

Project Completion Report Year Five

# Improving Qualitative Journalism in Bangladesh, Phase II

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**Background:**

Journalism in Bangladesh has experienced remarkable growth in recent years, with a significant increase in both the number of news outlets and journalists. However, this rapid expansion has made it difficult to accurately track the total numbers. As of May 31, 2024, the Department of Film and Publication (DFP), under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, reported over 40 television channels and 3,270 registered newspapers, of which 708 are media enlisted. Additionally, more than 170 online news portals are publishing news regularly. Out of 1,340 registered daily newspapers, 546 are published from Dhaka Metropolitan City alone. Around 56 television channels including state owned 4 were permitted by the Government of Bangladesh as of 2023, of which 36 are currently on air, 6 television channels have been taken off air and 10 are upcoming. Despite this proliferation, concerns about the quality and trustworthiness of many outlets remain prevalent.

The primary challenges stem from a shortage of skilled team leaders, editors, and managers, compounded by the ownership structures of these news outlets. Additionally, many newsrooms are staffed by relatively young reporters who often lack proper training and experience.

To address these issues, there is a need for initiatives aimed at building the capacity of journalists and newsrooms as well, thereby improving the overall quality of journalism in Bangladesh. It is crucial to support the production of high-quality, in-depth and investigative reports that serve the public interest. Furthermore, addressing issues such as the safety and security of journalists, and the complex relationships between media ownership, politics, and business is essential for ensuring quality journalism.

The project aims to empower Bangladeshi news outlets to produce quality reports that hold political and economic power accountable, enhance transparency, governance, democracy, and accountability, and reduce corruption. By focusing on critical areas such as environment and climate change, diversity and gender equality, and poverty, the project seeks to restore public trust in journalism and boost revenue streams for media outlets.

Given the complex media landscape in Bangladesh, the project ‘Improving Qualitative Journalism in Bangladesh,’ jointly implemented by Fojo Media Institute and MRDI, was designed to elevate the overall standard of journalism with a specific emphasis on in-depth and investigative reporting. As the second phase of the project successfully concludes its final year, planning is underway for its first year of third phase.

**Project period:**

Duration of the year five was September 2023 - August 2024.

**Activities performed:**

The fifth year in Phase II of the IQJB project had implemented advocacy, and capacity building activities to improve the situation of quality journalism and enhancing internal capacity building of the individual journalists and news outlets.

**Activity-1: Investigative Journalism Partnership (IJP)**

Under the IJP programme this year, seven partnerships were active, including four newspapers, two TV channels, and one online news portal. These outlets received support through training and workshops to enhance their reporters' skills, and mentoring support resulting in the production of 25 stories.

One of the partners have received support from the project to assess its business viability through an extensive audience survey where an international consultant was engaged by the partner organization Fojo, and gave his thoughts on the project's future, summary and recommendations which will guide the newspaper to develop a business plan and strategy for introducing a paywall by 2027.

Two popular TV channels were supported to improve the quality of their story production. One of them received a 10-day in-house training led by an experienced international investigative journalist, focusing on investigative techniques and improving an existing show and the other one got local expert support for story production. The project worked with both the TV station to explore how they can improve their digital platforms for business sustainability through consultation and review of existing data.

A Bangla daily completed its partnership with workshops on investigative reporting and the Right to Information Act. Additionally, a climate-focused news portal produced an investigative story. Two more newspapers, one national and one local, signed the partnership and started working on the capacity building and investigative report production.

**Activity-2: Investigative Journalism Helpdesk**

The Investigative Journalism Helpdesk remained active throughout the year, offering direct support to journalists on 109 occasions to 34 journalists, facilitating the production of 20 in-depth and quality reports. Reporters from TV, online platforms, and newspapers benefited from the helpdesk's services, during the project year, averaging production of five reports per quarter.

**Activity-3: Mentorship Training for Women Journalists**

A four-day residential training for women journalists was held from May 6-9, 2024, at the CCDB HOPE Centre in Savar, Dhaka, as part of a mentorship program to encourage them in quality journalism. Twelve young female journalists from print, online news portals, television, and digital platforms attended the training, nominated by their respective news managers.



Through this training the young women journalists having 2-5 years' experience have learned basic journalistic standards, developed an understanding of journalism ethics, and use of the RTI Act for public interest journalism. They were encouraged to think innovatively and learned how to refine reports, verify documents, and craft compelling narratives, approaching stories with fresh perspectives and emotions, and equipped with basic skills in journalism.

The participants developed their story ideas during the training and, after returning from the training, finalized their story pitches in consultation with their respective mentors and approved by their newsroom. Finally, they produced, and the respective news outlets published their planned stories.



#### **Activity-4: Visual Reporting Boot Camp**

A four-day boot camp was held targeting 12 young reporters from different newspapers, television channels, and online news portals at CCDB HOPE Centre, Savar from 30 October to 2 November 2023. Participants were selected through an open call considering their experience, and stories they have previously produced. It was initially planned as a TV Reporting Boot Camp but was turned into a Visual Reporting Boot Camp to accommodate all reporters engaged in visual journalism as most of the newsrooms are now in the process of transformation to multi-media journalism, and multi-tasking skills are essential for



journalists in the current scenario. Considering the situation, the MRDI project team worked with experts to design the training and tried to provide a solid hands-on understanding of the basic elements of visual reporting, idea generation techniques, research and planning, source, spot and live reporting, shots & sound, interview techniques, and storytelling methods.

The participants got an opportunity to produce a short visual production as an assignment based on the interview and footage they collected, which they presented in groups afterwards. Lastly, participants shared their ideas with their mentors to make a visual story and discussed how to plan, pitch, and prepare for the stories. From the idea generation session, they were assigned to select their stories and send it back to the mentors with the approval of concerned news outlets.

In the follow-up boot camp, the visual productions of all 12 participants were finalized after reviewing intensively by the experts and mentors gave their feedback. The reporters



received training on scriptwriting, information verification, journalism ethics, incorporating gender perspectives, simplifying numerical data, using graphics, applying the RTI Act, and improving their on-camera presence. They were also encouraged to pursue impactful journalistic work. Upon returning

from the follow-up training, all 12 participants successfully published their visual stories in their respective news outlets.

#### Activity-5: Media Monitoring

The media monitoring team strengthens the organization by collecting relevant data on targeted issues from selected news outlets. The team monitors 15 national news outlets including 7 newspapers, 5 televisions, and 3 online news portals. Data generated from the media monitoring will be utilized to assess stories produced under this project, ethical violation on gender, identify spaces for different development agenda, and how the media is covering these issues.

Sl.	Newspapers	Sl.	TV Channels & Online Portals
1	Prothom Alo	8	Somoy TV
2	The Daily Ittefaq	9	Jamuna TV
3	Samakal	10	Ekattor TV
4	Kaler kantha	11	Maasranga TV
5	The Daily Star	12	Channel 24
6	The Business Standard	13	<i>Bdnews24.com</i>
7	New Age	14	Prothom Alo Online
		15	Somoy TV Online

#### Activity-6: RTI Helpdesk

The RTI Helpdesk provided support to journalists and other information seekers around the country that includes identifying authorities for filing application and appeal, facilitated applicant to fill-up application, appeal, and complaint forms. A total of 399 instances of support were provided, of which 54 for applications, 23 for appeals and 10 for complaints and 311 others providing general information. 55 journalists sought assistance on the Right to Information (RTI) Act including applications, appeals, and complaints. A dedicated official is assigned to operate the desk through a hotline number from Sunday to Thursday during office hours.

#### Activity-7: GIJN Bangla

GIJN Bangla continues to provide valuable knowledge, resources and toolkits to journalists, academics, and students as the most effective and cutting-edge resource hub since its inception. GIJN Bangla publishes and discusses guides, tip sheets, tools and techniques of modern journalism and remarkable examples of investigative journalism, fellowship, grants, and training related information to enhance the capacity of Bangla speaking journalists.

During the reporting period, a total of 77 articles and 12 newsletters were produced by GIJN Bangla. Facebook and Twitter pages of GIJN Bangla are closely followed by around 11 thousand of followers.

### **Activity-8: Launching of Television News Reporting Online Course**

The online training course on TV News Reporting was launched on the MRDI e-learning platform on 14 December 2023 with a virtual announcement on the social media pages. There was an opening session, where the coordinator of the course, trainers and technical team attended and shared their experiences of producing the course.

The Bangla-speaking users including journalists and students can enrol and pursue the course free of cost from all over the world. The course contains 20 lessons related to TV news reporting in 27 videos which were developed by six prominent experts and journalists.

Since its launching, 1,165 users have enrolled in the online course with 9% female, among them 223 users completed the course and awarded certificate with achieving at least 70% marks.

### **Activity-9: Publication**

At the end of the last project year 'The Global Investigative Journalism Casebook' an investigative journalism handbook, originally a publication of UNESCO was translated and published with the title '*Anusandhani Sangbadikatar Casebook*'. The handbook is distributed among the editors, media gatekeepers, reporters, development partners and CSOs.

### **Activity-10: Gender Advocacy and Capacity Building**

#### **Gender Charter of Commitment**

MRDI has initiated the process of developing a gender charter of commitment for Bangladeshi news media to change the existing norms and attitudes that reinforce gender role stereotypes and bring a gender transformative approach in the newsroom. A ten-member working group led by Dr. Gitiara Nasreen, Professor, Department of Mass Communication and Journalism from University of Dhaka and other members of the team are by profession journalists, retired judge, university professor, representative from civil society organization, social scientist, and rights activist to develop the charter has been formed.

#### *Gender Charter Working Group Meeting*

Nine working group meetings were held in the last project year, starting from 21 November 2023, with an objective to finalize the scope of work of the working group and agree on the definition of gender. The other meetings mapped the stakeholders, fixed timeline, distributed responsibilities, set the methodologies, reviewed and finalized FGD and KII questions and reviewed progress of work time to time. Initially it was planned that some key informants will be interviewed separately. But, after completion of the FGD sessions constraint of time due to the country situation these interviews were not taken. The informants were covered through the FGDs.

#### *Focus Group Discussion (FGD) on Developing Gender Charter of Commitment*

As part of the process, a total of 15 FGD sessions were organized both in Dhaka and outside, where a total of 132 participants, representing stakeholders identified by the working group including news media owners, editors, publishers, academics, news media gatekeepers, journalists, journalist leaders, development workers working on gender and diverse identities, members of civil society and news media consumers. One FGD was planned for



the government officials under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, which could not be organized due to the country situation.

### Inspiring sessions at university level



Aiming to inspire female journalism students to pursue journalism as a career and prepare them to take the challenge, the project has initiated a series of sessions with a private and a public university as a pilot initiative. Expectations of the participants regarding topic for discussion and name of journalist as facilitator were identified through a questionnaire in Google form.



A total of 11 sessions were organized with the selected female students from the Journalism and Media Studies Department of both Jahangirnagar University (JU) and University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB). As part of this initiative, seven female journalists conducted different sessions for female students of separate groups from the universities. The sessions covered sharing of experiences of challenges of the career, achievements and their growth. They also answered different questions from the female students of the department, who

want to take journalism as a career. 16 students from ULAB and 20 from JU participated in the series of sessions.

### **Mental Health Support for Women Journalists**

To create a safe space for women journalists to share their experiences, build the capacity of a group of women journalists as para counsellors and provide professional help for women journalists who are experiencing emotional stress, trauma, anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the project took support of a mental health expert for counselling. Roufun Naher, Assistant Professor at the Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology, University of Dhaka, provided training to five selected women journalists for this purpose.



The first step of this initiative is to train a group of para-counsellors from among the female journalists, who will work as the first responder. To develop the module of the training, a challenge-identification meeting was held on 18 January 2024 at MRDI. Nine working women journalists from different news outlets participated in the meeting moderated by the expert Roufun Naher.

A four-day residential workshop on mental health for women journalists was held from April 2 to 5, 2024 at the CCDB HOPE Centre in Savar, Dhaka, aimed at enhancing skills to provide emotional support to female journalists in Bangladesh. Five experienced female journalists participated in this training to become para counsellors (empathic listener) throughout the intensive program. The objective of the programme is to equip the participants with crucial skills for effectively supporting individuals in their needs and mental health.

The 5 women journalists were trained on essential counselling techniques to enable them to offer emotional and mental support to the women journalists who are suffering from mental stress and trauma or have the potential of such syndrome. By covering foundational concepts, advanced communication strategies, cultural sensitivity, and self-care practices, the program ensured the attendees were thoroughly prepared to deliver compassionate

assistance. As a result of the four-day comprehensive training, they were committed to themselves to create a positive impact on their professional roles and the emotional well-being of those who seek support.

As a part of the mental health support initiative, four separate orientation sessions were organized for women journalists in Dhaka during May to August 2024. The sessions were jointly conducted by the 5 journalists, who have been trained to provide initial support to their peer journalists. A total of 67 women journalists, including staff reporters, senior reporters, senior sub-editors, sub-editors, broadcast journalists, and freelance journalists participated in the half-day long programs in partnership with Women Journalists Network, Bangladesh (WJNB), Bangladesh Nari Sangbadik Kendra and Dhaka Reporters Unity (DRU). Journalists who are experiencing emotional stress, trauma, anxiety, depression, and PTSD can reach out to the five journalists at any time, and also get professional support from the experts if required.

Apart from the group session, 27 counselling sessions were provided to the journalists for stress and trauma management. This service was made available to both male and female journalists in and outside Dhaka through online and in-person counselling in the context of political movement and unrest.



#### **Activity-11: Automation of MRDI’s administration and financial procedure**

The automation of MRDI's administration and financial procedures is moving forward with the implementation of Microsoft Dynamic 365 Business Central Essential through BizzNtek Limited. The ongoing collaboration involves detailed requirement gathering, with MRDI making presentations to ensure the ERP system covers all key operational areas, including finance, HR, procurement, and asset management. The current focus is on delivery of milestone 2, which emphasizes the base setup along with finance and accounting management.

The ERP system being implemented will encompass key functions such as financial and accounting management, petty cash handling, VAT & tax management, human resources & payroll management, attendance & staff movement tracking, fixed assets management, procurement, and store management.

#### **Activity-12: MRDI Strategic Plan Review Workshop**

A four-day workshop on MRDI strategic plan review was organized in the Sundarbans, Khulna from 12-15 January 2024 as a part of the organizational development of MRDI, where all the staffs participated. Apart from evaluating the operation plan, the workshop also served the purpose of orientation on its strategy documents for all the staff, as there are some new

members in the team. It also focused on the lessons learnt during the previous year and tried to evaluate what has been achieved.

Performance and actions on 10 milestone plans were presented followed by open discussions. Divided into groups, the participants worked on their perception of MRDI and its pathway. In addition to reflection on the performances, the discussions identified challenges and tried to find remedies for improvement. During the workshop days in the world's largest mangrove forest, the trip was full of fun with exploring nature and helped to refresh the team to march forward with a strong bonding.



### **Activity-13: Reduce Gap Between Classroom and Newsroom**

With a vision to enhance synergy between classroom and newsroom by providing support for a course and factcheck lab, expand the level of knowledge about the practical world and inspire female journalism students to take journalism as a career, MRDI signed an MoU with Journalism and Media Studies department of Jahangirnagar University on 10 January 2024.

Developing a course outline on 'Digital Literacy and Fact-Checking' for the undergraduate program and establishing a fact-checking lab were initiated in the Journalism and Media Studies department of Jahangirnagar University with support from MRDI.

The course and the lab are designed to equip students with knowledge and skills in digital literacy and fact-checking, providing them with the latest techniques to identify dis/misinformation on digital platforms. The project supported the department to set up a factchecking lab with 12 desktop computers, software and accessories.

Aiming to inspire female journalism students to pursue journalism as a career and prepare them to take the challenge, the department organized five special lectures by eminent journalists on various topics, attended by 236 students, 50% of whom were female.

As a part of the support to the department, the National Conference 2023 on Journalism, Media, and Communication was jointly organized by the Department of Journalism and Media Studies at Jahangirnagar University and MRDI, from 3-4 October 2023, at the university campus. The conference focused on the evolving landscape of journalism, media, and communication in Bangladesh, addressing challenges such as media ethics, digital transformation, misinformation, and the future of journalism. It provided a platform for scholars, journalists and activists to share research findings with 26 papers presented on different topics.

The conference was inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Md Nurul Alam, Vice-Chancellor of Jahangirnagar University, with Swedish Ambassador Alexandra Berg von Linde as the chief guest. Special guests included Prof. Dr. Md. Mozammel Hoque, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, and Hasibur Rahman, Executive Director of MRDI. Keynote discussions centered on “Emerging Challenges and Opportunities in Journalism,” with speakers addressing issues such as disinformation, AI, and the need for enhanced data analysis skills in journalism.



A special session on October 4 brought together academics and industry professionals to discuss ways to bridge the gap between journalism education and newsroom practices. Moderated by Hasibur Rahman, the session explored the challenges behind this gap, leading to suggestions for future collaboration.

The conference concluded with a commitment to continue dialogue and future initiatives to strengthen journalism in Bangladesh. An academic journal, featuring selected research papers from the conference was published by the Department of Journalism and Media Studies under the initiative.

Participants	Male	Female	Total
Paper presenters	14	12	26
Conference attendees	28	20	48
Academia and journalists	19	2	21

**Challenges:**

- Due to the political unrest ahead of the national election and the recent students' movement for quota reform in government jobs, the project team had to postpone some activities as well as delay its implementation.
- There are few female reporters and editors in the news outlets and most of them do not get the opportunity to showcase their strength of producing quality in-depth stories which created challenge in ensuring equal gender representation in the programme.

**Sustainability:**

- More opportunities have been created for young journalists, including women, through boot camps to enhance capacity and increase quality of news production.
- Enrolment in the online courses and engagement in the GIJN Bangla in social media and web portal is a significant indicator of the sustainability of the project efforts.
- Requests from the private and public universities to develop course curriculum with modern techniques and tools in partnership with the organizations results in the sustainability of the efforts.
- Efforts for an enabling and transformative environment for mainstreaming gender equity and equality in presence and content of news media will create an opportunity for a gender-conducive environment in Bangladeshi news media landscape.
- The mental health support initiative has created awareness among journalists on mental challenges and trauma that will push them towards a space for working with a sound mental state, thus contribute to improving quality of journalism.