Harassed and Hushed: Bangladeshi Women Journalists' Experiences of Gender Discrimination and Sexual Harassments

By Priyanka Kundu* & Maliha Tabassum±

A large number of Bangladeshi women journalists are facing gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace. This is one of the contributing factors in excluding women journalists' voices from the public sphere. Drawing on the feminist approach of structure and agency theory, the study investigated the causes and consequences of workplace gender discrimination and sexual harassment. A mixed method of survey and in-depth interviewing were conducted, and the data were thematically analyzed. The findings outlined gender discrimination and harassment are evident in the media industries of Bangladesh, commonly maneuvered by both internal and external perpetrators. The situation causes frustration among women journalists. As a coping-up endeavor, they often remain silent due to their lack of trust in protection mechanisms e.g., sexual harassment prevention committee in workplace, and sometimes they withdraw from their responsibilities.

Keywords: women journalists, Bangladesh, media, gender discrimination, harassment, sexism, silence, withdrawal, free agency

Introduction

Globally, gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace has been a growing concern. The problem has a resemblance to the collective outlook towards women. A United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) research suggests one in every three women faces sexual or physical violence in her lifespan (UNFPA, 2013). Many women have come up with their harassment experiences through the #MeToo campaign in last few years; that unfolded long untold stories of abuses starting from Hollywood actresses to school (Mendes et al., 2018). The situation is not any better for women working in the journalism industries. One in every two women journalists have gone through different forms of sexual harassment, emotional abuse, online nuisances, and other forms of gender-based violence during their work in a developed country like the USA (Ferrier and Garud-Patkar, 2018; Mendes et al., 2018). Ferrier and Garud-Patkar found the victims women journalists often remain silent because of a lack of trust in discrimination and harassment prevention authorities (2018). The situation has become grimmer in the networked age. Studies have found how women journalists

---

*Lecturer, Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, University of Professionals (BUP), Bangladesh.

±Lecturer, Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, University of Professionals (BUP), Bangladesh.

regularly have been facing different range of sexualized attacks online (Kundu and Bhuiyan, 2021). Harassment and discrimination from both online and offline settings, plus from inside and outside of work cause adverse job environment for women in journalism; also, often cost their wellbeing and freedom.

Bangladesh, a South-Asian developing country, is no exception. Bangladesh is standing in a sorrowful situation in terms of ensuring security for journalists and the right to freedom of expression, where, for women journalists the situation is even worse. Since 1992, Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has recorded the killings of 22 journalists (CPJ, 2021). Many other professional concerns for journalists are also in play. Enacted in 2018, the Digital Security Act (DSA) expanded the denial of freedom of expression and freedom of the press (Aljazeera, 2020). According to a police report from Bangladesh, 403 complaints were registered, and 353 arrests were made under the DSA Act within the first five months of 2020 (Abrar, 2021). Therefore, given the hostile legal conditions, along with professional threats of killing, harassment, and lack of stronger protection mechanisms (CPJ, 2021), Bangladeshi journalists are vulnerable of higher degree of risk (Human Rights Commission, 2021).

The working conditions for women journalists are harsher. Macharia (2015) suggests a significantly low participation of women in journalism leads to gender imbalance in decision-making positions, and gender discrimination in the media industries. Also, Article 19 (2020) found that women journalists have remained marginalized in Bangladesh's media industry, with only 15 percent of overall participation. This reflects an invisible restriction on their role in the Fourth Estate. Moreover, the lack of security against this violence makes the workplace harder for them (OAS, 2019; Habiba, 2018). The questions are how the female journalists are performing their roles in providing information and protecting people's right to freedom of expression, given the fact that the journalists themselves are not free. What is the state of their agency under the prevailing situation? This paper, therefore, raises the following research questions:

1. In what ways are female journalists in Bangladesh experiencing discrimination, sexual harassment, and threats?
2. What is the nature of the discrimination and sexual harassment?
3. What are the reactions and resilience mechanisms being used in such situations?

Literature Review

Women Journalists; Gender Discriminations, Harassments, and Violence

Safety, protection, and freedom of expression are necessary for journalists to perform their primary responsibilities. But globally, they are being denied to female journalists (Jamil, 2020). According to international feminist media analysts, women professionals face additional stress and dangers (Ross, 2009; North, 2013). Generally, physical, mental, sexual abuses, and discrimination

(Posetti and Shabbir, 2019; Robinson, 2005) are a day-to-day reality for women in journalism. A total of 11 women journalists were killed in 2017, which was the highest number after 2006- the year when the UN body started recording the number of journalists' casualties (UNESCO, 2015). Their experiences of sexual harassment, violence, and discrimination are also recorded in different countries' contexts (North, 2013; Jamil, 2020; Article 19, 2020). A fresh survey published by the Guardian in the UK showed that out of the 10 most abused writers in the online comments, 8 were women (Gardiner et al., 2016). Ross (2009) suggested three in every four women journalists in the British newsroom are exposed to sexual violence and harassment. Different other studies from USA, Norway, Caribbean Region, and Australia also depicted quite similar pictures (North, 2016; Idås et al., 2020; Opoku-Mensah, 2004).

Gender discrimination and sexual harassment are being faced on the most recent online platforms as well. A great number of women journalists encounter online threats of rape, murder, sexual harassment, stalking, cruel comments, sexism, and much more (Sutton, 2016; Pitcher, 2019; Kundu and Bhuiyan, 2021). The International Women's Media Foundation (2018) found that 63 percent of women respondents had been abused online at least once. And another survey of 1,200 media professionals throughout the globe, conducted by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and the UNESCO in 2015 outlined that 73 percent of women reported experiencing online abuse, harassment, threats and attacks. Findings of other similar studies also echoed the same results (IWMF, 2018; IFJ, 2017; UNESCO and ICFJ, 2020).

Generally, misogyny both off and online is a substantial threat to women's participation in journalism and public communication. Alongside the developed and democratic countries from the West, the South-Asian developing nations such as India, Nepal, and Pakistan, also displayed a parallel image. Jamil (2020) argued that women journalists of Pakistan are suffering in silence after getting harassed and discriminated and sometimes even leaving their jobs. In India, threats, discrimination, and violence against women in the professions are significantly higher. Bodily violence coupled with online abuses has taken a dreadful look there (Kathuria, 2018). A similar situation has been identified in Nepal. For example, Koirala (2020) found that 70 percent of their women journalists encountered online abuses, along with the existence of offline harassments and discriminations.

So, the aforesaid discussion outlined that regardless of developed or developing societies, women in the journalism profession are facing widespread discrimination and harassment. Therefore, in a country like Bangladesh, where the political system is not democratic in the true sense (Riaz, 2019), societal outlook and opportunities are not equal for women (Nasreen, 2009) and the media industry is considerably unrepresentative and discriminatory in respect of gender and class (Macharia, 2015; Kundu, 2019). Women journalists go through the harsh and hostile situations in routine. According to Nasreen (2009, p. 57)-

"The main reason of this problem is the legal position of female is still ruled by religious laws when it comes to legacy, marriage, divorce, and child custody. Religious laws are privileged over constitutional guarantees, working against the

interest of female journalist…Attitudes in society still stand against gender equality. Very often female are not aware of their rights, even when they are, female who depend on male protection are convinced that it's not in their best interests to claim those rights."

However, there remains a dearth of comprehensive academic research in this context. Therefore, the article has examined Bangladeshi women journalists' experiences of workplace gender discrimination and sexual harassment.

Women Journalists; Effects, Reactions and Resilience Mechanism Towards Discrimination and Sexual Harassments

The international scholarships have been discussing the effects of discrimination and sexual harassment of women as well as investigating the victims' reactions towards it for a long. A study by Barton and Storm (2014) showed harassment and threats put a long-term psychological and mental scratch within the sufferer women journalists. Ellao et al. (2021) found in Philippines, many women journalists are being sexually harassed by colleagues and sources but have chosen not to report due to fear of being judged and facing vengeance from the accused. Other reasons for silence were uncertainty about how their employer would respond, worry of losing connections, and concerns of being alienated from colleagues. Several studies (Posetti et al., 2021a; Zalnieriute, 2021; Ferrier and Garud-Patkar, 2018) have found that this fear has a chilling effect. Along with the mental and emotional effects, these types of attacks made women journalists feel chilled. It makes them hushed, limits their freedom of expression, and creates psychological discomfort (Ferrier and Garud-Patkar, 2018).

Besides offline issues, reactions towards online harassment and threats are also concerning. The global picture suggests that the impact of online harassments results in anger and frustration in journalists (RSF, 2020). Even they are experiencing burnout, exhaustion, and a desire to leave the industry (Holton et al., 2021). As a result of the added burden, many journalists have already switched or left their jobs, e.g., in Australia (North, 2013).

The work environment of Bangladeshi women journalists is somewhat similar. For instance, Safa and Akter (2015) conducted a multi-method study to determine the challenges faced by women journalists in Bangladesh. A poll of 100 women journalists and six in-depth interviews revealed that women journalists are leaving their profession due to gender-stereotyped attitudes, discrimination, harassment by male coworkers, and job uncertainty. However, a number of studies outlined coping-up actions such as changing dress-up, ignoring the problem, and so on from women journalists. For example, Ross (2014) found, British women journalists have chosen to modify their dress-up for work. While many other journalists are made to believe that "it is a part of their job" (Opoku-Mensah, 2004). Some women journalists altered their behavior towards others, including not making eye contact, not attending work social functions (Barton and Storm, 2014). In some worse cases, many journalists reported the events, but in most of the cases, they remained unsatisfied with the steps taken (North, 2016; Ferrier and Garud-Patkar, 2018).

Resilience mechanisms should not be an individual concern; rather, it should be a collective and networked approach, Martin (2018) proposed as a solution. Gendered violence and discrimination should be addressed as a multilevel internet governance issue rather than merely a personal safety concern, with improved assistance from peers, employers, and socioeconomic and regulatory institutions. Martin and Murrell (2020) recommended resilience training for both male and women journalists. Journalists should be empowered with a better oriented to collective care as well as self-care to prevent online and offline harassment.

This study offers stories of gender discrimination and harassment of women journalists in Bangladesh, and outlines its consequences on individual journalists, along with its impact on larger pledges of a free public sphere in the country.

Theoretical Framework

The study will attempt to interpret the findings in light of Structure and Agency concepts in Socialist Feminist Theory.

Structure and Agency in Socialist Feminist Theory

In sociology, agency is commonly demonstrated as the capacity of a social being to act freely and to manufacture his/her choices unrestrictedly. On the contrary, structures are the dynamics that create stimuli such as the concepts of social class, gender, religious systems, social customs and norms, ethnic identities, and so on, which help to control or edge an agent's decision, self-perception, actions, and reactions (Barker, 2003). In recent years, debates have raged over the significance of structure over agency as the starting point for social theory. The validity of structural theories and the extent to which social explanation must involve some conceptions of the informed, purposeful social actor are at stake in these discussions (Abrams, 1982). Approaches that emphasize either structure or agency are increasingly seen as inadequate in comparison to approaches that strive to combine both dimensions.

Feminist scholars in the '90s started relating gender analysis with the structure and agency theory where they attempted to showcase the structure as "gendered". Consequently, the gendered structure affects the free agency of women. None of the socialization process, social organization, and perception such as family, educational institutions, law, religion, social norms, relations, and other ideologies reproduction units are beyond the idea of gender (Wharton, 1991). Gendered interests and identities are embedded in every principle of social life which in long run benefited those who have the hold on the power of the structure (Hurrelmann, 1988), suggesting, the structure has the capacity to mold, construct, and reconstruct agency of an individual.

Wharton (1991) examines the changing nature of social theories on power, explaining the emergence of a new perspective that differs from the Marxist school, which emphasizes that capitalism governs all social relations. In her article, *Structure and Agency in Social Feminist Theory*, she examined several theories of

social feminism, one of which is a dual system approach that incorporates both structure and agency. The foundation of this ideology is patriarchy and capitalism, regarded as two distinct discourses. This theory blends structure and agency approaches by augmenting capitalism's structural approaches with a patriarchal perspective that prioritizes gendered actors' agency and consciousness.

Hartman (1976) described this idea as a "partnership" between capitalism and patriarchy, where her point of view implicitly integrates structure and agency viewpoints. For her, capitalist economic processes establish roles within labor divisions, and patriarchal relations decide whether men or women fill them. Patriarchy is a type of male solidarity that allows men to rule women by controlling women's labor, according to Hartman. One major flaw found by Wharton (1991) in this approach is that it connects capitalism and patriarchy in such a way that these two social connections are treated as separate and distinct entities, rooted in two distinct realms. Capitalism is viewed as a structure that exists outside of individuals, limiting their activities, but patriarchy is viewed as largely working via the actions of men and women. Gender dominance thus becomes a resource or capacity of men in comparison to women, rather than a feature of the larger organization. According to Wharton (1991), it is challenging yet necessary to conceive capitalism and gender from a standpoint that acknowledges these social relations as a motivator of action as well as a structural positional property (p. 3).

The media industry is not beyond the concept of "structure" as defined above. In Bangladesh, the discriminatory nature of the media towards women, society's reactions to them and the gendered safety mechanism- all can be described under the idea of the structure. As well as, how women act and react under the gendered media structure. Most importantly, how their sense of "free agency" is affected after being discriminated against and sexually harassed. This study intends to extend the existing theoretical perspectives by analyzing Bangladesh perspectives.

Methods and Sampling

Two research methods- survey and in-depth interviews- have been adopted between Jan 2021 to August 2021 at Dhaka. To find survey respondents, a random sampling method is used. To our knowledge, there has no complete updated list of women journalists available in the country. Therefore, we took help from the member lists of two noted journalists' association- Bangladesh Press Club (an association of journalists all over the country, regardless of gender identity) and *Bangladesh Nari Sangbadik Kendra* (Women Journalists' Center, Bangladesh), and make a primary list of around 500 women journalists. These two associations are the most prominent with the highest number of members, although their digital member list is also not fully updated. The primary list was random, and was not organized alphabetically, or not made based on media house category. From the primary, every 10th number member was tried to be communicated for survey. For example, we called/emailed member number 1, then 10, then 20, and so on. In case of failure in establishing contact to the number 10 journalist, the 11th number member in the list was communicated. Through this process, we managed to

survey 47 women journalists (around 10%) from the primary list. All the respondents signed an informed consent agreement before their participation. The survey was conducted by Google Forms. In the survey, we asked for opinion on whether the respondents were open to participating in in-depth interviewing. We received 12 respondents interested in participating in the in-depth interviews. From that list, we managed to finally conduct eight interviews within our project timeline. The in-depth interviews were piloted through the Zoom video conferencing, face-to-face interaction, and phone calls, based on the convenience of the participants.

Table 1. Description of the Survey Sample

Position	Number	Percentage
Sub-Editor, Staff-Reporter/ Equivalent	22	47%
Senior newsroom editor/ senior reporter/ equivalent	10	21%
Special correspondent/ equivalent	5	11%
Joint News Editor & Bureau Chief	5	11%
Chief Reporter	2	4%
Others	3	6%
Total	47	100%

The survey questionnaire contained 35 questions divided into five thematic areas including general information (e.g., age, work experiences, workplace, position, etc.), experiences of gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment within and outside of the office, their opinion about the safety-mechanism and their reactions and coping mechanisms. Answering all the questions was "required" in the Google Form; as a result, all the 47 participants answered every question. The survey form did not ask for any identification information, such as their name, workplace name and so on. However, to get in-depth interviewing with participants, we asked them to write their email address. After getting the responses, the responses were anonymized in a separate Excel document. Later, only interested respondents were contacted for in-depth interviews through email.

The in-depth interview questioner contained six open-ended questions on working conditions, rights to practice freedom of expression, the effects of discrimination, and their coping mechanisms. Some recommendations were also sought. A total of 40 to 45 minutes was the average timeframe for each interview. We recorded the interviews on our devices (mobile and laptop), and later anonymized them as Subject A to Subject H. Only the audio form of the interview recordings is stored for further analysis. The language of the interviews was Bangla and afterward, translated and analyzed in English.

To formulate and design the survey and interview questions, the study has taken assistance from the analysis and findings of the several similar studies done by Kathuria (2018), North (2016), Koirala (2020) and Jamil (2020).

Research Findings

Finally, for presenting and analyzing the responses, the data (both survey and interview) are divided into three thematic areas- (i) Nature of gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment, (ii) Impacts of gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment (iii) Resilient mechanisms in the unsuitable working conditions.

Ways and Nature of Gender-Based Discrimination and Sexual Harassment

To understand the nature of gender-based discrimination and harassment this study found two major themes. Theme 1. Discrimination and sexual harassment faced by women journalists in their newsroom and Theme 2. Discrimination and sexual harassment faced by women journalists outside the newsroom.

In theme 1, seven sub-categories (SC) have been identified to analyze the nature of discrimination and harassment. The survey reveals that a significant number of Bangladeshi women journalists encounter an alarming level of discrimination and sexual harassment inside the newsroom (see Tables 2-3). To summarize the results well, the first two level of responses (never and occasionally) are categorized as "Insignificant" and last three (Sometimes, Often and Always) as "Significant".

In terms of "inequality in responsibilities and decision-making," the statistics indicated that the majority (40.4 percent) of respondents experienced inequalities in their workplace at some point. Only 21.3 percent of people have never faced such challenges in their careers. Salary discrimination based on gender occurs sometimes also. But differences have been found in SC 3. Majority of the respondents indicated that they worked in a discriminatory environment in sub-category (SC) three on "discrimination in other facilities" with a percentage of 28.8% (Categorized as "Often"). The last four subgroups (gender stereotypes, professional successes being judged by gender identities, increased attention for gender identities, and receiving sexist comments) likewise.

Table 2. Gender-Based Discrimination and Sexual Harassment in Newsroom

Theme 1 (a): Discrimination and sexual harassment faced by female journalists in their newsroom					
	Insignificant Level		*Significant Level*		
Sub-categories (SC)	**Never**	**Occasionally**	**Sometimes**	**Often**	**Always**
SC 1- Inequality in responsibilities and decision-making	8.5%	10.6%	40.4%	19.1%	21.3%
SC 2- Discrimination in salary	27.7%	6.4%	31.9%	17%	17%
SC 3- Discrimination in other facilities (increment, promotion, leave, bonus etc.)	19.1%	8.5%	23.4%	28.8%	19.1%
SC 4- Faced gender stereotypes	17%	17%	29.8%	25.5%	10.6%

SC 5- Professional achievements are being judged by gender identities	29.8%	8.5%	31.9%	12.8%	17%
SC 6- Faced discrimination/extra attention for their appearances and gender identity	14.9%	17%	36.2%	17%	14.9%
SC 7- Encountered sexist comments, sexual abuse, or/and abusive comments in office or by colleagues	25.5%	8.5%	36.2%	19.1%	10.6%

Along with the office environment, journalists were questioned if they faced harder situations outside of work. According to the survey, the majority of women journalists faced difficulties, harsh comments, and/or discouraging statements from their community/family/friends since they selected journalism as a career. Almost 44.7 percent of all respondents stated they had faced these types of situations "Sometimes." From SC 2 through SC 5 (Facing sexist insults, being physically and mentally harassed, and facing gender-based violence offline and online), the responses have been decoded to occur "sometimes," not frequently or constantly. SC 6 and SC 7 produced some unusual findings. The majority of respondents (in both sub-categories) stated that they were neither threatened to get raped or killed nor faced any direct violence. The outcome suggests that, however, the situation has not yet gone out of hand.

Table 3. Gender-Based Discrimination and Sexual Harassment Beyond Newsroom

Theme 1 (b): Discrimination and sexual harassment faced by female journalists out of their newsroom					
	Insignificant Level		*Significant Level*		
Sub-categories (SC)	**Never**	**Occasionally**	**Sometimes**	**Often**	**Always**
SC 1- Faced barriers and/or negative comments and/or discouraging remarks from your community/ family/ friends about your professional identity	10.6%	8.5%	44.7%	21.3%	14.9%
SC 2- Faced sexist comments	12.8%	21.3%	27.7%	27.7%	10.6%
SC 3- Physically or mentally abused	27.7%	25.5%	34%	8.5%	4.3%
SC 4- Faced gender-based violence and/or sexually abused (offline)	36.2%	21.3%	31.9%	10.6%	00%
SC 5- Faced online violence and abuse	25.5%	25.5%	34%	10.6%	4.3%
SC 6- Threatened of being raped and/or killed	68.1%	17%	12.8%	2.1%	00%
SC 7- Encountered directed violence(s) (e.g., beaten, raped etc.)	85.1%	8.5%	2.1%	4.3%	00%

Sexual Harassment and Discrimination: Impacts, Reactions, and Resilience

As several journalists have to go through the discriminatory environment, in this section, the researchers wanted to know how they reacted to the discriminations.

Under this category the SC 1 revealed that when a women journalist faced with office discrimination (in salary, leave, increment, responsibility distribution and decision making and so on) for her gender identity, it made her feel depressed and thought of resigning in some cases. According to the data, almost 30% percent of total respondents agreed and strongly agreed with the sentiment.

SC 2 asked respondents if they had changed their lifestyle as a result of discriminatory and sexist settings (e.g., compelled to wear long dresses, hijab and/or stopped going for reporting, etc.). According to the responses collected, women journalists in Bangladesh are strong enough to face every criticism with their heads held high. The data indicated that 27.7 percent of them "strongly disagreed" with the statement.

The experiences of gender discrimination, harassment, and violence had a significant impact on many women journalists of Bangladesh. Many of them became more self-conscious and refrained themselves for several journalistic works (e.g., stopped or decreased covering sensitive issues, appearing on the screen, etc.) which were unfolded in the SC 3 and SC 5. 51.1% and 36.2% respectively agreed upon imposing self-censorship in their personal and professional spheres. As a result, many journalists, according to accounts, have withdrawn themselves from public debates (e.g., stopped/decreased posting or sharing your works on social media, removing bad comments, etc.) (see SC 4 in Table 5). The data also supported the claim as 27.7% "agreed" with the account and 19 percent "strongly agreed".

The SC 6 and SC 7 are mainly opinion-based. In SC 6 women "strongly" (46.8%) agreed upon the existence of a hostile environment which severely restricts their freedom of expression. Women journalists have to cope with an unbalanced and hostile atmosphere that has a substantial impact on their freedom. Majority (27.7%) agreed to the statement that sexual harassments and discriminations affect 'free agency' of the women journalists.

Table 4. Consequences, Reactions, and Resilience of the Women Journalists

Sub-categories (SC)	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
SC 1- When I faced office discrimination (in any aspects like salary, leave, increment, responsibility distribution and decision making and so on) for my gender identity, I felt depressed, and/or thought of resigning	8.5%	23.4%	12%	29.8%	25.5%
SC 2- After hearing sexist comments/ getting harassed verbally or physically, I became more self-conscious about my way of life and works (e.g., complied of wearing long dresses, hijab and or stopped going for reporting etc.)	27.7%	19.1%	21.3%	19.1%	12.8%
SC 3- I became more self- conscious about my journalistic works (e.g., stopped or decreased covering sensitive issues, appearing on the screen, etc.)	21.3%	23.4%	14.9%	36.2%	4.3%

SC 4- I withdraw myself from public debates (e.g., stopped/decreased posting or sharing my works on social media, removing bad comments, etc.)	8.5%	25.5%	19.1%	27.7%	19.1%
SC 5- Imposing self-censorship for avoiding unnecessary problems	8.5%	6.4%	17%	51.1%	17%
SC 6- 'Women journalists must	10.6%	10.6%	17%	46.8%	14.9%

In-Depth Interview

In the in-depth interview session, the researchers examined the nature of sexual harassment and discrimination, the consequences, the anomalies, their reactions and resilience strategies more descriptively.

The nature of our country's male-dominated journalism sector was stressed by the majority of women journalists. Patriarchy served as a root cause in this circumstance. Things are changing, but not at a fast enough pace, according to them. The overly controlling approach of the authority in the house hinders women from rising to leadership positions and generates a stigmatizing attitude about their abilities. In the in-depth, one senior journalist (Subject E) pronounced,

> "…in daily work routine, harassments, and gender-based discriminations became a part and parcel of our life…. Coming to journalism means, we have (women journalists) to accept the truth that they have to face these issues…. 'I am a middle-class and male' – it is the default profile for journalism. And I think it needs to be changed as women should have the level-playing field for their work."

Many women journalists have accused patriarchal society of being responsible. According to certain interviewees, the underlying impulses of "girls cannot do this/that" popped up on a regular basis. This happens more when assigning big responsibilities. It leads to gender difference and demotivates women employees professionally. While the Subject A thought that,

> "Patriarchy tends to look upon women as a mere subject, not a person. Previously society couldn't think of women working as journalist, not even women themselves. That's why we couldn't see much participation in this field. Situation started to improve a little in 90s."

With the nature of the Bangladeshi journalism sector, women feel uneasy, ridiculed, and useless. One interviewee opined that "Overprotective attitude of the higher authority in the house is preventing women to reach top positions and it creates a demeaning/humiliating experience for the women".

Concerning difficulties, ladies discussed how easily their "character" could be judged. When women achieve any level of success, there is invariably a backlash: they must be the spunky journalists, the dishonest journalists, or the beautiful journalists. "You'll have to make up for it in other ways" one said. Another interviewee, Subject D thought,

"There are challenges for women in journalism as it is perceived in our society, by many, that an independent woman, as an example if one women journalist came home late, her surroundings start asking questions. She is perceived as a bad woman and her character is being scrutinized."

Some also discussed how they would react or cope with the issue. One said "men are like the ruler of this society so it is inevitable that they won't spare their portion of power, for women's freedom and that is happening in journalism." As a result, in consequences, women journalists self-censor themselves as the date in the survey suggests. Subject C said, "Sealing one's tongue is far better instead of facing unwanted problems." Another interviewee, Subject B said

"I do my job for my interest in the profession, and it is also a necessity of mine. So, getting offended by the abuses and sexism in online and offline and leaving job will be a luxury for me. That is why, I am trying to cop up and survive."

However, it did not come without a cost because she chose to cover uncontroversial themes that would not leave her in a bad situation.

Findings and Discussion

It is apparent from the data that societal gender stereotypes, chauvinism, and a patriarchal worldview pervade the professional realms of Bangladeshi journalism. This study, however, summarizes the whole data with some unique and significant discoveries.

Exploring the Ways and Nature of Discrimination and Harassment

The results of the study revealed that women journalists in Bangladesh face a significant level of gender discrimination and harassment during their work inside and outside of their office. The discriminations included inequalities in work responsibilities and decision-making, discrimination in salary, gender stereotypes in the workplace, sexist comments or sexual abuses, and so on. Outside of their offices, they also face barriers such as abusive and sexist comments, physical or mental abuse, online and offline violence, and rape and death threats. The results are consistent with previous research from many western countries and other countries of South-Asia (Jamil, 2020; Koirala, 2019). Several insights are revealed by the overall results of the study. Women journalists in Bangladesh face different kinds of discrimination, harassment, and violence inside and outside of their workplaces. The survey found several ways of discrimination and harassment. They have to face different inequalities in their work responsibilities for their gender identity, encounter discrimination in salary and other facilities, fight gender-based stereotypes and also have to go through sexist retorts, abusive comments. They face discriminations or sometimes extra attention for their gender identity.

It has also been observed by researchers from the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Australia, France, Latin-American, Spain, Canada, Turkey and Arab World (Article 19, 2020; Chen et al., 2018; North, 2016). Findings in this study are consistent with other countries' research. However, compering the range of women journalists who are subjected to the harassments and discrimination with the world picture, it is found that the percentages are considerably higher here.

Some causes were disclosed during the in-depth interview session. Prime causes have been identified as patriarchy, masculine chauvinism, and the authoritative institution. Specifically in the workplace, gender-based discrimination and harassment for anyone's gender identity is a familiar issue since society is still in a profound patriarchal mindset (Nazneen, 2017). UN conducted a multi-country study to find the root causes of violence against women in 2013 where they found "while gender inequality, power and violent forms of masculinity may be understood as the root causes of violence against women", which are closely linked with individual, community, household and social causes (Fulu et al., 2013). The findings echoed the state of the country since it has been observing that women of all ages and all backgrounds use to get exposed to harassments and discriminations and causes might be deep-rooted in the social system.

However, the harassment has not been found to be extreme in nature. Women journalists are clearly subjected to prejudice and sexual harassment. The discrimination and harassment are "Significant," but not excessive. Also, it is reassuring that the majority of women journalists did not encounter direct violence or threats of being raped or killed (see Table 3). There is discrimination (albeit perhaps not at an extreme level), yet there is no danger to anyone's life.

Findings on the Reaction and Resilience Strategies of Women Journalists

The results of the study suggested that a significant number of women journalists among the respondents went through various levels of difficulties. These discriminatory and unhealthy environments harm their practice of freedom of expression. Respondents talked about several impacts, such as they imposed self-censorship, withdrawn from public debate, changed their way of life, and stopped/decreased practicing freedom of expression for avoiding extra problems (see Table 4). This denotes that the consistent encountering of gender discrimination and harassment made them try to raise their voices and practice their human rights properly. The result is also relevant with some literature discussed beforehand (Ross, 2014; Opoku-Mensah, 2004) where considering these harassments as "part of the job" or "becoming more conservative" were found to work as resilience strategies. Adapting appears to be a coping method.

In the interview session, women journalists revealed how they play it safe, tackling uncontroversial issues that would not get them in hot water. As a result, women journalists avoid controversial issues and become more easygoing in their work life. As, being upset by abuses and sexism both online and offline, and quitting their job, will be a luxury for some of them. This result also echoes Martin and Murrell (2020) where they discussed the necessity for Australian journalists to

develop a "thick skin" when it comes to dealing with interpersonal and coordinated violence online.

But why do they want to remain silent while refusing to fight back? Some of the answers in the in-depth interview are alarming. In Bangladesh, women involved in journalism have to go through these situations- is apparently a notion which is taken for granted. That is why, when they make formal complaints or take legal action, they do not get justice. Even a good number of women journalists said they cannot fully trust national and own-media house safety and protection system. That is why they deal with specific threatening environments with a weak protection and safety mechanism that restricts their work and/or has a disproportionate impact in the exercise of their freedom. Moreover, it has impact on the upcoming women journalists as one stated that "Misogyny, discriminations, online harassments, and sexism these have severe impact on the women in the professions and even on the upcoming journalists since these are red singles for their security and liberty of working freely." This fear and insecurity have been named as "Chilling effect" by several studies (Posetti et al., 2021; Zalnieriute, 2021; Ferrier and Garud-Patkar, 2018) and is also prevalent among Bangladeshi women journalists.

However, many journalists are still trying to survive bravely in the situation as they did not change themselves as others please. So, the good news is that, despite these challenges, the majority did not modify their perceptions, patterns of thinking, or lifestyle (see Table 4). This demonstrates the positive mindset of Bangladeshi women journalists.

Discussion and Recommendations

In light of the theoretical framework, the findings of this study can be discussed. The frame of feminist approach to structure and agency theory outlined that discrimination and sexism in and out of the newsroom, which is truly a double-bend for the women in the professions, commonly prevent it from emerging as a "free agency". This free agency should be in its fullest exhibitions of self and free from any other external or systematic power or circumstances (Feinberg, 1989). However, according to the responses of the participants, the discriminatory media industry and sexual harassment are defining or trying to mold the women in their own way, and in the long run these glitches in the media's structure affect victim journalists' self-identity and agency. The patriarchal and male-dominated structure of the media industry (Macharia, 2015) as well as the overall society which is not ready to accept women in a profession like journalism. So the two forces combined and worked as a shield in the success pathway of the women. The study by Hasan and Wadud (2020) outlined that journalists (both males and women) in Bangladesh suffer from multiple layers of difficulties such as insecurity, state-sponsored pressures, the pressure of laws and media system itself prevent them to work freely with significant impact on journalists' free agency. Narrowing down the sample to only women, the study found that in addition to the aforementioned difficulties of all the journalists, women are

encountering gender-based violence and discrimination inside and outside of their office with substantial effect of their free agency.

This study uncovers that a major portion of women journalists do not have confidence the safety mechanism of their own houses and county's legal procedures. The survey data revealed that those who have lodged a formal or informal grievance are unsatisfied with the aftermath result. Women journalists are going through a considerable amount of silence as they do not have confidence in the legal framework as well as the protection mechanisms of their media houses (see Table 4). Moreover, the study also demonstrated the negative consequences of sexual harassment, gender-based discrimination and impunities on the personal and professional lives of journalists. Many women journalists started to believe that they have to seal their mouth, self-censor themselves or continue under the sexist environment or just leave the profession.

For combating with the odds, many journalists came up with recommendations to make the situation healed, since they think parting would not be the retort; rather surviving and, at the same time, endeavoring to craft a gender-friendly professional environment would be the better way outs. Subject C stated that "discrimination against women should be stopped and the society should uphold the human rights of women by creating gender sensitive laws." The participants of the survey recommended that "there should be strong policy at all media house to protect women journalists from sexual abuse. Complaints of sexual harassment must be ignored and action must be taken to prevent recurrence of such incidents." Another journalist said, "I have nothing to say, there is no solution to come out of this situation." Moreover, some other recommendations came for mending the sorrowful situation of media such as- encouraging more women in the profession so that women voices are heard more, calling the houses to address the issues, speaking out the harassment and discriminatory incidents instead of keeping silence which will help to prevent further instances and lastly pressuring the government to address the issue.

Women journalists in Bangladesh face a significant level of harassment resulting in severe consequences on their psychological and professional lives. The analysis has pointed out that this phenomenon is directly affecting their free agency and plurality of the voices in the media.

In this regard, addressing gender-based discrimination and ensuring a safe and respectful work environment for women journalists in Bangladesh, major structural reform is needed inside and outside of the media. Women also should come out of their den and keep their voices louder in the media. Elimination of discriminatory stereotypes and patriarchal sociocultural patterns. It is also recommended that proper safety training to the women journalists, psychological counseling facilities, complaint box in the office premises and strict measures against the perpetrators should be ensured by the media authorities. Therefore, the state should complement these measures with actions aimed at dismantling and transforming patriarchal structures, systems, and practices that are sustained and reproduced in various spheres of society.

Definition of Terms

Gender Discrimination

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defined gender discrimination as 'any distinction, exclusion or restriction made based on sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the enjoyment of rights, on a basis of equality of men and women, and irrespective of marital status' (UNHCR, 2021). In this research, gender discrimination stood for the discrimination derived from gender perspectives for the women media practitioners in Bangladesh such as gender-based discrimination of salary and other facilities, opinion making, responsibility allotments and so one in and out their workplaces.

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is defined here as unwelcome sexual acts, requests for sexual favors or unconsented sexual conduct which would offend, humiliate, or intimidate the subject. It can be any form of sexual comments, assaults, threats, and attacks in any of the medium- physical, verbal or digital.

References

Abrams, P. (1982). *Historical sociology*. Cornell University Press.

Abrar, C. R. (2021). *The case for rescinding the digital security act*. The Daily Star.

Aljazeera (2020). *Bangladesh using controversial law to 'gag media, free speech'*. Available at: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/21/bangladesh-using-controversial-law-to-gag-media-free-speech.

Article 19 (2020). *Action needed on violence against women journalists*. Article 19. Available at: https://www.article19.org/resources/hrc44-action-needed-on-violence-against-women-journalists/.

Barker, C. (2003). *Cultural studies: theory and practice*. 2nd Edition. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications.

Barton, A., Storm, H. (2014) *Violence and harassment against women in the news media: a global picture*. International Women's Media Foundation.

Chen, G., Pain, P., Chen, V., Mekelburg, M., Springer, N., Troger, F. (2018). 'You really have to have a thick skin': a cross-cultural perspective on how online harassment influences women journalists. *Journalism*, *21*(7), 877–895.

Committee to Protect Journalists – CPJ (2021). *Country report of Bangladesh*, Available at: https://cpj.org/asia/bangladesh/.

Ellao, J. A. J., Roxas, E. F., Torres, T. P. S. (2021). Dealing with sexual harassment: are women journalists silenced at work? In *Handbook of Research on Discrimination, Gender Disparity, and Safety Risks in Journalism*, 24–42. IGI Global.

Feinberg, J. (1989). Essays on individual autonomy. In J. Christman (ed.), *The Inner Citadel*. USA: Echo Point Books & Media.

Ferrier, M., Garud-Patkar, N. (2018). Trollbusters: fighting online harassment of women journalists. In J. R. Vickery, T. Everbach (eds.), *Mediating Misogyny*, 311–332. Springer International Publishing.

Fulu, E., Warner, X., Miedema, S., et al. (2013). *Why do some men use violence against women and how can we prevent it? Quantitative findings from the United Nations*

multi-country study on men and violence in Asia and the Pacific. UNDP, UNFPA, UN Women and UNV.

Gardiner, B., Mansfield, M., Anderson, I., Holder, J., Louter, D., Ulmanu, M. (2016, April 12). *The dark side of Guardian comments*. The Guardian.

Habiba, U. (2018, July 16). *What is holding women journalists back?* Bdnews24.Com.

Hartmann, H. (1976). *Women and the workplace*. University of Chicago Press.

Hasan, M., Wadud, M. (2020). Re-conceptualizing safety of journalists in Bangladesh. *Media and Communication*, *8*(1), 27–36.

Holton, A. E., Bélair-Gagnon, V., Bossio, D., Molyneux, L. (2021). "Not their fault, but their problem": organizational responses to the online harassment of journalists. *Journalism Practice*, 1–16.

Human Rights Commission (2021). *UN: stand with Bangladeshi journalists on press freedom day; free expression under serious threat.* Available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/05/03/un-stand-bangladeshi-journalists-press-freedom-day.

Hurrelmann, K. (1988). *Social structure and personality development: the individual as a productive processor of reality*. Cambridge University Press.

Idås, T., Orgeret, K. S., Backholm, K. (2020). # MeToo, sexual harassment and coping strategies in Norwegian newsrooms. *Media and Communication*, *8*(1), 57–67.

International Federation of Journalists – IFJ (2017). *IFJ survey: one in two women journalists suffer gender-based violence at work.* Available at: https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/reports/detail/ifj-survey-one-in-two-women-journalists-suffer-gender-based-violence-at work/category/press-releases.html.

International Women's Media Foundation – IWMF (2018). *Attacks and harassment; the impact on women journalists and their reporting*. Washington, DC: Troll Buster.

Jamil, S. (2020). Suffering in silence: the resilience of Pakistan's women journalists to combat sexual harassment, threats and discrimination. *Journalism Practice*, *14*(2), 150–170.

Kathuria, C. (2018). *Indian women journalists battle threats for having opinions*. She the People [Blog].

Koirala, S. (2020). Women journalists' experience of online harassment: a case study of Nepal. *Media and Communication*, *8*(1), 47–56.

Kundu, P. (2019). Harassment in online news feedback: a study on digital safety situation of Bangladeshi women journalists. In *Communication 4.0, Communication in a Digital Age.* Bhubaneswar: Institute of Media Studies.

Kundu, P., Bhuiyan, M. M. H. (2021). Online harassment of women journalists in Bangladesh: forms, reactions, and consequences. In S. Jamil, B. Çoban, B. Ataman, G. Appiah-Adjei (eds.), *Handbook of Research on Discrimination, Gender Disparity, and Safety Risks in Journalism*, 1431–1466. IGI Global.

Macharia, S. (2015). Who makes the news? In *The Global Media Monitoring Project 2015*. World Association for Christian Communication.

Martin, F. (2018). Tackling gendered violence online: evaluating digital safety strategies for women journalists. *Australian Journalism Review*, *40*(2), 73–89.

Martin, F. R., Murrell, C. (2020). You need a thick skin in this game: journalists' attitudes to resilience training as a strategy for combatting online violence. *Australian Journalism Review*, *42*(1), 93–111.

Mendes, K., Ringrose, J., Keller, J. (2018). #MeToo and the promise and pitfalls of challenging rape culture through digital feminist activism. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, *25*(2), 236–246.

Nasreen, G. (2009). Changing society unchanging constructions?: The incorporation of gender equality goals into Bangladeshi TV programmes. *Media Asia*, *36*(1), 55–60.

Nazneen, S., (2017). *The women's movement in Bangladesh: a short history and current debates*. Bangladesh: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES).

North, L. (2013). Australia: a case of systemic inequity for women journalists. In C. M. Byerly (ed.), *The Palgrave International Handbook of Women and Journalism*, 333–345. UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

North, L. (2016). Damaging and daunting: female journalists' experiences of sexual harassment in the newsroom. *Feminist Media Studies*, *16*(3), 495–510.

Opoku-Mensah, A., (2004). Hanging in there: women, gender, and newsroom cultures in Africa. In M. De Bruin, K. Ross (eds.), *Gender and Newsroom Cultures: Identities at Work*, 107–120. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Organization of American States – OAS (2019). *Inter-American commission on human rights annual report 2019*. Available at: http://www.oas.org/en/iachr/docs/annual/20 19/TOC.asp.

Pitcher, G. (2019). *The long, hard road to gender equality in journalism*. London School of Economics (LSE) [Blog].

Posetti, J., Shabbir (2019). *The chilling: a global study on online violence against women journalists*. UNESCO.

Posetti, J., Waisbord, S., Harrison, J. (2021). *Women journalists are facing a growing threat online and offline*. Aljazeera.com.

Reporters Without Borders – RSF (2020). *Sexism's toll on journalism*. Available at: https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/sexisms_toll_on_journalism.pdf.

Riaz, A. (2019). *Voting in a hybrid regime*. Politics of South Asia.

Robinson, G. J. (2005). *Gender, journalism, and equity: Canadian, US, and European experiences.* Hampton Press.

Ross, K. (2009). *Gendered media: women, men, and identity politics*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Ross, K. (2014). Women in decision-making structures in media. In *Media and Gender: A Scholarly Agenda For the Global Alliance on Media and Gender*, 44–48.

Safa, M. N., Akter, T. (2015). Challenges of women journalists in Bangladesh. *Humanities and Social Sciences*, *3*(5), 207–214.

Sutton, K. (2016, December 7). *Women journalists: 'it was different' covering the "Access Hollywood" tape*. Politico.

The United Nations Population Fund – UNFPA (2013). *Realizing the Potential annual report 2013*. UNFPA.

UNESCO (2015). *Inside the news: challenges and aspirations of women journalists in Asia and the Pacific*. UNESCO.

UNESCO, International Center for Journalists – ICFJ (2020). *Online violence: the new front line for women journalists—#JournalistsToo*. UNESCO.

UNHCR (2021). *Gender equality and gender-based violence*. UNHCR.

Zalnieriute, M. (2021). Gender justice and freedom of expression: from public spaces to digital platforms and facial recognition technologies. *SSRN*.