

STATE OF FREELANCERS IN BANGLADESH

Challenges, ways forward



PHOTO:
ORCHID CHANGMA

MD. ZAHIDUR RABBI

In Bangladesh, a thriving freelance economy has emerged as a critical source of income for thousands of young professionals. Over the past decade, the country has earned global recognition as a hub for skilled freelancers offering services ranging from graphic design to software development. Yet, this emerging sector faces a insecure future due to a combination of systemic challenges and recent disruptions such as the internet blackout that followed the political upheaval in July 2024.

Freelancers in Bangladesh stand at the crossroads of opportunity and uncertainty. While the digital economy promises flexibility and global outreach, freelancers are grappling with the dual challenges of unreliable infrastructure and a fragile political landscape. Their stories highlight the need for urgent reforms and strategic

investments to secure the future of freelancing in the country.

Bangladesh's freelancing boom is no accident. According to the Oxford Internet Institute, the country ranks among the top global suppliers of online labour. Many other organisations have praised the freelancers of Bangladesh in various rankings. Platforms like Fiverr, and Upwork are swarming with Bangladeshi freelancers offering affordable and high quality services. The sector's appeal lies in its accessibility—armed with a well-built pc and internet connection, individuals can participate in the global economy without the need for costly infrastructure.

This growth has created opportunities for people from diverse backgrounds. Some

FREELANCING IN CRISIS DUE TO THE JULY 2024 INTERNET BLACKOUT

The promise of freelancing was abruptly shaken in July 2024, when political unrest culminated in a nationwide internet blackout. For five days, freelancers found themselves cut off from clients, deadlines, and income—their livelihoods effectively suspended.

For Sudipta Apu, a freelancer based in Khulna, the blackout was catastrophic. "I had eight ongoing projects worth over \$1,000 that were suddenly put on hold. I lost one client entirely and received bad reviews from another, which lowered my profile visibility on Fiverr," he lamented. This was no isolated case; thousands of freelancers faced similar losses, with

Fiverr attempted to cushion the blow by placing Bangladeshi freelancers in 'vacation mode' to prevent penalties for missed deadlines. However, this temporary fix was insufficient. Freelancers like Shaikh Abdulla saw their accounts banned due to unresolved disputes with clients. "I regret relying solely on marketplaces like Fiverr. Losing my account forced me to reconsider freelancing altogether," he shared. Abdulla is now working for a local company, highlighting the uncertainty of freelancing in an unstable environment.

STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES FACING FREELANCERS

While the blackout showed the vulnerability of freelancers to external shocks, it also highlighted deeper structural issues. Unreliable and costly internet connections, power outages, and the lack of robust digital infrastructure have long plagued Bangladesh's freelance community.

In addition to infrastructure woes, freelancers face steep platform fees that eat into their earnings. Fiverr and Upwork take commissions ranging from 10% to 20%, which can be crippling for professionals working on tight margins. As Sumayah Islam, a Shopify developer, said, "Finding clients outside traditional marketplaces is every freelancer's dream because it eliminates these fees. However, doing so requires skills and networks that many lack."

LESSONS FROM THE JULY REVOLUTION AND BEYOND

The July revolution, which brought down the autocratic regime, marked a turning point for Bangladesh. For freelancers, it was both a wake-up call and a source of renewed hope.

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» Bangladesh's freelancing sector has grown rapidly but faces challenges like unreliable infrastructure and political instability.

» The July 2024 internet blackout severely impacted freelancers, exposing their vulnerability to external disruptions.

» Structural issues, including poor internet connectivity, high platform fees, and a lack of advanced digital skills, hinder growth.

» Solutions include improving digital infrastructure, diversifying client bases, and investing in education and skill development.

» Building local platforms, reducing reliance on global marketplaces, and government support are key to securing the sector's future.

freelancers even earn incomes far exceeding local job opportunities, demonstrating the transformative potential of the digital economy in a developing country.

many struggling to recover months later. Apu's income, previously over BDT 1 lakh monthly, has since dwindled to BDT 70,000-80,000.

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