

BANGLADESH

BETWEEN A ROCK
AND A HARD PLACE

The fragility of the right to freedom of expression in Bangladesh can be well illustrated through the case of Shafiqul Islam Kajol, a photographer and editor of the Bangla daily *Pokkhokal*, who has been missing since March 10, 2020. Kajol is feared to be another name to a growing list of enforced disappearances in the country. Journalists, along with his friends and family in Dhaka went on to stage a series of demonstrations demanding information on his whereabouts and action for an investigation. Kajol's disappearance came just a day after ruling party lawmaker Saifuzzaman Shikhor filed a case against him, along with Matiur Rahman Chowdhury, editor-in-chief of daily *Manab Zamin*, and 30 others under the draconian Digital Security Act on charges of publishing "false information" and circulating it on social media. On March 21, Amnesty International shared CCTV footage recorded the last day Shafiqul was last seen that showed unidentified people approaching his motorbike and appearing to tamper with it.

Another Bangladeshi journalist, Ishan Ibn Reza Fagun, was also killed in the period under review. Local human rights organisation Ain O Salish Kendra recorded a total of 140 cases of harassment against journalists in the ten months from May 2019 to February 2020. Many of the incidents of torture, harassment and threat were committed by ruling party members and law enforcement agencies. The rights body also recorded 18 cases of death threats by government officials, drug dealers, terrorists and anonymous persons over the phone. Additionally, seven journalists became victims of attacks and violence during the Dhaka City Corporation election.

ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCE

Despite the Bangladesh government's ongoing denial of allegations of enforced disappearances, human rights organisations have repeatedly raised concerns about the practice of unacknowledged detention and enforced disappearances.

Last year, local human rights organisation Odhikar documented at least 34 incidents of suspected enforced disappearance. Eight of those "disappeared" were later found dead, 17 were shown as being arrested while the fate and whereabouts of the other nine remains unknown. The security forces are suspected to have forcibly disappeared over 550 people including many rights activists over the past decade, Odhikar says.

Journalists in Dhaka were alarmed when Mushfiqur Rahman, a reporter of private television channel Mohona TV, went missing on August 3, two weeks after filing a complaint with Pallabi police station in Dhaka over a death threat. Three days later, Mushfiqur was seen in the early hours of the morning, running and crying out for help along the Sylhet-Sunamganj highway near Govindpur village. Mushfiqur later said he was abducted when he was returning to his Mirpur residence by bus. He said some people sprayed a liquid on his face, rendering him unconscious. When he came to his senses, he was beaten severely by his abductors. At one point, they also threatened to shoot him. The identity of the abductors as well as the motive for the abduction remain unknown.



Supporters and photographers form a human chain during a demonstration on March 18, 2020, in Dhaka calling on the government to find missing photojournalist and editor Shafiqul Islam Kajol. The editor of *Pokkhokal* disappeared on March 10 after being accused by the ruling Awami League of publishing false information. CREDIT: MUNIR UZ ZAMAN / AFP

MURDER AND IMPUNITY

The body of online journalist Ishan Ibn Reza Fagun was found near the railway track in Jamalpur on May 22, 2019. Fagun, 22, worked with the online portal *priyo.com* as a sub-editor in the English section and was set to join another news portal *jagonews.com* in June. He was the son of satellite television NTV's journalist Kakon Reza in Sherpur and lived in Dhaka where he was studying alongside his job.

Fagun was travelling by train to his home in the bordering district of Sherpur. His body bore marks of injury in the back of his head, throat and eyes. Ten months on, the police are yet to find any clue or motivation behind his murder.

Since 1991, there have been at least 32 killings of journalists, bloggers and freethinkers in Bangladesh. But the victims in most of these cases are yet to get justice.



DESPITE THE BANGLADESH GOVERNMENT'S ONGOING DENIAL OF ALLEGATIONS OF ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES, HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS HAVE REPEATEDLY RAISED CONCERNS ABOUT THE PRACTICE OF UNACKNOWLEDGED DETENTION AND ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES.

One of the more prominent cases is the Sagar Sarwar and Meherun Runi murders, which never got beyond the investigation stage. The court has postponed the date to submit the investigation report into the murder of the journalist couple more than 66 times. While the names of Sagar Sarwar and Meherun Runi are today the subject of common household talk in the country, few know that Syed Farroque Ahmed of Sreemangal suffered a similar fate. Farooque Ahmed, the editor of *Pubali Barta* - a local publication in Sreemangal - went missing in June 2002. On August 3, 2002, his mutilated body was found on the rail tracks. His case, like too many others, died along with the journalist.

For some media killings, the trials are ongoing year after year, while others are lost at court and pushed aside. Some of their names are known from recent memory, but the further back the

case, the fainter is the recollection.

In 1996 Mohammad Quamruzzaman, a journalist based in Nilphamari was shot dead by security officers while covering a crackdown on protestors of the opposition party. Few know that his case represents a stark example of impunity in Bangladesh; no charge-sheet was prepared, no trial ever took place. Nor does it ever seem likely.

Cases in which investigations were completed still wait for decades for justice to be done. The trial of the murder of Saiful Alam Mukul, editor of the Jashore-based *Daily Runner*, has now been dragging on for 21 years.

In terms of outcomes, there were a few in the period under review. On September 23, 2019, three men were sentenced to life imprisonment for killing journalist Junaid Ahmad in Nabiganj in July 2012.



Demonstrators protest in Dhaka on October 21, 2019, a day after deadly clashes when police shot at Bangladeshi Muslims who were protesting against the protection of Facebook messages that allegedly defamed the Prophet. The rise of radicalism in the country remains a bar to a free press with journalists practicing self-censorship regarding religious issues while propagation of faith has special privilege. Mohammad. CREDIT MUNIR UZ ZAMAN / AFP

IN A MOVE THAT COULD HAVE SIGNIFICANT IMPLICATIONS FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, THE HIGH COURT ON FEBRUARY 24, 2020, ISSUED AN ORDER ASKING THE GOVERNMENT TO EXPLAIN WHY SECTIONS 25 AND 31 OF THE DIGITAL SECURITY ACT 2018 SHOULD NOT BE DECLARED UNCONSTITUTIONAL.

Then on January 30, 2020, the High Court upheld the life imprisonment of five convicts and acquitted four others in the 2005 Gautam Das murder case. On November 17, 2005, Gautam Das, then bureau chief of the Bangla daily *Samakal*, was killed by assailants in his office in Faridpur district.

The Das verdict is only the third verdict delivered since November 30, 2016, when a tribunal sentenced nine men to life imprisonment for the killing of journalist Manik Saha in Khulna in 2004.

It is worth noting that in some cases, the accused were killed in so-called ‘crossfire’ with law enforcement agencies, and the truth of their involvement in the crime will never come to light.

No bloggers were killed in the year under review, as a large number of atheist bloggers have fled Bangladesh, seeking asylum abroad. Others remain in hiding in the country and remain active on social media and blogs using pseudonyms. Secular bloggers and critics of Islam face risks from all quarters including government and militants, as well as by the society and the country’s laws which criminalise expressing opinions that “hurt religious sentiment”.

DRAGONIAN LAW

Bangladesh’s Digital Security Act (DSA), which passed amidst huge protests in 2018, replaced the previous draconian law namely Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act 2006. It has now emerged as the menace to freedom of speech and independent journalism in Bangladesh.

“It also contributes towards a growing animosity towards journalists across the country,” said Mahfuz Anam, editor of the *Daily Star*, the largest circulated English daily in Bangladesh.

The DSA law gives security agencies the power to hold individuals indefinitely in pretrial detention. If convicted, they could each face five years to life imprisonment.

More than 1,000 cases, mostly against Facebook users, have been filed under the Digital Security Act (DSA) since 2018, and the cybercrime tribunal has dismissed more than 200 cases for lack of sufficient evidence into the allegations.

Popular folk singer Shariat Boyati was arrested on January 11, 2020, and is facing indefinite detention for stating that music is not forbidden in the Qur’an. He is accused of “hurting religious sentiments” under the DSA.

Journalists sued under the law include daily *Manab Zamin* editor Matiur Rahman Chowdhury and two reporters of the daily, *Daily Sangram* editor Abul Asad and Independent Television's senior reporter Mahbub Alam Lavlu. As many as 29 people including journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol were implicated in the case, as they shared the *Manab Zamin* story on Facebook and made allegedly derogatory comments against the lawmaker and other influential persons.

On December 13, police arrested Asad after *Daily Sangram*, the de facto mouthpiece of Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh party, published an article calling Abdul Quader Molla, a leader of the party executed in 2013 for war crimes, a "martyr." Asad was arrested as protesters ransacked the offices of the *Daily Sangram* over the article, destroying televisions, computers, and furniture. On December 14 he was shown arrested in a case filed under the DSA.

The case under the DSA was filed against Independent Television's senior reporter Mahbub Alam Lavlu by a private citizen on March 12, 2020, on the allegation of spreading false and defamatory news through his YouTube channel.

A second case filed against missing journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol has become a source of mystery, as it was previously unknown. Three weeks after the journalist went missing, his family learned on March 31 that a second case had been filed against him under DSA on March 10; the same day he went missing. The case was shown to have been filed with Hazaribagh Police Station at around 10:10 pm, about three hours after he was alleged to have gone missing.

In a move that could have significant implications for freedom of expression, the High Court on February 24, 2020, issued an order asking the government to explain why sections 25 and 31 of the Digital Security Act 2018 should not be declared unconstitutional.

According to section 25 (1) of the Act: "If any person using

a website or any digital device-(a) deliberately or knowingly distributes any information or data that is attacking or intimidating in nature; or if a person publishes or distributes any information despite knowing that it is false to irritate, humiliate, defame or embarrass or to discredit a person. (b) Damages the image and reputation of the State or spreads confusion or with the same purpose publishes or distributes fully or partially distorted information or data despite knowing that it is false, and if any one assists in such actions then all such actions of the individual will be considered a crime".

According to Section 31: "If a person deliberately publishes or broadcasts via a website or any digital platform anything that creates enmity, hatred or acrimony among different classes or communities, or upsets communal harmony, or creates unrest or chaos, or causes or begins to cause deterioration in law and order, then that activity of the said person will be considered a crime".

PHYSICAL ATTACKS

Several journalists were attacked, threatened, or had equipment snatched while covering elections in two city corporations in capital Dhaka on February 1, 2020.

In an ominous sign that doesn't bode well for press freedom or democracy, the government tried its best to keep people, especially journalists, away from the city's polling centres. Activists and supporters of the ruling Awami League guarded most of the polling stations and booths and also threatened and attacked journalists in many places. It appeared almost as though police were assigned to help protect the ruling party cadre. Even though journalists were attacked in the presence of the police, no one was arrested.

Indeed, display of the special identity cards issued by the Election Commission for journalists, to be used during the

Monorom Palak, son of journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol who disappeared in 2020, speaks to media representatives at the National Press Club in Dhaka. Despite the Bangladesh government's ongoing denial of allegations of enforced disappearances, human rights organisations have repeatedly raised concerns about the practice of unacknowledged detention and enforced disappearances. CREDIT: SHAFIQUUL ISLAM KAJOL STR / AFP





election-day, became increasingly dangerous. Some journalists invited extra risks by showing their ID cards and were asked to leave the polling stations in many places. Ruling party cadres ensured that no-one could take photos or videos at polling booths. Presence of voters in the election centres was very thin and the opposition party did not show up. Journalists with apprehensions about possible consequences, preferred to stay away. Those who ignored the call of the ruling party men not to record anything, were harassed either verbally or physically.

Mostafizur Rahman Sumon, a young reporter was stabbed in the head, suffering severe injuries. A police complaint was filed by an attacker against three reporters, who sustained injuries. Others were attacked or barred from reporting. These included Sheikh Hasan, chief photographer for Bangla daily *Kaler Kantha*, Zisad Iqbal, a correspondent of the Press Bangla Agency, Faisal Ahmed, a reporter with the *Daily Star*, Mahabub Momtaji, a staff reporter at the Bangla daily *Bangladesh Pratidin*, and Nurul Amin, a reporter for the newspaper *The Business Standard*, Hasnayan Tanvir, a reporter for Maasranga Television, and Saiful Islam, a camera operator for Maasranga Television.

In retaliation, journalists in Dhaka staged a series of demonstrations condemning the attacks, demanding the arrest of the perpetrators. Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of the ruling party, suspended one of the attackers named Riyad from the post of vice-president (Dhaka South Unit). He was later arrested.

The elections weren't the only time media in Bangladesh came under attack. Shelu Akondo, a correspondent with daily *Bangla Bazar Patrika* and journalist of *Daily Polly Kontho Protidin*, was severely beaten and left for dead by a local leader of the Bangladesh Chhatra League, in Northern Jamalpur district on December 18, 2019.

According to the victim's statement, at least five or six people led by Rakib Khan, the district Chhatra League secretary of religious affairs, attacked Akondo with metal bars while he was on a regular evening walk on the banks of the Brahmaputra River. They broke both his legs and fled. Akondo was due to testify against them as a witness in a case related to the May 26, 2019 assault on Mustafa Monju, *Kaler Kantho's* Jamalpur correspondent.

On January 5, two unidentified foreigners and about four local workers of a project under the Khulna Water Supply and Sewerage Authority (KWASA) beat 71 TV Khulna bureau chief Rakib Uddin Pannu and his cameraperson. At the time,

Above from left: Shelu Akondo, a correspondent with daily *Bangla Bazar Patrika* and journalist of *Daily Polly Kontho Protidin*, was severely beaten and left for dead by a local leader of the Bangladesh Chhatra League, in Northern Jamalpur district on December 18, 2019. Media rights advocates visit Akanda in a local Hospital in Dhaka in February 2020.

CREDIT: BMSF

Journalist Mustafizur Rahman was seriously injured during a Dhaka City Corporation Election by the ruling party cadres on January 31, 2020.

CREDIT: BMSF

Journalists receive human rights defenders training in Dhaka with Bangladesh Manobadhikar Sangbadik Forum (BMSF). Formed in 1991, BMSF works to mobilise Bangladesh's journalist community national, local print & electronic media. CREDIT: BMSF

they were filming KWASA development work, focusing on irregularities, according to the statement filed by Rakib to Khalishpur police station. On the instruction of an unidentified KWASA official, the attackers tortured Rakib, vandalised his camera and snatched his mobile phone. Traffic inspector Rezaul Bashar is alleged to have joined the attackers and handcuffed him. Rakib was freed after local journalists staged a strong protest against the incident by blockading the Khulna-Jashore road for half an hour.

OVERREACH OF LAW

In an unprecedented incident, a mobile court under a taskforce of Kurigram district administration ordered the raid on the home of journalist Ariful Islam at midnight on March 14, 2020. Ordered by Magistrate Nazim Uddin, the members of Ansar, a para-police force, allegedly blindfolded him and tied up his hands and feet before shoving him into a car. They tortured Arif, who is a correspondent with online newspaper *Bangla Tribune*. He was then sentenced to one-year imprisonment on charges of possessing narcotics and sent to jail around 1:30 am.

Narrating his experience, Ariful says, "They proceeded to take me to an isolated place and the magistrate kept saying 'Say your prayers now, you are about to meet your maker.' I begged them to spare my life."

The incident triggered outrage on social media with journalists holding demonstrations across Bangladesh, prompting the government to launch an immediate inquiry and the withdrawal of the concerned magistrate and the



WOMEN ARE REPRESENTED IN JUST 16 PER CENT CONTENT OF NEWS COVERAGE IN BANGLADESHI MEDIA, THOUGH FEMALES ARE REPRESENTED IN INCREASING NUMBERS IN THE FORMAL WORKFORCE, SAID DR. GITIARA NASREEN, A PROFESSOR OF MASS COMMUNICATION AND JOURNALISM AT DHAKA UNIVERSITY.

Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Kurigram Sultana Pervin, who ordered formation of the mobile court. It is understood that the DC was displeased with Arif after he wrote several reports on alleged irregularities by the district administration.

On January 17, 2020, a court in Dhaka issued an arrest warrant for Motiur Rahman, editor of the daily *Prothom Alo*, considered to be an outspoken champion of freedom of expression. He and nine others were charged with causing death by negligence after a 14-year-old boy was fatally electrocuted in November at an event organised by a magazine published by *Prothom Alo*'s owner. Anisul Hoque, a leading novelist and associate editor of the Bengali-language newspaper was among those charged. The High Court granted them bail after a few days. Rahman, 76, already faces at least 55 cases for defamation and hurting religious sentiments but this was the first time was been issued with an arrest warrant.

Part of a larger, organised assault on independent media in Bangladesh, has seen major advertisers including multinational companies allegedly ordered by a security agency not to place advertisements in *Prothom Alo*, resulting in major revenue losses of up tens of millions of dollars.

WEBSITES BLOCKED

Beginning on April 2, the government blocked domestic connections to *BenarNews*, an online affiliate of Radio Free Asia, a US government-funded outlet providing news and information to audiences in Asia.

The move is an apparent attempt to silence critical reporting of Bangladesh's policies around the country's fight against the coronavirus pandemic. Telecommunications Minister Mustafa Jabbar confirmed that a number of sites were blocked by the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), which his ministry oversees.

Earlier, on December 28, 2019, the authorities blocked access to a Sweden-based investigative journalism website after it published a report alleging corruption by an influential

Bangladeshi minister. Access to Poriborton.com and *Bangla report* were blocked on May 19, 2019 by the government without any explanation.

REGULATING SOCIAL MEDIA

Of Bangladesh's 165 million population, an estimated 90 million are internet users. Facebook has emerged as the country's powerful media platform with 35 million subscribers, which frequently raises the ire of the country's authorities.

Telecommunications Minister Mustafa Jabbar in October 30, 2019, told the Washington based *BenarNews* that the Bangladesh government was planning to require its citizens to obtain licenses to use social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, and had installed software that would enable it to remove online content and control content published on social media sites.

Despite the minister's assurance that the government respected "the people's rights to express themselves, and will continue to do so", experts and activists in Bangladesh fear the misuse of the technology to control people's right to freedom of expression, particularly given the minister also suggested the government should strengthen the draconian Digital Security Act.

On April 4, 2020, Mostafa Zabbar told the daily *Independent* that the government was not happy with Facebook, in part because the social media giant is not complying with its requests to delete posts relating to novel coronavirus spread which the government considers a 'rumour'.

Government agencies, which monitor posts on social media, reportedly sent at least 100 requests to Facebook authorities to delete the posts regarding COVID-19. But they did not get any response from Facebook authorities.

In a meeting with the telecoms minister in September 2019, Facebook officials agreed to appoint a local representative in Bangladesh and pay taxes to the state exchequer. However, a local office did not materialise. Facebook authorities also agreed

to comply with Bangladesh's Digital Security Act (DSA) and share information with law enforcers, according to the minister, but compliance remains patchy.

After failing to force the global social media giants to set up representative offices or appoint agents in line with VAT laws, the authorities now plans to allow the digital platforms to secure direct VAT registration without opening local offices as part of its move to bring them under the tax net.

VIRAL ARRESTS

The government faced criticism on social media for its lax policy to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, at a time when there were numerous rumours circulating about the virus.

In response, the government arrested some of the critics or "wrong propagators" and sued them under DSA. Since mid-March 2020, the authorities have arrested at least a dozen people, including a doctor, opposition activists and students, for their comments about the coronavirus.

On March 25, the government issued a circular assigning 15 officials to monitor each television channel for "rumours" and "propaganda" regarding Covid-19. The next day, the order was withdrawn amidst criticism.

Access to the *BenarNews* website was blocked after it published a report on a leaked interagency United Nations memo on Bangladesh's Country Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19, which estimates that up to two million people could die from the disease in Bangladesh if immediate steps were not taken to contain the spread of the virus.

CHALLENGES AMID CORONAVIRUS

The novel Coronavirus poses new challenges for journalism, as unprotected reporters and photographers come face to face with affected people and continue to report from large gatherings. Few media houses have facilitated even limited personal protective equipment (PPEs).

Internet-based media outlets have now introduced virtual office systems. One mainstream newspaper, the *Manab Zamin*, has stopped its printed versions and most of the less circulated newspapers have stopped their publications indefinitely. The country's prominent newspapers are yet to decide whether to continue their printed versions.

The Newspapers Association of Bangladesh (NOAB), the platform of media owners, issued a statement saying: "Coronavirus cannot be infected by papers," a claim which is yet to be proved scientifically. All the newspapers published the NOAB statement on their front pages daily in a bid to keep their circulation intact. Newspapers hawkers are also in trouble amidst a lockdown situation, with many people not buying papers for fears of getting infected.

Amidst this situation SA TV, terminated 32 journalists on March 22, prompting the journalists to take the additional risk of staging protests in front of its office.

On April 2, the owner of the Bangla language newspaper *Alokito Bangladesh* also took the coronavirus situation as an opportunity to declare the closure of its outlet without resolving long-pending disputes with its employees. All the journalists and employees of the newspaper gathered in front of the residence of the employer at Dhanmondi in Dhaka to demonstrate, defying coronavirus distancing norms.

LIVELIHOODS AT RISK

The main challenge for journalists in Bangladesh in upholding freedom of the press continues to be their livelihoods.

Journalists can take risks and face hazards, but the country's precarious job situation continues to hold them back from independent and brave reporting in the public interest. In Bangladesh, press freedom is translated only as the freedom held by editors and owners. Owners of media outlets continue to have their own special agendas, which will have to be fulfilled, while the journalists remain largely helpless to a system that fails to support true media freedom.

For many journalists in Bangladesh, monthly wages are irregular and professional benefits are seldom provided. Too many journalists live in constant fear that they will find soon themselves out of a job.

In 2020, the situation deteriorated even further, with many media outlets terminating journalists' employment to cut costs. At least 25 employees of the country's leading daily newspaper *Prothom Alo*, one of the few financially solvent print media houses in Bangladesh, reportedly quit their jobs.

So too, journalists from *Daily Janakantha*, a decade-old print publication, demonstrated in the streets to demand regular wages.

Channel 9, one of 33 television channels in Bangladesh, decided to stop broadcasting news content and instead turned into an entertainment-based channel. The implementation of the plan left around 200 employees in the news production process unemployed. One of Bangladesh's oldest satellite television channel ATN Bangla let go 14 journalists and 35 employees. At least 25 employees were forced to quit their jobs at Maasranga Television, run by a leading business group in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's media industry is dominated by the private sector, with more than 1,000 daily newspapers, 33 television channels, and 25 FM Radio stations. Around 10 television stations are currently waiting to enter the market. But less than 10 per cent of the current newspapers maintain the government-declared wage structure in paying their employees.

WOMEN IN MEDIA

In 1987, Bangladesh had 34 women journalists compared to 900 men working in 242 newspapers, according to a survey by Press Institute of Bangladesh (PIB).

Leading online newspaper Bdnews24.com reported in July 2018 that the number of male journalists rose to 2,432 while the number of female journalists rose to 310 working in 3,263 media houses in Dhaka. With women still making up only 13 per cent of journalists, the situation has not changed significantly in over three decades. The situation is almost unchanged in 2020. There are some female reporters in the district levels also but participation of women in the profession is still negligible.

Many women start out in journalism with courage, taking the challenging profession by choice. But not all are able to stay and drop out for various reasons. These include a lack of women-friendly work environments, pressure from family, maternity and childcare issues, gender and wages discrimination, sexual harassment and transport problems. Women often face the tough choice of choosing between childcare and professional duties.

BD News quoted prominent Ekattor TV reporter Farzana Rupa as saying, "In fact, the character of newsroom is not women friendly. I started my day at eight in the morning, worked throughout the day and will go back home at around 1.30 am or 2 am. Under this circumstance day care centre, an arrangement to stay organised, a clean washroom and a breastfeeding corner are the facilities that women in media require, but the newsrooms have none."

More than 11 years after the High Court on May 15, 2009,

SINCE MID-MARCH 2020, THE AUTHORITIES HAVE ARRESTED AT LEAST A DOZEN PEOPLE, INCLUDING A DOCTOR, OPPOSITION ACTIVISTS AND STUDENTS, FOR THEIR COMMENTS ABOUT THE CORONAVIRUS.

A garment factory labourer wearing a facemask in Asulia on April 7, 2020, during a government-imposed lockdown to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Yet too few media houses facilitated the supply of personal protective equipment for journalists and many used the pandemic as an opportunity to terminate staff. CREDIT: MUNIR UZ ZAMAN / AFP



issued directives including formation of a complaint cell comprising five members in all academic institutions and offices to stop sexual harassment, not a single media house has followed the order.

Women are represented in just 16 per cent content of news coverage in Bangladeshi media, though females are represented in increasing numbers in the formal workforce, said Dr. Gitiara Nasreen, a professor of mass communication and journalism at Dhaka University.

Another study by Plan International Bangladesh and University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB) released in March 2020, finds news items related to women's affairs get very little space in newspapers but photographs get a lot more prominence. Only seven to nine per cent of news items are about women but photographs get twice the space. News items related to women chiefly related to crime, abuse or torture, lawsuits and entertainment.

The study found that photographs about women's issues get 14-18 per cent space of all photographs. Magazines publish news on arts, cinema, lifestyle and crimes. But news or photographs on women leadership, their success stories, reproductive health and education and other aspects of their life did not get prominence. On the other hand, men were presented as politicians and development activists in the community level. It is clear there is far to go before achieving gender balance in representation in the media.

FACING FEAR

Bangladeshi media is suffering a multidimensional crisis right now. There are a number of interrelated factors that are pushing the country's media into this state, including both political and economic influences.

In a report, the European Journalism Center said the Bangladeshi media industry, especially the television sector, remains highly dominated by the country's political parties. This in effect means that the primary objective of Bangladesh's media is often not to make a profit but rather to show political loyalties or serve a political purpose.

The rise of radicalism in the country also remains a bar to a free press with journalists practicing self-censorship regarding religious issues while propagation of faith has special privilege. The media, however, is less handicapped in criticising faiths other than Islam.

High Court Judge Justice Sheikh Hasan Arif recently questioned whether the media in the country enjoyed full freedom and whether fear was at play among journalists. The judge was partially right when he observed: "Journalists report and can report only when there is an outburst ... when it unfolds in front of our eyes nakedly."

However, Bangladesh's journalists also dare to uncover sensational hidden facts. But his rhetorical questions have a resounding ring of truth: "Then, is there full press freedom in our country? Does it mean fear is at play among journalists? If I do a report I will run into trouble or my editor may face a problem."

Confronting these truths without fear or favour or loss of livelihood is a true test of press freedom but, at this juncture, the country may fall short of fulfilling these promises.