women with little choice but to ignore the harassment since no source could be determined in a sea of faces. In the absence of someone to blame, and partly due to the conditioning of a deeply misogynistic society, self-blame was common among participants.

*“I started doubting myself. Like was I wrong somewhere? I kept thinking, what should I do? What should I say? Then I looked at my dress. I did not wear a salwar kameez. I had a leggings and a kurti. Maybe that was why..? So then I wrapped myself with the scarf very well, and covered my head”* (Tushi)

*in another incident, Nabila shares,*

*“When I complained, the (perpetrator) lashed out saying that a man like him did not NEED to harass a girl that looked like me. He made me feel so ugly, so unappealing, implying I wanted to embarrass a good-looking guy like him. And everyone on the bus kept silent. How was my appearance a matter of concern here?”* (Nabila)

Nabila talked about the *sinking* feeling in her stomach, the *silent tense* atmosphere in the bus, the onset of tears, and feeling like *all eyes were on her* as she disembarked the bus at the next stop. She used the phrase ‘*Chorer moto matha nichu kore*’ (hanging my head down like a thief who got caught in the act), emphasizing her affective field of shame and disgrace for being assumed a liar. In a flushed state of confusion and shame, she shares calling her husband after getting off the bus, to ask him if he too harassed women on the bus, because at this point, she felt, “*nothing is impossible. After that incident, I didn’t get on the bus for the next 2 to 3 months. I felt scared that if I ever flag anything like this again, 10 more*

people will come to defend the perpetrator and blame me. That fear. I think I still have.”

The affect of fear also played out as a bodily response in anticipation of aggression. Some women spoke of experiencing a *paralyzing affect* in the moment of a physical violation.

*“I don’t know why, I think I was physically unable to react. I was stuck. Everything was happening and I was just stuck in that situation. I couldn’t even push him. It’s not like I did not want to, it’s just that, you know you want to do something and can’t. (Tushi)”*

Tushi’s experiences of being gripped by fear portray how the body is held ransom to an affect and its potential for action is curtailed. Bovin et al. (2008) explained this as *‘tonic immobility’*, i.e. a decrease in responsiveness of a person towards their surroundings unable to move or vocalize, and detached from self.

The trauma, distress, and confusion of women as they negotiate situations riddled with ambiguities and uncertainty in a confined, transitory environment creates an assemblage of vulnerability that is more than the sum of its parts. Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s work on the *affective politics of fear* (Ahmed, 2004), we wish to treat fear in its cultural context and distinguish between the affective capacities generated by different kinds of fear. Embodying fear is also not a monolithic concept, rather people behave differently when confronted with different kinds of fear, such as fear of drawing attention to oneself and being judged for attire or travel companion (or the lack of an appropriate male chaperone in the Muslim-majority society), fear of being called a liar due to lack of proof of harassment, fear of not having moral support from bystanders, fear of encountering the perpetrator again under worse circumstances, fear of tarnishing family honor, etc. Ultimately, fear serves as a permanent constraint on their mobility and access to resources, perpetuating a subordinate status.

#### 5.1.4. Normative sociabilities

Knowing when to speak up during harassment was a tricky situation. With passengers boarding and deboarding in intervals, the appropriate window in which to voice out against the act of harassment or intervene is brief and fleeting. Most women take time to process the unexpected encounter and by the time they decide to react, it may be too late. These observations are pertinent for understanding why participants refrain from or delay their reactions to harassment, debating dilemmas of “is it worth reacting given that it’s only temporary?” As Tushi recalls, *“I kept praying for him to get off the bus before my stop came. Because I did not want him to know my stop. When he got off, I felt relieved. I was still traumatized, but I felt kind of, you know, like thank god he’s gone.” (Tushi)*

*“I hate to say this, but most times I’ve been scared to create a scene. I always feared being questioned for not wearing a hijab. But the fact that I have not stepped up, I hate that about myself. I think should have stepped up more.” (Rosy)*

Rosy’s dilemmas about not wanting to draw attention to herself since she was not wearing the hijab takes us back to the previously discussed propensity to self-blame. Moreover, both participants’ reluctance to respond to harassment in Dhaka buses, although similar in effect to women commuters in London Underground (Lewis et al., 2021), is very different in meaning. Lewis and colleagues (2021) reasoned that women experiencing harassment in London Underground are typically unwilling to react not so much for fear or embarrassment, but that they did not wish to disturb co-passenger journeys and felt that they *managed power* by refusing to disrupt their mobilities (pg. 289). He attributed this to *normative sociabilities*, specific to public transport. In the case of Dhaka, we observe that these sociabilities are often gendered and certainly not limited to public transport. Women generally follow traditional gender scripts in public spaces, maintaining composure and steering clear of confrontations, sometimes using earphones and the hijab as a means of dissociating from the environment. A gendered reading of this could be that since being emotional is considered

synonymous with being soft and weak (that women are generally accused of), women consciously tried to avoid exhibiting emotions in public spaces. As feminist scholars have noted, the binary model of attributing ‘emotion’ to the feminine (whilst being objective is masculine) works to subjugate the feminine body (Jaggar, 1996). To further nuance this finding, a feminist analysis of status and power by (Henley and Patrick, 1977) suggests that certain emotions are deemed more appropriate for women (emotions of fear, shame and sadness as expressions of vulnerability and powerlessness), in contrast to men’s expressions of anger, pride and contempt (Fischer, 1993). This is partly due to gender socialization in a dominant patriarchal structure, where people avoid transgressing gender norms (such as women being angry or men crying in public) for fear of being punished, and the consequence is that very few people transgress. Hence, gender norms and cultural identities influence emotional expressions, as much as emotional expressions form our ideas of gender.

#### 5.1.5. Class-specific unbelonging

On the other hand, *unbelonging* can also manifest from the quality of service offered to certain users. Reflecting on the public mobility infrastructures in certain parts of Dhaka, we observe that they suffer from poor maintenance in low-income neighborhoods compared to high-income areas. Footpaths are rarely free from obstructions (construction debris, garbage, broken glass) and streets are likely to be inundated with potholes and open manholes (sewer), ignored by the municipalities (refer to Fig. 3).

Anjum, a 30-year-old garments worker living in an informal settlement of Dhaka, laments about the night she fell into an open pothole, on her way walking back home from the factory in the darkness, and severely injured her feet. She ended up bearing medical expenses totaling 11,000 takas (110 Euros worth of out-of-pocket expenditure) which is greater than her monthly wage at the factory. Despite alerting the local authorities, she shares that the pothole still remains to be fixed five months later. Given her residence in a low-income settlement, she confers that her community is not a ‘high priority’ for local policy-makers. Experience of the pothole, although seems generic and ungendered on the outskirts, arises through multiple micro-factors which are gendered. Women with low income are more likely to walk the first and last-mile and do not have the luxury of availing para-transit modes (cycling, rickshaw, leguna) as many men might. Secondly, the time poverty of working-class women places innate pressure on them to traverse these walks hurriedly risking injuries and minor accidents. Thirdly, there is a spatial element since potholes tend to be commonplace in low-income informal neighborhoods, which municipalities conveniently turn a blind eye to fixing or spending budget on. Although pothole accidents could have happened to anyone crossing the streets, the risk of falling victim to such infrastructural ignorance (and violence) is always greater for low-income working women.

The same rationale holds true for public and privately owned buses, which are used by commuters who fall into a lower and lower-middle socio-economic bracket. The bus interiors are typically worn-out, the seats dirty with visible signs of wear and tear, and small circular fans hanging from the ceilings that are mostly defective. The bus windows are often jammed or broken, forcing commuters to open umbrellas inside the buses to protect against the rain. As a participant goes on to explain *“Travelling during rains is the worst. If the (bus) windows are closed, it gets too stuffy with the overcrowding of people, their sweat, and wet clothing. And if the windows are open, everyone gets wet.”*

When asked, how they had *changed* over the years in relation to traversing the city, most of them believed that their (experiences over the) years had better prepared them to handle untoward situations. The analysis could also be drawn from a life stage perspective where older (and more experienced) women were less likely to be harassed. Some felt that the *fear had settled in* and they anticipated risk and danger much more than before, whilst a handful reported switching to ride-sharing modes and two-wheelers even though it costs an inordinate share of



Fig. 3. Images of footpaths in a low-income neighbourhood taken by researcher.

their budget. As a natural implication, all participants were unambiguous in their aversion towards public transport and their willingness to opt out of it if they could afford to do so.

## 5.2. Affects (embodied) that empower

In this section, we unpack the affects that disrupt the status quo, i.e. deterritorialize the assemblage of (un)safety when women reach out for help. What enables some women to voice out and not others? What ripple effects do their actions have on others? Indeed, women commuters promptly pointed out that their decision to react or reach out for help was always a calculated one, depending on the intensity of the encounter, the supporting environment (or the lack of it), their familiarity with the space and the social capital they can leverage to negotiate safety.

### 5.2.1. Moral support

A low-income 45-year-old women traveling in Dhaka buses for over a decade talks about inertia of reaction. She says it usually takes one woman to speak up before others chime in. She adds, “Someone has to break the silence. I think if I speak out, a few more women will feel the confidence to speak up. There’s a kind of hesitation initially.” Sonia refers to a similar incident where she was encouraged by her fellow passenger to voice out during an incident of harassment.

*“felt a touch from behind. When I looked back I couldn’t tell who had touched me (muffled). The next time it happened I looked back again and saw his fingers still moving. The lady beside me said- say something? Sister, my voice was faltering and I was almost crying. (Pause). But since that lady was in my support, I raised my voice to say “Uncle what are you doing?”. Then she also raised her voice. And because we both said the same thing, the bus eventually let him down at the next step.”*

However, Sonia’s account is not a common experience. Not all women are lucky to find moral support on the bus, as Nabila confides. For instance, what affect did Nabila’s incident (of having to deboard the bus for complaining about harassment) have on those who witnessed it? Afrin, an NGO worker, explains that the opportunity to intervene (by other witnesses or bystanders) in these situations is also momentary. However, the decisions may generate affects (such as regret, self-blame, empathy, and increased vulnerability) that appear to stay with individuals for a long time.

*“I was on a BRTC bus in Banani..She had complained of being harassed, and the consequence was- she was the one who was asked to get down from the bus! She didn’t go without a fight. She got down complaining and shouting. And the conductor kept blaming her and name-calling her. The whole thing happened in front of my eyes. That incident stayed with me for a long time. I couldn’t get myself to protest I should have.” (Afrin)*

The idea of moral support (or the lack of it) from fellow commuters played a significant role in encouraging (or discouraging) women to speak up and take action. This indicates to the transmission of affect (Thrift, 2008) and how it diffuses through bodies at a semi-conscious level. The infectious movement of affect (Bissell, 2010) is critical in understanding how particular affects erupt and coalesce in the bus amongst other passengers.

Shuborna shares a harrowing story of how she once felt compelled to call up a police officer, who was a part of her social network and requested him to punish the bus staff for making derogatory comments towards all women on the bus until then.

*“The police officer(bhaiya) came and parked in front of the bus, so it couldn’t speed away. He came into the bus and asked what happened. I said- brother, I’ll tell you later what happened, first can you just slap these two (pointing at the driver and conductor)? The whole time they kept humiliating women. Some of the passengers supported me, and some of them left. The police then held the driver by the collar and got him off the bus and asked him to apologize to me. Then, I asked the driver- where is your aggression (golabaji) now? Now you have your “purush manush” (male authority) and your “proshashon” (government administration) in front of you so now you’ve become timid.”*

Shuborna’s account draws attention to how women redefine power relations in public spaces by leveraging social capital. Her act alludes to a form of patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti, 1988), where she uses her interpersonal ties to a relatively upper-class male authoritative figure (police officer) to counter harassment by a lower-class male (bus conductor). Her own education and class, which was superior to her aggressors, were immaterial and ineffectual in this scenario.

### 5.2.2. Social capital

However, we are cognizant that not all women are privy to the kind of social capital that Shuborna was able to draw on. To appreciate this, we look to understand the religious, and socio-cultural expectations of being a woman in the subcontinent and how that co-implicates



(cultural) identities in public transport spaces. Patriarchal societies, such as Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, tend to place symbolic and material restrictions on adolescent girls' bodies, comportment and mobility as they grow up, binding it with issues of family honor and respectability. Therefore, their mobility needs have to be qualified with a purpose, usually escorted by male family members, and cannot be left to 'loiter' unattended (Phadke et al., 2009; Khan, 2007). In Dhaka for instance, unlike their male peers, adolescent girls are discouraged from playing in the open grounds or streets on account of safety. Moreover, most of the playgrounds in Dhaka are adjacent to community mosques, the grounds of which are prohibited for girls and women. Farin spoke about her younger brother and male cousins saying *'they know everyone and everyone knows them'* in the community: the shopkeepers, the local rickshaw pullers, and the security guards of nearby buildings. The simple act of 'knowing locals' was established through the years of attending prayers at the mosque, playing cricket and badminton in neighborhood streets. The religious and civic involvements increased men's recognition in the community which helped to develop communal ties and build social capital. In contrast, women like Farin were constrained by social restrictions and could not claim the same kind of social support in public spaces as men (see Healy et al., 2007), and were left to fend for themselves.

Years of navigating public transport accrued higher levels of confidence, as evidenced among those who grew up in Dhaka city relying on public transport compared to those who had migrated from other smaller cities. New migrants spoke of feeling like an 'unwelcome' burden to the already densely populated city. Experiences of harassment and the lack of social capital to counter it reinforced a sense of alienation and unbelonging. These affects, although cognitive, tempered with material and spatial dimensions of commuting, often preventing women from actively reaching out for support. A case in point is Tushi, a woman in her 30s who migrated to Dhaka for work, sharing why she couldn't muster the courage to reach out for help.

*"You know if this same thing were to happen to me in Chittagong (home town), I think I would have screamed and shouted because I know people on the streets, the uncles would be like, "Maa (daughter) what happened?" and then they would get involved like they would for their own daughters. But I never felt that kind of, you know that belonging, or that attachment, or even having that kind of support in Dhaka."*

### 5.2.3. Situated Knowledge of being a local

Interviews with two participants with very outgoing personalities, Farnaz and Nishat, both in their mid-20s, spoke about having untethered access to the streets of Dhaka growing up. They were both involved with multiple extra-curricular activities beyond schooling (debates, activism, sports) and attributed their confidence to a liberal upbringing. Farin's parents had divorced and she was encouraged to start earning from a young age (13) to accommodate her expenses. Her parents, as she put it, were 'uninvolved with her day-to-day affairs'. Meaning they did not escort her to tuition, school, and work like most parents with young daughters. As a result, over the years, Farin grew up to experience the city in a way that most women her age don't. She confidently explained certain routes of the city to me and shared tips on what to do if one were to ever get lost in Dhaka. When I asked her what set her apart from other girls her age, who felt scared to travel alone, Farnaz explained, *"Other girls don't lack courage. They just have never honed it because they were never allowed to travel on her own. If you don't go out on the streets, the streets won't automatically become friendly for you! Because who cares?"*

Echoing the same idea, Nishita narrated to us how she never shied away from calling out harassers. Once on a crowded bus a male stranger kept pushing against her, after which at one point she loudly exclaimed "Why don't you just come and sit on my lap?". Her sudden loud outburst of calling out the aggressor was effective in not only establishing her spatial and personal boundary but also alerting potential aggressors in the vicinity. Interestingly, her passive-aggressive choice of words was

not a complaint or cry for help to another person of authority (conductor or bystanders), but a clear intolerance for such behavior.

As this sub-section elaborates, moral support from bystanders and familiarity with the environment, be it through social capital or situated knowledge of being local, appears to confer a greater sense of safety during travels. Moreover, Farin and Nishita's narratives of speaking up and redefining power relations within the bus portray how the affect of 'belonging' (de Certeau, 1984) to the city, has the capacity to shape agentic practices of women as they navigate public spaces.

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the notion of safety as a more-than-human assemblage in urban transport spaces charged with the threat of gendered violence. We began by examining the affects that permeate women's everyday travel and render them vulnerable: politics of fear, self-blame, anxiety, fatigue, and many more. As Koskela (1997) argues, embodying these affects over time, and often simultaneously, leads women to normalize aggressions and disengage from their surroundings to cope. Separately we studied configurations that empower commuters to act and respond to sexual harassment encounters. An analytical comparison indicates that decisions between reaching out for help or quietly accepting the status quo are a perceptive calculus of safety and threat in relation to spatio-temporalities, social capital, situated knowledge, and personal disposition. Similarly, the performances of speaking out against the harasser inside the bus, or not reacting to it, unsettled meanings (of safety) for women who witnessed it. This has the potential to subvert power relations and establish new meanings and moorings of safety, rendering both the transport vehicle and the commuter as active, inside agents in the construction of safety. In summary, we contend that the women's agency to act and respond to harassment in public transport is contingent on multi-scalar assemblages comprising socio-technical infrastructures, affects and emotions, lifestyles and cultural histories, personal dispositions and situated knowledge.

The empirical findings presented in this paper strengthen our understanding of the power of everyday encounters. When asked "what would you do differently if you encountered the same perpetrator again?", a participant exclaimed *"I would scream, and then people would come.. I would probably take his phone and call his family maybe? I would do something, anything. Just not sit down and let it go on."* Given comparable and prompt responses by most participants, we speculate that they have mentally rehearsed the incident several times, to prepare for the next encounter. Retelling past experiences from a new vantage point offer women the power to reinterpret the past and redefine their roles. Analytically, it appears, given the opportunity most women chose to narrate scenarios where they were no longer a victim. Whether or not they would carry out any of it is neither a fixed truth nor our concern to validate. Our interpretation is that they have nurtured this anger for a long time. Although the encounters had been fleeting, the affects stayed.

The value of this paper lies in its exploration of the socio-cognitive undercurrents of women's mobility and how it affects their travel decisions in a country that relies heavily on women's participation in the workforce for its development. It is within this increasing need for female bodies in motion that one needs to pay close attention to the socio-cognitive barriers in public transit, and how it emerges, reproduces, and disrupts power differentials in women's right to the city. To treat each element of travel (broken footpaths, dilapidated buses, or patriarchal power relations inside the bus) as discrete entities in silo is akin to missing the forest for the trees. But locating women's emotionally and politically charged negotiations of space, power struggles, (dis) comfort, and encounters between gendered bodies is key to configuring safer transport experiences. This paper has gone some way towards arguing the need to look at gendered mobilities beyond the usual economic and productivity gains and losses, as is common in transport studies of the Global South (see Bwambale et al., 2023, Sultana et al., 2020). Our

contention with this paper is not to provide solutions on service deficiencies by transport authorities or comment on transport planning implications. Rather we maintain that further research is necessary to understand the ways in which other commuter groups (men, people with disabilities and non-binary populations) nurture affects in transport that is likely to impress upon each other's experiences of the shared commuting space.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Seama Mowri:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Software, Supervision, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Ajay Bailey:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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