

Riding the change: Exploring women's navigation of risk and respectability through two-wheeler mobility in Dhaka

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ABSTRACT

This paper sheds light on the understudied phenomenon of female two-wheeler riders in Bangladesh, and their everyday negotiations of moto-mobility in patriarchal public spaces. In transportation research, female riders have traditionally been characterized as occupying the pillion seat. By conducting ethnographic observations of two-wheeler training clubs in Bangladesh (Dhaka) and qualitative interviews with female riders, the paper expands the discussion of gender and mobility beyond the usual focus on car and public transport in the Global South, which is critical for planning equitable and inclusive transport policies. Using the motility framework (access, competence and appropriation), this paper unravels the cultural, spatial and social dynamics of women's everyday moto-mobility. Through engagement in women-only training clubs which also serve as gendered social spaces, female riders actively build technical and spatial competence. They opt for safety-conscious approaches in driving behaviour, subverting traditional/masculine notions of dominance and authority. The findings also reveal how young riders subvert families and communities to acquire and ride motorbikes, but still largely conform (and adapt) to social norms to manufacture respectability (following normative sartorial choices, sex-segregated seclusion/purdah). In other words, their resistance is in proportion to how much they can assert themselves without facing negative repercussions from communities and society at large. As their presence and performances of micro-subversions rewrite spatial geographies (of risk and respectability), this has implications for reshaping the everyday transport geographies of women in urban public spaces. By presenting gender scripts as an element of appropriation in the constant negotiation of mobility, this paper contextualises motility in a non-western setting, and shows how multiple (seemingly contradictory) gender performances can feed into each other and regroup to facilitate women's access (to mobility) and rights in a gendered city.

The balancing act: notes from the field

I (the researcher) sit on the pavement with a row of eager women waiting their turn on the motorbike, while a young female instructor records a video of her 45-year-old trainee. "I'm doing a Facebook live reel for our social media engagement" the instructor explains to me. "Also in case of any trouble, my fiancé will be able to track me". Impressed with her pre-emptive safety measure, I inquire "What kind of trouble? Do you get threats on social media?" The instructor assures me that the club's Facebook group is private and females-only, "no, but things can go wrong anytime. Like if the locals start asking too many questions, we usually move to another location". The trainees don't seem to mind the video recordings, except for two young women (wearing the hijab) who specifically request not to be tagged on

social media posts. Somebody else explains to me, "They probably haven't told their families yet".

1. Introduction

The above is a vignette curated from our qualitative fieldwork on women moto-riders in Dhaka, emblematic of the socio-spatial tensions that female riders navigate: the precarity of riding in public spaces, the pre-emptive spatial mediation strategies, learning to ride at a later age, the absence of family approval, all of which this paper seeks to unravel, examine, situate and theorize.

Characterizations of women on two-wheelers have historically been limited in transportation research. In the Global North, the existing literature has predominantly featured masculine and heteronormative

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depictions, often portraying women in the passenger seat as passive and subordinate participants (Roster, 2007; Thompson, 2012; Terry et al., 2015). On the other hand, women's mobility (gendered mobilities) in the Global South has mostly been studied in the context of public transport, highlighting issues of overcrowding, safety, affordability and user-friendliness (Gopal and Shin, 2019; Khurana, 2020; Joshi and Bailey, 2023), with little focus on the motorbike. An emerging group of literature that has looked into the nexus of gender and two-wheelers in South Asia, limited to the regions of India and Nepal (Hamal and Huijsmans, 2022) has focused on the production of intimacy (Brunson, 2013), brand assemblage and identity work (Krishnan, 2020) of all-female bike clubs partaking in moto-tourism (Romy and Dewan, 2021). There remains little to no understanding of the everyday lived experiences of Bangladeshi women who ride motorized two-wheelers as a primary means of transport and livelihood, and their everyday negotiations of safety and respectability in a society that places heavy sanctions on women's mobility (and conditions on their visibility) in public spheres. What motivates women to adopt the two-wheeler despite its perceived danger (given the social and physical risks compared to public transport)? What competence do they require to navigate patriarchal and hostile urban public spaces on a vehicle that lends itself to gendered meanings? How do they negotiate the normative ideals of gendered mobilities without pushing it too far/countering backlash? In exploring these three questions, the paper sheds light on an understudied, and emerging phenomenon of female moto-riders in Bangladesh's urban transport, and expands the discussion of gender and mobility beyond the usual focus on car and public transport, which is critical for planning equitable and inclusive transport policies, in line with the New Urban Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 11.2 and 11.7).

To set the stage for the rest of the paper, we lay out extant scholarship on moto-mobilities in urban South Asia, with a contextual focus on Dhaka in the first section. Next, we present a conceptual model using Kaufman's motility framework and nuance it further using Butler's (1988) work on performative identities (and Bichieri's 'gender scripts') as tools of *appropriation*. After discussing a methodological overview of our qualitative approach in Section 4, we move on to key empirical findings (Section 5) in light of (i) the journey of owning/accessing the two-wheeler and the role of female bike clubs; (ii) competencies for negotiating everyday socio-spatial tensions in intimidating/patriarchal public spaces, and (iii) appropriation techniques (through compliance and subversion of gender scripts) to manufacture respectability. In conclusion, we articulate how their everyday spatial negotiations (re)configure geographies of risk and respectability for women's mobilities in Bangladesh. Here, respectability is conceptualized as a symbolic capital that has embeddings of gender and class (Bourdieu, 1984). Throughout this paper, the terms 'motorbike' will be used to denote the standard motorcycle and scooter for Vespa/mopeds, even though participants tended to use those terminologies interchangeably. The term 'two-wheeler' will be used in its broadest sense to encompass them all.

2. Moto-mobilities and gender in South Asia

Motorized two-wheelers play a critical role in densely populated urban geographies of South Asia, where public transport struggles to meet the growing mobility needs of an increasingly urban population (Pinch and Reimer, 2012). Central to its utility and role as an alternative to public transport, is its affordability and ease of manoeuvring (Hansen, 2016). In recent years, the trend of riding two-wheelers has increased among South Asian women (Romy and Dewan, 2021). Increased purchasing power (due to increased labour force participation) combined with the prospect of autonomous mobility has inspired female commuters to embrace the two-wheeler and (quite literally) move from the back seat to the driver's seat (Romy and Dewan, 2021).

As noted by Bourdieu (1984) the cultural and social 'biographies' of material objects vary across cultures and carry connotations of the owner's social status and personality. To further that line of enquiry and

understand how moto-mobilities is represented; produced, marketed and consumed, a stream of literature has sought to unravel the embodied and situated understandings of the two-wheeler and its rider (Brunson, 2013; Krishnan, 2020; Hamal and Huijsmans, 2022). Popular culture has consolidated representations of gendering the vehicle, such as the scooter being feminized in Chennai (Krishnan, 2020), while the motorcycle is associated with traits like excitement, speed, and danger representing heterosexual masculinity. In his study of 'scooty girls' in Kathmandu, Brunson (2013) suggests that scooters are seen as gender-neutral in Nepal, while motorcycle ads in India have sexual connotations but scooter ads emphasize independence and self-assurance, maintaining a sense of sexual modesty in the imagery. Brunson (2013) further explains that motorcycles are difficult to manage in a skirt which deters Nepalese women from using it. In contrast, the practical design of scooters allows women the comfort of sitting and the floorboard below is useful for balancing shopping and/or groceries. Krishnan (2020) explores how brand assemblages shape gendered engagements with risk in Indian cities. Hamal and Huijsmans (2022) argue that women using ride-hailing services in Nepal 'perform' gender, even from the back of two-wheelers, by demarcating boundaries of private space through the simple act of placing their handbags firmly between themselves and the (male) driver. By tracing these studies, we acknowledge that moto-mobilities and its complex relationship with gender warrant deeper discussions beyond the restricted understanding of 'girls on a motorbike' being rebellious or sexually liberated (Miyake, 2018). Building on the existing body of knowledge that explores the complex relationship between respectability and gendered mobilities (as evidenced in the works of Masood (2018), Parikh (2018), Shakthi (2022), and Annavarapu (2022) in the context of auto-mobility), this paper adds the realm of two-wheeler mobility in that discussion.

3. Gendered mobilities in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, women are increasingly more mobile, better educated and placed centre stage of nationalistic development pursuits. While increased opportunities for education, training and work have led to greater participation of women in public spaces (Hanson, 2010; Banks, 2013), it has not necessarily led to autonomous mobility or empowerment (Kabeer, 2011). Gendered mobility remains constrained by prescriptions of female modesty and propriety, historically rooted in Victorian/colonial practices of 'purdah culture' of seclusion and segregation (Papanek, 1982; Lata et al., 2020). Purdah, in the socio-cultural context, projects moral propriety and social status, and is further complicated by interpretations of class (Skeggs, 1997). For instance, upper-middle-class women can afford a private car for mobility, thereby maintaining *symbolic purdah* (in a portable private space) as she moves through public space, whereas working-class women will typically cover their heads with a scarf (hijab) or head-to-toe burqa in public spheres. It is policed through conservative socio-political apparatus, such as the media and State, which condone acts of violence against women for not abiding by appropriate dress codes (Mowri and Bailey, 2022). Such incidents continue to shape women's affective and spatial experiences of the city, limiting their mobility and autonomy (Mowri and Bailey, 2022). As pre-emptive measures, women deploy a range of tactics to navigate safety and respectability concerns, such as not going out after dark and ensuring male guardian chaperones, observing the veil, and qualifying their mobility with a purpose (see Phadke et al., 2011). To nuance, performing *respectability* remains key to accruing class and gender capital.

With more women traversing public spaces, recent studies point towards a growing market of on-demand ride-sharing services using two-wheelers such as Pathao, Uber moto, Obon, and others. This has ushered in a 10% annual growth of new motorcycle registrations in Bangladesh (Zafri et al., 2021), as depicted in the BRTA statistics (2024) (see trendline in Fig. 1). The figure also shows that two-wheelers constitute a dominant proportion of registered vehicles in Bangladesh.

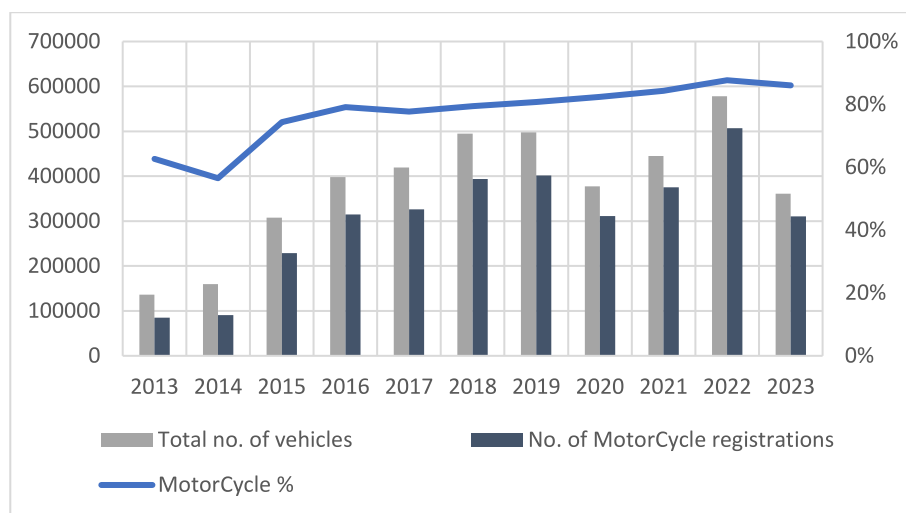


Fig. 1. Total number of motorized two-wheelers compared to total no. of vehicle registrations; and year-wise percentage of motorcycles in Bangladesh (Source: BRTA 2022).

Literature on moto-mobilities in Bangladesh is mostly positivist looking at demographics (Rahman et al., 2021) and factors influencing motorcycle adoption such as mileage, price, and brand attributes (Ashaduzzaman et al., 2018). However, only 1% of motorcycle registrations indicate female ownership (Rahman et al., 2019). This gender discrepancy in women's access to and ownership of automobiles is reflection of the patriarchal setup of Bangladesh. With hardly any studies on gendered perspectives looking at their motivations and embodied mobilities, the epistemic ignorance of female riders in Bangladeshi academic scholarship is apparent. This review found only one study reporting that female NGO staff who rode motorcycles for work were considered 'progressive and modern' which negatively impacted their marriage prospects (Ali, 2012). Another national newspaper article titled 'Sit like a Girl' (Kawser, 2019) unpacks why women choose to sit sideways on the pillion seat, although the uneven weight distribution increases their chances of falling off the bike. A study on motorbike accidents in Bangladesh shows that 83% of head injury cases were female passengers seated sideways on the motorbikes (Roy et al., 2020). This points to how women feel the need to adhere to societal norms of modesty, even if it means risking physical injury. The compulsion to undertake physical risks, in order to preserve respectability underscores the importance of examining constructions of respectability and embodied mobility practices.

4. Conceptual framing

Feminist transport geographers have long been interested in the relationship between mobility and the politics of access based on privilege, gender, and class. A number of studies have employed gender theories in the transport discipline to examine how individuals enact and express their gender identities through their choices, behaviours, and interactions within transportation systems (Joshi et al., 2022; Qiao et al., 2023). This perspective has not only been valuable in understanding mobility choices and trip patterns (Uteng and Turner, 2019; Peters, 2013; Phadke et al., 2011), but also in challenging and critiquing gender biases in infrastructure, transportation planning and policies (Joshi and Bailey, 2023). Furthermore, this lens has proven valuable in acknowledging the various ways individuals express and experience gender, thus promoting inclusive and equitable mobility solutions.

The concept of gender performativity is analytically important to this study because it captures the multiplicity of gender constructions. Butler argues that gender is not natural or binary, but rather an embodied structure in which traits are discursively naturalized through repetition

(Butler, 2004). Building on this, Bichieri and McNally (2015) explain that gender identities are constructed by inscribing or de-inscribing from gender scripts, where a script is a very detailed blueprint for an event with varying degrees of specificity. In this case, gender scripts for women travelling in public transport or motorbikes (the event) can comprise how and where they should sit, how loud they can be, what dress is appropriate to wear and how they should interact with other commuters. By inscribing to normative gender scripts (sartorial choices, yielding road space to male drivers, female-only clubs) and de-inscribing others (subverting family's views of respectability, adopting masculine guise), women perform varying versions of femininity. The riders' narratives in this paper help us understand the shifting and multiple performances that unfold in different times and places.

In framing this paper, we find it useful to start with Kaufmann, 2016 concept of motility. Kaufmann et al. (2004) postulates that the three determinants shaping the mobility patterns of the individual are access, competence and appropriation. Access refers to the availability (owning and ride-sharing two-wheelers), affordability (pooling savings) and usability of transport options. Competence refers to the skills and abilities necessary to access mobilities (such as obtaining a license, learning how to ride, knowing when to yield road space to aggressors on the road). Appropriation suggests behavioural components such as the need and willingness to make use of options to become mobile (defying family restrictions, when to assert agency and when to remain passive). Additionally, in light of our findings on how women leverage performances of gender and respectability as an act of appropriation, we nuance this model further to add 'gender scripts' as a categorical subset of appropriation.

Empirically, the paper brings to light the phenomenon of female moto-riders in Bangladesh, their journeys of access, developing competence and the everyday socio-spatial tensions they navigate in accessing patriarchal urban public spaces. This is particularly important since existing literature is silent on the emerging phenomenon of female bike riders in Bangladesh. While their spatial negotiations have implications on the everyday geographies of urban spaces (Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 2015), their very presence and performances of subversion (re) calibrate spatial geographies of risk and respectability for future female moto-riders.

5. Methods

This article has emerged from a broader research project on inclusive and equitable mobilities in India and Bangladesh. The research protocol

for this study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of (Utrecht University) University (L-19294). Informed consent procedures and confidentiality were strictly maintained, i.e. only the authors had access to the data, and any personally identifiable information (including the names of training clubs) was pseudonymized or aggregated so it would not be traceable back to individuals.

From April to August 2021, the principal author spent time engaging with three two-wheeler clubs as a participant observer. Their contacts were found by scanning social media groups and newspaper reports. After introductory chats with the founders, snowball sampling was used to recruit participants from the club networks. It is important to remember that our duration of fieldwork overlapped with intermittent COVID lockdown restrictions in Dhaka, which made it difficult to follow up with many participants who had initially agreed to be a part of the study.

5.1. Training schools/clubs

The three training clubs, we observed, were informal and mostly operated through private Facebook groups. The number of active members ranged from 5 to a maximum of 50 women although their social media pages had a larger following: (*Club A*) Women's scooter school Bd: 58 K followers on Facebook; (*Club B*) New lady driving school: 13 K followers; and (*Club C*) Bangladesh Women Riders Club: 5.8 K followers. Of the three clubs, only one had a long-term vision for growth (*Club C*) to become a 'federation' of women bikers. *Club C* founder was popularly featured in a number of local magazines/newspapers and served as a representative for women on motorbikes. The club liaises with local and international NGOs and collaborates with international female bikers when they come to visit Bangladesh. The club maintains a YouTube channel, which hosts a series of videos of club activities and members riding together to the city peripheries for day excursions. In contrast, *Clubs A* and *B* operate without any official accreditation. Their operations were limited to teaching women how to ride the motorbike/scooter for a small fee in various public empty spaces in the city, and socialising together while doing so. The training sessions were organized ad-hoc, and the location of the training was communicated 24–48 h in advance through WhatsApp or Messenger. In each training session that the researcher attended, there were not more than 7–8 women trainees in total. Both founders of clubs *A* and *B* were public college attendees who had started the club with a view to earn some extra pocket money, but over time it had turned into their main

livelihood and took precedence over their educational pursuits. Membership was not strictly regulated, except that all three clubs were female-only spaces. The researcher obtained permission to access these training clubs by reaching out to their founders. She was granted observer status during training sessions and also tracked their activities and social media posts by becoming a member of closed Facebook groups associated with the clubs.

5.2. Qualitative interviews and observations

Field observations and informal chats with trainees, onlookers, and local shopkeepers were carried out during club training sessions to build rapport and derive a sense of community perception about the riders. The researcher maintained a field journal, making separate entries for each day of observation and differentiating between observation notes, and reflexive notes. With the intention to capture the lived experiences of riding a two-wheeler in Dhaka, 14 women riders were interviewed, of which 5 owned two-wheelers and the rest had access to them through family, training clubs or ride-hailing services. See [Table 1](#) for a list of participant profiles. The interviews focused primarily on the lived experiences of (un)safety during mobility, and probes were used to look out for the meanings they attached to their everyday mobilities and how they negotiated 'maan-shomman' (respectability) on the streets. Notably, participants who owned two-wheelers referred to themselves as 'riders' or 'bikers', and not drivers (a term commonly used for working-class men who drive public buses or serve as chauffeurs for the upper class). The interviews lasted between 50 and 90 mins and were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim in Bangla, and then translated into English for coding. Photographs were taken, with permission, during fieldwork. Permission has also been sought to reproduce the pictures in this article.

Interview data were analysed using an inductive thematic coding approach facilitated by qualitative data analysis software, NVIVO 1.5.1. We employed two cycles of coding, in the first cycle a total of 63 codes were identified and in the second cycle, we grouped the codes into nine themes. A sub-section of the codes used in formulating this paper is provided as a [Table 2](#). Both the cycles of the coding and the ensuing analysis were discussed by the authors to avoid any bias of interpretation.

In terms of positionality, it is important to note that the principal author carries a personal bias of being a cis-hetero-able-bodied, upper-middle-class woman from Dhaka. As [Throsby and Evans \(2013: 9\)](#)

Table 1
Participant profiles.

| Pseudonym | Age | Marital Status | Access /Ownership of two-wheeler | Education | Occupation | Lives with (dependents) |
|-----------|-----|----------------|---|--------------------------------|---|----------------------------|
| Afrin | 31 | Married | Access via training club | Undergraduate (completed) | NGO Worker | Husband, brother-in-law |
| Prioti | 24 | Single | Access via ride-hailing services | Undergraduate (enrolled) | Student/ small enterprise owner | Alone (Hostel) |
| Nishita | 29 | Single | Access via ride-hailing services | Undergraduate (completed) | Student | Parents |
| Farin | 21 | Single | Access via brother's motorbike | Undergraduate (enrolled) | Student/activist | Mother and younger brother |
| Aroti | 22 | Single | Access via training club and ride-hailing services | Undergraduate (enrolled) | Student | Parents |
| Rosy | 27 | Single | Access via ride-hailing services | Interning as physician | Student/ freelance photographer | Father and older sister |
| Auritri | 28 | Single | Access via ride-hailing services | Undergraduate degree | NGO worker | Husband |
| Ishita | 32 | Married | Owens a two-wheeler and founder (<i>Club C</i>) | Undergraduate degree | Works in an internet service provider company | Husband and child |
| Sonia | 25 | Single | Owens a two-wheeler and founder/ instructor (<i>Club A</i>) | Diploma (enrolled) | Bike rider club founder | Parents |
| Sana | 28 | Single | Access via ride-hailing services | Midwifery training | Medical Nurse | Mother and brother |
| Trina | 24 | Single | owns a two-wheeler/instructor | Upto HSC (Grade 12 equivalent) | Gig economy worker/ part-time bike instructor | Alone (Hostel) |
| Nodi | 21 | Single | owns a two-wheeler, founder (<i>club B</i>) | Upto SSC (Grade 10 equivalent) | Student/ sales associate/Part-time instructor | Mother |
| Parboti | 39 | Widowed | Access to two-wheeler via employer | Upto Class 5 | Domestic service | Husband & two sons |
| Shuborna | 45 | Widowed | Owens a two-wheeler | MBA | Office Administrator | Son |

Table 2
RQ, themes and codes.

| Research Questions | Motility determinants | Codes (emerging themes) |
|--|-----------------------|--|
| What motivates women to adopt the two-wheeler? | Access | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aspirations for independent mobility • Pooling resources for ownership and access • Identity/belonging (signifier of spatial and social mobility) • Moral support networks and the role of training clubs |
| What competence do they require to navigate patriarchal and hostile urban public spaces on a vehicle that lends itself to gendered meanings? | Competence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capability and technical skills (passive commuter to active agent) • Societal tolerance for gender transgressions • Spatial mediation strategies |
| How do they negotiate the normative ideals of gendered mobilities without pushing it too far/countering backlash? | Appropriation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing gender wrong • Opportunistic subversion • Compliance with normative gender tropes or ideals for respectability |

offered, ‘the size, composition, sensation, and performance’ of a researcher’s body are essential aspects of the interview process. Thus, to avoid judgment, the researcher took precautions during field visits, by dressing conservatively in a traditional outfit (Shalwar kameez) and walking the last mile (to the location). With deep-situated knowledge of the city and its local language, the researcher was privy to many aspects of the participants’ personal lives that were discussed during training sessions but did not have permission to be studied for research. She was also able to go beyond the idealized answers of participants and probe for context-specific responses, adding to the richness of the data.

6. Results and discussion

In this section, we present a three-part analysis of women riders’ experiences using the three motility determinants: access, competence and appropriation. In the first sub-section, we focus on understanding motivations, and the role of bike clubs in enabling access. In the second sub-section, we explore the skills and strategies these riders adopt in navigating intimidating/patriarchal public spaces. Thirdly, we examine how riders appropriate spaces through compliance and subversion of gender scripts to manufacture performances of respectability.

6.1. Access to mobility: Understanding motivation, drop-outs, and the role of training clubs

In understanding what motivated women to adopt the two-wheeler, all participants expressed how the everyday exhaustion of navigating harassment and a ‘broken’ public transport system had led them to shift to alternative modes of transport, such as rickshaws, motorbikes and scooters. By providing key links between door-to-door mobility, it eliminated the need for first-and-last mile connectivity services (such as walking or the rickshaw) and reduced women’s exposure to sexual harassment on buses, at bus stops, or on deserted streets. Affordability, practicality and flexibility of the vehicle were key triggers for adoption (also echoed by Romy and Dewan, 2021; Swathy, 2016). Many of the participants mentioned television advertisements and Indian films that inspired their preferences for scooters. ‘On TV I see the ads by (scooter brand), and tamil movies and I don’t even understand tamil, but admired those girls driving scooters. I wished to be like them. Like butterflies.’ (IDI/Sana). The prevalence and popularity of Indian media consumption in Bangladeshi households considerably shaped women’s aspirations for autonomous mobility and the vehicle. However, our observations noted

a discrepancy between the demographic that the TV ads portrayed and the range of participants observed in training clubs. Unlike the popular trope of marketing images, featuring young women on scooters, many of the trainees of Clubs A and C were in their mid-thirties or above. A group of middle-aged female riders shared that gaining access and control over their mobility (and potentially the mobility needs of their family) was now ‘a necessity’, a realization that emerged for some following the loss of their spouses and no male family members to depend on. This highlights how middle-aged and older women are not perceived to be customers or quotidian users and thus invisibilised in transport.

However, the journey of access was neither straightforward nor without resistance. Four of the five female riders mentioned the lack of family support in their decision to purchase two-wheelers. They belonged to resource-constrained families headed by a male earning member. This meant that expenditure for a personal motorcycle would potentially come at the expense of some other household budget and hence required permission from the household head. Sonia, founder of a training club, shares, ‘I bought the scooter with my money from DPS (Deposit scheme). No one supported my decision, my parents did not talk to me for 7 days. Those 7 days, I did not eat or drink, in anger. Since I’d stopped eating, eventually they came around.’. Nodi’s account was similar, where she secretly took driving lessons without her family’s knowledge.

I had to go through a lot of trouble to convince the family. I didn’t inform them when I was learning to ride it. I knew that if they came to know about it, they would never allow it. They’re not that progressive-minded. I would ask around where can I learn to drive the scooter. It was both my dream and a necessity. I tutored students to save 60,000 to 70,000 taka (600 Euros) for a second-hand scooter. (IDI/Nodi).

Both Sonia and Nodi stress the fact that they earned their money to buy the vehicle and did not ask for money from the family unit. Whether it was by working extra hours, pooling their savings, or partaking in hunger strikes (in the face of family resistance), they exhibit strong aspirations for independent mobility.

It is in that context that the two-wheeler represents a complex relationship between access to mobility, social class, and identity for these female riders. Despite the initial hiccups, the riders took pride in owning their vehicles. It became more than just a mode of transport and an intimate fragment of their identity. Notably, the motorbike embodies the markings of an emerging lower-middle class, not capable of owning a car, but with enough purchasing power to afford a privatized vehicle and thus a higher social standing than public bus users. In essence, both on and off the streets, the motorbike becomes an artefact to define, display and entrench positions of class and agency; a signifier of both spatial and social mobility.

However, our analysis suggests that experiences of access were not uniform across all female riders. While some were regulars, others were missing months at a time, particularly the middle-aged cohort. When inquired about a particular participant who had agreed to speak to the researcher but was absent in the consecutive training sessions, the instructor (club A) complained, ‘They do 2 classes, then disappear for 3 months. It ruins the flow.’ In response, some of the older trainees defended themselves in unison, saying, ‘It’s not always easy carving time away from the family. We have responsibilities at home, we’re not young and carefree like you (pointing to the young instructor)’. (Field observations of training sessions, June 2021, Dhanmondi location).

While participants were right to point out that time commitments to familial responsibilities took precedence for older women, it is essential to consider how mobility of older women in public spaces carries different meanings and risks compared to the mobility of unmarried younger women. Women in Bangladesh usually tend to marry at a young age, with a significant portion (59% of women between the ages of 20–24, according to BDHS 2014 survey) married before the age of 18. By this measure, older women trainees (aged 40 years and above) would have already fulfilled their reproductive roles and accrued certain

cultural and social capital over time, which affords them a stronger defence against vulnerability to harassment or concerns about their social reputation. Nevertheless, some older women attended club activities as a way to bond and spend leisure time with other women. In this context, these clubs provided safe gendered spaces for social interaction and experimentation among women.

All participants agreed that having access to the club and its network of riders made a big difference on a bad day indicating that moral support networks were critical for access. The instructor (club B) shared “*When they don’t show up for a series of classes, others call or message to check in. It doesn’t take much for fear to creep in. So it’s important to motivate each other.*” Field observation notes that the camaraderie between trainees and instructors (club A and B) was always cheerful and motivational. The social media pages of all three clubs were filled with live reels and instructional videos of women learning to ride. The mundane everyday portrayals of women learning to ride the scooter were ‘liked’ and ‘shared’ (on Facebook and Instagram) between members and served to inspire more women to join. The clubs fostered strong communal ties as many of the trainees pooled rides to reach the training location, shared food during breaks and gave each other tips for better riding performance, supporting each other in what they believed was their collective fight and right to public spaces. See Fig. 3 for a collage of pictures shared by participants of their training sessions.

While social clubs provide valuable spaces for women, navigating the streets of Dhaka on a motorbike remains a significant challenge. The number of female riders on the streets of Dhaka is still a tiny fraction of the total number of motorcyclists on the road and even then, many of them drop out over time. Ishita explains,

There are many women in our club who after a year of driving, decide to give up, and sell off their bikes. They say – “buses scare me. Gully boys chase after me. They (male drivers) intimidate, provoke us to speed up, and sideswipe until we lose balance and fall off. A girl I used to know, her husband only made her doubt herself, she finally quit riding and sold her bike. Of course, I helped her sell it, but I was heartbroken. See, there are a lot of things that need to align for us to be able to ride our bikes: In-laws, husband, children, and budget. I am very lucky that my husband has always supported me. (IDI/Ishita).

This compels us to investigate what technical and/or life skills are necessary to navigate and sustain mobility in patriarchal and hostile urban spaces, discussed in the next section.

6.2. Competence in navigating hostile public spaces

The process of owning a two-wheeler involved developing multiple competencies, and were a journey in and of itself: convincing the family, learning to drive, obtaining a driver’s license, arranging finances and vehicle registration, maintaining the vehicle’s annual fitness evaluation, and the other associated obligations. Going through this process signified that women were shifting from the position of passive commuters in public transport to being active agents of their mobility. This is critical to note, since for the average Bangladeshi woman, driving or even learning to ride a bicycle is neither a requirement (life skill) nor encouraged by families. Hence, learning to ride the motorbike not only expanded their terrain of physical mobility but also challenged conventional expectations surrounding women’s movement. Since men have historically served as custodians of women’s mobility (and consequently their ‘izzat’¹/honour in public spaces), being able to move independently without a male *mahram*/chaperone (family member) or a male chauffeur

¹ The dominant discourse of izzat dictates that men must protect women from contact with ‘outside’ men in order to preserve family honour (Chatterjee, 1989; Lata et al., 2020)

in the form of a rickshaw-puller or bus driver, was significant in renegotiating the symbolic gendered spaces (in line with Masood (2018) interpretation of Pakistani female doctors driving cars).

Female drivers in Dhaka stand out due to their rarity and attract attention from onlookers. The attention manifests in both admiration and hostility. While their visibility amidst male drivers served as an inspiration for many other women to follow and register in training clubs, they were also plagued by sexist presumptions of their competence as drivers. Ishita lamented ‘*If male bikers topple over or have a collision, they immediately go and grab the other driver’s collar and start a fight. But if we have a collision, the blame is always on us. (The onlookers will say) If you can’t ride, why are you even on the road? People automatically assume that we are lousy drivers.*’

Digging into what other meanings were ascribed to riders, we observed a range of viewpoints from local bystanders (during training sessions), most of whom were curious and ambivalent. Some said it was nice to see women ‘on the front seat’ followed by a cautionary tale of how the times are changing and not necessarily for the better (*‘dinkal kharap’*), referring to concerns over the riders’ safety. This was further evident in the stories of hostility, intimidation and bullying that riders recounted facing on the streets. Nodi explained that for a female to ride, an otherwise masculine-perceived artefact, often drew unwarranted judgment from other male moto-riders and bus drivers ‘*Sometimes, they (male drivers) drive past us saying: do you want to be a man? Sometimes, they call us (derogatory) names. It’s usually a passing comment.*’

Albeit passing, such comments had enduring consequences of fear and anxiety, at times resulting in dropouts or triggering sartorial adjustments (manifestations of performative gender tropes elaborated in Section 5.3). Hence, new riders and aspirants spoke about struggling not only with technical skills but also with the pressure of performing in non-conducive environments where their competence was routinely questioned and dismissed, providing cues of societal tolerance for gender transgressions.

Several interviews highlighted participants’ concerns about organized crime targeting female riders in relation to the deteriorating law and order situation. Ishita recalls:

In the last few years, around 7 to 8 female motorcyclists I know of have died in accidents. Out of them, three died under the bus, driving at night on empty roads, and the bus simply ran over them. The buses dragged the bodies for some time and made sure they were completely dead. And there has been no justice or follow-up news. The vehicles have not been traced either. In a country, where this happens and nobody cares, how will women feel safe? We think this might be an organized group of bus drivers trying to instill fear among female riders.

Whether these cases are part of an organized crime circuit or not is beyond the scope of this paper, but the accidents and the narratives of intimidation raise pertinent questions about how male drivers are threatened by the transgressive female figure performing moto-mobility. A brief media scan of Dhaka newspapers yields the following captions: *University student dies after bus rams her motorcycle in Dhaka* (BDNEWS24, 2023), *Pathao rider, female passenger killed in city road crash* (The Financial Express, 2022), *Two female bikers killed in Dhaka accident* (The Business Standard, 2020). With captions that deliberately highlight the gender of the rider with no legal recourse or mention of structural transport inequalities, the articles only serve to incite fear among incumbent female riders and their families (Mowri and Bailey, 2022).

An important skillset that all women riders exemplified was a conscious awareness of when to slow down, and how to disengage/de-escalate hostile situations. Sonia, an instructor for club A, explained, ‘*I always tell my trainees, if the bus drivers are playing dirty, don’t play along. Just let it go. Since we’re on two-wheelers, a little bump is enough to make us fall.*’ Similarly, Shuborna, a middle-aged working woman, claimed that she prefers to give right-of-way to aggressive drivers: “*When they speed with me, I think of my son (at home) and park on the side. I can go faster than*

many of them (shows gears), but why should I? What do I need to prove to them?'. Reading women's attitudes towards speed and danger as solely risk-averse oversimplifies the analysis, as it neglects the importance of context. The decision to ride a two-wheeler, which leaves them physically exposed and vulnerable (to accidents) in a country known for being one of the most dangerous megacities for women (Thomson Reuters Foundation Annual Survey, 2017) can hardly be characterized as risk aversion. Instead, we interpret female riders' decision to avoid aggressive/competitive driving as a rejection of masculine norms of power and control on the streets. This perspective aligns with the findings discussed in Terry et al. (2015) study, which highlights the ways in which female riders challenge established gendered dynamics and expectations in the realm of urban mobility. By opting for more cooperative and safety-conscious approaches women subvert traditional notions of dominance and authority typically associated with driving behaviour. Now, one might interpret this passive disposition of female riders in yielding road space to dominant members, to some extent, reflects subordination and reinforces the prevailing gender order. However, rather than simply viewing this as a straightforward reproduction of material and social hierarchies of entrenched inequalities in daily geographies, we find it prudent to examine how women negotiate the normative ideals of gendered mobilities, elaborated in the next section.

6.3. Appropriation through performance

Participants appropriated moto-mobility through a balancing act of opportunistic subversion and compliance to social norms (and gender scripts). Going back to the underlying reason for parental resistance to women acquiring/riding bikes (articulated in Section 5.1), we find the reaction to be rooted in a fear of societal judgment, captured in the pervasive concern of "what will people say/think?"

Sonia shared,

'They [neighbours] would ask my parents- what kind of girl have you raised? How do you allow her to do something so unladylike? My parents would then take out their anger on me. They would threaten to throw me out of the house if I continued to ride the scooter. So I was also always worried – what would people think'.

The threatening impact of performing one's gender 'wrong' (i.e. challenging conventional gender scripts) invited a set of risks, both overt

(threats of being homeless) and indirect (shame on the family). In a parallel vein, Rashid's research in Bangladesh (Rashid, 2009) highlights the strict social sanctions placed on young women's mobility, which is always under protectionist surveillance by families, communities and the State. Any transgressions of these gender norms have consequences for young women's respectability and can impact their marriage prospects and dowry valuations. Sonia is well aware of the risk her subversion carries, but chooses to challenge her family's notions of respectability and actively (re)construct new perspectives. Weighing out her options, she says "With each passing day on the streets, I realized there was no easier way around it. This is how I must go out. The repeated performance of riding the bike and its utility eventually results in the family's acceptance, as the rider shares "I can be of help to my mother and give her a ride wherever she needs to go. She (mother) now understands, and says– this (scooty) is a good thing."

Majority of the participants (see Table 1), old and young (Shuborna, Farin, Auritri), educated and not-so-educated (Parboti, Aroti, Afrin), emphasized that wearing 'appropriate' clothing (that aligned with social norms) was a tacit prescription for modesty (using a Bangla tautology: 'dekhalei shob hoina, ar shob jaigay dekhateo hoina'). Normalizing the male gaze as an inherent part of the riding experience, Sonia showed the researcher how to drape the scarf during an interview: 'When we ride, men's eyes will dart around our bodies. It's normal. I always drape the orna (scarf) across the chest and also wear a koti (waistcoat to hide silhouette)'. Field observations note that the majority of the trainees wore the hijab and some were covered in head-to-toe burqas (see Fig. 2). Quoting Ishita, 'If one looks a little smart and dresses up nicely or wears westerns or doesn't wear an orna, chances are they've attracted the wrong crowd. They will make your life miserable.' In effect, they all reiterated that the key to safe mobilities was to remain marginal, unattractive, and invisible on the street. This heightened vigilance regarding appearance and sartorial choices in public spaces aligns with the well-documented phenomenon of women taking preventive measures against sexual harassment in public transportation (Joshi et al., 2022).

In contrast to the idea of maintaining a low profile, we also observed notable exceptions to this routine. Refer to Fig. 4 which shows the visibility of female riders in Dhaka on special occasions.

One of the images, of a participant riding the bike in a saree on her wedding day (see Fig. 3) is a glaring display of how intimately she identifies with the vehicle and asserts her right to the public space on it

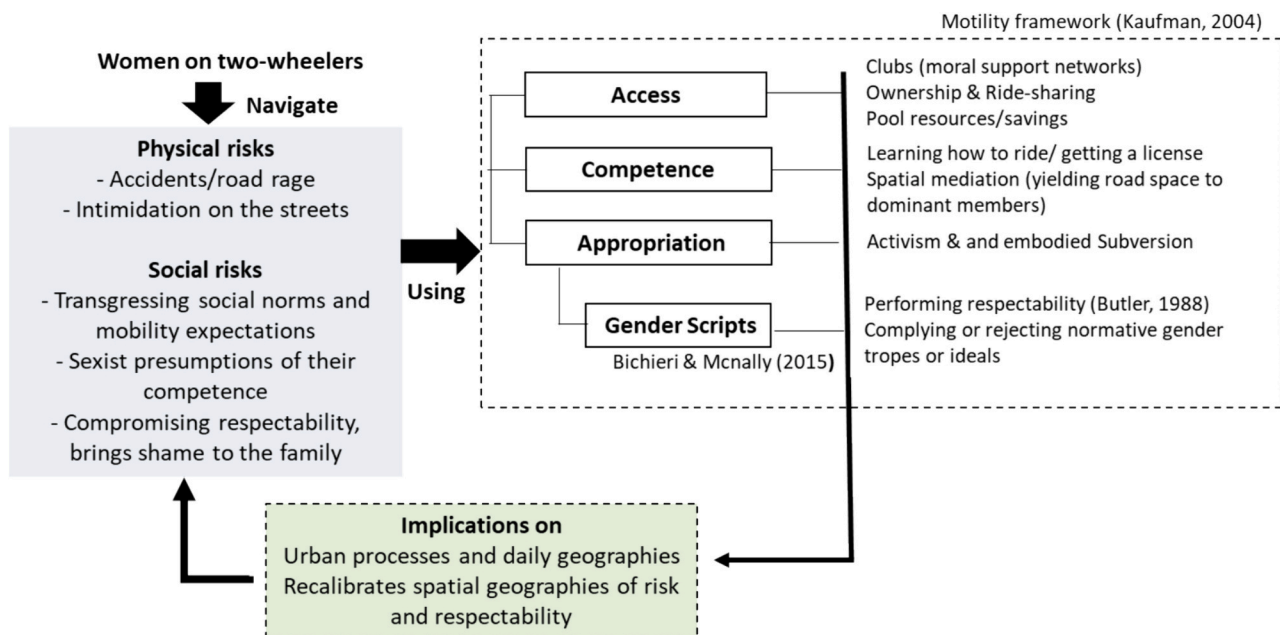


Fig. 2. Conceptual model.



Fig. 3. Collage of riders during training sessions.

(a clear departure from our earlier discussion around toning down appearances). Although this is a one-off event, and the picture was taken by her fiancé, so her mobility was not unchaperoned, we read this as an example of *embodied subversion* that challenges the spatial gendered dynamics of public spaces. Our field observations note that this kind of subversion also plays out on Women’s Day, national Independence Day, and during the 16 days against gender-based violence. On these occasions, the clubs collaborate with local and international NGOs to organize rallies of female riders in coordinated outfits (e.g. purple on Women’s Day). It can be argued that wearing saris in the colours of the national flag (green and red as depicted in Fig. 3) while riding the bike serves as a pre-emptive strategy against potential harassment and to uphold respectability. Additionally, by performing subversion in groups, their individual risk of respectability is lower. The visibility of riders in large numbers during rallies, excursion trips, and training sessions is a rare scene in Dhaka’s mobility landscape. The sight of a group of women sitting on the footpath, laughing and sharing food, sipping tea, and riding the motorbike is a sharp contrast to the everyday demeanor of women in public spaces, where they move around as quickly and inconspicuously as possible. As [Lochan \(2019\)](#) states, their loud and

assertive presence, individually or in the form of a critical mass, is a disruption to the otherwise normalized maleness of public spaces, and essential to the process of reconfiguring the urban space.

Although modest sartorial choices that emphasized respectability were a strategic means of appropriating mobility, we also came across narratives that show that ‘performing gender’ was far more complex than just merely covering up. Extensive quotations from Trina’s interview transcript are presented in the case study below (see box) to convey the lived sensorial experience, of harassment and appropriation, more directly to the reader.

Case study: Performing gender using tropes of masculinity.

Trina is a 23-year-old female who works as a gig economy worker, delivering parcels for a living. Her parents died young and she was raised by her grandmother in a village in Khulna. At the age of 16, she fled her hometown to escape a marriage that her uncles had arranged without her consent. Since then she has been living in hostels in Dhaka, studying part-time, and working side jobs to supplement her income, one of which includes working as a moto-rider for a number of ride-sharing and delivery services.

Sporting a crew haircut and a black Panjabi (a traditional one-piece long garment generally worn by men in South Asia) paired with jeans and sneakers, her demeanor is athletic and masculine. Throughout the interview, Trina spoke candidly about her

(continued on next page)



Fig. 4. Embodied activism (asserting visibility) of riders on the streets.

(continued)

decision to fashion a masculine guise as a means to avoid the daily micro-aggressions of harassment that women typically face in public spaces. She shares. *"Once after a bad injury, I needed stitches on my head, and had to shave off my hair. That's when I realized that people treated me differently when they couldn't tell if I was a girl. So, I decided to never grow my hair (long) again. I changed my whole 'getup' (look). I wear pant-shirt like boys."*

In doing so, Trina leverages being 'mistaken for a boy', and through the apparent concealment of her gender, she is able to enjoy the perks of 'being a man' in a man's world. The following excerpt in italics is Trina's words:

My work requires me to be outdoors all day. When I'm hungry, I sit in the roadside tea stalls (tong) for some tea and bread. I am always careful not to speak, or else they (the surrounding men) will know I am a woman. When they think I'm a man, they don't bother me.

When I used to work for (a ride-hailing service), I would hear things like "Don't you feel bad taking a man from behind (referring to the male passenger on the pillion seat)?" And they (male drivers on the streets) gesture all sorts of sexual innuendos in a 10 times worse language.

So then I retort- "I didn't go to bed with him (the customer). I am taking him to his destination and I am earning a little money in the process. You were raised in a dirty environment and that's why you think like that."

They kept saying, "You're a woman, why do you have to ride a bike? Why can't you just get an office job?" And I told him "suppose I take an office job, and you're the boss. Then you would force me to go to the bedroom with you. So what's the point?"

Then I sped away.

The case in point exhibits how Trina leverages tropes of masculinity (Butler's performance of gender refer to conceptual framework) to appropriate safe mobility. She dons a masculine guise and refrains from speaking in public spaces to avoid giving away her gender. Important to note, Trina's performance of gender, albeit inherently more risky and different from others' performances of femininity on the motorcycle, is not necessarily a contrast. The first group of riders inscribed gender scripts that promoted the female body as a site of modesty and respectability, preferring to remain on the margins, out of focus. Trina's performance of gender, despite taking a very different route, shared the same objective – remaining out of focus. By dressing and acting like a man, she was able to participate in the public sphere, without calling undue attention to herself. However, as her repartee shows, on account of her gender, she continues to be harassed and shamed on the streets for transgressing gendered mobility norms.

7. Conclusion

The findings presented here suggest that training and rider clubs offer women new and safe spaces for gendered sociality. It not only equips them with the necessary technical skills to brave the streets but also inspires, and motivates them to keep riding. By acquiring and riding a two-wheeler in male-dominated 'risky' transport spaces, female motor-riders are well aware of the physical and social risks (challenging cultural schemas and gender scripts around mobility) they undertake. Although female riders defy parental and community norms to procure and ride motorcycles, it is important to note, that they do not want to be seen as deviant. Hence they purposefully choose to conform to social norms in public spaces (following normative sartorial choices, participating in gender-segregated spaces like women-only clubs) and engage in collective performances of activism (with tropes of nationalistic symbols) where the risk of individual loss of respectability is lower. To maintain access to public spaces, they adopt spatial mediation strategies, such as yielding road space to dominant members, not engaging in competitive aggressive driving and quietly parking on the side to allow others to pass. The strategic spatial mediation strategies emerge as a function of both individual agency and overarching structural limitations. However, this subtle and polite acquiescence serves to perpetuate the extant gender hierarchy governing entitlement to public spaces.

This paper responds to Tiznado-Aitken et al. (2024)'s call in speaking to the intersectional experiences of commuting for women, highlighting the differences in agency and capability based on age, family support, access and ownership. The empirical findings enhance our

understanding of the everyday spatial and social calculus of risk and respectability that women negotiate at home and on the streets. Their assertion of agency can be opportunistic or rebellious, but over time, the constant pushback is a subtle way of contesting social structures. In due course, the aggregate of examples (of micro-resistances) discussed in this paper has implications on urban processes and daily geographies. By presenting gender scripts as an element of appropriation in the constant negotiation of mobility, this paper has two major theoretical implications. Firstly, it contextualises motility in a non-western setting, and secondly, it advances Butler's (1988) theory of gender performativity to show how multiple (seemingly contradictory) gender performances can feed into each other and regroup to facilitate women's access (to mobility) and rights in a gendered city.

Our intention with this paper is not to suggest a linear relationship between riding a two-wheeler and empowerment. In fact, we would argue that the image of the female moto-rider as the agent of women empowerment is problematic, as it relegates the critique on structural barriers of public transport (and spaces) to the back seat. It is essential to remember that all female participants expressed a strong aversion to public transport (Section 5.1), which was the primary trigger for their choice and adoption of the two-wheeler as an alternative mode. Decades of car-centric planning with predominant male commuters have created blind spots in transport planning, rendering other user groups, their needs and experiences as "invisible" (within policy context). Considering the significant proportion (66%) of registered motor vehicles in Bangladesh (BRTA, 2024), there is a pressing need to understand, address, and design transport to be more inclusive to these emerging mobility patterns.

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

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

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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