



Are we leaving youth with disabilities behind: Policy perspectives on the informal employment for youth with disabilities in Bangladesh?

Background:

Over a billion people live with at least one type of disability in the world (World Bank & World Health Organization, 2011). According to the National Survey on Persons with Disabilities (NSPD) 2021, among the people of Bangladesh 2.80% have at least one disability, this is 3.29% among male and 2.34% among female population. Throughout the world (and in Bangladesh as well), persons with disabilities are more likely to experience lower levels of educational attainment, poorer health outcomes, lower levels of engagement in employment, and higher poverty levels compared to persons without disabilities (World Bank, 2021).

Bangladesh has a rich wealth of policy instruments that are geared towards ensuring the rights of persons with disabilities. The adoption of the first National Policy on Disability in 1995, Bangladesh has in various steps adopted disability-inclusive measures into the national policy framework. The next significant step for disability-specific policymaking in Bangladesh was the adoption of the now-defunct Disability Welfare Act in 2001. The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) in 2015 introduced a new dimension of inclusive thinking in the development planning of the country. SDG's 4, 8, 10 and 11, which relate to Quality Education, Decent Work and Economic Growth, Reduced Inequalities and Sustainable Cities and Communities, all focus on inclusive development and leaving no section of the populace behind. Notably, all these goals specifically mention persons with disabilities, and call for measures to ensure their inclusion in education, employment, economic opportunities and the planning and development of infrastructure. Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act 2013, an important piece of disability-specific legislation that aims to incorporate the core stipulations of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) into the national policy framework. The Act recognizes education, training, and employment as rights of persons with disabilities and it must be ensured to be able to enjoy in an equal capacity as other citizens.

Despite the existence of policy instruments that protect and ensure the right of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh to decent employment, the extent to which these policies can effectively ensure protection is unclear. A major reason for this uncertainty is the overwhelming predominance of the informal economy in Bangladesh and there is little or no policy, strategy to regulate this sector. NSPD 2021 shows that only 27.21 percent of persons with disabilities are employed where 7.30 percent are female. The percentage of persons with disabilities in employment is higher in rural areas than that in urban areas (28.19% vs. 23.00%). The NSPD



2021 also
shows



that out of employed persons with disabilities, the majority are self-employed (54.94%).

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) Economic Census data from 2013 showed that out of 7.82 million enterprises in Bangladesh, 7.81 million were small and micro enterprises, the majority of which are part of the informal economy. The informal economy thus includes small businesses, self-employed individuals, and other enterprises and economic activities that are not registered under the state. The government has no visibility on the working condition of the informal economy of all workers-let alone persons with disabilities. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered even greater risks of the economic vulnerability of persons with disabilities (UNHR, 2021; Cunningham & Draeger, 2021). Many persons with disabilities working in the informal job sector have lost their job or income, where they are less likely to be employed than persons without disabilities (UNHR, 2021).

Methodology

BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health (JPGSPH), BRAC University has therefore conducted a study in collaboration with BRAC Skills Development Programme (SDP) and consortium partners of Inclusive Futures to explore the individual, institutional, political and social barriers young persons with disabilities face while accessing the informal employment sector, the attitudes held by different relevant stakeholders involved with education, training and employment of young persons with disabilities and the policy and implementation gaps towards ensuring inclusive labour market, training opportunities, and decent employment for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh. This study followed a multi-method research approach: comprehensive desk review, representative quantitative survey, and qualitative interviews, to undertake the research objectives. A representative survey was conducted among 328 young persons with disabilities between 14- 35 years of age, covering all twelve types of disabilities. Also, a total of 16 in-depth interviews (IDIs), 4 focus group discussions (FGDs), and 21 key-informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with relevant stakeholders from different study sites. The desk review involved reviewing peer-reviewed articles, grey literature, reports from government, nongovernment, and Organization for persons with disabilities (OPDs), blogs, newspaper articles etc.

Findings

Only 6% of all study participants said that they had the opportunity to avail any skill development training, of whom less than 40% were women. 31% of study participants were found to be currently employed, of whom nearly 80% were men. 73.4% of all employed study participants were engaged in employment in the informal sector, 14% were self-employed and 7.8% were found to be employed in the formal sector. 64% of study participants felt that they do not have access to decent employment opportunities. 49.5% of these participants felt that this was due to their disability, 15.5% felt that this was due to a scarcity of suitable job opportunities and 10.8% felt that this was due to a lack of appropriate skills development training and education. 96.6% of study participants opined that there are no inclusive and accessible transportation facilities provided to them by employers, and 94% felt that there is a lack of accessible infrastructure at workplaces.

Identified major barriers and recommendations

Persons with disabilities and their family members are unaware of the potential of persons with disabilities to participate in economically productive activities if given the right training. They are also unaware of the availability of training services, leading to a low uptake of these services by persons with disabilities.

Recommendations:

- ✓ Budgeted action plans need to be developed to include action points to increase awareness amongst family members of persons with disabilities regarding their productive capacity.
- ✓ Inclusive strategies should be developed for the promotion & marketing of skills & employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Training of trainers at TVET institutions does not include components regarding respectfully communicating with or using appropriate training methods and materials to cater their services to the range of learners with disabilities who might want to take these services. Master crafts persons from informal markets have little or no training on such issues.

Recommendations:

- ✓ Standardised sets of training methods and strategies need to be introduced into TVET institutions and any kind of skills training programme.
- ✓ Collaboration among the Ministry of Social Welfare, National Skills Development Authority, Technical Vocational Education and Training institutes, Skills Development Programmes should be enhanced to promote and practice those methods.

For interested learners with disabilities living away from the divisional towns or district-level urban centers, traveling to the existing training centers is challenging since there is a lack of accessible transportation services and road infrastructure. Existing training institutes and markets are not accessible for all persons with disabilities.



Recommendations:

- ✓ Accommodation facilities should be included at skills training institutions for persons with disabilities.
- ✓ Accessibility features should be added in all training infrastructure with special focus on the entrance, classroom, sitting arrangement, lab, washroom, dining etc.

Employers in most sectors of the economy lack both appropriate sensitisation and incentive to view persons with disabilities as a potentially productive addition to their workforce.

Recommendations:

- ✓ Budgeted action plans need to be developed to include action points on developing sensitization among employers to recruit persons with disabilities. Greater engagement of employers in dialogues with private sector actors such as NGOs and OPDs can potentially serve to sensitize them appropriately.
- ✓ Existing incentives for employers need to be discussed widely for promoting disability inclusion and incentives for informal market actors need to be introduced.
- ✓ Need systematic discussion on identifying how to introduce standardised sets of guidelines for ensuring disability inclusion in the informal economy.

Non-fulfilment of the quota for persons with disabilities, discriminatory clauses, and lack of proper orientation among people on the capacity of persons with disabilities reinforce the exclusion of persons with disabilities.

Recommendations:

- ✓ A focused effort to identify the causes for this non-fulfilment of the existing quota could shed light on further gaps in the existing system that could be improved upon to enhance rates of enrolment in skill development programmes by persons with disabilities.
- ✓ Existing laws could be revised to exclude discriminatory clauses (provision to terminate the employment of workers based on disability acquired during work, etc.).
- ✓ Mandatory anti-discriminatory clauses need to be introduced at all workplaces and accessibility should be promoted.
- ✓ Existing policies, strategies, action plans must highlight the challenges and way forward for the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the informal economy.