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Presence of Female Expert Comment Providers in Covid-19-related News in Bangladeshi Mainstream Newspapers

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Abstract

The capacity of the media to influence political, social, and cultural practices and beliefs has grown beyond the scope of their role as information providers. When it comes to gender relations, the media not only reflects the realities of society but also contributes to its construction by highlighting misconceptions, inequalities, and perceived distinctions between women and men. However, studies reveal that news portrays a world in which women, especially as expert comment providers, are drastically underrepresented and rendered invisible as compared to men. This study examines how Bangladeshi mainstream media uses women as Covid-19 experts. Six national newspapers (The Daily Prothom Alo, The Daily Samakal, The Daily Ittefaq, The Daily Star, New Age, and The Asian Age) were evaluated to assess the situation. This study's data analysis from four months of each

daily produced comparable findings to those of the global survey. Less than 10% of the specialists selected by the newspapers to offer their opinions in pieces about Covid-19 were female. In-depth interviews with the journalists were undertaken to uncover why fewer female experts' opinions are considered in the newspapers to address the problem more thoroughly.

Key Words: Covid-19, Bangladesh, Newspaper, Women, Expert comment.

Introduction

As the 'Fourth Estate', newspapers are held to higher standards of objectivity, impartiality, and accuracy. Along the same line, newspapers are required to present gender in a reasonable and balanced way. Regardless of their function as disseminators of information, societal norms, and values, the media can impact political, social, and other issues. By spotlighting gender stereotypes, disparities, and perceived differences between men and women, the media not only reflects the realities of society in this area but also helps to shape it. However, there are times when expectations and reality diverge. It is realistic to expect a far more equitable picture of women, given the higher-than-ever ratio of female journalists and executives in the media. Without any doubt, things have gotten better during the previous few decades. However, the rate of development is discouraging. According to global research, it will take an extra 75 years to achieve gender equality in the media if progress continues (IFJ, 2009).

Over the past decade, numerous nations have enacted new legislation and reformed their existing legislation to eliminate gender discrimination. Statistics indicate that 131 countries have added 274 gender-related legal reforms in the past decade (UN, 2020). Unfortunately, discrimination against women in the workplace and media portrayals has persisted for more than four decades since the passage of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The Global Media Monitoring Report (GMMR), 2005, made an important observation about how women are underrepresented in the media. According to the findings of the report, females are more likely to be featured in "soft stories," which deal with issues like a celebrity and the arts, and they are least likely to be featured in "hard stories," which discuss topics such as politics, government, and the economy (IFJ, 2009).

Inequality persists even when it comes to matters that are crucial to the plot of a story. The GMMR report indicates that women play a central role in only 10% of news stories. If one only takes into account newspapers, the ratio increases marginally to 15%, but this figure is still insufficient (GMMR, 2005). The scenario hasn't improved much in 15 years, as the latest data from Global Media Monitoring Project Report states that women have been absent in the stories as experts and news topics. At a time when a "shadow pandemic" of violence against women and girls was raging around the world, the fact that just 6 out of 100 stories were about sexual harassment, rape, or sexual assault against women and girls risked normalizing gender-based violence (GMMP, 2020).

When the context is limited to the expert opinions found in news articles, gender discrimination becomes readily apparent. Even though Covid-19 has dominated much of the recent worldwide news coverage, the data reveals that women's voices have once again been substantially absent from the discussion. Inaccurate gender stereotypes are reinforced when women make up only 27% of coronavirus stories despite making up an average of 46% of health specialists (GMMP, 2020). According to a study conducted on behalf of the Global Institute for Women's Leadership by the Center for the Study of Media, Communication, and Power, four out of every five experts quoted in online news pieces published by the top news sites in the United Kingdom are men. In fields like international politics and business, where nine out of 10 expert sources are male, the gender disparity is much more evident (Jones, 2018).

During the pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus, a situation very similar to this one was observed. It appears that the media has attempted to silence the voices of women who are subject experts in articles related to Covid-19. In a recent study titled 'The Missing Perspectives of Women in Covid-19 News,' the authors discovered that women are not given the same consideration as men when it comes to being chosen as experts in reports. According to this report, which covers six countries, including the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Nigeria, India, Kenya, and South Africa, it appears that men were cited in Covid-19 related articles nearly three times more often than women.

Women featured in such articles are occasionally portrayed as authoritative experts rather than victims of a fatal virus. In each of the six countries, the report reveals that the number of

women quoted in Covid19-related articles has decreased significantly compared to non-Covid19-related articles. Being curious about the result of the mentioned study, these researchers felt enthusiastic about assessing the actual situation in Bangladesh regarding gender disparity in Covid-19-related articles. This study will demonstrate how mainstream Bangladeshi newspapers covered Covid-19 issues about women experts.

Objective of the Study

The specific objectives of this research are-

- To explore the ratio of male and female expert comments in Covid-19 related news in Bangladeshi media
- To find out the journalistic perspectives behind selecting experts while taking comments for Covid-19 related news.

Research Questions

This study aims to address the issue of whether women are overlooked as news sources for Covid-19-related newspaper articles. Under this question, the researchers have also investigated the sub-questions listed below:

- What is the ratio of male-female experts giving valuable comments for newspaper reports?
- What is the point of view of the journalists regarding the selection of experts for comments in newspaper reports?

Background of Study

The latest GMMP covered 116 countries and more than 30 thousand stories across all media formats. Among them, one-fourth of the stories carried Covid-19 as a principal or sub-theme. The Covid-19 related story, which was the big news item of 2020, dominated the science and health beat news. A decline in women's voice and visibility in the tales has coincided with the pandemic's stratospheric rise in the news value of this important topic. Even though the percentage of science/health stories in the news increased greatly in 2020 compared to other

eras (from 10% in 2005 to 17%), the representation of women in these stories decreased by five points after rising steadily between 2000 and 2015. Talking about the Covid-19 related news across all mediums, only 26% of the stories had female experts. In health-related news, the ratio increased by the barest of margins and stood up to 27% (GMMP, 2020).

In Bangladesh, on March 8, 2020, the first incidence of a person testing positive for Covid-19 was discovered. A main report about the Covid-19 outbreak was published in Prothom Alo, one of the country's most prominent and widely circulated newspapers, on April 8, 2020, exactly one month after the first instance of the disease was discovered. The status of Covid-19 in Bangladesh was the primary topic of discussion in the article, which featured numerous experts' perspectives. To be more specific, six different experts offered the writer their enlightening thoughts. Despite this, one of the six experts was a woman, which was a surprise because there were six experts.

Finding this interesting enough, researchers focused on The Daily Star, the national English-language newspaper that maintains the most circulation. This newspaper's leading news story regarding the Covid issue was published the same day as other newspapers. After investigating the news, it was found that out of the four expert comments, everyone was offered by a male expert. Following that, the research looked into the preceding day's edition of the Daily Prothom Alo newspaper and the Daily Star and came to the same conclusion. Out of a total of 8 expert comments, seven were by men. As a direct result of the events that transpired, the researchers became acutely aware of the crucial significance of locating a full overview of gender equality before requesting specialists' opinions for the Covid-19 announcement.

Literature Review

Women's Representation as Expert in Global Media

Gender specialists have frequently voiced their concerns about the dearth of female voices in the media. However, this problem is pervasive and common in contemporary society. Women's voices in media pieces frequently get drowned out by men's views, according to a variety of studies. We know from research on women's underrepresentation in the workforce that detrimental gender stereotypes can be reinforced and perpetuated by this gender-

imbalanced view of society. According to study undertaken by the Center for the Study of Media, Communication and Power at Kings College in London for the Global Institute for Women's Leadership, four out of every five expert comments made in prominent UK news outlets have been made by men. The same report's examination of 1,112 articles revealed that 87% of expert comments in international politics are made by males, compared to 13% by women, and 86% of expert comments in business and finance are made by men, as opposed to 14% by women (Men nearly four times, 2018).

The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), also known as an advocacy project on gender in the mainstream media, has been working feverishly since 1995 to ensure gender parity in the media. GMMP releases a report with an overview of the gender balance in conventional world media once every five years. Recent publications have made shocking revelations that show how unsatisfactory the gender balance reform process in traditional media has been. Only 24% of the people named in traditional media news report are women, whereas 76% of those mentioned are men, or more than three-quarters, according to the GMMP. Despite the fact that 52% of women are quoted in the news, the percentage significantly decreases when offering expert advice. Experts make up 80% of the population, while 20% of them are women. (GMMP, 2010).

The following GMMP report was largely unaltered after five years. When it comes to the representation of women as experts, GMMP 2015 shows that things have gotten worse rather than better. Women's representation among experts dropped from 20% in GMMP 2010 to 19%. Positively, the ratio improved in almost every other area, including the proportion of female spokespersons and eyewitnesses.

Less frequently do Asian women become subject matter experts in news stories. in contrast to other parts of the world. Asia has the lowest representation of women specialists in the media, at 10%, out of eight geographic areas, including Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, the Middle East, Latin America, the Pacific, and North America. (GMMP, 2015). Another Norwegian study titled 'Female Voices in the News: Structural Conditions of Gender Representations in Norwegian Newspapers' found that women are exploited more commonly as victims (44.6%), spokespersons (41.1%), unsung heroes (48.4%), and family members (51.8%). However, when

it comes to using women as experts, the number drops to 32.9%, much fewer than in other categories (Sjovaag & Pedersen, 2019).

Armstrong (2004) suggested that the gender of the reporter may affect the selection of news sources. According to one of the primary arguments he presented for the hypothesis, female reporters are more likely to be assigned to soft beats, whilst male reporters are more likely to be assigned to hard news. Even while female reporters cover hard beats, such as economics and politics, the bulk is still assigned to soft beats, such as arts, features, and education, as North (2014) described. The need for more women in powerful executive positions is a further obstacle to identifying women specialists. A poll finds that only 4.9% of executive positions in 13 nations in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Europe are held by women (Edgecliffe-Johnson, 2018). Since women cannot provide professional commentary, reporters are typically relegated to contacting male experts.

Women's Representation as Expert in Covid-19 Related News

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation commissioned a paper titled *The Missing Perspectives of Women in COVID-19 News*, which vividly portrayed the scenario of women's presence as specialists in Covid-19-related news. Every woman's voice in news stories on Covid-19 is reportedly drowned out by three to five men's voices. Instead of being portrayed as experts, women are typically narrated as sources of personal opinion or as patients suffering from the illness (Kassova, 2020). This report found that men were quoted roughly three times more frequently in Covid19-related news than women in the United Kingdom (UK), almost five times more frequently in South Africa & Nigeria, more than four times more frequently in the US (United States of America), four times more frequently in Kenya, and five times more frequently in India after analyzing 80 publications from six countries and 2,100 sampled quotes. The analysis concluded that women were four times less likely to contribute as experts in the 175 Covid-19 stories with the highest rankings from the top five providers in each of the aforementioned nations. 2020 (Kassova).

Similar results were discovered in a different study by the Global Institute for Women's Leadership. The analysis concludes that barely a third of quotations in publications connected

to Covid-19 were from women specialists after analyzing a sizable data set of 1,46,867 articles relevant to Covid-19 published between 01 March and 31 July 2020 in 15 countries, including the UK, Australia, and the US. In publications about the pandemic, women have frequently been shown as a minority when economists or STEM specialists are quoted. The study report states that for every time a notable female STEM expert is mentioned, there are 19 references of male specialists in the same sector. Additionally, there are five references of their male counterparts for every time an accomplished female economist is mentioned in Covid-19 articles (Jones, 2020).

When the coverage of particular sub-topics in Covid-19-related literature is examined, a distinct divide is apparent. Stories about domestic abuse and childcare typically feature more women than men, with percentages of 70% and 53%, respectively. However, the figure drops dramatically to 27% when discussing the inclusion of women as public health and epidemiology experts (Jones, 2020).

Research Gap

There has been sufficient research on the absence of women's perspectives in global news media, but no research has been conducted on the discrimination and inequality of male and female experts' opinions in Bangladeshi news media. The number of women participating in and being experts in various fields is on the rise. However, it is evident that these women are not represented accurately in the media. Any gender equality issue presented in the media mostly presented from angles where no clear judgment can be done. Insufficient research exists on how women should be portrayed and how their tales should be shared. In addition, no study is conducted on the audience's response to issues of gender inequality or the role of women as expert commentators.

Theoretical Framework

This study has used 'Muted Group Theory' and 'Feminist Standpoint Theory' as the theoretical framework.

Muted Group theory

The idea that people in dominant groups frequently dismiss the ideas of people in subordinate groups based on traits including race, gender, class, caste, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity is known as "muted group theory." This argument holds that because women are typically subordinate to men in most civilizations, they are not as free to express their thoughts. Women's opinions are viewed as being less important, thus their comments get less attention and subsequently become quieter over time (Arender & Arender, 1975).

Edwin and Shirley Ardener and Cherris Kramerae contributed to the first development of "Muted Group Theory." Her research indicates that women's opinions are not valued in patriarchal societies. She contends that men have created and shaped language. As a result, women frequently refrain from sharing their ideas and opinions. In patriarchal society, women's opinions are frequently disregarded when they are spoken on any subject. Due to this, women become a voiceless group whose voices not only go ignored but also frequently vanish.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Another concept projected in this study is the "Feminist Standpoint Theory," which links power relations to the subjection of specific groups. In place of emphasizing social ideologies (such as sexism and the gender roles it permits) that explain why women are assigned to certain tasks and why such tasks are deemed less important than those assigned to men, this theory disproves the idea that knowledge is a simple and direct consequence of the key qualities of members of the group (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

This theory backs up the idea that power dynamics that create unequal social positions with one related to dominant groups and the other to subordinate groups are what form society. According to this theory, society forces men and women to fill separate social roles and accords them unequal rights and opportunities because of sex differences. It also encourages the idea that men and women in different social roles on farms have different kinds of knowledge (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

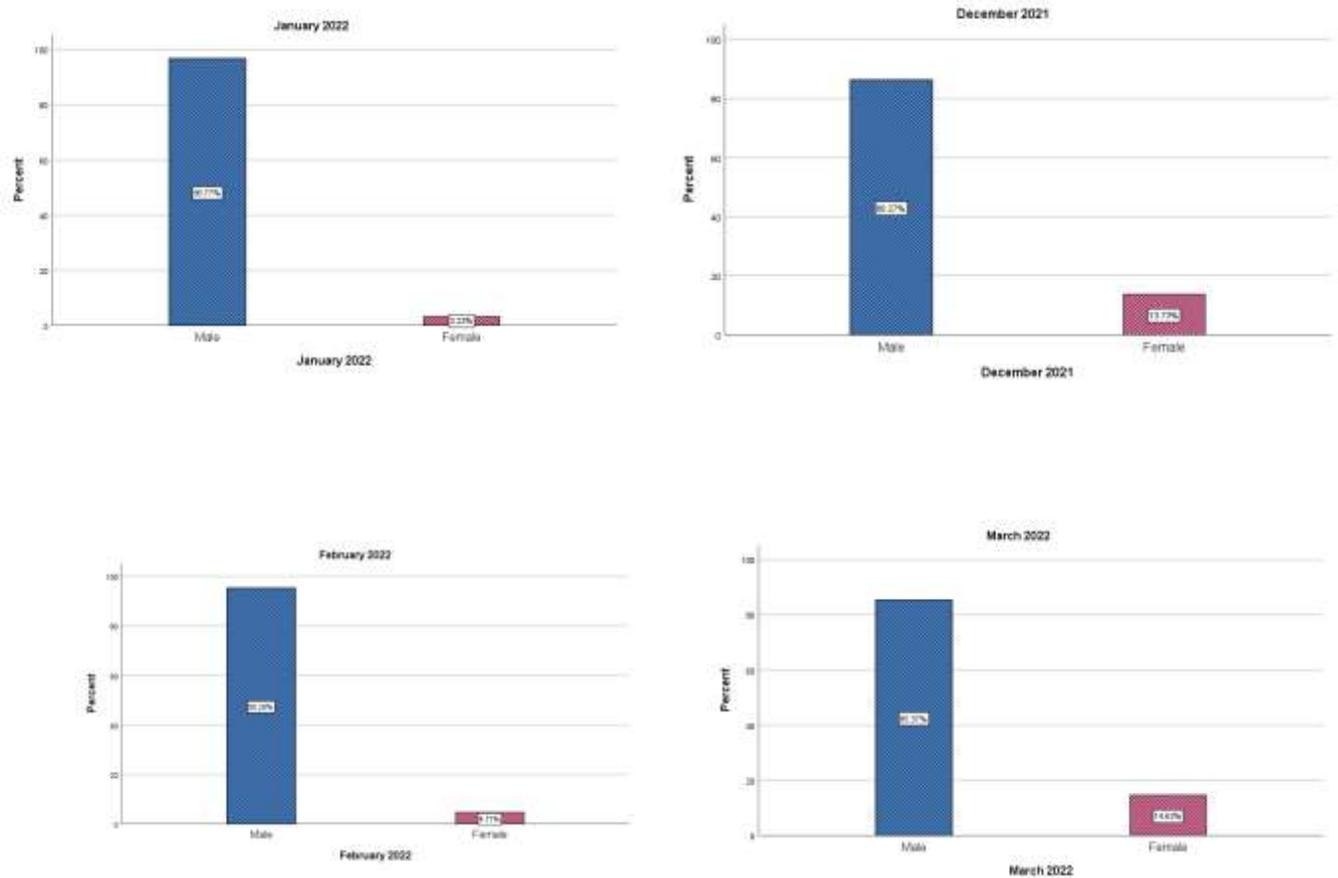
As this research intends to find out why women are marginalized as expert comment providers, The researchers believed that these theories could serve as a basis for any scholarly conclusion regarding this subject.

Method and Sampling

To investigate how mainstream Bangladeshi newspapers covered Covid-19 issues regarding women experts, this study used a mixed-method approach, which includes both qualitative and quantitative methods. To acquire data from newspapers for this study, a functional collection technique has been utilized. The research adopted six newspapers (three Bangla and three English newspapers) and collected data from December 2021 to March 2022 from each newspaper in order to determine the quantitative number of expert comments, and the ratio of male to female expert comments in covid-related news Data has been collected for a total of four months. This four-month period was chosen since Bangladesh was experiencing its third wave of coronavirus at that time. During that period, the infection rate was significantly higher than in the preceding months. The research was divided into two phases for ease of comprehension. During the initial stage of the project, data was gathered from the six newspapers, and a quantitative number was derived by SPSS from the findings to reflect statistics. In the second phase, in-depth interviews were conducted with four journalists from various newspapers. The purpose of this in-depth interview is to determine the point of view of the journalists behind the study's findings and to obtain concluding remarks.

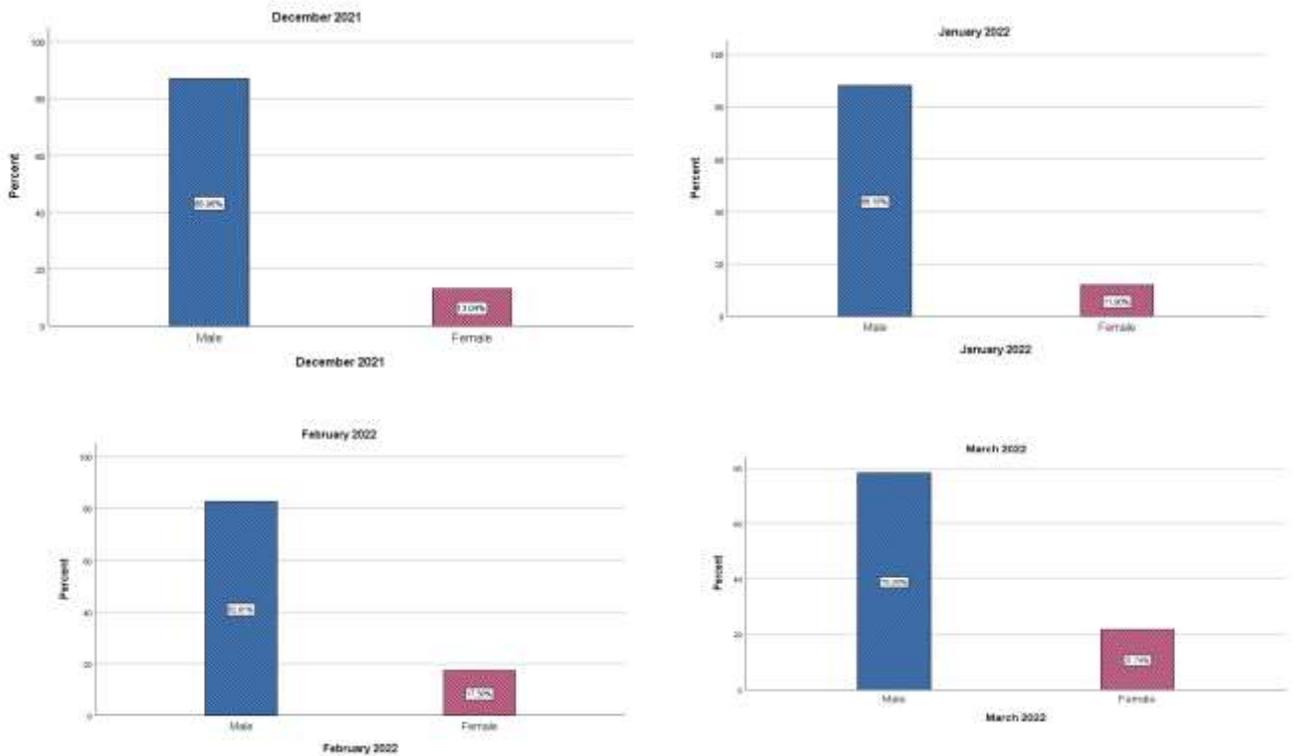
Data Representation

Figure 1. *Prothom Alo*



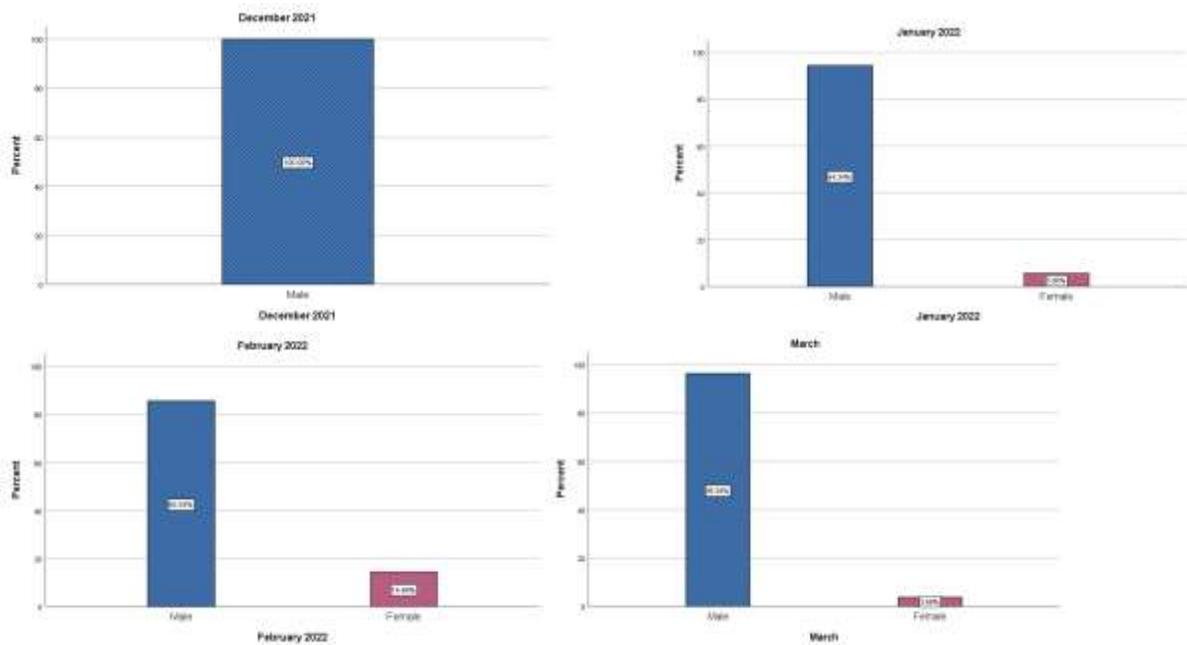
The graph charts represent the ratio of male and female expert comments of Covid related news (December 2021– March 2022) published in the Prothom Alo newspaper. In Covid related news during December, 86.27% expert comments from males were taken whereas only 13.73% were taken from female experts. In January, only 3.23% female expert comments were taken, and the number of male expert comments was 96.77%. The following month, 95.29% male expert comments were taken against only 4.71% female expert comments. In March the ratio was 85.37% comments from males and 14.63% from female experts from different fields.

Figure 2. *The Daily Star*



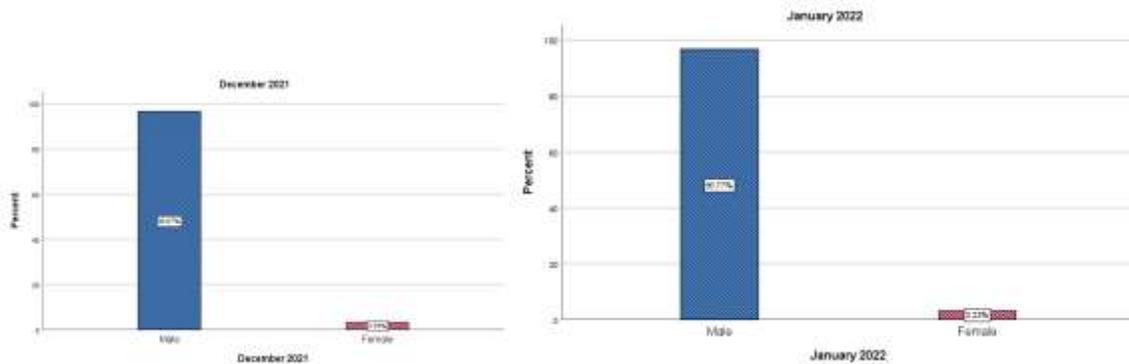
The graph charts illustrate the ratio of male to female expert comments on Covid-related news articles published in The Daily Star newspaper between December 2021 and March 2022. During December's Covid-related news, 86.96% expert opinions from male specialists were gathered, and only 13.04% from female experts. In January, there were 11.90% female expert comments and 88.10% expert opinions from male. The following month, 82.61% male expert comments were taken against only 17.39% female expert comments. In March, there were 78.26% male comments and 21.74% from females.

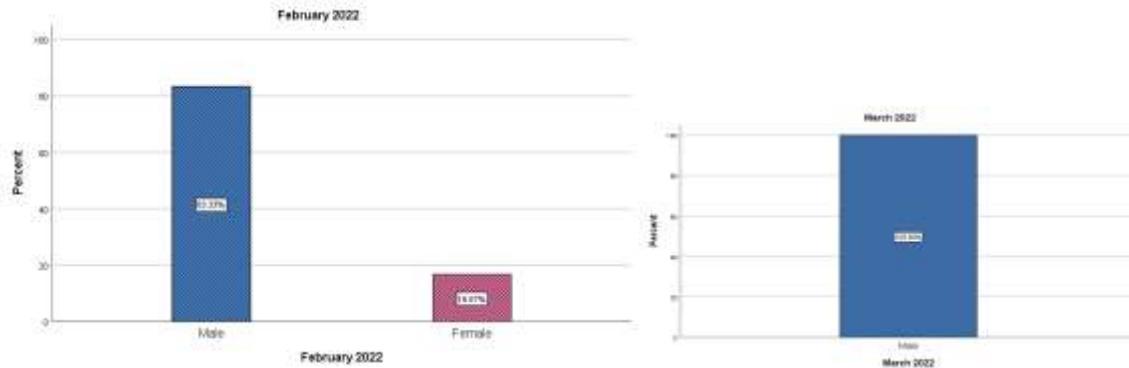
Figure 03. *The Daily Ittefaq*



The graph charts represent the ratio of male and female expert comments of Covid related news (December 2021 – March 2022) published in The Daily Ittefaq newspaper. In Covid related news during December, 100% expert comments from males were taken but none from female experts. In January, only 5.66% female expert comments were taken and the number of male expert comments was 94.34%. The following month, 85.54% male expert comments were taken against only 14.46% female expert comments. In March the ratio was 96.34% comments from males and 3.66% from the female experts from different fields.

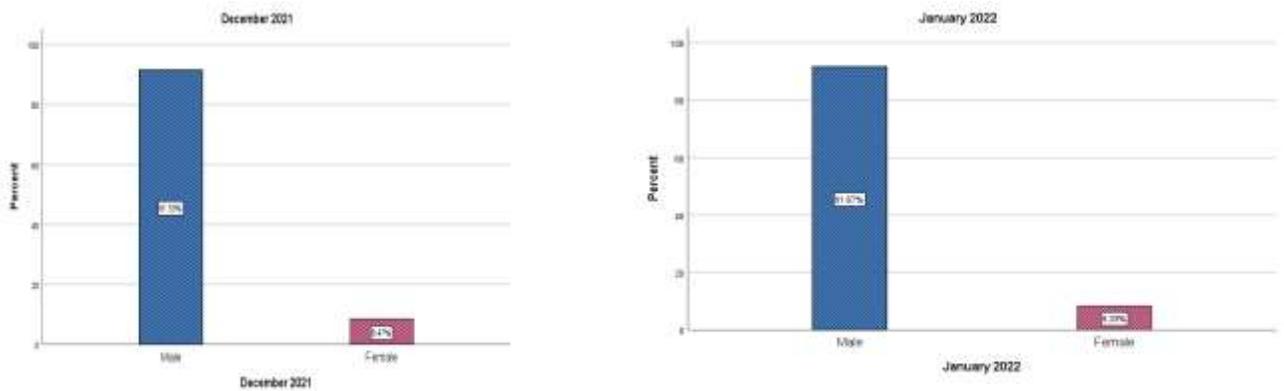
Figure 4. *Samakal*

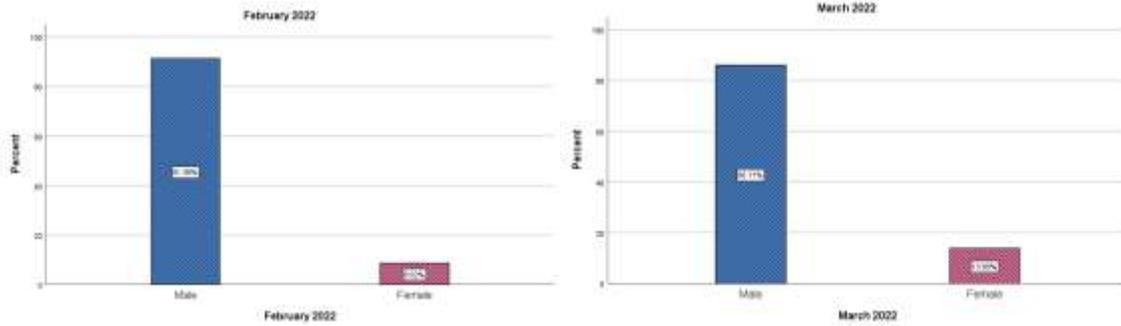




The graph charts depict the ratio of male and female expert comments of Covid related news (December 2021 – March 2022) published in The Samakal newspaper. In Covid related news during December, 96.67% expert views from males were taken whereas just 3.33% was taken from female experts. In January, there were only 3.23% female expert comments, whereas there were 96.77% male expert comments. The following month, 83.33% male expert comments were received compared to 16.67% from females. In March, there were 100% male comments and none from females.

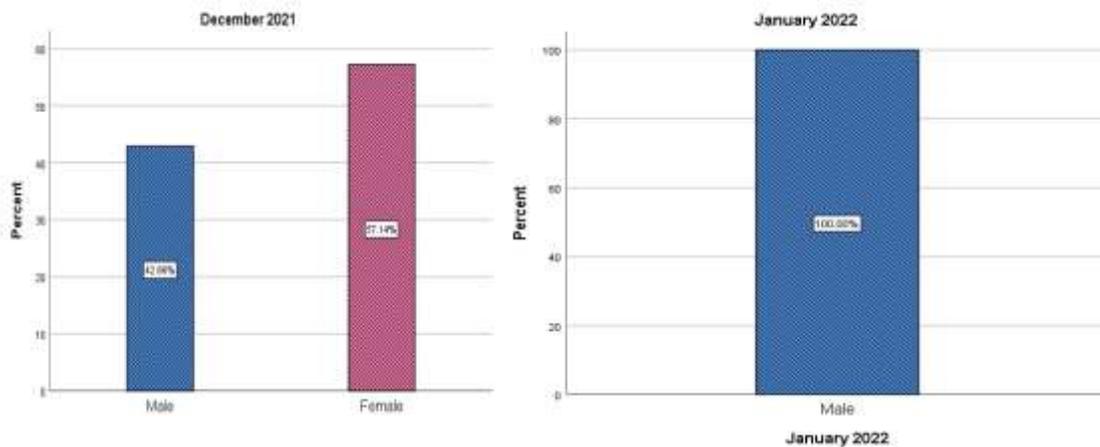
Figure 05. *New Age*

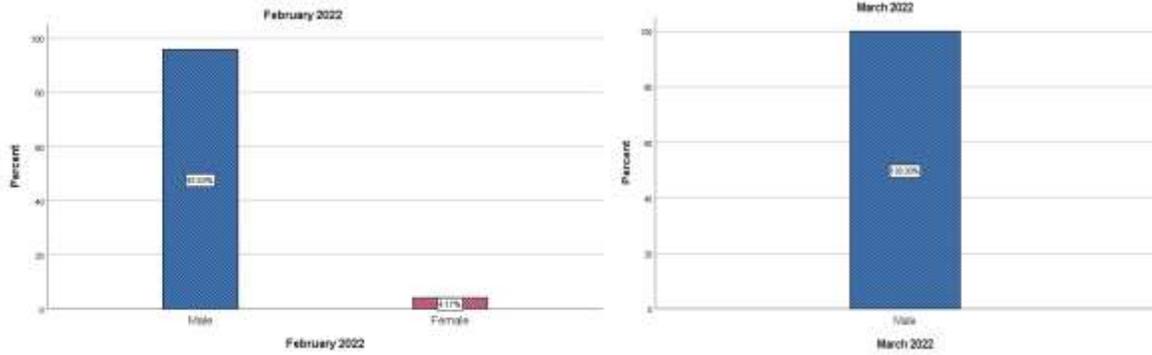




The graph charts represent the ratio of male and female expert comments of Covid related news (December 2021 – March 2022) published in the Newage newspaper. In Covid related news during December, 91.53% expert comments from males were taken whereas only 8.47% were taken from female experts. In January, only 8.33% female expert comments were taken, and the number of male expert comments was 91.67%. The following month, 91.38% male expert comments were taken against only 8.62% female expert comments. In March the ratio was 86.11% comments from males and 13.69% from female experts from different fields.

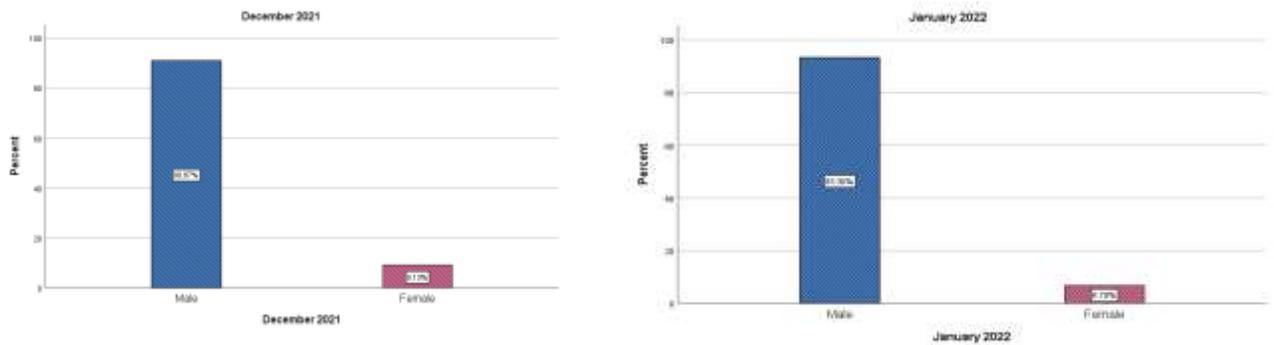
Figure 06. *The Asian Age*

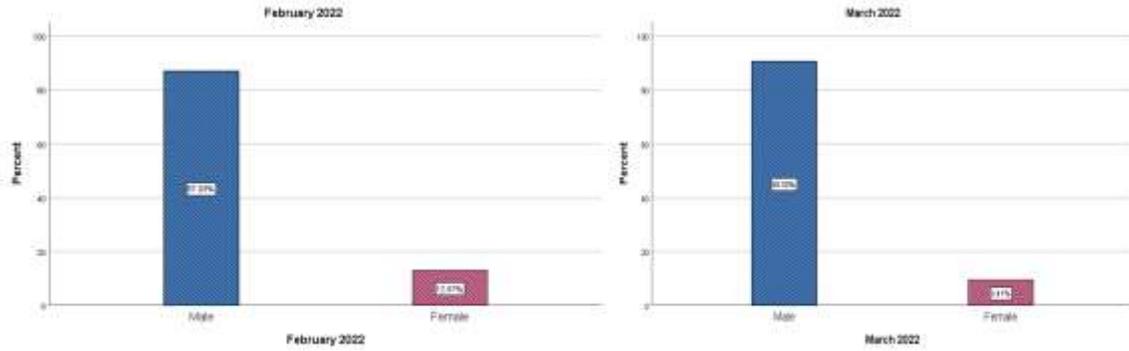




The graph charts depict the ratio of male and female expert comments of Covid related news (December 2021 – March 2022) published in The Asian Age newspaper. In Covid related news during December, 42.86% expert views from males were taken whereas 57.14% were taken from female experts. In January, there were no female expert comments. 100% expert comments were taken from male experts. The following month, 95.83% male expert comments were taken versus only 4.17% female expert remark. In March, there were 100% male comments and none from females.

Figure 07. Data in Percentage



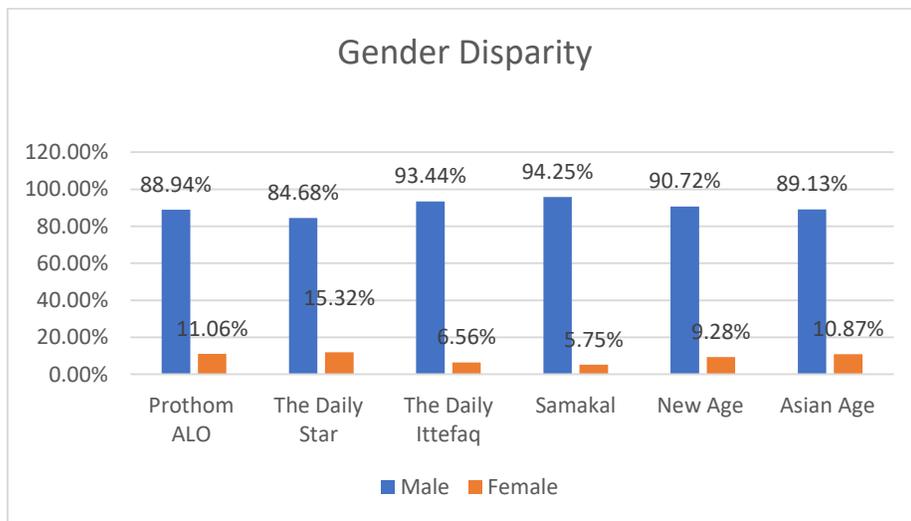


The charts clearly illustrate the disparity between male and female expert comments on covid-related news articles taken by newspapers. As can be seen from the chart, The Daily Star has the most female representation, at 15.32%. The range of male expert comments is 84.68% to 94.25%, emphasizing the disparities and the range of the female comment experts is to 5.75% to 15.32%.

Key Findings

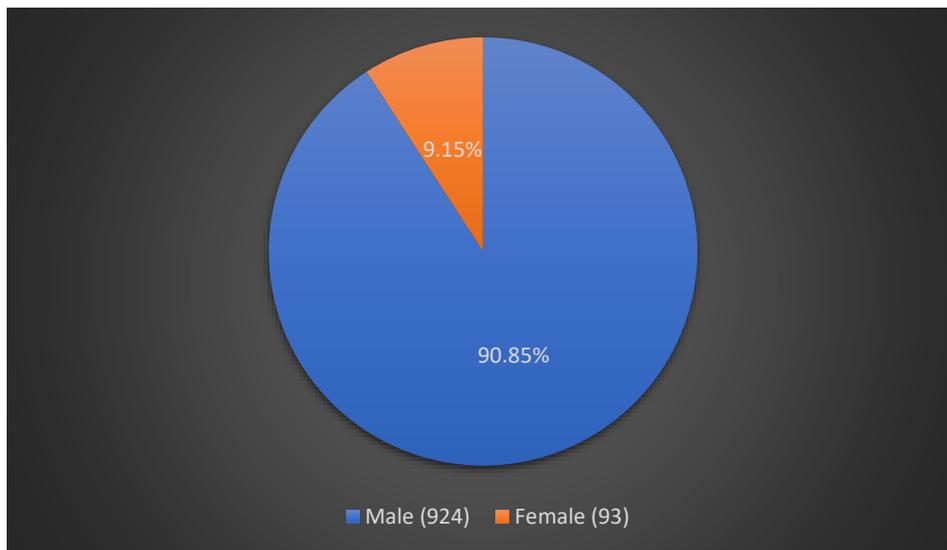
The findings can be categorized into two primary sections. The two sections have been statistically demonstrated in the findings.

Figure 08. Gender Disparity in Particular News paper



The chart clearly illustrates the disparity between male and female expert comments on covid-related news articles taken by newspapers. As can be seen from the chart, The Daily Star has the most female representation, at 15.32%. The range of male expert comments is 84.68% to 94.25%, emphasizing the disparities and the range of the female comment experts is to 5.75% to 15.32%.

Figure 09. *Overall Scenario of Gender Disparity*



This is the overall representation of expert comments in Covid -19-related articles in Bangladeshi newspapers, featuring 90.85 % of expert comments that come from male experts and only 9.15% from female experts.

Overall Findings

The study discovered a total of 924 male expert comments and 93 female expert comments in covid-19 related news. The ratio of male opinion in covid-related news 90.85 percent and female opinion 9.15 percent. Out of all the newspapers, The Daily Star has the largest female opinion proportion, 15.3%. Samakal has the smallest proportion of female comments, which is only 5.75%. Overall, the study indicated that women's participation in expert commentary on covid-related news is significantly lower than that of men. The difference in the ratios is 81.7

percent, which demonstrates a significant bias towards men regarding expert comment in mainstream media coverage of covid-related news.

Discussion on the Findings

According to the findings, In the newspapers, only 9.15% of female experts' opinions on corona-related matters have been considered, compared to 90.85% of male experts. The outcomes of the investigation made it abundantly evident that the bulk of papers about Covid-19 does not include the voices of women experts in the relevant fields. If an article contains any comments made by women, they are usually buried deep within a sea of comments made by men. Rarely have women been portrayed as experts.

Regarding the findings and rationale behind the statistical data's outputs, the study conducted four in-depth interviews with various media outlets to obtain precise conclusions. When asked about the male-to-female ratio of expert comments in covid-related news, the interviewed journalists claimed that they had never considered that fewer female expert comments were a problem. In addition, they did not deliberately interview male experts more than female experts.

During discussions with journalists, various causes for this issue were revealed. The following are the most frequent reasons cited by journalists for the dearth of female expert commentary in covid-related news coverage.

Easy Access

The interviewees claimed that a journalist's top priority is to gather information rapidly. They believe that getting knowledge as soon as possible is the most crucial action to take. The interviews make it clear that journalists frequently get in touch with people who are prepared to supply any information, even at odd times. Male experts, according to the journalists, are friendlier and more eager to provide them with the knowledge they need to finish their story. When gathering information for news reporting, journalists don't intentionally look only for the advice of men. But almost always the only specialists who provide their opinions are men.

Therefore, the Covid-related news has experienced the same thing. They have been working to cover the stories as soon as they arise and to acquire as much information as they can. Accessibility was crucial to them in this regard; thus they selected experts based on their ease of access, which in this case happened to be more males than female experts.

As a result, nothing has changed regarding Covid-related news. They have been working to get as much information and cover the stories as rapidly as they can. As a result, accessibility was important to them, and they decided to hire male professionals because of this.

Acquainted Source

The second observation was that respondents confirmed that journalists frequently build relationships with people who can provide them with information for reports. Male specialists are more accommodative in this situation. Female experts who are qualified to offer insight that can strengthen the veracity of a news report don't appear to be a dependable and helpful source for the reporting.

They construct a solid wall and refuse to divulge enough details to preserve the credibility of the news. On the other hand, they discover that male experts are more receptive to feedback or knowledge. Journalists regard male experts as trustworthy information providers because of their amiable approach.

Male experts were shown to be more reliable sources in the news regarding covid. To achieve this, they occasionally conducted many interviews with the same person at various times during various periods and for various components or situations of the story. They typically cite the same person repeatedly as the source of the numerous precise beats of the covid-related news.

Reluctant to give information

The interviewees denied that they solely sought the professional opinions of men. According to them, in most cases, female experts prefer to avoid interacting with journalists and other media members. They find dealing with the media to be an added burden. It is much more challenging for journalists to complete their reports on time if certain individuals are unwilling

to participate in providing information. Therefore, they seek out someone who is willing to provide information and does not hesitate to give information and most of the time, these experts are male.

Societal Barrier

The interviewees claimed that society constantly discriminates against women in a variety of contexts and that there are numerous barriers in the way of women. This problem contains a discriminatory reflection as well.

They discovered that social barriers are one of the causes of receiving fewer expert responses from females. They connected it to the phrase "Glass Ceiling." The term "glass ceiling" was coined by Marilyn Loden in 1978 while making a speech. It serves as a metaphor for women's inability, despite their aptitude, to advance further in their specialized industries. They experience pressure from the males around them and from society, which limits their daring.

In accordance with the interviews, journalists claim that women in our society typically keep quiet or gather in a safe place when speaking to the media or doing interviews with journalists. Because they don't want to make difficulties, the female experts are reluctant to speak to the media. Another reason for the starkly disproportionate number of males to female contributions to the expert views is due to this.

Due to cultural restrictions, there are fewer women specialists than there are men experts in several fields. Because of this, journalists frequently consult with male specialists for their advice and thoughts. In most fields, finding female specialists is often very difficult. The number of female professionals in the field of health has increased, although they are less cooperative than their male counterparts.

Conclusion

The media is the primary source of information, facts, ideas, and opinions for people worldwide. Who and what is chosen to appear in news coverage and how persons and events are portrayed are of utmost importance. According to the initial GMMP analysis from 1995,

which showed that men dominate news coverage practically everywhere in the world, only 17% of people in the news were women. Since 1995, the world's media has altered absurdly. Dedicated news outlets, internet publications, and global news services have all made it easier for people worldwide to read the news at home. Both the size and sophistication of the audience, as well as the news industry, have increased. But there has yet to be much change in the discrimination used to determine whose experts get featured in the news. This study demonstrates that less than 10% of female experts are chosen by media outlets to offer their opinions. Although the journalists gave several explanations for this situation, the Bangladeshi newspaper industry must actively break free of this and end such overt discrimination.

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