

ROUNDTABLE ON

Livelihoods for disabled people: Opportunities and challenges

Brigadier Shahedul Anam Khan, Editor, Op-Ed and Strategic Issues, The Daily Star

In Bangladesh, the number of people with disability is fifteen to twenty million, and the number is increasing day by day. Recurrent incidents of road accident and factory fire are making the situation worse.

We have to think about the employment of the persons with disability, seriously. Therefore, we need a proper planning to create employment for them. They obviously need training. We have to coordinate our training modules with existing market demands.

What should be the role of media? All of you present here today can be resource person for us as you are well informed than us. The Daily Star has dedicated pages for these issues. We can create pressure on the private and government sectors to fulfill their commitments.

Dr. Md. Anisuzzaman, Executive Director, LCD Bangladesh

We are implementing our programmes and projects in Bangladesh following the Cheshire Livelihoods Resource Centre model, developed by LCD, with a vision to create a 'one-stop shop', providing a wide range of services under one roof, designed to open up opportunities for disabled people to develop marketable skills, to access waged employment and to engage in business. We have implemented a project titled 'Livelihoods for Disabled People' in association with an informal network of NGOs and DPOs at local level, local government, training institutes, national network of NGOs and DPOs in nine districts of Bangladesh with the support from LCD, UK and Scottish Government.

According to the World Disability Report, published by the World Health Organisation and the World Bank, in 2011, it is estimated that around twenty million people in Bangladesh are living with a disability. It is evident that persons with disabilities are more likely to experience economic and social disadvantages than those without disability. There are many reasons for this, ranging from the limitations that arise from physical and mental impairment to the disabling impact of discrimination and a wide array of other societal barriers. We can include them in mainstream development through reducing social, environmental, attitudinal and policy barriers. If we can make ourselves aware about our discriminatory attitudes, ensure accessible environment, ensure disability friendly policies we can get an inclusive society and confirm the inclusion of the persons with disabilities.

We need to create access to mainstream training program for persons with disabilities to increase their livelihood opportunities. In Bangladesh, the access and opportunity for both technical and vocational training are limited. One of the effective ways of enabling persons with disabilities for livelihoods is to improve their access to informal training that is locally-based and create more access to microfinance institutes to engage them in self-employment.

The Government had declared quota for persons with disabilities along with the orphans in selected grades of Government jobs. But this was not adequately practiced in majority of the recruitments. Negative attitude towards the abilities of persons with disabilities, inaccessible workplace and rigidity in policy created obstacles in waged employment including government sector.

Readymade garments (RMG) sector is one of the main wheels in our economic engine employing around 3.6 million people. There are larger opportunities at the RMG sector. Reasonable accommodation and accessibility in the work place are the major factors for their employment. Persons with disabilities, usually, face drop out from their work place due to lack of cooperation and negative attitude from the co-workers, lack of adaptability, unfriendly infrastructure (absence of elevator) at the working place, lack of initiatives in further development of skills and lack of awareness of employers.

NGOs are working since our independence. Still our collaboration with the government sector is not as it is projected. If we could work together, the situation would be better. In 2007, Bangladesh government has signed UNCRPD and did ratify at the optional protocol. We are also attempting for a new law with more sensitivity for the rights of persons with disability. We are talking about empathy not sympathy or charity for the persons with disability. They have their constitutional and legal rights. More importantly, they are recognized by UNCRPD and other human rights instruments. We need positive attitude among the whole society. Our combined efforts will help us to improve the perspective at a large level and to include them in mainstream development.

Jahangir Alam, P.O, Sight Savers

The 10% quota is not applicable for the entire government sector. It is mentioned there that the 10% quota is for persons with disability and orphan. And it is applicable for the 3rd and 4th class jobs only. Lately in 2002, there was an announcement that disabled will get 1% job at the 1st and 2nd class jobs. And the 1% is according to the ratio of reserve quota (54%-56%) not from the 100%. We are facing a huge discrimination in the education sector. The visually impaired persons facing difficulty to face the written tests in PSC as they have to take the same writer in each of the examinations.

Ms. Nazrana Yeasmin Hira, Programme Manager, Manusher Jonno Foundation

In our country, persons with disabilities get chance only when able people are not some how available. CRP made employment for 400 girls at garment sector. There are more opportunities but coordination of the job opportunities and the contract process with a garment is a real complex. None of the ministries is giving definite budget for the persons with disabilities whether it is education or health or some other. Corporate, govern-

LCD Bangladesh and The Daily Star have recently organised a roundtable on "Livelihoods for disabled people: Opportunities and challenges". We publish a summary of the discussions.

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ment NGOs, RMG and manufacturing sectors and other related employers need to come forward to create employment opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Shajeda Begum, President, Sanjibani

Since 2000, we have been working on livelihoods for marginalised people. We found many talented people among people with disability could be mainstreamed with some vocational training and close follow up. NGOs working on livelihoods for persons with disabilities need to enhance their efforts on capacity building on business management skill and need to provide support with start-up capital and regular follow up.

Maj. General Shafiqul Islam (Rtd.), Executive Director, CRP-Bangladesh

We have enough capacity but the major obstacle is bringing in trainees from remote villages. Every year we provide training for 150 women with accommodation facility at our hostels and ensure job after training. Some of the garment owners are convinced of the capability of these women with disability. We also need to make our parents aware. For the first time, government machineries moved into disable chairing for their employment project with ILO. The trainers of the government technical training institutions come to CRP to learn from our people. We need to publish these success stories how these disabled people are living with dignity. The garments owners are not eager to change their infrastructure largely. So they are employing either people with listening disability or mild physical disability, not with persons with severe disability especially wheel chair users, although they represent a large population among the persons with disabilities. We need to develop a new production model. Even the machine producers are willing to modify their machines in a comfortable way for a person with disability using wheelchair. These will broaden the range of opportunity.

Aktabul Alam, Executive Director, JSSKS, Jhenaidah

People with disability, generally, have minimum information about their rights and entitlement, especially in the rural areas. Once they are organised and get access to trainings offered by government and NGOs they can share information with each other. It also helps increase their self-esteem and confidence. They feel that it is possible to be self-dependent. Still our access to bank loans is limited. We get assistance from non-government banks, MFIs, microcredit organisations to facilitate capital for the trained and persons with disabilities. We expect support from the government banks and MFIs also which will really certainly increase quality of life of persons with disabilities and their family members.

Albert Molla, Executive Director, Access Bangladesh Foundation

When there was a demand for law ensuring easy access to bank loans for the people with disability, the banking division advised against it. We need to do advocacy with our policy makers to get access to finance from MFIs and Banks for persons with disabilities. The Ministry of Social Welfare, Department of Women Affairs, Department of Youth Development, SME foundations are implementing related programmes but we are unable to use these facilities in an efficient manner. In general, trained and employed people with disability are playing their role with responsibility.

Julian Francis, Independent Development Consultant

There are many good examples of disabled people working in garment factories. As the opportunity is more than their expectation the productivity of the disabled people is often greater. We saw in many of our projects that women who are deaf and cannot speak are looking after cattle in a much better way. People with visual impairment are doing well in kitchen gardening. We need to mention these positive examples.

Bettina Schmidt, Inclusive Development Coordinator, CDM

We saw that a livelihood opportunity for disabled persons could change their lives overnight. They are not burden to their family anymore. Secondly, they are not a homogenous but a very heterogeneous

an organisation for the people with disability named Moitri Shilpo. This is the most effective and largest plant in our county that produces 5 types of mineral water and 86 types of plastic accessories. This is a profit-making organisation.

M.A. Halim, Secretary, Cheshire Foundation Home

We work for the relief and rehabilitation of the people with disability. We give them training on sewing machines. At present, we produce 46 types of handicrafts. However, we cannot reach the market. We do not even have enough resources to ensure marketing of our products. Initially we got some support from the government but it did not last long. We need sponsors to market our products.

Humaira Sharmin, Head of Operations, Prothom Alo Jobs

I would like to share some ideas as I deal with job market demands. We work as a bridge between the job seeker and the employer. Huge opportunities are there. Most of the companies are running without full employment. But there is not enough skilled manpower. Qualified people with minor physical challenge can get into the mainstream. Main challenge is the typical mindset of the employers.

Sultana Jahan, Mother of a girl with hearing impairment

My daughter is a trainee at one of the LCD projects. She says that most of the trainees are illiterate. She thinks that trainees should get literacy training besides these vocational and technical training.

AHM Noman Khan, Executive Director, CDD

I think this is the high time to discuss this issue inclusively. It is assumed that only 5% people with disability are employed. Employment is not only for money or earning livelihood but also for building confidence and self-esteem among them. We did not agree with the government decision of giving bank loan to disable people with zero interest. A large number of people without disability may abuse this scheme. Even different organisations may misuse the facility. It may affront the impression of persons with disabilities. We want to give loan to those people with disability who have training or experience of using a loan. We hope that people from various sectors will address the issue to promote the rights of persons with disabilities to employment.

Dr. Zia Rahman, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Dhaka

We seriously suffer from our feudal mindset. Most of the garments owners of our country do not bother about labor act or other conventions. In this regard, employment of persons with disabilities at the RMG sector is really a big success even though total number of people working at RMG industries is 3.6 million. And this can be happened due to giant foreign buyers like Marks & Spencer and others not our garment owners. There is also violation of labor laws in western countries but at the bottom line, they provide some facilities for the disabled. We need a civil movement to make things better.

Professor Dr. Sadeka Halim, Information Commissioner, Information Commission

The term 'physically challenged people' is preferable to me. These people are working efficiently at our National Institute of Traumatology & Orthopaedic Rehabilitation (NITOR). I think they are more productive and sincere than the mainstream people. These people have constitutional rights to vote. But they are deprived of their basic rights. Sometimes they are even cheated at receiving the social safety net programs. We treat them as second-class citizen. We failed to build a friendly family or society or state for these physically challenged people. Parents tend to hide their physically challenged children. However, there is a significant change in our mind set during the last decade, since 2000. I would like to thank those who are putting their effort behind this. There are 20 million disabled people in Bangladesh including a large number of children. What are we doing for these children? It is the duty of our government officials to identify these people. How cannot you find them out? 10% government quota for the disabled and orphan is a myth. What are the programs for physically challenged women? These women are facing even sexual harassments. They are not able to take the facilities of courts or district administrations or Union Parishads. Our NGOs should utilize the facilities of the Right to Information (RTI) Act to get data to get the real picture. We have published books in braille to disseminate information about RTI. We have to include these issues in our pre-budget discussions. Ministry of Social Welfare needs to demand for the allocation of adequate budget to ensure inclusion of most vulnerable people in mainstream development. Corporate sector needs to join hands together with NGOs to contribute to the wellbeing of most marginalised people in the society, which include persons with disabilities, adibashi people, destitute women and children.