Research Article
Journal of Journalism and Media (2026), Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 47-67
DOI: https://doi.org/10.59185/jjm.v8i1.553

The Digital Paper Ceiling: Gender Representation in Bangladesh's *Most-Read* Online News

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Abstract
In this era of digital news portals being the go-to source for news in Bangladesh, the 'most read' sections of the news portals wield significant power to influence public perception. Grounded in Framing and Representation theories, this quantitative content analysis examines the visibility, roles and agency of women in the 'most read' news of Bangladesh. The study analyzed 961 top-performing articles from three Bangla and three English major news portals, and the findings reveal a visibility gap: women were the primary subject in only 18% of the stories. When featured, women were concentrated in entertainment and crime stories and primarily framed in passive roles, such as victims (38%) or celebrities and entertainers (28%), while female experts constituted only 10% of representations. Furthermore, female subjects were rarely given a direct voice: 20% were quoted directly, and 55% were spoken for by others. A comparative analysis showed that while English websites were marginally more likely to quote female professionals than Bangla sites, both linguistic media relied on traditional patriarchal framing. The study concludes that the 'paper ceiling' persists in the digital age, with the observed patterns reflecting outdated gender stereotypes rather than contemporary female agency.

Keywords: gender representation, online news, framing, most read news, female agency.

Introduction

Over the last few years, digital media has evolved significantly and has changed the way audiences consume information. For many citizens, news portals are the main source of their daily information. The 'most read' or 'trending' sections are particularly important in shaping public discourse on these platforms, as they are used to promote content considered most relevant or interesting. Online news, however, has the potential to

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exacerbate and reinforce social inequalities, especially in terms of gender representation, but it also offers unparalleled access to information. The mass media is not a passive reflector of reality, but rather an active agent that frames reality (Entman, 1993). Thus, it is important to examine the portrayal of men and women in the most popular news to gain insight into the cultural narratives being advanced in society.

Women have been excluded from mass media in the past. Women are consistently observed to be underrepresented in the news across large-scale global studies, including the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP). The latest GMMP report shows that globally, women make up approximately 25% of news subjects and sources in print, radio, and television (World Association for Christian Communication, 2021). Moreover, when women are present in the news, their portrayals are often distorted. In a detailed computational analysis of online newspapers, women were found to be more likely to be visually represented than to be quoted or actively news-making, that is, to be seen more than heard (Jia et al., 2016).

In the context of Bangladesh, traditional gender roles continue to influence societal structures, and these norms frequently bleed into media and educational content. Studies indicate a systematic underrepresentation of females in reading materials, where women are often confined to domestic or passive roles, while men are depicted in professional and leadership positions (Islam & Asadullah, 2018). These deeply ingrained cultural stereotypes affect how individuals internalize expectations about gender and authority (Faruk et al., 2023). When major Bangladeshi news portals continuously frame women primarily as victims of crime or subjects of entertainment, rather than as experts, leaders, or active decision-makers, they risk validating and extending these historical biases into the digital age.

While previous content analyses have explored gender representation in traditional print and broadcast media, there is a notable gap regarding high-traffic online news specifically in Bangladesh. The ‘most read’ articles represent what is actively capturing the public’s attention and generating revenue through clicks. This study aims to fill that gap by examining the representation of women in the most-read news sections of six major Bangladeshi news portals.

The aim of this study is to empirically measure and analyze how women are represented in the high-traffic online news ecosystem of Bangladesh.

By focusing exclusively on the 'most read' or trending articles, this study seeks to uncover the editorial patterns that capture the highest audience engagement and reflect current social values. Specifically, the study seeks to quantify the overall visibility of women as primary subjects in top-tier online news; to identify the specific roles (e.g., expert, victim, eyewitness) and the level of agency assigned to women in these stories; to evaluate how female identity and voice are framed by journalists in high-traffic articles; and to compare the gender representation patterns between major Bangla and English news websites. On this note, this study aims to answer the following main questions and their subsequent sub-questions.

RQ: How are women represented in the most-read news of Bangladesh, and how do English and Bangla news platforms diverge in their editorial framing, visibility, and source selection regarding women?

SQ1 ***(Agency and Roles):*** To what extent are women positioned as active newsmakers (experts, professionals, decision-makers) compared to passive subjects (victims, bystanders, family members) in the most-read news?

SQ2 ***(The News Divide):*** How does the presence of women fluctuate across different news categories (e.g., hard news such as politics and crime versus soft news such as entertainment and lifestyle)?

SQ3 ***(Identity and Voice):*** When women are featured in top stories, how frequently are they identified by their familial relationships rather than their professional titles, and to what extent are they given a direct voice (quoted directly) versus being spoken for by others?

Literature Review

Global Trends: Visibility and "Symbolic Annihilation"

News media have been consistently described as a mirror image of society, but they also shape, reinforce, and sometimes question the social roles of men and women (Hall, 1997; Wood, 1994). The symbolic annihilation of women, coined by Tuchman (1978), was a major theme of early feminist media criticism. Tuchman maintained that the mass media systematically degrades women to invisibility or makes them seem like nothing more than a housewife or object of decoration.

The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) provides the most complete information on this. Initial reports set a benchmark of underrepresentation, which was described as severe (Gallagher, 2001), and the latest data show that women are still underrepresented, at approximately 24-26% of persons heard, read about, or seen in the news worldwide (World Association for Christian Communication, 2021, 2015).

This visibility gap is not about unavailable data, but rather a structural issue in journalism that Shor et al. (2015) call the 'paper ceiling'. Their large-scale analysis of English-language media revealed that male names were printed far more frequently than female names, irrespective of the news outlet's political orientation. In a large-scale analysis of online newspapers, Jia et al. (2016) found that images of women were often featured, but women were rarely quoted or used as active newsmakers. As Desmond and Danilewicz (2010) aptly summarized, women are often 'on' the news, but they are rarely 'in' the news as subjects of substance.

Source Selection and The Gendered Division of News

An important aspect of the representation of women in the news is examining their presence and what they are doing. Studies repeatedly find a gender split across news categories. The Journalistic Team is predominantly male across all categories, with female dominance in soft news, which includes entertainment, lifestyle, and health (Ross & Carter, 2011; Byerly & Ross, 2006).

Male dominance is even more evident when journalists choose their sources so as to make their stories credible. Zoch and Turk (1998) found that journalists tend to rely primarily on male sources for expert commentary, which significantly affects women's perceptions of public authority. Armstrong (2004) added that, despite the fact that women are writing the stories, institutional pressures tend to lead to male-dominated sourcing. As a result, women in news are often limited to a particular passive role. Early on, Rakow and Kranich (1991) noted that women in television news are most frequently employed as 'signs' of emotional trauma, or as silent witnesses in news coverage, and not as experts. In a comparatively recent work, Cann and Mohr (2001) found that men continue to be overrepresented as expert sources, and global monitoring revealed that female sources are more likely to be introduced as a relational identity (e.g., a mother, a wife), lacking any individual agency and professional identity, or

as a victim (World Association for Christian Communication, 2015). This dynamic can make it difficult for women to speak for themselves, as they are instead spoken for by male authorities on their behalf, such as policemen or a doctor (Carter et al., 1998).

The Local Context

Global trends can give a general sense of the mediation of gender, but it is impossible to ignore the local contextualization of gender in the specific cultural and patriarchal context of South Asian locales. Das (2011), for instance, noted that the media in India perpetuates traditional gender role stereotypes, which are associated with the domestic role for women, and puts more emphasis on men's professional success. Media structures are strongly integrated with traditional socio-cultural norms in Bangladesh. In the country, women have made considerable strides in both the economic and educational fields, but their voices are often not heard in the media. Islam and Asadullah (2018) highlighted the systemic nature of this issue, proving that gender stereotypes are embedded as early as school textbooks and subsequently mirrored in mass media consumption.

Recent empirical studies on Bangladeshi media confirm these biases. A recent visual content analysis by Deb (2024) of major Bangladeshi newspapers found that women were significantly underrepresented in news photographs and were overwhelmingly confined to the private sphere, associated with domesticity rather than public leadership. Similar visual studies have found that women make up just a fraction of the subjects in economic or political imagery (Mondol, 2025). When women do achieve visibility in Bangladeshi media, they are often subjected to over-sexualization or evaluated based on appearance rather than merit, which compromises their identity and professional standing (Yeasmin et al., 2024).

More recent evidence points in the same direction. A baseline analysis of 4,530 items from 15 Bangladeshi newspapers, television channels, and online portals found that women were far less likely than men to appear as spokespersons, held only 6.82% of online bylines, and were shown more often as victims and caregivers (Qurratul-Ain-Tahmina, 2023). An analysis of 664 images in three national dailies in January 2025 found that 57.98% showed only men and 21.08% only women (Mondol, 2025). Women's public

roles have also narrowed: only seven women won directly elected seats in the February 2026 parliamentary election, six months before this study's sample period (Mala, 2026).

The Gap in Digital 'Most Read' Content

Despite this robust body of literature, a critical gap remains in the contemporary context. While scholars have extensively analyzed print newspaper photographs (Deb, 2024), television broadcasts (Cann & Mohr, 2001), and general online news archives (Jia et al., 2016), very few studies have focused specifically on the 'most read' or highly trafficked digital news ecosystem in Bangladesh.

Agenda-setting theory posits that the media tells the public what to think about (McCombs & Shaw, 1972), but modern digital architecture, driven by algorithms, click-through rates, and social media sharing, creates a feedback loop. The 'most read' sections are a potent mix of editorial framing (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974) and audience demand. Furthermore, the Bangladeshi media landscape is split between a dominant Bangla press that serves the vast majority of the population and an elite English press that serves policymakers, international audiences, and urban professionals (Genilo et al., 2016).

Therefore, comparing how women are represented in the highest-traffic articles across Bangla and English platforms offers a unique, urgently needed snapshot of modern gender ideologies. By combining the global framework of the GMMP (World Association for Christian Communication, 2021) with localized insights into Bangladeshi media biases, this study seeks to determine whether the 'paper ceiling' remains intact in Bangladesh's most-read online news.

Theoretical Framework

This study relies on two major communication theories to explain why media content looks the way it does and how it impacts society: Framing Theory and Representation Theory, which are supported by the core concepts of feminist media studies.

Framing Theory

Framing Theory is one of the most widely used approaches in mass communication research. Originally rooted in the work of Erving Goffman

(1974), framing posits that people use mental frameworks to organize their everyday experiences. In the context of media, the most prominent definition is that of Robert Entman (1993). Entman argued that framing involves selection and salience. This means that journalists and editors select certain aspects of a perceived reality and make them more noticeable or important in a news text.

For example, when a news website publishes a story about a female professional, the journalist makes an active choice between highlighting her career achievements and focusing on her role as a mother and wife. By choosing to focus on her family role, the media 'frames' the story in a way that suggests her domestic life is more important than her professional authority. Framing Theory is essential for this study because it provides a measurable way to look at how English and Bangla news websites construct stories about women. When women are consistently framed as passive victims or emotional witnesses rather than active experts, the media effectively limits how the audience perceives female capability in the real world.

Representation Theory and Feminist Media Studies

While Framing Theory explains how information is packaged, Representation Theory explains what that packaging means for society. Developed heavily by Stuart Hall (1997), Representation Theory argues that the media does not simply mirror reality as it exists. Instead, the media actively creates and produces meaning through language, images, and symbols. Hall suggests that those who control the media hold the power to define cultural identities. When the media constantly represents men in positions of power and women in positions of vulnerability, it helps to normalize these inequalities in everyday life.

This concept ties directly into feminist media studies. As Liesbet van Zoonen (1994) explained in her foundational work, mainstream media is largely a product of patriarchal structures. Van Zoonen argued that the news often operates through a male gaze, meaning that the world is presented from a male perspective. In this system, news value is often attached to male-dominated fields like politics and economics (hard news), while women are pushed to the margins of entertainment and human interest (soft news).

Methodology

This study utilized a quantitative content analysis method. Content analysis is a highly reliable research method used in mass communication to systematically categorize and count specific elements within media texts, allowing researchers to find objective patterns in large amounts of data (Neuendorf, 2017).

Sample and Timeframe

The universe for this study consists of the most highly trafficked digital news articles in Bangladesh. To capture a comprehensive and comparative snapshot, the data collection spanned an entire month, from August 1 to August 31, 2026. Purposive sampling was used to select six major mainstream news websites. These outlets were chosen because each is the online edition of an established national daily that displayed a ranked 'most read' list throughout the study period, based on its web traffic (Similarweb country ranks), and to ensure an equal comparison between the country's two primary linguistic media. The selected Bangla outlets were Prothom Alo, Jugantor, and Kaler Kantho, and English outlets were The Business Standard, Daily Sun, and New Age. All these outlets have a 'most read' section under different names, which contains five most-read stories per day, except The Business Standard, which has six stories per day. The Daily Star, the largest English-language daily, was not included because its website lacked a 'most read' section during the study period.

By collecting the top 31 articles from these six platforms each day for 31 days, the study compiled a robust final sample of 961 high-traffic news articles. The unit of analysis was the article as listed on a given day, so an article that remained in a list on several days was coded for each day it appeared, reflecting what readers of the lists saw.

Coding Framework and Variables

Each of the 961 articles was carefully read and coded using a structured framework that was heavily adapted from the Global Media Monitoring Project guidelines (World Association for Christian Communication, 2021). The data were recorded in a centralized digital spreadsheet. The coding process evaluated each article across six primary variables, summarized in Table 1. GMMP topic categories were collapsed into six, its direct-quotation measure was extended to three levels, and an agency measure was added.

Two of the authors coded all articles after training on the codebook, which was first piloted on 30 articles from July 2026 and then refined.

To assess intercoder reliability, two coders independently coded a random subsample of 50 articles. Krippendorff's alpha is reported for each variable in Table 1; $\alpha \geq .80$ was treated as acceptable and $\alpha \geq .667$ as the minimum for tentative conclusions (Krippendorff, 2018). Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

Table 1

Codebook: Variables, Definitions, Categories, and Intercoder Reliability

Variable	Definition	Categories	SQ	α
News Category (Hard vs. Soft News)	Each article was classified by its central topic to determine where women are permitted to appear.	Categories included Politics/Government, Crime/Disaster, Business/Economy, Sports, Entertainment/Lifestyle, and Health/Science. Politics, business, crime/disaster, and health/science were classed as hard news; entertainment/lifestyle and sports as soft news (Reinemann et al., 2012).	SQ2	.91
Gender of Main Subject	The primary subject of the article was identified as Male, Female, Mixed/Group, or Institutional (when the article focused on a company or government body rather than a specific person).	Male; Female; Mixed/Group; Institutional	All	.94
Primary Role of Female Subject	When a woman was present in the story, her role was categorized to assess her societal position.	Authoritative Roles: Expert, Spokesperson, Leader, or Professional. Passive/Personal Roles: Victim, Eyewitness, or Family Member (e.g., wife, mother). Celebrity or Entertainer: Celebrity, Model, or Entertainer.	SQ1	.83

Variable	Definition	Categories	SQ	α
Level of Agency	This variable measured the woman's activity within the narrative. Where both applied, the dominant portrayal in the headline and lead was coded.	She was coded as Active if she was making decisions, providing solutions, or leading an action. She was coded as Passive if she was merely reacting, being rescued, or was the victim of an incident.	SQ1	.80
Identity Framing	This assessed the language the journalist used to introduce the woman, coded at first mention.	Professional: Identified strictly by her name and job title (e.g., "Dr. Salma"). Relational/ Familial: Identified by her relationship to a man (e.g., "Rahim's wife" or "Mother of two"). Appearance Focus: Introduced with unnecessary references to her physical looks or age.	SQ3	.81
Voice and Quotation Status	This variable measured who holds the power to speak in the news (Jia et al., 2016). Each subject was coded at the highest level received (direct, then indirect, then spoken for).	Female subjects were coded based on whether they were given a Direct Quote (their exact words published), an Indirect Quote (their words paraphrased by the journalist), or if they were Spoken For (a male figure, like a police officer or husband, spoke on their behalf).	SQ3	.86

Note. SQ = sub-question; α = Krippendorff's alpha, from 50 double-coded articles.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedure

To maintain accuracy and prevent the data from shifting as news websites updated their homepages, the 'most read' sections were accessed at the exact same time every evening during the August 2026 data collection period. The URLs and headlines were archived to allow for cross-checking.

Once all 961 articles were manually coded into the spreadsheet, the raw data were cleaned and analyzed using descriptive statistics. The analysis

focused on generating frequencies, percentages, and cross-tabulations to identify patterns, specifically examining differences in how the Bangla and English platforms framed female subjects. Visibility percentages are based on all 961 articles; all other percentages are based on the 173 articles with a female primary subject.

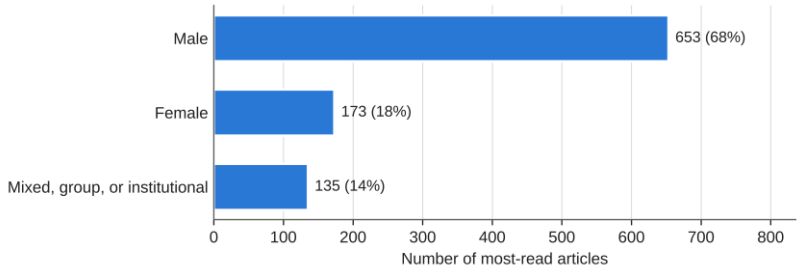
Findings

The findings are organized by sub-question, followed by the language comparison that completes the main research question.

Out of the 961 top-performing articles analyzed, the data revealed a severe gender disparity. Men were the primary subjects in 68% of the stories (653 articles). In contrast, women were the primary subjects in only 18% of the stories (173 articles). The remaining 14% (135 articles) focused on mixed groups, institutions, or government bodies (Figure 1). This baseline indicates that even in high-traffic digital spaces, male visibility heavily outweighs female visibility.

Figure 1

Gender of the Primary Subject in Most-Read Articles



Note. N = 961 articles from six news portals, August 1–31, 2026.

Agency and Roles (Addressing SQ1)

To answer this sub-question, the analysis focused on the 173 articles where a woman was the primary subject, categorizing the specific roles they occupied. The data overwhelmingly show that women are positioned in passive roles rather than as active newsmakers (Figure 2).

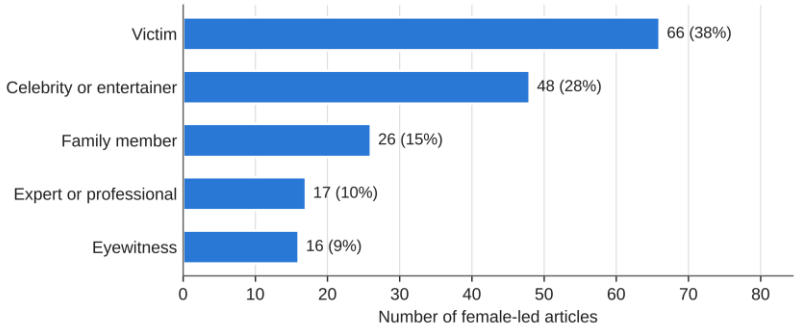
- **Victims (38%, N = 66):** The most frequent role assigned to women in high-traffic news was that of a victim. These stories largely

revolved around road accidents, domestic violence, or natural disasters. In these narratives, the female subject possessed no agency; things happened to her.

- **Celebrities and Entertainers (28%, N = 48):** The second most common role featured actresses, models, or social media personalities. In these articles, the woman's newsworthiness rested mainly on her entertainment value.
- **Family Members (15%, N = 26):** Women were frequently featured simply because of their proximity to a male newsmaker (e.g., a politician's wife or a victim's mother).
- **Experts and Professionals (10%, N = 17):** Only 1 in 10 female-led stories featured a woman acting in an authoritative capacity, such as a doctor, economist, or political leader.
- **Eyewitnesses (9%, N = 16):** Women were occasionally featured to provide emotional reactions to an event, rather than professional commentary.

Figure 2

Primary Role of the Female Subject



Note. N = 173 articles with a female primary subject.

Collectively, this means that 90% (N = 156) of the time a woman appeared in a top news story, she was not there because of her professional expertise or leadership. Her role was highly restricted, framed mostly through trauma, relation, or entertainment. Besides, on the agency variable, which was coded separately from the roles, 40 (23%) of female subjects were coded as active and 133 (77%) as passive. The active cases were 17 experts and 23

celebrities, while victims, eyewitnesses, and family members comprised the passive cases.

The News Divide (Addressing SQ2)

The 173 female-centric stories were heavily concentrated in entertainment and lifestyle (soft news) and crime and disaster (hard news), while remaining almost entirely absent from politics, business, and health and science.

Table 2

News Category of Female-Led Stories

News Category	N	Percentage (%)
Entertainment & Lifestyle	78	45
Crime & Disaster	52	30
Politics & Government	17	10
Sports	14	8
Business & Economy	7	4
Health & Science	5	3
Total	173	100

Note. Base: 173 articles with a female primary subject.

This distribution illustrates that women enter hard news mainly through crime and disaster; politics, business, and health and science together account for only 17% (N = 29) of female-led stories. Women appear in the most-read lists mainly when they are positioned as subjects of entertainment (45%) or as subjects of tragic crimes (30%).

Identity and Voice (Addressing SQ3)

Quotation status was coded for all 173 female subjects in the explored news. When evaluating quotation status, the findings showed:

- **Spoken For (55%, N = 95):** Females were rarely given a direct voice in the narratives concerning them. When women are quoted, they are almost strictly narrators of their personal experiences or trauma (acting as victims or eyewitnesses). Even in stories centered

entirely on a woman's own life, her perspective is frequently mediated by male authorities such as police officers or male relatives who speak on her behalf.

- **Indirect Quotes (25%, N = 43):** The journalist summarized or paraphrased the woman's words in these cases.
- **Direct Quotes (20%, N = 35):** Only one-fifth of the female subjects were granted the authority of a direct quotation (their exact words published within quotation marks).

Furthermore, the language used to introduce female subjects heavily favored relational identity over professional identity. Overall, 58 (34%) of female subjects were introduced professionally, 74 (43%) relationally, and 41 (24%) with an appearance focus. Many women were introduced into the narrative through their connection to a man (e.g., "The mother of two," or "Rahim's wife") rather than by their own names or occupations.

English vs. Bangla Media Comparison (Addressing the RQ)

A primary goal of this study was to compare the 496 English articles with the 465 Bangla articles to determine whether the language medium influenced gender representation. The data revealed three distinct editorial patterns:

- **The Expert Gap:** English news websites demonstrated a slightly higher tendency to consult women in professional capacities. On the English platforms (TBS, Daily Sun, and New Age), 14% of female subjects were quoted as experts. In contrast, the Bangla platforms featured female experts only 6% of the time.
- **Identity Language:** Bangla websites relied much more heavily on relational framing. Exactly 50% of the women in Bangla top news were introduced primarily through their family ties. English platforms also utilized this framing, but at a notably lower rate of 35%, opting slightly more often for professional titles or independent identification.
- **Shared Crime Focus:** Despite the slight differences in expert sourcing and naming conventions, both mediums displayed a similar pattern. Across both English and Bangla sites, crime stories featuring female victims reached the 'most read' lists with similar frequency. Of the 173 female-led articles, 83 were from English-language portals and 90 from Bangla-language portals. The

differences in expert presentation and relational framing were statistically significant but small, whereas the share of crime stories with female victims did not differ (29% vs. 30%).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to answer how women are represented in Bangladesh's most-read online news, and whether this differs between English and Bangla platforms. Taken together, the findings indicate that women's presence in the country's highest-traffic news is limited in quantity, narrow in kind, and muted in voice, and that this pattern is largely shared across the two language groups. Despite the growing participation of women in the country's workforce and education sector, the 'most read' news sections fail to reflect this societal progress. The discussion below interprets each finding through Framing and Representation Theory and then considers what most-read lists can and cannot reveal.

The first and most basic finding is the visibility gap. With women as the primary subject in only 18% of the most-read stories, compared with 68% for men, the online news landscape offers women limited visibility. This share is also below the roughly one-quarter recorded for women in the news worldwide (World Association for Christian Communication, 2021), although the measures differ, since the GMMP counts every person in a story whereas this study coded only the primary subject. The pattern is consistent with Gaye Tuchman's (1978) concept of 'symbolic annihilation.' When the mass media systematically ignores women as active participants in daily events, it may send a powerful societal message that female lives, thoughts, and achievements are simply less newsworthy than those of men. For the average reader scrolling through the top news, the world may appear to be built and run almost entirely by male figures.

This interpretation, however, should be weighed against an alternative. Tuchman (1978) also described a 'reflection hypothesis,' under which media under-representation partly mirrors women's actual position in society, and Shor et al. (2015) found that societal inequality, rather than newsroom practice alone, is the main driver of women's lower coverage, because news concentrates on the top of political and occupational hierarchies. The timing of this study makes the point concrete. In August 2026, six months after an national election that returned only seven directly elected women (Mala, 2026), political newsmakers were overwhelmingly male, which may partly

explain why only 10% of female-led stories concerned politics. The two readings are not mutually exclusive. From the perspective of Representation Theory (Hall, 1997), even an accurate reflection of an unequal hierarchy, repeated daily in the most visible positions of a news website, helps make that hierarchy appear normal. The visibility gap therefore matters whether it originates in society, in the newsroom, or in both.

Visibility alone, however, says little about how women are seen, and the category findings add an important qualification. Female-led stories were concentrated in entertainment and lifestyle (45%), and crime and disaster (30%), while politics, business, and health and science together accounted for only 17%. Because crime and disaster count as hard news, women were not simply confined to soft news; rather, they entered hard news mainly through events that happened to them, not through decisions they made. This refines the familiar soft-news account (Ross & Carter, 2011; Byerly & Ross, 2006); in Bangladesh's most-read news, the boundary that matters is less between hard and soft topics than between being an actor and being acted upon. From the perspective of Stuart Hall's (1997) Representation Theory, this division can be read as part of how the media construct cultural meaning: by placing women in the private, emotional, or decorative spheres, while reserving the public, intellectual, and authoritative spheres (like politics and economy) for men. It is also consistent with the male gaze described by van Zoonen (1994), in which the news agenda reflects a male perspective of what matters, so that women appear newsworthy mainly through tragedy or glamour rather than when they are shaping public policy or driving the economy.

The findings of portrayed roles reinforce this reading and connect it directly to framing. In Entman's (1993) terms, framing works through selection and salience, and the role distribution shows which aspects of women's lives were made salient: 38% of female subjects were victims, 15% family members, and 9% eyewitnesses, while only 10% appeared as experts or professionals. In other words, nine in ten women who reached the most-read lists did so for reasons other than expertise or leadership. Repeated across the most visible stories, such framing may suggest to readers that a woman's primary state is one of vulnerability and may reinforce the stereotype that women need protection, undermining their perceived capability as independent leaders. This does not mean that individual crime stories were inappropriate, since violence against women

is newsworthy; the concern is the cumulative image created when victimhood is the main route into the most-read lists. The second-largest role, celebrity or entertainer (28%), requires a more careful reading. Performing is a profession, and celebrity coverage is not, in itself, objectifying; what matters is whether such women are evaluated on their work or on their appearance, and an earlier study suggests the latter is common (Yeasmin et al., 2024).

If the role findings show where women appear, the voice findings show whether they are heard, and here the gap is widest. Even in stories in which a woman was the primary subject, 55% did not quote her at all because others spoke for her, and only 20% quoted her directly. This reproduces, at the level of individual stories, the pattern Jia et al. (2016) documented at scale: women in digital media are seen much more frequently than they are heard. Sourcing is itself a framing device, because whoever is quoted defines the situation. When a woman's experience is narrated by a police officer or a relative, the institutional or familial interpretation becomes the frame, echoing Rakow and Kranich's (1991) observation that women often serve as signs rather than as sources. The reliance on relational identity works in the same direction: introducing a woman as "the wife of a local businessman" rather than by her own name and profession strips away her independent social standing and turns her into a supporting character in a story about her own life. Part of the spoken-for pattern may, however, reflect ethical and legal restrictions on identifying survivors of sexual violence, or women's own reluctance to speak to the media; the coding did not distinguish these cases, and future studies should.

Against this shared background, the differences between the two language groups were modest. English portals presented women as experts more than twice as often as Bangla portals (14% vs. 6%), and introduced them through family ties less often (35% vs. 50%). Several explanations are possible, although none were tested in this study. English newspapers in Bangladesh generally serve a smaller, urban, corporate, and international readership and are considered influential among elites and policymakers (Genilo et al., 2016), which may favor a more professional register; English newsrooms may also draw on international style conventions; and each outlet's list reflects its own audience and its own method of computing popularity. Whatever the cause, the more important finding is what the two groups share: in both, most female subjects were victims, entertainers, or

relatives, and crime stories with female victims reached the top lists with similar frequency. The language of publication, in other words, appears to shape how women are named more than where they appear.

To conclude, in the most-read news of the nation, women remain highly marginalized. They are the primary subjects in fewer than a fifth of the top stories, and when they do achieve visibility, they are largely confined to the roles of victims or entertainment subjects. The findings indicate that the historical 'paper ceiling' that kept women out of print media is very much alive in the digital age, in its online form.

Finally, these findings must be read in light of what most-read lists are. This study did not observe editorial decisions, audience motives, or ranking algorithms. Readers' most-viewed stories elsewhere lean toward crime, sports, and entertainment more than editors' choices do (Boczkowski & Mitchelstein, 2013), and sensational or curiosity-arousing items attract clicks (Tenenboim & Cohen, 2015). Most-read lists are therefore a joint product of editorial supply and audience demand, and the present data cannot show which side drives the gendered pattern. What they do show is that the choices made in high-traffic crime and entertainment stories, such as who is quoted, how women are introduced, and whether their expertise is sought, carry disproportionate weight, because these are the stories that reach the largest audiences. Newsrooms could therefore improve women's representation without changing what they cover, by changing how they cover it: quoting women directly, identifying them by name and profession, and seeking female experts.

Ethics Statement

The authors adhered to all ethical standards while conducting the study.

AI Statement

The authors used generative AI to refine the manuscript's language.

Conflict of Interest

The third author is an employee of one of the media outlets included in the sample for this study.

Funding Details

The authors did not receive any funding for this study.

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