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HIGH RISKS, LOW PREPAREDNESS

Journalist Safety in 2026 Elections

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Preface

This study was born out of a growing concern: that journalists in Bangladesh are heading into a highly tense national election without the safety systems they need. Both physical and digital threats are rising, and reporters—especially those working in the field—are feeling exposed, unsupported, and unsure of where to turn if something goes wrong.

High Risks, Low Preparedness: Journalist Safety in 2026 Elections aims to document those concerns and highlight where the biggest gaps lie. Through surveys with over 200 journalists and in-depth interviews across 19 districts, we've gathered evidence that speaks not just to what could happen, but to what journalists have already experienced and what they realistically expect.

This report is the result of months of work by a committed team. Our sincere thanks to Shakawat Hossian, the lead researcher, and to the data analyst and survey team whose work made this study possible. We're also deeply grateful to every journalist who gave their time and trusted us with their experiences.

Digitally Right thanks Fojo Media Institute, Linnaeus University, Sweden and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) for their support through the Media Safety in the Digital Age initiative. Their support helped bring attention to an issue that urgently needs it.

We hope this study serves not only to inform but to push for better systems—ones that take journalist safety seriously, both online and offline.

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Executive Summary

Bangladesh's upcoming national election, scheduled for early 2026, will take place in a highly polarized and volatile political climate. Past elections have seen violent clashes, suppression of dissent, and attacks on the press. As the political landscape becomes more competitive and confrontational, respondents widely believe that journalists covering the election are likely to face intensified safety risks, both online and offline.

This study is conducted by Digitally Right as part of the Media Safety in the Digital Age initiative, in partnership with the Fojo Media Institute at Linnaeus University and with support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). It draws on a survey of 201 journalists across 19 districts and 10 in-depth interviews to better understand the threats journalists are likely to encounter and the extent to which newsrooms are prepared to handle them.

Survey participants overwhelmingly fear that reporters covering elections will face serious physical threats. 89% of respondents anticipate that reporters may face assault or beatings while covering the election. 76% believe journalists are likely to face verbal harassment, and 71% foresee intimidation. Among female journalists, 50% believe that sexual harassment is a likely threat facing reporters, and 40% expect sexual assault to be a risk for women working on election assignments.

Respondents also expect a rise in digital threats against journalists. 75% anticipate disinformation campaigns aimed at

undermining reporters or their newsrooms, while 65% expect hacking attempts. Women expressed heightened concern: 80% believe journalists—especially women—may be subjected to surveillance, compared with 68% of men. More than half (56%) anticipate smear campaigns directed at journalists.

Preparedness within newsrooms is widely perceived as insufficient. Only 24% of respondents said their newsroom provides safety gear or training for risky assignments. 77% reported that their newsroom has no digital safety protocol. When asked about preparedness levels among journalists, male respondents were nearly three times more likely than female respondents to say that journalists generally have a safety plan.

More than 90% of participants believe political actors are the most likely perpetrators of violence or harassment during election coverage. Law enforcement agencies and extreme religious groups were also cited as sources of risk, particularly by women and regional correspondents. Respondents pointed to political labeling, declining trust in media, rising extremism, mob violence, weak law enforcement responses, and targeted disinformation as key contributors to heightened danger.

The study identifies several areas where strengthened measures may reduce risk during the election period, including long-term practical safety training, clear newsroom safety protocols, gender-sensitive protections, and improved access to legal and emergency support.

1. Introduction

The upcoming 2026 general election in Bangladesh is widely seen as a pivotal moment after 16 years of authoritarian rule. The last three national elections (2014, 2018, and 2024 vote) under the Sheikh Hasina regime were marred by boycotts, rigging allegations, and violence, leaving many Bangladeshis disenfranchised.¹ With Hasina forced to resign amid a mass uprising in 2024, which resulted in an estimated 1,400 deaths (including six journalists)² in a brutal crackdown,³ an interim administration now presides over a society anxious for change.

Bangladesh's politics is now highly volatile – the interim government is pursuing reforms and prosecuting Hasina's abuses, but “rising violence and political rifts threaten stability” and the 2026 national election will determine whether the country's post-Hasina upheaval leads to “real democratic change or deeper turmoil”.⁴



Compared to the tightly controlled 2014 and 2018 elections, the risk of electoral violence is perceived to be higher than in past cycles, as multiple power centers are in play. For journalists, who often serve as the eyes and ears of the public during such fraught times, this volatility signals unprecedented risks.

Bangladesh's press freedom environment has long been ranked among the worst globally, reflecting the myriad risks journalists face. In 2023, the country slipped to 163rd of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' World Press Freedom Index – the lowest in South Asia as journalists were frequently attacked, arbitrarily detained, or forcibly disappeared for critical reporting.⁵ The Digital Security Act (DSA) of 2018, later repackaged as Cyber Security Act in 2023 – both preceding elections – criminalized broad categories of online speech, leading to over 2,000 cases and a climate of fear-driven self-censorship.⁶

In the 2025 World Press Freedom Index, Bangladesh ranked 149th out of 180 countries, a significant improvement of 16 spots from the

¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/5/bangladesh-elections-a-timeline-of-controversy>; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-67889387>

² <https://rsf.org/en/bangladesh-one-year-after-monsoon-revolution-justice-six-slain-journalists-remains-elusive>

³ <https://apnews.com/article/bangladesh-human-rights-hasina-yunus-volker-turk-united-nations-951dc40f60d6a798eb5af5ed1d11bbad>

⁴ <https://www.dhakatribune.com/opinion/longform/392925/the-good-the-bad-the-ugly-and-everything-in>

⁵ <https://www.tbsnews.net/bangladesh/bangladesh-ranks-lowest-among-south-asian-countries-press-freedom-index-2023-625626>

⁶ <https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/repackaging-repression-the-cyber-security-act-and-the-continuing-lawfare-against-dissent-in-bangladesh/#>

previous year's ranking. However, concerns remain.⁷ In 2025, as street confrontations intensified, CPJ documented at least 10 incidents of journalists being beaten, harassed, or having equipment destroyed while covering political events.⁸

Protests and elections are usual flashpoints for violence against reporters. During campaigning for the 2018 polls, for example, groups of masked men attacked journalists covering rallies, beating at least ten reporters and vandalizing media vehicles.⁹ More recently, as opposition demonstrations surged in 2023, approximately 30 journalists were assaulted with sticks and rubber bullets and had their cameras smashed by ruling party loyalists, opposition activists, or police while covering an anti-government protest in Dhaka.¹⁰ The deadly 2024 uprising was an extreme case: six journalists were killed and over 250 injured in just three weeks of unrest.¹¹ Prosecutions for attacks on media workers are rare, sending a chilling message before the coming election, and this time from all sides of the political divide.

A 2022 survey by the International Federation of Journalists found most South Asian newsrooms ill-equipped to shield staff from digital surveillance, hacking, and online abuse.¹² Restrictive laws and weak institutional protections have been identified

as common challenges across the region. Bangladesh is not an exception. A CPJ poll of local journalists ahead of the last election found that 100% of the journalists feared arrest or detention, 94% anticipated severe online harassment and physical assault, and 83% were worried about government surveillance.¹³

There is no comprehensive national safety mechanism for media workers in Bangladesh. The support that does exist (ad-hoc training sessions, safety guides, etc) is valuable but insufficiently institutionalized.¹⁴ As a result, journalists largely fend for themselves, relying on personal networks or caution learned from experience. This lack of structured support and policy framework leaves a dangerous gap, especially with a high-stakes election on the horizon.

In light of the above, this research seeks to understand and address the critical gaps in journalist safety as Bangladesh approaches the 2026 elections. By providing an evidence-based assessment of journalist safety and preparedness ahead of the election, this study hopes to inform targeted interventions by media organizations, press freedom groups, and policymakers to better protect journalists and uphold the public's right to information during this critical juncture.

⁷ <https://rsf.org/en/country/bangladesh>

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<https://cpj.org/2025/08/a-year-after-new-bangladesh-leader-vows-reform-journalists-still-behind-bars/>

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<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/25/bangladesh-masked-youth-attack-journalists-before-elections>

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<https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/article/bangladesh-30-journalists-attacked-while-covering-protests>

¹¹

<https://rsf.org/en/bangladesh-one-year-after-monsoon-revolution-justice-six-slain-journalists-remains-elusive>

¹²

https://samsn.ifj.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Safer-Smarter-Journalism_SURVEY-REPORT_FINAL.pdf

¹³

<https://cpj.org/2023/10/bangladesh-national-election-2024-journalist-safety-guide/>

¹⁴

<https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/unesco-news-net-work-launch-journalist-safety-initiative-3873481>

2. Objectives and Methodology

2.1 Objective

This study seeks to map the safety landscape for journalists in Bangladesh in the lead-up to the 2026 national election. It focuses on two primary questions:

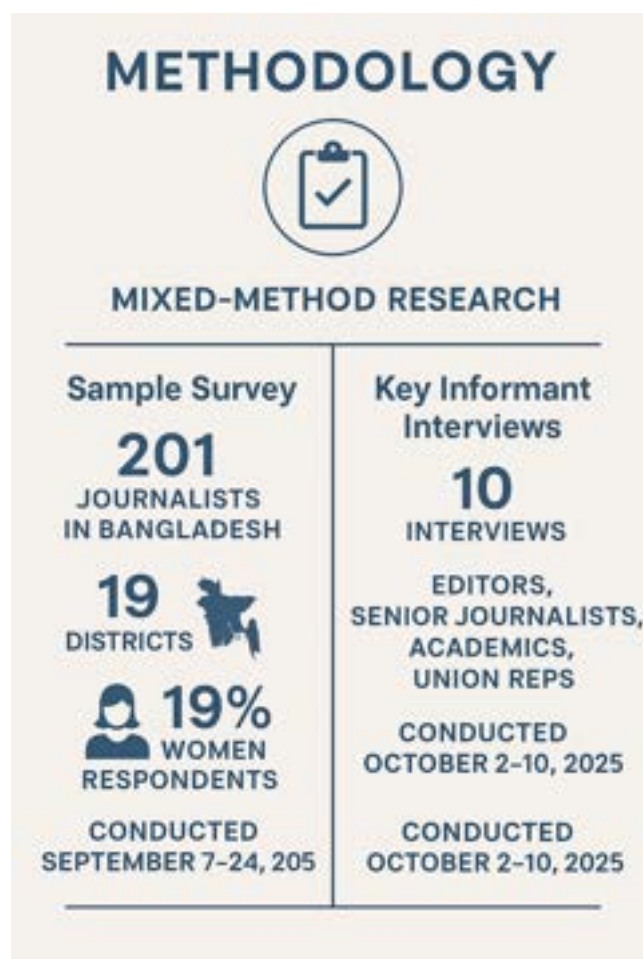
- What types of physical and digital risks do journalists anticipate;
- To what extent are they prepared to navigate those risks – personally and institutionally?

It also examines the forms of support journalists currently receive from their newsrooms or professional networks, and what is required to ensure their safety in a pre-election context.

2.2 Methodology

This study used a mixed-method approach combining a structured survey and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs). The survey examined the physical and digital safety risks that journalists may face while covering the upcoming national election, as well as the level of personal and organizational preparedness to manage those risks. The KIIs complemented the survey with deeper insights from experienced media professionals and safety experts. Together, these methods provide an overall understanding of the risks journalists may encounter during the election and the measures needed to safeguard them.

Sample Survey: The study used a purposive sampling approach and covered 19 districts to ensure geographic diversity. All eight divisional districts – Dhaka, Chattogram, Rajshahi, Khulna, Barishal, Sylhet, Mymensingh, and Rangpur – were selected due to their media concentration. Eleven additional districts (Madaripur, Narshingdi, Tangail, Sirajganj, Jessore, Bogura, Dinajpur, Brahmanbaria, Cumilla, Noakhali, and Rangamati) were included to reflect broader national coverage.



Lists of journalists were collected from local Press Clubs and Journalist Associations. From these lists, 201 journalists were selected as respondents. The sample included reporters and newsroom editors from print, TV, and online outlets, representing both national and local media. Because Dhaka plays a central role in national political coverage, a greater share of respondents came from the capital.

Female journalists remain significantly underrepresented nationwide (10.29% of media professionals and only 5.72% of reporters)¹⁵. To allow reasonable gender-based analysis, the study intentionally included approximately one-fifth female respondents.

A structured questionnaire was developed and pretested among five journalists before data collection. The survey was conducted from 7–24 September 2025, mainly through face-to-face interviews, with telephone or online interviews used when in-person access was not possible.

Key Informant Interviews: The study conducted 10 KIIs between 2–10 October 2025 with editors, senior journalists, academics, and representatives from journalist unions. A semi-structured interview guide was used to maintain consistency across interviews while allowing space for emerging issues.

The KIIs generated valuable insights on anticipated risks, actors responsible for threats, levels of preparedness, and the measures needed to improve journalist safety during the election period. Qualitative data from the KIIs and open-ended survey responses were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns. All data was anonymized.

Limitations: This study offers an exploratory picture of journalists' safety concerns but does not claim to be statistically representative of all journalists in Bangladesh. The absence of a national database required reliance on Press Clubs and journalist associations, which may not fully capture freelancers or informal media workers. While the sample spans 19 districts, the number of respondents in each district is modest, so findings should not be interpreted as district-level estimates.

The survey questions asked respondents to assess the risks of journalists covering the election in general, not only their own individual circumstances. The findings therefore reflect broader perceptions of the risks facing the profession. As with all perception-based research, responses may reflect individual experiences, expectations, or local conditions at the time of data collection (September–October 2025). Conditions may shift closer to the election.

¹⁵ MRDI. (2022). *Gender inequality and media regulation study: Bangladesh*. Management and Resources Development Initiative (MRDI) & Fojo Media Institute. https://mrdibd.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/GMR_Report.pdf

3. Key Findings From The Survey

Figure 1. Distribution of Respondents by Location

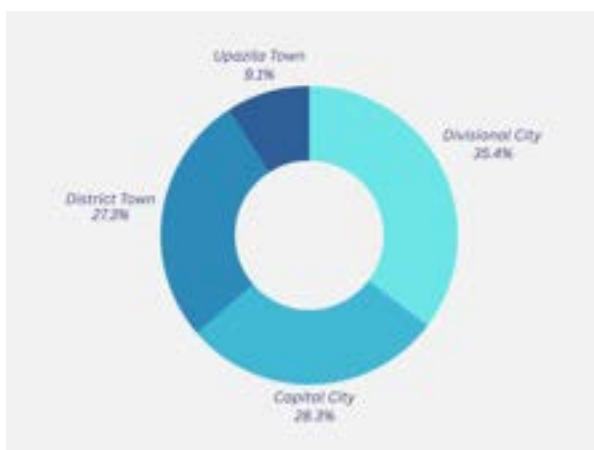


Figure 2: Distribution of Respondents by Media Type



The survey gathered insights from 201 journalists across 19 districts of Bangladesh. The vast majority of respondents were men with women making up about 20% of the sample. Participants were predominantly experienced reporters: nearly all had over five years of experience in journalism and had previously covered elections, providing important context for their risk perceptions.

Among the participants, 61%, primarily represent Print media, significantly outweighing those from TV (22%) and Online (16%). A majority of participants (71%) work outside the capital and are located in divisional cities (35%), district towns (27%), and Upazila or suburban areas (9%). The remaining 28% of respondents are based in the capital Dhaka. Out of the 190 respondents who have covered elections in the past, 31% reported facing both physical and digital threats, while about a third (32%) reported facing no threats.

An overwhelming 95% of respondents have prior experience covering elections. Most have reported on both national (92%) and local government (84%) contests, with 81% having covered both. Among these participants, more than half (54%) said they had faced physical threats, 45% encountered digital threats, and nearly one-third (31%) experienced both.

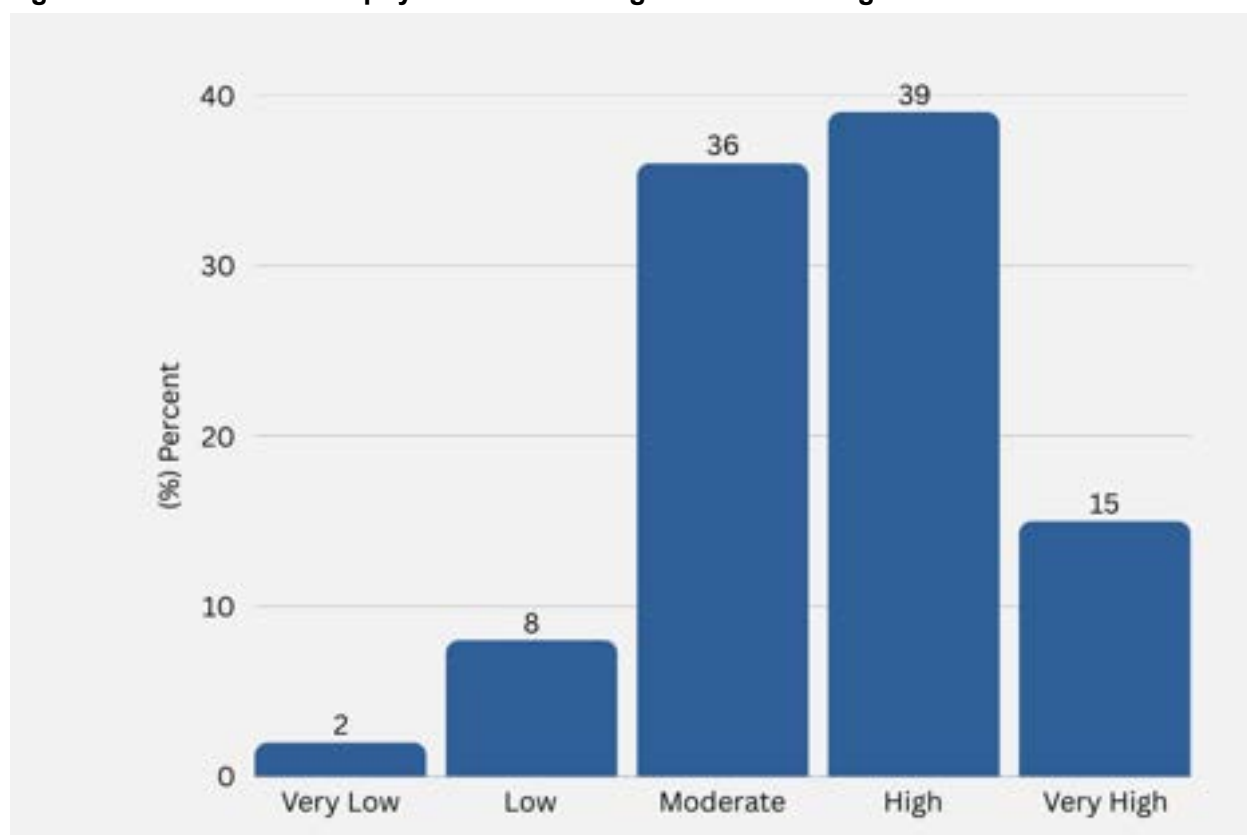
3.1 Physical Threat Landscape

The survey asked journalists to rate the likelihood of physical safety risks during the upcoming national election on a five-point scale (1 = No risk, 5 = Very high risk). Overall, 68% of respondents anticipated at least moderate risk, and 56% expected high or very high risk. The average score across all participants was 3.6, indicating widespread concern about the physical safety of journalists during the election period.

Perceptions of risk varied by gender. Female journalists reported a higher average risk score of 4.0, with 77% selecting high or very high risk. None indicated there was no risk. In comparison, male journalists had a lower average score

of 3.54, with a broader distribution across response categories. These differences suggest that female journalists perceive a greater likelihood of physical threats in the election environment.

Figure 3: Perceived risk of physical harm during election coverage



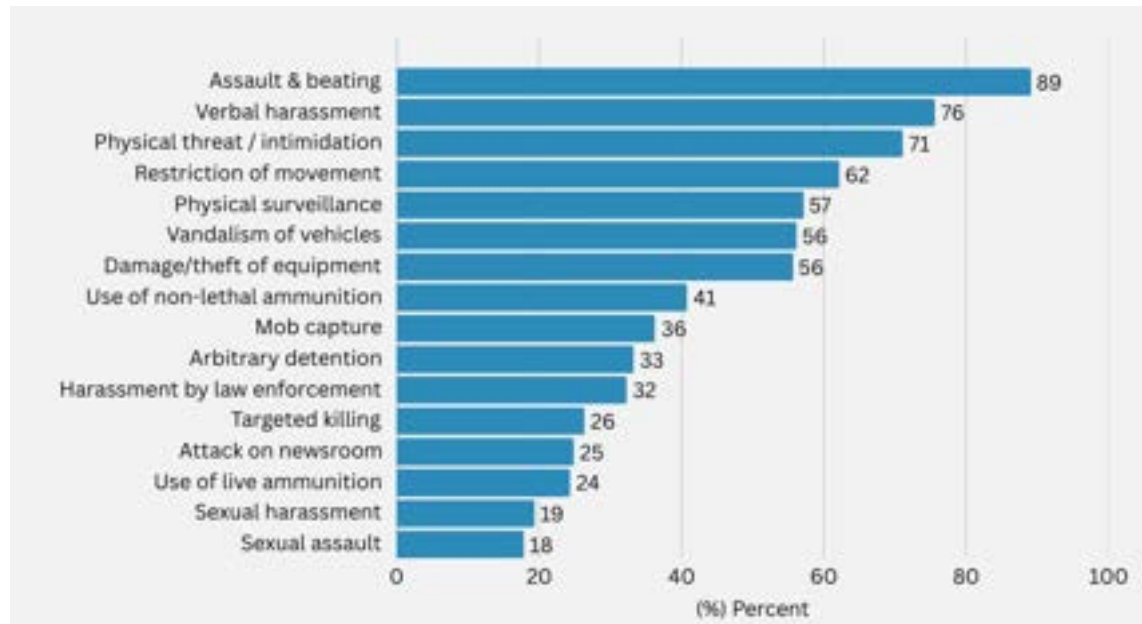
In practical terms, journalists anticipate a hostile and dangerous environment for election coverage. Nearly 89% believe that reporters are likely to face assault or beatings, and 76% foresee widespread verbal harassment, including threats or abuse. Over 70% expect that physical intimidation will be used to pressure the press, while 62% believe obstruction of movement during news gathering. A majority also anticipate that journalists will be subject to physical surveillance, and that seizure of equipment will occur frequently.

More than one-third of respondents predict that coverage will be disrupted by mob

violence, arbitrary arrests, and the use of non-lethal weapons. These perceptions reflect widespread concern about the physical safety of journalists during the upcoming elections – not just for themselves, but across the profession.

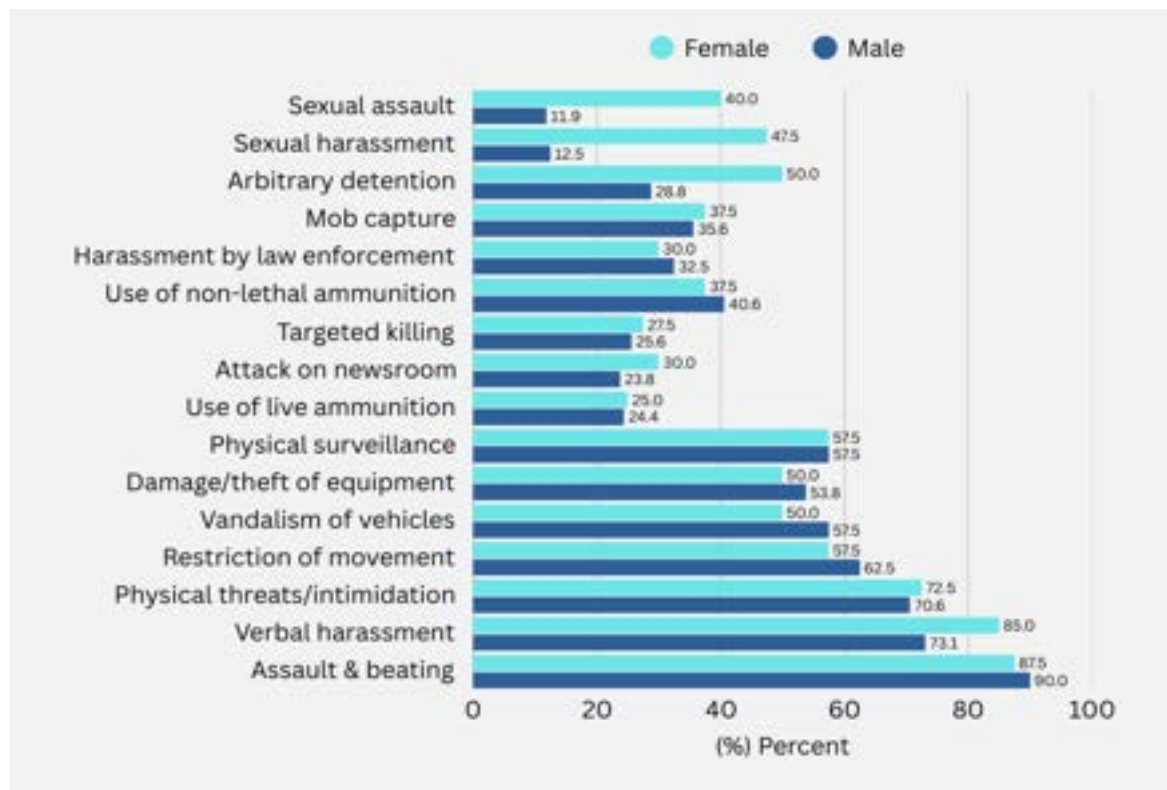
Journalists working for local media outlets reported a higher perceived risk of physical harm during the upcoming election than those in national media. The average risk score among local media journalists was 3.83, compared to 3.56 for national media journalists. Nearly half (48%) of local journalists rated the risk as high, and 20% as very high.

Figure 4: Anticipated Physical Safety Risks for Journalists.



Gendered Differences in Risk Perception: Female participants consistently anticipate higher levels of danger than their male counterparts, and they face unique gender-specific threats. For example, half (50%) of the women respondents said they expect to face sexual harassment, whereas this concern was reported by only about one in ten men.

Figure 5: Physical Safety Risks for Journalists (Female vs Male)



Participants also voiced far greater concern about female reporters being surveilled or stalked – roughly 85% of female respondents anticipated physical surveillance, compared to around 50% of male respondents. Similarly, about 40% of women in the survey fear the possibility of sexual assault against female reporters during election coverage, versus just 12% of men.

Several female respondents noted that their editors discouraged them from covering protests altogether, not by offering support but by limiting assignments, suggesting a protection-through-exclusion approach.

Local vs. Dhaka-Based Journalists:

Journalists working outside the capital city feel far more exposed to physical dangers than those based in Dhaka. Those affiliated with local media outlets in the districts (as opposed to national media headquartered in Dhaka) reported anticipating *almost every type of physical threat at higher rates*, suggesting a more perilous environment for reporters in regional areas.

For instance, the fear of arbitrary arrest or detention is dramatically higher outside the capital: over 40% of journalists in other regions anticipate possible detention, compared to only about 29% of Dhaka-based journalists. Likewise, forms of direct harassment and violence are seen as far more rampant beyond the capital. To illustrate, about 85% working in “other areas” expect to face verbal harassment, versus 73% among those in Dhaka.

The key informant interviews reveal mixed perceptions about which types of journalists face greater physical risks. Multimedia journalists—who both report and capture visuals—are seen as especially vulnerable because they are highly visible during

volatile events. Several respondents emphasized that television and video journalists are often targeted because they record live footage, which can provoke immediate backlash. However, others argued that television crews may face slightly lower risk since they typically work in teams, offering some safety in numbers.

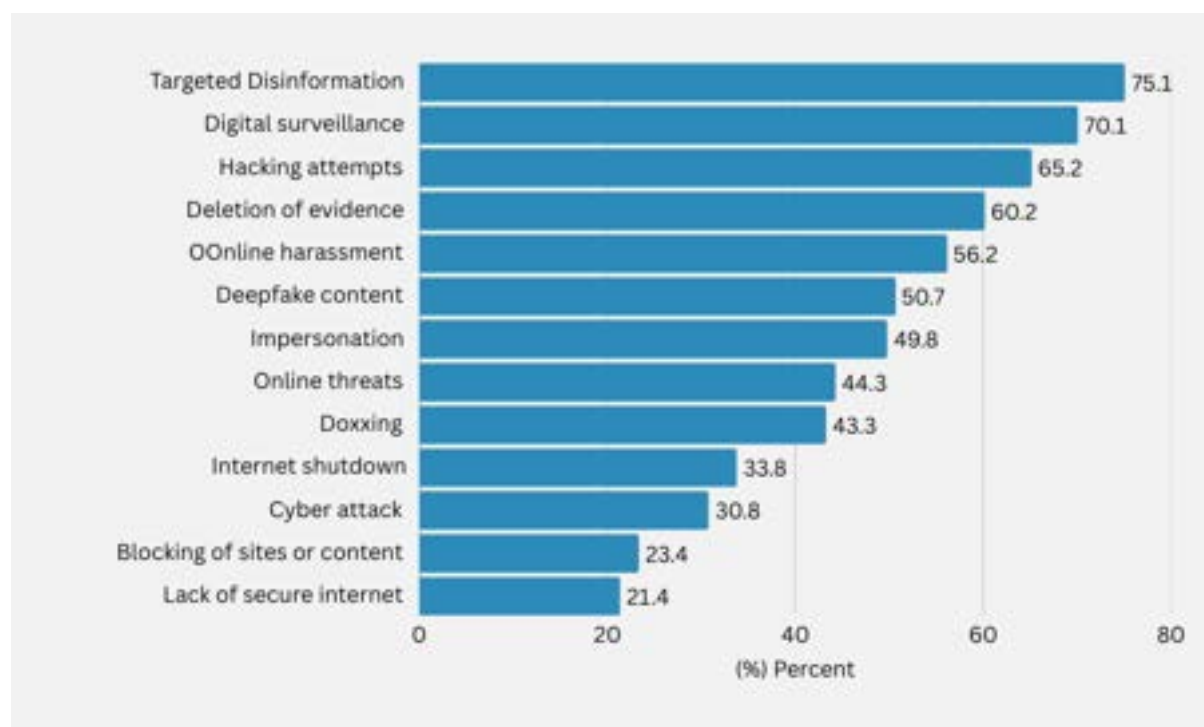
3.2 Digital Threat Landscape

Participants perceive digital threats to intensify around the election. Nearly half (47%) anticipate either a high or very high level of threat, while only a small minority (5%) believe there is no risk at all. The average perceived risk stands at 3.4 out of 5, signaling widespread concern. Female journalists, in particular, report a higher level of worry than their male counterparts reflecting their greater exposure to online harassment and gender-targeted digital abuse.

Journalists working outside the capital feel significantly more vulnerable to digital attacks. They report a higher average risk score (3.57 vs. 3.07) and a greater share (52%) foresee “High” or “Very High” risk, compared to only 35% of capital-based journalists.

Key informants see digital threats as serious, growing, and harder to control. Many said the risks are worse this election, especially with the rise of AI. One interviewee warned that AI could be used to spread fake news using their photo and false information—calling it “a total threat.” They worry about fake news using their photos or names, and how AI can blur the line between truth and lies. Several mentioned online harassment and the spread of rumors as constant problems.

Figure 6: Anticipated Digital Safety Risks for Journalists



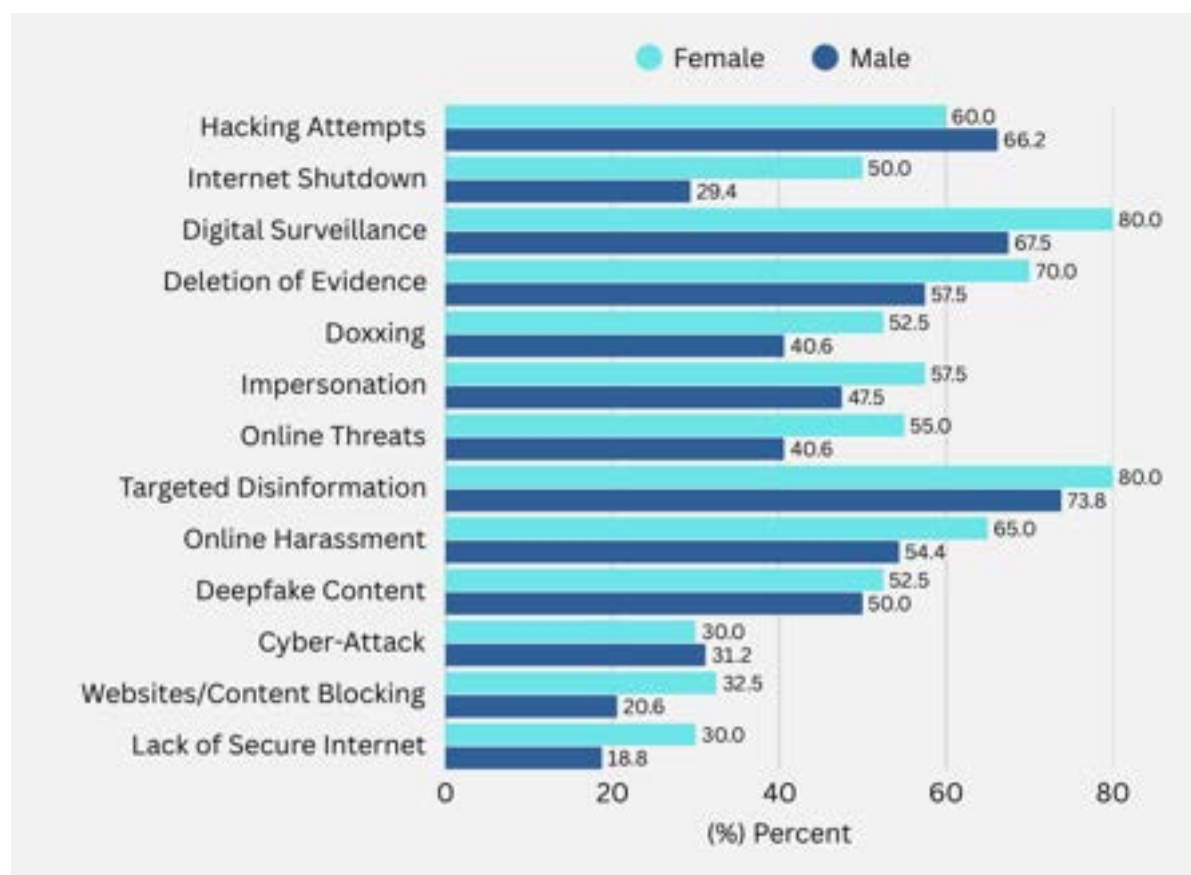
Roughly 75% of journalists expect to be confronted with false or misleading information campaigns aimed at undermining their reporting. A close second is the threat of digital surveillance: about seven in ten fear that their communications or online activities will be spied upon.

Direct cyber-attacks are another major concern; two-thirds of respondents anticipate attempts at hacking or phishing targeting their devices and accounts. More than half even expect hostile actors might try to wipe out evidence of their reporting – for instance, deleting photos, videos, or documents from their devices. Similarly, about one in two journalists anticipate coordinated online harassment, such as troll campaigns or mass abuse on social media, which can be aimed at silencing or discrediting them.

Gendered and Regional differences in Digital Threats: Female journalists face a distinctly more vicious digital threat landscape compared to their male colleagues. Women participants report more personal and gender-targeted attacks online as online harassment campaigns (72% vs 52%), digital surveillance (80% vs 68%), and targeted disinformation (85% vs 72%) to discredit reporting.

Character assassination and harassment campaigns are a top concern for women. Female respondents described expecting coordinated smear campaigns aimed at their personal reputation far more often than men did. For example, a significant number of women (in qualitative responses) mentioned fearing “fake news” about their personal lives or morality being spread to tarnish them.

Figure 7: Anticipated Digital Safety Risks for Journalists (Female vs Male).



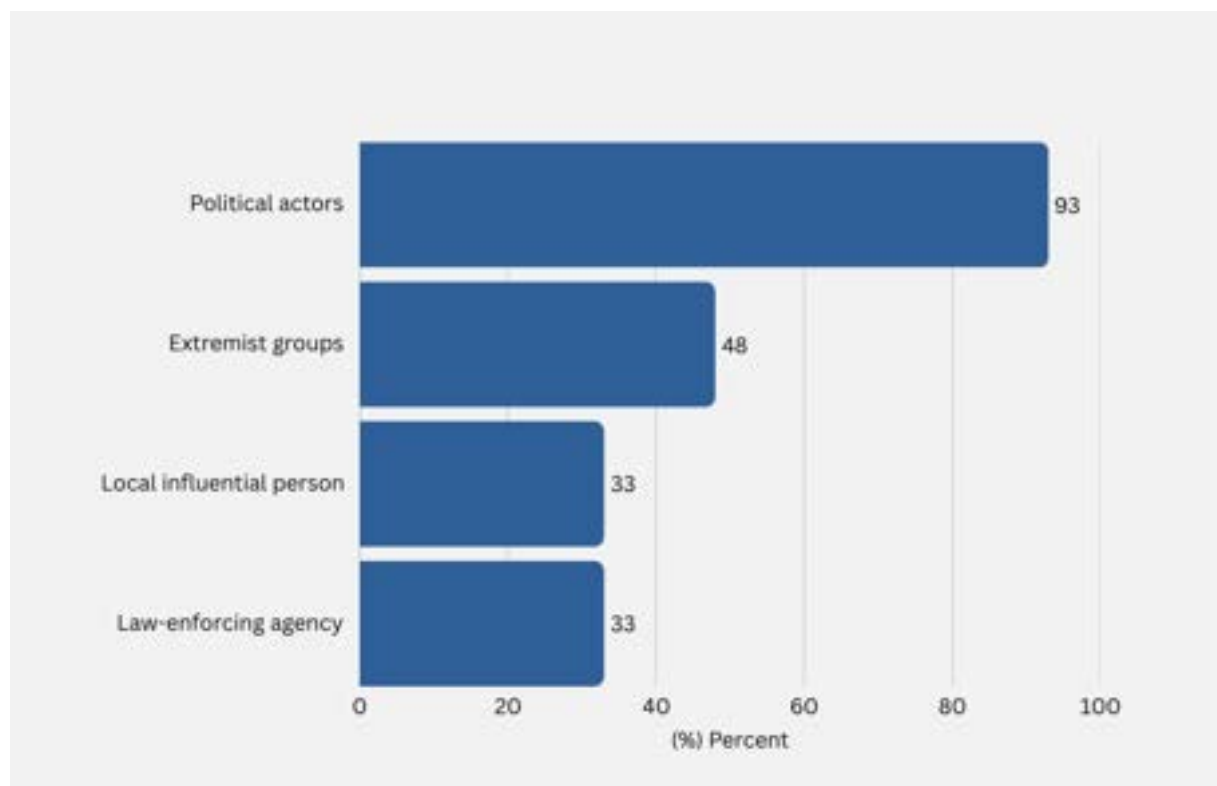
Journalists at local media outlets feel more vulnerable to digital threats than their national counterparts, reporting significantly higher rates of disinformation (85% vs 71%), deletion of image and evidence (70% vs 56%), and online threats (54% vs 41%). Internet Shutdown is a threat more feared in the capital than the peripheries.

Female journalists are often singled out for deeply personal digital attacks aimed at destroying their reputation. According to KIs, this includes being falsely labeled with degrading terms or linked to powerful men in smear campaigns. Interviewees described how attackers use AI and social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube to spread fabricated, reputationally damaging content.

One noted, “In Mymensingh, there are very few female journalists; those who exist rarely go into the field”.

3.3 Threat Actors

The sense of threats is largely attributed to political actors. When asked who is likely to inflict these harms, an almost unanimous number of journalists pointed to politicians and their party supporters as the primary threat. More than 90% of respondents identified political party figures – from local activists to influential leaders – as the group most likely to perpetrate physical attacks on the press. Next, but well behind in perceived threat were other groups such as law enforcement or extreme religious groups.

Figure 8: Perceived Actors of Physical Safety Risk

On the digital side as well, whether it's smear campaigns on social media, hacking attempts, or spreading fake news about reporters, political operatives are identified as the key threat actor. Female respondents report a markedly higher perception of risk from extremist groups (70% vs 43%), and local media professionals perceive a higher threat from the law enforcement (43%) compared to their national media counterparts.

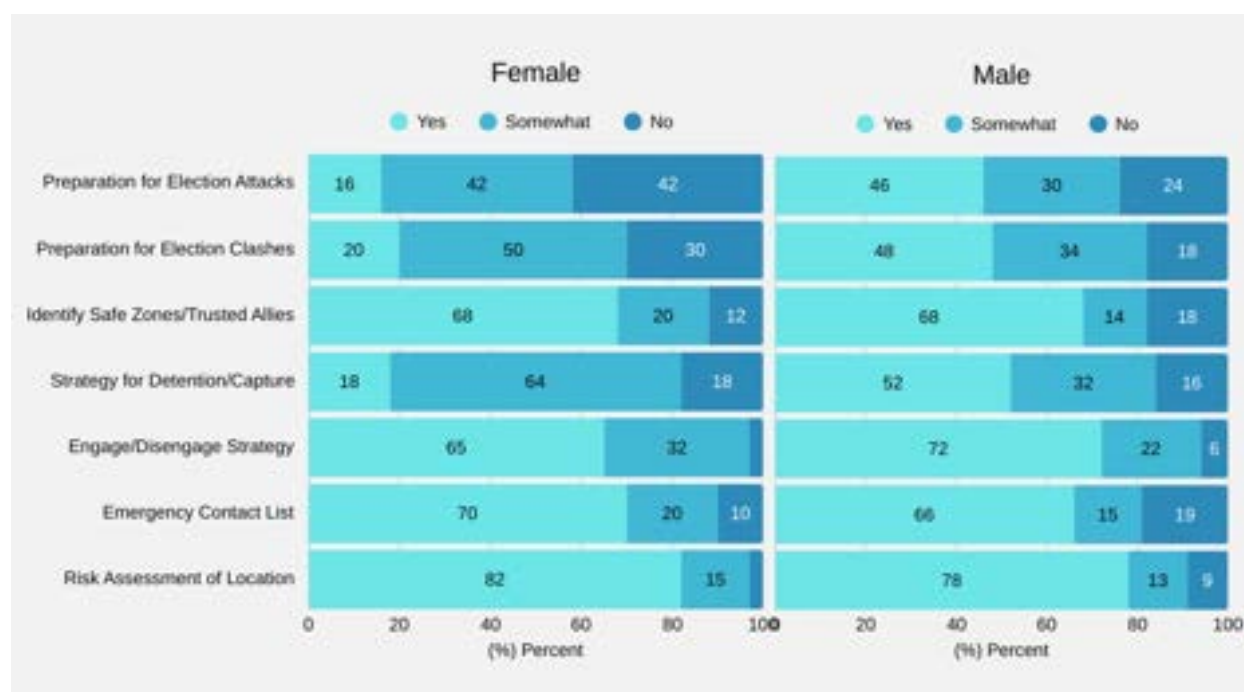
One interviewee emphasized that extreme religious groups often target women, aiming to push them out of public life and “bring them under the veil.” She expressed concern that if the state adopts a more hardline religious direction, women – those working outside the home or from non-Muslim backgrounds – will feel increasingly unsafe. Since the political shift, she noted, working as a female journalist in

the field has become “very risky,” with many now operating under constant fear of harassment.

3.4 Individual and Institutional Preparedness

The survey asked journalists how prepared they feel to handle safety challenges, and what support (if any) their news organizations provide. The findings reveal critical gaps in preparedness on both individual and institutional levels. In general, reporters are relying heavily on their own measures to stay safe, while newsrooms are failing to offer robust safety nets. Interestingly, journalists perceive higher physical risks but responses suggest more readiness to counter such threats. On the other hand, the readiness to counter digital threats appeared low.

Figure 9: Physical Safety Preparedness of Journalists (Female vs Male)



Individual Readiness: Many participants take basic personal steps to protect themselves, such as planning safer travel routes, using stronger digital security on their devices, or being cautious about what they share online. A majority say they practice some form of personal digital security – for example, about two-thirds use two-factor authentication on their accounts and prefer secure messaging apps for sensitive communication.

However, when it comes to serious, high-threat situations, most journalists admit they are not adequately prepared. Only around 40% of respondents feel confident about handling a physical attack or violent encounter during election coverage. Similarly, just 42% say they would feel prepared if caught in an election-related riot or clash.

The survey exposed a pronounced gender gap in safety training and planning: male journalists were nearly three times more likely than female journalists to have a concrete strategy for situations like being detained or captured by a mob. Over half of male respondents felt they had a plan for such an emergency, whereas only about one in five female journalists (18%) felt prepared for that possibility.

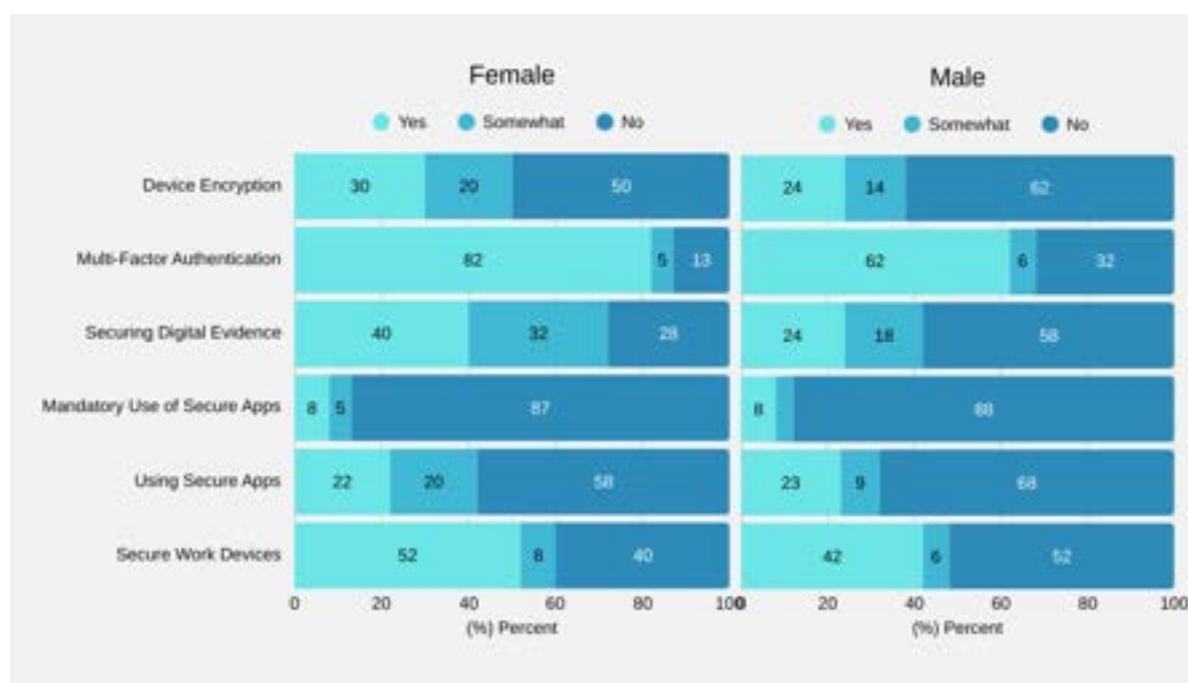
Journalists outside the capital report being better prepared for physical safety threats than those based in Dhaka. Local media journalists are significantly more likely to identify safe zones or trusted allies (85% vs 61%), suggesting stronger community ties. While national media journalists have a slight edge in preparing for detention or mob capture (48% vs 35%), likely due

to greater resources, both groups show similar levels of preparedness for election-related violence.

The data reveals gaps in digital safety preparedness among journalists, with noticeable gender differences. Female journalists generally report higher levels of preparedness than their male counterparts

across most indicators. For instance, 82% of women use multi-factor authentication (MFA) compared to 62% of men, and 52% of women have secure work devices, compared to 42% of men. Similarly, more women than men have received training on securing digital evidence and device encryption.

Figure 10: Digital Safety Preparedness of Journalists (Female vs Male)



However, both groups show low preparedness in several critical areas. Training on the use of secure communication apps is especially lacking, with fewer than a quarter of both men and women having received it. Even fewer—just 8% across both groups—say the use of such apps is mandatory in their newsroom.

A large majority also lack training on basic encryption practices, with 50% of women and 62% of men reporting no training at all. The overall picture points to a digital safety environment where most journalists are operating without the necessary skills, tools, or institutional support—leaving both themselves and their sources at risk.

3.5 Newsroom Support (or the Lack Thereof)

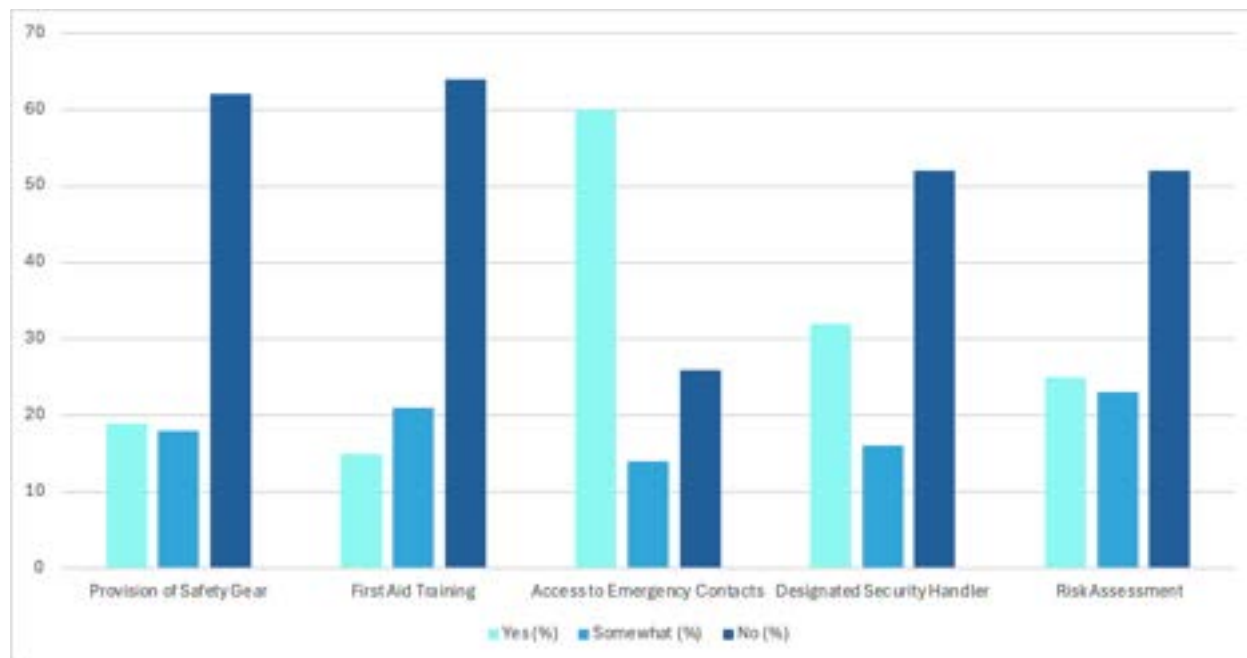


Figure 11: Physical Safety Preparedness of Newsroom

On the institutional side, the survey highlights a widespread lack of organized safety measures in news organizations. Many journalists reported that their employers do not provide even basic safety resources or protocols, effectively leaving staff to fend for themselves.

- Fewer than 1 in 4 newsrooms (under 25%) supply any safety equipment (such as helmets, vests, or first-aid kits) to journalists going into the field.
- Only a similarly small fraction – roughly 15% of organizations – offer any form of safety or first-aid training to their reporters. The vast majority of journalists have never received formal training through their workplace on how to handle physical risks or medical emergencies while on assignment.
- In more than half of newsrooms, as reported by the participants, there is no one officially tasked with guiding or assisting reporters on security matters, meaning reporters have no clear point person when threats arise.
- About 77% said their newsroom has no formal “backup and wipe” plan for devices. In other words, if a reporter’s phone or laptop is stolen or confiscated, most organizations lack any protocol to remotely secure data or wipe sensitive information.
- About 55% of journalists reported that their employers do not have an anti-harassment policy in place, leaving many, especially female employees, without institutional backing when faced with trolling or threats on social media.

- More than half of the journalists (particularly those in national outlets) indicated they were not provided with dedicated secure devices for work – for example, they must use personal phones or computers that may not be properly secured.
- National media journalists appear to have lesser access to digital safety resources and training than local journalists. Despite having fewer resources, local outlets often report better preparedness, possibly due to their closer connection to field-level risks and adaptability.

4. Why Do Journalists Fear for Their Safety?



In open ended questions, participants identified politically motivated violence as a primary danger, where political parties and their activists launch reprisals for unfavorable news coverage. Compounding these risks is a weak rule of law, where the systemic inability of institutions to protect journalists fosters a climate of impunity for attackers. Here are a few reasons the participants pointed out:

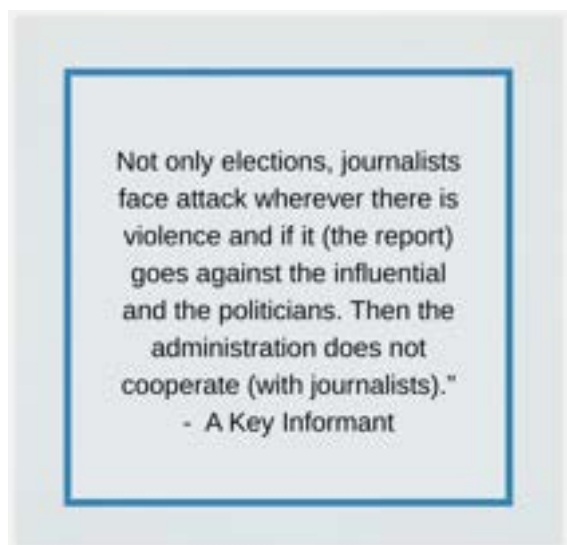
Law and Order Deterioration: Journalists widely agreed that the overall security situation of the country has worsened. Many respondents noted that there is a “deterioration of the law and order situation” and “law enforcement is weak”. As one respondent wrote:

“The situation of the current administration is very fragile. Not only elections, journalists face attack wherever there is violence and if it (the report) goes against the influential and the politicians. Then the administration does not cooperate (with journalists).”

Political Instability and Rivalry:

Participants consistently described an environment of political instability and rivalry, marked by political vendettas, factionalism, muscle power, extremism, and undemocratic attitudes. Many noted that “the overall situation of the country is chaotic” pointing to serious differences between political parties that have intensified discord and deepened a crisis of confidence.

They also stressed that journalists may be attacked when political parties face off, and that the absence of a major party in the field further fuels instability. For instance, one respondent feared that “Previous government (the Awami League) activists could harass or assault journalists” in an attempt to block the elections”, while another warned that “Political instability allows miscreants to take advantage.”



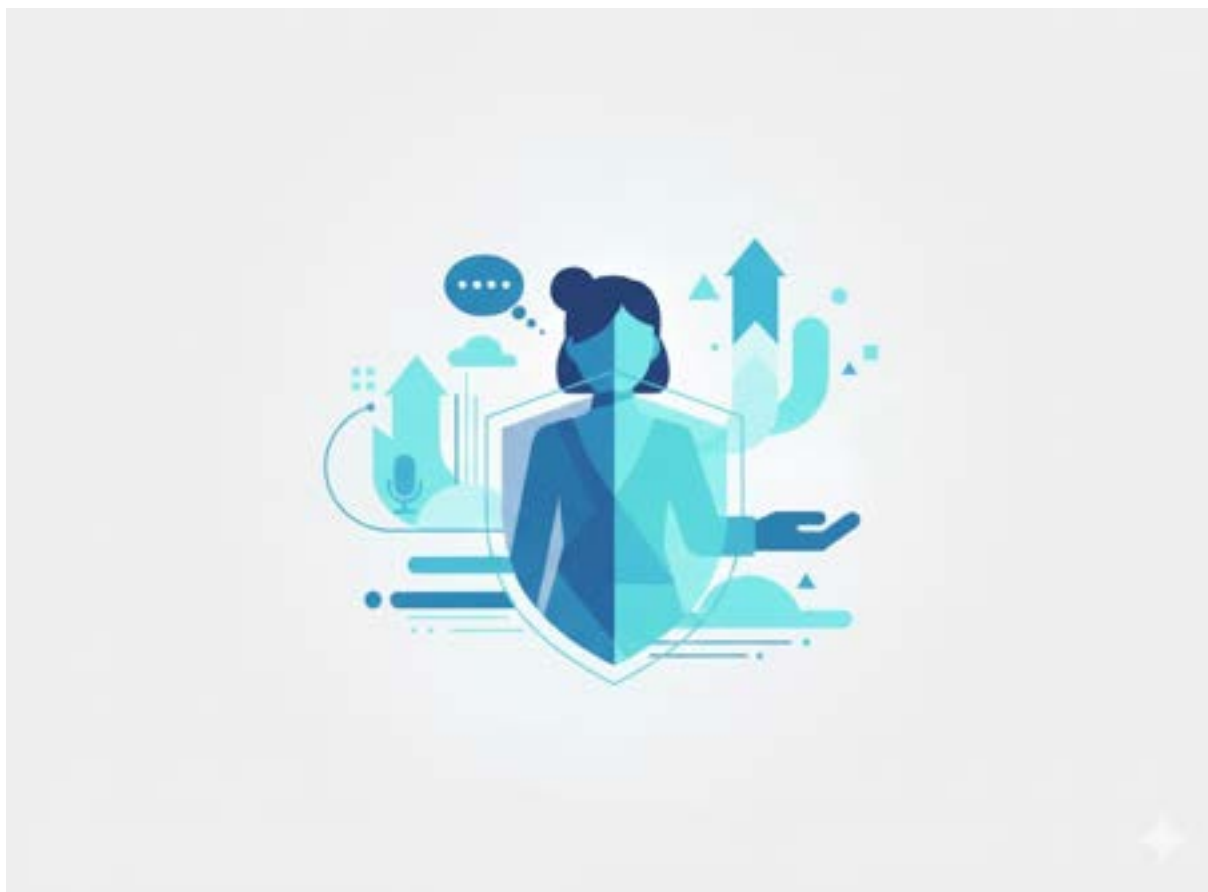
Fear of Mob Violence: Several respondents highlighted the dangers posed by a recent trend of mob attacks on media, often targeted and coordinated. One participant explained: “Currently mob-like

incidents are happening in various places. The administration is silent there. Police are not able to perform their duties properly. Since the elections will be held under this administration, there is a high risk of physical attacks on journalists during the elections.”

Lack of Trust in Journalists: A recurrent theme was the erosion of public confidence in the media. Several respondents observed that people don’t trust journalists the way they used to. Instead of seeing them as neutral observers, some see them as enemies. Participants also highlighted the corrosive effect of “unethical or yellow journalism”, which they believe erodes public trust in all media and makes legitimate journalists more susceptible to accusations of bias, thereby increasing the risk of physical assault.

Potential Reporting on Vote Rigging: Participants expressed a direct fear of retaliation from political entities for unfavorable coverage and journalists covering sensitive issues – like election irregularity or party wrongdoing – face heightened risks. “When you report on vote rigging or expose a party’s wrongdoing you become a direct target,” and such exposure makes investigative journalists particularly vulnerable, a participant noted.

Past Violence and Impunity: Journalists noted that previous violence against journalists, coupled with the impunity of perpetrators, could encourage further attacks. Past elections showed that political rivals attacked journalists with impunity and political actors may feel that they can attack journalists without consequences.



Political Labelling: Several key informants described an increasingly hostile digital environment shaped by political labeling. Journalists are frequently targeted through “politics of tagging,” where they are labeled as supporters of political parties – such as “Awami League mouthpiece,” “pro-BNP,” or “pro-Jamaat.” These labels, often amplified through coordinated online campaigns, erode trust and incite harassment, undermining the credibility of independent reporting.

Rise of Conservative groups: The rise of ultra-conservative groups, notably the so-called ‘Tawhidi Janta,’ has heightened risks for female journalists in particular. Described as promoting regressive social norms, these groups have been linked to

targeted online abuse and broader efforts to restrict women’s mobility and visibility in public life. Interviewees reported threats, rumors, and religiously driven intimidation warning women to retreat from public workspaces.

Diaspora Influencers: Several informants highlighted the role of diaspora-based influencers and foreign actors in fueling propaganda. Operating across social media platforms, these groups are said to drive misinformation campaigns that further destabilize the online space. Their presence contributes to an already chaotic information environment, raising concerns about election-period disinformation and coordinated smear campaigns against journalists and newsrooms.

5. Needs and Recommendations

While institutional mechanisms for journalist safety remain inconsistent and limited, a few media houses have taken modest steps to support their staff. Some outlets facilitate safe transportation, particularly during nighttime coverage, arranging pick-up and drop-off for reporters using cars or local transport. However, these efforts are ad hoc and far from systematic. Digital safety support, though present in select organizations, often depends on individual awareness rather than structured newsroom policy. A few houses have implemented VPNs or distributed designated SIM cards for safer communication during the July uprising coverage, but there is no in-built system.

On the individual level, journalists rely heavily on personal efforts to protect themselves in the absence of robust institutional protocols. Practices such as using strong passwords, enabling two-factor authentication, or adopting encrypted messaging apps like Signal, Telegram, or WhatsApp are common among more digitally aware reporters. Some journalists use multiple devices during source communication. Others choose to deactivate social media accounts to avoid online harassment.

5.1 Gaps and Needs

Key informants highlighted widespread gaps in institutional and individual safety measures, with most identifying an urgent need for structured training, consistent organizational policies, and stronger legal and political guarantees.

I. Lack of Institutional Commitment:

Across media organizations, safety preparedness is described as ad hoc and largely unsupported. Most journalists rely on personal coping strategies, with few media houses providing systematic protection. Transport arrangements and emergency coordination exist in some outlets, but these are limited in scope and reach. A number of respondents stressed that many media organizations do not routinely check on the safety of their journalists, reflecting a broader absence of institutional responsibility.

II. Institutional and Financial Neglect:

The most significant gap is the failure of media outlets to transition from a purely commercial model to one that prioritizes staff safety. Safety measures are characterized as "highly inconsistent," indicating a major shortcoming in institutional commitment. This negligence is evidenced by the fact that providing tangible security equipment and resources is "not the norm," forcing protection to be an individual rather than an organizational responsibility.

Media development organizations have occasionally stepped in to fill these gaps by offering legal or advocacy support and providing short-term training. However, these interventions are often seen as too brief to meet the complex safety challenges journalists face in high-risk political environments.

From the Key Informants

“There is no proper training or standard protocol for tackling online harassment or fake news. It’s on the journalist to protect themselves.”

“Even if we report the threats to authorities or newsroom heads, there is no proper mechanism to act on it.”

“Journalists are sent to the field without any training—physical or digital. We have to figure things out on our own.”

III. Inadequate and Adhoc Training:

Training is universally cited as the most critical need, yet its current provision is fundamentally deficient. The lack of mandatory, comprehensive training is a severe gap, as most media houses are criticized for failing to provide it. When training is provided by NGOs, it is often criticized as being “theoretical,” “very short-term,” or “done just for the sake of doing it,” failing to achieve the necessary “long-term for awareness building.” There is also demand for legal training to help journalists navigate election coverage within regulatory bounds.

IV. Equipment and Infrastructure Gaps:

Informants underscored the lack of basic protective gear and modern devices

necessary for fieldwork. Requests included discreet, high-functioning digital cameras and secure communication gadgets. There was also a call for the creation of dedicated security units within media houses to monitor field correspondents and coordinate rapid response if needed.

V. Legal and Political Safeguards: Several informants pointed to the need for formal institutional policies that commit to protecting staff during coverage. Newsroom should be prepared to escalate cases of assault or harassment to regulatory authorities, including the Press Council or courts. More broadly, informants emphasized that political parties and state institutions must pledge to uphold the safety of journalists, particularly during election periods. The enforcement of such commitments by law enforcement and administrative bodies remains a significant concern.

VI. Weak or No Response to Gendered Threats:

Women journalists are disproportionately targeted with online violence that includes explicit threats of sexual violence, doxing (publishing private information), cyberstalking, and the deliberate use of gendered disinformation (like sexist hate speech and AI-generated deepfakes) to discredit their work. There is a critical gap in institutional policy for combating gendered online abuse. Anecdotal evidence suggests women who report online harassment often face a culture of silence and disbelief within newsrooms, with no clear protocol or mechanism to address the abuse originating from external political actors or the general public.

5.2 Recommendations

This section outlines actionable priorities emerging from the research findings. While the previous chapter identified key gaps in institutional preparedness and individual safety capacities, the following recommendations focus on practical steps that media organizations, civil society, and state actors can take to address these deficits and support safer journalism in the lead-up to Bangladesh's 2026 national election.

1. News Organizations

Media houses must fundamentally shift from a business-only mindset to one of proactive institutional commitment, shouldering the primary responsibility for the safety and welfare of their staff.

I. Establishing Robust Security Infrastructure and Support

Newsrooms must establish internal systems for immediate safety response during high-risk periods like elections. It should be in constant, reliable connectivity with field journalists to arrange quick measures for victim journalists (e.g., medical aid, immediate extraction). At a minimum, this includes establishing safety focal points, maintaining real-time check-ins during field reporting. Providing improved, high-quality safety gears for reporting is also urged to minimize journalists' vulnerability in hostile environments. Logistical support should be complemented by provisions for insurance (covering injury or death) and decent wages to address the financial and welfare concerns of reporters.

II. Legal and Proactive Commitment

Institutions must pledge and deliver unyielding legal backing for their staff, moving away from passivity when reporters are targeted. This requires a public and firm commitment to complain to the Press Council and pursue legal action ("I will see it through to the end. I will go to court"). Proactively, media houses should assess risk and discourage journalists from visiting extremely vulnerable areas until security is reasonably ensured. This includes making safety an operational standard, where the provision of protective and reporting materials is bundled with maintenance and essential training.



III. Integrate Gender-Sensitive Protocols

Given the unique digital and social threats women journalists face, all safety efforts should include a gender-responsive component. Confidential complaint mechanisms, field safety guidelines that account for harassment risks, and digital hygiene training with a focus on gendered targeting are urgently needed. Newsrooms must recognize and formally address the differentiated risks their female staff face online and in the field.

5.2.2. Sustained Training Initiatives

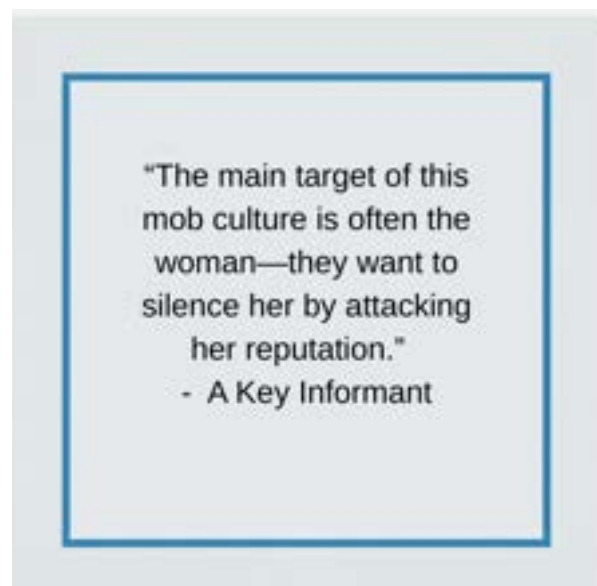
Training is consistently cited as the single most important component and requires a coordinated effort from media houses, NGOs, and the Election Commission to provide a practical, long-term curriculum.

I. Implementing Multi-Faceted, Practical Training

All stakeholders must collaborate to provide comprehensive, long-term training that moves beyond theoretical, or short-term workshops. This training must have three core components: Hostile Environment and First Aid Training (HEFAT), covering practical skills like first aid and how to safely navigate large processions; advanced digital Security training, focusing on technical measures like mobile phone security, securing evidence, and detecting digital threats; and legal and professional preparedness, including knowledge of election laws and professional ethics.

II. Ensuring Quality and Broadening the Scope

Training should be practical and hands-on, designed specifically for active field journalists rather than just "familiar faces." Training should also be extended to government officials, law enforcement, and election staff so that officials understand the vital role of the press and commit to cooperation rather than obstruction. NGOs and Donor Organizations are urged to fund and arrange expert-led, safety training to fill the gap left by news organisations.



5.2.3. Government and Law Enforcement

The state holds the primary responsibility for ensuring a safe working environment and legal justice for all citizens, including journalists.

I. Ensuring Policy Reform and Legal Justice

The government must decide at the highest policy level what they are doing for the safety of journalists and must move away from enacting restrictive laws and election codes that place journalists in risk or hinder their access to information. Law enforcement agencies must guarantee immediate assistance for journalists when attacked and take exemplary action against those involved, establishing a deterrent against future attacks.

II. Fostering a Supportive Environment

The Administration and Police Administration must be responsible for security, demonstrating sincerity and solidarity towards journalists by viewing them "as belonging to their own group," not as opponents. They must ensure strict vigilance to prevent obstruction by political workers and guarantee an environment where journalists can collect information or report without any hindrance. Law enforcement protocols must prioritize the journalist's unimpeded duty at polling stations.



5.2.4. Political Commitment for Journalist Safety

The safety of journalists is fundamentally reliant on a clear, public, and functional commitment from political parties to ensure their members, supporters, and activists do not obstruct, harass, or attack the media during the electoral process. Current

measures are insufficient, noting that parties must shift from general tolerance to a formal, accountable pledge of non-interference.

I. Securing Written Pledges and Codes of Conduct

A critical recommendation is to formalize political commitment via binding, written documents facilitated by external, non-partisan actors. Civil society organizations (CSOs) and NGOs must push for a written commitment that is more potent than mere verbal assurance. This formal document, potentially integrated into a broader Code of Conduct for Political Parties, should explicitly state that "no one from my party will beat journalists or attack anyone covering the election." The pledge should also establish a benchmark for accountability of the parties.

II. Enforcement through Monitoring and Legal Action

Compliance with these formal commitments must be ensured through active monitoring and the threat of immediate, consequential legal action by the Election Commission and state bodies. The EC must take strict measures when attacks occur, ensuring that any violation of the pledge or attack on a journalist leads to immediate action against the perpetrators. CSOs and journalist unions should actively monitor the situation on the ground and amplify instances of non-compliance, while the Government must guarantee that any attack is followed by prosecution and exemplary punishment.



6. Conclusion

This study reveals a sobering picture of the safety landscape facing journalists in the lead-up to the national election. Physical and digital risks are perceived as high, with female and local journalists reporting heightened vulnerabilities. Despite the clear threat environment, institutional preparedness remains critically low as only a few offer structured support mechanisms. Key informants confirm this gap, citing a widespread reliance on individual journalists to manage their own protection.

With less than three months left before the election, the study emphasizes an urgent need for systemic action: media organizations must prioritize safety training, implement comprehensive protocols for physical and digital protection, and ensure responsive mechanisms for addressing threats. Without such reforms, journalists will continue to face escalating dangers with inadequate institutional backing—placing not only their safety, but also press freedom and democratic accountability, at significant risk.



digitally right

