

Deep-rooted stigmas hinder social inclusion of persons with disabilities

In conversation with Mohua Paul, co-founder & chairperson of Access Bangladesh Foundation.



Mohua Paul

The Daily Star (TDS): What is the current status of the initiatives aimed at identifying the unique needs of persons with disabilities?

Mohua Paul (MP): The Joint Secretary of the Jatiyo Protibondhi Unnoyon Foundation (JPUF) under the Ministry of Social Welfare has initiated a plan to conduct 12 workshops targeting different types of disabilities, as outlined in the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act 2013. These workshops aim to identify the unique needs of persons with disabilities and develop a plan based on the findings.

In the initial meeting, discussions focused on the participants. The JPUF is introducing a new approach, asking experts working with various disabilities—such as autism, cerebral palsy, down syndrome, intellectual, visual, hearing, and speech disabilities—to provide updates on the current situation to help develop a

comprehensive plan. This approach is more inclusive and participatory compared to previous methods, where consultations were limited to specific days of celebration like Autism Day or International Day of Persons with Disabilities.

This new strategy actively involves stakeholders from disability groups, OPDs (Organisations of Persons with Disabilities), and disability-focused organisations, ensuring their voices are integral to the planning process. Additionally, OPDs and disability organisations are adopting a twin-track approach (mainstream and disability specific) to foster inclusion. Besides OPD leaders and disability activists, we formed a Disability Watch Group, from that group we also met with the honorable Chief Advisor to share the current scenario and recommendations to include disability inclusion aspects in different reforms.

TDS: What are the most pressing barriers

Build an inclusive society for individuals with disabilities.

PHOTO:
SAZZAD IBNE SAYED



people with disabilities face in accessing basic rights, particularly education, employment, and public spaces in Bangladesh?

MP: A major challenge is the negative attitudes of families, society, and policymakers, who often believe persons with disabilities cannot contribute or be independent. These stigmas severely limit their access to education, employment, and public spaces.

Persons with severe disabilities, particularly those who use assistive devices like wheelchairs, crutches, or tri-cycles, often face significant mobility challenges due to inaccessible environments. Lack of accessible transportation and infrastructure prevents many from leaving their homes, hindering access to healthcare and education.

Persons with visual disabilities face challenges in education, with limited availability of accessible formats like

Braille and digital versions of textbooks. While some progress has been made at the school level, gaps remain in higher education, with textbooks and teachers lacking necessary training in universal design for learning.

Similarly, persons with speech and hearing disabilities struggle with communication barriers in education. The absence of sign language interpreters in most institutions limits their ability to follow lessons.

In employment, negative attitudes and inaccessibility persist. Many employers lack awareness about disability inclusion. The current 1% quota for third-gender individuals and persons with disabilities in government jobs is inadequate and should be separated to ensure at least 1% is specifically allocated for persons with disabilities.

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» The current 1% quota for third-gender individuals and persons with disabilities in government jobs is inadequate and should be separated to ensure at least 1% is specifically allocated for persons with disabilities.

» Despite the introduction of Braille and digital textbooks at the school level, higher education lacks accessible materials and teachers trained in universal design for learning.

» To promote inclusive education, proper facilities and support systems, such as accessible infrastructure, sign language interpreters, and Braille materials must be made available.

» TVET institutes must design and implement training programs that are accessible and inclusive, providing accessible classrooms, adaptive technologies, and trained instructors who understand the needs of persons with disabilities.

» It should be mandated by law that employers hiring persons with disabilities will receive tax rebates and government incentives.

» During the July Uprising, many young people became persons with physical or visual disabilities due to injuries. If their peers stand by them, it will send a powerful message of solidarity.



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