



Equally Safe

Towards a feminist
approach to the safety
of journalists

ARTICLE 19

CASE STUDY

BANGLADESH

ARTICLE 19 works for a world where all people everywhere can freely express themselves and actively engage in public life without fear of discrimination. We do this by working on two interlocking freedoms, which set the foundation for all our work. The Freedom to Speak concerns everyone's right to express and disseminate opinions, ideas, and information through any means, as well as to disagree with and question power-holders. The Freedom to Know concerns the right to demand and receive information from power-holders for transparency, good governance, and sustainable development. When either of these freedoms comes under threat through the failure of power-holders to adequately protect them, ARTICLE 19 speaks with one voice, through courts of law, through global and regional organisations, and through civil society wherever we are present.

First published by ARTICLE 19, 2022

DESIGN [Daniella Domingues](#)
ILLUSTRATION [Mariana Coan](#)
ALL PHOTOS Shutterstock

ARTICLE 19
c/o Sayer Vincent
Invicta House
108–114 Golden Lane
London EC1Y 0TL
UK
www.article19.org



Thank you to the European Research Council-funded Gender Peace project at the Centre for Women, Peace and Security, London School of Economics and Political Science.

© ARTICLE 19, 2022 (Creative Commons License 3.0)

About Creative Commons License 3.0: This work is provided under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-ShareAlike 3.0 license. You are free to copy, distribute, and display this work and to make derivative works, provided you: 1) give credit to ARTICLE 19; 2) do not use this work for commercial purposes; 3) distribute any works derived from this publication under a license identical to this one. To access the full legal text of this license, please visit: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/legalcode>

Contents

5	Acknowledgements
6	About this project
7	1. Introduction
7	Country context: Bangladesh
8	Violence against women journalists in Bangladesh
9	Existing protection mechanisms in Bangladesh
10	The feminist movement in Bangladesh
13	2. Case study
13	Introduction
14	<i>Bangladesh Nari Sangbadik Kendro</i> (Bangladesh Women Journalists Centre)
17	3. Conclusion
18	Notes

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the following contributors. ARTICLE 19 thanks each and every one of them.

Report author

- Nobonita Chowdhury, gender specialist, journalist, and news analyst, Bangladesh

Research participants

- Masuda Bhatti, Executive Editor, *Amader Notun Orthoneeti*
- Dr Kaberi Gayen, Professor of Journalism, University of Dhaka
- Nasimun Ara Huq Minu, President, Bangladesh Women Journalists Centre
- Farhana Haque Nila, Senior Reporter, *News Now Bangla*

Report design

- Design: Daniella Domingues
- Illustrations: Mariana Coan

About this project

What might a feminist approach to the protection of journalists look like? What concrete benefits might it bring? And could it provide solutions to the well-documented – and highly gendered – abuse that women¹ journalists face every day?

While journalists and communicators² worldwide experience threats, surveillance, attacks, arbitrary arrest, detention, enforced disappearances, and murder for carrying out their vital work, women journalists deal with additional, gendered threats, violence, abuse, and harassment – in their workplaces, when out reporting, and online. They bear the brunt of not only the increasingly hostile environment affecting all journalists but also pervasive gender-based violence, gendered discrimination, and [‘gendered censorship’](#). These risks multiply for women journalists who experience multiple, overlapping discriminations on the basis of race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, sex characteristics, gender identity/expression, and religious beliefs (among others).

Current policies and practices – even those deemed ‘gender-sensitive’ – are failing to protect women journalists from these risks. A bulletproof vest may be useful in some contexts, but it will not protect a woman from sexual harassment in her newsroom, abuse when she shares her stories online, or assault on public transport when she travels to an assignment. Due to this lack of effective protection measures, women journalists have, in some cases, taken the situation into their own hands, creating solutions to keep themselves and their colleagues safe. These solutions are grounded in diverse feminist approaches that place women’s everyday experiences, lived realities, and protection needs front and centre.

In 2021, ARTICLE 19 set out to make these sometimes invisible practices more visible, building on our [existing programmes](#) on the safety of women journalists worldwide. We undertook original research globally and specifically in six countries – three in Asia (Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka) and three in Latin America (Brazil, Chile, and Paraguay) – guided by the questions:

What might feminist approaches to the protection of journalists look like, and what benefits might they bring?

From national organisations to grassroots networks, our findings document women’s monumental efforts to make structural changes, tackle entrenched patterns of gender-based discrimination and violence, and enhance the safety of women journalists. The initiatives showcased in these case studies are a testament to the creativity and resilience of those working on the feminist frontlines.

1. Introduction

Country context: Bangladesh

In ARTICLE 19's [Global Expression Report 2022](#) – a global, data-informed, annual look at freedom of expression worldwide – Bangladesh is ranked 131st out of 161 countries, with an overall GxR³ score of 13 out of 100, and is classified as In Crisis. Between 2011 and 2021, the country fell 10 places.

Bangladesh declared independence in 1971. Two years later, parliament passed the Printing Presses and Publications (Declaration and Registration) Act 1973, which imposed a constitutional limitation on freedom of expression. Every administration since then has been accused of using this provision to control the print media.

More recently, state actors and ruling party cadres are using the notorious Digital Security Act 2018 to silence and punish journalists, human rights defenders, and communicators expressing dissenting views. The Act includes offences such as 'tarnishing the image of the nation' and 'creating hostility, hatred, and adversity'. In 2021, [443 people were imprisoned under the Act](#), mostly under the 'false information' provision. In early 2022, a minister publicly recognised that the provisions of the Digital Security Act were being abused.

Bangladesh is ranked 11th in the Committee to Protect Journalists' (CPJ) [Global Impunity Index 2021](#) which calculates the number of unsolved journalist murders as a percentage of a country's population and ranks countries accordingly. This hostile environment, in a sector influenced by corporate ownership and political allegiances, often results in journalists self-censoring.

In 2020, a staggering 1,600 journalists lost their jobs due to media outlets closing or losing income as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The industry is still struggling to cope with the fallout of the pandemic. Women journalists have suffered the greatest burden in terms of both job security and the risks of the profession more broadly due to inadequate protection measures.

The [Global Media Monitoring Project Report 2020](#) found that 84% of Bangladesh's journalists were men and 16% were women. Women make up 5% of newspaper reporters, 65% of radio presenters, and 77% of TV presenters – but only 21% of TV reporters. The beats they are allowed to cover are heavily based on gender stereotypes; according to one [analysis](#), men make up 97% of journalists reporting on subjects like government and politics, while more than 25% of women journalists report on celebrities, arts, and the media – and even then, editorial decisions are made by their male superiors. Women journalists are further held

back by pervasive gender discrimination in media houses, from low pay to unequal opportunities and sexual harassment, and a lack of policies to protect them.

Violence against women journalists in Bangladesh

Violence against women and girls in general runs rife in Bangladesh. A 2015 [survey](#) by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics found that more than half of the married women or girls surveyed had been physically abused at some point by their partners, and 72% never told anyone about it. When asked why they did not tell anyone, nearly 40% said they did not think it was necessary.

Furthermore, according to [recent UNICEF data](#), over 50% of Bangladeshi women who are now in their mid-20s were married before they turned 18, and nearly 18% were below 15 years of age.

Sexual harassment in the workplace

While [32.8%](#) of Bangladeshi women in general have experienced sexual violence in the workplace, a survey of 100 Bangladeshi women journalists found that [71%](#) had faced sexual harassment at work. Nasimun Ara Huq Minu, President of **Bangladesh Nari Sangbadik Kendra** (Bangladesh Women Journalists Centre) (BNSK), told us that most of the complaints they receive from their members relate to sexual harassment at work – from derogatory remarks to sexual assault – yet most women neither formally complain nor report the harassment to the police, and those who dare to speak out are shunned by both the [male-dominated media industry](#) and society.

This harassment and impunity is exacerbated by a lack of complaints mechanisms. Dr Kaberi Gayen, Professor of Journalism at the University of Dhaka, and Masuda Bhatti, Executive Editor of **Amader Notun Orthoneeti**, told us it is impossible for the workplace to be safe for women without a specific mechanism to deal with sexual harassment complaints – both online and offline. Without any proper channel to lodge complaints about their colleagues or bosses, women journalists have to either ignore sexual harassment or leave their jobs.

Most media houses in Bangladesh have no gender-equality policy or sexual harassment complaint mechanism in place. One leading newspaper claimed to have a gender-equality policy, but ARTICLE 19 spoke to three women journalists who had worked there for a significant period of time, and none were aware of its existence. Masuda Bhatti told us this is unsurprising, given that women are still not fully welcome in media organisations, but that such policies are urgently needed:

‘Organisations should also implement robust workplace anti-discrimination measures and make their cultures more inclusive. To do this effectively, more national-level surveys and continuous research are required to be done on inclusivity in the media from [an] intersectional feminist perspective.’

Farhana Nila's story

In 2016, Farhana Nila, then Senior Reporter at a private TV station, lost her job after her boss – the Joint News Editor of the station – repeatedly sexually harassed her. She video-recorded his unwanted sexual advances and lodged a complaint, after which she was fired. A female colleague, who had worked at the same organisation for nearly a decade, also lost her job for supporting Nila's complaint. Neither reporter has been able to find another job in the mainstream media since.

Nila eventually filed a sexual harassment case against her boss. The TV station has not yet taken any action against him, and the police have not summonsed him, but Nila continues to fight the case in court.

She also reported the harassment to BNSK, who, during the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence in 2019, formed a human chain in protest at the National Press Club, demanding that the accused was brought to justice. BNSK claimed that at least 18 journalists, including four women, had lost their jobs in the same newsroom for complaining about the accused man. Senior women journalists spoke at the protest, expressing solidarity, demanding punishment of the accused, and calling for a safe work environment for women journalists.

While Nila's case demonstrates unity among women journalists in Bangladesh, no official action has yet been taken against the accused; the patriarchal leaderships of media organisations would rather ignore official complaints and street protests than hold harassers accountable.

Existing protection mechanisms in Bangladesh

The Constitution

The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees the right to freedom of speech and expression. Freedom of the press is mentioned, but is not absolute; it is subject to reasonable restrictions imposed by the law. The Constitution guarantees equal participation and rights to women in the public sphere, but in the private sphere, women are not equal to men; religious personal laws govern women's rights within marriage and their rights to divorce, custody, and inheritance.

High Court guidelines on harassment

There was significant progress towards tackling sexual harassment in 2009, when, on 13 May, the High Court Division of the Supreme Court issued a set of guidelines with the aim of preventing any kind of physical, psychological, or sexual harassment of women, girls, and children in workplaces, educational institutions, and other public settings. This was a landmark in protecting women from sexual harassment in Bangladesh, and remains the only recognition of sexual harassment in the country's legal framework.

The guidelines offer a list of behaviours and acts that amount to sexual harassment, from inappropriate text messages to rape, and include both 'quid pro quo'

acts and those that create a 'hostile working environment'. The Court directed authorities to form a five-member complaint committee, headed by a woman and made up of a majority of women, at every workplace and institution to investigate allegations of harassment and recommend appropriate actions. It also prohibited the disclosure of names and addresses of both the accused and the complainant unless and until an allegation is proved.

The High Court ruled that these guidelines must be treated as law until adequate and effective legislation was passed, and instructed the government to create such legislation. Since then, BNSK has consistently demanded that the Court's guidelines be operationalised in media houses.

Lack of progress on Mass Media Employees Act

Journalists in Bangladesh have long called for a specific protection framework for journalism, but this call has not yet been heeded. In October 2018, at a meeting chaired by the Prime Minister, the Cabinet cleared the draft Mass Media Employees Act (Conditions of Service), which would provide legal protection for all media employees, including those in electronic media. However, no progress has been made on the Act since then.

The feminist movement in Bangladesh

Not all women's rights organisations in Bangladesh identify with the label 'feminist'; indeed, some would prefer not to categorise themselves as such, despite working to challenge the subordination of women. However, Bangladesh has a long history of women organising to claim their rights, which can be traced back to anticolonial struggles.

Diversity and vibrancy

The feminist movement in Bangladesh is characterised by diversity and vibrancy. Feminist activists and women's rights organisations, while few in number, have made their presence felt by engaging in various social movements – from protesting against fundamentalism, violence against women, and state repression during authoritarian rule to calling for equal economic opportunities, equal political representation, reproductive rights, family-law reform, and gender mainstreaming in public policies.

Progress and setbacks

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Bangladeshi women's movement was mostly composed of urban, professional, middle-class women. Since then, with the growth of the NGO sector, it has expanded to include a more diverse set of actors. However, this NGO-isation of the movement has led to a decentralising of its goals.

Given the rapidly changing economic and political contexts, today's movement faces real challenges regarding its sustainability, not least the need to attract and

retain younger activists, a decrease in international funding for small- and medium-sized women's groups, conservative backlash against the movement, and shrinking space for political activism due to the rise of extremist groups.

In spite of the social, cultural, and structural barriers, women have made considerable gains since Bangladesh became independent in 1971 – from reducing maternal mortality and fertility rates to attaining gender parity in primary-school enrolment, introducing gender quotas in government, and enacting laws that address violence against women. The women's movement has played a critical role in bringing about these changes.

However, the nature of progress is uneven, and some gender inequalities persist – particularly gender roles and the gendered division of labour. Women are still primarily responsible for unpaid care work in the family and community, meaning longer workdays and less time for leisure. While women are participating in significant numbers in the workplace, the market remains highly stereotyped; professions deemed suitable for women are often restricted to teaching, nursing, domestic work, and home-based entrepreneurial work. And, while women's presence in formal political institutions has increased, gender equity has little currency in mainstream politics.

Diversity in the media

Patriarchal norms in Bangladesh (as elsewhere) intersect with class, geography, and religion; it is easier for rich, educated, urban women to access the public sphere – including a career in journalism – than for women from poor and rural backgrounds. The representation of journalists from ethnic minorities is very low, especially outside of Dhaka. Journalists working in rural areas are also more vulnerable to attacks; ARTICLE 19 [found](#) that, of the journalists who experienced attacks in 2020, 77.8% were from outside the capital.

In March 2021, Tashnuva Anan Shishir started her career as Bangladesh's first transgender news presenter at a private TV channel. This landmark event in the history of Bangladesh's media was covered in national and [international media](#) and met with huge applause. It has not, however, inspired the country's media to break its long silence on the existence of and stigma against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI+) community. [Section 377 of the Penal Code](#) criminalises 'unnatural intercourses' – which is interpreted to mean all forms of sexual activity other than heterosexual penile–vaginal intercourse, and for which the highest punishment is life imprisonment – and in 2015, Islamist extremists [hacked to death](#) a leading gay activist and editor of an LGBTQI+ magazine.



2. Case study

Introduction

To identify feminist approaches to the safety of journalists in Bangladesh, ARTICLE 19 first conducted desk research, reviewing the constitutional framework for freedom of expression and relevant legislation and policy to understand protection mechanisms for journalists in the country.

Subsequently, extensive informal discussions and interviews were conducted with journalists, editors, academics, researchers, and activists, including from the LGBTQI+ and indigenous communities, to establish what could be regarded as feminist approaches to the safety of women journalists in a country where this subject is rarely discussed among media stakeholders. Even the researcher herself – a woman journalist who had worked in Bangladesh for more than two decades – could not instantly think of an initiative that had attempted to improve the environment for women journalists. Discussions with other women journalists in Bangladesh confirmed this difficulty, which was a limitation to the research.

All interviews took place online, although one interviewee – BNSK President Nasimun Ara Huq Minu – was interviewed twice, once online and once in person, to more fully understand the organisation featured in our case study.

Almost everyone interviewed mentioned BNSK as the only organisation taking a feminist stance by unifying women journalists from around the country and raising their concerns. Almost all women journalists in Bangladesh are members of BNSK, which supports them by publishing statements, organising protests, fighting for equal and fair treatment in the workplace, and highlighting incidents of solidarity between them – even where legal loopholes and systemic problems make justice almost impossible.

BNSK was therefore chosen as the featured organisation for this case study.

○ **Beginnings**

BNSK is a networking, campaigning, training, and social organisation for women journalists across Bangladesh. It was established on 13 March 2001 with the aim of supporting and encouraging women who work for newspapers, news agencies, and online media.

When BNSK was founded, only around 100 women journalists were working in newsrooms around Bangladesh, making it even more difficult for them to raise their voices than it is now. Against that background, a group of women journalists thought it was important to create a platform that would voice their professional concerns.

○ **Aims and demands**

BNSK has formulated 13 key demands, which it has called for since 2018 as absolute prerequisites for creating safe and gender-responsive workplaces for women journalists:

1. All media organisations must ensure at least 30% of employees in all departments are women.
2. Special training programmes should be arranged for women journalists. Women journalists should be given equal opportunity and, if needed, given priority in all training at home and abroad.
3. Women journalists must be given equal opportunities for promotion. There should not be any discrimination.
4. A special committee must be formed in all media organisations to investigate and take action against any complaint of discrimination against women.
5. Women journalists must be granted maternity leave according to the national law. Job seniority and promotion must not be affected by this leave.
6. Every organisation must have women's toilets, restrooms, and breastfeeding corners.
7. Every media organisation must have daycare centres for children.
8. Every organisation must provide safe transportation for going to and returning from the office.
9. There must be no discrimination when recruiting women, giving them assignments, selecting news beats, or sending them for training.
10. Women journalists cannot be sacked without due process.

11. To stop sexual harassment in every media organisation, a sexual harassment prevention committee must be established, following the High Court ruling in May 2009 (see previous section).
12. All media organisations must have a code of conduct detailing how all men colleagues, superiors, high officials, and recruiters must behave with women journalists and employees.
13. All organisations must have a gender policy.

BNSK further demands that, if a media organisation does not fulfil the above requirements, the government should not give it any benefits, including government advertising. BNSK has submitted these demands to the Minister of Information, but at the time of writing (September 2022), he had not responded.

Uniting women in protest

BNSK originally intended to undertake research and deliver capacity-building workshops for women journalists across Bangladesh. However, due to a lack of funding, it became a campaigning organisation that protests whenever a woman journalist faces violence or discrimination, whether at home or in the workplace. Indeed, it has become the only respite for women journalists speaking out against abusive husbands, colleagues, or bosses. It also protests against women journalists disproportionately being the victims of job cuts and a lack of promotion opportunities. Often, BNSK is the only organisation that publicly protests against these issues.

By uniting women in public protests, BNSK has become a strong voice opposing violence against women, discrimination, job cuts, and other forms of injustice. It regularly forms human chains as a method of protest, which attracts media interest and raises awareness of the problems facing women journalists. It also negotiates with media management on behalf of women journalists.

Although BNSK President Nasimun Ara Huq Minu could not remember an incident in which their protests brought a perpetrator to justice for harassment or job cuts, she emphasises the intrinsic importance of women raising their voices together and ensuring these incidents do not go unnoticed. Furthermore, she draws attention to media reports about BNSK protests, which show that the organisation is helping to break the long silence on discrimination against women journalists.

Current focus and limitations

Currently, BNSK has almost 1,000 members, comprising women journalists from across Bangladesh working on different beats and in print and electronic media. In the absence of any central authority or journalists' union, BNSK remains the only collective bargaining platform for women journalists in the country.

BNSK organises an annual conference for its members. Its unity and voice give women journalists the strength to fight against discrimination. However, it has neither the funding nor the structure to protest or provide support outside of Dhaka, despite understanding that women journalists in remote areas face even greater challenges.

‘[W]omen need to be united and there is still [a] need for voices which can raise issues relating to women’s rights in workplaces and [the] home. The need for protests against violence against women at home and workplaces are endless too.

The challenge is that women journalists have the least time and freedom to be involved in [the] organisation and its duties. However, women feel the loneliest when in crisis too. This is where BNSK has been the most successful. It could be a shelter and respite for women in crisis. It also created the space for women to show solidarity against inequality and injustice.’

– *Nasimun Ara Huq Minu, President, BNSK*

BNSK works in partnership with national and international NGOs and UN organisations, such as UNICEF, Bangladesh Women Health Coalition, Bangladesh Family Planning Association, Prip Trust, Care Bangladesh, Breaking the Silence, *Bangladesh Nari Progoti Sangho*, and the Women and Gender Study Department of Dhaka University. BNSK has sometimes received financial support from the Canadian International Development Agency.

3. Conclusion

This report set out to identify ways to take action to address the safety concerns of women journalists.

The findings highlight the need for the state in Bangladesh to take affirmative action to encourage more women to pursue careers in the media. Ensuring greater participation by women in media work and the creation of content is a positive goal in itself. It is also important in terms of promoting diverse and objective reporting, for example by improving the representation in the news of the true situation of women in society.

In order to measure progress, it is vital too that the numbers of women journalists and their struggles and the challenges they face, including threats to their safety, are properly documented.

However, beyond documenting current conditions, specific work is then needed in order to eliminate any harms and concerns identified and create a fear-free environment for women journalists in which they can work safely and feel confident to raise their voices against any sort of violence. All state and non-state actors need to understand the requirements of an ideal professional environment and the protection mechanisms necessary to create an enabling environment for the safety of journalists, and to take steps to implement these conditions.

The proactive involvement of leadership and management in resolving their safety concerns is essential in creating a safe space for all women journalists. It is also important that women are not simply appointed to positions of authority but are granted credible levels of power, without restricting them on the basis of gendered roles and stereotypes, and to strengthen accountability mechanisms through the lived experiences of women.

Notes

- 1 ARTICLE 19 uses 'women' and 'men' to refer to all those individuals who identify themselves as such.
- 2 ARTICLE 19 uses a functional definition of journalists and communicators, as per the [UN Human Rights Committee General Comment 34](#): 'Journalism is a function shared by a wide range of actors, including professional full-time reporters and analysts, as well as bloggers and others who engage in forms of self-publication in print, on the internet or elsewhere'.
- 3 ARTICLE 19's [Global Expression Report](#) metric (the GxR metric) tracks freedom of expression across the world. In our 2022 report, 25 indicators were used to create an overall freedom of expression score for 161 countries, on a scale of 1–100, which places each country in an expression category.



[article19.org](https://www.article19.org)