

Still a Male Preserve

Women in Bangladeshi News Industry

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In an article entitled, "Reporting: Why Are Women Not Coming?", Baby Moudud reported that there was only one woman journalist in Bangladesh in 1970. In 1972, the number increased from one to two. In 1990 there were still only two (Moudud 1990). According to a report published in 1996, among 1500 journalists working in Dhaka-based Bangla and English newspapers, the number of women journalists was sixty, that is, 4 percent of the total strength (Ahmed 1998:7-8).

Obstacles for Women

In his article, "What Does Prevent Bangladeshi Women from Journalism?" published in the "Women and Media" issue of the *Bangladesh Journalism Review* (August 1998, vol. 2, no. 2), Farid Hossain, The Associated Press (AP) representative in Dhaka, stated: "In Bangladesh women journalists are as few as stars on a cloudy night. They can be head-counted. Among more than 470 members of the National Press Club only about 15 are women. If this is not enough to show the disparity then have a glance at the list of members of Reporters' Unity, an exclusive club of Dhaka city based reporters. Their recently published members' telephone directory reveals only three women among 366 reporters. Almost all the women working in newspapers and news agencies in Dhaka and elsewhere in the country are confined to covering soft issues. The women work mostly as sub-editors at desks or look after the specialised feature sections of the newspapers. Some of them have their

eyes on other jobs. They leave journalism as soon as better job offers come.

Back in 1988, I was involved in hiring journalists for a news agency that was about to be launched. A good number of women university graduates applied to join the news organisation. At least six of the women were recruited. Given a choice none of them, however, opted to become reporters. They preferred deskwork to reporting. A decade later none of the women is in the profession. Two of them got married and were happy to become housewives. One left journalism to be a banker. Another took an airline job and never returned to journalism." (Hossain 1998).

Although the situation has been changing very slowly, this is the real scenario of women journalists in the newspapers of Bangladesh. A survey conducted by Mass Line Media Centre (MMC) in November 2000 on "What Is the Reality of the Condition and Position of Women Journalists in Newspapers?" surveyed nine districts of the coastal regions of the country. They found only one woman journalist in the Laxmipur, Feni, and Noakhali districts, as well as a total of six others in the Barisal, Zalkhathi, Potuakhali, Pirozpur, Borguna, and Bhola districts (Ferdous 2001:11).

Most of the women graduating in journalism from three universities (Dhaka, Rajshahi and Chittagong) have not pursued it as a profession. According to statistics released by Dhaka University, of the 838 students

who obtained degrees from its Mass Communication and Journalism Department from 1990 to 1999, 227 were women (more than one in four). Chittagong University, which is one of the three public universities offering a journalism degree, has seen its women's enrollment steadily increase since its founding in 1995. During the first academic year, three students were women. For the 2003-2004 academic year, ten students in the freshmen class were women. The same is true for Rajshahi University, where women's enrollment has increased since its founding in 1992. During the session 1991-1992, the number of women students was seven. By 2002-2003, it had increased to sixteen.

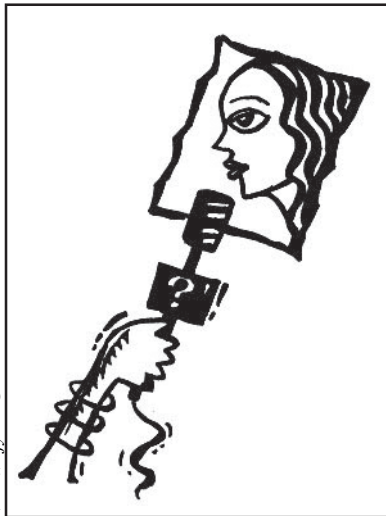
However, even for these graduates, few had enrolled in journalism to become reporters. In Dhaka, there are 116 daily, 370 weekly, 129 fortnightly, and 270 monthly newspapers. Out of the 4 percent of journalists who were women (Ahmed 1998:7) there were almost none working as reporters. As indicated in another survey (Kabir 1998:18), 85 percent of the working women journalists are assistant editors, 10 percent were recruited as reporters, and the rest worked in the editorial department. Similar results were reported in a survey by the Press Institute of Bangladesh (PIB) in Dhaka which revealed that of the 120 women working on 86 Bangladesh newspapers, 62 work as editors, but only 10 (8 percent of the total) work as reporters. In Chittagong there are 3 women sub-editors working at daily newspapers (Chepesiuk 2004:5).

Challenges and Barriers

A report by UNESCO addressing gender discrimination in media employment in more than 40 countries shows that in the Asian countries studied, the percentage of women employed in the media is among the lowest in the world. With women comprising only eight percent of employees in the media, Japan has the lowest proportion of all countries included in the report. In India, women do not fare much better, constituting only twelve percent of the workforce in media organisations. Even for those women who do hold positions in the news media, the situation is not always favourable. The 1996, the IWMF report “Women in the Media: Facing Obstacles: Changing Attitudes” which included data from women journalists in 40 countries, showed that 93 percent of the respondents felt that they encountered obstacles in their career development that their male counterparts did not. Balancing family obligation with work responsibilities and coping with different types of discrimination were the most commonly cited challenges (Johnson 1996). Women journalists of Bangladesh are no exception. They have been facing the following challenges in their workplace:

Societal Pressures

Bangladesh is the world’s eighth largest country with a population of 131 million (BBS 2003). Educated Bangladeshis invariably describe their nation as a “Liberal Muslim country.” Bangladesh is one of the few countries in the Islamic world with a free press, and its Constitution is not written specifically according to the strict tenets of Islamic law. But Bangladesh’s culture has become oppressive and illiberal in its attitude towards the role of women at home and in society. They are expected to work in areas considered suitable for women: in the agricultural sector, this includes sowing, husking, reaping; and in the



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non-agricultural sector, including teaching, sewing, knitting, crafts, and embroidery.

Women’s work is undervalued both in terms of pay and status (Nahid 1994:319-21). Women consider the job of a journalist to be hazardous, assuming it involves outdoor assignments covering such topics as political riots, natural disasters (such as cyclones and floods), and gunfights. In addition, working odd hours is one of the factors that discourages them from taking journalism as a career. If a woman is put on a night shift that lasts until the wee hours, she would feel uncomfortable. A woman working even in the early hours of the night would require a male escort to return home, even if the employer were to provide her with transport. This puts her at a clear disadvantage vis-a-vis men, as she is seen as a liability to her company.

Balancing work and family is a major challenge for women. In order to devote more time to their homes, women often pass up the “essential extras” – working long hours, networking with colleagues, and participating in after-hours training, in which (like their male counterparts) they need to participate to advance in their careers. Eventually, this places them at a disadvantage in competing for the best jobs and the best

assignments. Even when they do attempt to take advantage of more professional opportunities, the repercussions on their other priorities cause further strain on their work, resulting in tension that can have a profound impact on women’s careers, their families, and the companies for which they work.

Facets of Discrimination

Discrimination against women is deeply ingrained in every aspect of the newspaper industry in Bangladesh, as evidenced in the list below:

Salary Difference: The pay-package for an experienced journalist in Bangladesh is no more than \$200 to \$300 a month – not a very attractive deal. However, many women are forced to accept much lower wages out of necessity or as a survival tactic in situations of hard competition. Furthermore, most of the newspapers are not regular in paying salary to journalists. But this is not the case in other sectors of the country.

Access to Information: Women journalists are frequently denied access to information in the workplace. Against the usual mentorship between men, the lack of women’s alliances and networking groups, and the lack of women mentoring limit the kind of critical information for stories, assignments, and special opportunities to which women in the newspapers need access. Ultimately, all these have a negative effect on women’s careers.

Access to Jobs: Internationally, women hold an average of between 20 and 24 percent of all editorial positions in the news media (Uritus and Rockey 1998:68). In Bangladesh, however, women hold only eight percent and are more likely to be found working as sub-editors rather than as reporters, anchors, and technicians or in management positions. Sometimes, despite their areas of expertise and interests, their skills are not put to use: too often, women are assigned to covering “soft topics” such as fashion

and entertainment, instead of the more challenging news issues in science, technology, politics, and business. It is their male colleagues who cover the most visible, controversial, and news-worthy stories.

Negative social attitudes extend far and deep as causes for discrimination. Although not as visible, they weigh women down, nonetheless rendering them victims of harassment and exclusion from the “old-boys’ network”.

In most newspaper offices, the environment is not women friendly; for example, some offices do not even offer a separate toilet for women. Since women are dwarfed by a dominant male presence, they feel like fish out of water and intimidated by their male colleagues, even if some of them are decent and helpful. If a male apprentice fails to perform a job it may go unnoticed with the hope that he will improve one day, but the same failure for a woman will earn humiliating remarks, making them feel unsuitable for the job. Most managements blame the non-professional attitude of women as an excuse to create a barrier to their leadership advancement, insinuating that journalism is a full-time job with which women simply can not cope.

Survivors Not Comfortable

Even those women who have survived in the profession do not have happy stories. They, too, feel their position remains precarious, despite long years in the profession. For example:

Daisy Moudud joined the staff of the *Dainik Purbokone* in 1986 and became the first woman journalist in Chittagong, the port city of Bangladesh. Today, she is a sub-editor at the newspaper, supervising a staff of six and overseeing the editing of the city news. Her family

was supportive of her career choice, but establishing herself in the profession was not easy. She says that she had to prove herself constantly and be better at her job than her male colleagues.

Bulbul worked as a reporter for Press Institute of Bangladesh (PIB), Dhaka, Bangladesh, before joining the Communication and Journalism Department of Chittagong University in 2002 as a lecturer. She said that while Bangladeshi women are entering professions like law, nursing, social work, and teaching in increasingly larger numbers, journalism still remains an unacceptable career choice for many families. Bulbul concedes that she



would not want her daughter to follow in her career path, that she would rather her daughter worked in a profession that had regular hours and where security would not be an issue (Chepesiuk 2004:5).

Rawshan Akhter of the Chittagong Bureau of *Prothom Alo* is one of the few women in the city working as a reporter for a daily newspaper. She said that the families of many women journalists believe the profession is dangerous because they keep irregular hours and often work late. This is not acceptable in a society where it is not customary for a woman to go

out by herself at night (Chepesiuk 2004:5).

Both Shabiha Shobnom and Nilufar Yesmin were interested in taking up journalism as their profession after the completion of their Master’s degree from the Mass Communication Department of Rajshahi University. But, like many female students, they discarded the idea of being journalists in consideration of their families’ disapproval. They both said that reporting the lively part of journalism requires a reporter to mingle with various types of people and not to stick to a 9-to-5 workday. This is something that our conservative society does not permit women to do.

Recommendations

In order to overcome the barriers women face in trying to become reporters, they should be given two-way transport facility so that they need not feel a sense of insecurity. Needless to say pay scales should not discriminate against women. Redressal mechanisms against sexual harassment should be institutionalised in the industry. Adequate facilities, such as separate toilets must be provided in each office. Special training programmes should be institutionalised to help women develop their professional and management skills so that they can overcome gender-based barriers. Hitherto denied areas such as covering health, economic policy and environment issues need to be opened up for women. Given that women themselves have many reservations about this profession, extra efforts are required to make the industry attractive to them. When those who come to the profession taste the excitement associated with it, they are likely to stay and inspire others to follow them. □

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I Saw Her

*I saw her dying every day
She knew death as a foetus
I saw her lying in the drain
She was so still
I saw her as a baby bride
She slept in her mama's lap
I saw her illiterate in rags
She was carrying her brother's books
I saw her very thin and pregnant
She was only fifteen
I saw her baby dying at birth
No doctor ever helped
I saw her being harassed and beaten
She was used to it
I saw her being exploited and raped
She had ventured out on her own
I saw her dreaming of the sky
She was pinched back to reality
I saw her yearning to break free
She was wearing ornaments
I saw her aged, bent and broken
She was just thirty-nine
I saw her being neglected and abandoned
She was old and useless
I saw her being robbed of all her rights
She never knew them
I saw and saw and see ...
She has not changed along with me
I am INDIA and she is still SHE
I am FREE but no, not SHE
... not yet.*

Shivangi Singh