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Bangladesh looks to women drivers to quell testosterone-fuelled fatalities

By putting women in the driving seat, an all-female driving school hopes to cut accidents on Bangladesh's male-dominated roads

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Annie Kelly in Dhaka
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Wheel deal ... a woman trains on a simulator at Brac's Dhaka-based driving school, an all-female facility contributing to Bangladesh's road safety push. Photograph: Brac

Kobita Rani grew up in a family of rickshaw drivers. Even as a young girl, she dreamed of following her father and brothers into the business. The vehicles fascinated her, but she was always told by teachers and her friends that, as a girl in Bangladesh, becoming a rickshaw puller was not a prospect.

"All I have ever been told is that I must get married and have children ... the only person who said I could be whatever I wanted to be was my father," she says. "Now, I am showing them all they were wrong."

Rani is one of the first graduates of Bangladesh's new all-female driving school. Based in the middle of traffic-clogged Dhaka, the course is run by Bangladeshi NGO Brac, which opened the driving school as part of its push to improve the country's appalling road safety record.

"We need to de-testosterone our roads," says Brac's director of road safety, Ahmed Nazmul Hossain. "Road deaths in Bangladesh are a constant dripping away of life, a haemorrhaging of people, mostly productive working people from our society. There is this crazy belief that getting to places quickly is more important than lives."

Women, says Hossain, are generally safer drivers. "Generally, women drivers don't drink, they don't do drugs, they take the rules of the roads and others' lives more into consideration," he says. "Once we have trained these women, there are no better drivers on the roads."

According to the [World Health Organisation \(WHO\)](#), about 20,000 people die every year on Bangladesh's roads, and tens of thousands are injured. The country has one of the highest road fatality rates per capita in the world (more than 125 deaths for every 10,000 registered motor vehicles).

At Brac's driving school, the young women, all dressed in identical white lab coats and baseball hats, believe dangerous drivers are the main problem. The majority have been affected personally by road accidents, and most believe that poor training and a cavalier attitude to safety are largely to blame.

"The drivers on the roads are not able to drive properly: they have no idea about safety or of the rules of the road," says Rani. "When you take the bus to market or to school, you are risking your life – but the more trained drivers we have on the roads, the safer it will become."

After the lesson, the women file out of the classroom and into the street, where they climb into cars to continue their practical training. With an instructor beside her, Rani carefully negotiates her way through Dhaka's hectic traffic. She may be the only person using the indicators, but she says she gets a jolt of pride every time she gets behind the wheel and pulls out into the road.

"Three weeks ago, I couldn't drive; now I know I am good and I feel confident, like I can do anything," she says. "It really feels as if I am changing my destiny."

Rani and her 21 classmates come from some of Bangladesh's poorest villages. Most are graduates of Brac's education programme, and have been selected to take part in the driving scheme because they have shown ambition and resilience.

All have gone through an intensive three-week training programme at the Brac driving centre, where they have been trained to drive large vehicles and given a solid grounding in road safety and vehicle maintenance. As women, they are also taught to be prepared for harassment and intimidation on the roads.

"We know men's attitudes to women on the roads are very bad," says Rina Khatum, a 23-year-old graduate. "I am prepared to face whatever problems there will be, but I am determined not to be put off from pursuing driving as a profession. They will have to get used to seeing women behind the wheel. It will be difficult for us because we are the first, but other women will come behind us and it will get easier in time."

For Khatum and the other graduates, being a professional driver offers the chance of regular paid employment and a solid career. If they find work the women can expect to earn around 14,000 takas a month (£110), which they say is roughly double what they could make in the other jobs open to young women from poor rural backgrounds.

After graduation, all hope to get jobs as professional drivers with government agencies, NGOs or in the public transport system. Hossain explains that government policy stipulates 10% of all professional drivers must be women, but – because so few women drive – this has never become a reality. Until now.

"We are going to be taking the government at its word," says Hossain. "It is still rare for women to learn to drive, let alone work as professional drivers, so the quota system has just been a nice piece of positive legislation that has never been tested. We are hoping to change that, and make our roads safer in the process."

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