

Improving digital security and safety for activists and journalists in Bangladesh

As part of the [INSPIRES project](#), Flexible Response Funds (FRFs) are designed to provide USAID missions and partners with easily accessible and flexible support in the form of technical assistance and subgrants to local organizations that can help address urgent and emerging threats to civic space.

In Bangladesh, Internews collaborated with local partner News Network to support stronger digital safety and security skills among journalists and human rights activists in the country. This was done through three key activities:

- Conducting a training of trainers for digital security and hygiene;
- Providing digital safety and hygiene training in three districts, including one training dedicated to women journalists, bloggers and writers who are frequently targeted by the government-sponsored troll army or extremist groups; and,
- Undertaking tailored mentoring on digital safety and hygiene.

Support was provided over the course of 3 months from October - December 2021.

In this summary brief, we share learnings and lessons from key informant interviews and document reviews for these activities.

Outputs and Outcomes

The FRF activities in Bangladesh were designed to produce several key outputs, including guidelines and trainings for a diverse set of audiences.

Based on interviews with key informants who were involved in the program, the Bangladesh team and

partners achieved several key outputs, as highlighted in Figure 1.

Figure 1. FRF Outputs



Evidence from key informant interviews as well as documentation from partners suggest that the FRF activities contributed to several key outcomes:

Greater awareness of and capacity to address digital security threats. Informants highlighted how the FRF activities provided critical resources and tips to journalists and human rights activists regarding both the dangers to their digital safety and ways to mitigate these risks. Partners highlighted that knowledge of digital hygiene is very low in Bangladesh, even as the government is passing laws that can be used to monitor or prosecute people for online activities. Using a training of trainers and mentorship model, Internews and New Networks

were able to provide skills to people who could continue training a wider network of journalists and activists and to create a platform through which trainees could stay connected about the challenges they face.

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“Before they enrolled in the training, they had no idea how their privacy can be breached, how devices can be monitored, how they are under surveillance, how they are profiled. They had no idea about this, but now they know how to navigate safely and how to deposit sensitive data. They have a lot of safety measures, and I believe that some people are sincerely following that.”

- Key informant interview, September 2022

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Providing support directly to marginalized and susceptible populations. While the digital security training was not designed specifically for marginalized communities, informants highlighted that several participants (including Training of Trainer participants) were members of marginalized communities, such as LGBTQIA+ individuals. Such populations may be more highly targeted by digital safety attacks, and providing guidelines for online security to these populations may have an outsized impact on their safety and their ability to share these skills across their communities.

Creating connections across journalists and activists. Through both the training and the WhatsApp mentorship platform, Internews and News Network were able to connect representatives of media and human rights communities that were previously not engaged with each other. These trainees now connect more regularly with each other on the individual risks or experiences they face with regard to digital security, and there is evidence that some participants have created connections that will support them as they move forward with their work in Bangladesh.

Helping and Hindering Factors. Key informants were asked about factors perceived to help or hinder this work. Understanding these factors can help support the implementation of future activities.

Helping factors include:

- **Local partner strength, including government and media connections:** Informants highlighted how News Network's reputation and experience working with both the media and with government actors helped to ensure strong participation in the training as well as permission from the necessary stakeholders to undertake these activities.
- **Quality of trainers:** Despite challenges associated with training diverse populations, informants pointed the skills of the trainer brought on to support this work as a key to its success.

Hindering factors include:

- **Resistance by some participants due to diversity of training recipients:** While one of the positive outcomes of the training was that it provided support to a diverse set of individuals, some trainees were resistant initially to be involved in training that included younger journalists, women, and members of the LGBTQIA+ community.
- **COVID 19-related delays and scrutiny:** Informants noted several challenges stemming from the spread of the pandemic, including delays in receiving permissions to undertake activities and increased scrutiny of online activities during the height of COVID-19.

For more information about this FRF, please contact: info@inspiresconsortium.org.



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