

Increasing the Effective use of the Right to Information Law by Media and Civil Society



Project Completion Report



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BACKGROUND

Media in Bangladesh is perhaps suffering the biggest crisis in its 50 years of history. The country has become one of the world's deadliest COVID-19 frontlines for journalism, with the death of 52 journalists and around 1,363 infected, according to data compiled by journalists in their private Facebook group "[Our Media Our Rights](#)."

Many journalists in Bangladesh are putting themselves in harm's way to report on the global crisis, with many falling ill from COVID-19 themselves in the process. An MRDI survey suggests 70% of the local correspondents who work in remote areas did not get any support from the newsroom, in terms of protective gear, hand sanitizers, and even training.

Media had to change their workflow to adapt with the pandemic, as more and more of their staff began to get infected. Some of them continued work from home, some others had to employ rotation-based duties, limiting their production capability to half than a normal time, as told media managers in an interaction meeting organized by MRDI.

The second biggest victim of the COVID-19 is the media industry itself as their revenue shrank unprecedentedly during the first six months of the pandemic. According to media reports, sales of newspapers dropped by 60% and advertisement followed through as the advertisers are also struggling to keep their balance sheet, same. In a webinar on media economy in Bangladesh, Gousul Alam Shaon, the country representative of Grey Bangladesh, the top advertising agency, said that TV ad bookings also went down by 26% on an average during the pandemic, despite a surge in viewership.

According to a survey by MRDI, two-thirds of the local media stopped publishing, and the top 6 newsrooms laid off 30% of their staff to make it a nightmare for the newsmen. There is no data of how many journalists have lost their jobs, and how many had to accept a pay-cut as the newsrooms continued to struggle to meet the expenses from their earnings.

When big media outlets need extreme cost-cuts, it is fairly understandable how small local media outlets are doing. According to Mobinul Islam, editor of Gramer Kagoj, four out of seven newspapers in Jessore have completely shut down their operation. He said that the local media would not be able to survive this shock and many outlets are sure to die in this crisis.

The enactment of the Right to Information (RTI) Act 2009 is recognized as a milestone achievement towards improving transparency and accountability in Bangladesh. This groundbreaking Act empowered citizens to seek all information from the state by incorporating robust provisions such as proactive disclosure in public procurement and service delivery and also ended the prevailing culture of secrecy.

The Government of Bangladesh (GoB) has made good progress in implementing the Act in the last decade. The number of RTI requests has been growing and the institutional practice of providing the requested information has seen positive changes.

Public awareness is important to increase enthusiasm and support, stimulate self-mobilization and action, and mobilize local knowledge and resources. Globally, it is recognized that level of awareness fluctuates through time due to the influence of external variables. Although the level of public awareness about RTI was found to be low compared to the 2012 survey, a 2019

survey indicates that raising public awareness is not the sole responsibility of IC as other stakeholders such as NGOs and media have similar roles to play.

In many countries, lack of awareness of RTI is still a reality, even years after the enactment of the law. For instance, in India, more than 30% of rural public information officers surveyed in a study in 2013 did not know about the provisions of the RTI law.

An analysis of IC’s social mobilization activities over the decade reveals that many public engagement activities were limited only to the urban and semi-urban areas. And various media channels used by IC to carry forward key RTI messages broadcasted them during very particular and limited periods, which prevented greater outreach and penetration among the mass audience. More importantly, in the absence of a comprehensive media strategy, IC was constrained by both budget and scope to undertake behavior changing communication interventions, which require sustained campaigns over a longer period of time to register key messages among a countrywide audience.

OBJECTIVE OF THE INITIATIVE

- Increase independent media capacity for unbiased and objective reporting, and to conduct effective investigations
- Strengthen linkages and collaboration between individual journalists, media organizations, and NGOs to address self-censorship and lack of media freedoms

RESULTS ANALYSIS

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, some of our activities have become delayed at the beginning of 2020. This was because there was lock-down imposed all-over in the country. But soon the programme was adapted to virtual platform for organizing the events online. This included participatory and national workshops, thematic workshops, in-house training on RTI and training on data journalism.

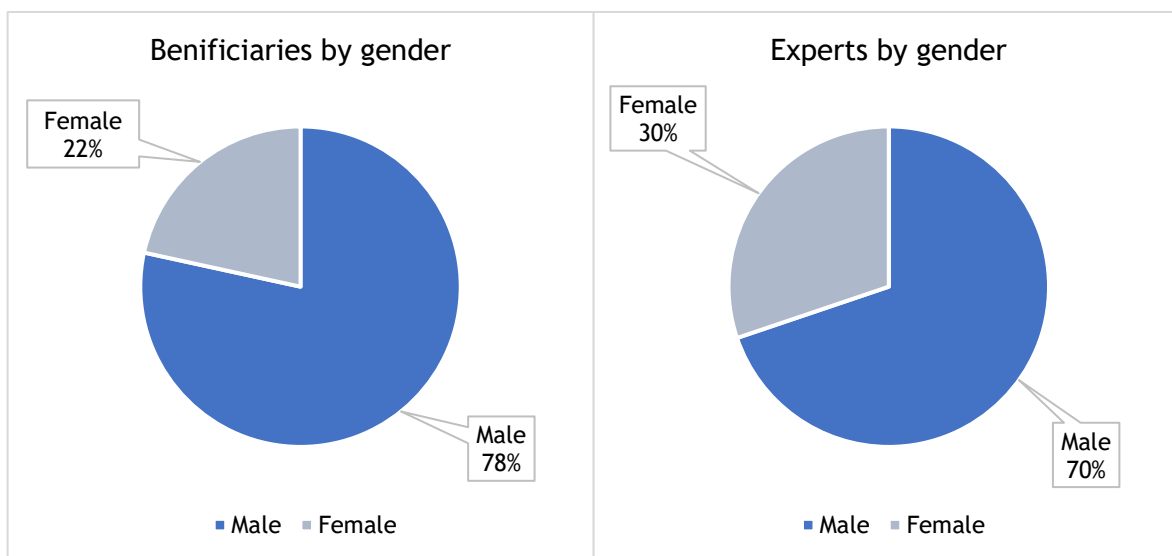
Key project results

Implementation of project activities brings following results.

1 Curriculum on data journalism developed	1 Open data repository developed	1 Open data country report produced
10 reports through fellowship published/aired, 2 yet to be published/aired (delayed due to pandemic situation)	1 RTI action plan developed	88 editors of local newspapers, journalists, academics and chief executives of NGOs participated in the divisional level participatory workshops and national consultation
71 journalists trained on RTI for objective reporting	48 journalists trained on data journalism	12 journalists received long term capacity building through data journalism fellowship

GENDER ANALYSIS

The importance of gender diversity, equality and sensitivity is not well recognized in Bangladeshi media. Different studies found that, the representation of women in mainstream newsrooms is below 20% and only a few are in leadership roles in more than 30 TV channels and hundreds of newspapers and online. Situation is even worse in the local outlets. In most of the newsrooms, women journalists are considered for less important beats and social obstacles also influence their ability to continue and grow in this profession. The ratio of female representations at civil society organization and educational institution are also the same. To ensure women's participation in the journalists training, a separate batch of data journalism training was organized for female journalists exclusively. MRDI made an announcement for interested female journalists through its website and facebook page to submit application.



ACTIVITIES UNDER OBJECTIVE ONE

OPEN DATA SURVEY

Bangladesh, a developing country, has witnessed rapid pace of advancements taking place in its information and communications technology (ICT). This has led to massive data generating from various sectors and institutions. Data pertaining to the economy, broadband and mobile data usage, health, education, among many others, are collected at the national, division and district levels. Despite open government data being available online through multiple public sector institutions, it is highly fragmented and sometimes inaccessible by the general populace.

The Government of Bangladesh mandated in 2016 to make open data a reality - in line with its development strategies. The then Access to Information Programme at Prime Minister's Office (A2i), a whole-of-government program of the ICT division of Bangladesh, initiated a project to increase the accessibility of data among the citizens through an open government data portal

(<http://data.gov.bd/>). More specifically, the OGD portal developed by a2i targeted to solve the problem of data fragmentation and inaccessibility. This meant that the collected data would be available to the public through a centralized portal, paving the way for the open data movement in Bangladesh.

Despite the creation of the OGD portal by a2i, the data download rate and the number of applications created based on the data have been less than expected. A criterion to measure the success of open data, among others, is through the number and the impact of the services created through the data and, as such, it is pertinent to ask why success has been limited in Bangladesh. In our findings, it was identified that the relevant ministries were not in a position to share data in the portal due to lack of priority.

Therefore, current situation of open data and data journalism in Bangladesh is not favorable. Bangladesh presents a distinct context where there is information asymmetry, emerging technologies, and journalism norms which are unique to the region. In this context, under this project MRDI conducted a survey to explore the current situation of [open data and data journalism](#) in Bangladesh, its challenges and needs.

Primary research of the study consisted of two instruments for data collection: key informant interviews and surveys. Other than data collection, the key informant interviews also served to inform the design of the survey. 5 primary stakeholder groups identified for the data collection: Government agencies, editors, journalists, data analytics agencies, and civic hackers. All the stakeholder groups participated in the key informant interviews but the survey was designed to accept responses from journalists only. The resulting data was analyzed to report on the state of data journalism and open data in Bangladesh, and to develop the recommendations.

The secondary research involved examining existing literature on the global open data and data journalism practices. Documents on open data strategies and government policies were also taken into consideration for analysis and recommendation. Furthermore, open data portals around the world, including Bangladesh, were examined and compared to identify usability problems and inform better user experiences.

The recommendations were developed following a comprehensive review of the primary (KIs and Surveys) and secondary research. Recommendations were suggested for the two stakeholder groups:

1. Supply Side:

Ensuring Data Availability and Strengthening Interoperability

There is a need to ensure that data is easily available for everyone. As open data is the most popular modality among journalists for accessing data, it is important that all kinds of data are



made available in these sources. Often, it can be noticed that only a portion of the data is available in these government repositories or sites, and as such we recommend that the government “open up” data through these repositories. While data or information can be obtained through RTI, it is often slow and cumbersome leading to less usage among journalists in Bangladesh.

Ensuring Data is Updated

We have learned that journalists and stakeholders often do not have access to updated data. Journalists have surmised that organizations in charge of open data repositories do not monitor or track the data for updates, hence, it is often neglected. It is imperative that journalists and media houses engage the government through the help of civil society organizations to bring attention to this problem.

Promoting a bottom-up approach through mass publicity

Our findings show that the open data initiative is mostly a top-down approach in Bangladesh with the demand side being mostly passive. As such government should take initiatives to encourage the uptake of open data and publicize the usefulness of it and its connection to the SDGs. This could result in more publicity and demand, leading to more datasets being made public and updated.

Improving the Usability of Open Data Portals and Websites

We recommend that the user experience of open data portals and websites be improved through the provision of dashboards and summaries, and data in user friendly formats such as csv and xlsx.

Cross country collaboration

The open data barometer is global measure of how governments are publishing and using open data for accountability, innovation and social impact. Based on this measure, the US remains the torch bearer of open government data along with countries such as the UK. Considering India is relatively one of the better performers in the South Asia region, we recommend the Government of Bangladesh to engage in more cross-country collaboration regarding open data with India and other better performing nations.

Engaging with Media houses

Thus, it is imperative that the government engages the media houses in their discussions and implementation plans for more uptake and usage of open data. The government should specifically focus on the needs of media houses. Media houses feel that the government has the capability to ensure more open data uptake and promote data journalism. More specifically, media houses have asked for more funding in the aforementioned areas. Media houses reckon that the provision of funds will serve as a motivation and they will feel a sense of responsibility to reciprocate through increased data journalism activities and more open data uptake.

2. Demand Side:

Contrasting between Data Journalism and Traditional Journalism

Journalists often find it difficult to differentiate between data journalism and traditional journalism as the latter is more common practice in Bangladesh. Based on the interviews and subsequent findings, it was found that there is a general consensus among us that data journalism - although cannot be strictly defined - is not being practiced in accordance to its definition despite journalists believe that they do. It is imperative that media houses acquaint journalists about these differences through practical demonstrations and workshops, preferably conducted by organizations/media houses that prioritize data journalism in their objectives or works.

Increasing Awareness about the Benefits of Data journalism

There is a need to create a strong culture of data use and data appreciation among stakeholders, mostly journalists. Like the government, media houses have a role to play in raising awareness regarding the benefits of data journalism to its journalists as awareness is very low.

Training in quantitative and reasoning skills

Based on the discussions, we surmise that journalists are not adequately trained in quantitative and reasoning skills leading to less participation in data journalism. Furthermore, journalists did not make use of quantitative skills in their current works, and as such, it is ideal that trainings in quantitative and reasoning skills are conducted to ensure journalists can transition smoothly to areas of journalism that rely on quantitative aptitude and reasoning.

Exert “Positive Pressure” on the government

Journalists and editors agree that it is not only the duty of media houses to promote data journalism. A feat such as this remains a difficult task and requires the active support of the government and civil societies.

Self-Initiatives and self-capacity building

Journalists and media houses have underscored the importance of self-initiatives and self-capacity building during the interviews conducted. We recommend journalists to engage in data journalism through personal projects and showcase their works within media houses to pique their interests.

DATA JOURNALISM TRAINING CURRICULUM LOCALIZATION

In Bangladesh data journalism concept is not used frequently in preparing qualitative and in-depth reporting. Absence of proper knowledge on the issue is the major reason behind it. It also doesn't get importance in the academic curriculum of journalism schools. Even though the concept of data journalism is not clear to the media houses. Most of them equate data journalism with data visualization whereas data cleaning, analysis and data storytelling deserve equal importance. Absence of training institution for capacity building on data journalism and appropriate training curriculum is not available here.



Considering the context under the project, localizing of Internews classroom and practical journalism curriculum in Bangladeshi context has been made. Following Internews's 200-hours curriculum, 4-day 36 hours classroom training on data journalism and a summary of that in 12 hours online training has been developed in Bangla which includes data literacy and ethics, data mining, data analysis, data reporting and data visualization.

The curriculum starts with the difference between traditional journalism and data journalism. It defines the techniques of investigate main reason and analysis the wideness of the problem by data journalism. Definition of data journalism, qualitative and quantitative data, aggregated and disaggregated data and what analysis can be done through these are also explained in the curriculum. How to retrieve data from national and international data pool and what could be the problem with source-based data is discussed. The curriculum introduces basic excel and its importance in data journalism as well as its function and formulas. Finally, it includes techniques of story-telling with the obtained data.

The curriculum designed with a good combination of lecture sessions and practical exercises. It linked with recent incidents as example for practical sessions.

Zyma Islam who played main responsibility of localizing this curriculum mentioned, "Data-journalism is not difficult one. To be honest, many of us may do data journalism, but have never declared own work in this term. Data journalism begins with data, document, database-based work - be it hands-on, or using data processing software or programming languages. There is only one condition - the data analysis must be your own. The main goal of this curriculum is to make the task of analysis a little easier for journalists. Data journalism can be done with which data? Where to find analytical data? Which 5 "tools" of Excel can be used to handle any analysis? How do you convert hundreds of lines of data into a report? What are journalists from other countries doing? With the answers to all these questions, this curriculum is made up of the world-renowned syllabus of Internews. With great pleasure, I am proud to hand over this text to those who have set their goals, but need only a little help to aim."

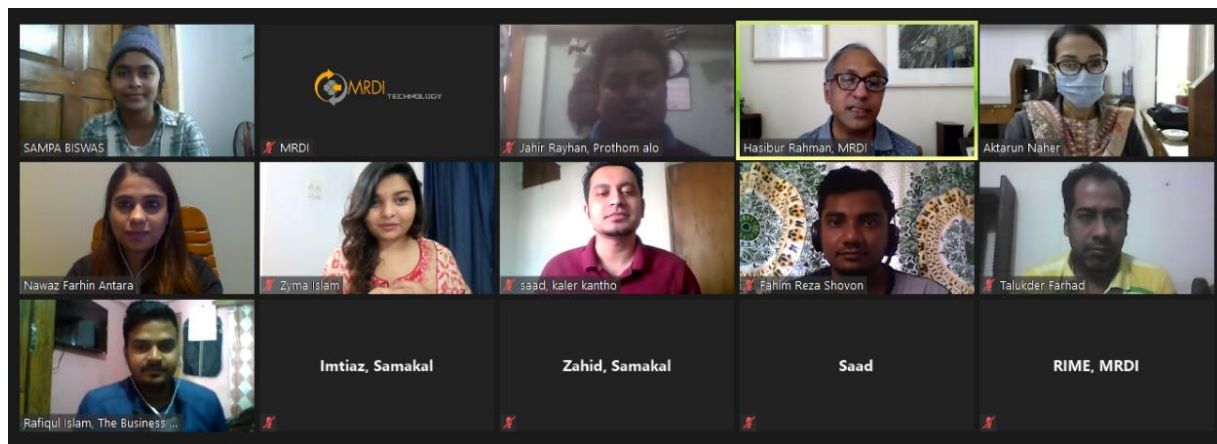
DATA JOURNALISM TRAINING FOR JOURNALISTS

In Bangladesh data journalism is not well discussed and practiced by the media. Though there are some good investigative reports with extensive data analysis, but they are very few in number. Access to open and public data is crucial to meaningful data journalism. However, open data is hardly available in Bangladesh. This is one of the main reasons why the practice of using data for preparing reports has not yet been established. At present, media is depending on traditional journalism and interview-based reporting. At the same time, most of the journalists have not minimum understanding of data mining and data analysis.

Keeping the importance of data journalism for increasing the objectiveness and quality of reporting in mind the project organized four batches training on data journalism. A total of 48 journalists including national & district level correspondents of print, online and TV reached throughout the process. A special batch training for female reporters also organized. Each of the training was for four half days.

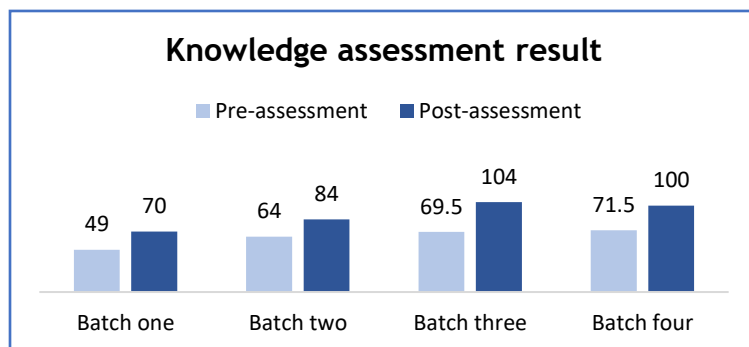
Total participants	Male	Female
48	29	19

According the data journalism curriculum localized in Bangladeshi context following Internews 200 hours curriculum, 8 lecture sessions and 5 practical sessions were conducted in these trainings. Data journalist Zyma Islam was the facilitator of the training. Naeemul Hassan, Assistant professor, University of Maryland, Philip Merrill College of journalism and Md. Jamal Hossain, Senior Manager Monitoring, BRAC conducted sessions in the training as resource persons. Hasibur Rahman, Executive Director MRDI, also conducted a session on RTI in the training.



A.S.M. Saad, Business Reporter, Kaler Kantho, recognized “The four-day MRDI training was very important. I learned how to create a reliable report using data. I want to be more involved with such trainings in future, because, data can be used to provide quality and reliable report to the reader”.

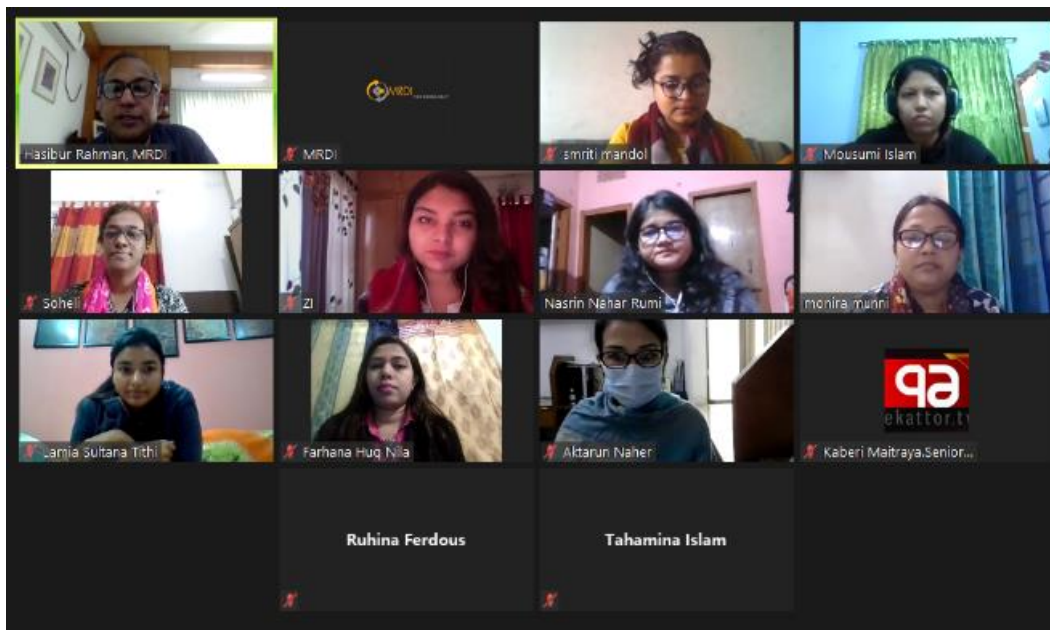
Knowledge assessment of the participants was conducted before and after the training. The result showed improvement in knowledge of the participants.



Mohammad Farhad Hossain Talukder, Staff Correspondent, The Business Standard mentioned “it was a wonderful initiative. I was reluctant to use Excel before. However, I often needed to analyse data, in particular the data we get from Bangladesh Bank. It takes a long time to analyze this data manually. But from today it will be easier for me to analysis those data and I hope I will be able to deliver my report in a short time.”

Salauddin Ahmed Reza, Staff Reporter, Jamuna Television agreed “Before the training we only presented different data in visual story with minimum analysis. But after the training, I will be able to prepare more analytical reports using knowledge on data analysis.”

At end of each training, the participants were given an evaluation form to give their feedback about the overall training programme. As per the evaluation, 86-100 percent participants agreed that the content and discussion of the training fulfilled their expectation. 89-93 percent found the information given through the training was useful & relevant. 89-100 percent found the trainers were competent & helpful.



Participants planned to change their reporting methods, incorporate data analysis in their reporting and way of presentation after receiving our training. Yahia Fazal, Staff Reporter, Sylhet, Kaler Kantho cited “I will practice to prepare quality reports as well as daily routine journalism.” Sajida Islam Parul, Staff Reporter, Samakal mentioned, “In most cases data is not available for report writing and we have to depend on different organizations. After participating data journalism training organized by MRDI, I can create own dataset as per requirement. Data is very important for journalism. I have learned to use Excel through this training. I also learned how to organize data, importance of being careful in using data, including repeated checks and balances. Above all, this training will be helpful in developing my professional skills. Thanks to the MRDI authorities.”

DATA JOURNALISM FELLOWSHIP

Training participants were given opportunity to submit their application for data journalism fellowship. Objective of the initiative was to provide long term capacity building support and encourage reporters for data journalism. Among 23 applications 12 journalists have been awarded fellowship based on their story

Total participants	Male	Female
12	9	3

ideas. Fellows closely work with their mentors in preparing stories and data analysis. Virtual meetings were conducted among the fellows and mentors during the pandemic.

Fellowship reports brings interesting findings and analysis. Prothom Alo Pabna correspondent worked on [Chalan beel](#). The vast water body is located at northern part of the country. Once



it was famous for mouthwatering fishes and bio-diversity. The report analyzed, implementing development projects for building dams, sluice gates, bridge, culvert and roads at beel areas seriously disrupted its water flows which impacted on its fish production and hampered bio-diversity.

The report brings forth the need of collective efforts to save the bio-diversity of Chalan beel.

The government approved nine fourth generation banks in 2013 to increase competition and also hoped they would open new avenues in the banking sector. But the trend of [bad debts](#), which is common at old banks, affected them as well. Analyzing data on default and bad loans of 59 banks from 2016 to 2020, staff reporter of the Business standard found that bad debts,

although low in amount, increased rapidly at fourth generation banks, and such loans at six foreign banks were almost 100% of the total amount of their default loans.

Political consideration, shortage of skilled manpower, failure to launch new products,

providing conventional banking services, and the tendency to not learn from the mistakes of old banks are the reasons for the rapid increase in bad loans at these banks, the report explored.

TOP 5 FOREIGN BANKS IN TERMS OF BAD LOANS
(AMOUNTS IN CRORE TAKA)

2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
Bank	Amount	Bank	Amount	Bank	Amount	Bank	Amount	Bank	Amount
NBP	1,460	NBP	1,377	NBP	1,385	NBP	1,379	NBP	1,375
SCB	362	SCB	360	SCB	421	SCB	294	SCB	204
HSBC	123	HSBC	132	HSBC	128	HSBC	135	HSBC	140
Habib	47	Habib	42	Habib	42	Habib	40	Habib	39
Ceylon	46	Ceylon	32	Ceylon	32	Ceylon	35	A I - F alah	34

Source: Bangladesh Bank

Chattogram correspondent of same media house investigated around 41% of [business loan defaulters](#) in the port city come from the consumer goods sector. Different banks and financial institutions in the city have provided loans for various sectors including consumer goods, steel-ship breaking, readymade garment, agriculture and housing. Of the business loans disbursed so far, around Tk35,000 crore has been defaulted by traders in the last eight years. There are a number of reasons behind the rise in defaulted loans in this sector year by year. Among those, selling goods at less than imported prices during 2007's army-backed caretaker government's reign; fluctuation of product prices in domestic and international markets; still conducting business in a conventional way; inadequate development of corporate culture; and the tendency of traders going into hiding after receiving loans are the main ones.

Highlights

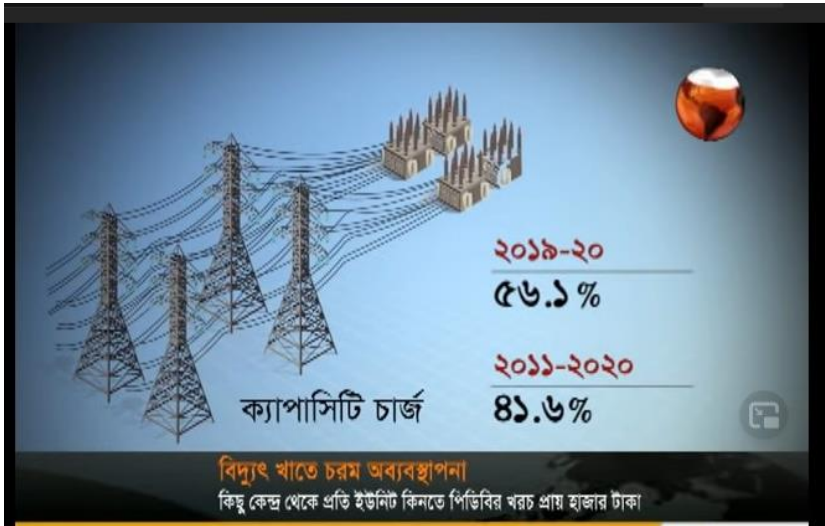
- In 2020, defaulted loans in the sector was around Tk600 crore
- Tk35,000 crore defaulted by traders of all sectors in 8 years
- Of the amount, the consumer goods sector defaulted Tk14,000 crore
- Among big groups, SA Group owes Tk4,000 crore to 18 banks
- Loan-giving banks filed cases with Chattogram Artha Rin Adalat in 2020 to get back around Tk2,421 crore

Government under its rehabilitation project allocated 1305 houses for homeless people at Mymensingh district. Though houses have already been distributed but till now 30% peoples are living here. Mymensingh correspondent of Channel 24 explored, these houses have no [electricity, water and sanitation facilities](#). Complaints have also been raised about the actual beneficiaries on the list. This situation ruins the effectiveness of the initiative.



Another senior reporter of Channel 24 investigates on extreme [mismanagement of the power sector](#). To increase power generation in the country many projects have been taken since 2009.

At present total number of projects are more than 150 and their electricity production capacity is 21 thousand megawatts. Report mentioned, over 1.85 lakh crore has been invested at power sector in 12 years. But the production cost per unit could not be reduced. In 10 years, government has given Tk 59,000 crore as subsidy. Experts believes this crisis could have been avoided if the impression of efficiency in planning and implementation had been maintained from the beginning.



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Most of the cultivable land in Bogra produce two times crop or three times crop, even four times from some of the lands. However, in the last few years, [factories are being set up on fertile arable land](#). In 10 years, the amount of cultivated land has decreased by about 16 thousand hectares. According to experts, it is necessary to build industrial factories on relatively less productive land.



Kaler Kantho reporter worked on the [allocation and expenditure City Corporations for forestry and beautification](#). In the last four fiscal years, the budget of Dhaka North City Corporation has been reduced by 91 percent in the forestry and beautification sector. On the other hand, the budget of Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) for forestry and median, beautification and greening of sidewalks has been reduced by 92 percent as compared to last year. However, the DNCC officials do not have accurate information on how the money allocated for afforestation

and beautification is being spent in any sector even after the budget is reduced every financial year.



During the Corona epidemic, [rate of carbon emission](#) and other greenhouse gases decreased by 2.8 gigaton in 2020. This results in a reduction of 125 billion carbon emissions, which is detrimental to many countries around the world. According to the decision of the climate conference, this compensation should be given to those who emit excess carbon. However, in normal times, they pretend to pay this money while actually they do not. Experts fear it will increase due to corona. As per TIB's research,

international organizations have promised to lend Bangladesh taka 315.4 million and taka 265 million for free. In total, payable amount was taka 638.4 million. But so far, they have paid only taka 132.75

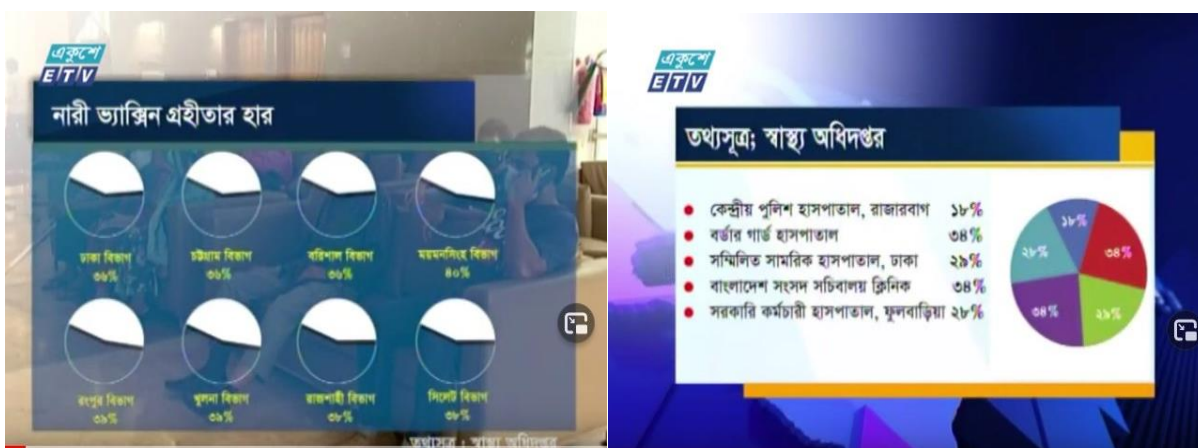
million. Which is one-fifth of the promised money. A reporter of News24 under the fellowship programme brings this issue forward through her report.

NEWS24

জলবায়ু অর্থায়ন			
প্রতিশ্রুত অর্থ আপেলি যেসব প্রকল্পে			
সংস্থান নাম	প্রকল্পের সংখ্যা	প্রতিশ্রুত অর্থ (মিলিয়ন ডলার)	অর্থ এলোকে
গোবাল ফ্লাইমোট কেন্দ্র অ্যালাইন্সেস (জিটিসিএ)	১	১০.৯৪	০
গোবাল এনভায়রনমেন্ট ফান্ডসিটি (জিইএফ)	২	৪.৯২	০
গোবাল ফ্লাইমোট ফাউন্ডেশন (জিএফ - ১)	২	২৫৭.৪৮	০
লিসট ডেভেলপমেন্ট ফান্ডস ফাউন্ডেশন (এলডিএফ)	৪	২৫.২৫	০
পাইলট প্রোগ্রাম ফর ফ্লাইমোট রেসিলেন্স (পিপিআর)	৩	১৩.৪	০
কোলিং অ্যান্ড বিনিউয়েবল এনার্জি প্রোগ্রাম (এআবইপি)	৪	৬৭.৫৪	০
সর্বমোট	১৭	৩৯৭	০

তথ্যসূত্র: টিআইবি

ETV reporter analyzed the data of [women vaccination](#) and found the rate of corona vaccination taken by women is less than 40 percent which is less than half of total vaccination. In reference of Director General of Health Services Dhaka, Chittagong and Barisal divisions have the lowest vaccination rate for women at 36 percent. This rate is 18-34 percent in the vaccination centers allocated for government officials and employees. According to data from 10 maternal and child health care centers among 48 vaccination centers in the capital, the vaccination rate of women is 36 to 48 percent. Women-friendly environment and prior acquaintance is the reason highlighted for choosing these centers. The infection rate in women is 24 percent which is the main reason for low rate of vaccination. Experts say that although the rate of infection in women is low, but everyone should be vaccinated.



A Daily Star report produced under the fellowship highlighter the ‘Green Cost’, i.e., the environmental cost of the ‘so-called’ [development in Sylhet City](#). Through data, the reporter shows that, Sylhet City Corporation reportedly fell 332 trees in last 5 years; whereas actual count is around 3 times more. According to data given by the Sylhet City Corporation (SCC), they felled 263 trees in last five years since 2016; while the data of the Forest Department, the permitting authority for felling trees, shows that the

TREES FELLED FOR DEVELOPMENT				
AREA	GIVEN DATA	SCC LISTED	FOREST DEPT PERMITTED	DS FINDING
Amberkhana to Bandarbazar via Chowhatta, Zindabazar	0	No	Data N/A	96
Subidbazar to Madina Market Road	0	No	Data N/A	77
Kazi Jalaluddin School Adjacent Road, Kumarpara	2	Yes	Yes	70
Zindabazar to Tilagarh via Naiorpul	0	No	Data N/A	58
Amberkhana Primary School to Tilagarh via Electricity Supply	25	No	Yes	76
Chowhatta to Kumarpara Road	0	No	Data N/A	39
Kumarpara Christian Tila to Shahi Eidgah Point	18	No	Yes	54
Keane Bridge to Humayun Rashid Chatter Road Side	64	Yes	Data N/A	94
Amberkhana to Chowkidekhi Road Side	13	Yes	Yes	40
Mirer Maidan to Blue Bird School Bridge Road Side	40	Yes	Data N/A	65
Bangabir Road to Sifat Ullah Mosque Road Side	22	Yes	Yes	35
Shajalal Shrine's Western Side to Osmani School Road Side	26	No	Yes	37
PDB Mosque to Nabab Road's Picher Mukh	71	Yes	Data N/A	76
Bakhtiar Bibi School Premises	1	Yes	Yes	6
Shahi Eidgah WDB Road Side	18	Yes	Data N/A	18
Pouro Biponi at Dhopa Dighir Par	6	Yes	Yes	6
Manik Pir Tila	26	Yes	Yes	26
TOTAL:	332			873

corporation felled another 69 trees by this time. However, a data analysis between Google Street View of 2015 and field visit to assess the present situation, The Daily Star report found that the corporation felled at least 873 trees while implementing seven development projects, mostly road widening.

SI No	Fellows	Date of published/ aired	Story title
1.	Sarwar Morshed District correspondent, Pabna, Prothom alo	21 April 2021	The Chalan beel is gradually losing its life
2.	Mohammad Farhadh Hossain Talukdar Staff Reporter, The Business Standard	26 April 2021	Bad debts hit new and foreign banks too
3.	Mohammad Omar Faruque Senior Staff correspondent, Chattogram, The Business Standard	20 April 2021	41% loan defaulters of Chattogram are from consumer goods sector
4.	Sultan Mahmud Konik Staff reporter, Mymensingh, Channel 24	21 April 2021	In Mymensingh, 70 percent of the families are not living in the house given by the Prime Minister
5.	Iqbal Ahsan Senior Reporter, Channel 24	17 April 2021	Half of the cost of generating electricity is for rent
6.		18 April 2021	The cost of power generation could not be reduced even at the cost of Tk 2.5 lakh crore
7.	A B M Amirul Latif Senior Staff correspondent, Bogura, Independent Television	19 April 2021	Arable land is disappearing due to the pollution by factories and houses
8.		19 May 2021	Amount of cultivable land is increasing in the char areas
9.	Sampa Biswas Apprentice Reporter, Daily Kaler Kantho	26 April 2021	There is allocation but no calculation of the expenses for forestation and beautification by the government
10.	Antara Biswas Staff Reporter, News24	26 April 2021	Corona reduces carbon emissions on earth and there are fears of a reduction in funding in affected countries
11.	Smriti Mandol Reporter, ETV	24 March 2021	Detection and mortality rates have increased with the increase in corona sample testing
12.		25 March 2021	The number of women receiving the vaccine is less than 40 percent
13.	Dwoha Chowdhury Sylhet correspondents The Daily Star	18 May 2021	Developmental works is harming environment in Sylhet

THEMATIC SEMINARS

Media, as the fourth column of the state and an influential social force, keeps people informed about what is happening around and makes the government and other authorities alert about what should or should not happen. To discuss recent burning issues for journalism and to create a platform to work together, four thematic workshops were organized under this initiative.

Each of the workshop started by a keynote presentation to explain the current scenario of the issue and facilitate to open the floor of discussion. Former government officials, media gatekeepers, NGO chief executives and journalists were present as panel discussants. To compare the situation on regional context, experts from India also joined in these workshops.

Editors of local media, journalists, academics and CSO representatives from around the country were participates in the discussion.

Total participants	Male	Female
119	98	21

Challenge of reporting during pandemic

The covid-19 pandemic appeared as a big threat to the human civilization affecting global health, life, livelihood and economy. Development and economic activities came to a sudden halt. Panic and uncertainty loomed large in all sectors including development, business, economy, occupation and livelihood that created an unprecedented threat on fulfilment of the basic needs of people.

Bangladesh is one of the worst sufferers of the situation in South Asia. Lockdown and people's restriction on physical movement left a significant number of working people jobless and partially employed. Closure of educational institutions put children's education and academic life to a state of uncertainty. Health specialists and decision makers looked confused and helpless in combating the situation. Despite different measures taken, there are hardly any signs of improvement in the situation.

Total participants	Male	Female
30	26	4

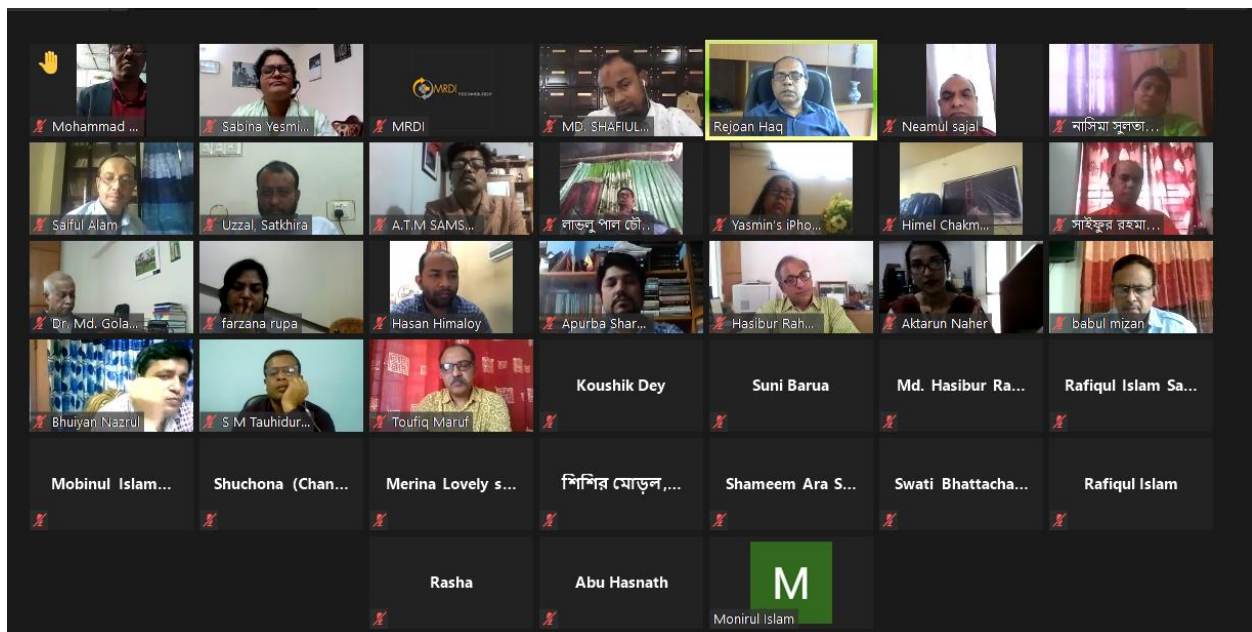
Like other sectors, media industry is facing the challenge of existence. Journalists are working amid high level of health risk to gather news for the media outlets. Reporters are hardly prepared to cover events and produce stories in the pandemic situation. A number of local media had to shut down due to absence of content and financial crisis. Spreading of disinformation and fake news over online and social media also disseminated wrong message to the media audiences. Despite all these obstacles journalists are working to deliver news to their audiences.

Presenting the keynote in the workshop *Shishir Moral*, Special Correspondent, Prothom Alo mentioned new terminologies have emerged with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Journalists need to be oriented with these technical terms properly. Source of reporting was also a crucial part in this whole period as the information were new and it had to be checked for authentication otherwise it would have created panic. Reporters identified some authentic sources for regular update. Bangladesh government has disseminated information through IEDCR from the very first day of this pandemic. Other remarkable sources were international media, World Health Organization, IDCR, Public health experts, ICDDR, Lancet, British Journal and Johns Hopkins University.

Some media houses have faced problems in getting information as they do not have reporters dedicated to health beat. Sometimes they got partial or wrong information that they cannot not verify. Apart from these, mental pressure, putting families under risk while covering the pandemic, decreasing circulation, fear of losing job etc. were some of the hurdles and worrying factors.

Efforts have been there to overcome the barriers. Prothom Alo built a five-member factchecking team and developed a guideline to help reporters produce stories during the pandemic. Other houses also took measures to combat infodemic and produce authentic reports through proper planning.

Toufiq Maruf, President, Bangladesh Health Reporters Forum discussed on the relation of trust between government and the media houses which is vital for authentic reporting. He mentioned that WHO appreciated Bangladesh’s health journalism in the challenging pandemic situation. *Jenia Kabir Shuchona*, Staff Reporter, Channel 24, mentioned misinformation and the unhealthy



competition amongst the news channels to provide ‘Breaking news’ were one of the challenges of the media industry in this period. During the pandemic situation *Farzana Rupa*, Special Correspondent, Ekattor TV, found doctors and journalists established professional solidarity by sharing information and knowledge to each other. *Professor Md. Golam Rahman*, former Chief Information Commissioner, observed that the journalists have failed to cover the pandemic scenario, and they were mostly providing day to day information. Social media’s role in this pandemic was very crucial and it played a vital role during this time. *Rejoanul Haq*, Head of News, Maasranga agreed media houses have already realized need for a designated health reporter.

Swati Bhattacharjee, Senior Assistant Editor. Ananda Bazar Patrika, Kolkata, explained that journalists are working in a vulnerable situation not only in the covid period but also in normal

scenario. She also shared that in India and other countries, governments are hiding information from the journalists because of political interest.

The discussion generated following recommendations:

- Central offices of every media houses can develop a guideline on reporting in the pandemic situation. They can also recommend which journal or website can be followed to understand the appropriate situation, cross check information and avoid misinformation.
- Discussion session can be organized for district level journalists on how to cover pandemic situation and what issues need to take into consideration.

Challenges and opportunities in Investigative Journalism

Investigative journalism contributes to freedom of expression and freedom of information. Despite limitations in capacity and opportunity, investigative journalism has the potentials to strengthen democratic process and social responsibility of the press. It contributes to combat social injustice and establish rule of law in the country. It exposes corruption at the local and national levels, irregularities and unlawful activities and corruption in both public and private service providing sectors.

Journalists are facing number of challenges in producing and publishing investigative reports. Absence of legal support by the media houses is one of the major factors that puts the journalist under threats, harassment and false lawsuit. Proper investigation always demands delegation, time and cost which in many cases are not allowed by the media houses.

Total participants	Male	Female
30	26	4

However, facing all the challenges and difficulties, some good investigative stories are being published, though they are not many in number. Also, there are some institutions giving award on best investigative stories to encourage the journalists.

Manjurul Ahsan Bulbul, Editor-in-chief, TV Today presented the key presentation in the seminar. Challenges of doing investigative reports may be seen from different angles. The public has constitutional right of freedom of expression, but no guarantee of freedom after the expression. Digital security act is seen as a major barrier. But there are many other acts, rules and regulations that are hampering such freedom. He referred to the loopholes of new, old and updated laws of Bangladesh. Legal protection and professional recognition are hardly available to broadcast journalists. Owners of media houses are also reluctant to adopt with a structural system.

Self-censorship & media ownership are creating complications. Owners has multiple identities, political and business interests which are affecting the investigative reporting.

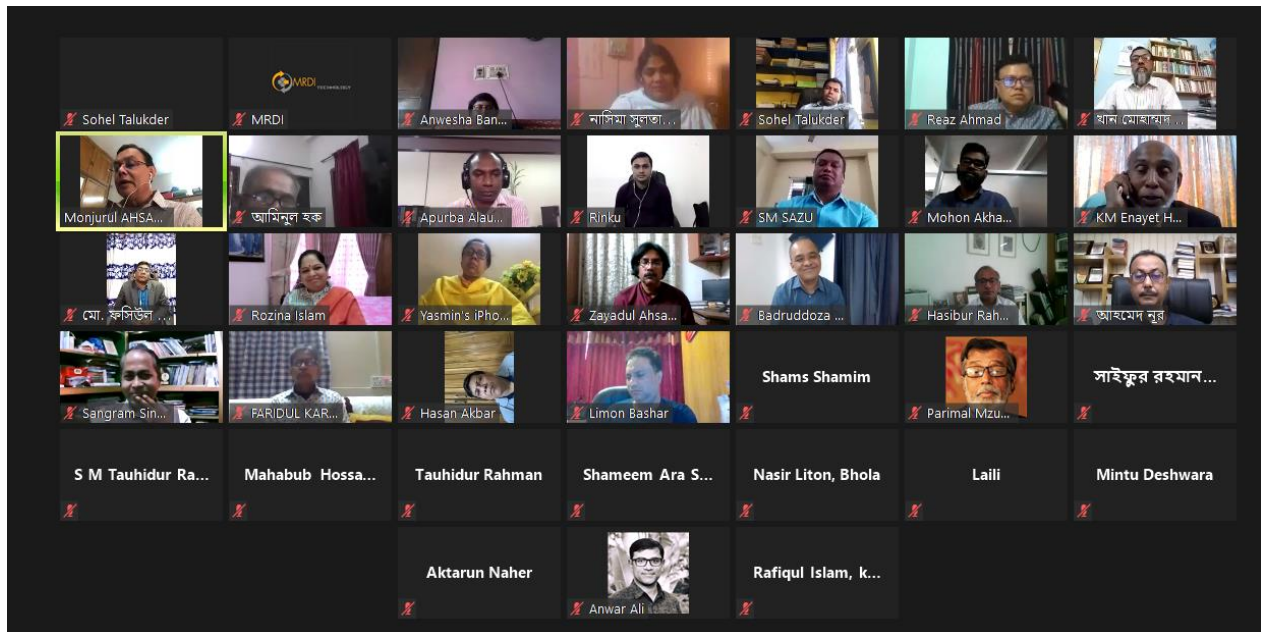
In newsrooms, lack of professional leadership is very common and their own conflicts affect the whole media industry. Where same person plays role as owner and editor will create challenge for the journalist.

From reporter's perspective, however, there is a positive scenario. Young reporters are very interested in investigative reporting now. But as the trend of investigative reporting is not that common yet, there are very few reporters who are devoted only to this which is becoming one

of the core problems. Reporters have multitasking responsibilities, so they cannot focus on only reporting. Financial issue is also a concern.

Lack of skilled journalists is a major problem. If there is no efficient leadership, young reporters tend to lose interest.

Most importantly, peer pressure from upper level is very crucial for publishing investigative reports. State, non- state actors work together sometimes against some reports. Legal problems also arise when it comes to investigative reporting. Various journalists' forums are also not that active to promote or support journalists if needed. Job security and unavailability is still a major concern for many journalists.



Zayedul Ahsan Pintu, Editor, DBC News, thinks that IJ is related to democracy and the challenges that were explained before cannot be overcome before next decade maybe. It is an old culture of power politics that hampers the journalists. Media has very low level of independence. 93% of the owners are editors without having any prior experience. *Badruddoza Babu*, Head of IJ Help Desk, MRDI, regretted the fact that the goodwill of journalism is being lost because of some journalists' tendency to please the authority and powerful people, they do not want to take the risk of not being in the list of their 'good book'. Not only in Bangladesh many countries like Malaysia, Russia, China etc. are dealing with worst situations when it comes to journalism. He is thankful that his mentors have let him learn everything about investigative journalism, which is a process and needs to be done with ethics. *Rogena Akter*, Senior Reporter, Prothom Alo, opined there are many scopes to work, many stories to produce, and the risks are part of journalism career. Teamwork is also needed, she mentioned. Expectations and reality are not the same, so reporters should keep all these in mind. *Apurba Alauddin*, Editor, Investigation Cell, Jamuna TV thinks it is becoming more tough day by day to produce investigative reports. There are many reports that are not being published. Difficulties arise without enough manpower and logistic support. There should be a common platform for investigative journalists. *Reaz Ahmad*, Executive Editor thinks that with trust, support, courage

and patience journalists of the country will make more investigative reports, and will overcome all the challenges.

Anwasha Banerjee, Assistant Editor, Ei Samay, Kolkata mentioned that in India the situation is similar, and even worse in some cases. There are investigative reports but most of those are unilateral and pre-made. Political issues are common but other than that no new issues or corruptions are coming up which is making investigative reports less important. In the name of national security many information are being hidden. Neutrality is not being maintained. Still there are many reports being produced but their standard is not at the desired level. Authorities are not taking any responsibilities on behalf of their journalists.

From the open discussion in the seminar, following recommendation surfaced:

- A platform needs to be developed through which journalists around the country can work for their investigative reporting independently.
- To facilitate the existing platforms continue their efforts for investigative journalism an investigative cell can be developed which will provide necessary technical and financial support.
- Media gatekeeper's sensitization programme needs to be organized to facilitate bring the way out of existing challenges in investigative journalism and create realization on the benefits of investigative reporting.
- Case studies focused on good investigative stories can be published to encourage the young journalists.
- Journalists outside Dhaka should be nurtured more for investigative journalism.

Gender sensitive reporting

The media plays an increasingly important role in shaping our thoughts and behaviors including perceptions of women and men. Still, the media reflects and sustains discriminatory attitudes to gender, failing to represent the voices of women or to report on such crucial concerns as gender-based discrimination, including violence against women. The fact remains also that women still have relatively little decision-making power inside media organizations.

Gender reports in media normally cover the issues like women repression, sexual harassment, family violence, killing and suicide. Success story of women and investigative reports on gender issues are hardly found in the media. Women's stories are published as surface reports mostly in the entertainment or women's page.

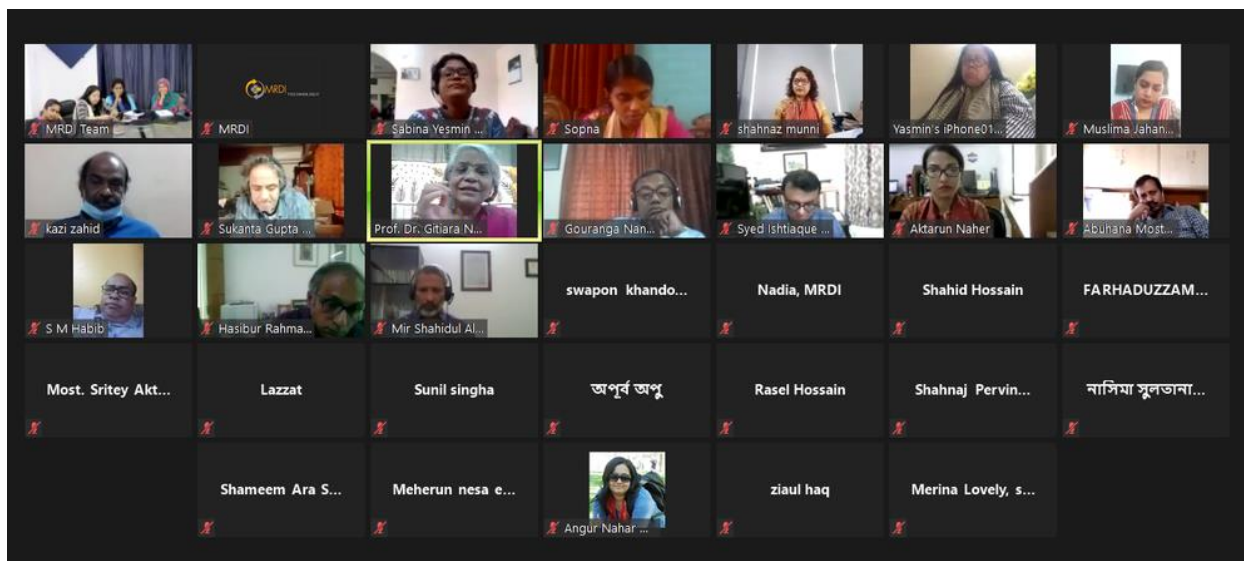
Total participants	Male	Female
29	16	13

Dr. Gitiara Nasreen, Professor, Department of Mass Communication & Journalism, Dhaka University presented the keynote in the workshop. She started the presentation with an analysis of some recent media stories seen through a gender lens. She brought up the timely theme of this year's International Women's Day, that is, choose to challenge which encourage to challenge the discriminating viewpoints of the society towards women. She mentioned that the society has positively changed in view of gender balancing and people now recognize the dignity of a transgender person, as the news of the first transgender anchor in Bangladeshi media drew global attention. Sharp reaction of people to the racist attitude of the British Royal Family also

proves that they are now questioning the traditional norms. But it is a matter of regret that our media still could not adapt with the paradigm shift and they are still governed by the age-old, faulty perception about gender.

She further explores this point by citing several examples where even mainstream media showed their bias towards the traditional gender outlook. When media should be an active agent of change, they are rather obstructing the change. There is a huge gap between the audience and the media decision maker who think their target audience is only the males even though MRDI's recent survey on media audience showed that a large percentage of the audience are women. In one hand we have a vibrant social media, where progressive point of view of the people are putting pressure on the traditional media to adapt the change, on the other hand, the traditional media are trying to adhere to a conservative position regarding gender issue.

However, she admitted that there is still a huge challenge to change the perception of the society to be a gender inclusive one. As an example, she showed the powerful image of the recently bailed Cartoonist Kishore, where he is photographed in tears. This photograph created a huge impact on the social media and there was controversy whether the photographer should take the photo while he was crying, whether it violated his dignity. She argued, while it is very positive that people are talking about journalistic ethics, but it is interesting to note that it takes a crying male figure in the photograph that can create such reaction. People never objects when watching women cry in front of camera. It is accepted that the women are weak, and crying is normal for them, but people cannot accept that even a man has feelings and should be allowed to express them by crying. There is a strong no-no to publish the photograph of a crying man. But it is high time that media act to deconstruct such biased view, Gitiara suggested.



Angur Nahar Monty, Joint News Editor, News24 expressed instead of improvement, the situation seems to be further deteriorating. Not only the media managers, but also the media owners should be gender sensitive. Social media is becoming a strong pressure group, and this is something we can be hopeful about. *Lazzat Enab Mahsi*, Deputy Editor, Prothom Alo emphasized

to understand the agenda of the media owners too, as they often dictate the strategy of a media outlet. They often ignore the importance developing capacity of journalists through training. *Shahnaz Munni*, Chief News Editor, News 24 stressed to be clear that gender sensitivity is not a matter for women only, rather men should be more concerned about it as it is their mindset which need to be changed. Women’s voice is less included in news report. Fair portrayal is also hardly found. And there is a language issue, offensive words should be excluded carefully. Media should do more to change these practices. *Syed Ishtiaque Reza*, Editor-in-Chief, GTV & sarabangla.net mentioned instead of blaming the media owners, media should self-criticize first. Media behaves like ignorant when it comes to gender sensitive reporting.

According to *Stella Paul*, International Journalist, Project officer and mentor at Internews, the common practice and trends of the media is very similar in the region, especially in India and Bangladesh as two neighboring countries. And the scenario is of course not very positive. But one thing we can be assured that we have already identified the problem, we know the challenges. Now we need a roadmap to solve the problem. We don’t often see ourselves as problem solvers, we rather wait for someone to do a miracle. But this is a faulty attitude, we all should give our best effort to contribute to bring the change. We need an inner circle in the media, who will work to sensitize the issue.

The seminar brought some recommendation through the open discussions’

- Media should act gender sensitively to ensure their survival.
- Journalists, editors and media managers should create an inner circle, a network amongst them who will work to sensitize the issue within the media organizations.
- News media should be smart enough to publish stories passed through gender lens.
- There should be combined effort to increase number of female journalists, especially in the district level.
- District level journalists should be trained more on gender sensitive reporting, especially the male journalists.
- To build up capable journalist, more institution should be established.

Use of RTI for objective reporting

Right to information Act 2009 came into execution in Bangladesh as a gleaming hope for the people, as it was thought to improve their lives using the information they need. With the government’s strategy to implement the law at every level of the society and activities by the civil society organizations, who also worked as a front liner campaigner for the act itself, RTIA did help a lot of people to ensure their access to information relevant to their lives. However, the act did not reach all the people as it was intended due to several reasons. While the government and other NGO's are trying hard to popularize the act, the other aspect, RTI in journalism, still remains unexplored.

Total participants	Male	Female
30	30	0

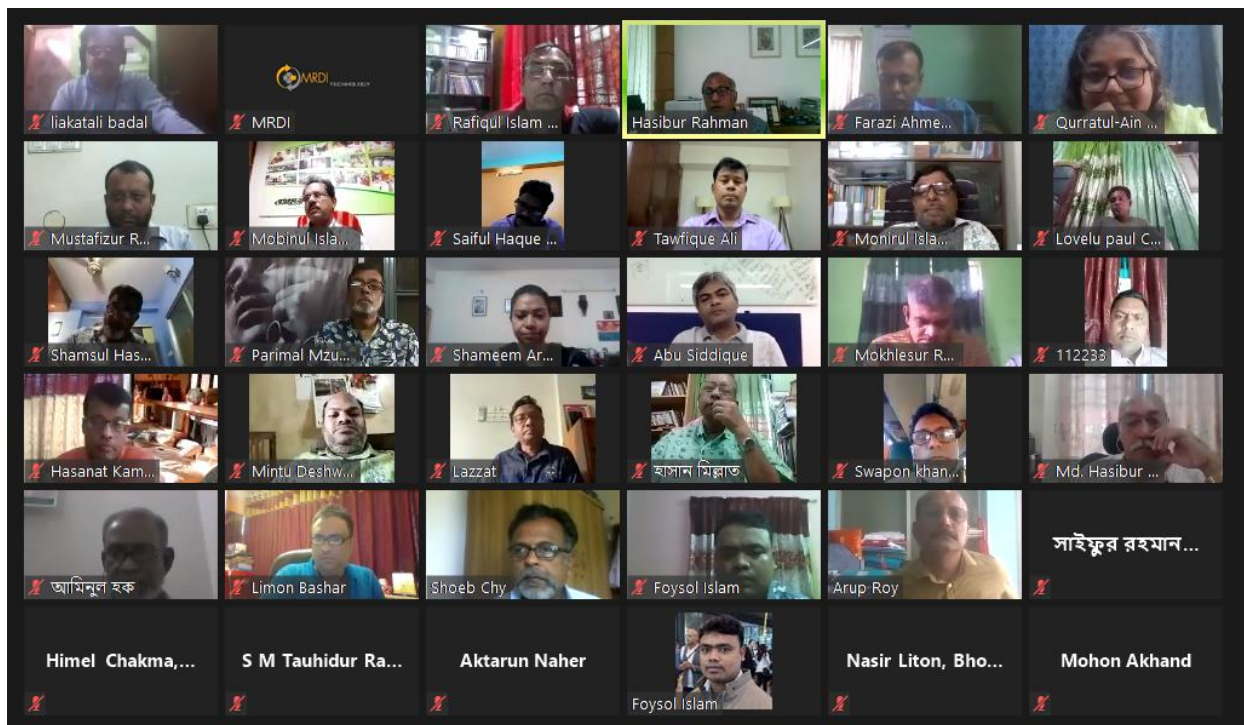
RTI Act can be very effectively used as a tool of investigation to produce objective media report. In neighboring India, right to information has become a strong source to the journalists, as found in the most recent example of filing an application to know in what area the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi took part in the movement to support the War of Independence of Bangladesh in 1971 as he claimed during his visit to the country on the eve of 50th anniversary of Bangladesh’s independence. It had become a headline the following day in the leading

newspapers and TV channels in both the countries. There are examples of breakthrough news reports which used RTI act to gather information that could not be accessed otherwise in Bangladesh too. But the extent it is used is very limited in regards to the actual potentials it has.

In the seminar *Qurratul Ain Tahmina*, Trainer and Journalist started her key presentation by defining objective report as a report based on facts. It is really difficult for a journalist to present the facts only, without being clouded by his/her own perception on the facts, she said. It is like walking on a very thin line. She explained three levels of media reporting. Conventionally a reporter is supposed to state the fact gathered from the source, without analyzing its implications. The information a reporter gathers, often is not verified in the first level. In the second level, s/he cross checks and verify the information. In the third level, the reporter probes deeper to find the true meaning of the fact and its' relevance to the people. Information can make the people take the right decision easily.

The strength of RTI is that it provides information. Because a reporter also seeks information, it is obvious that s/he can use the act to get the desired information. RTI is not an act to help the journalists in particular of course, she explained, but a main essence of the act is to disburse the information for the benefit of people. That is exactly what a reporter can do through his/her report, she emphasized.

In this regard, she referred to Shyamlal Yadav, the famous Indian journalist who took RTI as one of the major sources for his reporting from the beginning of the enactment of this law in India. She also discussed some examples from Bangladesh, where a reporter used RTI act to collect necessary information for well-planned, objective report.



Arup Roy, Staff Reporter, Prothom Alo, Savar has filed 324 RTI applications and 150 complaints. Even after appellate authority ordered to provide information, the designated officer refuses to give it. Arup urged the Information Commission to be more vigilant and take action against those who are reluctant to provide information. *Tawfique Ali*, Former Senior Reporter, The Daily Star emphasized on being focused, target oriented, persistent and determined as a journalist to get optimum benefit from RTI act. He mentioned an imaginary triangle to explain his view. The top angle of the triangle represents public interest, the other two RTI and journalism. RTI act is both a weapon and a refuge to a journalist, he said. *Abu Siddique*, Freelance Journalist reflected on his thrilling experience, where he also used his resources in the neighboring country to file RTI application there to get data on water flow, proves the extent RTI can help a reporter to get detailed information. *Lazzat Enab Mahsi*, Deputy Editor, Prothom Alo admitted the fact that it is not that easy to get information useful for a news report through RTI, as some journalist might have been thought when the act first came into being. There is no short cut way to a big investigation. He emphasized on the capacity building of the reporters regarding the use of RTI. He criticized the media houses for not giving enough time for big investigation and noted that lack of quality and objective investigative reports contributes to the challenge media is facing right now in Bangladesh. *Mobinul Islam Mobin*, Editor, Daily Gramer Kagoj mentioned RTI is a great tool for good journalism and reporters can use this to strengthen their news report. Sometimes, using RTI minimizes the risk as it seeks information direct from the authorities. Even if the reporter faces legal cases for any report, s/he can evidence of authenticity.

The seminar bough following recommendations.

- Continuous public discourse is needed to promote RTI.
- Government, Information Commission, NGOs and media should collaborate together to make RTI act more useful to the journalists.
- Information Commission should be more active in implementing RTI.
- List of designated officers of different government office should be made available, and updated regularly.
- Designated officers should be trained up so that the they can help the information seekers.
- Initiatives should be taken to inspire the media houses and journalists to use RTI more.
- Reporter should follow all the procedure patiently to get information, from application to appeal if needed.

ACTIVITIES UNDER OBJECTIVE TWO

IN-HOUSE TRAINING ON RTI FOR JOURNALISTS

The RTI Act has opened up opportunities for the journalists to gather information from authorities to develop in-depth and investigative reports for the media. Coverage of in-depth information by media will ensure transparency and accountability of the administration and the service providing authorities and thus contribute to reducing corruption and establishing good governance.

After the act was promulgated, a considerable number of applications by the media were filed with different authorities seeking information. Media produced reports using information

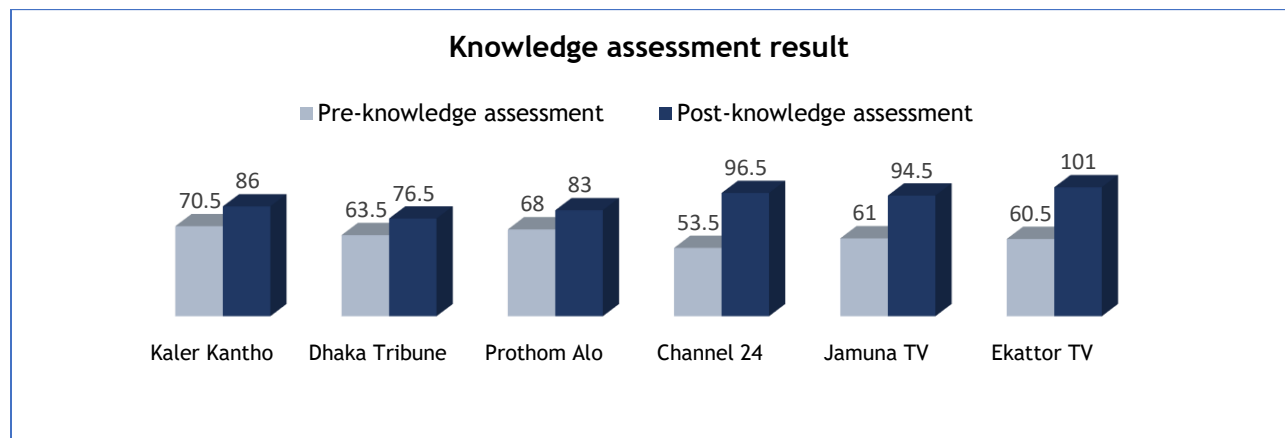
collected through the provision of the RTI Act. However, the act has so far failed to make a desired impact as it is not being used adequately by the mass or by journalists. It has been observed that RTI related news on events-based stories get routine media coverage.

With an aim to enhance capacity of journalist in producing authentic in-depth and investigative reports by using the RTI Act as a tool, six inhouse trainings were organized. Three for print media and three for TV media.

Total participants	Male	Female
71	62	9

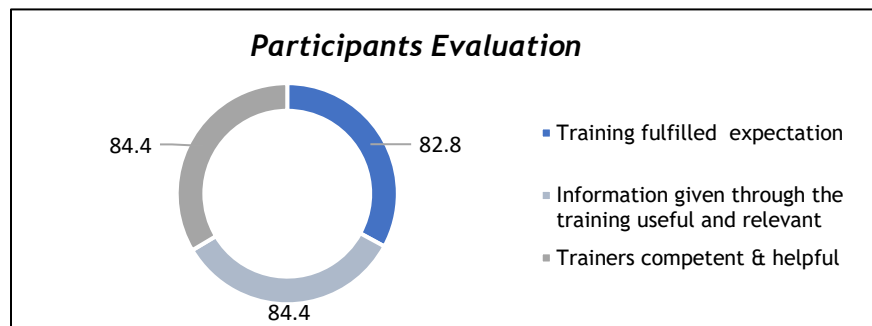


Participants enhanced their knowledge on basic feature on RTI acts and the process of RTI application, appeal and complaint submission. They also learned about why RTI can be a strong tool of investigation and uses of RTI for producing public interest reporting specially during covid-19 pandemic. Public procurement and procurement management system, important information in public procurement management, emergency measures in procurement agreement, why this information is important and access in this information & how to get these information also discussed throughout the sessions.



The assessment result found overall knowledge of the participants were increased. Participants developed 58 story ideas throughout the trainings.

Md. Mostafizur Rahman, Pabna correspondent of Ekattor TV hoped that after this training, he will be able to produce quality and informative reports for my organization. There are many irregularities in the government organizations, and he will try to make those organizations accountable through my reports. *Sharif Biswas* Kushtia correspondent of Channel-24 stated, “I have learned how to make special reports through using RTI, at the same time techniques of investigation which will bring change in my future reporting.”



As per evaluation, 83 percent participants agreed that the training fulfilled their expectation. 84 percent found the information given through the training useful & relevant and the trainers are competent & helpful.

Imran Hossain Rabbi, Sherpur correspondent of Channel 24 conveyed his gratitude to MRDI, and his office to give him the opportunity to take part in MRDI’s training, which was his long-standing desire. He hoped to use the learning from this training to fulfill his professional responsibilities.

PARTICIPATORY WORKSHOP AND NATIONAL CONSULTATION ON RTI

The civil society group ‘RTI Forum’ played a vital role in enacting the Right to Information Act 2009. Media also raised the demand for free flow of information that would help them unveil the truth before the audience in an objective manner. NGOs and CSOs have their stake in the RTI both from the demand and supply ends of information. Media, as part of the civil society and also as an independent entity has an important stake in the right of access to information in order to produce in-depth and investigative stories.

Even after more than ten years of enactment of the act, it is found that the public awareness and demand for information is quite far from the level of expectation despite different measures taken by the government and other agencies. Strong advocacy is needed to improve the situation. Optimism remains that the RTI can play a key role in promoting transparency and accountability if journalists and civil society actors can effectively use it. Their engagement with oversight bodies including the Information Commission could be a model for advocacy. The media-CSO coalition built under the Strengthening Independent Media project could be an effective platform for such advocacy.

Considering the context three participatory workshops and one national consultation were organized to identify the existing challenges and way-out future recommendations for future steps.

PARTICIPATORY WORKSHOP

Three participatory workshops were organized with an objective to find a road map on creating people’s demand for information and how these stakeholders can help each other in achieving the objective. Participants including editors of local dailies, journalists, NGO

Total participants	Male	Female
60	52	6

chief executives and head of journalism department of public universities from Rajshahi, Rangpur, Khulna, Barishal, Sylhet and Chattogram divisions took part in the discussions.

Dr. Ananya Raihan, member of RTI forum and CEO i-social gave an elaborate presentation in each workshop on the act, its key feature, uniqueness and how people can be benefitted from it. He focused on the commitment from the highest level of government to prevent corruption, which resulted, Information Commission is now jointly working with different stakeholders, CPTU has also taken initiative to ensure transparency, Coordination and reforms unit of the Cabinet Division is working to ensure transparency and accountability of government offices. Also, it monitors the grievance by the citizen, investigate and take measures. He also mentioned enactment of whistle blower protection acts and rules to protect information provider is another important initiative.

Martuza Ahmed, Chief Information Commissioner noted Right to Information Act is a very progressive & inclusive law for the people which brought a huge paradigm shift in the mindset. Before this law, Official Secrets Act was being practiced for almost 100 years. He assured based on the proposals, findings and recommendations generated from these workshops, the Information Commission will be able to prepare some action plans with MRDI, which will serve as a guideline for all and will be helpful for implementation of this Act. He also assured that The Information Commission, government and NGOs are working continuously to change the situation.

CHALLENGES IDENTIFIED FROM DIVISIONAL CONSULTATION

- RTI application process is still hampered as information on designated officer is not properly displayed at the offices. The names and addresses provided on the Information Commission's website are often not updated. Due to lack of awareness about their responsibilities, designated officers, in many cases delay the information disclosure process. Moreover, even after being directed by the Information Commission, there is a tendency of many organizations not to provide information.
- In most cases, it is observed that NGOs are formulating disclosure policies for the implementation of the Right to Information Act, but in practice it is not properly implemented. Many NGOs have not yet appointed their designated officers, and do not proactively disclose information of completed projects.
- Due to dependency on projects, NGOs are still lagging behind in RTI implementation. In most cases it is not possible for them to continue activities after the project period. But the Right to Information is not an issue of being confined to a time frame.
- There is a lack of interest by media houses for using the Right to Information Act. The time required for the application process creates barrier in preparing investigative reports. Getting required information following application, appeal and complaint process often reduces the relevance and usefulness. In many cases decision makers of the media houses have not shown their interest to invest time, human and financial resources for this process. Bearing transportation cost to attend hearing by the district correspondents is also a challenge.
- As media relies on advertising, in many cases it hinders the flow of information. Journalists also face lawsuits, threats, dismissals and outrage because of influential authorities are hardly aware about the RTI Act. For this reason, even if there is a need, the journalists are not interested in asking for information. There are examples, after

making the investigative report, the journalist had to change the media and later his report was published there.

- No significant activities by the RTI monitoring and supervision committee are found at district and divisional level. In many cases, the designated officers think no action will be taken against them even if they do not provide the information. Such mindset also hinders the flow of information.

RECOMMENDATION FROM THE CONSULTATION

FOR MEDIA

- Media can publish an analysis on the implementation of the Right to Information Act and the situation of the demand and the supply aspects. It will create awareness of the people about the current situation of RTI implementation.
- Evaluation report can be published to inform citizens about overall activities taken by the Information Commission.
- Analysis on GO-NGO initiatives for RTI implementation and its adequacy.
- To create awareness on RTI act and increase demand of RTI uses, media can promote effectiveness of RTI act and its consequences; importance of the act; uses of RTI act at different stages and benefits of RTI using.
- The success stories after using RTI act can be published to encourage others. At the same time, it will facilitate to reach the goal of the RTIA.
- There can be a separate page allocated for RTI act and relevant topics in the newspaper.
- Pro-active disclosure of all authorities can be published regularly.
- There could be separate helpdesk in the media houses for RTI.
- There could be special trainings for raising awareness about RTI.
- Editing policy should be RTI-friendly and RTI should be integrated in mainstream media.
- Journalist's organizations can be united to increase the use of RTI act.
- Investigative journalism's periphery can be increased by using RTI.

FOR NGO

- Necessary steps may be taken in collaboration with the regulatory bodies of NGOs to ensure compliance of Right to Information Act, implementation policies, appointment of designated officers and overall self-motivated disclosure of information. This will ensure transparency and accountability of NGOs and will help in effective implementation of the law.
- Positive mindset of authorities in providing information is required. The issue of people's right to information should be given priority instead of questioning the reason for seeking the information or the purpose for which it will be used.
- NGOs can arrange meetings before project period and also afterwards to share success stories to the media by which the community will also get all the information on time.
- RTI related rules and regulations should be disseminated properly.
- NGOs need to integrate RTI in their mainstream program.
- NGOs organize courtyard meetings and public gatherings as part of their project implementation. They can easily integrate RTI campaign in these initiatives.
- Information received through application of beneficiaries can also be circulated regularly to the media.

- NGOs can play responsible role to make the field level RTI monitoring and supervision committees more effective.
- To ensure people's access to information, the organizations should emphasize on proactive disclosure of information and proper implementation of information disclosure guideline.

MEDIA AND NGOs JOINT INITIATIVE

- In the field level NGO and journalists can make committees which will create a ground for mutual interaction and there will be a trustworthy issue. It will facilitate media to aware about NGO initiatives and dissemination of those information. Other stakeholders will also be able to keep updated on current situation and get guidance about necessary steps required for future.
- At local level people are still not fully aware about their rights and entitlements. Media-NGO jointly can prepare the list of authorities, services and eligibility of service recipients. It will facilitate people get services in future.
- NGOs, as a part of their projects can help beneficiaries to seek information. This information can be shared with journalists later, which will be a good source for investigative stories. These reports can bring the scenario of irregularities and corruptions. Decision makers will also be benefited to take necessary steps from this initiative.
- NGOs conduct their social audit at field level and the results can be shared with national and local news medias. At the same time, it will fulfill the people's demand for information.
- Monitoring committee can be formed with NGOs and journalists at Upazila and Union level to oversee the RTI applications and status of information receive. Report based on this will be sent to the Chief Information Commissioner twice in a year.
- Disadvantaged people's rights can be protected through RTIA.
- Threats from influential people can also be avoided by using RTIA

INFORMATION COMMISSION

- Coordinating and monitoring is needed on media-CSO joint initiatives taken at the field level.
- Information Commission can prepare issue wise lists of appropriate authorities which will facilitate information seekers to get required information.
- Locally many offices do not display information on the designated officer at a visible place. Also, information is not updated after transfer of DOs. Information Commission may take effective steps to update the database of DOs and display it on the website of the authority in coordination with division/district/upazila administration.
- Regular discussion can be organized among with media, NGOs and law enforcing agencies to analyze the existing challenges and what needs to be done to improve the situation. Information Commission can formulate a precise outline of work plan based on the recommendations generated from these discussions.
- Quarterly meeting with media gatekeepers can be organized to review the activities, success and future planning of Information Commission. It will increase the scope of regular reporting on RTI over media.

- The Information Commission may take steps to arrange regular programme through BTV and Bangladesh Betar on the Right to Information Act and what to do at the application-appeal-complaint stages. It will introduce the Right to Information Act among a wide audience.
- Monitor the RTI implementation status by RTI monitoring and supervision committees at division/district/upazila level as well as take new initiatives.
- To encourage investigative journalism using RTI as a tool, IC can announce regular reward for journalists.
- The annual report of the Information Commission may disclose the information of the field level journalists filed RTI application and attend hearing, which will encourage the media to use the Right to Information Act.
- Information of RTI applications and hearing attended by the journalists at field level can be included in the annual report of Information Commission.
- Necessary steps can be taken to create a database of journalists to show what kind of information was asked and what they received.
- Continuous monitoring on the result of RTI initiatives implemented by RTI implementing organization is required.
- Conduct intensive analysis on how the NGOs are complying with RTI rules and regulations.
- Arrange quarterly meetings to discuss success, lesson learned and future plans.

National Consultation

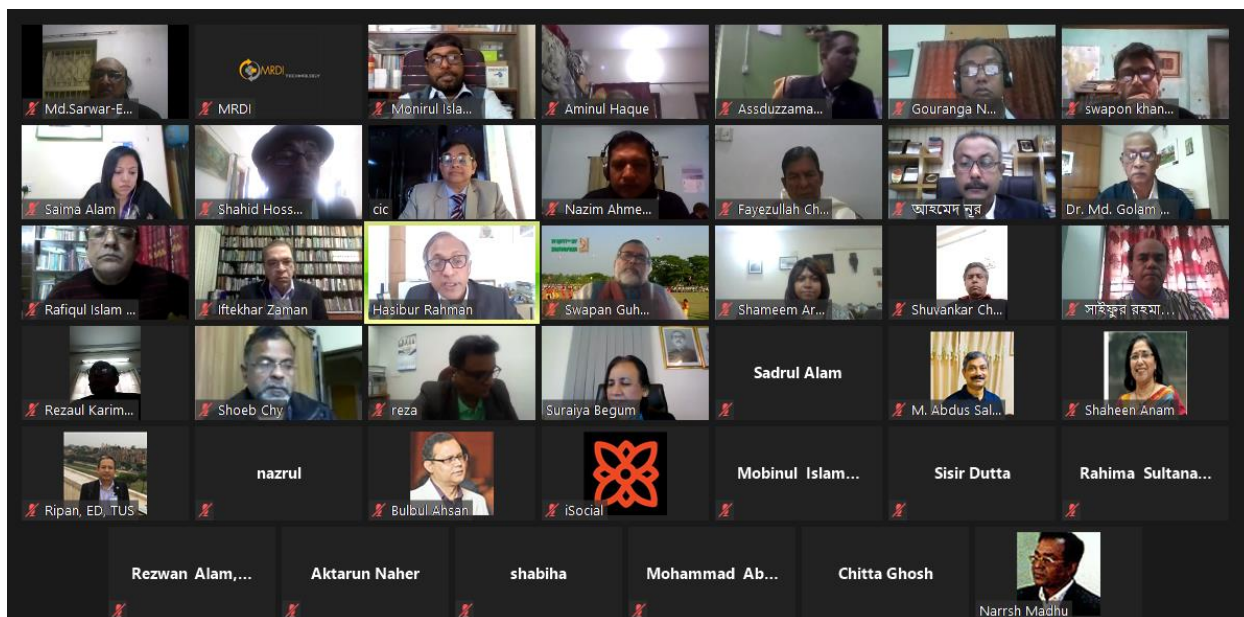
Sharing compiled findings and recommendations surfaced from the participatory workshops and present it before the forum for further inclusion national consultation was organized. Dr. Ananya Raihan gave the presentation followed by panel discussions and open remarks. He mentioned Right to Information Act as a powerful law to ensure accountability of government and non-government organizations as well as eradicate corruption from the country. Section 3 of the Act states that if the provisions of the Right to Information Act conflict with any other law, the Right to Information Act shall sustain. In other words, even if an information is restricted for people by any other law, there is an opportunity to get that information by applying the Right to Information Act. Any citizen can use RTI Act anytime to get required information from the authorities. Media & NGO can play a vital role for proper implementation of RTI act, he emphasized.

Total participants	Male	Female
30	28	2

Dr. Iftekharuzzaman, Executive Director, TIB emphasized on the needs to develop a platform with representation of Media and CSO to implement the recommendation properly which came through the discussion of divisional workshops. It will be lead by a convener where core committees can be formed with those who are interested to be involved in such noble initiative. Main role of this platform will be to facilitate the Government reach the target. *Manjurul Ahsan Bulbul*, Editor-in-chief, TV Today mentioned media wants to use RTI but they are facing problems. An intensive analysis is required here. IC can play important role here. *Shaheen Anam*, Executive Director, Manusher Jonno Foundation stressed, that besides taking separate projects on RTI, it should be integrated in every project as a cross-cutting issue. *Professor Md. Golam Rahman*, Former Information Commissioner said, The Information Commission is an

independent body. So, it has to carry on with that spirit. People need to be encouraged to make more use of the Right to Information Act. The media can create coverage of RTI law enforcement.

Suraiya Begum NDC, Information Commissioner mentioned Information Commission is working for implementation of RTI Act. It has already reached upazila level to create awareness among mass people. IC also organized training for government officials, NGO and journalists. Appraising this initiative, she mentioned all of us are working towards the same objective. Media, NGO or government officials all are looking for good governance, transparent & accountable society. Information commission will always welcome the initiative facilitating the implementation of RTI act and work combinedly to overcome the challenges. *Martuza Ahmed*, Chief Information Commissioner stressed, IC believes that proactive disclosure is the rule, secrecy is not the culture anymore. Information Commission will play as the safeguard for the citizen in regard to implementing and popularizing RTI Act in everyday life and will provide all kinds of assistance in this work.



Open discussion of the consultation raised some recommendation for future steps.

- A network or platform needs to develop at central, divisional and district levels to do advocacy and lobby in following areas:
 - Facilitate Information Commission to act more effectively
 - Increase RTI campaigning through media
 - Monitor the role of NGO/CSO to create awareness among citizen
 - Coordinate central and local level media and NGOs to implement RTI Act.
- RTI implementation action plan should be developed in an integrated way which could be monitored by RTI monitoring and supervision committees at divisional, district and upazila levels.
- It is necessary to determine who will be responsible for the implementation of the action plan, as well as the financial support for the implementation of the action plan needs to be specified.

- Monitoring is needed on the activities at the local and national levels to ensure the law is being implemented properly.
- Information Commission should take the coordination role to implement the action plan.
- Comprehensive assessment needs to be conducted to identify what have been done so far for RTI implementation.
- One survey can be conducted on who applied for RTI, who got information, who was refused, participation of media/NGOs and how RTI was acknowledged by mass people.
- Information Commission should be more functional.

Action Plan

Bridging Media and Civil Society for effective use of RTI Act

MRDI developed RTI action plan based on the recommendations generated from the consultations to facilitate Information Commission in taking necessary action for ensuring effective use of RTI act.

The strategic objective of the plan is to strengthen advocacy for promoting the preamble and features of RTI Act and contribute to better governance and accountability by developing linkage and collaboration between media and civil society and using the act as a tool, for bringing following results:

1. The situation of environment in terms of governance, accountability and transparency improved in the community through media-civil society collaboration
2. Authorities more supportive to disclose information
3. People inspired to seek information using RTI Act through RTI success stories
4. Vibrant monitoring and supervision committees on RTI implementation

Achieving above results the plan finalized a set of activities with its milestone. It proposed the timeframe for 2021-2024. The plan clearly mentioned responsibilities of each activity. Indicators and sources of measuring results were identified.

The action plan has been submitted to the Information Commission for taking further steps.

SUSTAINABILITY

Increasing effective use of RTI act by the media and civil society implemented by MRDI in partnership with Internews has successfully completed its project duration. On this eventful journey, it facilitated over hundreds of journalists to build their capacity in investigative reporting using RTI act and data journalism. Journalists were taught about the process of RTI application and how to link it with future story planning. This learning will facilitate them to bring in-depth and qualitative stories, through fellowship programme on data journalism journalists got experienced of data handling and converting it into stories. The impact of training has already begun to show.

Participants are using knowledge received from the training and getting professional success. According to Farhana Huq Nila, Senior Reporter, News Now Bangla.com “I did a special report

after finishing MRDI Data Journalism training. I have made a database, and prepared chart & graph with the information. Seeing one announcement of GIJN, I sent the [news link](#) and applied to Asia democracy chronicles. They have selected my report. Thank for organizing this beautiful training which has given me the opportunity to participate.”

Prothom Alo published an [editorial](#) after publishing the fellowship stories of its pabna correspondents which is one of the big achievements of this programme.

The meta [data repository](#) developed under the project based on potential sectors (broad sectors) of interest along with their respective sub-categories will be useful to various stakeholders, particularly for the media house and journalists to get different useful data under one platform.

Implementation of RTI action plan submitted to the Information Commission will be able to bring visible changes in RTI implementation and facilitate on ensuring peoples access to information. It will also contribute to achieve the SDG goal 16.10.