

Digital journalism has not been kind to rural journalists



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MOSTAFA SHABUJ

In this age of social media, people can't imagine getting breaking news on the front page of the newspaper the morning after a news event takes place. So naturally, over the past two decades, mainstream media organisations have adapted their storytelling to match up with these trends. However, along with these changes, the ugly sides of digital journalism have also emerged. Starting from villages, hundreds of online news portals are active in each and every town, upazila, district, and division. Even 15 years ago, you couldn't find 50 journalists in a district, but now, more than 200 journalists may be working in an upazila. It is almost as if anyone with a smartphone can be a journalist if they wish to be one. Allegations of spreading rumours, fake news, extortion, and harassment are very common against such journalists, which have contributed to an erosion of trust in journalists.

Mainstream journalists have also changed themselves to meet the needs of this changing landscape. A rural journalist who used to send a single piece of news to cover an event now has to send the same content in multiple formats for multiple platforms (news, pictures, videos, along with text in both Bangla and English) as soon as possible. Mainstream news organisations are always hungry as they have to compete with news portals. That means a new media journalist has to work much harder than before.

But the salary structure of these digital journalists has not changed at all. Apart from a handful, most newspapers in the country do not pay journalists according to the government recommended wage board.

The current government has strived to digitise the country over the last 15 years, trying to make Bangladesh smart. However, the government or newspaper owners are yet to take the initiative to make a policy or salary structure for the journalists who have to work relentlessly for 24 hours for digital news production. As a result, journalists are being exploited. Rural journalists are particularly vulnerable in this regard. They are placed at the lowest grade of the wage board—their salaries are so low that it is almost impossible to support a family in this era of high commodity prices. The sad thing is that even after 53 years of independence, journalism has not yet become a profession in these mofussil (rural) places.

On the flipside, journalists in metropolitan areas are appointed on a contract basis. They get regular salaries at the end of the month. They get increments and promotions every year. They have luxury office facilities with the support of entire teams. Within a few years of appointment, they get access to a wage board salary structure and other benefits. They have the chance to take days off. Of course, they have sufferings of their own, but their lives and jobs are not insecure

like rural journalists.

An upazila or district correspondent is responsible for a range of tasks—from the humblest or most menial of services to the most exalted. But to facilitate this, most newspapers do not even have a district office room.

The government announced the Eighth Newspaper Wage Board in 2013. According

to this structure, the basic salary of a district correspondent is under Tk 12,000. Additionally, they get money for the number of printed lines, photos published, and multimedia content produced. However, since the new media revolution, most of a district correspondent's content goes online, not on print. Therefore, the number of monthly lines have decreased by at least 50 percent, affecting their monthly income.

As the government or the Newspaper Owners' Association of Bangladesh (NOAB) have not formulated any policy or salary

structure for online content, news outlets are free to fix the remuneration for online content as they wish. For example, some media houses pay Tk 100 for online news, some pay Tk 150. In the same way, some pay Tk 100 for multimedia, while others pay Tk 1000 for the same content.

Despite all this hard work, rural journalists are not considered journalists. If that were a result, we always have to be on alert about anything that may happen in our areas. Even though the newspaper office was closed for six days last Eid, news production never stopped for rural journalists.

Six years ago, when I started my journalism career as a district correspondent, I would find myself keeping track of events happening in my areas even in my sleep. Even now, I have to worry about whether I can be the one to send the news first or on time. No matter how much time off I get, I am always worried about not missing anything important happening in my area.

If a correspondent misses an important news event, they have to be responsible for it to their bosses. Sometimes, jobs are on the line too, and it is very common for rural journalists to lose their jobs due to minor reasons.

As many newspaper houses do not pay salaries on time, some of my district colleagues can't pay their house rent on time. They have to go through various inconsistencies and irregularities in life. During the termination or retirement of their jobs, the majority of rural journalists go home with empty hands without any gratuity or retirement benefits.

The bottom line is that neither the state, nor the media outlets or the NOAB has been able to properly value the country's journalists, which remains a matter of regret. New media, digital media or online is the future of the news industry, but the government has not made any policy for this future. Holidays, salaries, and other benefits for rural journalists are undetermined and mostly depend on the will of the individual newspaper authorities.

Journalists, who are always vocal about other people's rights, are not getting their deserved returns from their workplaces or from the state. This is a matter that must be addressed properly and immediately.



VISUAL: ABIR HOSSAIN

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Make subordinate courts accessible for women

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NAWSHIBA ARNOB and ABU SAID MD JUEL MIAH

Improving the efficiency and quality of the basic service facilities available in the courts—in particular for women users—is a key element of improving the justice delivery system. Adequate and effective infrastructures include basic systems and services required for an institution's smooth operation at various levels. As research from BRAC reveals, the availability of basic facilities can be quite low in the 192 subordinate courts of Bangladesh, which includes the Divisional and Sessions Judge Court, the Chief Judicial Magistrate Court, and Nari O Shishu Nirjaton Daman Tribunal.

According to a BRAC study, among the 192 courts in 64 districts, only 24 percent have separate female washrooms. On the other hand, 67 percent courts out of the total have designated lactating mothers' corners for female justice-seekers. Merely 12 percent of courts have a separate waiting room for females, and only 13 percent have ramps for persons with disabilities. Additionally, a mere 42 percent of courts provide safe drinking water facilities, while 38 percent have



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADHON

snack corners. Among the essential facilities mandated by the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006, and the Bangladesh Building Code, 2021, lactating mothers' corner and separate female washrooms are crucial. However, even within this low rate of availability, it was observed that women cannot utilise the separate washrooms and breastfeeding corners constructed for various reasons. Some available washrooms are rendered unusable due to their use as common toilets, fees required for access, toilets being kept locked,

lack of signposting, or restrictions imposed by court staff. Additionally, one out of three lactating mothers' corners remains locked, abandoned, unknown to users, repurposed as a smoking zone, or situated far from the courthouse.

In difficult to access places like char, haor, mountainous, and coastal areas in Bangladesh, only 24 percent have separate functional female washrooms, while 41 percent have functional lactating mothers' corners. The study reveals that although the percentage of separate functional washrooms is similar in the hard-to-reach areas, the percentage of functional lactating mothers' corners is lower than in plain land districts.

On the other hand, even though the Nari O Shishu Nirjaton Daman Tribunal is exclusively for women and children, only 80 percent of the total Nari O Shishu Nirjaton Daman Tribunals have availability of separate washrooms and lactating mothers' corners.

The aforementioned findings suggest that the issue is not solely a supply-side constraint; it also reflects a lack of interest from authorities. Particularly in hard-to-reach districts, the interest seems notably diminished. For instance,

Laxmipur, Rajbari, and Sunamganj lack any lactating mothers' corner or separate washroom in their courts, with two of these districts falling under the hard-to-reach category (Laxmipur and Sunamganj). The inaccessibility of a significant percentage of infrastructure

centric basic facilities in all courts. When it comes to these basic facilities in courts, several existing and interrelated issues and action areas within court premises have been identified. Allocation of higher budget for establishment and maintenance of separate washrooms,

lactating mothers' corner and separate waiting room for women and children are certainly desperately needed. Establishing separate waiting rooms and lactating mothers' corner far from court houses will not be a desirable kind of change. Toilets should be close by for litigants while they wait for their hearing. The number of these toilets should be proportionate to the court needs.

Another recommendation is improving the reception area in the courthouses, in particular for persons with reduced mobility. The access to information by court users through infographics must be encouraged. It is essential that reception staff are physically present to answer any questions from court users who may often feel intimidated, and in this way exert a calming influence.

Another issue that should be brought up is that relying solely on long-term strategies for women and child-friendly court premises may take time. Instead, immediate actions should be taken to turn non-functional facilities into functional ones. Allocating budgetary and human resources for the upkeep and maintenance of these facilities can also be an effective solution.

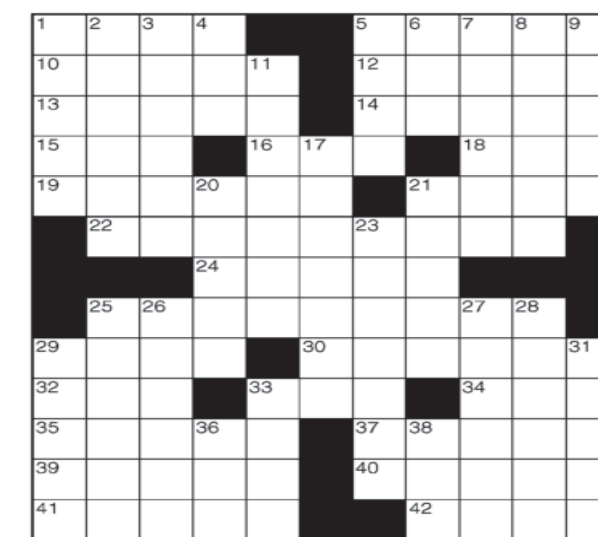
A budget of Tk 35 crore has already been allocated in FY2023-24 for setting up "Nyaykunj"—restrooms for both men and women with all necessary facilities—in the premises of each court across the country. However, this small budget is not adequate enough to ensure women-

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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SUNDAY'S ANSWERS

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