

# Gender equality for sustainable development: Analysis of local journalists' role in Bangladesh<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Gender discrimination turns women and girls into a part of a marginalized community. As a traditional value-centric and gender biased society, people in Bangladesh undervalue the contribution of women in family and community. Goal five of the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), nevertheless, calls directly for achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls. Some analysts also intend that gender equality is connected with achieving all the 17 goals of SDGs. As such, promoting gender equality through media portrayal is a key to the sustainable development of Bangladesh. Different literature also focused on media professionals' responsibilities for eliminating gender-based discrimination. However, media mainly give more concentration on the central or core level issues of society. Thus, the representation of local or peripheral gender issues in media remains poor. Media professionals, local journalists in particular, could play a significant role in promoting local gender equality issues. Under the given context this study aims to analyze to what extent the local journalists play roles in achieving gender equality for sustainable development. Incorporating a multi-level social ecological framework, this study adopted both the quantitative and qualitative research approaches. Employing convenience sampling, 32 local journalists from different media in Chittagong city, a Southeastern coastal city of Bangladesh, were surveyed. In addition, five in-depth interviews from gender and media analysts were taken

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using purposive sampling. The findings of the study demonstrated that based on journalistic principles a significant portion of local journalists plays a positive role to promote local gender issues from the individual level to the policy level. Thus, they accelerate the course of achieving sustainable development goals. This study also suggests guidelines for the policymakers to use local journalists for promoting gender equality at the local level.

## **Keywords**

Bangladesh, gender equality, local journalists, SDGs, SEM.

## **Introduction**

The importance of gender equality, women's empowerment, and the realization of women's rights in achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs) have been increasingly recognized in recent decades (UN Women, 2014). But surprisingly, gender-based discrimination and inequalities are still very much apparent in many developing societies, although their governments are working to overcome the challenge (Bayeh, 2016). In these unprivileged societies, unfortunately, women and girls are considered marginalized communities who are deprived of their basic human rights and opportunities. As a patriarchal value-centric and gender biased traditional society, it is a common scenario in the economic and social system of Bangladesh (Farhana & Stephen, 2019). In the country, gender differences, resulting from social restrictions and patriarchal norms and traditions, are still in existence in most families. Compared to the core level (e.g. urban areas), the condition is relatively more severe in unprivileged peripheral or local level (e.g. rural areas) of the country (Karim et. al., 2018).

As gender equality is a human rights principle, a precondition for sustainable people-centered development and it is a goal in and of itself (UNESCO, 2019), therefore, achieving gender equality at the marginalized rural or local level of Bangladesh has become the main concern in terms of development initiatives. Goal five of the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in this perspective, calls directly for achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls in all spheres of society. Furthermore, some studies and papers also intend that achieving gender equality is connected with achieving all the 17 goals of SDGs and it accelerates various aspects of sustainable development (Dugarova, 2018; Panda, 2019).

However, for achieving gender equality and empowering women, media professionals as leading characters should provide a balanced portrayal of women and girls' issues on media. They can promote sustainable development

in society through women-centric media coverage in a proper manner. Realizing the significance of gender equality and women empowerment for accelerating sustainable development, a number of international bodies focused on the media's responsibilities for raising awareness about gender-based discrimination. For instance, the Global Alliance on Media and Gender (GAMAG) at a conference of the International Association for Media and Communication Research has emphasized the importance of promoting gender equality through mass media (UNESCO, 2016). Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women has also suggested developing strategies for the media to ensure that women's needs and concerns are properly reflected and promoting balanced and diverse portrayals of women by the media (UN, 1995). But, the media mainly emphasize the core level subjects and issues of society. Thus, the representation of local or peripheral gender issues in media remains poor.

Media professionals, particularly, local journalists as the change agent could play a significant role to promote local gender issues for equal access of marginal women to opportunities like education, health care, decent work, decision making, and political, social and economic participation. A nationwide survey on Chinese journalists' perceptions and attitudes about gender equality and professional practices revealed 83.2% of the respondents believe that media as well as journalists can play an important role in promoting gender equality (Chen, 2017). Moreover, Narayana & Ahamad (2016) suggested that the powerful and positive role the media can play in women empowerment and gender equality should be supported and further explored.

Bangladesh has made significant progress in the last two decades in improving the lives of women and girls and reducing gender gaps. Despite efforts by the government and non-governmental bodies to ensure gender equality in all spheres of society, many women at the local level of Bangladesh are still struggling to establish their rights. Discriminatory socioeconomic practices often hamper equal access of women to social benefits. As such, gender gaps are extending and this situation is weakening the progress in achieving global sustainable development goals in Bangladesh. In order to ensure women's empowerment and improve their status through the reduction of gender-based gaps, Bangladeshi journalists might promote local gender equality issues as the country's news media system has a wider scope than before. So, it is important to identify and analyze local journalists' role in promoting gender equality for achieving sustainable development goals in Bangladesh. Such rationale inspires the researcher to undertake the study in the local context of the country.

This study with a quantitative survey on journalists working in Chittagong, a southeastern district of Bangladesh, and qualitative in-depth interviews from media and gender analysts aimed to identify and analyze local journalists' role in promoting gender equality within the local or peripheral level of the society for achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs). This study also aimed: a) to know the status of journalists' understanding of gender equality and SDGs, b) to indicate the gender related issues usually covered by local journalists, c) to assess the frequency of maintaining journalistic principles in gender issue coverage, and d) to identify the aspects of the importance of promoting gender equality to journalists. The following research questions were formed to approach the study objectives:

*RQ1:* What is the awareness and understanding level of gender equality issues of Bangladeshi local journalists?

*RQ2:* What types of gender related issues they cover in their day-to-day professional practice in society and how do they follow basic journalistic principles in covering these?

*RQ3:* Is promoting gender equality for achieving sustainable development goals important to them?

*RQ4:* What roles can they play to promote local gender equality issues and SDGs?

*RQ5:* How can local journalists play roles in mobilizing gender equality in terms of achieving sustainable development goals in Bangladesh?

## **Literature review**

A number of sources pertinent to the study have been reviewed. The literature review finds the relevance of the present study. Studies relating to gender equality and sustainable development, violence against women, gender sensitivity, women's challenges, the portrayal of women and girls on media have been undertaken by academicians' and researchers' community. Further, the literature review found some studies related to influences on journalists, cultural and traditional attitudes of journalists toward women and their rights, women stereotyping, religious perspectives and gender which have been done in different developed, developing and underdeveloped nations.

Available evidence shows that media as well as journalists can play a driving role to promote gender equality within society and make aware different stakeholders, such as community members, social leaders, and policymakers. A paper written by Bala (2017) described how media can accelerate the process of women empowerment by making Indian people aware of different social

issues and factors like gender inequality, crime against women, women's health, women's education, etc. Similarly, a textual study by Hassanzadeh (2018) on media and its role in the empowerment of Afghan women analyzed how Afghan women are represented by women's magazines and how these media impact women's social condition in Afghanistan. The important lesson learned from the study is that the media's representation of women can shape the social perceptions and attitudes about women's role in society.

On the other side, different studies have been done to analyze the socio-cultural context of a gender perspective and its influences on journalists. Reviewed seminal literature highlighted that socially and culturally constructed gender roles and relationships influence the portrayal or representation of women in media by journalists. Postulating political system and cultural tradition as the strongest social factors that influence news professionalism, Zhu et al. (1997) opined journalists under different political, economic, and cultural systems could have much more diverse views on their missions and roles in the society. In a study on the impact of cultural values on journalists' professional views, Hanusch (2015) asserted that culture and cultural values play a significant role in shaping journalists' professional views and practices.

While empirical analysis showed that cultural values are considered as crucial on journalists' news-making decisions on gender issues (Xu, 2005), some researchers described the conscious or unconscious biases that many media professionals sometimes have towards one-sidedly reductionist masculinist perspectives is partially due to the lack of capacity to report on women and gender more broadly (UNESCO, 2012). In the line of the view of achieving gender equality, the importance of capacity development for a range of stakeholders including media professionals was highlighted in all critical areas of concern (UN, 2010).

However, some literature shed light on the media's transformative role in achieving gender equality for implementing the global development agenda. These sources (UNESCO, 2012; UNICEF South Asia, 2018) demonstrated that media professionals should create gender-transformative and gender-sensitive content and break gender stereotypes by challenging rigid socio-cultural norms and attitudes regarding gender perceptions. Endorsing comprehensive media policies, media industries' self-regulation rules, and mechanisms is considered a quality pathway by the insights of these literatures.

Moreover, substantial literature (The Carter Center, 2016) emphasized that access to information empowers women and girls to claim their rights and make better decisions in their life. It also helps women to participate more fully in

public life. Grizzle (2014), in an article on media and information literacy for enhancing gender equality, noted that the proliferation of media, the explosion of new technologies, and the emergence of social media in many parts of the world have provided multiple sources for access to gender-related information and knowledge. Stating gender inequalities and gender stereotypes exist in social structures and the minds of people, Grizzle (2014), also described media and other information providers, including those on the Internet, have the potential to propagate and perpetuate or to ameliorate such gender imbalances ensuring women's access to necessary information.

Theoretical and empirical studies carried out about women and media also provide comprehensive explanations for the gendered frames found in the news coverage by journalists. Pointing out journalists play an important role in shaping and influencing the public's gender concepts and gender equality awareness, Chen (2017) noted that the perceptions, attitudes, and sheer knowledge level of journalists all are the matters to what they choose to cover, how they cover stories, who they interview, and how they write those stories. Further, it is observed that journalists' perceptions and attitudes about gender and gender equality arise from their society. Sharma, more specifically, (as cited in Kumari & Joshi, 2015) opined that the prevailing attitude of the society towards women and their rights reveals through the way subjects dealing with them are treated by the media.

Reviewed studies have pointed out that whether and how journalists can exceed the limitations of restricting factors, such as gender, the prevalent gender concepts of the society, and professional practice rules, to disseminate the ideas of gender equality, remain important topics either in research or practice (Chen, 2017). Even more importantly, it has been argued that the promotion of gender equality in general through the implementation of the gender mainstreaming strategy should be prioritized by the media professionals (UN, 2010).

In the line with this view, Montiel (2015) proposed to make news media a tool for improving gender equality and women's rights. However, comparatively few extents regarding local journalists' role in promoting gender equality had been explored and less scholarly attention had been paid to find out the ways of how local journalists can accelerate gender equality in society. Further study is required to analyze the role of local journalists in advancing gender equality in marginalized local communities so that more rapid progress towards achieving the sustainable development agenda can be made.

## Theoretical framework

This study takes into account the theoretical concept of social ecological model (SEM). As an interactive ecological framework consisting of intrapersonal, interpersonal, organizational, community and policy levels (McLeroy et. al., 1988), the SEM suggests that individuals within the dynamic network are influenced by their environment (Salihu et. al., 2015). Previous studies proposed the use of the SEM as a theory-based framework in examining barriers to social inclusion and addressing the various obstacles in development interventions. Walker et al. (2011) upheld the effectiveness of social ecological approach to promote self-determination through greater social inclusion. They believed that this framework through creating social networks for strengthening personal capacity provides a powerful foundation upon which to scale up efforts to be occurred effectively to improve the quality of life of people with developmental disabilities.

As such, the SEM might provide a framework for understanding the factors that promote gender equality through influencing the actors functioning in all the five levels of the social ecology. Integrating this perception with the concept of journalists' role in society, the present study sheds light on the theoretical discourse of SEM. The SEM has put in this study in order to provide an integration of promoting gender equality and SDGs within the multifaceted levels of society and to analyze how individuals of the society and the journalists interact within a social system. In this study, the SEM framework presents an analysis on how local journalists through their practices discursively try to influence individual's attitudes, their interpersonal setting, organizational strategies and actions, community culture, and public policy formation process with respect to promoting gender equality for achieving sustainable development goals. Thus, this study fits in the discourse of SEM.

## Media landscape and journalists' community of studied region

The Bangladeshi media industry has a long legacy of contributing to the country's social transition. Media have made the country's people more aware by revealing development issues and guiding policymakers. Over the last two decades, the country's media sector has expanded significantly. Bangladesh now has 44 television channels, 28 FM stations, 32 community radio stations, 1187 daily newspapers, and over 100 online news portals authorized by the Ministry of Information<sup>3</sup>. Besides, government-owned TV channel 'Bangladesh Television',

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<sup>3</sup> Strengthening independent media in Bangladesh. Available from: <https://bnrc.net/strengthening-media-bangladesh/>

radio center 'Bangladesh Betar' and international satellite and cable channels telecast their programs. This is the general landscape of the Bangladeshi media system. However, as a regional locality, Chittagong has a heritage with a distinct media feature. The country's first printed newspaper was published from this region after the independence war. Even 'Swadhin Bangla Betar Kendra', the radio broadcasting station of Bengali nationalist forces during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971, started its first transmission from Chittagong.

There are various local newspapers including dailies, weeklies, and monthlies published from Chittagong city. Major circulated local daily newspapers are 'Dainik Azadi', 'The Daily Suprobhat Bangladesh', 'Dainik Purbokone', 'Purbodesh', etc.

But there are no satellite-based TV channels broadcast from Chittagong although government-owned TV and radio channels have transmission centers in the city. Local newspapers' readership and circulation rate are higher compared to national newspapers while all the major national newspapers are circulated in this region. Local newspapers are privately owned and mainly focus on regional social, political, economic issues. Most newspaper readers and TV audiences of Chittagong live in cities and a relatively small portion lives in rural areas.

In the last 15 years, the Internet has transformed the media landscape in Bangladesh, as well as in Chittagong. The digital revolution has opened a new platform for the Chittagong media industry. A number of local online news portals are now active in this region. Chittagong has some associations of journalists including Chittagong Press Club, Chittagong Union of Journalists, Chittagong Metropolitan Union of Journalists, and Chittagong TV Camera Journalists' Association. A significant portion of local journalists is the members of these associations and every day they work for a heterogeneous and large audience community.

## **Methods**

The area of this study was Chittagong city, a Southeastern coastal city of Bangladesh, belonging to distinct demographic and social characteristics (e.g. different social status, conservative social belief and gender roles). Being located in a rigid patriarchal socioeconomic setting, this locality is facing substantial challenges in social actions and planning in terms of achieving gender equality for sustainable development. Moreover, compared to the men, a very limited number of women of this area have access to information on their rights and socioeconomic development issues. Women of this locality have also less exposure to media as there are some considerable social obstacles in using mass

media by females. All these adversities trigger the researcher to choose the study area to analyze the roles of local journalists in promoting gender equality.

This study adopted both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. The population of the study was 392 registered members of the Chittagong Union of Journalists (CUJ), an association of Chittagong city-based local journalists. This study selected 32 members of CUJ as the sample at a 95% confidence level. Through applying a convenience sampling technique, these 32 local journalists working in different media in Chittagong city including local and national newspapers, television, radio, and online news portals were surveyed to gather quantitative data. Out of 32 respondents, most of the journalists are male (75%), whereas only one-fourth of the respondents are female (25%). It indicates that journalism is a male dominated profession in Chittagong and females are discouraged or not so interested to choose this job.

Majority of the respondent journalists are in the 26-35 age group (56.25%), followed by 36-45 (15.63%), 16-25 (12.50%), 46-55 (9.37%), and 56-65 (6.25%) age group. On average, respondent journalists are 34.56 years old ( $SD=10.26$ ), indicating that more young people are entering into this profession. Holding higher educational degrees from college or university, they are also considered as a potential for ensuring gender equality in local strata. The sample reveals that respondent journalists have a strong educational background. It points out that out of 32 respondents more than two-thirds of the journalists hold postgraduate degrees (71.87%), followed by graduation (18.75%), higher secondary (6.25%), and other degrees (3.13%).

Further, the journalists of Chittagong work in diverse media outlets. The sample demonstrates that half of the respondent journalists work in newspapers (50%) including national and local dailies. Across other forms of media, slightly less than one-third of the journalists work in television (28.12%), followed by online news portals (15.63%) including local news portals and radio (6.25%). The respondents consisted of 28.12% senior-level media professionals (e.g. News Producer, Chief Reporter, Bureau Chief, Head of News, Senior Reporter, etc.), 46.88% mid-career level (e.g. Staff Reporter, Staff Correspondent, etc.), and 25% entry-level journalists. Respondent journalists had, on average, worked as media professionals for 6.66 years ( $SD=4.17$ ), and about one-third of them had 6 to 10 (31.25%) years of professional experience, followed by 3 to 5 (28.12%), 11 to 15 (21.88%) and 0 to 2 (18.75%) years' work involvement.

Quantitative data collection was accomplished between March 2019 and April 2019 with a self-administered survey questionnaire. The questionnaire consisting of eleven (11) questions encompassed demographic and professional questions. To

know the dimensions of the respondents' journalistic practices to promote gender equality, the Likert scale was also employed in some professional questions. The questionnaire was designed to know journalists' awareness and understanding level of gender issues and how they follow journalistic principles in covering these. The questionnaire also included questions to describe the importance of promoting gender equality to local journalists and to what sort of journalistic roles they play in achieving gender equality for sustainable development. Using computer-assisted software SPSS, collected data was analyzed doing different statistical functions, e.g. frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, etc.

In addition to this, five in-depth interviews from gender and media analysts were taken to get a qualitative comprehensive panorama of the study. Five interviewees were selected by using purposive sampling. Prior to the interviews, all interviewees were informed about the study's purposes. The core orientation of in-depth interview questions was on how local journalists are mobilizing local gender equality issues in terms of achieving sustainable development goals. The data of some interviews were collected over the phone and some through face-to-face conversation. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data of each of the recorded and written in-depth interviews. The analysis was done manually by the researcher. A major limitation of the study was it had been conducted with economic constraints and a lack of sufficient manpower. The study was also completed in a limited period. So, it was restricted to a limited number of samples. 32 samples might not be enough to generalize the findings.

## **Results**

The findings of the study have been presented under the following subheadings:

### **Understanding on gender equality, SDGs and journalistic principles (RQ1)**

A five-point Likert scale consisting of excellent (5), very good (4), good (3), poor (2), and very poor (1) was assigned to realize journalists' knowledge and understanding status on gender equality, sustainable development goals, and journalistic principles. In response to the question, most of the journalists showed assenting views. The majority of the respondents (40.6%) indicated that they belong to good knowledge on gender equality and local gender issues ( $M=3.56$ ,  $SD=1.076$ ). While responding to the statement on knowledge of Sustainable Development Goals ( $M=3.75$ ,  $SD=1.016$ ), more than one-third of the respondents (37.5%) expressed that they have very good knowledge. The findings reveal that journalists' understanding of the journalistic principles of

promoting gender equality at the local level of the society is also affirmative ( $M=3.68$ ,  $SD=1.013$ ) as the majority of the respondents have very good (35.5%) understanding, followed by good (32.3%), excellent understanding (22.6%), etc. [See *Table 1*].

*Table 1*

**Journalists' understanding of gender equality, SDGs  
and journalistic principles**

Statements	Excellent (5), %	Very Good (4), %	Good (3), %	Poor (2), %	Very Poor (1), %	N	Missing Value	M	S.D.
Knowledge on gender equality and local gender issues	21.9	28.1	40.6	3.1	6.2	32	0	3.56	1.076
Knowledge on Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's)	25.0	37.5	28.1	6.2	3.1	32	0	3.75	1.016
Understanding on the journalistic principles of promoting gender equality in local level of the society	22.6	35.5	32.3	6.5	3.2	31	1	3.68	1.013

*Source: Researcher's own field survey.*

**Coverage of women and gender issues by journalists (RQ2)**

This study exposes that the respondent journalists, on their day-to-day professional practice at the local level of the society, cover diverse issues or stories relating to gender and women or girls. It indicates that covering gender issues is one of the major concerns of local journalists in Chittagong. Findings show that an overwhelming majority of the journalists cover news of physical violence and mental torture over women (90.63%). They also raise awareness about women's basic human rights (71.88%), followed by covering issues of women's sexual harassment (68.75%), women entrepreneurship (53.13%), and girls' education (50%).

Similarly, nearly half of the respondent journalists are assertive to focus on issues of women empowerment in politics, society and administration (46.88%), followed by women’s healthcare (43.75%) and early marriage (37.50%). On the other hand, journalists have less interest to cover matters of religious fundamentalism and cultural subordination related impacts on women (15.62%), women participation in decision making (31.25%), and social attitude regarding the dowry system (34.38%) [See Table 2]. Socio-cultural environments where journalists work, journalists’ own attitudes or views, and media houses’ news selection process are considered as the causes behind journalists’ less interest to cover these issues.

*Table 2*

**Categories of local gender issues covered by journalists \***

Categories	Frequencies (f) (N=32)	Percentage (%)
Physical violence and mental torture over women	29	90.63%
Awareness about women’s basic human rights	23	71.88%
Sexual Harassment (e.g. Rape, Teasing etc.)	22	68.75%
Women entrepreneurship	17	53.13%
Girls Education	16	50.00%
Women empowerment in politics, society, administration, etc.	15	46.88%
Women healthcare	14	43.75%
Early marriage	12	37.50%
Social attitude regarding the dowry system	11	34.38%
Women participation in decision making	10	31.25%
Religious and cultural impacts on women	5	15.62%
Others	2	6.25%

*Source: Researcher’s own field survey. \*Multiple answers were given.*

### **Maintaining journalistic principles in covering gender issues (RQ2)**

A five-point Likert scale consisting of ‘always (5)’, ‘very often (4)’, ‘sometimes (3)’, ‘rarely (2)’ and ‘never (1)’ was assigned to know the journalists’ frequency of maintaining journalistic principles in covering local gender issues. The respondent journalists reported that maintaining the principles in covering gender issues is a necessity in their journalistic practice.

*Table 3*

**Journalistic principles to cover gender issues in local level**

Statements	Always (5), %	Very Often (4), %	Sometimes (3), %	Rarely (2), %	Never (1), %	N	M	S.D.
Ensure accuracy to report on women	65.6	31.2	3.1	0	0	32	4.62	.554
Maintain fairness when you cover gender sensitive matter	68.8	25.0	3.1	3.1	0	32	4.59	.712
Be impartial toward gender issues	65.6	18.8	12.5	3.1	0	32	4.47	.842
Respect privacy of women and girls	65.6	18.8	15.6	0	0	32	4.50	.762
Proper sourcing in gender related news coverage	65.6	15.6	12.5	3.1	3.1	32	4.38	1.040

*Source: Researcher's own field survey.*

The study reveals that the majority of journalists (65.6%) always attempt to ensure accuracy to report on women (M=4.62, SD=0.556) and 68.8% always maintain fairness when they cover gender-sensitive matters while only 3.1% rarely maintain the principle (M=4.59, SD=0.712). Similarly, most of the respondents (65.6%) always try to be impartial toward gender issues (M=4.47, SD=0.842), 65.6% always show respect to the privacy of women and girls (M=4.50, SD=0.762), and the same portion of the journalists always maintain proper sourcing in the gender-related news coverage (M=4.38, SD=1.040) [See Table 3].

**Importance of promoting gender equality to journalists (RQ3)**

The respondents were asked to give their answer on the importance of promoting gender equality for achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs)

through the coverage of local gender issues. A five-point Likert scale indicating 5 as extremely important, 4 as very important, 3 as somewhat important, 2 as little important, and 1 as unimportant was assigned to realize the respondents’ opinion in this regard.

Table 4

**Journalists’ opinion on promoting gender equality through coverage of local gender issues**

Statements	Extremely important (5)	Very important (4)	Somewhat important (3)	Little important (2)	Unimportant (1)	N	M	S.D.
Promoting gender equality for achieving sustainable development goals	15.6%	62.5%	15.6%	3.1%	3.1%	32	3.84	0.847

Source: Researcher’s own field survey.

The journalists showed affirmative opinion (M=3.84, SD=0.847) as more than three-fifths of the respondents (62.5%) think that promoting gender equality through coverage of local gender issues is very much important for achieving sustainable development goals. Out of 32 respondents, 15.6% think that it is extremely important for achieving SDGs in marginal society, followed by 15.6% somewhat important, 3.1% little important, and 3.1% unimportant. [See Table 4].

**Roles of local journalists in promoting gender equality for achieving SDGs (RQ4 and RQ5)**

The study shows that the respondent journalists in many respects have been promoting gender equality within the individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and policy level of social ecology. Based on a three-point Likert scale consisting of ‘agree (3)’, ‘uncertain (2)’, and ‘disagree (1)’, this section upholds details of the findings on the role of local journalists in promoting gender equality.

Findings indicate that majority of the respondent local journalists (71.9%) agree that they, at the individual level, attempt to change the individuals’

attitudes and behaviors that limiting women empowerment ( $M=2.56$ ,  $SD=0.759$ ), whereas, three-fourth of them (75%) apply self-censorship while producing news in gender-sensitive subjects [See *Table 5*]. This study reveals that, at the interpersonal level, slightly less than three-fourths of journalists (73.3%) acknowledge women's voice through their reporting so that other women get motivation and support.

Further, findings demonstrate that more than four-fifths of journalists (80.6%) let the local women and girls express their views to others through news coverage on their subjects [See *Table 5*].

The findings demonstrate that, at the organizational level, most of the journalists (84.4%), with their reporting, mobilize the actions of women's development organizations ( $M=2.72$ ,  $SD=0.683$ ), whereas, 66.7% apply befitting media rules for balanced portraying of gender equality related actions of development organizations on news ( $M=2.57$ ,  $SD=0.679$ ) [See *Table 5*].

Findings reveal 96.9% of journalists agree that they promote, advocate, or support gender equality within the societal level for achieving SDGs ( $M=2.94$ ). The lowest standard deviation ( $SD=0.354$ ) indicates the consistency of their stance on this particular role. The study also found 93.8% of journalists promote women's participation in all spheres of society ( $M=2.88$ ,  $SD=0.492$ ), whereas, 87.1% make the society aware of women's rights to equal access to opportunities ( $M=2.74$ ,  $SD=0.682$ ). Significant portions (48.3%) of respondent journalists also agree that they emphasize gender equality issues to advance sustainable development in the marginal level of the society ( $M=2.21$ ,  $SD=0.861$ ) [See *Table 5*].

Table 5

## Roles of local journalists in promoting gender equality

Level	Statements on journalists' role in achieving gender equality	Agree (3), %	Uncertain (2), %	Disagree (1), %	N	Missing value	M	S.D.
Individual level	Apply self-censorship in limited to highly gender sensitive subjects while producing news	75.0	3.1	21.9	32	0	2.53	0.842
	Attempt to change the individuals' attitudes and behaviors that limiting women empowerment in local level	71.9	12.5	15.6	32	0	2.56	0.759
Interpersonal	Let the local women and girls express their views to others through news coverage on their matters	80.6	0	19.4	31	1	2.61	0.803
	Acknowledge women's voice so that others women get motivation and support	73.3	13.3	13.3	30	2	2.60	0.724
Organizational	Mobilize the actions of women's development organizations	84.4	3.1	12.5	32	0	2.72	0.683

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Level	Statements on journalists' role in achieving gender equality	Agree (3), %	Uncertain (2), %	Disagree (1), %	N	Missing value	M	S.D.
	Apply befitting media rules for balanced portraying of gender equality related actions of development organizations on news	66.7	23.3	10.0	30	2	2.57	0.679
Societal/ Community	Support and localize sustainable development goals through news making	96.9	0	3.1	32	0	2.94	0.354
	Promote women's participation in all spheres of the society	93.8	0	6.2	32	0	2.88	0.492
	Make the society aware about women's right to equal access to opportunities	87.1	0	12.9	31	1	2.74	0.682
	Emphasize gender equality issues to advance sustainable development in marginal level of the society	48.3	24.1	27.6	29	3	2.21	0.861
Policy level	Provide information and interpretations to policy makers for formulating policies on local gender issues	74.2	9.7	16.1	31	1	2.58	0.765

Level	Statements on journalists' role in achieving gender equality	Agree (3), %	Uncertain (2), %	Disagree (1), %	N	Missing value	M	S.D.
	Cooperate the respective authority through your journalistic works to implement the plans and strategies in local level for women and girls' development	67.7	19.4	12.9	31	1	2.55	0.723

Source: Researcher's own field survey.

This study also found affirmative results on journalists' role-playing in social advocacy at the policy level. Findings reveal that about three-fourths of the journalists (74.2%) provide information and interpretations to policymakers for formulating policies on local gender issues ( $M=2.58$ ,  $SD=0.765$ ). Accordingly, 67.7% of respondents cooperate with the respective authority through their journalistic works to implement necessary plans and strategies at the local level for women and girls' development ( $M=2.55$ ,  $SD=0.723$ ) [See Table 5].

## Discussion

As discussed in the literature review, local journalists are viewed as local change agents. They, by their day-to-day activities, can play roles in stopping the persisting discriminations against women which originated from the socio-cultural environment. In response to the RQ4, the study findings have shown that Bangladeshi journalists working in marginalized local areas play some crucial roles in different strata of society to achieve gender equality for sustainable development. They, from the individual level to policy level of social ecological model (SEM), work:

- 1) To change individuals' attitudes and behaviors that limiting women empowerment,
- 2) To acknowledge women voice and to let them express their views interpersonally,
- 3) To mobilize women's development organizations and to portray their actions on media in a balanced way,

4) To promote gender equality, women participation and women's rights at the societal level to achieve SDGs, and

5) To influence policymakers and authorities to formulate women supportive policies and to implement plans as per them

As a result, the findings are explored in this section in the following five broad themes with references to established literature.

### **Changing attitudes and behaviors at individual level**

It is worth noting that to achieve socio-cultural transformation so that women will be considered equal to men, turning socially constructed wrong knowledge, attitudes, behaviors and beliefs towards women and gender equality into a positive shift is crucial at the individual level. As discussed earlier, in the social ecological model (SEM), knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs are the typical variables measured for the individual/intrapersonal level of influence. Therefore, the findings fit within the conceptual framework of the study. The results of this study are also consistent with previous research that shows that changing individual's attitudes and behaviors to promote women's and girls' rights as well as gender equality and women's empowerment is considered a key pathway to sustainable development (UN Women, 2018).

RQ5 asked how local journalists can play roles in mobilizing gender equality in terms of achieving sustainable development goals in Bangladesh. This paper found that local journalists by applying self-censorship in gender-sensitive subjects and spreading women empowerment messages are playing roles in the local community to shape individual attitudes towards women. How journalists influence individuals' attitudes and behavior regarding gender equality awareness? While responding to this qualitative in-depth interview question, Mr. Sazzad Hossain, a faculty member from the law discipline and a women's rights analyst, expressed affirmative views to local journalists' duties. Emphasizing local journalists' role in raising awareness about gender discrimination at the root level, Mr. Sazzad said [Interview 01]:

*'Journalists often write and tell for ensuring women rights through providing examples of women's success stories so that individuals in the marginal levels can be motivated to change their traditional and patriarchal attitudes to support gender equality.'*

Further, the Gender-Sensitive Indicators for Media (GSIM) provide a comprehensive framework for media to analyze their content and operations regarding gender portrayal in media. The GSIM suggested strategies for the fair portrayal of women through the elimination of stereotypes and the promotion

of multi-dimensional representation. It also gave emphasis on the coverage of gender equality and equity issues as an important and integral part of the media's acknowledged role as a watchdog of society (UNESCO, 2012).

### **Acknowledging women's voices as interpersonal influence**

Strong interpersonal communication regarding the representation of women in a positive manner within society is an essential one for achieving gender equality. Thompson (2017) has argued that interpersonal factors consist of formal and informal social networks and social support systems, including significant others, such as colleagues, family members, opinion leaders, and friends. The interpersonal level, within social ecological framework, emphasizes external influences on interactive networks. This paper also found that for influencing interpersonal networks through a fair portrayal of women on media, local journalists acknowledge women's voices and give the women opportunities to express their views in media content. Thus, the results support the expression of UN Women (2018) that it's important to give women the right place in the media landscape, and their representations must be fair and equal.

It is viewed that media as well as journalists have a substantial influence on interpersonal networks that exist in social ecology. How do you (journalist) consider the interpersonal setting in your reporting? While answering this in-depth interview question, Mr. Imran Bin Sabur, a journalist from a local newspaper provided an affirmative response. He said [Interview 05]:

*'We are concern about interpersonal settings and patriarchal nature of the actors of the society from where we report. For example, people form marginal societies usually do not accept women's voices in family decision making. In that case, we explain it and try to raise awareness on women related subjects in a way so that their family and other peers not only acknowledge them, but also let them to express their views.'*

### **Mobilizing women's development actions at organizational level**

In the social ecological framework, the organizational level encompasses social institutions and organizations with formal and informal rules and regulations for operations that affect the practice and views of individuals. These factors include the transmission of social norms and values and socialization into organizational culture (Thompson, 2017). It is considered that women's rights organizations are key catalysts for ensuring gender equality and the realization of women's development. Media professionals can co-operate these

organizations in terms of transmitting positive social norms and values on gender equality into the action plan and cultural environment of these development organizations.

This paper found that local journalists of Chittagong are mobilizing the actions of women's development organizations in marginal communities as the majority of journalists (84.4%) use their reporting to encourage these organizations to take action. Moreover, they apply befitting media rules for balanced portraying of gender equality related actions of development organizations on news. This finding supports the argument of Ogato (2013) that development institutions are encouraged to work with women's rights organizations for the allocation of social development resources equally. Seminal findings of the in-depth interview have also shown that journalists have a positive impact on development organizations' settings. Praising media professionals' role in mobilizing the actions of women rights organizations, Mr. Asrafull Anwar, a development practitioner from a rights organization, affirmed [Interview 03]:

*'Yet they are playing vital role in fighting the social war against child marriage, dowry, domestic violence against women, women's empowerment etc.'*

How can local journalists mobilize women's development organizations and portray their actions on media in a balanced way? While responding to the question, Mr. Anwar recommended providing training to local journalists so that they can follow the basic norms and principles of accuracy, decency, privacy, and impartiality while reporting on women. Recommending that Mr. Anwar also told: *'In order to mobilizing the actions of women's rights organizations, journalists, regardless of being local or national, must be gender sensitive as in reality many of the local journalists in Bangladesh have lack of knowledge of gender sensitivity.'*

### **Promoting gender equality at societal level**

Shaping social attitudes, beliefs, cultures, and norms through awareness-raising, advocacy campaigns, community mobilization is viewed as a critical element in achieving gender equality. Moreover, promoting gender equality, women's participation, and their rights at the societal level is a key to rapid progress in the sustainable development of society. McLeroy et. al. (1988) conceptualized the societal level as the relationships among groups of individuals, organizations, and information networks with defined boundaries. This level incorporates sources of social resources and social identity, which are known to influence social norms and values (Thompson, 2017).

The media professionals through information networks can play a noteworthy role in either shaping or influencing social norms and values that form community members' perception of gender equality and women empowerment. In response to RQ3, Bangladeshi local journalists stated that fostering gender equality is a significant aspect of achieving sustainable development goals. This study identified that local journalists are facilitating this notion and molding positive perceptions about women. Even, they have been playing a vital role to promote gender equality and women's participation through mobilizing all levels of people of society. Highlighting such role of local journalists in achieving SDGs, Mr. Shamsuddin Illius, a senior journalist working in Chittagong, shared his reporting experiences regarding gender coverage [Interview 04]:

*'As a journalist I always try to balance in gender. For example, if I quote one male expert in my report, I try to give a comment of female too. It is one of the ways in which I try to ensure equality. Second thing is that I try to present the fact from a neutral view not from patriarchal perspective,'* Asserting that Mr. Illius also opined:

*'I believe newspaper as well journalism is the big platform to aware male about the rights of female.'*

While asking a question on do you try to make aware the society of women's rights, he also replied:

*'I don't directly aware anyone about women rights, but I try to do it by my reporting. I try to cover news on the success of women so that it can remove the traditional concept that women only for household works. I want to show women in a way that they can also march in the society with male with equal strength and capacity.'*

This research finding backs up King and Mason's theory that gender is a socially and culturally constructed identity (as cited in Bayeh, 2016).

## **Influencing policymakers at policy level**

In response to RQ1 and RQ2, this study found that local journalists who have a strong understanding of gender equality and the SDGs adhere to journalistic values when covering gender issues. They also recognize the importance of influencing policymakers at the policy level of social ecological frame in order to achieve global SDGs. In the SEM, the policy level encompasses local, state, and national laws and policies.

This paper considers the local journalists as an important source of gender-related information for policymakers as they prioritize women's and girls' rights through their agenda-setting role. Thus, through fueling policymakers and

authorities to formulate women supportive policies, they contribute greatly to address the challenges of gender issues of a marginal society. In line with the quantitative results, participants of the qualitative in-depth interviews also recognized local media professionals' role in influencing policymakers and respective authorities. While responding to a question on the journalistic role, Mr. Mohammad Morshedul Islam, a media analyst and Associate Professor from the journalism discipline, told [Interview 02]:

*'Local journalists can play very important role motivating policymakers in taking initiatives for policy reforms paving the ways of gender equality not only at the local level but also at the national level.'*

Asserting journalists have ample scope in depicting the pros of gender equality and cons of inequality, Mr. Islam also stated:

*'Local journalists can promote opinion against existing socially harmful practices and policies organizing mass people's support for new policies and practices.'*

Therefore, the study recognizes Thompson's (2017, p. 37) theory which states that 'These laws and policies are the mandates within which society functions and serve to raise awareness of key issues, shape environments, and directly or indirectly affect behavior.'

## **Conclusion**

In the socioeconomic context of Bangladesh, gender equality should be ensured in all spheres including the unprivileged marginal level, if the society really wants to achieve sustainable development goals. Although Bangladesh has significantly reduced gender gaps in several sectors over the last decades through initiating some effective measures, there are still some challenges remaining. According to the 'Global Gender Gap Report 2020' published by World Economic Forum, Bangladesh ranked 50<sup>th</sup> position out of 153 countries globally. In addition, how women are viewed and perceived in Bangladesh is heavily influenced by cultural and traditional factors. It is accepted and recognized by global entities that media can help to form socio-cultural values. So, they support the use of the media as a powerful tool for eliminating gender-based discrimination and promoting gender equality. Media personnel, especially, local journalists by promoting, focusing, and covering gender issues positively can accelerate the process of achieving the SDGs in this perspective.

The findings of this study contribute here as it has identified the role of the journalists working at the root or marginal level of Bangladesh and analyzed how they have been creating platforms to ensure rights for unprivileged women

in individual, interpersonal, organizational, community and policy levels of the social ecological framework. The study has also found that with their journalistic role-playing, local journalists have been changing socially harmful patriarchal attitudes, letting women express their views, mobilizing women's rights organizations' actions, ensuring women's participation in society, and influencing the policymakers to formulate gender-sensitive policies. Based on the descriptive statistics, the result indicates that local journalists of Chittagong city overwhelmingly (96.9%) agree to promote, advocate, or support gender equality within society for the course of achieving SDGs. Therefore, this study can conclude that promoting gender equality for achieving sustainable development goals is considerably relevant to the responsible practices of local journalists. Having analyzed the data with reference to existing literature and research questions, this study recommends that:

1) Local journalists, by their day-to-day activities, should incorporate the factors of individual, interpersonal, organizational, societal and policy level of SEM to promote gender equality for achieving global sustainable development goals.

2) Journalists should develop their understanding of local cultures as gender issues in Bangladesh are socio-cultural value driven.

3) They should follow the proper norms and journalistic principles of objectivity, accuracy, fairness, privacy, and impartiality in the coverage of gender related issues.

4) Obscenity and vulgarity should be eschewed from their news stories to depict women in the media rightly.

5) Local journalists must be gender-sensitive. To reduce the lack of knowledge of gender sensitivity, training and workshops should be organized for journalists.

Besides, further studies employing more respondents and using more data can be carried out to explore the dimensions of gender equality and SDGs in other regional settings.

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