

SURVEY REPORT

Health Journalism during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Safety-Security Measures of the Journalists

Conducted under the Project titled
**"The Fourth Estate: Under the Shadow of Restrictions
and the Search for Ways Forward."**



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Conducted and analyzed by

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Disclaimer

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Executive Summary

Covid-19 pandemic affected people from all walks of life, globally journalists were doubly challenged by the pandemic. As front liners they continued their work exposing themselves to the virus; they not only faced financial uncertainty but also endured social stigma and psychosocial challenges. Despite these challenges, Bangladeshi journalists made continued efforts to gather and disseminate information and thus contributed significantly in addressing the crisis situation. In this context, Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) conducted this research on journalists of Bangladesh to investigate the impacts of and preparedness for the pandemic.

CGS conducted this survey on “Health Journalism during the Covid 19 pandemic and Safety-Measures of the Journalists” as a part of the FCDO funded TAF managed project, “Strengthening and promoting active citizenship in Bangladesh” (SPACB) programme which aims to contribute to a more participatory, inclusive, gender-sensitive, and sustainable local governance processes, embedded in robust and vibrant civic spaces. The programme intends to promote active citizenship and create space for all democratic actors, including political parties and the media. Under the SPACB programme, the present study aims to investigate the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the journalists of Bangladesh and assess their preparedness for such pandemics. Primary audiences of the survey report are the journalists of Bangladesh.

The present study finds that the rate of infection was quite high among the respondent journalists. The study observes that the pandemic brought change in work processes of Bangladeshi media houses. It found that about 67 per cent respondents worked from home fully or partially. Only 29 per cent of the respondents received logistic support for performing their media related duties from home. For 53 per cent respondents, the pandemic increased work burden.

During the pandemic, the respondent journalists experienced financial uncertainty, social stigma, and psychosocial challenges. Only 40 per cent of the respondent of the survey received full payment regularly during the pandemic while 36 percent were paid half of their salary. About one fourth of the respondents faced social stigma and 60 per cent faced some sort of psychosocial challenges.

Support provided to the journalists by their offices was not very satisfactory. 57 per cent of the respondents who worked outside, received safety materials from their offices. The safety materials mainly included facemask and hand sanitizer. Only 50 per cent respondents received transport facility during lockdown.

Training remains to be a significant limitation for Journalism in Bangladesh. About half (48 per cent) of the respondents was found to be unaware of the theoretical aspects of health journalism; only 10 per cent of the respondents were found to attend training/workshop on Covid-19 pandemic.

With respect to press freedom, condition of Bangladesh was not encouraging even before the pandemic. Reporting on some issues like corruption and mis-governance has always been challenging in Bangladesh. During the pandemic too, such reporting remained to be a great challenge for the journalists. Some opined that in some cases, the emergency situation created by the pandemic further facilitated the practice of oppression on journalism.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic, which can be termed as a “generation defining crisis”, deeply impacted all spheres of life all over the world. For media, the pandemic posed double challenges. On one hand, as one of the front-liners, the journalists were comparatively more exposed to the virus as well as to the social and psychosocial impacts of the pandemic. On the other hand, the pandemic exacerbated the financial downturn that media, particularly newspapers, had been experiencing in recent years. With significant fall in global advertising income, the pandemic contributed to closure of news outlets, major job losses, pay cuts and furloughs. On top of all this, journalists had to face increasing attacks both on and offline as governments in many countries tried to roll back press freedom using the pandemic situation as an excuse.

Against this backdrop, it is pertinent to examine the situation of the journalists in Bangladesh during the Covid-19 pandemic. Such an examination is important for two reasons. First, it will enhance the understanding on the impact of the pandemic on journalists from developing country like Bangladesh. Second, the scrutiny of the challenges posed by the pandemic in this region would help in policy formation in respective areas at both national and international level. It can be noted here that even before the pandemic, Bangladeshi journalists had been facing a variety of challenges, including legal and extra-legal pressures and there was concern over press freedom in the country. It is imperative to see whether the pandemic has deteriorated the situation in this regard.

Like elsewhere, journalists of Bangladesh played an important role in addressing the crises posed by the pandemic. As one of the frontline fighters, journalist community contributed immensely, by collecting and disseminating relevant information and thereby raising public awareness about the new disease. The pandemic brought health journalists in the forefront in two ways. First, pursuing journalism amid the pandemic was a new experience for journalists which made expertise in health journalism more important to the journalist community than it was before. Second, health issues became the most important subject of discussion in society at large which in turn added the importance of health journalists to the society in general and media houses in particular.

Under these circumstances, the Centre for Governance Studies (CGS) conducted this research on 100 journalists of Bangladesh to examine the situation of journalism in the country during the Covid-19 pandemic. The objectives of the study are:

- i. To examine the impact of the pandemic on journalists of Bangladesh.
- ii. To assess the support provided to the journalists by their employers during the pandemic.
- iii. To assess the preparedness of the journalists of Bangladesh in health journalism.

The report is organized as follows. Following introduction, section two will depict the global scenario on journalism during the Covid-19 pandemic. Section three describes methodology. Findings of the study are discussed in the following four sections. Section four presents the findings on impacts of Covid-19 pandemic on journalists of Bangladesh while section five highlights the findings regarding supports provided to the journalists during the pandemic. Section six discusses the preparedness in health journalism among the journalists of the country. Section seven identifies the challenges in journalism in general and health journalism in particular. Section eight provides some recommendations. Section nine concludes the report.

Journalism During The Covid-19 Pandemic: Global Scenario

The Covid-19 pandemic was more than a health crisis. Globally, it had a profound impact on all spheres of society; journalism was no exception. Health restrictions and lockdowns, which were practiced widely at global level, severely affected those professions who cannot afford to stay at home even in pandemic; media being one of the biggest examples. Studio room journalism did not face much problem as it could be easily shifted to home; but ground reporting suffered heavily. In a report published by BBC India, journalists were found to be one of the most affected professional groups besides health sector.¹

With the outset of the pandemic which required the toughest restriction on human movement in history, media organizations had to quickly restructure their work

¹ Singh, Pavitar Parkash, and Sabeeha Shaheen. "Journalism and covid 19: A study of how indian journalists are managing their work amid the pandemic." *European Journal of Molecular & Clinical Medicine* 7, no. 06 (2020): 2020.

processes.² In the report of BBC India mentioned above, big or small media houses in India were found to shift their bases to personal spaces. Two third of the crew and staff of BBC India were working from home.

ILO estimates that the loss of global working hours during the second quarter of 2020 was equivalent to 305 million full-time jobs which is approximately four times greater than the loss caused by the global financial crisis in 2009.³ Media houses were no exception to this trend. For example, in India, even big publishers like Forbes India and Outlook discontinued their print operations while some other renowned publications either declared salary cut or asked employees to take leaves without any pay.⁴

The International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University took a collaborative research initiative where 1400 English speaking journalists from 125 countries were interviewed over the period April-June 2020. In the survey, largest number of respondents (70 per cent) cited psychological and emotional impacts of dealing with the COVID-19 crisis as the most challenging aspect of work during the pandemic. The second most significant challenge was financial uncertainty (67 per cent) while intense workload was ranked as the third biggest challenge (64 per cent), ahead of social isolation and the risk of actually contracting the virus.

According to the abovementioned report, the grim situation was compounded by the failure of the employers in providing adequate support for their staffs, not only in the area of mental health but also at the most basic level - providing appropriate safety equipment. Thirty percent of the respondents said that their news organizations had not supplied field reporters with a single piece of recommended protective equipment. On financial impact, 89 per cent respondents of the study reported that their news organization had enacted at least one COVID-19 related austerity measure (including job losses, salary cuts and outlet closures), 7 per cent reported that their outlets had ceased print editions and 11 per cent reported reduced print runs due to COVID-19-induced budget constraints.

On top of all this, in many countries, journalists had to face increasing attack both from governments and public. The former attempted roll back press freedom under the cloak of the pandemic while the latter held the journalists liable for the lockdowns and other

² Quandt, Thorsten, and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen. "The Coronavirus Pandemic as a Critical Moment for Digital Journalism: Introduction to Special Issue: Covering Covid-19: The Coronavirus Pandemic as a Critical Moment for Digital Journalism." *Digital Journalism* 9, no. 9 (2021): 1199-1207.

³ International Labour Organization. "ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the World of Work." Updated estimates and analysis. *Int Labour Organ* (2020). Seventh edition, 25 January 2021

⁴ Singh, Pavitar Parkash, and Sabeeha Shaheen, op. cit.

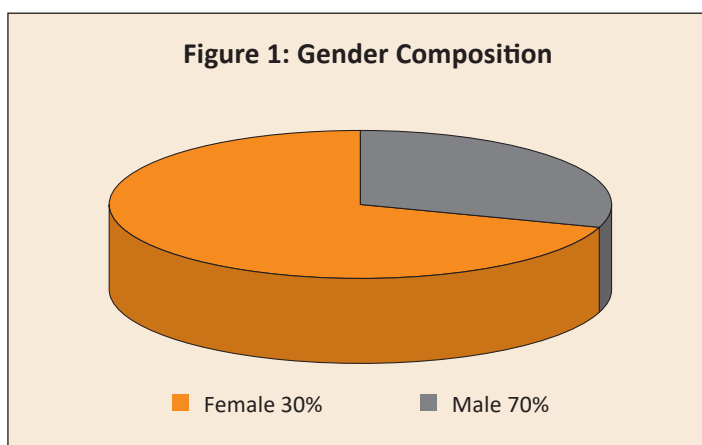
sufferings associated with the pandemic. In the ICJF-Columbia University study, 48 per cent respondents reported that their sources had expressed fear of retaliation for speaking to them in connection with COVID-19 and 10 per cent respondents said that they had faced abuse in public, State-linked censorship and legal harassment.

The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and the University of Toronto interviewed 73 journalists from international news organizations in June 2020 and found that 70 per cent of the respondents suffered from some levels of psychological distress while 26 per cent had clinically significant anxiety compatible with the diagnosis of Generalized Anxiety Disorder which includes symptoms of worry, feeling on edge, insomnia, poor concentration and fatigue. The Reuters study also found 60 per cent of the respondent journalists to work harder during the pandemic while having increased responsibilities at home at the same time.⁵

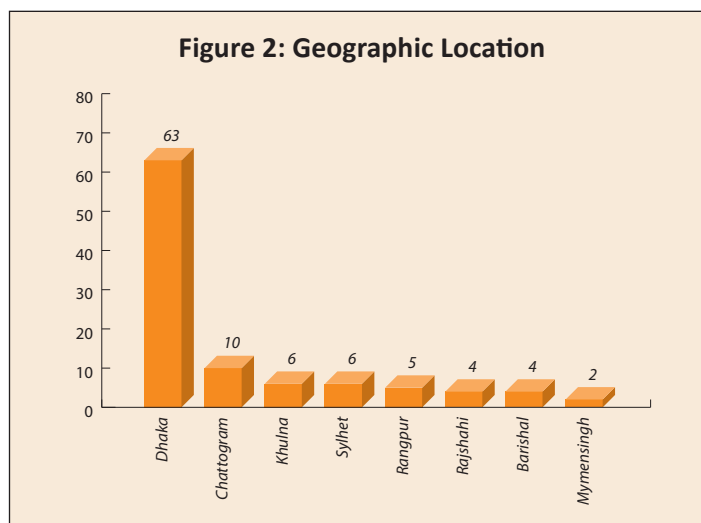
Literature review suggests that the Covid-19 pandemic took a great toll on the journalists worldwide. With this backdrop, the present study attempts to examine the situation of Bangladesh in this regard.

Methodology

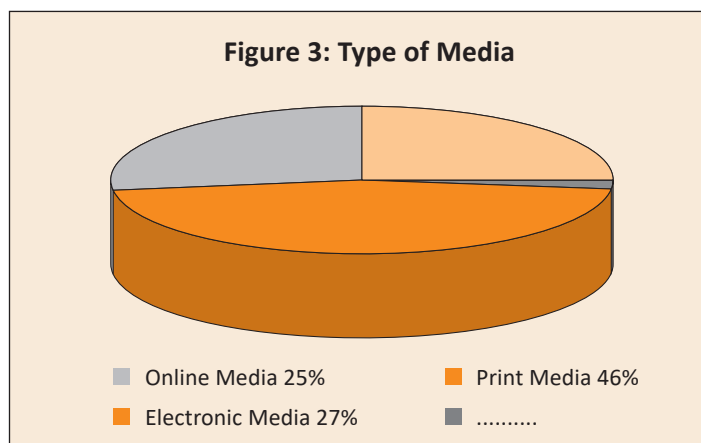
The present study is quantitative by nature. It used primary data collected from survey, FGD and KII. To select the samples for the survey, snowball sampling method was applied. A total of 100 journalists were chosen from eight administrative divisions.



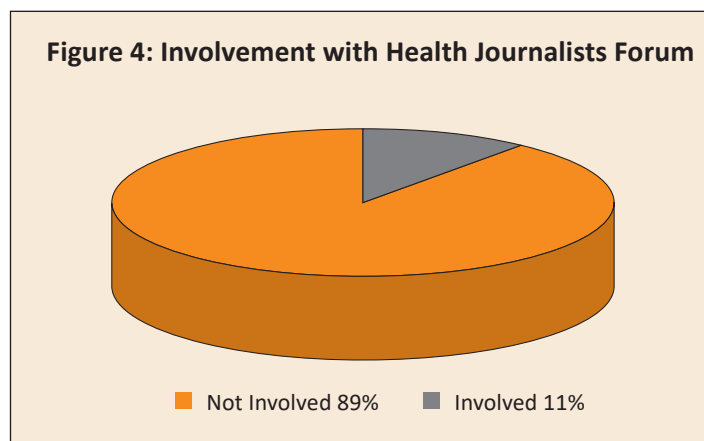
⁵ Al Tompkins, "COVID-19 is harming journalists' mental health, a new study found", Available at <https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2020/covid-19-is-hurting-journalists-mental-health-a-new-study-found/>, accessed on 06 February 2022.



The survey questionnaire included both open-ended and close-ended questions. A draft of the questionnaire was subjected to a pretest, resulting in modifications to the questionnaire both in terms of wording and length of the questions. Each survey interview took 20 minutes, on average. Although the initial idea was to collect the data physically, due to a sudden lockdown, the team was unable to conduct face-to-face interview for the survey. Therefore, the survey was later conducted through an online Google form and over the telephone. Data was collected during March to May 2020.



Of the respondents, 70 per cent were males and 30 per cent were females. 63 per cent of the survey respondents were from Dhaka division who included journalists working for national newspapers, electronic media, and online media (both online news portals and online sections of the print media and news agencies), while the remaining 37 per cent were chosen from other seven divisions including journalists from local newspapers and the online sections of some local newspapers.



About half of the respondents (46 per cent) were from print media, more than one fourth (27 per cent) from electronic media and another one fourth (25 per cent) from online media; only 2 per cent were from news agency.

Health Reporters forums are the kind of organizations that raise the demand of the journalist and protect their rights, especially regarding the health issues. Among the respondents, only 11 were found to be involved with such organizations.

Impact Of Covid-19 Pandemic On Journalists Of Bangladesh

Being one of the frontliners during the pandemic time, journalists had to face multifaceted problems. “At a time when the public needs to rely on credible independent journalism to stay safe and informed, journalists and news organizations are grappling with a mental health crisis, financial peril, physical safety threats, and press freedom attacks, while simultaneously battling pandemic levels of disinformation” – observes International Center for Journalists. The present study is an attempt to see where Bangladeshi journalists stand in terms of the challenges posed by the pandemic. This section analyzes the study findings on the impacts of the pandemic on the journalists of Bangladesh.

Health Impact

Due to their nature of job, globally journalists were in a greater risk of contracting Corona virus. Geneva-based Press Emblem Campaign (PEC) observes, “Journalists are at great risk in this health crisis because they must continue to inform, by going to

hospitals, interviewing doctors, nurses, political leaders, specialists, scientists, patients.”⁶ According to PEC, over the period March 2020 to February 2021, at least 840 journalists died of Covid-19 in 68 countries while with 44 deaths, Bangladesh ranks 6th in the world in terms of coronavirus-related deaths among journalists.⁷

As will be shown in the following sub-sections, not only the Bangladeshi journalists themselves, their families and neighbors were also apprehensive of their being infected. The present study finds that this apprehension was not a speculative one; the journalists indeed got infected by the virus at a high rate, 34 per cent of the respondent journalists were infected by corona virus. As Dhaka was the most affected region of the country, journalists from Dhaka showed higher rate of infection (41 per cent) compared to their fellows working outside Dhaka (26 per cent).

The rate of infection among the respondent journalists appears to be quite high if it is compared with other professional groups. A study was conducted on health workers working in Mugda Medical College Hospital, a dedicated government hospital for corona patients, over the period 15 April – 05 June 2020. During this period 10.8 per cent of the health care workers of the hospital were tested covid positive.⁸ In another report it was shown that by mid July 2020, out of 200000 members of Bangladesh Police Force, a total of 13000 were infected by corona virus which makes the infection rate to be less than 1 per cent.⁹

Due to small sample size and non-random sampling method, the finding of higher infection rate for journalists cannot be generalized. Putting differently, the extremely higher infection rate might be the result of sample error. But, further discussion with journalists through KII and FGD suggests that the Covid infection rate among journalists was no less than other frontliners like doctors, if not higher.

⁶ Radcliffe, Damian. "The impact of COVID-19 on journalism in Emerging Economies and the Global South." Available at SSRN 3796666 (2021).

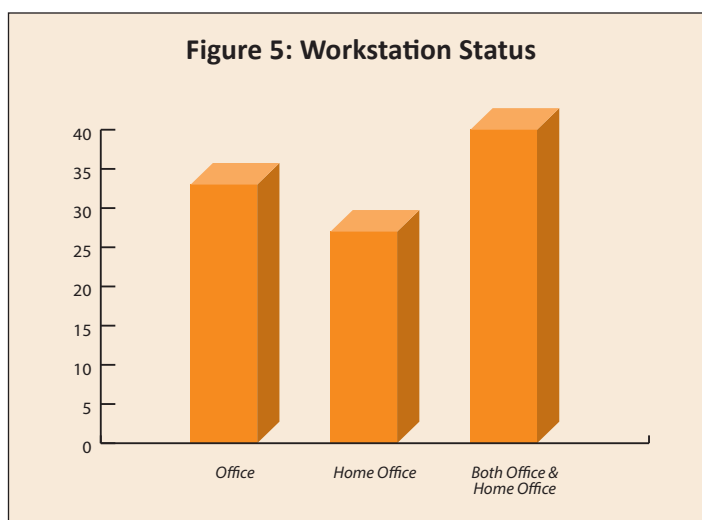
⁷ "Bangladesh 6th in Covid-19 death toll among journalists", Available at <https://archive.dhakatribune.com/health/coronavirus/2021/03/05/bangladesh-6th-in-covid-19-death-toll-among-journalists>, accessed on 09 February 2022.

⁸ Yasmin, Rubina, Rahnema Parveen, Nazim Al Azad, Sudip Ranjan Deb, Nandita Paul, Md Manjurul Haque, Md Ahsanul Haque, and Shehreen Azad. "Corona virus infection among healthcare workers in a COVID dedicated tertiary care hospital in Dhaka, Bangladesh." *Journal of Bangladesh College of Physicians and Surgeons* (2020): 43-49.

⁹ Md. Kamruzzaman, "Bangladesh: Police force faces brunt of virus COVID-19 death toll in police hits 50", available at <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/bangladesh-police-force-faces-brunt-of-virus/1909056>, accessed on 02 February 2022.

Impact on Working Condition

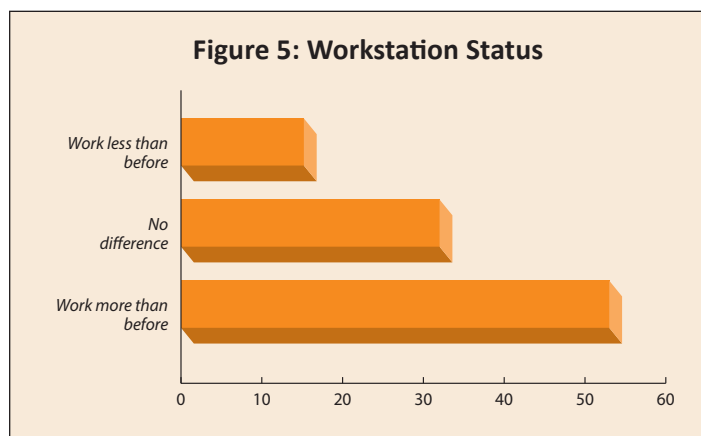
With the blessing of modern technologies, the pandemic sparked a culture of home office activities. The present study tried to see to what extent did the media houses of Bangladesh practice this home office culture. It found that less than one third (27%) of the respondent journalists totally worked from home while 40 per cent had to work both at home and office. The rest 33 per cent physically attended the office during the study period. The finding of the present study is consistent with the finding of MRDI survey which found that 75 per cent of the field level journalists covered assignments from the spots resulting in serious risks for themselves and their families.



Some observe that though at the very outset of the pandemic, a large part of the media staff was asked to work from home, within a very short time, media employees feared being treated redundant and started going to work risking their health.¹⁰

Respondents of the present survey who worked from home, were further asked whether working from home acted as a barrier to their work through, for example, hindering proper communication with colleagues and other relevant persons/offices. About half of the respondents (47%) felt that they have faced problems in this regard. The respondents were further asked whether their offices had provided any logistic support (tab, laptop etc.) to conduct home offices; only 29 per cent responded in affirmative.

¹⁰ Reza, S. I. "Bangladesh media: Pre and post-Covid-19 realities and opportunities." The Business Standard (2020), available at <https://www.tbsnews.net/thoughts/bangladesh-media-pre-and-post-covid-19-realities-and-opportunities-133591>, accessed on 11 February 2022.



Finally, the survey respondents were asked whether the pandemic has increased their workload. 53 per cent respondents said that during pandemic they had to work more than before while 15 per cent reported that they had to work less during the pandemic. 32 per cent saw no change in workload. It can be noted here that prior to the pandemic, working hour of journalists varied with their type of responsibilities. The previous trend continued during the pandemic. The pandemic brought changes in working pattern which included home office and rotation of duties. These changed pattern of work along with lay-off and fear of lay off contributed to increased working hour for the journalists.

Financial Impact

As mentioned before, the Covid-19 pandemic had profound impact on global economy. ILO estimates that the loss of global working hours during the second quarter of 2020 was equivalent to 305 million full-time jobs which is approximately four times greater than the loss caused by the global financial crisis in 2009.¹¹ The media houses were no immune to this economic stalemate. In the ICJ-TCDJ joint study on 125 countries, 89 per cent respondents reported that their news organization had enacted at least one COVID-19 related austerity measure which include job losses, salary cuts and outlet closures.¹²

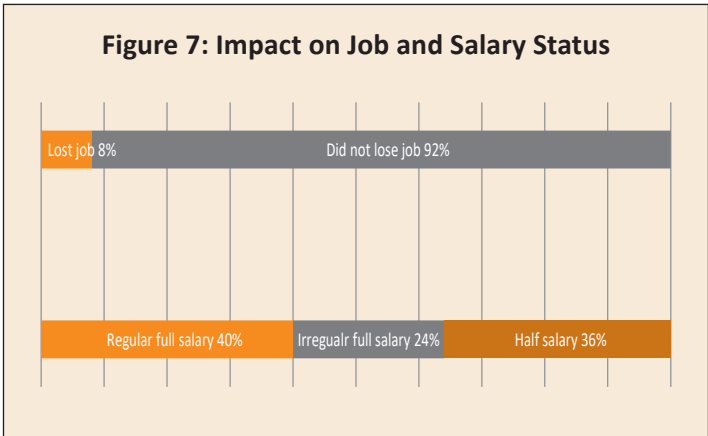
Scenario of Bangladesh was expected to be worse as the pandemic appeared here in an already shrinking media market. Even before the outbreak, the media revenues were falling as rise of social media and increased consumption of mobile internet challenged

¹¹ International Labour Organization, op. cit.

¹² Julie Posetti, Emily Bell and Pete Brown, "Journalism and the Pandemic: The Global Snapshots of Impact", Tow Center for Digital Journalism, May 13-June 30, 2020.

the traditional way of selling content. The pandemic made the situation worse. Advertisements dried up as businesses closed and subscription nose-dived leaving an adverse effect on the routine operations of the media industry.¹³ By as early as May 2020, the media houses started feeling the pinch, even though additional financial uncertainty was yet to be noticeably felt by the journalists.¹⁴

It is in this context that the present survey asked the respondents about the economic impact of the pandemic. It found that less than half of the respondents could retain their pre-pandemic salary flow. As can be seen from Figure 7, 40 per cent of the respondent received full payment regularly while 36 percent were paid half of their salary. For the rest 24 per cent, salary payment was full but irregular. Moreover, 8 per cent of the respondent journalist lost their job due to the pandemic.



The present study did not find any vivid discrimination against female journalists in terms of salary payment. As can be seen from Figure 8 compared to their male counterparts, more of female journalists received regular full salary. Though incidence of receiving half salary is higher for female journalists, they were in better position in terms of regularity of payment.

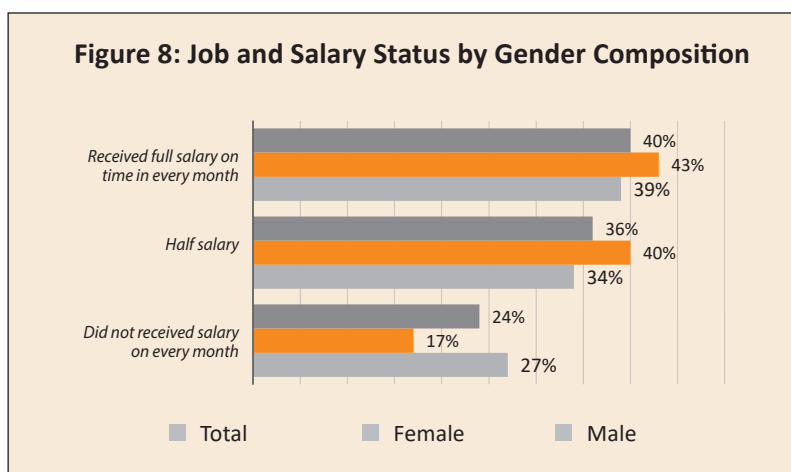
To gain a broader picture, the present study further discussed the financial impact issues in KIIs with senior journalists. The interviews reveal that during the pandemic year 2020, about 1500-1600 journalists of Bangladesh lost their job, of whom 1200 were from Dhaka. About 3000 journalists experienced salary cut, consolidated salary or

¹³ Reza, S. I., op. cit.

¹⁴ Ahmed Shatil Alam and Wahida Alam, “COVID-19 challenges for journalists”, New Age, available at <https://www.newagebd.net/print/article/106209>, accessed on 11 February 2022.

deferred payment. For about 500 journalists, payment was overdue for six to even 18 months. “The year 2020 was the worst year for the journalists since independence” comments one senior journalist.

According to the interviewees, almost all media houses reduced salary and almost none of them followed the payment structure suggested by the existing Wage Board for journalists. Even those newspapers which followed the Wage Board suggested payment structure before the pandemic, discontinued during the pandemic time. More importantly, during the pandemic, media houses widely practiced consolidated salary which is in violation of the existing labour law.



The interviewees suggested that reduced revenue of the media houses was one of the reasons of such practices. During the pandemic, print media suffered from dual crisis of falling advertisement revenue and drastic cut in subscription. Though electronic media did not see reduction in subscription, their advertisement revenue also fell. Of the 32 television channels now on air in Bangladesh, about 20 reduced their manpower significantly during the pandemic.

Local newspapers were disproportionately affected by the pandemic. A survey by the Bangladesh Independent Journalists Network (BIJN) conducted in June 2020 found that more than 60 per cent of 457 local newspapers published in 34 districts of the country have been completely shut down. The KII participants of the present study echoed this finding.

¹⁵ Nawaz Farhin Antara, “Survey: Over 60% of local newspapers have shut down in Covid-19 pandemic”, Dhaka Tribune, available at <https://archive.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2020/07/11/survey-over-60-of-local-newspapers-have-shut-down-in-covid-19-pandemic>, accessed on 09 February 2022. .

Irregular payment of salary of journalists, however, cannot be fully attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic. As mentioned before, in pre-pandemic time too, many media houses were struggling to pay its stuffs regularly. It is these media houses whose stuffs suffered more from pay cut and job loss – discussion Irregular payment of salary of journalists, however, cannot be fully attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic. As mentioned before, in pre-pandemic time too, many media houses were struggling to pay its stuffs regularly. It is these media houses whose stuffs suffered more from pay cut and job loss – discussion with journalists reveals. They also highlighted that fear of job loss in a shrinking job market made journalists to compromise while negotiating about their rights in issues like working hour, benefits, safety measures and timely and full payment of salary.¹⁶

Case Study 1

The Tale of a Journalist during the Pandemic

Nazmul Hasan (pseudo name) started his career as journalist in a newspaper which started its journey immediately before the pandemic set in. The pandemic was a blow to the nascent newspaper. At the very beginning of the pandemic, the newspaper laid off about 60 per cent of its workforce – from junior to senior, even at the sub editor level. As the team became smaller, workload increased manifold. Instead of 7 hours, he started working 10-12 hours a day. His working hour increased but salary decreased. Holiday roster was also not followed by his office. In 2020, he worked in the two Eid vacations but did not get any bonus. When he wanted to quit his job, his office did not cooperate. They delayed his NOC and deprived him of the salary of last two months.

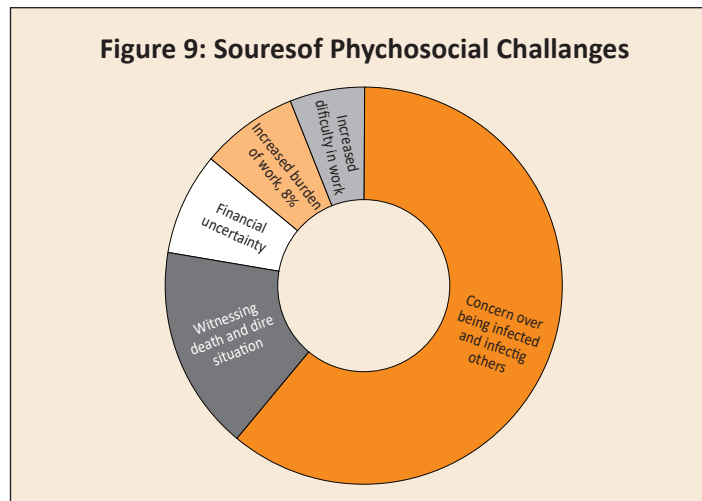
Hasan then joined a renowned news agency of Bangladesh as sub editor. In his new office, there was no problem with salary but workload was very high as there was so few sub editors to do so many tasks. Due to excessive workload, he quit this job too. This time his office cooperated with his quitting job but the office still owes him the salary of last one month.

¹⁶ Islam, Kazi M. Anisul, Md Sumon Ali, Asma Islam, Shahariar Khan Nobel, Nazmul Hasan Shajib, Mohammad Abdullah Al Mamun Chowdhury, and Rydwanul Islam. "Safety Measures of Journalists During Corona Pandemic in Bangladesh." Global Journal of Human-Social Science (2020): 29-45.

Psychosocial Challenges

During the pandemic, journalists found themselves immersed in various social and psychosocial challenges which took a heavy toll on them. In the aforementioned survey conducted jointly by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and Tow Centre for Digital Journalism, 70 per cent of the respondents identified the psychological and emotional impacts of dealing with the COVID-19 crisis as the most difficult aspect of their work, and 82 per cent reported at least one negative emotional or psychological reaction as a result of the pandemic. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism and the University of Toronto interviewed 73 journalists from international news organizations in June and got similar finding; 70 per cent of their respondents were found to suffer from some levels of psychological distress.¹⁷

Condition of Bangladeshi journalists is not much different as suggested by the findings of the present survey. Among the respondents, 60 per cent reports facing some sort of psychosocial challenges.



The respondents of the CGS survey identified the following sources of psychosocial challenges.

- Journalists not only worked with continuous fear of being infected, they also had been in constant concern that the type of their job had put their family members in risk. Concern over health risk of family members was the single most important source of psychosocial challenges among the journalists.
- Witnessing lots of death cases and dire situations had psychosocial impact.

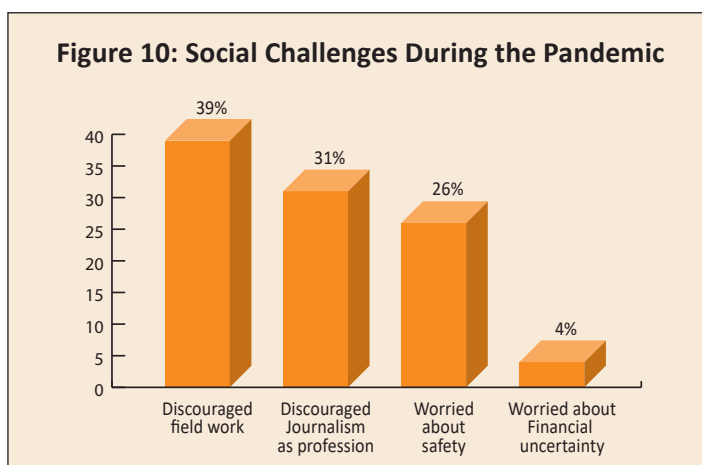
¹⁷ Selva, M., and A. Feinstein. "COVID-19 is hurting journalists' mental health. News outlets should help them now", Reuters Institute (2020).

- Financial uncertainty also had its psychosocial toll.
- Increased burden of work, new working environment, additional challenges of work arising from lack of proper communications and difficulty in movement due to lockdown were other major sources of psychosocial challenges.

In the present sample, psychosocial challenges were more common among male journalists compared to their female counterparts. Sixty-seven per cent of male respondents faced psychosocial challenges; for female respondents, the share was 33 per cent. No distinctive pattern, however, could not be observed between the male and female respondents regarding the sources of psychosocial challenges.

Social Challenges

Like in other countries, journalists of Bangladesh were acknowledged as “front-liners” during the Covid-19 pandemic, it could not prevent many from facing social stigma. About one fourth of the respondents of the present survey faced social stigma whereby they were suspected by community members as probable carrier of the virus and hence were avoided.



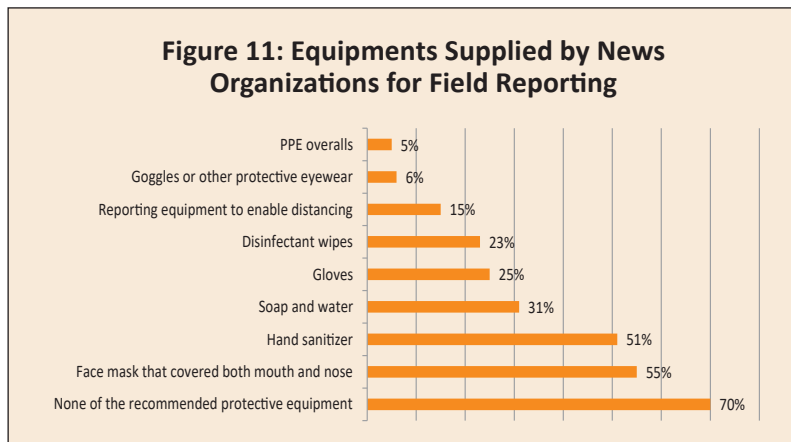
Those respondents who faced such social challenges said that as they had to continue their outdoor duties during lockdowns, people started avoiding them in fear of contagion. Neighbors started keeping a distance from them and stopped talking. Even some of the journalists themselves avoided their colleagues who were on outdoor field-level duties. Some respondents said that at times they felt socially isolated for being journalists and continuing duties during the pandemic.

Unfortunately, for a similar number of respondents, the attitude of family members was discouraging to the journalists during the pandemic. Thirty nine per cent of the respondents had to face such situation where their family members were worried about their safety and discouraged them in performing field duties. In many cases, family members discouraged or even put pressure to leave this profession. Figure 10 analyzes the discouraging attitude of family members during the Corona Pandemic.

Supports Provided To The Journalists

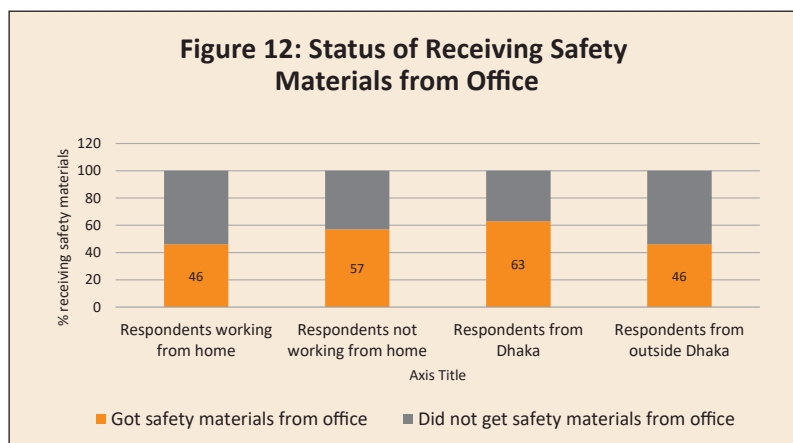
Safety Measures at Work

When it comes to the question of ensuring safety of the journalists by the employers, the global picture appears to be grim. The ICJ-Tow Center study indicates widespread failure of employers to supply basic recommended safety equipment for journalists engaged in field reporting during the Covid-19 pandemic – ranging from protective clothing and hygiene products to PPE (see Figure 11). In their study, 30 per cent of the respondents reported that field reporters had not been supplied with a single piece of safety equipment.



Source: Julie Posetti, Emily Bell and Pete Brown, “Journalism and the Pandemic: The Global Snapshots of Impact”, Tow Center for Digital Journalism, May 13-June 30, 2020.

In the present study, the respondents were asked whether they got PPE or other safety materials like masks, sanitizers, etc. from their office. In response, a mixed picture emerged. Of those respondents who worked outside home, only 57 per cent received safety materials. In most cases the safety materials provided by office included facemask and hand sanitizer. Interestingly, even half of those respondents who worked from home, received safety materials. Respondents from Dhaka got more safety materials than their fellow colleagues from outside Dhaka.



The findings of the present survey regarding safety materials is close to that of Mondal and Paul (2020).¹⁸ They found that 62 per cent of their respondents had collected PPE. Of those who could collect PPE, half got it from the employer and the other half had to purchase it.

Amidst the nationwide lockdown when public transport came to a total halt, providing transport by office became a necessity for the journalists not only to facilitate their daily operations but also to protect them from the virus. But during the present study, only 50 per cent of the respondents reported to have such facility. It can be mentioned here that in Bangladesh, for many journalists, especially of print media, travelling allowance is included in their salary and it is mentioned in their contracts. It is this section of journalists, especially those who do not have private transport, who suffered most during the lockdown.

The respondents were also asked whether health safety protocols for Covid-19 were maintained at their offices. 70 per cent responded that health safety protocols were well maintained in their office.

¹⁸ Mondol, Beauty, and Basudev Paul. "Journalism in Bangladesh During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Overview." *Current Res. J. Soc. Sci. & Human.* 4 (2021): 45.

Case Study 2

Covid and Transport

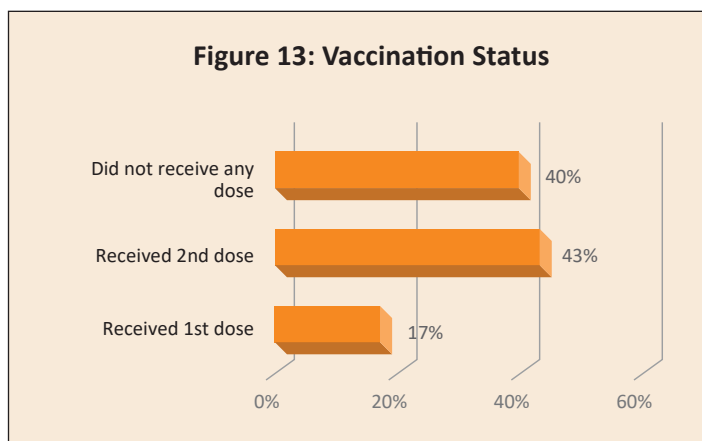
Ishrat Parvin (pseudo name) works in a news agency. Like many others, her travel and daily allowance (TA/DA) is included in the salary. During the first lockdown when public transport as well as ride sharing was halted, she had to travel through CNG at her own expense. Every day she had to spend BDT 500-1000 for covering news; sometimes the expenditure reached to BDT 1500-2000. Her travel expenditure increased but her salary did not. In some months during the pandemic, she had to spend even half of her salary as travel expenditure. Yet, she could not bargain with her office about travel expenditure as it was mentioned in her job contract. “Covid created an extraordinary situation for us but many media houses failed to respond accordingly” – she expresses her disappointment.

Support for Covid affected Journalists

While ensuring health security of the journalists was a crucial responsibility for the media houses, providing support for those who got infected was no less important. To see, to what extent such support was practiced, the present study asked the respondents whether they received any support, for example, regarding testing facility, financial support and psychosocial counseling, from their office after they suspected or tested COVID-19 positive. 56 per cent of the respondents said that they had received such support from the office.

Support for Vaccination

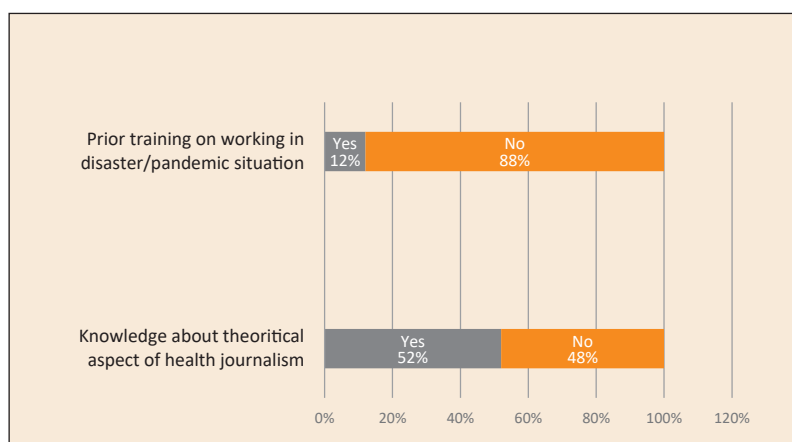
Vaccination status of the journalists is crucial to understand the safety and security status of the journalists. Therefore, respondents were asked about their COVID-19 vaccination status. At the time of the survey, 43% of respondents had received two doses of vaccine, 17% had received only the first dose, and 40% did not receive any vaccine at all. The respondents were further asked whether they got vaccinated through their offices or by self-arrangement. It was found that two third of those who were vaccinated, got vaccine through self-arrangement and the rest one third got the shots through official arrangements.



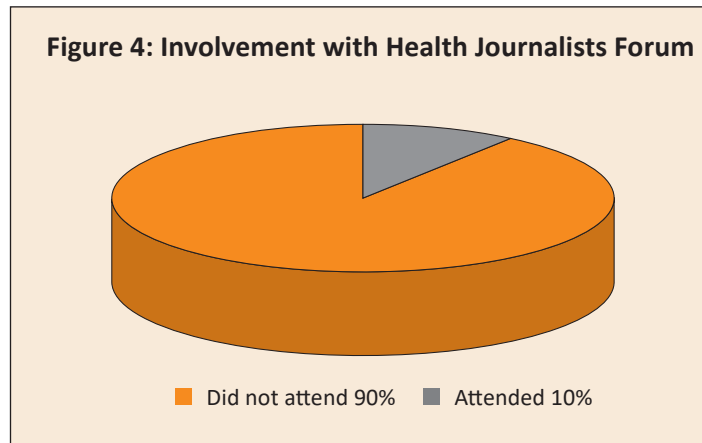
Preparedness In Health Journalism

Training remains to be a significant limitation for Journalism in Bangladesh. In the country, many journalists come from backgrounds other than journalism and theoretical training on journalism is essential for them. The study found significant shortcoming in this regard. Findings from survey and FGD suggest that very few media houses arrange training for journalists. Health journalism is no exception to this trend. About half (48 per cent) of the respondents was found to be unaware of the theoretical aspects of health journalism. To understand the preparedness of Bangladeshi journalists for working in a pandemic situation, the present survey also asked the survey participants whether, prior to the pandemic, they had received any training on field reporting during a disaster or pandemic situation. Eighty-eight per cent reported that they had not participated in such training or workshop.

Figure 14: Prior Training on Health Journalism and Pandemic



With or without prior training on journalism in general and health journalism in particular, the pandemic situation demanded that as front-liners, journalists would receive training on how to work in a pandemic situation. The present study found a grim situation in this respect. Very few media houses came forward to arrange such trainings for their staffs. What took place was some trainings of one or two day or even of one session arranged by CSOs working with journalism issue in collaboration with some other organizations. Press Institute of Bangladesh also arranged training for journalists from all over the country, but the coverage was not very high.



In the survey, only 10 per cent of the respondents were found to attend training on Covid-19 pandemic. Those who have participated in such training/workshop, found it to be quite beneficial. From the trainings, they came to know about how to collect news in a pandemic situation, how to ensure self-protection during a health crisis and what should be the safety and security measures for journalists during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Challenges In Health Journalism During Covid-19 Pandemic

Like any crisis, Covid-19 pandemic created its own challenges for the journalists in collecting news. In the joint global study of ICJ and Tow Centre, 48 per cent of respondent journalists said their sources had expressed fear of retaliation for speaking to journalists in connection with COVID-19. Another 10 per cent reported that they had been publicly abused by a politician or elected official during the period. Other major restrictions on journalism, as identified by them, were State-linked censorship and legal harassment.

For Bangladesh the scenario was no better, if not worse. In April 2020 alone, at least 12 journalists were reported to have been assaulted, with some needing to have been admitted in hospitals, after they reported on pilfering of relief supplies and mismanagement in relief distribution during the outbreak. Journalists were also reported to have faced intimidation.¹⁹

With respect to press freedom, condition of Bangladesh was not encouraging even before the pandemic. The situation was reflected in the present study too. Seventy-nine per cent of the survey respondents expressed that the Digital Security Act (DSA) was a barrier for them in working independently. Twenty-three per cent reported that they faced threats while working during the pandemic.

Sometimes, reporters are restricted by their editors from publishing particular reports on certain matters due to their long-term impact. The respondents of the present survey, therefore, were asked whether they faced any such difficulties in reporting and/or publishing the reports in their offices during the pandemic. Of the respondents, 13 per cent faced such problems.

Discussion with the journalists reveal that reporting on some issues like corruption and mis-governance has always been challenging in Bangladesh. During the Covid-19 pandemic too, collecting news about pandemic situation was not that challenging. But when it comes to health or pandemic related corruption and misgovernance, the journalists had to face significant challenges. Some opined that in some cases, the blanket of emergency situation created by the pandemic further facilitated the practice of oppression on journalism.

Recommendations

Analyzing the opinions of survey respondents and consulting with the participants of FGD and KII, the present study identified the followings to be necessary to make journalists prepared to carry out their duty during any disaster or pandemic, for many of which the journalists of the country were in a disadvantageous situation.

- Having proper financial and psychosocial support during any pandemic or disaster event.
- Receiving adequate training on specific health and disaster journalism issues.

¹⁹ Ahmed Shatil Alam and Wahida Alam, op. cit.

- Maintaining proper health safety with emphasis on mitigation of every possible risk.
- Increasing online activity and carrying out fieldwork as well.
- Ensuring vaccines for journalists on emergency basis.
- Maintaining good liaison with the officers designated locally and nationally for disaster-related information.
- Last but not the least, ensuring that journalists can work in an environment free from political pressure.

The participants recommended the followings to resolve the problems associated with health journalism in Bangladesh.

- Rescind the laws that help to cover up corruption.
- Legislations for the health care authorities should be transparent which would guarantee fast and free flow of information. Complete cooperation is needed from the Health Ministry and relevant organizations for the journalists to get information quickly.
- Ensure easy access for journalists to the hospitals and offices concerned.
- Facilitate fast and free flow of information, data needs to be updated online, especially for health-related data during the pandemic time.
- Make available special allowances for health journalists, especially when they work in epidemic or pandemic situation.
- Initiate training by the media house on health journalism which will include but limited to training on how to work in epidemic or disaster situation. Journalists themselves should also be aware of enhancing their technical knowledge of health journalism.
- Free Journalism from political pressure.

Concluding Remarks

The media industry, as the country's fourth estate, has a significant role to play in its development. Ensuring freedom of the press is a precondition in this regard. Besides freedom of press, journalists need necessary trainings, equipment, logistical facilities and social security to do their job properly. As suggested in the present study, in a pandemic situation where journalists contribute as front-line warriors, they must be provided with a satisfactory working environment equipped with proper logistical and

administrative facilities. The survey result represents a scenario where there are many areas of improvement. Issues like health journalism and the social security of journalists should get adequate attention in the policy debate.

Furthermore, journalists must have the opportunity to work independently and fearlessly and uninterruptedly. The government should eliminate those legal restrictions and legislations that act as obstacle in ensuring such environment. Besides, to perform their duties more efficiently, journalists require support from the society as well as from their families. This is particularly true for epidemic/pandemic situation when they have to endure a tremendous pressure to accomplish their duties.

In conclusion, the survey provides important insights about the state of health journalism in Bangladesh during the pandemic which can be utilized by concerned stakeholders in devising programmes and measures aimed at developing a favorable working condition for journalists in Bangladesh.

Annex - I

List of FGD Participants

Tajwar Mahmid, Reporter, Somoy TV

Shakil Hasan, Reporter, Jamuna TV

Meherun Nahar Meghla, Correspondent, bdnews24.com

Nusrat Zabin Biva, Sub-editor, Newsbangla24.com

Jannatun Nahar Ankon, Sub-editor, UNB

Taufiq Mobin, Multimedia Reporter, TheReport.live

Meer Raihan Masud, Multimedia Sports Producer, BBC Bangla

Mashfiq Mizan Mugdho, Sub-editor, The Business Post

Mazharul Islam Robin, Campus Reporter, Samakal

Tanvir Hasan, DU Correspondent, Desh Rupantor

List of Interviewees (KII)

M Abdullah, President, Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ)

Waliul Huq, Graphic Designer, The Daily Ittefaq

Arifur Rahman, Staff Reporter, The Business Post

Azizur Rahman, Staff Reporter, Vorer Kagoj

Annex - II

Questionnaire

Health Journalism during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Safety-Security Measures for the Journalists.

We, a research team from Centre for Governance Studies (CGS), have come to conduct a survey on the threats faced by journalists during the COVID-19 pandemic. We would like to talk in detail out the character and pattern of the crisis that the professional journalists of Bangladesh have faced while carrying out their duties during this catastrophic pandemic of COVID-19. According to our research policy, the information provided by you will be used for the purposes of research only and the privacy of your identity and information will be strictly protected. It may take you a maximum of 15-20 minutes to fill up this survey. Your participation in this survey is voluntary and you may refrain from participating at any time. You reserve the right not to answer any specific questions during the interview. We would be grateful to you for your kind cooperation. If you agree to participate in the survey, we will move on towards the next steps of the survey.

Note that the following questions have been considered in the context of the first lockdown.

Do you want to participate in the survey? ☐ Yes ☐ No

1. Personal Information

1.1. Personal Information

1.1.1. Name:

1.1.2. Age:

1.1.3. Gender:

1.1.4. Marital Status:

1.1.5. District:

1.1.6. Division:

1.2. Occupational Information

1.2.1. What kind of Media are you associated with?

☐ Print ☐ Electronic ☐ Online ☐ News Agency

1.2.1.1. If it is Print Media, the type of Print media you are associated with

☐ National Daily ☐ Local Newspaper (daily, periodical)

1.2.1.2. If it is online Media, the type of media you are associated with:

☐ Online of National daily ☐ Online of electronic Media

☐ National Online ☐ Regional Online

1.2.1.3. The Name of the Media in which you are working:

1.2.3. Your Designation at the workplace-

1.2.4. Daily working hours: ☐ 8 Hours ☐ More than 8 Hours ☐ Less than 8 hours

2. Journalism during the COVID-19 Pandemic

2.1. How did you work during the pandemic? ☐ Home Office ☐ At Office ☐ Field Work

2.2. In case of home office were you given the necessary devices? ☐ Yes ☐ No

2.3. In case of home office, has there been any interruption in communication with co-workers and news sources that impacted on your job adversely? ☐ Yes ☐ No

2.3.1. If yes, what problems have you faced? (Describe in one or two lines)

2.4. Did you face any problem while reporting the Coronavirus during the pandemic? ☐ Yes ☐ No

2.4.1. If yes, what problems have you faced? (Describe in one or two lines)

2.5. Did you face any pressure/threat from any government/private/influential or political individual or group while working/reporting during the pandemic?

☐ Yes ☐ No

2.5.1. If yes, what kind of pressure have you faced? (Describe in one or two lines)

2.6. Did you face police harassment/legal complications during the lockdown?

☐ Yes ☐ No

2.6.1. If Yes, what were the causes behind that situation? (Describe in one or two lines)

2.7. Was there any differences in the work schedule during the pandemic-

☐ Had to work longer than the usual ☐ Had to work less than the usual

☐ There was no difference

2.8. Did you lose the job during the pandemic? ☐ Yes ☐ No

- 2.9. Salary disbursement status during the pandemic-
☐ Regular ☐ Irregular ☐ Half payment ☐ Salary off
- 2.10. Do you think the Digital Security Act has created barriers to the independent and investigative journalism during the epidemic? ☐ Yes ☐ No

3. Knowledge on Health Journalism

- 3.1. Were you involved with the health journalism before the Covid-19 pandemic?
☐ Yes ☐ No
- 3.2. Did you participate in any training on health/disaster journalism before the pandemic? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 3.3. Have you attended any training courses on coronavirus arranged by the government or any private initiative? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 3.3.1. If yes, what have you learnt through the training?
(Describe in one or two lines)
- 3.4. Did your current organization arrange any kind of health related training course during the corona pandemic? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 3.5. Are you affiliated with any association/organization related to health journalism? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 3.6. Have you received any training or other assistance from the Press Institute of Bangladesh? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 3.7. Are you aware of the theoretical aspects of health journalism? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 3.8. Do you think that health journalism is getting enough priority in Bangladesh?
☐ Yes ☐ No
- 3.9. What are the main drawbacks of the health journalism in Bangladesh? (Describe in one or two lines)
- 3.10. What steps do you think should be taken to overcome the limitations of health journalism in Bangladesh? (Describe in one or two lines)
- 3.11. Are you satisfied with the role of the Ministry of Health or other relevant government departments, while collecting necessary information? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 3.11.1. If No, then what are the reasons behind?
- 3.12. Have you faced any barrier/difficulty from your own organization while writing or publishing/broadcasting health related reports? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 3.13. Was there any kind of 'risk allowance' or 'health insurance' from the organization for doing epidemic journalism? ☐ Yes ☐ No

4. Social and Psychosocial Problems

- 4.1. Did you face any social pressure while reporting/writing, during the corona pandemic? ☐ Yes ☐ No
 - 4.1.1. If yes, what kind of pressure was it? (Describe in one or two lines)
- 4.2. Did you face any pressure or non-cooperation from your family while performing your duties during the pandemic? ☐ Yes ☐ No
 - 4.2.1. If yes, what kind of pressure was it? (Describe in one or two lines)
- 4.3. Did you suffer from any psychosocial problem while dispensing professional responsibilities during the pandemic? ☐ Yes ☐ No
 - 4.3.1. If yes, what kind of problem was it? (Describe in one or two lines)
- 4.4. Have you faced financial difficulties during the pandemic? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 4.5. Did you get any kind of support to overcome the financial stress from work place? ☐ Yes ☐ No

5. Adequacy of Health Safety Materials

- 5.1. Were health safety materials (mask/PPE/others) provided from the workplace? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 5.2. Was transportation facility provided from the workplace? ☐ Yes ☐ No
 - 5.2.1. If no, then what type of transportation have you used for attending the office- ☐ Public Transport ☐ Personal Transport ☐ Other ()

6. Personal Health Issues during the Pandemic

- 6.1. Were you infected by Coronavirus? ☐ Yes ☐ No
 - 6.1.1. If yes, did you get any kind of assistance from the office? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 6.2. Is hygiene properly maintained in the office? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 6.3. Are you vaccinated? ☐ Yes ☐ No
 - 6.3.1. If yes, how many dose did you get? ☐ 1 ☐ 2
 - 6.3.2. If no, then why? (Describe in one or two lines)
 - 6.3.3. If yes, what was the initiative? ☐ Official ☐ Personal

7. The Future of Health Journalism

- 7.1. Do you think there is enough preparation for journalists to deal with the next wave of COVID-19 pandemic? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- 7.2. Which steps should be taken to ensure safety and security for journalists of Bangladesh in post-COVID-19 era? (Describe in one or two lines)
- 7.3. How do you think journalists should prepare themselves for performing their duties properly in the time of pandemic or any disaster?
(Describe in one or two lines)

