



# More and more women give colour to **community radio** in Bangladesh

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“There have been times when people did not want to speak to me as a journalist, when they found out where I came from. Sometimes I wasn’t even asked whether I wanted to sit during the interview. But I’ve never let that bother me,” says Kakoli Rani Das. She is one of the young women that takes part in the training programme that Free Press Unlimited organises in association with Bangladesh NGO Network for Radio and Communication (BNNRC). This means a great deal to her. “It has drastically changed how I look at my life.”

*By Lydia van Rooijen and Jolijn de Blocq van Schelting*

Kakoli grew up in a family of cobblers. So poor that the other people in their village looked down on the family. She did not go to school much, but when she was there she was put at the back of the class. “Everyone kept their distance from us.” Until they heard about the training programmes at Radio Meghna, a radio station in her neighbourhood. This is one of BNNRC’s community radio stations.

Community radio is important throughout Bangladesh. Seventeen radio stations ensure that people living in rural areas are given up-to-date news about their community and a voice in the media. Kakoli did not know much about journalism when she got the chance to join the training programme. But due to her perseverance, curiosity and determination she learned to work for the radio station as a fully fledged journalist.

That is because BNNRC offers a journalism programme together with Free Press Unlimited. It is an opportunity for young women in particular to find a job outside the home. This is unusual because there are few women who work outside the home or even get the opportunity to do so. So it was a bit of a shock for the family when one of the daughters was accepted on the programme. Even now, women are far from equal with men in Bangladesh. It can be especially difficult for fathers to see their daughters working, but ultimately this feeling makes way for pride when they see that the girls are trained to be good journalists.

Young women can apply to join the training programme three times per year. The only condition is that they must be able to read and write. That is because the training starts with a week of theory. After that the cub reporters go to work for the community radio station in their village for eleven weeks with old fellows – women who have completed the training in the past.

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In spite of this training, female journalists do experience a number of problems. They are not always taken seriously as journalists by interviewees, which was Kakoli's experience early on. The dominant view in Bangladesh is still that women cannot be journalists and cannot work outside the home at all. Now they get a press card, which they can use to prove that they really are doing their job. That not only gives women proof of their occupation, but also recognition of their abilities.

Completing the training does not mean that the hard work and efforts are over. It is important that the new journalists get to work as professional journalists and that they continue to do so, which is obviously why they are training in the first place. Mahbuba Islam Bonhi, one of the participants in the programme at another radio station, Radio Padma, says that since completing the training she works harder than ever. "I want to put everything I've learned to proper use so as to become a better journalist. As a journalist I find it very important to stand up for young women and children, who deserve to be heard in this country!"

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