

Final Draft Report



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Overcoming Barriers for Persons with Disabilities in Bangladesh".

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Abstract

The global understanding of disability is currently undergoing a fundamental paradigm shift from a medical "deficit" model to a rights-based Social Model of Disability, which identifies systemic attitudinal, environmental, and institutional barriers as the primary drivers of exclusion. In Bangladesh, despite progressive legislation such as the *Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities (RPPD) Act 2013*, approximately 4.7 million persons with disabilities (PWDs) remain trapped in a self-perpetuating "disability-poverty trap" fueled by high living costs and limited access to essential services. This research investigates the socio-economic conditions and structural hurdles facing PWDs, evaluating the accessibility and effectiveness of Department of Social Services (DSS) provisions through the dual lenses of the Social Model and Amartya Sen's Capability Approach.

Employing a mixed-methods cross-sectional design, the study analyzed a cohort of 240 respondents across eight geographically diverse divisions of Bangladesh, including remote haor, coastal, and hill tract regions. Quantitative mapping was triangulated with sixteen Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and eight in-depth Case Studies to explore the "lived and felt" realities of structural exclusion.

Findings reveal a profound "Mandate-Implementation Gap" regarding national and international obligations. While administrative reach for basic disability allowances is high (82.7%), a significant "Mobility Trap" exists, with 52.8% of respondents reporting public transport as completely inaccessible. This environmental failure acts as a "physical lock" on human capabilities, contributing to a 79% dependency rate and an "Agency Gap" where 35% of respondents require third-party assistance to access state services. Furthermore, a "Gendered Glass Ceiling" is evident, with 0% female representation in higher income brackets and vocational training programs. Institutional integrity is further compromised by an "Access Tax," with nearly 18% of beneficiaries reporting the necessity of bribes to claim their legal entitlements.

The research concludes that current social protection frameworks function primarily as passive "Maintenance" mechanisms that sustain subsistence rather than facilitating "Economic Graduation". To achieve the global mandate of "Leaving No One Behind" (LNOB), the study recommends a transformative shift toward an "Active Empowerment Model". Key strategic priorities include the mandatory adoption of Universal Design in public infrastructure, the implementation of gender-responsive mobile outreach to bridge information asymmetries, and the professionalization of service delivery through a National Social Security Agency to provide individualized, rights-based support.

Keywords: *Social Model of Disability, Capability Approach, Bangladesh, Economic Freedom, Universal Design, Institutional Integrity, Intersectional Marginalization, Department of Social Services.*

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On a personal note, I wish to express my deepest love and gratitude to my family, particularly my **parents, wife and children**. Their unwavering patience, sacrifice, and emotional support provided the strength necessary to complete this demanding scholarly endeavor.

Finally, it is my hope that this research provides a robust roadmap for the DSS to further empower Bangladesh's "**Golden Citizens**" (*Subarna Nagarik*) and fulfill the global mandate of "**Leaving No One Behind**".



Md. Raihanul Islam

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Executive Summary

The global understanding of disability is undergoing a fundamental transition from a medical "deficit" model which views disability as an individual pathology toward a rights-based Social Model of Disability. This model identifies systemic attitudinal, environmental, and institutional barriers as the primary drivers of exclusion. In Bangladesh, despite robust legal scaffolding provided by the *Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities (RPPD) Act 2013* and the *National Social Security Strategy (NSSS)*, approximately 4.7 million persons with disabilities (PWDs) remain marginalized. This research, titled *"Social Model for an Inclusive Society: Overcoming Barriers for Persons with Disabilities in Bangladesh,"* investigates the profound "implementation gap" between these progressive mandates and the lived realities of PWDs.

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the "implementation gap" between Bangladesh's progressive legal mandates such as the **Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities (RPPD) Act 2013** and the **National Social Security Strategy (NSSS)** and the actual lived realities of persons with disabilities (PWDs). The study aims to identify systemic attitudinal, environmental, and institutional barriers to inclusion and provide a strategic policy roadmap to transition PWDs from state dependency to economic independence.

1. Theoretical & Methodological Framework

Theoretical lenses: The study is grounded in three primary theoretical lenses:

- **The Social Model of Disability:** Shifting the "problem" from the individual's impairment to the societal failure to accommodate them (Oliver, 1990).
- **Sen's Capability Approach:** Focusing on what individuals are actually able to do and be, rather than just their income levels.
- **Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA):** Framing disability support not as an act of pity, but as a legal obligation of the state.

Methodology: The research utilized a Triple-Axis Triangulation Framework, combining:

- **Quantitative Data:** Socio-economic surveys and detailed demographic mapping conducted across eight study areas to capture primary data on income, education, and accessibility.
- **Qualitative Data:** Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Case Studies with PWDs and policy-makers to understand lived experiences.
- **Secondary Data:** A comprehensive review of documents, including existing legal mandates, census reports, and international benchmarks such as the UNCRPD and SDGs.

2. Key Findings: The Socio-Economic Reality

A. Demographic and Economic Marginalization: The "Productive Window" vs. the "Dependency Trap"

The research identifies a significant demographic potential that is currently being stifled by "Capability Failures" (Sen, 1999).

- a) **A Young, Stagnant Cohort:** A striking 64.4% of PWDs are aged between 10 and 39, representing a critical "productive window" (World Bank, 2021). However, instead of contributing to the national economy, they are trapped in low-yield subsistence.
- b) **The Educational Participation Cliff:** While enrollment exists at the primary level, there is a sharp decline in higher education. 32.5% of the cohort remains illiterate, and a mere 1.7% have reached graduation level or above. This validates the "vicious cycle" of educational deprivation identified by UNESCO (2020).
- c) **Income and Financial Fragility:** Primary research data shows 60% of respondents subsist on a monthly income of 5,001–9,000 BDT, an amount critically insufficient to meet the high "conversion costs" of disability (specialized healthcare and assistive technology) now exacerbated by post-pandemic inflation. Consequently, 37.1% of the cohort is trapped in consumption-led debt, a state of financial fragility often compounded by the "access tax" (bribery) required to reach state benefits, which further depletes the limited resources of these households.
- d) **Gendered Exclusion:** The data reveals a "Gendered Glass Ceiling" (Criado Perez, 2019); while 31.25% of men engage in agriculture, 22.08% of women are confined to unpaid housework, lacking the "Substantive Freedom" to access the formal labor market.

B. Etiology and Functional Diversity: Beyond the Medical Label

The study moves beyond medical labels to show how the "onset" of disability acts as a negative "Temporal Conversion Factor" (Sen, 1999).

- a) **Distribution of Impairments:** 51.7% of the cohort lives with physical disabilities, followed by 36.3% with visual impairments. The prevalence of physical disability in rural areas underscores the urgent need for "Universal Design" in infrastructure.
- b) **Preventable Impairments:** While 35.8% of disabilities are congenital, over half (57.4%) are acquired. The primary drivers are preventable illnesses (32.8%) and accidents (15.0%), pointing to systemic failures in maternal healthcare and workplace safety (ILO, 2020; WHO, 2011).
- c) **The Conversion Gap:** For the 36.3% with visual impairments and 12.0% with hearing impairments, the absence of "Reasonable Accommodation"—such as Braille literacy or sign language—effectively neutralizes their human capital (United Nations, 2006; Nussbaum, 2006).

C. Societal Accessibility: The "Spatial Injustice" of Rural Infrastructure

The built environment acts as an "Environmental Conversion Factor" that currently restricts mobility (Sen, 1999).

- a) **The Transport Bottleneck:** 52.8% of respondents reported public transport as "Not Accessible," a direct violation of Article 9 of the UNCRPD (United Nations, 2006). This creates "Spatial Injustice," house-binding PWDs despite their domestic mobility.
- b) **The Dignity Deficit:** Only 15% of public toilets are fully accessible. The lack of "Universal Design" (Mace, 1985; Oliver, 2013) in these basic nodes strips PWDs of their bodily autonomy and financial independence (Robeyns, 2017).

- c) **Passive Awareness:** While 50.5% of families claim to give "huge importance" to their PWD members, only 12.8% believe there is any significant scope for their employment. This indicates that PWDs are "loved but not empowered," indicating that passive "Social Recognition" rarely translates into active economic empowerment (UNESCAP, 2012).

D. Institutional Integrity: The "Implementation Gap" and the "Access Tax"

Chapter 7 evaluates the relationship between the beneficiary and the Department of Social Services (DSS) through the lens of "Instrumental Freedom" (Sen, 1999).

- a) **Information Poverty and the Rights-Knowledge Gap:** Based on primary survey data for the total research cohort (N=240), a significant 33.3% of respondents possess only "vague awareness" of their legal rights and the services available through the Department of Social Services (DSS). This information asymmetry acts as a capability ceiling, particularly for women; while 50% of males feel fully informed, only 15% of females report the same level of clarity, indicating that women with disabilities face significantly higher barriers to formal communication channels and outreach
- b) **The Crisis of Agency:** 35% of PWDs relied on "Others' Assistance" (middlemen or relatives) to apply for benefits. This "Mediated Citizenship" (Oliver, 2013) increases vulnerability to "Elite Capture" (World Bank, 2021).
- c) **The "Access Tax" (Bribery):** 17.7% of respondents reported paying a bribe to access state benefits. Crucially, 68.7% of these cases involved local Union Parishad (UP) members, highlighting a significant "Integrity Gap" in frontline governance (Gupta, 2021).
- d) **The Maintenance Trap:** The DSS portfolio is heavily skewed toward the Disability Allowance (82.7%), with only 14.4% accessing training. This reinforces a "Maintenance Model" rather than the "Economic Graduation" roadmap required for true inclusion (Inclusion London, 2015; Sen, 1999).

3. The Policy Roadmap: From Maintenance to Graduation

This section presents the Policy Roadmap for Disability Inclusion, transforming the research findings into a strategic timeline for national implementation. This framework shifts the state's role from a provider of "passive relief" to an enabler of "substantive freedom," aligning domestic actions with international legal obligations (Sen, 1999; United Nations, 2006). The following table provides a guiding framework for the transition from a Maintenance-Based Model (survival) to an Empowerment-Based Model (independence). The research concludes that current social protection frameworks function as "Maintenance" mechanisms that sustain subsistence rather than facilitating "Economic Graduation". To achieve the global mandate of "Leaving No One Behind" (LNOB), the following actions are required:

- **Transition to an Active Empowerment Model:** Shift from passive cash transfers to "Empowerment Packages" that integrate vocational re-skilling, interest-free micro-credit, and affordable assistive technology.
- **Mandatory Universal Design:** Enforce "Zero-Threshold" entry and accessible WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) facilities in all public buildings and transport systems to dismantle the "Architecture of Exclusion".

- **Professionalization of Service Delivery:** Transition toward a **National Social Security Agency (NSSA)** to minimize local political interference, eliminate the "Access Tax," and provide individualized, graduation-based support.
- **Gender-Responsive Outreach:** Implement mobile enrollment units to bridge the identification gap for women and ensure their inclusion in active economic participation programs.

Table 1: Strategic Framework for Disability-Inclusive Development

Phase	Strategic Action Item	Mechanism for "Graduation" & Agency	Global Mandate Alignment
Short Term (1–2 Years)	Mandatory Accessibility Audits & Enforcement	Removes "Physical Unfreedoms"; converts public spaces from sites of exclusion to sites of participation.	UNCRPD Art. 9 (Accessibility); SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities).
	Digitalization of Subarna Nagorik Certification	Eliminates "Information Asymmetry" and the "Access Tax" (bribery) by bypassing local gatekeepers (Gupta, 2021).	Incheon Strategy Goal 1 (Poverty Reduction); SDG 16 (Strong Institutions).
Mid- Term (3–5 Years)	The "Graduation Model": Vocational Linkages	Shifts from a "Charity Model" to "Transformative Capital"; links cash transfers to micro-finance for PWD-led SMEs.	SDG 8 (Decent Work); Incheon Strategy Goal 2 (Work & Employment).
	Transition to "Integrated Classrooms"	Addresses the "Participation Cliff"; provides "Reasonable Accommodation" through shadow teachers and inclusive pedagogy.	UNCRPD Art. 24 (Education); SDG 4 (Quality Education).
	Automatic Educational Stipends & Employment Support Centers	Stops the 52.7% "Participation Cliff" by bypassing institutional waiting lists; prioritizes the 64.4% "Productive Window" for market-oriented training.	UNCRPD Art. 24, Art. 27; SDG 4, SDG 8.
	Full Inter-Agency Software Integration & Inclusive Curriculum	Provides real-time service tracking for all "Golden Citizens"; dismantles the "double glass ceiling" through mandatory digital accessibility standards.	UNCRPD Art. 19; Incheon Goal 1.
Long-Term (Beyond 5 Years)	Universal Design as Infrastructure Standard	Ensures "Zero-Threshold" entry in national mega-projects (Metro Rail, Economic Zones), preventing future barriers.	UNCRPD Art. 2 (Universal Design); Incheon Goal 3 (Physical Access).
	National "Rebranding" Campaign	Dismantles "Social Stigma"; rebrands PWDs as "Differently-Abled Contributors" to the national GDP.	UNCRPD Art. 8 (Awareness-raising); SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities).

The socio-economic exclusion of Persons with Disabilities is a loss for the entire nation, not just the individuals affected. This research demonstrates that while Bangladesh has strong legal frameworks on paper, the "implementation deficit" remains the primary barrier to progress. By shifting from a paradigm of "charity" to "investment," and by addressing the institutional integrity issues identified in this report, Bangladesh can ensure that its journey toward a high-income nation is truly inclusive. The "Golden Citizen" must be treated as a stakeholder in the country's future, not a spectator of its growth.

Terms and Concepts

Core Theoretical Frameworks & Disability Models

Social Model of Disability: A paradigm that reframes disability as a socio-political construct driven by systemic physical, attitudinal, and institutional barriers within an unaccommodating society, rather than an individual medical pathology or personal "tragedy."

Capability Approach: A normative framework developed by Amartya Sen emphasizing "substantive freedoms"—an individual's real opportunity and freedom to choose and achieve specific states of being and doing (capabilities) that they have reason to value.

Functionings: The realized, practical achievements of an individual within the Capability Approach, representing various states of being or doing (e.g., being well-nourished, moving freely, or participating in community life).

Conversion Factors: The internal traits (e.g., individual skills, physical health) and external environments (e.g., public policies, social norms, physical infrastructure) that dictate how effectively a person can transform a resource into an achieved functioning.

ICF (International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health): A biopsychosocial synthesis framework providing a universal language to document disability as a dynamic, non-static interaction between an individual's health conditions and contextual (personal and environmental) factors.

Interaction Framework / Approach: A conceptual model illustrating that disability is a relational outcome generated at the "collision" or mismatch between an individual's functional diversity and the rigid constraints of their society.

Medical Model: An outdated, restrictive framework that isolates disability purely as a biological defect or bodily pathology to be cured, managed, or rehabilitated by medical professionals.

Infrastructure, Design & Standards

Universal Design: The proactive, strategic engineering of environments, products, and services to be inherently usable by the broadest possible spectrum of humanity from the outset, eliminating the need for expensive, retrofitted "add-ons."

Accessibility: The multi-dimensional availability of environments, services, and products to the widest population. It acts as a structural prerequisite for inclusion and a "gatekeeper" to basic freedoms like education and political participation.

Reasonable Accommodation: Necessary and appropriate modifications and adjustments that do not impose a disproportionate or undue burden, required in specific cases to ensure persons with disabilities enjoy human rights on an equal basis with others.

AAAQ Framework: A human rights-based evaluation standard assessing public services across four distinct axes: *Availability* (quantity), *Accessibility* (physical/economic reach), *Acceptability* (ethical/cultural appropriateness), and *Quality* (scientific/medical excellence).

Washington Group Six Core Functional Domains: A standardized international framework used to identify disability by assessing levels of difficulty faced across six essential areas: seeing, hearing, walking/mobility, self-care, cognition, and communication.

Spatial Injustice: A term describing a built environment devoid of Universal Design, where the public square systematically excludes marginalized bodies, converting biological differences into geographical "unfreedoms."

Systemic & Socio-Economic Dynamics

Disability Premium / Conversion Costs: The disproportionately high, hidden, out-of-pocket costs (e.g., specialized transport, healthcare, assistive devices, physical dependencies) required for a person with an impairment to survive or navigate hostile environments.

Working Poverty: A socio-economic condition where individuals or household units actively engage in labor but remain trapped below living income thresholds (e.g., 5,001–9,000 BDT monthly) due to systemic structural exploitation.

Participation Cliff: The phenomenon where enrollment, retention, or engagement rates for persons with disabilities drop precipitously during major lifecycle transitions, such as the steep decline observed between primary and secondary educational levels.

Asset Pentagon: A component of the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework mapping five core capitals—human, social, physical, natural, and financial—needed to build long-term household resilience against shocks.

Development / Labor / Healthcare Traps: Self-reinforcing cycles where early-onset impairments miss out on education (Development Trap), dangerous manual labor causes physical impairments in young adults (Labor Trap), and rural medical malpractice converts preventable conditions into permanent disabilities (Healthcare Trap).

Administrative Barriers & Institutional Traps

Capability Ceiling: A structural barrier where formal, institutional rights remain purely theoretical due to acute information asymmetry, administrative misclassification, or environmental unfreedoms that prevent resource conversion.

Flat-rate Cash Transfers: Uniform, one-size-fits-all welfare payments that ignore variable life-cycle risks and the "disability premium," functioning merely as passive survival mechanisms rather than catalysts for economic graduation.

Average Trap: An administrative failure where public facilities are deemed "accessible" based on aggregate compliance metrics but remain functionally unusable for individuals with severe impairments due to incomplete design (e.g., adding a ramp but omitting wide interior doors).

Little Bit Trap (Information Paradox): A state where beneficiaries possess only vague, informal, word-of-mouth knowledge rather than formal institutional counseling, leading individuals to misconstrue legal entitlements as benevolent gifts from local elites.

Crisis of Agency: An administrative environment forcing rightsholders to utilize third-party intermediaries to claim services, stripping them of autonomy and reinforcing a state of "Mediated Citizenship" that reduces legal rights to patronizing favors.

Access Tax: Systemic bribery and illicit tolls extracted by frontline bureaucratic gatekeepers (e.g., local union parishad members) that corruptly devalue allowances before they reach the recipient.

Normal Trap (Paternalistic Gap): A bureaucratic state where service providers maintain a superficial "nice" interpersonal cordiality that masks an administrative failure to provide active, transformative empowerment or vocational training services.

Paradox of "No" Barriers: A research metric where individuals with severe disabilities report experiencing zero environmental barriers because deep structural hostility has forced them into complete Enforced Domesticity and total social sequestration.

Satisfaction Paradox (Maintenance Paradox): A condition where marginalized beneficiaries express high contentment with survival-level support because structural oppression has deflated their expectations and obscured their statutory rights to full independence.

No Comment (Statistical Silence): In disability research, a critical indicator of profound fear regarding structural reprisal or total social isolation, showing that a built environment is perceived as too hostile to even attempt interaction.

National Tools & Policy Paradigms

Suborno Nagarik (Golden Citizen): A centralized digital registration and identification framework in Bangladesh designed to streamline inclusive service delivery, bypass local gatekeepers, and ensure persons with disabilities are visible in national planning.

Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act (2013): The primary domestic legislation of Bangladesh establishing a statutory legal mandate for accessibility, universal design, and rights-based accountability across all public domains.

Implementation Gap / Mandate-Implementation Gap: The structural divergence and policy rift separating progressive national legal frameworks from the actual, ground-level operational realities in rural communities.

Maintenance-Based Paradigm vs. Graduation-Based Model: The policy shift from a "Charity Model" of passive, insufficient relief that reinforces dependency to an "Empowerment Model" that prioritizes vocational re-skilling, inclusive infrastructure, and active socio-economic independence.

Proactive Doorstep Governance: A strategic decentralized governance approach utilizing digital frameworks and mobile service squads to deliver rights and social safety net entitlements directly to rightsholders' residences, eliminating transport bottlenecks.

Notes

AAAQ Framework: United Nations, 2006; WHO, 2023.

Access Tax: World Bank, 2021; Gupta, 2021.

Accessibility: Mace, 1985; United Nations, 2006.

Agency: Sen, 1999; Oliver, 1996.

Asset Pentagon: DFID, 1999; Sen, 1999.

Average Trap: Mace, 1985; Oliver, 2013.

Capabilities: Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011.

Capability Ceiling: Sen, 1999; Gupta, 2021.

Conversion Factors: Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2017.

Crisis of Agency: Oliver, 1996; United Nations, 2006.

Development / Labor / Healthcare Traps: WHO & World Bank, 2011; UNCRPD, 2006.

Disability: Oliver, 2013; GoB, 2013.

Flat-rate Cash Transfers: Robeyns, 2017; World Bank, 2021.

Functionings: Sen, 1999; Robeyns, 2017.

ICF (International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health): WHO, 2011; WHO, 2022.

Impairment: Oliver, 2013; United Nations, 2006.

Implementation Gap (Mandate-Implementation Gap): GoB, 2013; United Nations, 2006.

Interaction Framework: UNESCAP, 2012; WHO & World Bank, 2011.

Little Bit Trap (Information Paradox): Oliver, 2013; Gupta, 2021.

Maintenance-Based Paradigm vs. Graduation-Based Model: Sen, 1999; UNESCAP, 2012.

Medical Model: WHO, 2011; Oliver, 2013.

No Comment: Gupta, 2021; Field Data, 2024.

Normal Trap (Paternalistic Gap): Nussbaum, 2011; Field Data, 2024.

Paradox of "No" Barriers: UNESCAP, 2012; Field Data, 2024.

Participation Cliff: GoB, 2013; World Bank, 2021.

Reasonable Accommodation: United Nations, 2006; GoB, 2013.

Satisfaction Paradox (Maintenance Paradox): Oliver, 1996; UNESCAP, 2012.

Social Model of Disability: Oliver, 1996; Oliver, 2013.

Spatial Injustice: Mace, 1985; Oliver, 2013.

Subarna Nagarik (Golden Citizen): GoB, 2013; World Bank, 2021.

Universal Design: Mace, 1985; United Nations, 2006.

Washington Group Six Core Functional Domains: Washington Group, 2020; GoB, 2013.

Working Poverty: World Bank, 2021; Sen, 1999.