

Socio-Economic and Cultural Realities of Persons with Disabilities in Bangladesh: Challenges and Opportunities

Manir Uddin Sikder¹
Nuzhat Afrin Misha²

Abstract: This paper investigates the challenges and opportunities faced by persons with disabilities in Bangladesh within a socio-economic and cultural framework. Despite policy reforms and increasing advocacy, people with disabilities continue to experience systemic barriers in education, employment, healthcare, mobility, and social participation. Cultural stigma, low awareness, and inaccessible infrastructure further marginalize this population, limiting their ability to achieve social and economic inclusion. Using a mixed-methods approach—including surveys, interviews, and document analysis—the study explores the lived experiences of disabled individuals and evaluates the effectiveness of government policies, NGO interventions, and societal attitudes. The findings reveal persistent inequalities but also highlight emerging opportunities such as stronger legal protections, community-based rehabilitation, and vocational training initiatives. The study emphasizes critical issues affecting disabled individuals and their families, with implications for policymakers and practitioners seeking to reduce poverty and promote inclusion. It concludes by recommending integrated socio-economic development and cultural transformation to build a more inclusive and equitable society in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Disability, Socio-economic inclusion, Cultural stigma, Bangladesh, Policy interventions, Poverty reduction, Social participation

Introduction

In Bangladesh, people with disabilities—often referred to locally as “handicapped”—represent a significant but marginalized segment of the population. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2023), approximately 2.8% of the country’s total population lives with some form of disability—physical, sensory, intellectual, or mental health. Despite legal protections, they still face structural discrimination, including poverty, unemployment, limited access to education and healthcare, and social stigma. Cultural and religious misconceptions often lead to disability being viewed as “shameful” or “divine punishment,” which further exacerbates discrimination at both the family and societal levels (Ahmed, 2016). Furthermore, inaccessible infrastructure, inadequate transportation, and inaccessibility to the workplace further compound their marginalization. However, in recent years, the government and various NGOs have taken initiatives to empower people with disabilities through inclusion, skills development, and

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Public Administration, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka, Email: sikdermanir62@gmail.com

² MPA Student, Department of Public Administration, Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka

policy reforms.

Bangladesh has already taken some important steps. The Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013, the National Disability Policy (1995, revised 2018) and the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) have laid a strong legal foundation for building an inclusive society in the country. While some progress has been made in education, vocational training and social awareness-raising through concerted efforts by government, non-governmental and international organizations, a significant policy-implementation gap still exists in practical implementation (Rahman, 2019). Despite the legal framework and international commitments, persons with disabilities still face limited access to education, healthcare and employment, as well as social stigma and discrimination (Khan, 2021). Bangladesh's physical infrastructure is still largely inaccessible, and the public service sector is not adequately prepared to meet their needs. In addition, misconceptions prevalent in society often portray disability as a "curse" or "burden," which leads to isolation and marginalization (Islam, 2018). Although various programs have been launched through government and private initiatives, the implementation and impact of these initiatives are often limited and inconsistent.

In this context, the purpose of the present study is to explore the real-life experiences of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh and to evaluate the effectiveness of existing policies and interventions. The study attempts to identify the key socio-economic and cultural barriers that impact the lives of persons with disabilities, as well as to uncover the possibilities for their inclusion and empowerment. The rationale for the study lies in the realization that inclusive progress is essential for sustainable national development. By shedding light on the socio-economic and cultural dimensions of disability, this study provides a holistic view of the challenges faced by the disabled population in Bangladesh. In addition, it also highlights the emerging opportunities that can ensure their active participation in society.

The findings of this study can serve as an important information source for policymakers, NGOs, social workers, and academics, which will help build an inclusive and equitable society. The study analyzed government policies, legal frameworks and the role of non-governmental organizations, particularly by assessing the impact and limitations of skills development programs, disability allowances, inclusive education and community-based rehabilitation initiatives. The scope of the study is limited to Bangladesh and includes a wide range of disabilities, including physical, sensory, intellectual and mental disabilities. The study used both primary data collected through surveys and interviews and secondary data obtained from government reports, academic research and policy documents. Although it did not cover every district in the country, the study aimed to reflect national trends through a representative sample. Finally, this study provides a broad and in-depth understanding of the socio-economic and cultural realities of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh. It explores not only the challenges but also the possibilities for their development and social integration. Through this, the study aims to contribute to evidence-based policy making, raising social awareness and bringing about meaningful change.

Research Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-method design, combining surveys for quantitative data and case studies for qualitative insights. It explored in depth the socio-economic and cultural challenges of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh, particularly in Roumari and Rajibpur upazilas of Kurigram district. A total of 130 validated questionnaires and multiple in-depth interviews with families of persons with disabilities were conducted in the study. Participants were selected using a combination of random and purposive sampling methods to reflect diverse experiences and realities. In addition to primary data, the study enriched the data using various secondary sources, including government reports, NGO publications, and academic literature. Ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation were strictly followed throughout the research process. The selected rural areas—where poverty, social isolation, and limited access to services exist—provided a meaningful and realistic context for analyzing the lives and problems of people with disabilities in marginalized areas.

Findings and Data Analysis

This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the data collected from both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews in the study areas—Rowmari and Rajibpur Upazilas of Kurigram District. The findings have been categorized thematically to highlight the socio-economic conditions, cultural perceptions, institutional support, and opportunities available to people with disabilities in rural Bangladesh. Of the total 328 participants, 47.56% were male and 52.44% were female. In terms of marital status, 70.12% of the participants were single and 25.91% were married. In terms of residence, most of the participants came from rural areas, while 41.16% were urban residents. In terms of age, most of the participants were in the 14–19 age group (36%), followed by the 20–25 age group (29%). Figure 1 presents the educational qualification of the participants. The findings showed that most of the participants were involved in mainstream education (75.77%). However, the highest level of education completed among them was incomplete secondary (27.9%) and incomplete primary (22.1%). Very few participants (10.8%) had completed SSC or equivalent education.

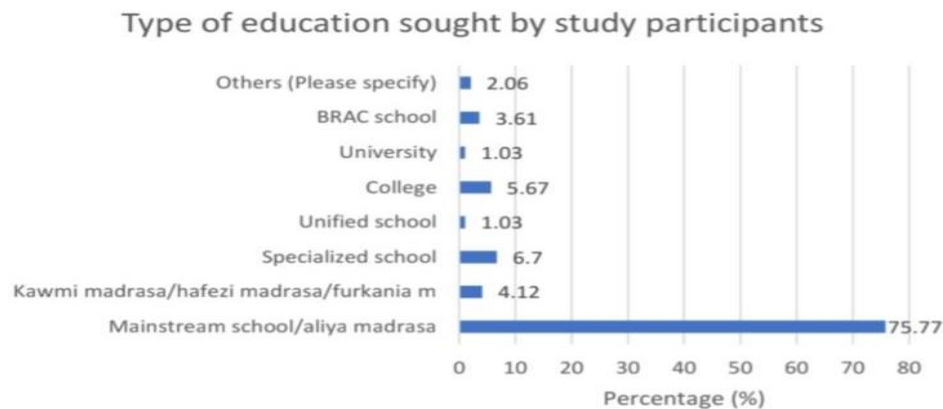


Figure 1: Educational Qualifications

Employment and Economic Participation

It presents a picture of the financial status of persons with disabilities based on their household income and expenditure. The survey results showed that the monthly income of most of the participants' households was 11,000–15,000 taka (27.13%), and their monthly expenditure was mainly limited to 10,000–14,000 taka (35.98%).

Case Insight: One female respondent in Rajibpur stated:

"I have learned tailoring, but I have no space to open a shop. No one helps either."

Analysis: Disability significantly limits economic participation, with rural isolation and poverty acting as compounding factors. Skills training programs are rare and not disability-friendly.

Cultural and Social Perceptions

Figures 2, illustrate an internal stigma - isolation. Feeling isolated (“Yes”) is reported more by females (44.19%) than males (35.90%). Not feeling isolated (“No”) is higher among males (55.13%) compared to females (40.70%). A small percentage selected “Not applicable” (females 8.14%, males 5.77%). Very few responded “Don’t know” (females 6.98%, males 3.21%). Overall, the data suggests that females experience a higher sense of isolation than males, while males more frequently report not feeling isolated.

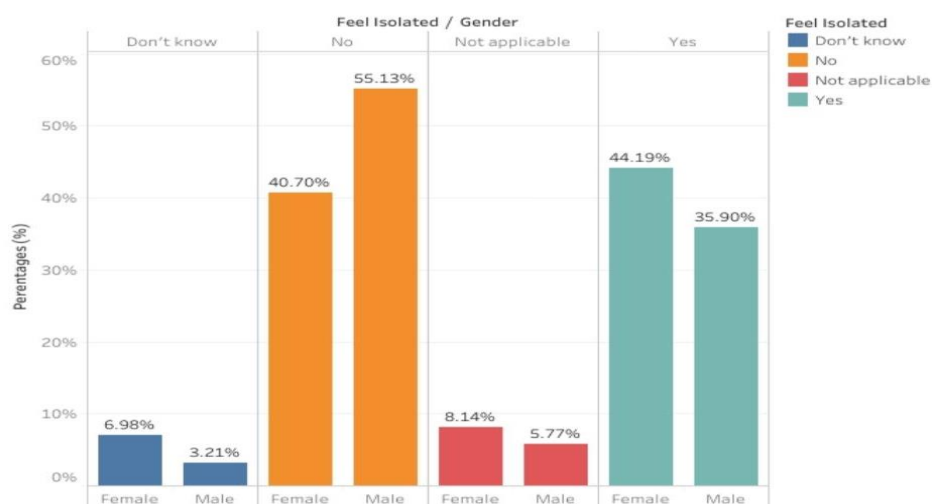


Figure 2: Experience of Internal Stigma (Feeling Isolated) –Gender Distribution

It presents the results of a group of interrelated internal stigma components. Two of the most important of these components are — ‘feeling a burden to the family’ and ‘feeling disrespected’.

Out of a total of 130 survey participants, 82 (62.8%) reported that they had felt a burden to the family at least once in their lives. Of these, 54 (42%) rated the intensity of this

feeling as ‘moderate to extreme’. Notably, the tendency to feel a burden to the family was observed more among male participants than among female participants. Two other important components of internal stigma are — ‘feeling disgust’ and ‘disgust’, which often arise as a result of repeated negative social interactions. These feelings create a sense of rejection and unwelcomeness in an individual, which severely damages his or her self-esteem and self-worth. About 36% of the 130 participants reported that they had experienced such feelings at least once in their lives (Table 1).

Characteristics	Male		Female		Total	
Felt hatred from people around (n=130)	Percent (%)	Frequency	Percent (%)	Frequency	Percent (%)	Frequency
Yes	32.69	20	38.95	26	35.98	46
No	44.87	28	38.37	26	41.46	54
Don't know	17.95	11	18.60	13	18.29	24
Not Applicable	4.49	3	4.07	3	4.27	6
Total	100	62	100	68	100	130
Felt disgust from people around (n=130)	Percent (%)	Frequency	Percent (%)	Frequency	Percent (%)	Frequency
Yes	29.49	18	36.63	25	33.23	43
No	48.08	30	42.44	29	45.12	59
Don't Know	16.67	10	16.86	11	16.77	21
Not Applicable	5.77	4	4.07	3	4.88	7
Total	100	62	100	68	100	130

Table 1: Distribution of internal stigma (feeling hatred and feeling disgust) among the survey participants.

Table 1 presents a comparative analysis of the levels of internalized stigma between male and female participants. The results show that there is little difference between the two groups in terms of internalizing this stigma. More than one-third of the 68 female participants experienced higher levels of disgust and disgust than their male counterparts.

While the rates for men were 32.69% and 29.49%, respectively, for women it was 38.95% and 36.63%.

Discrimination Experienced From Close Family Members and Neighbors

According to the results of the quantitative survey, 30 out of 130 interviewees (22.86%) reported that they had experienced discrimination from family members at least once in their lives. Gender-based analysis shows that about 18% of male participants and about 25% of female participants have experienced discrimination in the family. The results clearly indicate that women with disabilities face more discrimination within the family than their male counterparts (Table 2). Furthermore, about 94% of the 30 participants who experienced discrimination from family members stated that the main reason for this discrimination was their ‘disability’ (Figure 3).

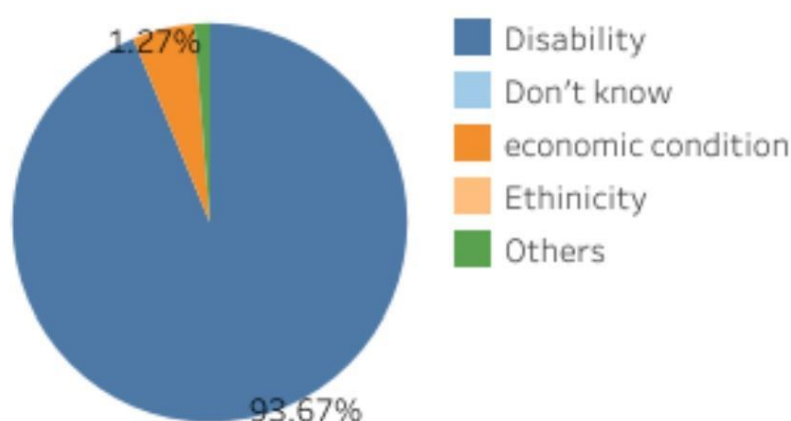


Figure 3: Reasons for experiencing discrimination from within family

Type of Discrimination	Male		Female		Total	
Discrimination within family (n=130)	Percent (%)	Frequency	Percent (%)	Frequency	Percent (%)	Frequency
Not at all	82.05	51	72.67	49	77.13	100
Somewhat	16.03	10	23.84	16	20.12	26
Moderately	1.92	1	1.16	1	1.52	2
A Lot	0	0	2.33	2	1.22	2
Total	100	62	100	68	100	130

Table 2: Discrimination faced by participants from family members

Women reported experiencing discrimination more than men—19 (65.52%) of the 29 reported incidents were women and 10 (34.48%) were men. When asked about possible reasons for discrimination, nearly 81% (n=29) of the participants cited their ***‘disability’*** as the main reason, while nearly 17% of the participants identified ***‘sex’ or ‘gender’*** as one of the reasons for discrimination (Figure 04).

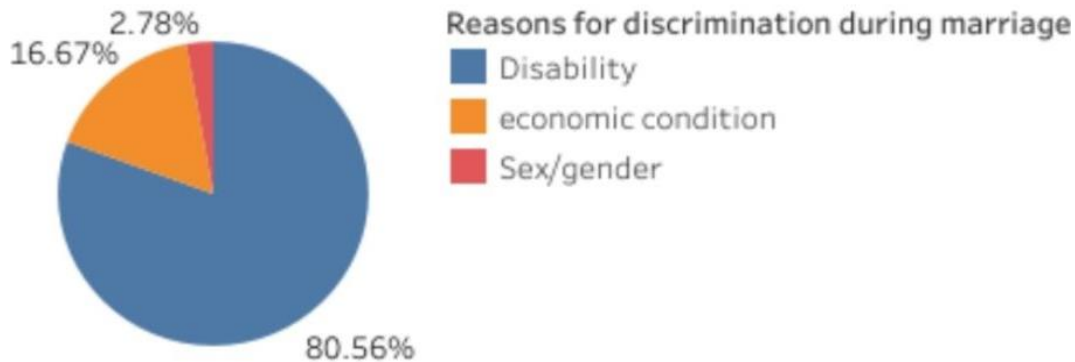


Figure 4: Reasons for discrimination within marriage and relationships

The survey results revealed that about 44% of the 130 participants had experienced discrimination from their neighbors. Of these, about 15% (n=57) of the participants rated the severity of the discrimination as ‘moderate to very high’. A follow-up analysis showed that such experiences were almost equally prevalent among male (48.5%) and female (44.5%) participants. About 93% (n=57) of the participants who experienced discrimination identified their ***‘disability’*** as the main reason, while only 7.41% of the participants mentioned ***‘socio-economic status’*** as a possible reason for this discrimination (Figure 05).

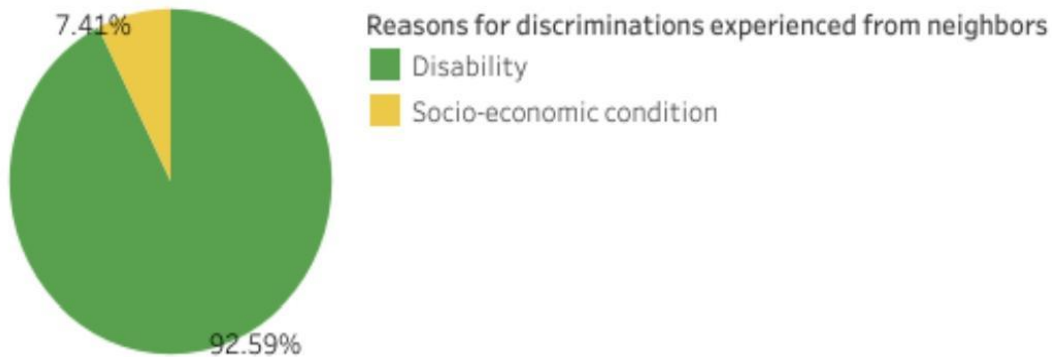
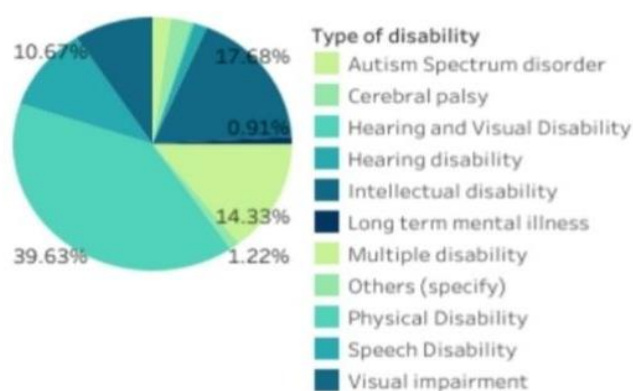


Figure 5: Reasons for experiences of discrimination from neighbors

Type of Discrimination	Male		Female		Total	
Discrimination from neighbors (n=130)	Percent (%)	Frequency	Percent (%)	Frequency	Percent (%)	Frequency
Not at all	54.49	34	57.56	39	56.10	73
Somewhat	31.41	19	26.74	19	28.96	38
Moderately	10.9	7	9.3	6	10.6	13
A Lot	3.21	2	6.4	4	4.88	6
Total	100	62	100	68	100	130

Table 3: Discrimination faced by participants from their neighbors**Disability Condition**

Among the different types of disabilities recognized by the Government of Bangladesh, the survey participants cover 10 types of disabilities. Out of the 130 participants, the majority had physical disability (39.63%), followed by intellectual disability (17.68%) and multiple disabilities (14.33%).

**Figure 6: Distribution of survey participants with respect to disability conditions****Benefits of the study:**

The study provides valuable contributions across academic, policy, community, and social dimensions by focusing on the often-overlooked rural upazilas of Rowmari and

Rajibpur in Kurigram. Unlike most disability research in Bangladesh, which emphasizes urban contexts, this study generates localized data on the challenges faced by rural disabled people in education, employment, healthcare, and social inclusion. Its findings highlight infrastructural, institutional, and cultural barriers, offering guidance for policymakers, NGOs, and development planners to design inclusive interventions such as accessible schools and vocational training. By documenting stigma, myths, and discriminatory practices, the research raises social awareness while amplifying the voices and lived experiences of disabled individuals, especially women and children. Academically, the study enriches disability and development research, paving the way for future comparative, gender-based, and longitudinal studies on disability in Bangladesh.

Limitation of the study:

The study acknowledges several limitations that affect the scope and generalizability of its findings. It was confined to two remote upazilas (Rowmari and Rajibpur), with a small sample size and lack of reliable baseline data, limiting representativeness. The focus on physical, visual, and hearing impairments excluded many with mental or psychosocial disabilities, while stigma and respondent bias may have influenced the accuracy of responses. Time, budget, and logistical constraints restricted follow-up visits and longitudinal analysis, while language barriers created communication challenges. Finally, limited cooperation from government and NGOs hindered access to institutional data and policy records.

Recommendation

The study recommends a series of targeted actions to address the socio-economic and cultural challenges faced by persons with disabilities in Bangladesh, particularly in rural areas like Rowmari and Rajibpur. Key measures include community-based awareness campaigns involving local leaders to reduce stigma, ensuring gender-inclusive representation in disability committees, and integrating disability issues into school curricula to prevent discrimination and dropout. Governments, NGOs, and OPDs should increase access to information, services, and vocational opportunities while promoting disability-friendly infrastructure and caregiving skills training. Strong partnerships between public and private sectors are needed to improve coordination, with employers sensitized to hire people with disabilities and strict monitoring of disability quotas in both education and employment. Safeguarding policies in schools and workplaces, disability-inclusive TVET programmes, and the visibility of ICT training opportunities must be strengthened. Finally, the creation of a disability employment database and further research on stigma and discrimination are crucial for shaping inclusive policies and sustainable development initiatives.

8. Conclusion

This study reveals that persons with disabilities in Bangladesh, especially in rural and marginalized areas like Rowmari and Rajibpur, face multifaceted challenges – from being deprived of education and employment to systemic barriers to accessing healthcare and basic human rights. Cultural beliefs and social stigma often exacerbate their isolation,

limiting their ability to fully participate in society. Despite these adversities, there are emerging opportunities through government initiatives, NGO efforts, and changes in societal attitudes. However, current levels of support are inadequate and inconsistently implemented. A nation cannot achieve sustainable development by leaving a significant portion of its population behind. Empowering persons with disabilities is not just a matter of social justice – it is essential for economic growth, social cohesion, and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This survey serves as both a diagnostic tool and a roadmap for improving the lives of people with disabilities across Bangladesh.

References

- Ahmad, W. (2016). Higher education for persons with disabilities in India: Challenges and concerns. *Journal of Disability Management and Rehabilitation*, 1–4.
- Ajisuksmo, C. R. (2017). Practices and challenges of inclusive education in Indonesian higher education. In ASEACCU Conference on “Catholic Educational Institutions and Inclusive Education: Transforming Spaces, Promoting Practices, and Changing Minds”. Assumption University of Thailand, Bangkok August (pp. 21–27).
- Cabinet Division & GED. (2022). Draft Concept Note for Pilot Study on Universal Social Protection for Persons with Disabilities (PWDs). Cabinet Division and General Economics Division, Planning Commission of Bangladesh, Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh.
- Centre for Disability in Development (CDD) (n.d.). Key focus areas. Retrieved June 14, 2021, from <https://cdd.org.bd/about-disability/>
- Disability Information. (n.d.). Centre for Disability in Development. Retrieved June 10, 2021, from <https://cdd.org.bd/about-disability/>
- Disability Rights Watch Group, 2009. State of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Bangladesh.
- ESCAP. (2017). Disability in Asia and the Pacific: The Facts – 2017, Midpoint Review edition. Retrieved from: https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/Disability_The_Facts_2.pdf. Date: 13-02-2020
- Greater inclusion for children with disabilities. (n.d.). Retrieved June 14, 2021, from <https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/greater-inclusion-children-disabilities>
- Haider, M. Z. Country report: Bangladesh. Bangladesh: Department of Social Services SWID Bangladesh, (http://www.gttd.net/acmr_18/pdf/2.pdf), Accessed 10 August 2012.
- Handicap International and Agence Francaise Development. Global situation of people with disabilities. Disability and Development [cited 2015 04 November]; Available from: http://www.hiproweb.org/fileadmin/cdroms/Handicap_Developpement/www/en_page21.html.

- ILO. (2020b). Disability inclusion in company responses to COVID-19: results of a survey among National Business and Disability Networks and their members. International Labour Organization and Global Business and Disability Network.
- Islam, M. Z., & Jahan, A. (2018). Disability rights: challenges and opportunities in Bangladesh. *Journal of Asian and African Social Science and Humanities*, 4(2), 45–51. Retrieved from <https://www.aarcentre.com/ojs3/index.php/jaash/article/view/191>
- Japan International Cooperation Agency, Country Profile on Disability: People's Republic of Bangladesh. 2002, Planning and Evaluation Department, Japan International Cooperation Agency. p. 1-35.
- Khan, R. S., & Huq, L. (2021). The pandemic has exacerbated the challenges faced by persons with disabilities. Retrieved from <https://www.thedailystar.net/views/opinion/news/the-pandemic-has-exacerbated-the-challenges-faced-persons-disabilities-2915221>
- Ministry of Education. (2010). National Education Policy 2010. Dhaka: Ministry of Education, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.
- MoF. (2024). Promoting Inclusive Growth and Social Inclusion; Social Security Budget Report 2024-25. Finance Division, Ministry of Finance, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.
- MoHP. (2023). Demographic and Health Survey of Nepal 2022. Ministry of Health and Population, Kathmandu. <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR379/FR379.pdf>
- NHRC Bangladesh. (2013). Institutional, functional and financial independence need to be strengthened, Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), Dhaka Available at: <http://www.askbd.org/ask/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/NHRC-Capacity-Assessment-ASKs-Written-Submission-December-20131> Accessed: 17.02.19
- Rahman, H. Z., & Gain, S. M. (2019). Rishis of Khulna. Dhaka, Bangladesh: Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC) and Society for Environment and Human Development (SEHD).