

WORLD DAY FOR SAFETY AND HEALTH AT WORK

The unspoken trauma of journalists



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As we observe the World Day for Safety and Health at Work, attention turns to garment workers, factory safety, and workplace reforms. In Bangladesh, this day also invariably brings back haunting memories of numerous disasters, including the Rana Plaza collapse, which claimed more than 1,100 lives. It is a day dedicated to workers' rights, safety, and remembrance.

But there is another group of workers who, while not inside factories or construction sites, also live through trauma, violence, and suffering. Their pain, however, is largely invisible, unacknowledged, and rarely addressed because, typically, their workplace extends beyond the concrete walls of buildings. As such, generic workplace definitions and regulations do not apply to journalism. They witness pain, often at the frontlines of disasters, tragedies, and conflicts. Yet in Bangladesh, while we cover trauma, our own trauma remains undocumented, untreated, and mostly undiagnosed.

Consider the July 2016 Holey Artisan Bakery massacre that changed Dhaka forever. As the horror unfolded in the heart of Dhaka's diplomatic zone, reporters scrambled to cover the siege. They thronged the cul-de-sac, standing there for hours in confusion and chaos, fearing that they too might be caught in crossfire. The ones who covered the attack vividly remember the smell of gunpowder and the sound of screams. The image of bodies being carried out, and the wails of family members, remain etched in their memory.

"We stood outside for more than 14 hours. When the shooting started, we all crouched

behind walls, praying. I had to write a breaking story while shaking inside," said one photojournalist, requesting not to be named. "After that, I couldn't sleep for weeks. The sound of gunfire haunted my dreams."

A similar wave of trauma swept through the media fraternity during the Rana Plaza tragedy in 2013. Reporters watched as rescuers pulled mangled bodies out of the debris, many of them children and young women. For days, journalists worked without sleep, consoling bereaved relatives, and narrating scenes too horrific for most people to imagine.

"I still remember the sound a lifeless body made when it was being pulled out. I smell dust and blood when I close my eyes," said a senior reporter who covered the Rana Plaza incident. "I had nightmares for months. Nobody ever asked how I was doing."

More recently, in 2024, journalists covered a violent conflict when the streets of Dhaka and other major cities turned into battlegrounds. Law enforcers and Awami League members turned on quota reform protesters in July and went on a shooting spree. Hundreds of students and ordinary citizens were killed, thousands more were injured. The UN estimates at least 1,400 deaths. At least five journalists were killed, and many were injured. Those who managed to make it through continue to cope with their trauma. Some will probably never recover from it.

Unlike aid workers or emergency responders, journalists have little institutional recognition when it comes to mental health

support or trauma care. In Bangladesh, there is hardly any form of psychological assistance, debriefing sessions, or even basic mental health leave. There are no safe space to talk, heal, or process the emotional toll of the job.

Yet the reality is, the trauma builds up. A journalist—be it a reporter, sub-editor, or photographer—covering a fire one day, a rape case the next, and a bomb threat later in the week, carries all those images internally. Over

heart is breaking.

The first step is simple yet powerful: acknowledge that journalists, too, are workers. And they, too, deserve safety, health, and dignity at work.

The need for mental health leave, meaning days off specifically for psychological recovery after covering traumatic events, should be recognised. Just as firefighters are debriefed and given downtime after a big operation,

and others. This would help them cope, flag signs of distress or acute stress, and more sensitively cover the trauma of victims and survivors.

Media outlets and journalist unions can establish peer support groups, where journalists can meet periodically to talk, share experiences, and decompress. Sometimes, healing begins simply by talking to someone who understands.

The Press Council of Bangladesh, journalist associations like the Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ), etc must actively push for national-level guidelines recognising journalism as an emotionally high-risk profession. The information ministry can collaborate with health experts to launch media mental health initiatives.

Recognising trauma is not just a matter of empathy, it impacts the quality of journalism itself. A burnt-out, emotionally fatigued journalist cannot ask the right questions or connect with the people. Trauma clouds judgement, kills curiosity, and numbs the storytelling instinct.

Moreover, untreated trauma leads to high dropout rates, especially among women journalists who face added layers of emotional stress. When the brightest and most compassionate voices leave journalism due to pain and burnout, democracy suffers.

It is also time to change the narrative. Journalists are not mere bystanders in national tragedies—they are active participants, navigating between chaos and deadlines. We document grief so others can understand it. We hold microphones in bloodied spaces. We stare at trauma, then look at the camera and hand it over to the anchor in the studio with a simple, "Back to you." The trauma, however, stays with us.

But who turns the camera on us?

So, on this World Day for Safety and Health at Work, let us expand our lens. Let us remember the survivors of Rana Plaza. Let us remember the victims of Holey Artisan. But let us also remember those who documented their stories, often at the cost of their own mental well-being.



FILE PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

A man tries to save an injured journalist on a rickshaw during the July uprising in 2024.

time, the mind grows tired, the heart heavy.

The impact of vicarious trauma is well-documented globally. Journalists may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suffer from depression, anxiety, insomnia, or emotional numbness. Some develop addictions; others quit the profession entirely.

Yet, in Bangladesh, the stoic culture of "just carry on" dominates. There is almost a macho pride in being unfazed, even when the

journalists should be also be allowed to rest. Media organisations can provide access to professional counsellors so that journalists have the option to avail therapy sessions after covering events like murders, suicides, rape cases, and disasters. Newsrooms should normalise counselling, availing which should not be perceived as weakness but as a strength.

Journalists, especially those on crime and disaster beats, should be trained on how to identify the signs of trauma in themselves

Biochar: A climate solution from the ground up



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It is now a foregone conclusion that global warming caused by a buildup of carbon dioxide, the most important climate-warming greenhouse gas humans have been adding to the atmosphere, is, for all practical purposes, irreversible. That is because the current concentration of carbon dioxide will keep the engine of climate change running on a scale of centuries to millennia. As a result, halting our planet from heating up more will be extremely difficult to achieve, unless we go "carbon negative" as soon as possible.

Going carbon negative means removing more carbon dioxide from the atmosphere than adding it. It requires effective use of carbon dioxide removal technologies,

Another area of concern with DAC is energy efficiency. Carbon dioxide is not a very reactive molecule, so extracting it is both energy and resource-intensive.

At its most basic, BECCS involves growing crops, burning them to generate electricity, capturing the carbon dioxide emitted during combustion and storing it deep down into the Earth's crust. However, it is essential to exercise caution to ensure that the emissions resulting from the cultivation, harvesting, transportation, and processing of biomass do not exceed the amount of carbon dioxide captured by the crops. Besides, there are concerns for the safety of the storage of carbon dioxide in huge volumes over a long

mitigation, and environmental sustainability.

Biochar is a durable, carbon-rich substance created via pyrolysis, which involves the thermal breakdown of organic materials in an environment with limited oxygen. It has long been recognised for its ability to improve the health of soil and sequester carbon dioxide. Most importantly, biochar can help address climate change because it is one of the several techniques that target carbon dioxide.

As plants grow, they breathe in carbon dioxide from the air, using the carbon they absorb to build their tissues. Then they die and rot or decompose, releasing carbon dioxide into the air again. But if the decomposed plants are turned into biochar, carbon dioxide is instead converted into a solid, which can stay locked in the soil for many years. In this way, plants become one kind of carbon removal engine, drawing climate-warming carbon dioxide out of the air and storing it in the ground.

Biochar can be produced from various types of waste materials,

catch fire, and their carbon does not turn into carbon dioxide and escape into the air. Instead, the wastes are converted into biochar.

Depending on the operating temperature, the process also yields a liquid called tar or a gas called syngas. These byproducts can be combusted to generate the necessary heat for the continued functioning of the pyrolyser. Consequently, a pyrolyser can sustain its operation or generate additional fuel or energy for commercial purposes.

Once produced, biochar can be added to the soil. It can be applied in various ways, including being sprinkled on the surface, incorporated into the soil in layers or holes, or blended with compost or seeds. The carbon contained in the biochar has the potential to remain in the soil and be sequestered for a prolonged duration. According to Our World in Data, a non-profit online publication that focuses on global problems and trends, biochar can offset the equivalent of up to three gigatons of carbon dioxide each year by 2050, which is like shutting down 800 coal-

fired power plants.

The most significant characteristic of biochar is its capacity to enhance the structure of the soil, retain water, and increase the availability of nutrients. It functions similarly to a sponge, effectively retaining vital nutrients and minimising the reliance on chemical fertilisers. Furthermore, its porous structure supports microbial activity, thus promoting healthier soil ecosystems. Biochar presents an environmentally friendly approach to improving characteristics of the soil, especially in sandy, acidic, and nutrient-deficient soils that typically experience challenges with water retention and loss of nutrients.

The production of biochar commonly utilises feedstocks such as rice husks, cassava peels, and various agricultural by-products, which are favoured for their accessibility and effectiveness in generating high-quality biochar. These biochars, sourced from agricultural waste, are particularly valued for their environmental sustainability and low production costs. For example, rice husk biochar is recognised for

its ability to enhance the fertility of soil and improve water retention capabilities. Likewise, cassava peel biochar is extensively employed in tropical areas due to its capacity to improve soil structure and nutrient availability. Moreover, biochar derived from agricultural residues like straw, sawdust, and coconut shells is increasingly utilised for sequestering carbon dioxide and enhancing the quality of soil, particularly in regions where the management of organic waste is a significant concern.

The primary obstacle facing biochar is its cost and the fact that it is not a universally applicable solution. Compared to other soil amendments such as fertilisers or compost, biochar is generally more expensive, which complicates its mass production. For biochar to develop into a significant industry capable of contributing meaningfully to the mitigation of climate change, it will be essential to pursue innovative methods that enhance its affordability and efficiency.

Finally, biochar fits the bill *kanta diye kanta tola!*



FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

A worker in Peru prepares to grind biochar made from bamboo residues.

such as direct air capture (DAC), or bioenergy with carbon capture and storage (BECCS), or biochar fuel to mitigate residual emissions. A challenge for DAC is that the atmosphere blanketing the Earth is very big, and carbon dioxide is a relatively small part of it, about 0.04 percent. Hence, the technology will work effectively only in the vicinity of power plants where carbon dioxide is emitted in large concentrations.

timescale at a single location due to the possibility of leakages, which can lead to contamination of the environment.

Lately, biochar has gone from being a highly theoretical proposal to being one of the most viable negative emissions technologies. It has gained considerable attention in recent years for its potential to address pressing challenges in agriculture, climate change

including wood, shells, agricultural residues, and byproducts from industries such as paper mills, sawmills, and breweries, among others. The waste is fed into a special stove-like device called a pyrolyser, a low-tech version like a kiln. Inside the device, the raw materials are deprived of oxygen as they are heated to temperatures between 200 and 700 degrees Celsius. Without oxygen, the wastes cannot