

Tough assignment: Working as a woman journalist in Bangladesh

RON CHEPESIUK

IN 1985, Daisy Moudud joined the staff of the Dainik Purbokone and became the first woman journalist in Chittagong. Today, she is a sub or assistant 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 wasn't easy. "I had to prove myself constantly and be better at my job than my male colleagues," Moudud explained. "Many of them didn't think I could do the job as well as they could. I had to be tough to survive; otherwise, the challenges would have discouraged me."

Eighteen years ago, Moudud was the only women journalist in Chittagong. Today, there are two other women sub-editors working at Chittagong newspapers, while another 30 are working for newspapers and magazines in Dhaka. There are about ten women journalists total in Chittagong. Few of the women journalists, however, are working as reporters. A survey by the Press Institute of Bangladesh (PIB) in Dhaka revealed that of the 120 women working in 86 Bangladesh newspapers, 62 work as editors, but only 10 (8 percent of the total) work as reporters.

These statistics illustrate the barriers and challenges facing women journalists in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is the world's eighth largest country with a population of 131 million. 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 isn't based on the strict tenants of Islamic law.

But Bangladesh's culture is conservative, especially in its attitude towards the role of women in the home and society. Marriages are often arranged, wives are expected to stay home and take care of the family, and when women want to work, parents invariably play a big role determining their career choices.

"Traditionally, the attitude in our society has been that women need to fulfill their commitment to their family first, so Bangladeshi women have felt compelled to stay home," said Aroza Bulbul, "It's only been in the past decade that Bangladeshi women have begun to think about a career."

Bulbul worked as a reporter for PIB before joining the Journalism Department at Chittagong University in 2002 as a lecturer. Yet, 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. "I would want my daughter to work in a profession that had regular hours and where security is not an issue," she explained candidly.

One young woman journalist, who asked not to be identified, recalled the time when a television station offered her a job after she had graduated from the University of Dhaka with a Master's degree in journalism. The young woman was excited, but her enthusiasm dimmed when her mother strongly opposed her taking the job. "She (my mother) thought working as a journalist was too dangerous and that it was not a suitable profession for a woman in a male dominated society," the young woman explained.

According to sources, the families of many women journalists believe the profession is dangerous because they keep irregular hours and often work late. "In our society it is not customary for a woman to go out by herself at night," explained Rawshon Akhter. "Besides, many men in our society feel uncomfortable talking with a woman who is unaccompanied." Akhter's uncle called her from New York City when he found out that she was going to become a journalist. "He urged me to enter another profession," she revealed. Akhter is a staff reporter for a Chittagong Bureau of Prothom Alo and one of the few women in the city working as a reporter for a daily newspaper. The job has not been

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easy for the young journalist, who graduated with a journalism degree from Chittagong University in 2001. "Some sources aren't comfortable talking to me and they have not been very helpful," she explained. "Some have even suggested that I join another profession."

Ayesha Kabir, the editor of the Dhaka-based newspaper Probe, says that this attitude is unfortunate and counter-productive. She believes that when it comes to investigative reporting in the country's rural areas, women journalists can get the story more often than men, because residents are more willing to open up to them.

Some women journalists reveal that sexual harassment can be a concern because of the stigma attached to the act of a women going out into Bangladesh society by herself. They didn't feel comfortable talking about the issue for the record, but Sahid Ullah, an Assistant Professor of Journalism at Chittagong University, put the issue in perspective. "Some men in our society don't respect a woman who goes out on her own, so that makes women journalists vulnerable to sexual harassment," he explained.

Farida Yasmin, the editor in charge of the women's page at Ittefaq, believes that the traditional family needs to adjust its attitude to the changing Bangladeshi society. "Parents don't raise any questions when their daughter wants to be a doctor who works late at night at a hospital, so why such concern when their daughters want to work for a newspaper or a television channel," Yasmin asked. She added, "That attitude will only change if enough women are willing to take up the challenge and overcome the obstacles facing

them in journalism."

By any standard, Bangladesh can be a dangerous country in which to report the news. Since 1998, at least five Bangladeshi journalists have been murdered. The media watch-dog group Reporters without Frontiers reports that three of them died in 2002. In the same year, 250 Bangladeshi journalists were assaulted or threatened with death, thirty newspaper offices or press clubs attacked, and 125 journalists detained. "Corruption exists at all levels and an investigative journalist takes tremendous risks reporting the story," Ullah explained. "It's even dangerous to talk to the police. That's why media companies choose not to give women investigative reporting assignments."

In such a working environment, late, irregular hours can be a concern both for male and female journalists. The salary for an experienced journalist in Bangladesh can be no more than \$200 to \$300 a month, so most journalists can't afford to own a car. That's not an issue for women journalists, however, since it's

not customary for a Bangladeshi woman to drive.

Many media companies are sensitive to the security issue and provide transport for their staff members. For example, The Daily Star, uses vans that to take its staff home in two shifts: one at midnight when the newspaper is put to bed, and one at 2:30 a.m. when the office closes for the night.

Still, as Sayed Fahim Munaim, Daily Star Managing Editor explained, "With the breakdown of law and order in the country, security is always a concern, especially for women. If you're a woman reporter, there will be times when you have to travel alone and there won't be a staff photographer with you."

In dealing with the security issue, many Bangladeshi newspapers assign women to a sub editor's desk or to the "soft" news sections, such as features, entertainment, or the society page. "Few of our women graduates have become reporters," Ullah revealed. He says that many of the department graduates have found work with NGOs, where security and gender aren't issues.

Working at a sub-editor's desk on a Bangladesh newspaper is considered not as important a job as gathering the news, so a sub-editor doesn't make as much money as a reporter. Given the issues, some Bangladeshi media companies feel that women journalists can be more trouble than they are worth. Ullah added that it's not uncommon for a newspaper to request that his department send a male student to a job interview. There have been reports that the management of many media companies is reluctant to include women in their reporting team, and when they do, they assign to cover women's and children's issues.

Mahfuz Anam, Editor of the Daily Star, concedes that the Bangladesh media hasn't been sensitive enough to gender issues, but he added, "The Daily Star has been aggressive in seeking out women to join our team, and we hire the best candidate, male or female, for a reporting job. A bigger concern for us is finding a candidate who can write well in English."

Ahsan Aziz, the publisher of the

Housing solutions

MAHUB RAHMAN, PhD

IMAGINE life in a warm climate, enjoying what one might call the blessings of the sky. Such open-to-sky spaces are of crucial importance to architecture -- not only for the subtle and meta-physical feelings they engender within us, but also because of the decisive role they can play in the creation of humane (and affordable!) habitats.

Today, in many Third World cities, the majority simply cannot afford the kind of housing that is being produced. It is time to go back to fundamentals. We must learn again the invaluable role of open-to-sky spaces in enhancing habitat, while drastically reducing their cost. For instance, a courtyard is used for a number of essential functions e.g. cooking, entertaining friends, children's play, and so forth. This has always been an integral part of the indigenous housing typologies produced in from the Kasbahs of North Africa to the hill towns of Italy.

How do we integrate such spaces into the new housing fabric? Here are a few cues to develop a reasonably high density of 500 persons per hectare (including open spaces and social amenities), and yet give each family an individual house on an independent plot. Instead of stringing out the houses along a street, these can be grouped in clusters around courtyards. The basic module may consist of a number of houses arranged around a court measuring less than a katha each. We can form a larger cluster of up to two dozen houses arranged around a larger open space by repeating thrice the basic module. The larger unit in turn can be repeated thrice to form an even larger open space--and so on, right up to the central open area--the focus of the whole community.

The houses are only starting points; each of them can be extended and embellished as the family wishes. Architecturally, they are but a simple kit of parts. The plots on which the houses stand are nearly all the same size, varying from 0.6 katha (as in DUIMP project in Mirpur) to 1 katha. The scheme can be designed to cater for a wide income range, the plot size variation should be kept minimal to ensure that equity is built into the

incremental- and malleable. That is a habitat in which people can add their own layers of meaning, giving personal and cultural identity to their habitat. This is the traditional way in which people have humanised the houses they live in, all down the centuries. This is precisely what is impossible for them to achieve within the context of contemporary housing, because the buildings seem so intimidating, so immalleable. Malleability is

Evening Post, a new English language weekly newspaper in Chittagong, agreed. "I'd hire any qualified candidate. Gender is not an issue. It's just that the mass communication departments in the university aren't producing enough graduates who are proficient in English."

But will the women who are hired be paid the same as their male colleagues? Some women journalists told this reporter that management has been fair to them in terms of salary, and that they have no complaints. Others, however, say wage discrimination does exist. "I think the discrimination comes from the fact that Bangladeshi women are not very good yet at bargaining," said Lavina Ambreen Ahmed, a feature writer for the Daily Star's weekend magazine. "When it comes to salaries, (Bangladeshi) men are more demanding."

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During the first academic year three students were women. For the 2003-2004 academic year, ten students in the freshmen class are

women. But the women aren't necessarily enrolling in journalism because they want to become journalists, said university officials. As Mohammed Ali Asgar, Chairman of the Journalism Department at Chittagong University, explained, "Many students feel that a journalism degree is a good one to earn because it can prepare them for a number of careers, especially those in public service."

Those who have joined the journalism profession, however, remain optimistic about their future. "In the past, journalism hasn't been an encouraging profession for women, but it has been changing slowly since I became a journalist in 1991," Moudud said. "It's getting better (for women)." Moudud conceded she will never be move up to the position of news editor because it's a "male position," but she dreams of one day owning a magazine that covers important women's issues and educates the women of Chittagong. "I don't know what's the market for such a magazine, but I know one day I will try to find out," she explained.

Many young women come to Farida Yasmin and ask her what career prospects in journalism are like. Her answer: "I encourage them to be journalists, if they are willing to work hard to achieve their dreams. But I also say that they will have to work harder than their male colleagues to do that."

Daily Star columnist Ron Chesepiuk is a Visiting Professor of Journalism at Chittagong University

new neighbourhoods of up to half million people. The structure plan shows how to use public transport to open up land. Now, on the scale of half million people, one has the opportunity to perceive the fundamentals. For instance, what kind of housing should we build given the income profile? Or, granted that courtyards and terraces provide additional room, can we really afford this amount of open space? In other words, don't high-rise

cities in Asia, Africa, or South America. The rich live in high-rise buildings, the poor in shacks which travel like a river of poverty through the spaces between these towers. What is frightening is not just the contrast of income levels, but the vicious discontinuity between the concrete and steel towers where the rich live and the polythene lean-tos of the squatters. We have lived with rich and poor -- as has much of the rest of the world. But, the difference was that, regardless of the differences in sizes and materials between palaces and the most humble abode, there was certain continuity in their typologies. In contrast, the grotesque discontinuities we observe in our urban centres today are a horrifying portent of the breakdown within the social fabric of society itself.

I will end with two images. One fills me with great hope, the other with a kind of despair. This man lives in a miserable existence in an unused sewer pipe -- sharing a cup of tea with a friend. It's a social occasion! Humanity in the Third World is still intact. In the ultimate analysis, that's probably the greatest strength of all. The other image is a sadder one of the high-rise towers in Eskaton or Banani. Silhouetted in the foreground are the squatters and construction workers. Behind them rises a bunch of new skyscrapers. Many of these buildings are deplorable. But to them, it is the surreal, mythic image of the city, which they yearn for, but can never attain. The discontinuity of built-form is truly horrendous. Until we find ways to change this, there can be little hope.

Prof. Rahman offers settlement and design courses at BRAC University and the University of Asia Pacific, and advises the State University of Bangladesh School of Architecture & Design.

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