



Journalist Fellowship Paper

# Responsible reporting on sexual violence: a review of Bangladeshi print media practices

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## Introduction

What should journalists do if a country's legal definition of sexual violence is in direct conflict with reporting that is centred on survivors and acknowledges their trauma? In October 2020, the newsroom of the Bangladeshi paper that I work for, *The Daily Star*, was deep in this moral quagmire.

Should we repeat the words used in a 162-year-old penal code that solely defines rape as the penetration of a woman by a man she is not married to, and ignores all other forms of sexual violence? Or should we come up with reporting language that, while not breaking the law, makes readers question the status quo?

This conversation was triggered by the [Begumganj](#) case, where violent criminals used objects to rape a rural woman.<sup>1</sup> She was too afraid to go to the police, especially after an elected village official refused her any help. It was only after a video of the violence was shared on social media by the rapists themselves that her story went viral, lighting the fuse for mass protests across the country and the perpetrators' arrests.



*Female activists and students take part in a torch procession demanding women's safety and justice for rape victims, Bangladesh, October 14, 2020. REUTERS/Mohammad Ponir Hossain RTX821UM*

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<sup>1</sup> Note: I will be referring to specific rape incidents in terms of the locations of the violence, which is what is done in Bangladeshi media. The names used cover a broad geographical area so as not to risk jigsaw identification.

The movement took the media by storm. Demands of justice for rape survivors, and the end of impunity for rapists, were reproduced in every media outlet in the country. For the first time, I saw reports related to gender-based violence (GBV) being featured on the front pages of major daily newspapers, often as the lead story.

Even then, most of mass media went on to describe it as a case of torture, rarely using terms like “rape” or even “sexual violence”, since the law in Bangladesh currently defines rape as only penile penetration of a woman.

While the demonstrations surrounding Begumganj were the largest we’d seen, this movement for justice was far from a one-off. Ten months earlier, protests continued for days when a man raped a university student after abducting her from a bus stop in the capital’s [Kurmitola](#). Throughout 2020, despite pandemic-related lockdowns, several incidents of sexual violence led to such demonstrations around the country.

The anti-rape movement in Bangladesh not only demanded accountability from state authorities who had failed to stem the tide of sexual violence, but questioned a system and society that normalised it. Trauma, and its impacts on individuals, families and communities, was at the heart of this story. But none of our reporting during this period was done with any guidelines for handling such a trauma-laden issue.

While some media organisations have certain rules and practices that have evolved over years of reporting, very few have them written down as organisational policy, and even fewer focused on sexual violence specifically.

How did that impact the media’s ability to tell this story? Did this period of protest have coverage that centred on survivors and the rights of women, or did the media fixate on voyeuristic representations of violence? Did the reports challenge rape myths and the culture of shame that demonstrators spoke up against, or did they repeat sexist stereotypes that end up reinforcing gender inequality? And finally, how can media coverage of sexual violence be made more gender-sensitive and trauma-informed?

These are some of the questions I attempted to answer in this paper. I started by studying existing resources on reporting on sexual violence, and establishing why it is important for news media to engage in journalism that takes a survivor-centred approach and identifies GBV as a human rights violation. From the vast literature on how systemic gender inequality can affect media and its narrative, I isolated eight markers of what a gender-sensitive report should (and shouldn’t) have for the purpose of analysis.

I then [looked at reports](#) related to three different rape cases in four Bangladeshi newspapers in 2020: the January 2020 Kurmitola case involving a man who raped a

university student in the capital, the aforementioned Begumganj case from October 2020, and the [Khagrachhari](#) case that occurred a few weeks prior to Begumganj, where a group of men raped an Indigenous woman after breaking into her house. I selected these three cases specifically to identify survivors from different contexts in terms of geographical location, race and class.

I analysed the reporting for a seven-day period after each story broke to find out how many of the markers were present. I also analysed a one-week period before the stories broke to establish to what extent these specific cases and the protests surrounding them lead to an increase in reporting.

I discussed the findings of my analysis with the editors of the four newspapers surveyed, as well as reporters and news editors from these publications. I also consulted media and legal experts, Bangladeshi activists campaigning for survivors of sexual violence, and journalists reporting on similar stories in other parts of the world.

Finally, I brought together the lessons learned for a set of context-specific recommendations that could be used in producing a standard guideline for gender-sensitive reporting on sexual violence.

While these recommendations are aimed at Bangladeshi print media, I hope they prove useful to any journalist operating in similar contexts of low resources and high levels of sexual violence.

# Why does it matter how media reports on sexual violence?

UN Women dubbed violence against women as the “shadow pandemic” in 2020, warning that the gendered impacts of COVID-19 meant that, globally, women and girls were even more at risk.

In Bangladesh, this translated to 1,627 cases of rape in [2020](#), and 1,321 in [2021](#) – and this data only reflects the cases reported in news media. Currently, the process of justice faces numerous obstacles that are deeply connected to an honour culture that shames survivors into silence about their abuse. In the [words](#) of Bangladeshi feminist lawyer Sultana Kamal, there is a “misogyny embedded in the legal system [that] has to be addressed to ensure fairness to women seeking justice”.

What role does the media play in this context? Academics argue one of the functions of media is the creation of a “realm of shared experience” that influences how social issues are perceived, filtered and responded to by different audiences.<sup>2</sup> Simply put, how media reports on issues is significant to how people ultimately understand them. This includes policymakers, to whom media coverage can act as a guide to what issues are of public concern.<sup>3</sup> Through its interpretive authority, media can reflect, shape and challenge public discourse. And if the media narrative is – explicitly or implicitly – biased against women, it becomes a site where gender inequality is reproduced, leading to a situation where news reports end up normalising the very injustices they are focusing on.

Unfortunately, research suggests that is often the case. In 2020, stories on gender-based violence hardly made the news, with the most severe underrepresentation being in newspapers.<sup>4</sup> According to the [Global Media Monitoring Project](#) (GMMP), even when reports are written on sexual harassment, rape, other forms of gender violence and specific gender inequality, seven to nine out of every 10 stories end up reinforcing or failing to challenge gender stereotypes.

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<sup>2</sup> Hjarvard, S. (2008), “The Mediatization of Society: A Theory of the Media as Agents of Social and Cultural Change”, *Nordicom Review* 29 (2008) 2, pp. 105-134. Available at: <https://sciendo.com/abstract/journals/nor/29/2/article-p102.xml>.

<sup>3</sup> Carlyle, K. E., Slater, M. D. and Chakroff, J. L. (2008), “Newspaper Coverage of Intimate Partner Violence: Skewing Representations of Risk”, *Journal of Communication* 58 (2008), pp. 168–186.

<sup>4</sup> Global Media Monitoring Project (2021), “Who Made The News?”. Available at: [https://whomakesthenews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/GMMP2020.ENG\\_FINAL.pdf](https://whomakesthenews.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/GMMP2020.ENG_FINAL.pdf)

Data from the US has further shown how news media represented GBV as isolated incidents rather than a systemic consequence of gender inequality.<sup>5</sup> Analysis from Flemish media found media reinforcing stereotypes regarding the “ideal” victim (female, vulnerable, powerless and unrelated to the perpetrator) and “ideal” criminal (poor, psychotic, uneducated, and potentially outsiders/immigrants).<sup>6</sup> In India, researchers found media representing women as “passive symbols” who need to be protected and kept safe.<sup>7</sup>

In my experience of writing about sexual violence in Bangladesh, I have come across similar stereotypes being reproduced in media narratives as well. Regardless of where in the world we report from, we tend to have one thing in common: media reports are created within a “gendered societal landscape” that makes them highly susceptible to the influence of unconscious gender biases.<sup>8</sup> Because of this, GBV is regularly put in a box with other crimes, with little acknowledgement of how it is a violation of fundamental human rights that routinely occurs in a system defined by gender inequality.

More specifically, experts have argued that media shapes portrayals of violence against women, and of women in general, through agenda-setting, priming and framing.<sup>9</sup> Agenda-setting sets the public discourse by deciding which issues to cover, which then influences the importance the public ascribe to the issues. Priming chooses to elevate certain issues over others. Finally, framing theory suggests that any one issue can be presented in multiple fashions, and the language and perspective of each unique frame can influence the readers’ views on the particular issue. This idea is particularly salient to this analysis of reports on sexual violence in selected Bangladeshi newspapers.

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<sup>5</sup> Bullock, C. (2007), “Framing Domestic Violence Fatalities: Coverage by Utah Newspapers, *Women's Studies in Communication*, 30:1, pp. 34-63, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2007.10162504>.

<sup>6</sup> Custers, K. and Bulck, J. V. (2013). “The Cultivation of Fear of Sexual Violence in Women: Processes and Moderators of the Relationship Between Television and Fear”, *Communication Research*, [Volume: 40 issue: 1](#), page(s): 96-124. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0093650212440444>.

<sup>7</sup> Chaudhuri, S., Krishnan, P. and Subramaniam, M. (2018), “Mainstreaming Gender, Endangered, Ungendered? Analysis of Media Reports of the 2012 Case of Rape in India” in Segal, M. T., & Demos, V. (Eds.). (2018). *Gender and the Media: Women's Places*. Emerald Publishing Limited. Pp. 125-140.

<sup>8</sup> Easteal, P., Holland K and Judd, K. (2015). “Enduring themes and silences in media portrayals of violence against women”, *Women's Studies International Forum* 48 (2015), pp. 103–113.

<sup>9</sup> Terkildsen, N. and Schnell, F. (1997). “How Media Frames Move Public Opinion: An Analysis of the Women's Movement”, *Political Research Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (1997), pp. 879-900. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/448991>

# A brief history of Bangladeshi media (and why I focused on print)

In Bangladesh, there are a few terms synonymous with memorialising the contributions of those who fought for the country during the 1971 war of independence from Pakistan: “martyrs”, “freedom fighters”, “Birangona” (war heroine, a term for women who were raped by the Pakistani army).

Then there are the Shobdo Shoinik, or the warriors of words – the people who worked for Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendra, an underground radio station that became a symbol of resistance during the nine-month war by continuing to broadcast news from the country.

While this gives an idea of the importance accorded to traditional media in independent Bangladesh, its expansion was initially stunted due to an extended period of military rule. It wasn't until 1991, when a mass movement deposed the military dictatorship and established parliamentary democracy, that the media experienced a burst of growth. Hundreds of newspapers were set up, as well as a number of TV and radio stations.

There are still laws in place that restrict press freedom and lead to self-censorship, despite the fact that the Constitution enshrines freedom of the press. The latest is the controversial Digital Security Act 2018, which the Editors' Council of Bangladesh has [called](#) the greatest challenge to “mass media to work with freedom”. Bangladesh is now ranked 152 among 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index.

Despite these obstacles, there are 490 daily newspapers based in the capital, and another 784 that are local [dailies](#).<sup>10</sup> If all forms of news publications are considered – weekly, monthly, quarterly, etc – a whopping 3,160 are currently serving the country's population of 164 million, of which 75% of adults are literate.

Research suggests that print media is still the second most sought after source for news, right after the country's 33 different TV channels.<sup>11</sup> And in terms of criticising state policy, creating national conversations and speaking out against press censorship, the long-established print media outlets of Bangladesh continue to play an important role.

For these reasons, and because I am a print journalist myself, I chose to focus on print media. I selected four publications:

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<sup>10</sup> Note: the government's data does not clarify if all Dhaka-based dailies are national newspapers.

<sup>11</sup> Chowdhury, S A (2020). 'News Literacy in Bangladesh: National Survey', *Management and Resources Development Initiative (MRDI)*. Available at:

<https://mrdibd.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/News-Literacy-in-Bangladesh-National-Survey.pdf>

Accessed: April 28, 2022.

1. *Bangladesh Pratidin* (BP), the highest circulated Bangla language daily with half a million print readers, established in 2010.<sup>12</sup>
2. *Manab Zamin* (MZ), one of the most well-known Bangla tabloids, founded in 1997.
3. *Prothom Alo* (PA), the second highest circulated Bangla daily, operating since 1998. It is the only newspaper with an organisational policy that has been made public, which includes a section on reporting on sexual violence.
4. *The Daily Star* (DS), the highest circulated English daily, founded in 1991.

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<sup>12</sup> Department of Film and Publications (2022). 'ঢাকা মহানগর থেকে বাংলা ভাষায় প্রকাশিত মিডিয়া তালিকাভুক্ত দৈনিক পত্রিকার প্রচার সংখ্যা ও বিজ্ঞাপন হার (Circulation and advertisements of Dhaka-based daily Bangla newspapers)'. Available at: [www.dfp.gov.bd](http://www.dfp.gov.bd) Note: The government data only reflects circulation numbers, without taking into account online readers.

# What does a responsible report on sexual violence look like?

There is growing consensus that journalism that deals with traumatic experiences must be done with special sensitivity, keeping in mind the ethical and psychological implications of such work. Much of this reporting has historically been done on a trial-and-error basis, with little formal training on best practice journalism. As British journalist and founder of [Trauma Reporting](#) Jo Healey described in a 2019 blog: “Our current culture is to practice on the grieving public until we reckon we get it about right.”<sup>13</sup>

Last year, Columbia University’s Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma published a [style guide](#) for trauma-informed journalism, arguing that “responsible reporting and newsroom decision-making now demand baseline literacy in trauma concepts and emerging reporting standards.” This view was reiterated in the 2021 [media guide](#) created by the Centre for Women’s Global Leadership (CWGL) at Rutgers University, which identified the need to bring together different resources and perspectives from journalists and media experts in one place to ensure quality reporting.

While there are a number of other resources that provide guidance on similar topics, I found these two to be particularly helpful. The Bangla language [guide](#) on gender ethics in journalism, published this year by media training organisation MRDI, and founded on the principle that gender-sensitive news judgement is essential to good journalism, was also instructive and provided useful context.

Based on my reading, I have isolated eight markers of insensitive reporting on sexual violence. The markers are all related to language and framing, while interview techniques and agenda-setting are discussed with journalists and editors later in the paper.

## Victim-blaming

Victim-blaming or shifting the responsibility of risk of violence onto the survivor can be done in a number of ways, including through the reporting of unnecessary personal details. Examples include what time of the night a victim went out or whether they knew the rapist before. The information provided can be deeply rooted in the patriarchal notion that “good girls” who stray from traditional norms are more vulnerable to violence. Using

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<sup>13</sup> Journalism Initiative on Gender-Based Violence (2021). *Silence and Omissions: A Media Guide for Covering Gender-Based Violence*, p17. New Brunswick: Centre for Women’s Global Leadership, Rutgers. Available at: <https://gbvjjournalism.org/book/introduction>

terms that cast doubt on the reliability of the victim's statements, such as using "alleged rape" instead of "reported rape", are also a form of victim-blaming.

This has the effect of placing the onus of women's safety on women's behaviour rather than on the state and society, ultimately minimising their trauma and perpetuating the idea that sexual violence is a source of shame. When journalists engage in this kind of reporting, they fail to challenge rape culture, perpetuate the culture of silence around sexual violence, and become complicit in its normalisation.

### Sensationalising

Sensationalist language in reporting fixates on violent details and creates a spectacle of the crime. Highlighting the cruelty and unusualness of it all, it tries to reel in readers with shock value, which some argue is needed in environments where violence is so commonplace that readers have become apathetic to it. There is often a provocative tone used and extraneous information of injuries shared, which feeds into the victim-blaming trope of how a "respectable" woman is expected to fight back against her attacker.

All reporting guidelines agree that this sort of journalism is triggering for survivors and fails to uphold their dignity and agency. In fact, it ultimately has the effect of further desensitising readers by dehumanising survivors with reporting that represents trauma as entertainment.

### Extraneous details and jigsaw identification

Including unnecessary personal details of the survivor, alongside sensationalism and victim-blaming, also runs the risk of jigsaw identification. This means that even if the survivor is not named directly, giving details of their location, family and employment background, scene of the crime, etc, can create a thread of information that allows readers and interested parties to piece together their identity.

Publishing information that leads to jigsaw identification is not only traumatic for survivors, but can discourage others from coming forward to report their abuse. In Bangladesh, the [law](#) protects the survivor's right to anonymity, and forbids the media from publishing information that could lead to jigsaw identification as well. However, there has never been a case of a media outlet being held accountable for this.

## Victim vs monster stereotypes

A common frame used in reporting is that of the ideal victim and perpetrator, where survivors are portrayed through the lens of “helpless victim” and rapists as “monsters”. By doing this, we portray the survivor as someone who has been “ruined” by abuse, not as an individual deserving of empathy. While the idea might be to strike a sympathetic tone, it often ends up being condescending or tone-deaf. Who journalists decide is the ideal victim leads to a number of problematic associations as well, with “respectable” and “unlikely” victims getting more space than survivors from marginalised backgrounds.

In this regard, language plays a crucial role. Using the term “survivor” instead of “victim” can lead to greater agency. Ultimately, the best path for reporters to follow is to let survivors direct this conversation.

In the Bangla language, victimising of the survivor is done with words like “*dhorshita*” (ধর্ষিতা) and “*nirjatita*” (নির্জাতিতা). While difficult to translate literally, these terms make the violence a part of the woman’s identity – in the way you would call someone a student or a lawyer, these describe survivors as “the raped/abused one”. In MRDI’s Bangla guideline, it is suggested that newspapers should scrap these terms for “*bhuktobhogi*” (ভুক্তভোগী), the legal term used for victims of all crimes, not just rape. MRDI also suggests using the term “*dolboddho dhorshon*” (দলবদ্ধ ধর্ষণ) instead of “*gono dhorshon*” (গণ ধর্ষণ) to describe gang-rape, since the word “*gono*” carries with it a positive connotation.

Victim/monster stereotypes also end up portraying rape as being related to deviant sexual behaviour and bad habits, rather than being a systemic issue. The presumption is that the rapist is somehow an outlier or anomaly in society and not a product of the unequal power structures that lead to gender-based violence. It over-represents stranger danger as well, which implies that women could save themselves from violence by being more careful in public spaces. Most sexual violence is perpetrated by someone known to the victim.

## Survivor and perpetrator: erased and over-represented

The other side of the victim vs. monster narrative is the unbalanced representation of the survivor and perpetrator, where one or the other is erased from the narrative. Examples of this are headlines like “woman raped”, and not “man rapes woman”, where a passive tone of reporting focuses solely on the survivor. With little information shared on perpetrators, it allows them to evade responsibility or shift it onto the survivor in the eyes of the reader.

Without going into unnecessary details, we must identify perpetrators in terms of their position in the class/social hierarchy in order to embed the story in a larger context. For example, a report should explore whether perpetrators are members of dominant

communities, and if their crimes are part of systemic violence against marginalised communities.

The other extreme is when the reports centre on perpetrators, erasing survivors from the narrative. This can involve personalised accounts of perpetrators to “humanise” them, or focusing on the “reasons” why the violence happened (Eg., she refused his marriage proposal). It takes away from the fact that there are no special circumstances to sexual violence and it is always the fault of the perpetrator.

In Bangladesh, this also takes on the shape of reports that solely focus on perpetrators and the power structures that enable them. This happens especially when they are found to have connections with local criminal/political actors. While this is a line of reporting that should definitely be pursued to explore reasons behind the culture of impunity, it misses the mark when the survivor and the issue of gender-based violence and gender inequality is wholly erased from the narrative.

### Episodic vs thematic framing

When reporting on sexual violence, journalists have a responsibility to go beyond the facts of individual cases and address issues at the institutional level to highlight patterns, trends and contexts. When rape cases are reported on as isolated events, with a focus on details of crimes and individual behaviours and motivations in the private sphere, the journalism takes an isolationist approach that is described as episodic framing. This approach does not engage in meaningful follow-ups either, giving readers no information on the process of justice for rape survivors.

Experts suggest employing a thematic frame instead, where the reporting focuses on a contextual, big-picture narrative to address the whole cycle of violence, from prevention to prosecution, and identifies gender-based violence as a human rights issue that requires policy intervention. Doing this can then make the narrative about accountability, remedies and solutions, rather than the “victimhood” of the survivor and the “monstrosity” of the rapist.

### Lack of female sources

To date, reports on GBV tend to be dominated by actors from male-dominated institutions: police, politicians and lawyers. Witnesses, relatives and community leaders interviewed also tend to be male. Globally, there is a glaring underrepresentation of female voices in media reports. According to the GMMP, in 2020, only 19% of subjects and sources in Bangladeshi news media were female, as were only 11% of reporters.

Research suggests that state representatives, political actors and even ordinary citizens' voices tend to marginalise women's agency in reports, whereas experts on women's rights, such as feminist lawyers, activists and journalists, are far more likely to focus on women's agency and wider issues surrounding sexual violence.<sup>14</sup> While that is not to say only women can speak to these issues, it is of concern if the population being reported on are excluded from said reports. GMMP data also suggests that the underrepresentation of women journalists and editors is an important factor in the erasure of female voices in reporting, and of gender-sensitive news judgement in general.

### Triggering images

Finally, many images in reports continue to refer to trauma and the act of rape in indirect ways, such as by showing a hand being held forcefully, or a woman in tears, running/shrinking from a male figure. Such images can be extremely triggering for survivors.

It is important for media organisations to stop using images that portray women as passive, helpless victims. The images used should instead reflect resilience and strength, allowing the journalist to tell a more compassionate story that engages with the wider context of gender-based violence. Using images of protests against GBV are often suggested as a good alternative.

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<sup>14</sup> Chaudhuri, S., Krishnan, P. and Subramaniam, M. (2018), "Mainstreaming Gender, Endangered, Ungendered? Analysis of Media Reports of the 2012 Case of Rape in India" in Segal, M. T., & Demos, V. (Eds.). (2018). *Gender and the Media: Women's Places*. Emerald Publishing Limited. Pp. 125-140.

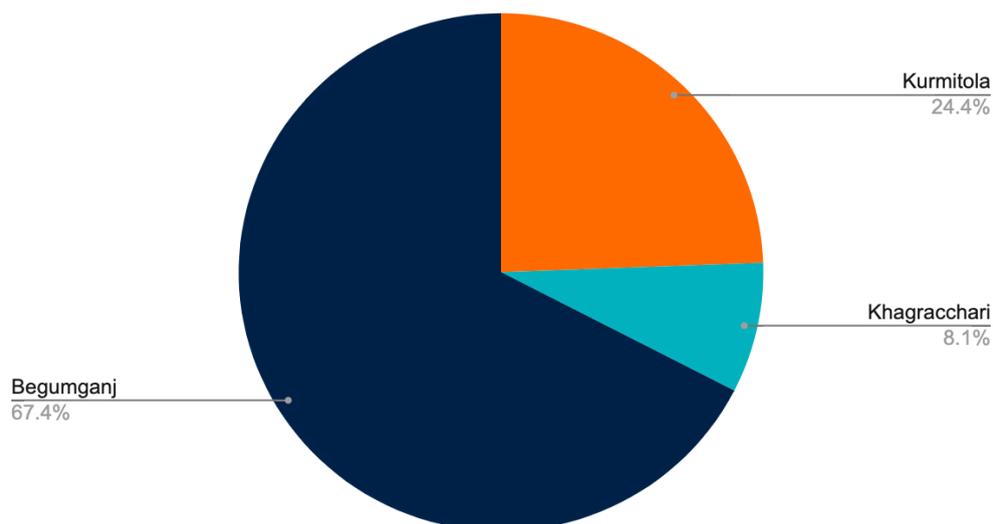
## How did we do? And how do we do it better?

Of the 258 reports that I looked at in my analysis, 63 were from the Kurmitola case, where a man abducted a university student near a bus stop in the capital and raped her before fleeing the scene on January 5, 2020. While this story was largely ignored the day after, demonstrations on January 6 stemming from the country's most well-known public university, home to prominent student leaders, quickly pushed it onto the front pages of all four newspapers.

The Khagrachhari case – where Bengali robbers gang-raped an Indigenous woman in a south-eastern town on September 24, 2020 – received far less attention. All together, only 21 reports were printed, despite the fact that demonstrations were organised to protest settler violence against minority communities. Khagrachhari was soon replaced in the news cycle by other, more prominent cases of sexual violence that also led to protests across the country.

Soon after, Begumganj became the straw that broke the camel's back, culminating in the biggest nationwide protests yet when the video of a gang-rape was released online by the rapists themselves on October 4, 2020. Over the one-week period analysed, I found a total of 174 print reports related to Begumganj.

The data, and interviews with journalists, academics and rights activists, yielded interesting insights that could prove useful when formulating reporting guidelines.



*Division of total coverage generated for three rape cases in the week following their occurrence across The Daily Star, Prothom Alo, Bd Pratidin and Manab Zamin*

## More than 68% of reports used isolationist frames, 49% erased the victim

In the aftermath of these incidents of sexual violence – and possibly as a result of protests – there was a drastic spike in reporting on sexual violence. In the same week that 174 reports were printed on Begumganj, another 129 reports on other cases of sexual violence were published, the majority of which had no follow-up reporting.

Most followed the same formula and focused on individual circumstances. A lot were a “hodgepodge”: one long report hashing together as many as 13 different cases in one place, with little or no follow-up.

Another style of reporting that was commonplace was short follow-ups with details of what was happening to perpetrators, such as court dates and statements. I also found a tendency to print long quotes from political leaders, teacher’s organisations, or human rights NGOs as separate articles, with no other context given.

Worryingly, 49% of reports completely erased the victim from the narrative, focusing more on perpetrators and quotes from police and political leaders (usually male).

When I asked editors about this, Matiur Rahman Chowdhury, editor of *Manab Zamin*, said they viewed sexual violence solely through the lens of crime news. “A lack of time, sources and training on how to do proper in-depth reporting means our crime reporters can make the wrong judgements, on top of which, the lengthy process of justice makes follow-ups difficult.”

Alongside resource constraints, *Prothom Alo*’s editor, also named Matiur Rahman, identified male-dominated newsrooms as a problem, too: “The honest truth is that we simply don’t have the time, or often the inclination, to think deeply about these issues.”

Mahfuz Anam, editor of *The Daily Star*, agreed with this, and added: “Journalistic freedom, quality reporting, lack of investigative skills – these are all generic weaknesses in which gender issues come into play.”

While editor of *Bangladesh Pratidin* Naeem Nizam thought more could be done to ensure “victims do not face a second injustice at the hands of the media”, he was optimistic about how things have improved.

All of the editors agreed that there had been positive change, since Bangladeshi media had moved on from the times when survivors’ pictures were published and their identities left unprotected. However, they all lamented a dearth of investigative journalism and increasing restrictions on press freedom as hampering their newspapers’ work.

According to Dr Gitiara Nasreen, Professor of Mass Communications and Journalism at Dhaka University, the only solution to this is for media organisations to become more competitive by writing better stories and exploring different angles.

“There are so many issues that media can focus on: the justice system, policy decisions, measures taken by law enforcement, government responsibility, community-level initiatives, intersectionality, social stigma, health consequences of sexual violence, abuse of the LGBTQ community. If media houses want to end their dependency on external funding, there is no alternative to doing better journalism.”

### Why are newspapers not focusing on these issues?

Limited resources as an obstacle to in-depth reporting came up multiple times in interviews. But for Aasha Mehreen Amin, joint editor at *The Daily Star*, this argument is simply not good enough. “There will always be not enough reporters, but the question is: are newspapers willing to give gender-based violence the same treatment they give to politics, economy and even sports?”

“We can be more innovative, especially in our use of editorials and opinion columns, in keeping the topic of gender-based violence in the public eye,” she added.

A news editor who spoke to me on condition of anonymity was also critical: “We have the tendency in Bangladeshi media to follow the tide.<sup>15</sup> Instead of reporting on patriarchal power structures that enable rape, we are in a mad rush to react to what our editors feel, what is discussed on social media, and what others are reporting on.” However, he added that the fact that reporters are stretched across different beats also makes it difficult for them to become specialised and achieve the social knowledge and cultural understandings that reporters need to report on GBV.

Other journalists and news editors argued they simply do not have the tools to make this happen due to a severe lack of training on GBV reporting. A couple of journalists spoke of in-house trainings they had attended, but none of them focused specifically on sexual violence. Two had also attended gender-sensitivity training organised by NGOs, but felt they were not able to apply the learnings due to their (mostly male) news editors not being involved in the process. A few journalists expressed their frustrations with their media houses for failing to use available resources and guidelines to organise in-house training, arguing that an older generation of newsroom leaders do not consider this a priority.

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<sup>15</sup> A number of interviewees preferred to not have their names in the report so they could speak more freely about their organisations and the industry. In certain other parts of the paper, I chose to leave out the names so that any one journalist does not feel singled out.

Qurratul Ain Tahmina, freelance journalist and writer of MRDI's Bangla language [guide](#) on gender ethics in journalism, thinks the major issue is one of acceptance. "We live in a patriarchal society, and those patriarchal mindsets are reproduced in newsrooms. A majority of owners, editors and decision-making managers still do not understand how important training – especially on gender-sensitivity – is for quality and sustainable journalism."

Referring to her involvement in developing *Prothom Alo's* organisational guidelines, she said, "There is no alternative to having your reporting guidelines written down as policy and organising regular training. But our media houses are still very hierarchical, so this pressure has to come from the top. And what is the point of training reporters if the decision-makers are not on board?"

### Confusion over reporting practices is negatively affecting survivors

According to one news editor, a lack of training means many reporters are acting like lawyers instead of journalists, trying to collect evidence or find gaps in survivors' stories. In my analysis, I found victim-blaming occurring in about 10% of cases, but almost all of those instances stemmed from similar attempts to try and account for the "missing pieces of the puzzle", such as questioning how the DU student was abducted "so easily" (the perpetrator was small and frail-looking) and why the streets were so empty that day. A few reporters corroborated this by stating that one of the first questions that they ask when reporting on sexual violence is whether the person accused of the crime is actually responsible for it.

Journalists also spoke of the issues they faced while speaking to survivors. One of them shared how reluctant she once felt in approaching a rape survivor who was still traumatised and had already had too many journalists interview her. What is concerning is that despite her qualms, she still felt compelled to conduct the interview, even though the survivor was not in the right state of mind to provide meaningful consent.

In the CWGL 2021 [media guide](#), meaningful consent is defined as consent that comes from the survivor, is given for specific use at an appropriate time, is trauma-informed, and where requests for consent are repeated. Ideally, the reporter should have a line of communication open with the survivor to ensure that she understands the risks of sharing her experiences and that her vulnerability is not taken advantage of in any way. However, all the journalists interviewed said they never have the time and space to do so, and none of them have ever been encouraged by their team leaders to continue communicating with survivors to ensure they are comfortable with being quoted. None of the survivors they

ever interviewed knew what was going to be said about them until they saw the final report in print.

In the absence of training on how to deal with vulnerable and traumatised persons, journalists also struggled in managing emotions – their own and the survivor’s. Many felt intense guilt for not staying in touch with survivors after gaining their trust. One reporter shared her experience of continuing to communicate with a survivor because she was suicidal. Another mentioned how she tries to step out of the role of journalist and be their friend. While she spoke of how she consoled them, it became clear that in the process, she had ended up trivialising their pain. Journalists who are based in the city and often depend on district correspondents to conduct primary interviews also spoke of how survivors can face insensitive questions from them.

### There is a worrying lack of understanding of survivors’ trauma and mental state

During the Begumganj case, the survivor was made to repeat details of the violence she faced over and over again to different law enforcement agencies, often with journalists present. Most of these rooms were male-dominated. This story also came with the most sensationalised language (38%), including terms like “stripped and tortured”, “brutalised”, “obscene”, “shame” and “mediaeval torture”. This occurred even in reports that used a thematic frame. Overall, 36% of reports analysed included some element of sensationalism, 17% provided extraneous details that could lead to jigsaw identification, and about 16% of images used depicted inappropriate violence.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, all interviewees agreed this is wrong. Why then, was there so much of it? One reporter mentioned the need to use the “correct words” to describe the violence, even if she felt bad using them. Another spoke of the need to dispel disbelief in the minds of readers by ensuring that all the facts of the case are present. Unfortunately, but perhaps not unsurprisingly, a couple of reporters repeated the patriarchal notion of rape taking away the “honour” of a woman, with one even saying that her family’s trauma is worse than hers because they are worried she will die by suicide or “never be able to show her face to society again”. As one journalist bluntly put it: “The reporters who are thinking about survivors’ trauma are in a tiny minority in our industry.”

What can journalists do right now to make sure they treat survivors with empathy and dignity? I spoke to Australian journalist Isabella Higgins, who covered Indigenous Affairs for ABC for five years and dealt almost exclusively with vulnerable communities, and she suggested the following:

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<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that around half of articles didn’t have any corresponding images. The percentage given here is a proportion of the articles that *did* carry images with them.

- Make sure survivors know they don't have to answer your questions. People who have experienced trauma from marginalised communities can forget that it is their right to say no to us, and we need to empower them to do that.
- Start your interview by asking them: "What do you want to get across? What is *your* message?" Use their own words as much as you can, and let them set the tone and mood of the story.
- Don't sit face-to-face and stare them in the eyes like you are about to interrogate them. Conduct interviews in the way that people talk to each other, sitting side by side, while walking or while they are doing an activity. How much eye contact they want to make should be up to them.
- Never promise that your interview will make them feel better, or that actions will be taken as a result of their story being published.
- Ask questions that reflect their resilience. I often interviewed people when they were on their healing journey and not right after the traumatic event, so that they can talk about what they have overcome and how they are so much more than the trauma they experienced.
- Be conscious of the power you have as a journalist, but also remember to maintain professional boundaries.

### Information from police and medical reports is only muddying the waters

All the reporters interviewed spoke of consulting the police reports filed when a case is initially accepted at the station, and of how these reports tend to be filled with insensitive comments, graphic descriptions, and sometimes even incorrect information. They also spoke of looking through medical reports from crisis centres, where rape survivors are taken for treatment, which one reporter described as being filled with "excruciating, biological details". Information on DNA evidence, injury marks and identities of the accused are common details from these reports that are used by journalists.

How ethical is this? According to Taslima Yasmin, associate professor of law at Dhaka University, when a case is still ongoing at court, responsible journalists must be especially sensitive with regard to evidence found in police and medical reports.

"When I did my research on sexual violence, police sources told me that in most cases, DNA evidence cannot be found. Yet the media often reports on this as if police investigations involve only DNA evidence. When such information is printed without understanding its complexities, it can mislead the public and risks negatively affecting the process of justice as well."

Human rights lawyer Sara Hossain also spoke of how women's response to rape or sexual violence is not necessarily physical resistance. "For many, the understanding is to survive the situation. If you don't let it happen, you will preempt further violence. A preponderance of medical and expert opinion has led to significant pushback against the idea of proof of force needing to be established to prove rape. Yet we continue to see this mentioned in news reports in Bangladesh."

Another common tendency was to repeat information from police reports or police quotes without interrogating their statements in any way. For example, the Kurmitola rapist turned out to be a homeless man with a history of drug addiction and, during that period, police routinely made comments linking drug use with sexual deviancy. This narrative was reproduced without question in a number of reports, ultimately erasing the simple fact that sexual violence occurs across all sections of society.

### Female sources were hugely underrepresented in news reports

Almost 66% of reports had zero female sources. Less than a fourth had the voices of rights activists or GBV experts. These are astonishing findings when you consider that all the reports concerned female survivors of violence. This huge gap could also explain the treatment of survivors in Bangladeshi media. On top of the sensationalising, around 36% of reports portrayed them as helpless victims, with no allusion to their trauma or resilience. In fact, almost half of the reports did not refer to them at all – the survivors were completely erased from the narrative.

In the 23% of articles that did include voices from the Bangladeshi women's rights movement, 80% referred to gender-based violence as a human rights issue and discussed the structural problems that lead to it. I also found that all the newspapers had some sort of reference to GBV statistics released by women's rights organisations like Ain O Salish Kendra and Bangladesh Mahila Parishad. However, the majority of these reports were reprints of their press releases. Very few actually analysed the data or spoke with researchers to come up with more compelling stories.

Even more surprisingly, despite the majority of images used being that of female protesters, their voices failed to materialise in print, leading to a crucial gap in reporting. For example, one report pictured women holding up placards with sayings such as "men put your gaze in jail" and "only a rapist is responsible for rape", yet the final report ignored these themes and focused on the police investigation instead.

Almost all quotes related to protests were from male demonstrators, mostly leaders of student bodies affiliated with political groups. Many of them referred to women as their "mothers" and "sisters", and used other patriarchal and often victimising language to talk

of survivors. Journalists reproduced these comments without interrogating this representation of women as passive actors needing protection, rather than citizens actively demanding their rights. On the other hand, when female protesters' voices were included, many spoke of wider issues such as rape culture, gender inequality and hate speech against women.

When I put forward these findings to Bangladeshi journalists and newsroom leaders, they agreed that there should be more engagement with female sources and experts. However, a lot of them did not seem to differentiate between civil society actors, such as well-known academics, political commentators and rights activists, and people who are specifically experts in gender justice. One journalist also pointed out that it is always the same few in the feminist circuit who are interviewed over and over again by print media.

It is clear that there is a need for greater diversity of sources in Bangladeshi print media. Sara Hossain also made an interesting point, asking why some male rights activists speak out on issues like enforced disappearances and police brutality, but are relatively silent when it comes to gender-based violence. "When journalists ask male commentators to speak about politics, governance and democracy, why don't they also ask about women's rights? If we don't make these conversations a part of the public agenda, will women's rights ever be anything more than a 'niche issue' that only female activists speak about?"

### Less than 10% of reports were produced by identifiable female journalists

This is in line with GMPP data from Bangladesh in the same year, which found only 11% of reporters to be female. GMPP findings across time also suggest that women reporters are more likely than men to turn to women subjects and sources. This was reflected in my analysis: out of the 24 reports identifiable as being written by female journalists, only one report did not have a female source. It was, however, difficult to ascertain the reporter behind a large proportion of reports that were credited to the newsdesk.

It should be noted here that all four newspaper editors that I interviewed were male. The reporters I interviewed were all female. All of them were minorities in their own newsrooms, worked across beats, and agreed that they would like to see more female journalists, editors and newsroom leaders in their organisations.

The male newsroom editors I interviewed also agreed that their work spaces were disproportionately male, and having more female journalists would improve the quality of reporting and lead to more gender-sensitive journalism. One news editor also mentioned the importance of having religious and ethnic minorities in newsrooms. Another news editor put forward a patriarchal notion that having more women around would make male journalists more disciplined and well-behaved.

Aasha Mehreen Amin, one of the few women in leadership positions in Bangladeshi print media, said views like these are exactly why we need more women in the industry. “In our male-dominated newsrooms, you will almost always find female journalists behind the stories that are covered adequately because they have a personal interest,” she said. “The sad truth is that I rarely find male journalists going out of their way to write about gender justice. The female presence makes a big difference, not just in terms of GBV reports, but in bringing new voices and diverse perspectives into any news topic.”

One reporter countered this narrative by saying she was unhappy with how GBV stories were almost exclusively assigned to women, and there was disproportionate pressure on female journalists to focus on “women’s issues” instead of the male-coded topics like politics. This view was echoed by Prof Nasreen, who argued that it was gender politics to suggest that only women should report on sexual violence, and that media houses need to train male reporters to be sensitive to issues related to gender justice.

### Journalists need to be sensitive to biases in class, race, religion and location

Out of the three cases of sexual violence selected for the analysis, the Kurmitola survivor – a middle class, university student from the capital – was the most present in narratives. Each newspaper printed at least one report on her determination to return to her studies, or her courage in helping the police. Even though her trauma was not acknowledged directly, there were some attempts to humanise her. Unfortunately, a lot of this was undermined by the extraneous details given about her, risking jigsaw identification in 35% of reports. At the same time, reporters failed to follow-up police information on how the perpetrator had previously raped other homeless and disabled women, showing a considerable apathy towards survivors from marginalised groups.

This apathy was extended to the other two survivors, who come from working class, rural backgrounds. The Khagrachari survivor, an Indigenous woman, initially received so little attention that *Prothom Alo* and *Bangladesh Pratidin* reported on the protests surrounding it before they actually reported on the case. While PA went on to include activist quotes on violence against minorities and *The Daily Star* identified the rapists as settlers (Bengalis who relocated to previously Indigenous-majority areas), the other two newspapers did not even indirectly refer to the unequal power structures that come into play when members of a dominant community rape a woman from a minority community.

Surprisingly, even though the Begumganj survivor created a storm of debate surrounding sexual violence in Bangladesh, her trauma was the most underrepresented in news reports. She was erased from over 53% of reports, and 38% presented sensationalist details about her abuse. This was also the case where a thematic frame was used the least

(24%). But when it was used, the reports focused on the failure of law enforcement agencies and the justice system in controlling crime (note: *not* sexual violence specifically), and political power structures that enable criminals.

When reporting on perpetrators, most publications failed to clarify that rape is an abuse of power and an exercise in misogyny. Instead, the focus was on their criminal backgrounds. Around 35% of reports portrayed them as lone monsters who committed rape due to criminal and deviant natures. This reporting was highly personalised and included their images, names, home towns, ages, and often their parents' names. Their working class backgrounds were also routinely highlighted. One *Bangladesh Pratidin* report even included the argument that homeless people, hawkers and rickshaw pullers should be removed from campus areas for women's safety, with no evidence to back up the idea that they would be more prone to sexual violence.

Qurratul Ain Tahmina believes the practice of revealing such personal details about perpetrators is completely unethical. "We have had cases of minors accused of rape having their identities revealed to the media, as well as family members being named," she said. "While it is important to contextualise the power that a rapist abuses to commit rape, we must consider their right to privacy, especially when the crime has not actually been proven against them."

This view is echoed by women's rights activist Shireen Huq. "Our society is very vengeance-prone, and the way media reports on violence against women makes us want to only inflict violence on rapists, which is why you see calls for the death penalty being highlighted. We are failing to hold meaningful discussions, not just on violence and impunity, but on misogyny."

Human rights lawyer Sara Hossain also warned of the risk of public opinion framing judicial response, even though we don't have jury trials. "It is not unreasonable to think a media trial of a person accused of rape, particularly where the accused is working class, or from a stigmatised or marginalised community, might affect the court. And of course, upper/middle class men who are accused of sexual crimes are generally not publicly villified in the same way and have a better opportunity of getting a proper legal defense."

Lack of reporters in districts and remote areas, urban bias, social media traction influencing agenda-setting, media preoccupation with violent rapes and rapes that end with death, corrupt practices in journalism which lead to certain reporters accepting bribes to "miss" stories, media elitism, misogyny, racism and classism were cited by interviewees as some of the reasons behind this treatment of victims and perpetrators in news reports.

## Conclusion

Throughout my interviews and research for this paper, one question came up repeatedly: when there is such a high volume of reported rapes, how can we possibly do better?

“If we individually report on every rape that happens in the country, we will have to dedicate the entire newspaper to it,” said Prof Nasreen.

Others argued that it is important for print media to act as a place of record. This is especially due to the huge gap in government data collection, which means that news reports are often the only source for rights organisations to gauge the extent of gender-based violence in the country.

Cathy Otten, journalist and editor of the CWGL publication *Silence and Omissions: A Media Guide for Covering Gender-Based Violence*, offered some solutions, arguing there are opportunities to contextualise these stories even if there is limited space.

“Even with breaking news, we can add a line or two about how what happened is part of a systemic problem of violence against women and not a one-off, unique example. We can identify how this is human rights abuse, ask specific questions to the police or politicians on what they intend to do about it, and quote women’s rights experts, too.”

Prof Nasreen added: “When it comes to stories that involve trauma, journalists must focus [their efforts] on investigative pieces to talk about the wider issues. Readers shouldn’t be opening the newspaper and thinking, ‘Things are so bad they will never change’. They should be reading about what needs to change for the situation to get better.”

Ultimately, introducing reporting practices that are trauma-informed and centred on survivors will not only be for the sake of gender justice, but for the sake of good journalism as well.