



Gender, Politics, and the Call for Change



Panelists discuss the significance of activism in various campaigns to spotlight women's contributions during the "Woman, Life, Freedom" session, held on December 3 as part of the "36 Days of July: Saluting the Bravehearts" exhibition, organised by The Daily Star.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Women's growing anger could serve as a catalyst for change. "Don't let this anger fade. We hope to bring about change during this interim government that will help women progress and gain more visibility."

SAUDIA AFRIN

In July, the antidiscrimination movement gained renewed momentum as courageous female students, standing side by side with their male peers, took to the streets in protest, enduring violent attacks while demanding their rights. Women in this region have long demonstrated extraordinary strength and resilience in the political arena, from Bangladesh's struggle for independence to the 2024 mass uprising.

Yet, over time, their voices have been muffled, marked by a decline in leadership representation and a disturbing rise in gender-based violence. Instead of being celebrated for their contributions, many women now find themselves disheartened and fearful, uncertain of what lies ahead.

A group of women united at The Daily Star Centre on the fourth day (December 3, 2024) of the weeklong program, "36 Days of July: Saluting the Bravehearts," to share their stories and perspectives.

The dialogue, titled "Women, Life, and Freedom," began with topics on political representation and branched out to other interconnected issues, including women's rights, gender discrimination, and sexual harassment.

Following the collapse of the previous government, there was a heightened anticipation among citizens for the establishment of a new interim administration. However, the minimal representation of women in the new government raised numerous questions and concerns.

"It was disturbing for all of us. When there was women's representation, it should not have been tokenistic. The worst part is that when we started discussing this and posting on social media, another woman was added to the list, but even

that decision was made by them," said one of the speakers.

Adding to this point, Wasima Farzana, an aspiring anthropologist, said that women in politics may find themselves in a marginalized position due to their lack of experience. "The way women are functioning can be described as embodying masculinity. Their habit of being present in public and political spaces is low. We must nurture the habit of occupying these spaces," she emphasized.

Habiba Nowrose, an academician and photographer, aptly said, "Questions are being raised about why women's visibility in political representation remains low. I believe a constructive structural discussion is missing from dialogues, even in seminars and meetings initiated by women-centric organizations. This lack of structural dialogue hinders the process of achieving meaningful reforms to increase women's participation in politics."

The nature of leadership has always differed between men and women. "In our political sphere, the approach to political participation is extremely masculine in a toxic way. It requires arrogance and an aggressive demeanor. Women do not naturally function that way. We must emphasize creating leadership spaces that are women-friendly," said Trishia Nashtaran, a female activist and founder of Meye Network.

An uprising does not signify that all daily life problems have vanished; they are still deeply embedded in the system. Issues such as security for women in public spaces, the availability of daycare facilities, and transport services often go unaddressed. Should we prioritize these concerns now, or leave them for later? Who will

strongly advocate for them? These aspects require serious consideration. They said such a platform could help formulate action plans and influence policymaking to increase women's visibility and representation in politics.

The speakers further emphasized the importance of activism through different campaigns to highlight women's contributions and called for engaging the media as allies to reshape societal perspectives. Women also need to increase their political awareness and understand gender politics, they noted.

Dr. Sakia Haque, president of Travellettes of Bangladesh, advocated for increased visibility of women's work, stressing that the media should highlight their efforts to prevent them from being overlooked.

Rabeya Jhumur, a journalism student, called for amplifying the voices of marginalized groups, such as homemakers and women from rural areas. "When their rights are violated, no one advocates for them."

One speaker proposed creating a platform that brings together all women's organizations, aiming to formalize an action plan that includes policy-making and emphasizes activism.

Shehreen Ataur Khan, assistant professor at Jagannath University, emphasized the importance of quotas to address systemic inequalities. "Equality and equity are distinct concepts that must be understood from the family to the workplace and society as a whole. Quotas are vital for ensuring women have access to spaces from which they've been excluded."

Another speaker pointed out that schools should work alongside families to teach equitable roles for men and women, stressing that such foundational education is essential for transforming societal norms.

Naziba Basher, senior sub-editor at The Daily Star, highlighted the media's influential role in shaping public narratives. She criticized the media for sidelining women during movements, recalling how several media outlets deliberately excluded student protest organizer Nusrat Tabassum from a photo of protest leaders at the DB office. "Media professionals in positions of power must champion the inclusion of marginalized groups, including indigenous women, gender-diverse individuals, and women from low-income backgrounds," she urged.

After August 5, numerous incidents of sexual violence against women were reported. An indigenous woman was allegedly raped by two men in Ramgarh upazila of Khagrachari on August 22. The following month, a significant part of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) witnessed unrest, with houses and business establishments burned, leaving scores injured and resulting in deaths during sectarian violence.

"When things seemed to be settling down, the brutal incident occurred, clearly indicating a rise in violence that is often ignored by society. If

this is what we call freedom, I question what kind of freedom it truly is," said indigenous activist Shuchi Marma. She highlighted the systemic oppression faced by indigenous communities and raised critical questions about whether they are being left behind, or if there is a deliberate effort to keep them marginalized.

Another individual from the hills echoed this sentiment, saying, "Even during the victory parade, I was called 'Chakma' by many. It stirs a mix of indifference and deep pain within me. I fear for my son, who faces stereotypical remarks in school"

Shireen Huq, the founding member of Naripokkho and chairperson of the newly established Women's Rights Commission, emphasized that women's growing anger could serve as a catalyst for change. "Don't let this anger fade. We hope to bring about change during this interim government that will help women progress and gain more visibility. This anger is the first step toward reform. Women must take ownership of public spaces to ensure their presence is felt," she said.

She also mentioned that there are 90 days ahead, during which they seek input from various sectors and generations.

Speakers further highlighted the need to involve men in telling women's stories to help reshape societal norms. They also called for social media movements to promote accurate and positive representations of women's contributions.

Shaveena Anam, facilitator of the discussion and Manager of New Content and Audience Research at The Daily Star, commented, "I've frequently heard people say, when discussing the limited representation of women, 'Now is not the right time for this conversation. Focus on reform first. Women, wait for your turn.' What we need is a neutral platform for women, one that can bring together advocates for rights and amplify the voices of those at the grassroots level."

Recommendations:

- Structural dialogues are crucial for achieving meaningful reforms to increase women's participation in politics.
- Long-term planning, including dialogues, action plans, and public involvement, is essential to help women understand their power and move forward with an affirmative attitude.
- Equality and equity, as crucial elements, must be widely discussed, especially within families. Involving men in women's stories can be instrumental in reshaping societal norms.
- It is vital to strengthen alliances among women, with the media serving as an influential component of society.
- Women must claim public spaces to ensure their visibility.

Saudia Afrin is a journalist at the daily star

ECLIPSING REPRESSION

The Herculean Feat of Bangladeshi Journalism in July '24

SIFAT AFRIN SHAMS

Amid unprecedented levels of suppression, legal hurdles, and personal risks, journalists in Bangladesh stood firm against the fascist government of Sheikh Hasina during the July uprising.

The stories of the challenges they faced, and the courage with which they overcame them, serve as testaments to the hope we still cling to — the hope that Bangladesh can have a better, brighter future as a true democracy.

The tools of suppression and oppression used by the previous government to silence independent media were intensified during the mass movement. Feeling threatened by the critical stance of a large portion of journalists, the government, like any fascist regime, tried to dictate what the media could publish, even threatening to halt broadcasts.

At around 8:30 p.m. on July 18, the nation experienced a total internet blackout, with mobile data and broadband services becoming unavailable. During this period, journalists worked tirelessly to collect news and share information, as recounted during a discussion titled "Blackout Chronicles: How Journalists and Activists Navigated the Blackout," organised by The Daily Star on December 4, 2024.

Shamina Sultana, senior reporter at Channel 24, mentioned how they were forced to revert to analog journalism methods. They gathered information from students and protesters via texts and calls, despite frequent disruptions. Alternative, expensive, and rare communication methods, such as cable connections, were used to collect material from outside Dhaka. "The government was never fully successful in suppressing us because we resorted to all kinds of alternatives," she said.

The journalist, still traumatised from being brutally beaten by a mob on August 4 at Shahbagh, shared:

"Our channel never fully compromised. There was pressure on us, but we always tried to sneak in the real news during bulletins and other times."

She and her colleagues also sent



Panelists discuss the challenges journalists faced while performing their duties during the July uprising at The Blackout Chronicles session, held on December 4 as part of the 36 Days of July: Saluting the Bravehearts exhibition, organised by The Daily Star.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

information and footage of atrocities to international media outlets like the BBC, which faced less direct pressure.

"We did that because our house was at risk of being shut down if we ran such stories, but the news still had to be out there," she added.

Tanvir Chowdhury, a broadcast journalist at Al Jazeera, explained how local media provided tips and information that international outlets relied upon. While international media adopted certain safety measures, local journalists bore severe risks.

"Due to our media brand, we knew the police or other forces would not harm us, but groups like the BCL could, and they would blame the students," he said.

As a video journalist, sending footage was a top priority for him, but the government severely hindered this by cutting off internet access. Apart from using Al Jazeera's satellite system — which was occasionally jammed by security forces — he relied on the local AFP office for help. Shafiqul Alam, the AFP bureau chief at the time (and now press

secretary to the Chief Advisor), along with his team, provided alternate internet access and opened their office to accommodate both international and local journalists.

"It was a top-secret operation back then. If it had been discovered, the office would have faced a severe crackdown," he said with a smile, adding that it can now be shared openly.

Another major challenge journalists faced during the movement was the spread of misinformation and disinformation that followed the restoration of internet access. The government actively downplayed the real numbers of protesters and casualties. Hospitals were instructed not to disclose information about injured individuals or bodies brought in.

"We were not getting any info from the government, so we had to call individual hospitals, which was time-consuming. But after July 18, even hospital directors stopped disclosing details," said Qadaruiddin Shishir, Fact Check Editor at AFP.

Following the internet blackout, social

media saw a flood of disinformation campaigns led by pro-government forces. This significantly increased the workload of the AFP Fact Check department.

The AFP office in Dhaka became known as "Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendra 2" among journalists, as it was the only place with internet access during the five-day blackout. The office was opened to both local and international journalists with permission from AFP headquarters, Shishir noted.

For many young journalists, the scale of confrontation with authorities was a novel experience.

"We were on the field and had to decide our course of action instantly, depending on how the situation escalated," said Saim Bin Mujib, multimedia journalist at The Daily Star, about covering news in such volatile conditions.

On July 16, when clashes in Dhaka between protesters, police, and government supporters continued for hours, journalists found themselves mediating.

"We positioned ourselves between the

opposing sides and told the pro-government forces, 'The students want to retreat now. Please do not attack,'" Saim recounted, describing an experience unlike any other in his career.

The unprecedented internet blackout posed significant challenges for new media journalists.

"We were left with no means to reach the people — it felt like an existential crisis," said Saim, adding that his team prepared footage and reports in advance to release the truth as soon as internet access was restored.

Journalists are assets to society when they remain unbiased. While some media outlets misused their platforms to propagate the fascist agenda of the Hasina government, many journalists upheld the principles of journalism, risking their jobs, health, and lives during one of the nation's most critical moments.

We mourn the loss of journalists Hasan Mehedi, Shakil Hossain, Abu Taher Md Turab, Tahir Jaman Priyo, and Pradip Kumar Bhowmik, who sacrificed their lives to reveal the atrocities committed by the Hasina regime.

It is now imperative for the government and political parties to uphold the fourth pillar of democracy by protecting media houses and journalists from partisan pressures.

Recommendations

- Introduce a comprehensive security protocol based on international standards to prevent attacks on journalists in the line of duty.
- Strengthen legal protections to safeguard press freedom and freedom of expression.
- Ensure a safe working environment for journalists, free from political or partisan interference.
- Provide specialised training to help journalists combat misinformation and disinformation campaigns effectively.
- Implement measures to support journalists affected by PTSD and psychological distress.

Sifat Afrin Shams is a journalist and former sub-editor at The Daily Star.