



Internews

Gender Assessment of Civic Space and the Media Environment in Bangladesh

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Executive summary

Bangladesh, while seen nominally as a parliamentary democracy, is in reality largely governed by traditional customs and mores that define everyday social and political relations. Gender and cultural norms in Bangladesh conform to the broader patriarchal society, in which prevalent gender norms and values are usually rewarding to men, while ostracizing to their gender minority counterparts. These norms shape and prescribe both gender expression (clothes, hair, makeup, posture etc.) and behavior (attitudes, beliefs, thinking, emotional inner life, etc.) that members of the society should follow to conform. These norms are also constraining for men and boys in various ways, although they are particularly harmful for women and girls and for gender and sexual minorities, and can prevent LGBTQ+ individuals from reaching full potential and fully expressing themselves in media and civic debate.

This gender assessment focuses on social and cultural norms including roles, responsibilities, legal frameworks, and power relations to identify needs, challenges, constraints and opportunities in the civic space and media environment in Bangladesh. The study also examines specific vulnerabilities of the LGBTQ+ community.

Based on primary and secondary data, the analysis shows prevalent gender inequality in Bangladesh, which limits the agency of women in their professional spheres, including in the media industry. The culture of male dominance is omnipresent in many media workplaces, and reports from women journalists and media personnel on sexual harassment and other forms of harassment and discriminatory behaviors against them are not uncommon. They are often subjected to a lower pay and stuck in static or lower-ranking positions with an omnipresent ‘glass ceiling’ across the media industry. Only a small percentage of women are seen working in leadership or high positions. Despite the goal of trying to represent a democratic, progressive, society, both print and electronic media in Bangladesh have yet to remove stigma and parochial attitudes that dominate the overall culture. Sexual harassment against women in the workplace is also increasing in the media spaces in Bangladesh, while women and girls are the primary targets of cyberattacks and other forms of harassment online¹.

Members of LGBTQ+ groups face inequality in the legal sphere as well as in civic and media spaces. Without legal protection, stigmatization, harassment, and violence against LGBTQ+ continues, creating barriers to their well-being and ability to secure stable employment. The controversial 2018 Digital Security Act (DSA) increases threats, as the law can contradict Bangladesh’s obligations under international human rights standards, particularly the right to freedom of expression. The law could be used for suppressing dissent and criticism that challenge existing power dynamics, and gender and cultural norms that discriminate against women and LGBTQ+ community.

None of the Bangladeshi media organizations contacted during this study (2 TV channels, 4 print media and 4 online portals.) had comprehensive gender policies. **The study recommends that organizations adapt a clear framework of gender equality principles for all media organizations**, including through operational policies that adjust that and re-model

¹ Bangladesh: Violations of the right to freedom of expression in 2017. Article 19, 2018. Retrieved from https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Bangladesh_violations-of-right-to-FOE-2017.pdf

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workplace practices. Organizations should also implement robust workplace anti-discrimination measures and make their cultures more inclusive. To do this effectively, more national level survey and continuous research on inclusivity in the media are needed.

Existing legal frameworks allow for and incentivize continued discrimination against gender minorities. **Empowering young Human Rights Defenders and increasing digital literacy among the public are absolutely key to empower and protect women and LGBTQ+ people from sexual violence.** At the same time, robust civil society advocacy to alter existing discriminatory laws is needed.

Finally, at the core of gender discrimination, there is a need to transform individual and collective perceptions of women and LGBTQ+ people. Thus, there is a need for training on gender sensitivity, unconscious bias, equality, diversity and inclusion, especially for those in the organizations' leadership positions, to overcome the biases that undermine merit-based and fair treatment.

1.1 Introduction and background

This gender assessment examines the social and cultural norms, roles, responsibilities, laws, and power relations related to gender in Bangladesh, focusing specifically on their impact on the civic space and the media environment. This assessment considers women, men, and gender minorities.

The 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh enshrines equality and human rights for every citizen in its very preamble: "... it shall be a fundamental aim of the State to realize through the democratic process a socialist society, free from exploitation – a society in which the rule of law, fundamental human rights and freedom, equality and justice, political, economic and social, will be secured for all citizens." The constitution also guarantees freedom of the press in Article 39, recognizing freedom of expression as one of the fundamental rights in Bangladesh. However, Article 39 affirms that this right is subject "to the reasonable restriction imposed by law." This limitation was imposed in 1973 soon after the independence, when the Parliament passed the Printing Presses and Publications (Declaration and Registration) Act, 1973. All administrations since then have been accused of using this provision to repress the freedom of expression, especially by controlling the print media. Some have viewed the [Digital Security Act 2018](#) precisely as a tool for further repression in the new media and digital spaces.

While Bangladesh is officially a parliamentary democracy, social and political relations in reality are largely governed by traditional customs and norms.² These customs and norms are part of a feudal governance system in which a handful of mostly elite cisgender men enjoy the utmost power, while the rest compete to get a slice of power.³ As the Asian Development Bank report referenced above points out, "Electoral competition, rather than being truly democratic, is largely a contest between feudal elites, and often about access to patronage resources." Nevertheless, along with its renewed journey toward democracy in 1990, Bangladesh started to pass through a transitional phase where the old feudal system was becoming weaker, and a new democratic system started to flourish. This is the time when Bangladesh also observed significant digitalization that created growing opportunities for the younger generation to be connected with the outer world and get access to the free flow of information and ideas. Unfortunately, for several reasons, this renewed journey could not ensure the right to information and freedom of expression. On the contrary, some have criticized the ruling Government's unprecedented repression, specifically against journalists, activists, bloggers and other critics to the administration.⁴

Against this backdrop, this assessment explores different aspects of gender relations and other intersecting social identities in the context of the civic space and the media environment. The report is divided into several sections. The first deals with the

²See Asia Foundation, 2012. [Strengthening Democracy in Bangladesh](https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/OccasionalPaperNo11FINAL.pdf). <https://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/OccasionalPaperNo11FINAL.pdf> (asiafoundation.org)

³ **Imtiaz, S.S.** 2014. *RonginShohorerTorunera: Pourush, JounotaabongBangladeshe HIV/AIDS er Voyabohota* [Young Men in a Colorful City: Masculinity, Sexuality and HIV/AIDS in Bangladesh (in Bengali)]. Dhaka: CMMS

⁴ Khan, T. & Kararisma, S.E. ,2014. FREEDOM OF THE PRESS IN BANGLADESH. *The International Journal of Social Sciences*. Vol 25 No. 1

methodological aspects of the research. The second discusses the overall gender norms and values in Bangladesh. The third section examines the representation and participation of women and LGBTQ+ persons in media. The fourth section focuses on existing laws concerning freedom of expression and their impact on women and people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity. The last section offers recommendations to improve gender equity in this landscape.

1.2 Objectives and Methodology

1.2.a Key objectives

- To understand how social norms and cultural beliefs shape gender relations and division of labor in public and private spaces in Bangladesh, and access to and control over resources and benefits;
- To examine how gender is related with the current practices in the freedom of expression in civic space and the media environment;
- To explore the gendered dimensions of legal frameworks in relation to civic space and the media environment using an intersectional lens.

1.2.b Data Collection Methods

This study used a mixed method approach collecting both secondary and primary data through literature review, focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews respectively to explore the situation of freedom of expression and its gendered dimensions in Bangladesh. The study has been conducted in two phases:

First phase –Literature Review to Explore Freedom of Expression in Bangladesh and its Gendered Dimensions: Consisted of a review of legal frameworks concerning the press as well as of academic publications concerning freedom of expression. Next, the author reviewed stories related to freedom of expression published in different newspapers, including instances in which women or LGBTQ+ persons were targeted to identify gendered social norms which hinder or threaten women and people from LGBTQ+ community in expressing their opinions.

Second Phase — Collecting Primary Data: In order to complement the secondary data, gain qualitative insights, and provide specific recommendations, the author conducted two FGDs with 5 participants each, and four in-depth interviews. For the FGDs, 10 TV, print media and online journalists working at Dhaka University were invited through personal connection. Two of the participating journalists work as TV reporters, four represented print media and four others work for online news portals. Interviews were conducted with one female TV journalist (recruited from the FGD), one female journalist from the print media, one online LGBTQ+ rights activist and one self-identifying LGBTQ+ journalist from print media. The aim of both FGDs and in-depth interviews was to triangulate the data gathered from the literature review, while also further exploring participants' experiences regarding the objectives of this study. It should be noted here that it was not possible to get access to any female journalists who also identified as LGBTQ+, as no one was interested to talk over phone or meet in person due to COVID-19 situation.

2.1 Gender norms and values in Bangladeshi society

In Bangladeshi society, descent is traced through the male line and it is the social expectation that after marriage the woman would reside in her husband's home.⁵ Gender norms also prescribe strict division of labor, which in general promote and institutionalize male supremacy at the household. Even if a woman is formally employed or holds other income generation activities, the paid activities generally add to her burden of caregiving or other household-



related labor.⁶ Domestic violence is extremely high and underreported. A 2015 survey conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics indicated that more than half of the married women or girls surveyed had been physically abused at some point by their partners, but 72 percent never told anyone. When asked why they didn't tell anyone, nearly 40 percent said they didn't think it was necessary.⁷

In addition to the burden of unpaid labor to women and gender-based violence, patriarchal values, norms and associated practices substantially limit women's access to the public sphere. Patriarchal norms intersect with class status, geography, and religion. While women's access to public sphere is more common among the rich, educated, and urban households, this is less so for marginalized women from poor and rural backgrounds. They are more disadvantaged, and oftentimes, forced to comply with the rigid, conservative, social norms. Simply put, a poor, rural woman from a religious minority group will likely face heightened obstacles compared to a wealthy, urban, Muslim woman in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, generally, women are simply not welcomed and accepted in public domain. Moreover, the misinterpretation of religion is often used to discriminate, even justify acts of violence, against women and girls as well as LGBTQ+ individuals. This also impose restrictions on access to opportunities and the space and ability to speak for themselves.⁸

However, while all men to some extent benefit from patriarchy, some men are also oppressed by these very norms and social structures. For example, society often ostracizes men who fail to adhere to the dominant traits of masculinity and labels them as weak (popularly tagged as

⁵ Sohela Nazneen, 2005. Gender Relations in Bangladesh: CARE SDP brief. Source: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317429298_Gender_Relations_in_Bangladesh_CARE_SDP_brief/link/593a986c4585155042a41106/download

⁶ A very commonly use poster in South Asia to show 'working women's' triple burden. The picture is downloaded from [Womens-role.jpg \(800x597\) \(netdna-ssl.com\)](http://www.netdna-ssl.com/Womens-role.jpg) [Last accessed on 03/01/2021 at 08:57 am]

⁷ A total of 19,987 women who had ever been married were surveyed. Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, UNFPA, "Report on Violence Against Women Survey 2015," August 2016, <http://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/-/media/files/un%20women/vaw/vaw%20survey/bangladesh%20vaw%20survey%202015.pdf>

⁸ Sohela Nazneen, 2017. "The Women's Movement in Bangladesh: A Short History and Current Debates", FES Bangladesh Country Study.

‘hijra’ in a derogatory way). This not only affects sexual minorities such as gay men and transgender individuals, but also non-violent, socially or environmentally conscious men along with any other men who think differently from mainstream masculinity.

2.1.1 Recent changes

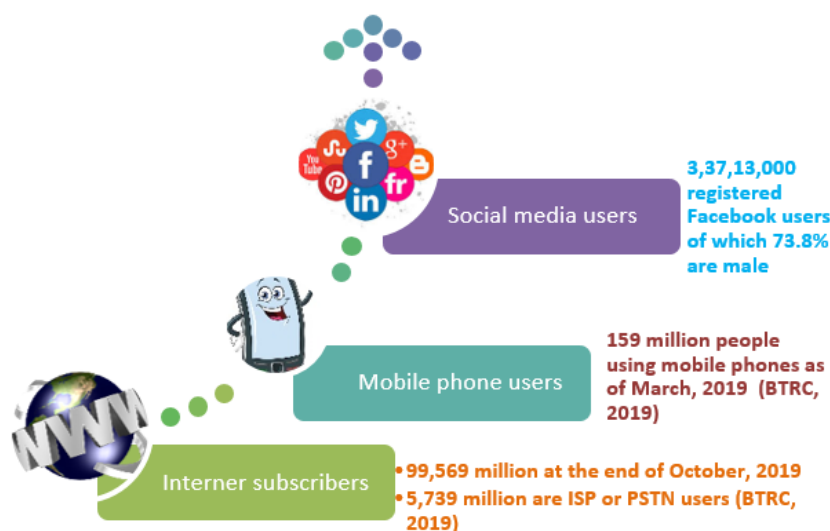
Bangladesh has made major progress in human development⁹ and in closing the gender gap. According to the World Economic Forum’s 2020 Global Gender Gap Report, Bangladesh is ranked first among South Asian countries in narrowing the gender gap and 50th of 153 countries globally in the WEF’s gender indicators.¹⁰

The narrower gender gap is seen in both primary and secondary school enrollment, as well as, to some extent, increased women’s participation in the workforce. Over the last 30 years, women’s labor force participation has increased by around 11 percent, prompted by rising levels of women’s education, greater access to electricity and mobile phones, the emergence of the garment industry, and possibilities for migration, according to an ILO study.¹¹ Overall, however, women’s comparative position on the occupational ladder in Bangladesh has progressed very little and women are not generally in position to exercise financial autonomy.

While women’s participation in market-based productive activities is critical in creating an inclusive economy, pressures to adhere to cultural norms – such as the routine wearing of purdah or hijab, childcare and household responsibilities – are likely to keep their work confined to the home. Meanwhile, other factors such as a lack of educational qualifications, limited work opportunities and gender insensitive work environments pose further challenge.

All of these challenges stem from the deep-rooted social stigma against women’s work outside the home.

The economic benefits stemming from digitalization are also gendered. Over the last 15 years, Bangladesh observed remarkable progress in this advancing its digital development goals.



Although mobile phone ownership and mobile internet use have increased significantly among women, there is still a persistent gendered digital gap in Bangladesh. GSMA's 2019

⁹ UNDP, 2020. Human Development Report, 2020. <http://hdr.undp.org/en/2020-report>

¹⁰ According to the [WEF report](#), Bangladesh’s “success” of women’s empowerment was measured by its performance in four key areas, and apart from political empowerment, the country ranked lower than in 2006 in all three remaining areas: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, and health and survival. Undoubtedly women’s political empowerment is increasing. But there is concern over how meaningful such political empowerment would be.

¹¹ Yasmin, T., 2020. *Overview of laws, policies and practices on gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work in Bangladesh*. International Labour Organization

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Mobile Gender Gap Report said that mobile phones were the primary means of internet access in the surveyed markets, yet only 58 percent of women in Bangladesh own mobile phones (compared to 86 percent of men), and only 13 percent are mobile Internet users.¹²

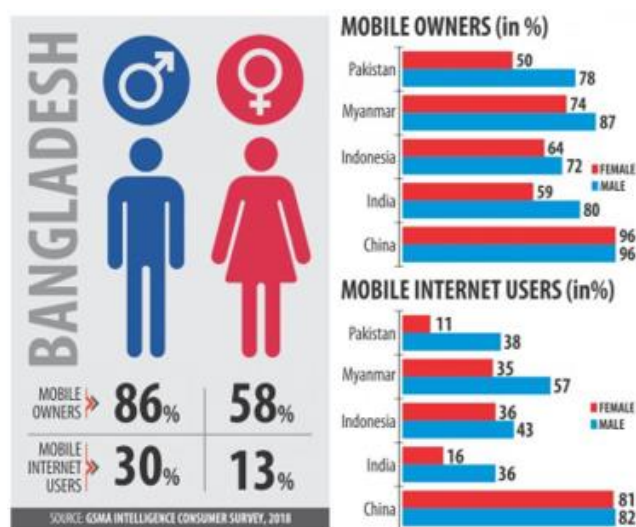
Bangladesh's journey to digitalization has also opened new avenues for freedom of expression and civic space. Citizens, especially youth, have started to express their opinions through blogging platforms and new media platforms like Facebook, and YouTube. These new platforms offer new options for advocacy, coalition building, and accountability to guard against social injustice. They have also presented opportunities for the women and gender and sexual minorities to establish digital networks and connect with families, peers, and friends.

However, the emergence of new gender-diverse voices online has evoked crisis among two different groups: the rulers and the heterosexual patriachs (mostly men). The former group finds this trend threatening, as digitalization gives more people power to communicate and express grievances, especially on governance issues. From the patriachs' point of view, social media tools are giving women and LGBTQ+ individuals spaces of expression, opening up opportunities to organize and generate broader social consensus on issues that often challenge patriarchal values and norms.

Rulers are adapting to the new situation by adopting new laws, while the patriachs are manifesting their anger through increasing violence against women, girls and LGBTQ+ people both on and offline.

Women and girls are the primary victims of violence online. According to a study conducted in 2017, 73 percent of women internet users have reported cybercrime, such as cyber stalking, spreading non-consensual intimate images and videos, cyberbullying, and trolling¹³. As of December 2017, the Government of Bangladesh's Information and Communication Technology Division's Cyber Help Desk had received more than 17,000 complaints – 70 percent of complainants were women.¹⁴

2.2 Freedom of Expression, Media and Civic Space: Legal Frameworks



¹² See the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSMA's) 2019 Mobile Gender Gap Report. Retrieved from <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/telecom/news/mobile-internet-use-women-far-behind-men-1711996>

¹³ Zaman, Gansheimer, Rolim, & Mridha, 2017. *LEGAL ACTION ON CYBER VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN*. Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) and BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health. Retrieved from <https://www.blast.org.bd/content/publications/Cyber-violence.pdf>

¹⁴ *ibid*

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It wasn't until Bangladesh's independence that the right to freedom of expression¹⁵ was clearly outlined in any state document. The Constitution of Bangladesh declares freedom of expression as a fundamental right of its citizens, regardless of race, class, religion, gender and so on, with a number of articles reaffirming the equality of Bangladeshi citizens before the law. Article 28 (1) provides that the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. Bangladesh's Right to Information Act, enacted in 2009, also ensures "free flow of information and citizens' rights to information" and allows journalists to submit right to information requests.¹⁶

Despite the rights guaranteed under the Constitution of Bangladesh and the Right to Information Act, press regulations persist to enable continued control of the press for both State and private interests. While citizens and journalists in Bangladesh are said to be able to express views in contrary to the government, they constantly live under the pressure of official crackdown, threat or harassment. Colonial laws that continue to hinder freedom of expression and the full freedom of the press include the Printing Presses and Publication Act 1973, the Official Secrets Act, the Special Powers Act, the Code of Criminal Procedure, and the Penal Code.

The press is further constrained by national security legislation as well as sedition and criminal libel laws. Journalists continue to be charged with contempt of court or arrested under the 1974 Special Powers Act – it allows detentions of up to 90 days without trial – for critical stories towards government officials or policies. Empowered by the Printing Presses and Publications Act, a district magistrate can revoke any publication license and shut down a publication. The Penal Code has provisions to punish anyone including journalists to protect national security, law and order as well as 'prevent moral decay'. The Code of Criminal Procedure empowers the government to ban any publication considered treasonous and hurtful to religious and social sentiments. And the Governments Service Rules of 1979 also prohibits public servants to disclose official information to press or non-official persons.

One of the most draconian national security-related laws against free flow of information in Bangladesh is the Official Secrets Act of 1923. The Act bars public servants from revealing any government information interpreted to pose a threat to state security if made public. The Government has utilized this law to keep all of its decisions, including very trivial ones out of the public sphere. The government's abuse of this law blatantly curtails free flow of information.

Monitoring and censoring the media in the name of national security continues to the present day. In December 2009, authorities reportedly drafted unofficial guidelines for media houses regarding television talk shows, noting that provocative statements could lead to the banning of a show. Military intelligence and public relations officials monitor media content. While

¹⁵'Freedom of expression' refers to the right to disclose one's opinion or thought in public without being controlled or censored. According to Article 19 of Universal Declaration of Human Rights, "Freedom of expression is the right of every individual to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (UDHR 1948).

¹⁶https://mrdibd.org/RTI%20Repository/35_RTIA%20in%20Bangladesh,challenges%20of%20implementation.pdf

they no longer issue regular guidance to media outlets regarding content, they do occasionally caution specific journalists against coverage of particular stories or topics.

Bangladesh's background of legislative restrictions to free press and freedom of expression have most recently culminated in a sweeping law that is silencing government critics online: the Digital Security Act (DSA). Unfortunately, analysis shows that the DSA not only expands existing restrictive provisions, but also includes several provisions in breach of international human rights law, particularly due to vague and overbroad definitions.¹⁷ Prosecution under this act and its scope are vast and include criminal defamation, defamation of religions, or even sending 'offensive' information – criminalizing a wide range of legitimate expression. The DSA also grants carte blanche to the government to make rules in areas such as the collection, preservation or decryption of evidence or data, without due process and deliberation in the Parliament.

The DSA has already been leveraged to prosecute writers, cartoonists, university teachers, students, journalists, and editors for expressing their views, including on Facebook. In 2018, ARTICLE19 recorded 71 cases filed against practitioners of freedom of expression, including journalists, under the then section 57 of the ICT Act and the then newly enacted DSA. In 2019, there were 63 recorded cases initiated under DSA.¹⁸ In the first six months of 2020, 113 cases of this kind have been recorded. A total of 208 people have been accused in these cases due to mere expression of opinion, of whom 53 are journalists. Of the accused, 114 were arrested immediately, most of whom are still awaiting bail.¹⁹ Despite repeated calls for enforcement of the law in compliance with commitments it has pledged on international platforms such as the United Nations, the government is still reluctant to take effective steps to amend the controversial DSA.

Nevertheless, media in Bangladesh is still bold in promoting human rights, including by publishing risky content to hold government to account. This is in part enabled by a few ministers and government officials who tacitly lead information with the media. However, here too, sometimes professionalism of media suffers at the cost of securing this information.

2.2.1 Laws, Diverse Gender Identities and Freedom of Expression

Though the Constitution of Bangladesh ensures equal rights to all its citizens, people of diverse sexual orientation and gender identities are still facing obstacles including discrimination in education, employment, harassment, barriers in practicing religion, as well as rejection and abuse from family. Legal frameworks play an active role in perpetuating that discrimination. For example, Bangladeshi law does not recognize same-sex relationships, as well as civil unions or any kind of domestic partnership for different-sex couples. Section 377 of the colonial era Penal Code criminalizes consensual same-sex sexual activity, with a

¹⁷ Bangladesh: Analysis of the Digital Security Act. Retrieved from <https://www.article19.org/resources/bangladesh-analysis-of-the-digital-security-act/>

¹⁸ Bangladesh: Increase in charges under DSA as government seeks to silence criticism. Retrieved from <https://www.article19.org/resources/bangladesh-increase-in-charges-under-dsa-as-government-seeks-to-silence-criticism/>.

¹⁹ Ibid

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maximum penalty of life imprisonment.²⁰ In another example, transgender men and women are unable to change their gender on official legal documents due to the absence of any enabling legal mechanisms. During Bangladesh's 2018 Universal Periodic Review, the government rejected recommendations to remove Section 377 of the criminal code and adopt effective protection from discrimination, harassment and violence against the LGBTQ+ community. The Bangladesh government's reluctance to promote LGBTQ+ rights contradicts its commitment to universal human rights and freedom of expression.²¹

These legal frameworks are used alongside vigilante violence or the threat of violence to silence diverse voices. LGBTQ+ groups reported that police used the law as a pretext to bully LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly those seen as effeminate men. Some groups also reported harassment under the provision on 'suspicious behavior' in the police code.²²

"Unfortunately, Bangladesh is one of 75 countries that currently have laws criminalizing homosexuality and the highest punishment for 'unnatural intercourses' is life imprisonment, but lesser jail terms of up to 10 years in prison and fines might also be handed out under the existing law. In order to keep up with the traditional norms, the government has used a set of laws to shut down websites that provide valuable information and promotes the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals in Bangladesh, directly or indirectly." [LGBTQ+ rights activist, who requested anonymity]

Laws discriminating against minority genders intersect with current laws restricting freedom of expression, culminating in even more extensive scrutiny for women and LGBTQ+ groups:

"Due to the fear of infringing religious sentiments and laws, we can be easily targeted by the DSA act if we write something in support of our rights as individuals on the web space or in person. This is deeply problematic for sexual minorities in Bangladesh. It has curbed our freedom of expression," said a LGBTQ+ rights activist, who requested anonymity, during an interview.

Moumita, a female TV journalist stated, *"In Bangladesh we are seeing serious misuse of the defamation law. Although according to our existing Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure (CrPC) defamation falls under both criminal and civil law provisions, the punishments are not as harsh as in the new Digital Security Act. If we do not check such misuse of the laws, our freedom of expression as individuals and freedom of the media will be at stake in the near future. Female journalists are more vulnerable to this as they are generally at a worse-off condition in society."*

The government of Bangladesh has made some changes to the legal frameworks in support of gender minorities - since 2011, it provides an 'other' gender category for passport applications, and since 2013, it has granted a 'third gender' status to the country's approximately 10,000 *hijra* (transgender) community members. In 2019, the Government even acknowledged *hijras*' social status by creating a special 'third gender' category on

²⁰ Human Dignity Trust. Retrieved from <https://www.humandignitytrust.org/country-profile/bangladesh/>

²¹ Ibid

²²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_rights_in_Bangladesh

Bangladesh's national voters list.²³ Despite these positive developments, existing laws still do not recognize people with diverse gender and sexual identities. Without legal protection, stigmatization, harassment, and violence against LGBTQ+ groups will continue, maintaining barriers to their well-being and to their ability to fully participate in public fora and express themselves.

2.3 Women and LGBTQ+ Individuals in the Media

Discriminatory and often violent gender norms are propagated through the media and communication platforms in Bangladesh. This is manifested in several ways: through the

All print and electronic media interviewed for this study did not have gender policies. The status of sexual harassment prevention policy and practice in media industry requires detailed investigation and further research.

promotion of traditional gender norms in the media, as well as the underrepresentation of women and LGBTQ+ people in the media sector. Much content on Bangladeshi mainstream television, from commercials to talk-shows and movies, reproduces prevalent gender stereotypes. For instance, in a vast

majority of commercials, women are characterized by their reproductive or domestic roles.

Although the number of women in media has risen considerably over the last decades, it continues to be low. Women journalists in Bangladesh media houses account for only 5 percent in print media and 25 percent in broadcast media²⁴. In the Jatiya Press Club, for instance, women account for only 74 of 1,252 total members. Women still lag far behind their male counterparts not only in number but also status, rights and benefits afforded by their employing companies. This is also subtly maintained by the widespread lack of gender policies.

The low percentage of women's participation in the media sector is reflected in the news content and portrayal of women in the media. The below table shows a harrowing picture of unequal representation of women in news stories. According to the 2015 national report of the Global Media Monitoring Project,²⁵ women's representation in Bangladeshi news has decreased over the past decade. This has implications not only on the participation of women in the sector but also on the presentation of a stereotypical, highly imbalanced, male-centric world and viewpoints.

Table: Women and men's presence as subject of stories in the news content in Bangladesh, 2015

²³ Jebin, L. 2015. The Rights of Hijras in Bangladesh: An Overview. *ResearchGate*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322753151_The_Rights_of_Hijras_in_Bangladesh_An_Overview/link/5aaa7c690f7e9b8826710dc8/download

²⁴ Women in Journalism: Numbers on the rise yet hurdles remain. *The Daily Star*, retrieved from <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/numbers-the-rise-yet-hurdles-remain-1433239>

²⁵ The Global Media Monitoring Project is the largest longitudinal study of women's representation in global media, running every five years. The 2020 edition of the study was conducted in October 2020, although the results have not been published as of February 2021. <https://whomakesthenews.org/the-gmmp/>

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Main field of the news	Newspapers, radio, television		Online media	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Government and politics	3%	97%	29%	71%
Economy	12%	88%	0%	100%
Science and health	19%	81%	0%	0%
Social and legal issues	26%	74%	13%	88%
Crimes and violence	31%	69%	43%	57%
Celebrities, arts and media, sports	26%	74%	25%	75%
Others	38%	62%	0%	0%
Average	18%	82%	29%	71%

Source: Global Media Monitoring Project, National Report- 2015

Many challenges prevent the professional advancement of women journalists or those who identify as a gender or sexual minority. Deeply rooted societal norms and gender stereotypes pose huge challenge to women's ability to begin and pursue a career in journalism on equal terms with men. The culture of male dominance is omnipresent in many newsrooms, where a lot of women journalists and media personnel have reported sexual harassment

The widespread socio-cultural inequalities that LGBTQ+ persons face due to their sexual orientation or gender identity also extend to professions in media. No data was available on how many self-identifying LGBTQ+ people work in journalism. Moreover, a culture of denial exists in media with regard to LGBTQ+ issues.

and other forms of discriminatory behaviors. In 2019, ARTICLE 19 documented 18 cases of attacks against women journalists, including a disturbing number of cases of sexual harassment in their own newsrooms.²⁶ However, in most cases women have not taken any steps against perpetrators out of fear of stigmatization or losing their jobs. When they have complained, they have seen little positive outcome, and complaints have made it more likely that they have to continue to work in that abusive environment or were forced to leave.

In newsrooms, women journalists often face disparities in covering news beats like energy, economic, political, parliament, crime, sports and elections. Moreover, they are often subjected to a lower pay, being stuck in static or lower ranking jobs. Add the discouraging environment and upward mobility is a struggle. Women suffer discrimination in training, recruitment and promotion and are denied decision-making positions. Only a small percentage of women reach leadership or high-ranking positions in the media industry.²⁷

²⁶ HRC44: Action needed on violence against women journalists. Article 19 Retrieved from <https://www.article19.org/resources/hrc44-action-needed-on-violence-against-women-journalists/>

²⁷ Safa, M.N & Akhter, T. 2015. Challenges of Female Journalists in Bangladesh. *ResearchGate*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/285503295_Challenges_of_Female_Journalists_in_Bangladesh

Gender Assessment of Civic Space and Media Environment in Bangladesh (Draft)

According to the 2019 report by Internews and MRDI, women still face more pressure and sometimes threats while trying to pursue journalism.²⁸

“Though the number of female journalists is increasing, there are still challenges which need to be addressed and overcome. Women are interested to join this profession as I think it is a better medium to get connected with people and serve society. But I do not get proper recognition of my good works from their colleagues and offices unlike my counterparts. There is no visible representation of women journalists yet at that level, and this is greatly lacking. We are not given the opportunity to hold the policymaking positions though we are capable or sometimes better skilled than our male counterparts. We also have to manage both home and office. So, the office has to understand that they are not helping us, rather it is our right,” said Moumita, a female journalist working in RTV

LGBTQ+ people are especially vulnerable mistreatments and inequality.

“We are ostracized in the offices as much as outside from every point of view. Because we represent a sexual minority cohort, we are usually looked down, despite our competencies and skills just because of our sexual orientation. This has far-reaching implications for our careers and overall lives. In many cases, I have to hide my sexual orientation to not face the discriminatory attitude from people.” LGBTQ+ journalist, who requested anonymity.

Another significant challenge to full and equal participation of gender and sexual minorities in the media sector is violence or threat of physical violence. According to the International Federation of Journalists Report in 2014, apart from the killing of bloggers and numerous attacks on journalists, women journalists have also been specially targeted in violence against the media stemming from fundamentalist forces like the Hefajat e Islam. Women have been attacked and ridiculed while covering public meetings and stopped from reporting in the field. Journalist Nadia Sharmeen was on assignment to cover a Hefajat meeting when she was brutally attacked and subsequently hospitalized. She stated, *“I was attacked because I am a woman. About 15 to 20 men started it and then there were 50 to 60 of them beating and kicking me while I lay helpless on the ground.”*

Referring to the case of a woman TV journalist who was stabbed to death at the door of her home in Pabna of Rajshahi division, Bangladesh on August 28, 2018, the International Federation of Journalists said: *“Each year, women journalists are killed, assaulted, threatened, jailed, abused and harassed, most often for doing their job, but also for the ongoing and pandemic discrimination that normalizes violence against women. Bangladesh authorities must ensure that the killers are arrested and prosecuted as soon as possible.”*²⁹

In April 2016, suspected Islamist militants in Dhaka hacked to death Xulhaz Mannan, the founder of Bangladesh’s only LGBTQ+ magazine, and Mahbub Rabbi Tonoy. Though the state was never found guilty, activists suspect the state played a significant role in this case, due to its significant delays. It was later reported that Ansar al-Islam, the Bangladeshi

²⁸ Media-CSO Collaboration: Old Allies, New Challenges. Internews and MRDI 2019. Retrieved from https://mrdibd.org/publications/Media-CSO_Collaboration.pdf

²⁹ Retrieved from <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/human-rights/article/female-tv-journalist-stabbed-to-death-in-brutal-attack-in-bangladesh.html>

division of al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the killings.³⁰ The deaths generated a chilling effect within the LGBTQ+ community. Following the event and continued harassment, many members of LGBTQ+ community, including the leadership of key organizations, reduced their activities and sought refuge, even outside of the country.

In their attempt to reshape Bangladesh, Islamic fundamentalists also have targeted the media. They used the social media to conceal not only their pressures on the government but also acts of violence that they perpetrate. Their most common targets are women working in the media, bloggers, free thinkers, even theatres that show movies displaying what is considered offensive appearances as well as cultural events that highlight Bangladesh's pre-Islamic culture. Unfortunately, when dealing with the press and the international community, the authorities approach it with a systematic denial.

3. Conclusion and recommendations

One of the most important elements of a democracy is the existence of free, fearless, and inclusive press that serves as the voice of all people. Censoring or threatening the press means the suppression of the people's voice.

Accessing information is simply not enough for women and other marginalized groups' empowerment in society. It requires their active participation, which goes beyond increasing women's access to ICT equipment. An essential element is information literacy, defined as "the ability to access, know where to find, evaluate and use information from a variety of sources. It involves communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills."³¹ This is crucial for every marginalized men, women, and LGBTQ+ persons to efficiently make use and act on the information. Education is a crucial factor, as generally more educated individuals are more competent to understand and effectively use the formation they receive.

As the diffusion of ICTs spreads over the whole population, groups with higher socioeconomic and education levels tend to benefit from information at a faster rate than those at lower levels. So, the gap between them tends to increase. The core issues related to access to digital networks are who gets empowered and who is informationally marginalized through these new tools. Moreover, LGBTQ+ people face social stigma around their sexuality and gender identity, severely undermining their ability to act on gained information.

It is rather unconstitutional to legitimate laws like Digital Security Act 2018 that confine freedom of expression of the citizens under the veil of 'state security'. It is observed that instead of protecting journalists, whistle-blowers and human rights defenders, the Bangladesh government continually harasses and prosecutes them.

Lastly, freedom of thoughts, conscience, and expression cannot be restricted on the ground of 'reasonable restriction'. Without them, the existence of people's rights in all spheres of society is unimaginable in the modern era.

³⁰ <https://thediplomat.com/2016/04/2-more-bangladeshi-activists-murdered/>

³¹

<https://skylinecollege.edu/library/informationliteracy/#::~:~:text=Information%20literacy%20is%20the%20ability,%20or%20the%20acquisition%20of%20knowledge.>

Recommendations:

1. **Adopt a comprehensive strategy to integrate diversity into operations across all levels of activities.**

Media organizations should be encouraged to adopt a clear framework of gender equality principles. Ensuring the equal participation of women at all levels– from leadership roles to content production and dissemination – should be the overarching goal of this strategy. The strategy should also focus on sensitizing the workforce on gender equality. Diversity should be stated as a core value in the corporate values and business strategies. The strategy should encompass action plans that have clear objectives, measurable targets, timeframes and accountability mechanisms. There should be key performance monitoring indicators set by media organization management. Unfortunately, at this moment no single such document was found in any of the print or electronic media.

2. **Remodel operational policies and workplace practices.**

Robust anti-discrimination measures in workplaces should be in place and be applied. Recruitment, promotion and development processes should be continually evaluated and adjusted. Working practices should be critically reviewed and approaches evolved that are more conducive to retaining and assisting women in their career progressions – for example, demonstrating senior level approval by making work-life balance policies available to workers regardless of gender and family status, and flexible work arrangements a standard practice for everyone rather than the exception. Parental leave should become a standard policy extended to men. Further, there should be active encouragement and support for women to return to work after career breaks for parental leave and caring.

Media organizations should implement training on gender sensitivity, unconscious bias, equality, diversity and inclusion, and should prioritise leaders and managers to raise awareness of the biases that influence perceptions, judgement and behaviour around what constitutes merit.

3. **Provide incentives, practical support and development opportunities for women and LGBTQ+ professionals.**

A combination of mentoring opportunities should be set up, where women are mentored by successful men and women, and men are mentored by women to improve collaboration and approaches to improving organizational culture, tackling unconscious bias and removing barriers in traditional workplace practices.

4. **Empower young Human Rights Defenders.**

Human Rights Defenders, whose motivation is to build a peaceful society, are experiencing threats and tremendous harassment, confinement, humiliation, and injustice. But unless safe space for the Human Rights Defenders can be ensured, the overall wellbeing of society will crumble. To support the activities of the Human Rights Defenders, first, they need to be empowered with necessary skills and training to establish a functional mechanism to network safely within and outside of the country using social media and other new technologies.

5. **Develop sexual harassment policy and gender policy for the media sector.**

In 2009, the High Court Division (HCD) of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh issued a landmark judgement³² acknowledging the need for a legal framework to address sexual harassment. This judgement offers detailed guidelines for all workplaces and educational institutions, and categorically specifies that these directives must be followed until adequate and effective legislation is passed. The Court issued guidelines for all workplaces and educational institutions in the public and private sectors in Bangladesh. Significantly, the guidelines offer a relatively comprehensive list of behaviors or acts amounting to sexual harassment, including both ‘quid pro quo’ acts and those that create a ‘hostile working environment’. This guideline should be followed in the media houses and if needed, to address particular needs of the women and LGBTQ+ journalists or media personnel, contextualized sexual harassment policy, gender policy in media should be brought into operation.

6. **Increase digital literacy among citizens.**

In the era of digitalization, citizens need to have strong digital literacy to create their own space in digital platforms and avoid falling into the trap of reinforcing fundamentalism unknowingly. These platforms are prominent where people are practicing their right to freedom of expression through blogs posts, articles, and so on. Given that online media has been so powerful to escalate new thoughts and trends, the need for digital literacy is ever more crucial.

7. **Provide training for a more inclusive group of media professionals on how to produce gender-sensitive content.**

There seems to be a huge lack of knowledge among the media professionals on how to develop gender-sensitive media content. In the past, such training was provided only to the journalists whereas the scriptwriters, camera person, editors, and other professionals who work behind the scenes were left behind.

8. **Conduct a National Level Survey and continuous research on media.**

Research conducted for this gender assessment showed that valid sources and data are scarce on the number of women and different LGBTQ+ people in media, gender policies and practices as well as the prevalence of gender-based violence in media and so on. More research initiatives should be taken to understand different gender-related aspects of media and relevant civic spaces.

9. **Strengthen civil society advocacy to alter existing discriminatory laws.**

The government of Bangladesh has been under pressure from the international community to remove Section 377 of the criminal code and adopt effective protection from discrimination, harassment, and violence against the LGBTI community. When Bangladesh offers itself as a democratic country and declares itself as the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, this law is surely contradictory to its ideology. Unfortunately, laws like digital security acts also added to this. Civil society

³² Supreme Court of Bangladesh, High Court Division, Bangladesh National Women Lawyers’ Association (BNWLA) vs. Government of Bangladesh and Others, 29 BLD 415, 2009.

initiatives should be strengthened to conduct more advocacy with the Government so that these laws could be abolished or corrected.

10. Focus on changing social norms that are at the root of gender-based violence.

The person who commits gender-based violence does not become a perpetrator in a day. Lifelong learning teaches people that it is okay to be violent. Bangladesh's social system, in which women and people of diverse gender identities belong to lower strata, teaches men to use violence as a tool to oppress women and LGBTQI persons. On the other hand, women are taught to be silent, to accept it as their fate. To be violent, men are taught to be hard, to be cruel and this socialization process starts during their childhood when they are told, "boys do not cry". They are free from the responsibilities of care works and household chores. Women, on the other hand, are subject to limitless workload that society places no value on, which makes them more submissive and vulnerable to violence. Even though women strive to continue their education and jobs outside the home, there remain threats like "child marriage", payment of "dowry" in the name of customs, and in addition, men are never ready to welcome women in public places. Rape, sexual harassment, and other acts of gender-based violence are committed by men who cannot accept women's mobility, success, and opinions. Considering all this, there should be initiatives to change "Hegemonic Masculine Practices" and turning those into "Positive Masculine Practices." Along with empowering women, men need to be sensitized to appreciate women's empowerment and cooperate with empowered women. To ensure sustainable change, every micro-level practice ranging from participation in household chores to a commitment of nonviolence needs to be taken under consideration. As gender learning should be a lifelong process, interventions must start at the earliest age.³³

11. Ensure gender sensitivity online and prevent online-based violence.

Women and LGBTQ+ individuals bear the brunt of online violence. Hence the concern for gender sensitivity cannot be ignored while promoting digital literacy. Otherwise, digital platforms serve as another arena of gender-based discrimination and violence, silencing women and other marginalized groups. Citizens need to learn how to respect others in the digital world, how to protect other's rights while claiming their own. Gender sensitivity, to ensure the rights of men, women as well as people belonging to the LGBTQ+ community, should be integrated into all the aspects we live with.

12. Consider men as partners of positive change for women's empowerment.

Although some people argue that empowering women would automatically ensure gender equality, the high prevalence of GBV suggests a bleak picture of the future of gender equality in Bangladesh. It is evident at every level of society that men are not ready to accept the change in general. This has added an extra burden to the empowered women's lives. There should be immediate policy and accompanied programmatic interventions to help men to understand the positive impact of empowerment of women on their lives. Despite incorporating the issue in the national

³³ Imtiaz, S; Smith, B; Rabbi, S. (2015). Report on BraveMen Campaign Phase II 2014. Bangladesh National Human Rights Commission Capacity Development Project.

action plan to prevent violence against women and children 2013-2025, unfortunately the Bangladeshi government has so far failed to address the issue.³⁴ This represents an opportunity to hold the government to account on their own policies and promises.

13. Establish diversity-friendly services in urban areas.

Gender-based violence will not be reduced unless the urban social structure is made more gender and diversity-friendly. Services such as women-friendly bus services, daycare-centers, etc. need to be increased and valued by all, including men so that women do not face obstacles to access those. Local leaders should be sensitized so that they become allies of women-friendly initiatives.

14. Ensure legal support, financial support, and rehabilitation for survivors.

Violations of the right to freedom of expression, violence and discrimination towards any gender identity degrade Bangladeshi society. The government should take strong measures to ensure legal, financial support and rehabilitation for the survivors and guarantee their freedom of expression.

³⁴ See section 1.10.1 of National Action Plan to Prevent Violence against Women and Children 2013-2025