

Factors Influencing the Accessibility of Education for the Children with Disabilities in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Education is a basic requirement for every human being which is the only means of ensuring human survival, protection, and development. Education is the foundation of society, and educational opportunity, particularly equitable opportunity, is a major concern in the educational system. By 2030, the United Nations has adopted a target (Goal 4) for achieving quality, equitable, and inclusive education for all. Bangladesh has made great progress in terms of the enrolment of children in schools over the last few years. However, a large proportion of children with disabilities have yet to gain access to the educational facilities that they desire. This paper is an attempt to focus on the current education status of children with disabilities and identify some key factors that restrict access to their education in Bangladesh. As the paper is based on secondary sources of data, hence, published journal articles, research report, policy documents of government and non-government organization etc. were used to outline. A number of factors influencing the accessibility of education for children with disabilities are discussed here, including parental perception, negative attitudes, school problems, poverty, inaccessibility, flawed curriculum and scarcity of teaching materials, and poor enforcement of policies and laws. Finally, in this paper, some recommendations are made to ensure educational opportunities for children with disabilities by removing barriers to access to education.

Key words: Disability, Accessibility, Inclusive Education, Factors, Children with Disabilities

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Introduction

Since the dawn of civilisation, people with disabilities have always been a part of society. Despite their status as members of human civilization, they were not considered human beings at various eras and in various societies. They have been deprived of their rights, tortured by other people, neglected in many ways. However, the situation is gradually improving, even though many of them continue to fall behind non-disabled persons for a variety of reasons.

Bangladesh is one of the developing countries in South Asia where there is a high prevalence of disability as a result of acute poverty, low literacy, ignorance, and, most importantly, a dearth of access to healthcare and other services. Despite the fact that disability is a major

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socio-economic issue, reliable data are scarce on the subject (Sultana, 2010). According to the Disability Information System website (DIS) (2020), in Bangladesh, there are 1,810,821 people with disabilities (1,108,859 men, 699,473 women, and 2,489 third gender) (UN, 2020). On the other hand, according to National Survey on Persons with Disabilities (NSPD) 2021 data, the prevalence of disabilities in Bangladesh is 2.80 percent overall, with 3.28 percent of males and 2.32 percent of females (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022). There is no doubt that Bangladesh has made significant progress in various sectors in recent years, but there is considerable doubt as to whether the rights of people with disabilities have yet to be fully established. The majority of them are cut off from the rest of society, stigmatized, and deprived of necessities like health care, education, shelter, employment, and transportation (Sultana, 2010). Children with disabilities have the right to an education that helps them achieve their full potential and integrate into society. They have the right to access and use any kind of mainstream educational tool. However, despite several initiatives, Children with disabilities in Bangladesh continue to encounter barriers to education and other aspects of their lives.

Methods

The paper is mainly based on secondary sources. To prepare this paper the author has collected information from various secondary sources such as journals, text books, printed materials, reports of various public and private organizations and internet publications.

Children with Disabilities and their Education

Education plays an important role in a country's overall development. A properly educated people at all levels is a precondition for developing a strong progressive country (Prodhon, 2016). For this reason, every child, whether disabled or not, has the right to an equitable education. Furthermore, students with disabilities have the right to expect to be held to the same educational standards as their peers.

However, millions of children continue to be excluded from and within educational systems around the world. Around 264 million primary and secondary school-aged children were out of school in 2015 (UNESCO, 2017). In developing countries, around 65 million primary and secondary school-aged children have disabilities, with half of them dropping out. Even if they enroll, they have a much lower chance of finishing school than others. As a result, only 3% of people with disabilities and only 1% of women with disabilities are currently literate (Barua, 2018).

In recent years, Bangladesh has progressed significantly in different sectors. The educational situation in Bangladesh has changed dramatically over the years as a result of government efforts, resulting in better education provision. The literacy rate, as well as women's enrolment, has increased, which is a positive indicator for the country. The country is now on track to increase primary school attendance. Several initiatives, such as the distribution of free textbooks,

the provision of scholarships, stipends for primary school students, food for education, and community or satellite schools, have made this possible. However, these achievements have certain limitations, as the government has failed to ensure the rights of education for all groups of people equally, particularly children with disabilities, who continue to face discrimination and challenges in acquiring education (Ahmed & Kashem, 2015). Due to inadequate attention to their requirements, children with disabilities are among the most disadvantaged when it comes to completing elementary school (Limaye, 2016a). A substantial percentage of children with disabilities are still now out of school and living in a world of ignorance. In terms of education and primary school completion, they are among the most disadvantaged. Although the literacy rate in Bangladesh is 73.2 percent, approximately 90% of children with disabilities are out of school (Dhaka Tribune, 28 January 2020). They have long been among the most marginalized groups of children in Bangladesh. The impact on their educational development is frequently significant, severely limiting their growth potential. According to a survey, only 4% of an estimated 1.6 million children with impairments of primary school age had access to schooling (Zulfiqar et al., 2018). In another survey it was found that, slightly more than half of people with disabilities have no formal education (54.74 percent), while 23.11 percent have primary (I-V) education and 18.33 percent have secondary (VI-XII) education. Only 1.57 percent have a higher education (i.e., above XII) (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022).

Special education, inclusive education, and integrated education are the three main types of education systems for students with disabilities in Bangladesh. Apart from all of these, home-based education is also used when other options are unavailable. Parents and family members are mostly responsible for providing education for their children with disabilities at home (Choudhury, 2011). Inclusive Education has been included in Primary Education Plans by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education. Along with the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Social Welfare (MOSW) plays an important and vital role in delivering education to children with disabilities according to their needs and capabilities. At present Department of Social Services (DSS) under the Ministry of Social Welfare runs some educational programs like Integrated Education Programme in regular schools for the Visually Impaired, Special School for the Visually Impaired, School for the Hearing Impaired, Institute for the Mentally Retarded Children (Hossain, n.d.). Furthermore, NGOs, Organizations of People with Disabilities are taking various initiatives in this regard.

Legal Framework for Education of Children with Disabilities

Education is recognized as a fundamental right in the constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh where article 17 mentions that the state should provide education to all children without making any discrimination. To ensure equitable and inclusive quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, Bangladesh has embedded different policies and legislations (Alam, 2018).

As per the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, the target for all developing countries is to ensure an equitable, inclusive, and quality education system for all children by 2030. All countries around the world, including Bangladesh, are working to remove inequities and barriers to access and quality education (Zulfiqar et al., 2018). Bangladesh is a signatory to and active participant in many international declarations, conventions, and charters, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Jomtien Declaration (1990), UN Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (1993), Salamanca Declaration on Inclusive Education (1994), Dakar Framework (2000), United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD) (2006). All of these have highlighted and clearly emphasized education for children with special needs (Zaman, 2016), which have influenced policies and laws regarding their education in Bangladesh. Bangladesh, as a signatory country to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, is dedicated to providing a learning-friendly educational environment for students with disabilities (Malak & Khanam, 2011). Following the ratification of the UNCRPD in 2007, Bangladesh has made legislative and policy steps to nationalize these international commitments, including National Education Policy-2010, the Children Policy-2011, Children Act-2013, and the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act 2013 (UNICEF, 2014). Education Policy, 2010 recommends making the necessary efforts to promote the underprivileged people in the educational sector. The Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013 outlined the rights of children with disabilities to receive inclusive or integrated education according to their needs. Furthermore, they have the right to a favorable environment in educational institutions so that they can be benefited from it (Zaman, 2016). In addition, a Combined Special Education Policy on Disability-2019 has been developed by the Ministry of Social Welfare. The goal of this policy is to match the education system for people with disabilities with the goals of the CRPD (UN, 2020).

Factors Influencing the Accessibility of Education

Education is a fundamental right of every child, regardless of caste, religion, or special needs (Mukherjee, 2018). In Bangladesh, children with disabilities are among the most disadvantaged in terms of access to education and completion of primary school. Many children with disabilities never went to school, and some of those who do eventually drop out of mainstream schools because of inappropriate teaching methods, inaccessible school infrastructure, limited learning opportunities, and an unfriendly school environment (Rahman et al., 2008). Children with disabilities can be mainstreamed by providing reasonable accommodation in the school environment, changing the attitudes of parents, teachers and other concerned persons, ensuring inclusive education training for teachers, ensuring availability of educational materials and implementing existing policies (Khan & Anisuzzaman, 2011). But, it is very sad that significant steps

in these fields are not being noticed in Bangladesh. Many issues, such as a lack of well-educated teachers, resources, curriculum, adequate infrastructure, knowledge, a positive attitude, plans, and policies, are impeding children with disabilities' access to education(Mukherjee, 2018). Though many factors influence the education of children with disabilities in Bangladesh, the following are some of the most important.

Parents Perception

The overall development of a child is strongly affected by parental perception. Parental perspective has an important role in shaping the overall growth and development of a child with disability (Limaye, 2016a). The attitude of parents toward children with disabilities and their education can either be a major facilitator or a major impediment to their integration and participation in mainstream society. When a child is born with disability parents are shocked and grieved by social stigma and unfavorable views toward disability, which influence children with disabilities. Some parents believe that their children with disabilities are unable to receive an education like non-children with disabilities. Parents are sometimes unaware of their children's educational rights and may accept the community's belief that these children are incapable of learning. Parents' lack of knowledge about educational facilities prohibits them from providing a better education to their children with disabilities(Limaye, 2016a). Furthermore, they believe that, in a time when many non-disabled individuals are unemployed despite having higher education, there is no guarantee that a person with disability will be able to find work in the future by studying hard. They rarely realize the importance of education to bring them into mainstream society. They consider their education as a waste of money and time rather than an investment.

In the case of a child with disability, parental education plays an important role because, in our society, parents are the primary caregivers for their children. However, the majority of parents of children with disabilities are illiterate, and they are hesitant to provide their children with disabilities with educational opportunities. Many parents are ignorant of admissions, educational opportunities, vocational training, exam concessions, and other benefits available to their children. Parents are unable to provide education to their children with disabilities due to a lack of awareness of educational facilities.

Negative Attitude

The most serious impediment to inclusive education, particularly for individuals with disabilities, is a negative attitude(Baraka Manjale Ngussa, 2017). Negative attitudes are frequently the result of misconceptions about disability(Institute of Development Studies, 2020). In the education system, children with disabilities continue to endure harsh attitudes and prejudices(Ahmad, 2016). Exclusion, discrimination, and neglect of people with disabilities

and their families are still common in Bangladesh (Institute of Development Studies, 2020). Negative attitudes against children with disabilities are frequently blamed for keeping them out of school. It is widely believed that having a child with disability is retribution for the family's previous misdeeds. Disability is typically viewed as a curse and a source of shame in families. Few efforts have attempted to correct these misconceptions and enhance community awareness about disabilities. Prejudice and ignorance are said to be hurdles to education for children with disabilities in Bangladesh. They are frequently excluded due to attitudes and environmental reasons rather than their disabilities. Discrimination happens in the home, in society, and the school. One of the most significant hurdles to enrolling in primary school may be a negative attitude. It is more common in children with special needs and other vulnerable groups (Choudhury, 2011). The negative attitude encourages parents to deny the opportunity to their children with disabilities to attend school. In regular school, some non-disabled students and teachers show their unfavorable attitude toward children with disabilities by ignoring, discriminating, labeling, bullying, verbally abusing, and so on. Few schools make an effort to acknowledge the special needs of students with disabilities and to provide accommodations that motivate these students and their parents to continue their education.

School Issue

The requirements of children with disabilities are not always met by mainstream schools in Bangladesh (Nasrain, 2017). In rural schools, inclusive friendly teaching-learning methods are completely absent and nearly absent among the urban schools (Zaman, 2016). On the other hand, special schools are mainly located in big cities or urban areas, and there is a dearth of such schools in rural and remote areas where there are no specially trained teachers. Schools are sometimes far from the home and there is a lack of transportation and access roads for traveling. Students with disabilities experience prejudice and are frequently ridiculed by their peers, and many parents do not allow their children to attend classes with disabled classmates (Islam & Juhara, 2021). For this reason in the teaching of children with disabilities, the teacher's attitude is important because they influence non-disabled students who treat their classmates properly. The majority of teachers are not prepared to implement educational programmes in regular schools for children with disabilities. Many of them have negative attitudes to children with disabilities, and some of them are hesitant to teach such children. A study found that 41% of respondents said that schools lacked disability-friendly education equipment and 18% said that children with disabilities were denied admission to school (BLAST, 2015). Teachers' lack of empathy is itself a barrier to the education of children with disabilities. Besides, almost all secondary school teachers are untrained in using sign language to interact with students who are deaf or have speech impairment. Students with speech and hearing impairments find it challenging to keep up in class and attain the required achievement levels on their exams (Choudhury, 2011).

Poverty

Disability and poverty have a complicated and intertwined relationship. They are interlinked as both a cause and a result of one another. Extremely impoverished persons are more likely to suffer from illnesses and injuries, which can lead to disability in a variety of ways (Tareque et al., 2014). Inadequate information about the causes of disability, poor nutrition, hazardous living and working conditions, poor hygiene, limited access to health care, poor sanitation, war and violence, and natural disasters all contribute to disabilities. Unfortunately, many PWDs continue to live in poverty and have a low level of education (Ajisukumo, 2017). It is believed that in developing countries, 15-20% of the poor are disabled, which is substantially more than the usually assumed 10% of the overall population are disabled (Islam & Juhara, 2021). A low family income makes it difficult for the family to send their children to school. Some of the children assist the family with regular chores. Neither the parents nor the children have a desire to enroll in school (Khan & Anisuzzaman, 2011).

Despite significant reductions in poverty in recent years, poverty remains a serious development concern in Bangladesh (BBS, 2017). Bangladesh is a country plagued by extreme poverty, with little opportunities for education (Ali et al., 2020). Poverty, which creates impediments to education and skill development, may exacerbate the disability. A substantial number of children with disabilities come from low-income families. Poverty disproportionately affects people with disabilities in Bangladesh where persons with disabilities have a greater poverty rate (28 percent) than persons without disabilities (24 percent) (Institute of Development Studies, 2020). It has been observed that children from non-poor households enroll at a higher rate than children from poor households (BBS, 2017). The low income of the family restrains them from sending their children to school. Some of the children assist their parents with their regular chores. Neither the parents nor the children show an interest in enrolling in school (Choudhury, 2011). Poor families may find it difficult to offer educational facilities, such as assistive devices, educational materials, school fees, transportation costs due to financial hardship. This is why parents often have to choose between having a child with disability and a non-disabled child for education (Limaye, 2016b). In this case, non-children with disabilities are predominant. Because of poverty, parents often find it more profitable to beg rather than send their children with disabilities to school.

Accessibility

In everyday life, accessibility is important, especially when dealing with external and internal settings. The degree to which a product, equipment, environment, or service is available and usable for people with disabilities or persons with special needs is

referred to as accessibility(Kulkarni, 2019). The issue of accessibility and adaptation is the most important prerequisite for any educational setting, and it must be appropriately addressed by the authorities(Khan & Anisuzzaman, 2011). According to UNICEF, physical accessibility for children with disabilities at school is essential that includes various components: walking to school, entering the school, entering and using classrooms, moving through the school, bathroom, and play area(Ulfa & Rohmad, 2016). Due to infrastructural impediments, many children with disabilities are unable to attend school(Choudhury, 2011). It is a big challenge for students with disabilities that prevent them from moving freely and taking advantage of opportunities. Inadequate classroom space, changes in floor elevation, stairs, tight passageways, poor ventilation, few electrical outlets, and poor lighting are all challenges for students with disabilities in many schools. Many schools in Bangladesh continue to lack sufficient accessibility and do not provide equal opportunity for children with special needs to engage in all learning activities at their schools. Children have a lot of trouble getting to the washroom, classrooms, libraries, and playground on school grounds. In a study, Mistry (2012) found that students with impairments did not have easy access to libraries, classrooms, academic and administrative buildings at their individual universities. They were also not given any learning resources such as assistive technology. Physical infrastructure and other facilities - not all schools are provided equally. Physical impediments to educational services continue to exist for students with disabilities, such as a lack of ramps and/or elevators in multi-storied buildings, inaccessible washrooms, heavy doors, and/or difficult transportation to and from the institution(Ahmad, 2016). Even, there are distinctions between urban and rural schools, private and public schools.

Curriculum and Education Materials

Curriculum should be customized to meet the needs of all children, including those with disabilities(Khan & Anisuzzaman, 2011). Many children with disabilities are unable to study and achieve in school due to inflexible curriculum and exam systems, as well as non-inclusive teaching techniques. When these children enter regular school, they may find it difficult to comprehend the general curriculum. Evidence reveals that lack of necessary facilities and materials is a major impediment to implementing effective mainstream education (FAREO, 2020). Educating and learning resources such as Braille sheets, stylus, embossers, recorders, toys, colors, and diagrams are required to make educating children with disabilities fruitful and to allow children with disabilities to take part in class activities(Opoku et al., 2016). But most of the educational institutions in Bangladesh cannot provide these equipments properly. As a result, many of them are unable to finish school and drop out. Students with disabilities require special educational materials that are not only costly but also unavailable in the market. With the help of

some specialized organizations, a small number of students with visual impairment, low vision, or hearing impairment can access content in alternative formats, although this is not sufficient.

Poor Implementation of Policy and Laws

In Bangladesh, despite various policies and laws related to the education of children with disabilities, these have not yet been properly implemented. In addition, there are numerous policy and legal loopholes that make it difficult to ensure their education. Basically, due to lack of funds, coordination, and proper monitoring, these policies and laws are not properly enforced and many children with disabilities are being deprived of their rights.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Everyone, including people with disabilities, has the right to get an education. Bangladesh government has declared solidarity with international treaties and its constitutional commitments to ensure equal opportunities and rights for people with disabilities. In truth, there are no separate and thorough statistics on the percentage of children with disabilities who are literate. Some sorts of disabilities do not affect intellectual functioning, thus children with disabilities should be allowed to pursue education. Educating illiterate parents is essential as parents can play an important role in educating their children. It can be done by holding a parental education program, such as a workshop or providing training, to assist parents in supporting their children's learning. To raise disability awareness among parents, community peoples, and others, disability advocacy groups, mass media, and community development organizations, could play a vital role. The government should give poor parents of children with disabilities special incentives to encourage them to educate their children. Educational institutions must be appropriately prepared to meet the challenges posed by the ongoing growth in the number of students with disabilities enrolled. Physical accessibility needs to be prioritized so that they can achieve the same level of success as other children. A positive attitude among the school community, as well as effective cooperation among those engaged, such as teachers, peers, school personnel, and others, are important aspects for inclusion. Teachers can play an important role in initiating and establishing such an environment. Many of these impediments might be readily addressed with teacher training and education programs that include special education for children with disabilities. Special schools should be set up in various remote areas as per need. After all, comprehensive efforts are required to implement the existing laws, and policies regarding the educational rights of children with disabilities.

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