

Exploring the State of Inaccessibility for Persons with Disabilities in Bangladesh and Analyzing Policy Frameworks that Address the Issue

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Abstract: *This paper proposes to conduct a study on the state of inaccessibility for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh and existing policy frameworks that address the issue. The proposed study will use secondary sources of information. It will review published literatures including individual researches, government and non - government reports, news reports, and so on that shed light on disabilities in Bangladesh. In addition, it will analyse national policy documents that address the issue of inaccessibility for people with disabilities. The study will provide readers with important insights into the state of inaccessibility for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh and the extent and coherence of the responses from government to the problem.*

Keywords: Persons with disability, Inaccessibility, Policy frameworks, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

People with disabilities constitute a significant number of the world population. According to World Report on Disability published in 2011, one billion people, constituting 15% of the world population, go through some form of disability while between 110 million and 190 million people experience significant disabilities (World Bank, 2011). There is no official national statistics in Bangladesh on persons with disabilities. However, the Household Income & Expenditure Survey 2016 shows that 6.94% people in Bangladesh suffered with some sort of disability in 2016 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2019). This rate revealed by the government agency is widely unacceptable to the communities working on disability in Bangladesh. In addition, this rate does not go in line with what international communities argue. While World Bank (2011) claims incidence of disability to be more than 15% of the world population, it is argued by the World Health Organisation (n. d.) that countries with low and middle income see higher rates of disability than countries with high income. The communities working on disability in Bangladesh largely believe that the rate of incidence of disability hold by the World Bank and the World Health Organisation applies for Bangladesh.

People with disabilities face widespread marginalisation that leads to vulnerability and poor standard of living. According to World Health Organisation (2017), people with disabilities constitute one of the most marginalized groups in the world with poorer health outcomes, lower education achievements, less economic participation and higher rates of poverty compared to people without disabilities. For widespread marginalisation and vulnerabilities, people with disabilities receive significant attention from both national and international communities around the globe. The United Nations in its '2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', popularly known as Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), clearly states that disability cannot be a reason or criteria for lack of access to development programming and the realization of human rights. A total of seven targets of

the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework, which Bangladesh signed as a state party, explicitly refer to persons with disabilities. Besides, six targets on persons in vulnerable situations include persons with disabilities. Essential development domains such as education, employment and decent work, social protection, resilience to and mitigation of disasters, sanitation, transport, and non - discrimination are addressed by the SDGs in reference to persons with disabilities (United Nations, 2015). While inclusion of persons with disabilities has been prioritised in the development agenda, like in the SDGs, of many countries and development partners worldwide, inaccessibility, among others, has appeared to be a great obstacle in this regard. As per World Bank (2020), inaccessible physical environments and transportation is among the barriers to full social and economic inclusion of persons with disabilities. While persons with disabilities face discrimination and marginalisation across the globe, in developing countries like Bangladesh, the situation must be even worse as is upheld by the World Health Organisation as 'the impact of disability on people in poorer areas of the world is compounded by issues of accessibility and lack of health care service.' Since Bangladesh is a developing country which lacks necessary infrastructure facilities for an overcrowded population, people with disabilities here are very likely to experience huge problem of inaccessibility. The possible inaccessibility problem for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh and the existing policy frameworks addressing the problem need a systematic study to reveal the magnitude of the problem while understanding government's policy responses to this end.

The proposed study intends to inquiry into the problem of inaccessibility for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh and the policy frameworks which are in place to address the problem. In doing so, it is crucial to have clear understanding of what 'inaccessibility' really means. Inaccessibility can simply be understood as absence or short of accessibility. Akter (2017) defined accessibility as 'the abilities and opportunities to reach desired goods, services, activities and destinations. According to Akter (2017), accessibility must comply with barrier - free environment

Volume 12 Issue 2, February 2023

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which means environment designed to be free of obstacles, friendly towards people who are physically disabled and hence, use wheelchairs and prosthetics. The proposed study plans to explore inaccessibility for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh as absence or short of what have been attributed, in the definition above, to the idea of accessibility. The study is supposed to provide readers with important insights into the state of inaccessibility for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh. In addition, it will offer an analysis of the existing policy frameworks addressing the problem to help understand the extent and coherence of the responses from government to the problem.

2. Literature Review

Persons with disabilities constitute a significant portion of the population in Bangladesh, while belonging to the most underprivileged and vulnerable communities in the country. Study finds that persons with disabilities account for around 9 percentage of the vulnerable population across the country (Bhattacharya et al., 2017). The study further reveals that persons with disabilities of all types have lower literacy rates and poorer performance relating to education in comparison with the rest of the population in Bangladesh while the households headed by persons with disabilities possesses lesser wealth in any benchmark which altogether put people with disabilities in a state of vulnerability. This finding is supported by another study. According to Rahman et al. (2019), poverty is widely prevalent, with a new dimension, among persons with disabilities in Bangladesh. Persons with disabilities, in Bangladesh, not only have very poor income but lives are more expensive for them compared to any other groups due to the unfriendliness of the societies they live in to disability (Rahman et al., 2019).

Poverty and marginalisation of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh can be attributed largely to problems regarding accessibility in each sphere of their lives. As Titumir & Hossain (2005) asserts "inaccessibility marginalises people with disabilities in Bangladesh." Another study (Tebbutt et al., 2016) recognizes the linkage between marginalization of persons with disabilities and lack of their access to a wide range of services and opportunities. Persons with disabilities in Bangladesh find it difficult to flourish themselves through building capacity and reaping the opportunities to utilize their capacity. It is found that people with disabilities in Bangladesh cannot enjoy equal access to educational facilities due to lack of necessary arrangements, while they lack access to different resources and services due to infrastructural barriers (Bhattacharya et al., 2017). According to Rahman et al. (2019), inaccessibility due to lack of necessary infrastructure appears to be a great barrier at the higher level of education while mainstream health infrastructure and services remain inaccessible for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh. As far as employment opportunities are concerned, the study finds that though, employment of people with disability has shown an upward trend in some sectors, notably in education and health sector, the disappointing picture is that persons with disabilities finding jobs are very inadequate in number indicating their inaccessibility to education and skill development opportunities. Even if persons with disabilities find jobs, there are cases in which they either quit or get sacked from

jobs as they face obstacles and fail to realize their full potential due to lack of friendly infrastructures (Rahman et al., 2019).

While poverty and marginalization is prevalent among persons with disabilities in Bangladesh and require effective response from the policymakers, the issue seems to be inadequately addressed in the national policy documents. Bhattacharya et al. (2017) finds that persons with disabilities are among the vulnerable groups who are least addressed in policy documents while specific needs of persons with disabilities are not addressed in the policy documents addressing water, sanitation, and infrastructure. It is further argued that prevailing discrimination against persons with disabilities is not adequately addressed by existing legal frameworks. However, a recent study reveals that in absence of a specific national plan for implementation of SDGs, Bangladesh has incorporated the 169 targets of the SDGs in its Seventh Five Year Plan (2016 - 2020) that highlights government's commitment to the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all development initiatives. The plan covers the area of inclusive education, health care and rehabilitation, basic infrastructure and services, skill development, access to information, social security, and social inclusion with reference to persons with disabilities (Rahman et al., 2019).

Literatures show that persons with disabilities are among the excluded groups in Bangladesh lagging far behind in many aspects. Studies explored that inaccessibility for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh has contributed, to a great extent, to their poverty and marginalization. It is found that some policy instruments, though considered insufficient, are there that address education, health, skill development, rehabilitation, social security, social inclusion, and discrimination against persons with disabilities. While study finds policy documents addressing infrastructure and access to information, no study has been conducted to exclusively reveal the inaccessibility issue which is crucial for ensuring inclusion of persons with disabilities to the mainstream. So there is scope of studying the state of inaccessibility for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh and existing policy frameworks that aims to improve the situation in order to ensure their inclusion to the mainstream.

Research Question

The proposed study will attempt to find answers to the following questions:

- What is the state of inaccessibility for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh?
- What are the national policy frameworks that address issues of inaccessibility for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh?
- How national policy frameworks address issues of inaccessibility for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh?

Research Design and Methods

The proposed work is designed to be a secondary research. It will gather data and information from published works and will analyse them in order to find answers to the research questions. Therefore, the study plans to apply 'literature search' as the method for collecting necessary information.

In this study, broadly two types of literatures will be gathered. In the first place, published works such as individual researches, government and non - government reports, news reports, and so on that address the issues of disabilities will be accumulated to find the state of accessibility for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh. To have a complete picture of accessibility for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh, both qualitative and quantitative information will be resorted to. Quantitative information will show the magnitude of the problem, while qualitative information will help to understand the contexts and the dimensions of the problem. Secondly, national policy documents of government of Bangladesh that address disabilities in general and accessibility for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh in particular will be collected. The policy documents will allow scrutinizing government's perceptions and response to the problems relating to accessibility for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh. In addition, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) document will be used to assess national frameworks dealing with things relating to accessibility of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh.

In the current study, information will be analysed and presented in descriptive manner. The information gained from existing literature will be analysed to produce a comprehensive scenario of the state of accessibility to different services for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh. In assessing government's policy frameworks in addressing the issue of accessibility for persons with disabilities, the UNCRPD will be taken as the standard to compare and analyse relevant provisions in national frameworks. The analyses will be presented for readers in a narrative manner.

3. Conclusion

People with disabilities comprise a significant part of the world population. As a lower middle - income country, Bangladesh is believed to have incidence of disability at a rate which is higher than the global average. People with disabilities all over the world experience vulnerability which can largely be attributed to lack of access to different services leading to poverty and marginalization. Given the shortage of necessary infrastructure facilities in the country, people with disabilities in Bangladesh are more likely to experience problem of inaccessibility. With huge number of people experiencing varying degrees of disabilities, it is essential for the government of Bangladesh to have adequate policy measures to improve lives of people with disabilities in the country through ensuring their accessibility to all sphere of life.

While there are studies on the overall conditions of lives of people with disabilities in Bangladesh, no study has been done to exclusively explore the state of inaccessibility for people with disabilities in Bangladesh and the policy frameworks that address the problem. With the intention of filling the gap, the proposed study will attempt to explore the state of inaccessibility for people with disabilities in Bangladesh and the policy frameworks that address the problem.

The study has some limitations. It is designed to inquire into the state of inaccessibility for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh. To get real and in - depth picture from across the country, it will require gathering of a huge amount of primary information, while secondary information will be necessary in comparing ground reality with existing knowledge. But due to time and resource constraints, the study has to do away with primary source of information. It will rely on secondary sources of information alone. Absence of primary information will prevent the proposed study from capturing the reality that persons with disabilities in Bangladesh are currently experiencing. In addition to that, the scope of the study has to be delimited due to time and resource constraints which will result in focus on limited dimensions of the problem. However, given the limitations mentioned above, the proposed study is supposed to make valuable addition to existing knowledge about the state of inaccessibility for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh and existing policy frameworks to improve the situation.

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