

NEWS

Trapped in charity, deprived

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reinforcing the idea that disability is a welfare issue, not a constitutional right.

Ten-year-old Sakib Ahmed from Kapasia, Gazipur, who has a neurological disorder, illustrates the system's failings.

Officially enrolled in a local government primary school, he has no access to trained teachers or adapted learning materials.

"I teach him at home," his mother said. "School is just a place for him to see the outside world — it doesn't actually help him learn."

According to the 2021 National Survey on Persons with Disabilities by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics with Unicef, 60 percent of children with disabilities aged 5-17 are out of school. Only 76 non-government schools serving these children receive monthly pay order (MPO) benefits.

"The problem is structural," said Md Jahangir Alam, senior coordinator at the Centre for Disability and Development.

"Education ministries see persons with disabilities as Social Welfare's responsibility. Children are pushed into segregated schools, isolated from peers. These institutions — set up in the 1960s — now function like disconnected 'prisons,' with no scope for social integration." He said a lack of trained teachers, poor infrastructure, and rigid curricula continue to exclude children from mainstream education.

Women with disabilities face even greater challenges. They have lower literacy rates and limited access to training and jobs — only 0.13 percent join vocational training and 3.13 percent hold formal jobs. Their labour force participation rate is just 11.34 percent, compared with 41 percent for men, according to the Access Bangladesh Foundation.

Yet the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs has no targeted or inclusive programmes for women and children with disabilities," said Ashrafunnahar Mishti, executive director of the Women with Disabilities and Development Foundation.

"If a woman with a disability becomes pregnant or needs nutritional support for her child's first 1,000 days, she is often excluded because she already receives

a disability allowance," she said. "That allowance is only Tk 850 — barely enough for medicine or basic needs. Students face the same issue, as receiving an education stipend makes them ineligible for the allowance. Unless all ministries share responsibility, women with disabilities will remain excluded."

Meanwhile, essential therapies — physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, and clinical psychology — are also provided by the National Disabled Development Foundation, which operates under social welfare instead of health ministry.

"This raises concerns about quality," said Jahangir Alam. "Therapy professionals remain outside the mainstream health system. Even the planned Rehabilitation Council is under social welfare instead of health ministry."

Mishti said identifying disabilities requires medical expertise. "Administrative officers can only detect visible disabilities. Autism, cerebral palsy, or mental health conditions require doctors. Most upazila health complexes lack neurologists, therapists, or psychologists, so early intervention becomes impossible," she said. "This is not just a welfare issue; it's a public health issue."

The National Skills Development Programme (NSDP) reserves five percent of training seats for persons with disabilities, but the policy remains largely symbolic.

"Many centres are physically inaccessible and lack sign language interpreters, materials for visually impaired trainees, or specialized instructors," said Dr Nafeesur Rahman, a disability development specialist.

"Responsibility lies only with Social Welfare, so the system cannot deliver meaningful results," he said. Sports for persons with disabilities also remain neglected. The National Sports Council under the sports ministry has taken little initiative, leaving the matter to, again, social welfare ministry.

"We held a stakeholder meeting on September 14 and submitted a resolution to the ministries to implement these measures," said Social Welfare Additional Secretary Bijoy Krishna Debnath, also managing director of the National Disabled Development Foundation.

"Revising the Allocation of Business requires coordination among ministries. This is a long-term process. If each ministry fulfills its duties under the 2013 Disability Rights Act, persons with disabilities will finally enjoy their rights fully," he said.

Md Habibur Rahman passes away

CITY DESK

Md Habibur Rahman, a freedom fighter of Sector 9 during the Liberation War, passed away on October 20 in Dhaka. He was 76, said a press release.

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"Every ministry should have a disability section with a dedicated officer. Revising the Allocation of Business won't solve everything, but it will make ministries accountable," he added.

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After the formation of Disability Rights Watch, a five-member team met Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus in November last year with proposals to implement the 2008 recommendation and rename the Ministry of Social Welfare to the Ministry of Social Development and Empowerment to promote a rights-based approach.

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