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# IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE LIFE AND LIVELIHOOD OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES (PWD): HOW TO OVERCOME THE CHALLENGES

The Daily Star, ADD International Bangladesh, and Daily Samakal jointly organised a virtual roundtable discussion titled "Impact of COVID-19 on the life and livelihood of persons with disabilities (PWD): How to overcome the challenges". on November 22, 2020. Here we publish a summary of the discussion. Speakers' serial has been maintained as per the flow of the discussion.



**Mustafiz Shafi,**  
Acting Editor, Daily Samakal

Till now, a total of around 4.5 lakh COVID-19 cases have been reported in Bangladesh. The rate of infections has started peaking again recently and this has gotten us all worried about the impact this second wave might have on the country and its people. People of divergent culture and profession in our country have been seriously impacted by this pandemic. Against this backdrop, PWDs are the most vulnerable, exposed, unprotected, and at risk. Coordinated effort is needed to ensure a disability-friendly state. As a media person, I am committed to stand by their side. It is a positive sign that the state works towards bettering the lives of PWDs. Inclusiveness can be rooted in our society if we work together to establish the rights of the PWDs.



**Md Shafiqul Islam,**  
Country Director, ADD International Bangladesh

The adverse effects of COVID-19 have disrupted the life and livelihood of PWDs. Various surveys have shed light to the fact that the PWDs are the most vulnerable and at risk population. They underwent harrowing difficulties during the months of April, May, and June. We, as well, have failed to assist them from our end. According to a government source, the total number of PWDs amount to about 21 lakhs but the actual figure may be far larger. An inclusive action needs to be accounted for in the next population survey to analyse the actual number of PWDs in Bangladesh.

This population has not managed to return to their regular life yet. In regards to this, an Action Plan can be developed to establish their rights and protection. Government can take apt initiatives to overcome this crisis. Media can play a vital role here. A new way will be explored by the implementation of that Action Plan. Inclusion of country wide assistance centres and helplines are necessary. The disability rights committees need to be strengthened. Initiatives such as instant health service facility, increased test assistance, office order for the jobless, and easy conditioned loan facility can be taken into consideration to build back better.



**Md Rafiquzzaman Biswas,**  
Field Operation Manager, ADD International Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, so far, the death toll caused by COVID-19 is 6,350 and 3,60,352 people have recovered as of November 21, 2020. Unfortunately, we do not have any statistics regarding the infection, death toll, and recovery rates of the PWDs.

ADD International Bangladesh conducted a survey on 15 organisations working with PWDs. A large number of interviewees said that, they did not receive the same survival packages and they also mentioned that the survival packages were not specified for the disabled. A large portion of them failed to maintain health protection measures due to lack of sanitisation facilities. The pandemic impacted their lives, livelihood, and earning severely.

Lockdown also resulted in decreased of wage and loss of jobs. Small business owners had to completely close down their operations and many of them cut down on their meals and even sold their own belongings to meet their daily needs. Many of them experienced difficulties in receiving health services as well. The ones without a disability card were not considered for survival assistance provided by the government. The PWDs are supposed to get priority, but that did not happen everywhere. This survey elucidated that all PWDs do not have equal access to financial aid and support packages. To bounce back to their routine life, a comprehensive and collaborative initiative from government and non-government agencies is essential.



**Nasima Akhter,**  
President, National Council of Disabled Women (NCDW)

The Persons with disabilities remain at high risk in this pandemic ridden world. They have innumerable complications along with a lack of awareness regarding COVID-19. They did not receive healthcare services due to a poor communication system in remote villages.

In terms of support from the Union Parishad, PWDs holding disability cards received priority and even then they did not get sufficient support.



**Salma Khatun,**  
President, Erulia Trinomul Protibondhi Songstha, Erulia, Bogura Sadar, Bogura

One of our sisters, physically handicapped and orphaned, lost her job due to COVID-19. She went through a hard time for six long months. Another sister with a disability has also been undergoing difficulties over managing her life and livelihood with her two children. Those who were working in the jute mills had to go hungry for days.



**Salma Mahbub,**  
General Secretary, Bangladesh Society for the Change and Advocacy Nexus

June was a particularly difficult month for the PWDs. The survival packages, financial assistance, and sanitisation support undertaken were not reaching them properly. Again, in many places, the ones who did not have the disability cards were excluded from any sort of support.

We are expecting a second-wave of COVID-19, but till now no protection measures exist for those who have lost their jobs, especially the garment workers who are still losing their jobs. Furthermore, they are still not receiving sufficient survival support from the government. We believe separate support programmes should be ensured for this vulnerable community. Small business owners are also suffering. We know that there is a taskforce to reduce the risk of disaster under the Ministry of Disaster Management and Relief (MoDMR). This taskforce needs to ensure separate measures for the PWDs affected by the pandemic as well as make sure that survival packages and financial support reach them properly. State should undertake adequate accountability for the life, livelihood, and protection of the PWDs.



**Shahnaz Begum,**  
Union Parishad Member and Panel Chairman, Latachapl Union Parishad, Kalapara, Patuakhali

During the COVID-19 situation, we sent survival packages to our brothers with intellectual disability. We updated our list of PWDs and made sure the survival packages from different agencies were properly sent out on an emergency basis, making sure no one was deprived of it. We also provided health and hygiene tips for navigating COVID-19 and regularly checked up on these individuals and their family members via cell phones.

Furthermore, detergent powders, soaps, and masks were provided as well which we received from different non-government organisations (NGOs). While distributing survival supports, PWDs have always been our priority.



**Abul Kalam Azad,**  
President, Shouhardo Protibondhi Unnayan Sangstha, Galachipa Poursava, Patuakhali

On top of COVID-19, these people also had to deal with the natural disasters, such as storms and floods, which took over in the last few months. This crisis has led to wretchedness for many.

In Galachipa Poursava, we contacted all PWDs and provided them with the necessary instructions on how to wash hands with soap and use masks. Survival packages were also sent out which reached everyone's doorstep.

The government initiated 10 taka per kg rice for the poor. This was not allowed to be distributed to people already receiving a disability allowance. We had to speak to multiple government officials to allow this rice to be distributed among the PWDs in Galachipa.



**Monsur Ahmed Chowdhury,**  
Trusty, Impact Foundation

Impact Foundation distributed relief packages to seven Upazilas. We were instructed to not distribute the packages to the people receiving the government allowance but we did not comply with that, given that the allowance is very little and the 700 taka will not last them very long. Our recommendation to the government would be to allow survival packages to be sent to all individuals, with or without the disability card.

A lot of decisions have been taken by the government in favour of this community. However, are these initiatives being implemented? We should get to the bottom of this matter. In view of this, media assistance to repeatedly bring light to these issues is crucial.

I am really surprised that despite the pandemic having hit our country in March, the Ministry of Social Welfare did not undertake significant steps to protect the individuals with disabilities. There's still time, and it is my humble request that in the next ten days, instead of holding different

access to such information. PWDs without disability cards are not allowed to receive survival packages. Therefore, the Ministry of Social Welfare is requested to give special attention to ensure all PWDs are provided with their respective disability cards.

In a recent report published by The Daily Star, according to the World Bank, 68 percent of people have lost their jobs in Dhaka, Chattogram, and Cox's Bazar. The PWDs were the first to bear the brunt of job cuts. The logical reason, according to the employers, is that they felt insecure about these people. To overcome this crisis, the government should create new job opportunities by undertaking a new project in the next national budget.

We also need to know if the students with disabilities have been able to receive proper education online. We can see that in the job sector, education sector, and healthcare sector, they are being deprived. This must have led their mental health to deteriorate and caused long-term adverse effects on their well-being. In this case, they require both psychological support and counselling. The current hotline number for providing such services is not accessible to the PWDs. I believe a different hotline number should be made available to them. There is no distinct facility available in Bangladesh for the PWDs to receive COVID-19 testing. Test samples of COVID-19 infected PWDs should be collected from their homes.



**Khandakar Jahurul Alam,**  
Executive Director, Centre for Services and Information on Disability (CSID)

A number of government orders lie ahead concerning the PWDs and we all have got to work efficiently in order to implement them. In the meantime, we have to consider modernising the national action plan as well. Every ministry should develop their own plan.

So far, no action plans have been undertaken yet. All responsibilities cannot be put on the Ministry of Social Welfare alone. They do not have the capacity to handle the entire situation alone. Their responsibility is monitoring which

This discussion can provide guidelines to the Ministry of Social Welfare about the way forward to tackle the current challenges inflicted upon the PWDs. Currently, there are 88,232 job holders who identify as PWDs. 60,000 of these individuals are involved in businesses and this group has faced the most adverse impacts of COVID-19.

Instantly, our ministry has taken multiple initiatives. We have distributed three crore taka among 63 districts, where the PWDs received priority. Besides disability allowance, small loan facilities will also be provided. If our disability rights committee was functional, the present scenario would be much better.

We have allocated 50 crore taka for this initiative and the Ministry of Finance has promised to provide a further 100 crore taka to support this initiative. Due to ongoing pandemic, the implementation of the national plan of action has been delayed. We have already asked for representatives from each ministry to implement the national plan of action, so that we can monitor the program effectively. We are expecting to implement the national plan of action effectively with the collaboration of all ministries. We will closely look into the issue regarding the PWDs without disability cards not receiving survival support and take appropriate actions. We will share the comments and recommendations from today's discussion with the concerned authorities.



**Yasmin Akhter,**  
Vice-President, Jagoron Protibandhi Nari Parishad, Modhupur, Badargonj, Rangpur

Females with disabilities have been the most negatively impacted by this pandemic. We had contacted the union councils for the distribution of survival package to these communities. We have also contacted numerous government organisations as well as NGOs for support.

Females with disabilities who have lost their jobs have had to face various issues in their homes. Visitation to various homes revealed that a lot of these individuals had been starving since there was no income.



**Ali Reza Mazid,**  
Additional Secretary, MoDMR, People's Republic of Bangladesh

Bangladesh's disaster risk management has become a role model for various countries. Bangladesh is the first country to include the interests of PWDs in its disaster risk management initiatives. Our work mainly involves dealing with natural and man-made disasters and hence COVID-19 stands as a completely new hurdle for us to overcome. Since March 24, 2020, we have provided country-wide humanitarian assistance. The proposal of strengthening disability rights committee is a time based issue.

We have also created a national taskforce for PWDs. We are providing training modules to the officers dealing with PWDs so that they can properly understand their special needs.

We will discuss further regarding the concern with distribution of survival packages for the PWDs with the taskforce. PWDs have been included in our standing orders. The distinct action plan for PWDs is a time based proposal by the discussants. Inclusion of PWDs and their concerning issues in disaster management is the first of its kind in the history of the world. Our ministry has always put emphasis on this issue, so that we can improve the life and livelihood for PWDs in case the pandemic prolongs.



**Tanjim Ferdous,**  
National Consultant, United Nations in Bangladesh and Moderator of the session

COVID-19 has gravely shaken the economic state of our country along with having a major impact on the health of the citizens. Thus, keeping this socio-economic context in the background, today's discussion focused on a group of people who have been particularly affected by this pandemic. Through this discussion we have tried to bring light to the challenges this group continues to face and the way forward.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure protected life and livelihoods for PWDs
- Bring light to the plight of PWDs through social media platforms
- Create a separate database for COVID-19 infected patients who are persons with disabilities
- Ensure that the individuals who still do not possess disability cards are provided with it soon
- Assess the situation for students with disabilities and ensure they are properly receiving online education
- Create a distinct database for PWDs in Bangladesh
- Ensure equal distribution of financial aid and survival packages for PWDs

ceremonies, we initiate cooperation between national and Upazila levels and between government organisations and NGOs. That way, regardless of whether a disabled person has a disability card or not, they and their families can receive survival support.



**Nasrin Jahan,**  
Executive Director, Disabled Child Foundation (DCF), Dhaka

In urban areas, during this pandemic, the PWDs who were private job holders, especially in the corporate sectors or different factories and garments, have lost their jobs due to fewer opportunities. Disabled people who were small business owners have also lost their source of income. This has put their livelihoods on hold. Special consideration needs to be provided towards the PWDs facing such challenges.



**Albert Mollah,**  
Executive Director, Access Bangladesh Foundation

The government needs to provide a separate count for the COVID-19 infected patients with a disability and the PWDs deserve



**S M Zahidul Hassan,**  
Deputy Director (Admin and Finance), Jatio Protibondhi Unnayan Foundation

Jatio Protibondhi Unnayan Foundation has distributed BDT 1,10,00,000 among 17,755 PWDs. We have plans to increase this figure. We hope that the Ministry of Social Welfare will take cogent initiatives regarding this matter. Likewise, we will keep continuing our efforts as well.



**Shobnam Mushtari Rikta,**  
Deputy Secretary (NDD and autism), Ministry of Social Welfare, People's Republic of Bangladesh