

Policy Brief

What's Work Worth: The Impact of and Barriers to Paid Work Experienced by Young Disabled People in Dhaka, Bangladesh

Acknowledgements

This policy brief was created by Edanur Yazıcı on the basis of the MA dissertation written by the researcher, Inga Reichelt.

More information about her academic services can be found here: <https://yazicitranslationservices.wordpress.com/>

Executive Summary

For many, paid work, whether formal or informal, is key to economic survival. The work we do in part determines our social status, our self worth and the material quality of our lives. Disabled people are no exception to this. In a world where our worth is often based on a perceived ability or inability to materially contribute to society, the question of paid work for disabled people is a pressing one.

Paid work plays a crucial role in young disabled people's lives and in shaping their self-image. This policy brief presents research on the barriers to work facing young disabled people in Dhaka and how these barriers can be reduced. The findings are summarised in terms of recommendations for policy makers, civil society actors and researchers.

"When I have no job then people think more that I am disabled. When I have a job, they don't think that I am disabled, they give me more respect". Samir

Introduction

This policy brief presents the findings of research based on the questions of how paid work interrelates with young people's self image and social position both within their families and in their communities. It was generally found that the ten young people interviewed believed firmly in their capacity to work and had high future aspirations. Being in paid work significantly increased their confidence levels and positively influenced their social position. It was found that family support greatly enabled access to work.

The brief makes contributions to potential policies that can successfully intervene in the ways that economic activity in the form of paid work influences and interacts with other- culturally framed- oppressive and disabling experiences and structures.

Disabling barriers hamper young disabled people's potential - among them are attitudinal barriers, lack of safe transport, educational barriers and financial barriers. These barriers were amplified for disabled women.

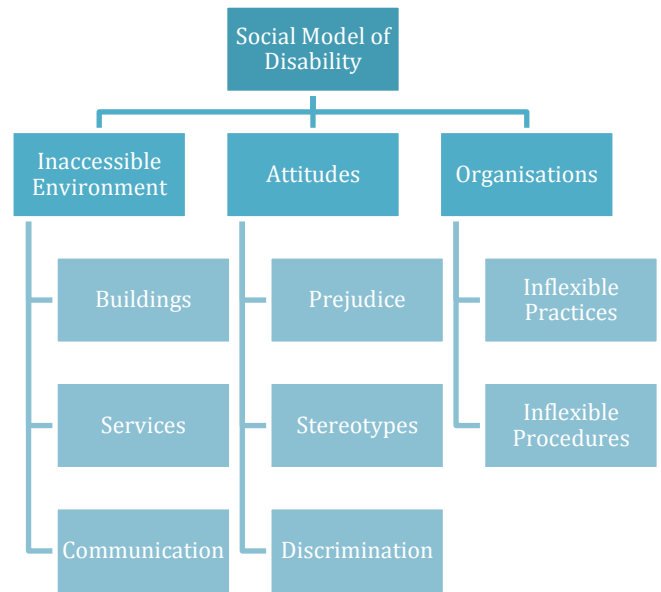


Approaches and Results

Bangladesh has long been at the forefront of debates about exploitative labour conditions. At the same time, there has been an increased effort to create inclusive workplaces for disabled people. This apparent contradiction as well as the growing Bangladeshi Disabled People’s Movement motivates the place and setting of the research.

- The research is driven by a need to value the voices of young disabled people and illuminate their understandings of paid work and barriers to finding work
- A feminist materialist framework was followed which values personal experiences but assumes that they are shaped by structural material conditions
- Semi structured interviews were conducted with ten participants with various impairments aged 18- 31 and with three policy actors
- Pseudonyms are used for the ten young disabled participants
- Participants were recruited through local Disabled People’s Organisations
- Five out of ten participants were successfully employed or had work experience
- The gender ratio of participants was 5:5
- The research framework is based on The Social Model of Disability

“The family and the other people, they think that disability is a kind of sickness. But I am confident that disability is not a sickness”. Rafid



- It was found that six out of ten had supportive families that encouraged them to learn and believed in their ability to work. Of these, the majority were successfully employed
- Three out of ten participants were not in receipt of disability income benefit
- Barriers to work were significantly amplified based on gender

“[My parents] arranged a marriage for me, they found a boy, they bribed him three or four times, but I refused to marry, because I was afraid of divorce. The men only look for beautiful girls, and if the girl has a disability like me, they will not love us. So I decided not to marry - but I think my education and my job will not divorce me”. Shayari

- Participants were concerned about being a burden on their families
- Young disabled people’s confidence was high even if they were not in employment
- It was found that the ability to contribute financially has the potential to alter the social relations and interactions which disabled people experience, to enhance their social status in the community and to positively affect their self-image

- However, it was also found that being in work could lead to new discriminatory experiences in public spaces and at the workplace and hence expose young disabled people to a higher risk of discrimination

"I could [only] control my urine for five minutes or ten minutes, it was frequent, very frequent [...]. The doctor said: "So what happened? It is not any problem. If the urine comes out, it comes out." My brother said: "We come here to get a solution from you, because she is going to office, and she has some society activities." [The] doctor said: "Why it is needed? She can stay at home". An activist

Implications and Recommendations

A clear implication of the research was that although disabled young people had high aspirational levels and were committed to finding paid employment as a means of empowerment and independence both socially and materially, there nonetheless remain a significant number of barriers both to finding and maintaining employment.

In this section, policy recommendations and the implications of the research will be presented using the framework of the social model of disability. Following this, specific recommendations will be made for policy makers, civil society organisations and researchers.

Overall, it was evident that participants had a positive attitude to seeking employment. It was also clear that paid work or prospects of paid work led to an improved self-image, confidence and recognition in the

community. Despite this, the barriers to successful long-term employment are numerous and greatly influenced by factors such as gender. The most significant barriers included: attitudinal barriers, lack of safe transport, educational barriers and financial barriers.

"Before [gaining employment] I was not that strong to go somewhere and talk, now I don't feel that shy any more, and I know that this world is my world". Ratul

Environment and Accessibility

1. Reasonable adjustments

A key finding of the research was that employers often fail to make reasonable adjustments for disabled workers. Although a 10% quota for disabled people in the public sector exists, this is not rigorously implemented. Moreover, even if the quota were to be enforced, necessary adjustments are not made. Such adjustments include but are not limited to:

- a. Providing on-the-job training for disabled people who lack experience in the work place
- b. Raising the age ceiling to apply to work in the public sector from 35 years for disabled people
- c. Ensuring that inclusive evacuation procedures are in place in the case of emergency (e.g. in factories)
- d. Providing accessible toilet facilities
- e. Having a specific system for job allocation
- f. Providing accessible office spaces

For this, it was found that an allocated budget is necessary to meet access requirements and the costs relating to assistance for disabled workers.

2. Transport Infrastructure

It was found that the lack of safe, affordable and accessible transport both limits mobility and decreases the likelihood of accessing and retaining paid employment. To redress this, it was found that the following would be necessary:

- a. Ensuring that buses run according to a timetable, stopping at specific stops for set durations in order to improve access for people with visual and physical impairments
- b. Improve road infrastructure to ensure that roads are accessible for wheelchair users

“One of the girls I know [...] she is working at the garments factory, and she is getting maybe around 6000 to 7000 taka per month. But she lives 3 km far from the factory, and she uses crutches, so if she comes by rickshaw it will cost 150 taka per day, so 4500 per month - and she is very poor, so how will she feed her family? That is why she starts walking with crutches to the factory at 5 am, three hours before her workday starts, and walks back home at night, arriving at 9 or 10 PM. So keeping the job is really very tough”. Maliha (recounting an anecdote about a friend)

3. Gender

It was found that gender is a disabling factor for some disabled workers. Three participants considered using public transport to be more disabling for women than men. One participant suggested that creating same gender environments for disabled women might be beneficial.

“When we as disabled women are going outside or going to the office, we have to dress up properly, we have to use ‘Orna’ [traditional scarf] but if women are using crutches, maintaining the scarf is not that easy. And also the long Bangladeshi dresses are difficult for women to maintain. But men can use any dress they like, and they can share and use all kinds of transport”. Maliha

Attitudes

1. Families

It was found that informational and financial support was crucial for empowering young disabled people. Consequently:

- a. Strategies to support families materially and socially are needed
- b. Strategies to challenge the assumption that disabled people are naturally passive are needed

2. Employers

All participants mentioned negative attitudes and ignorance by employers and the public as one of the major barriers to paid work. As a result, spreading information about disabled people’s capacity to work is important.

3. Communities

Social networks were shown to be crucial to finding non-discriminating employers and developing links with the wider community. Consequently, effective strategies to develop and strengthen diverse social networks for disabled young people are necessary.

Organisations

1. Education

Although there have been initiatives to increase the number of disabled children in mainstream schools, one study found that 70% of the enrolled young people drop out before completing their educational path. It was found that teachers have limited training in inclusive education. In order to increase educational participation, it is necessary to:

- a. Tackle overcrowding in classrooms
- b. Increase available resources
- c. Train teachers in inclusive education
- d. Diversify the educational opportunities available for disabled young people

2. Financial

Three participants made it clear that a lack of access to funding and interest-free loans for self-employment stifled or delayed professional potential. As a result, it is necessary to ensure financial organisations are able to provide support to disabled young people and to collectives of disabled people.

3. Disabled People's Organisations

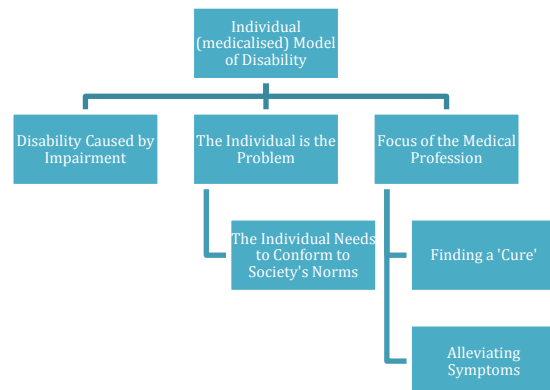
It was found that the social networks created by DPOs allowed for young people to access work, support and solidarity. It is clear that DPOs have the potential to utilise disabled people's solidarity to disseminate information, raise awareness, educate others and challenge societal norms.

Recommendations for Policy Makers

- Collect appropriate data in order to meet obligations to the UN CRPD
- Implement demand side labour policies

- Move away from medicalised, individualising definitions of disability
- View disability as a collective issue that is not limited to the sole responsibility of the Ministry of Social Welfare
- Appreciate that disabled people's needs coincide with the needs of general citizens to whom they must be equal
- Implement holistic policies across ministries including transport, healthcare and education
- Increase disability income benefit
- Address the issue of accessing disability income as a result of urban/rural divides and accessing hard to reach communities

“The government officials spent 2000 taka per month on smoking, so how can [the disability income benefit] 500 taka per month be [enough] for a disabled person to survive?” Mahmoud



Recommendations for Civil Society Organisations

- Educate and support young disabled people's families, while being aware of disabling hierarchies within the families

- Build social and informational networks
- Create a network of accessible employers who account for disabled people's needs
- Provide information on how to access low interest start-up loans and microfinance initiatives
- Raise awareness of disability rights issues
- Engage in community work
- Challenge psycho-emotional barriers to work and social engagement
- Encourage the establishment of disabled people's cooperatives

Recommendations for Researchers

- Consider the overall effectiveness of awareness raising campaigns
- Conduct policy document analysis
- Uncover the determinants of family support
- Consider whether employing disabled people creates a positive attitude towards disabled people.

Conclusions

Overall, it was found that the ability to contribute financially has the potential to alter the social relations and interactions which disabled people experience, to enhance their social status in the community, and to positively affect their self-image. In line with this, a number of policy suggestions have been put forward in order to challenge disabling barriers that hamper young disabling people's potential.