

# Barriers to Accessibility and Inclusion: Lived Experiences of People with Physical Disabilities in Bangladesh

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## Abstract

This study investigates the lived experiences and societal interactions of individuals with physical disabilities in Bangladesh. Through qualitative interviews with 14 participants, including individuals with physical disabilities, their parents, and officials, the research explores the challenges faced in daily life, societal attitudes, and the effectiveness of existing support systems. Findings reveal significant barriers in accessibility, prevalent discrimination, and inadequate policy implementation, all impacting the quality of life and social inclusion of these individuals. The study underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions and policy enhancements to improve accessibility, employment opportunities, educational support, and public awareness in Bangladesh. Recommendations include promoting inclusion and diversity, enhancing public infrastructure, ensuring equal opportunities in employment and education, developing specialized vocational training, establishing accessible financial support systems, and increasing public understanding of disabilities.

**Keywords:** physical disabilities, societal inclusion, accessibility barriers, disability policy, Bangladesh, support systems, qualitative research, discrimination, public awareness, vocational training, social inclusion, disability rights.

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## Introduction

In Bangladesh, individuals with physical disabilities face a multitude of barriers that critically impact their socioeconomic inclusion and quality of life. Despite global advancements towards inclusivity, the realities for these individuals remain harshly constrained by persistent social, economic, and environmental challenges. This study seeks to explore the lived experiences of people with physical disabilities in Bangladesh, focusing on the daily challenges they encounter, societal attitudes towards them, and the effectiveness of existing support systems in facilitating their integration and participation in society.

Women with disabilities, in particular, encounter formidable barriers to socioeconomic inclusion, ranging from exclusion from education and employment to increased risks of violence and social isolation (Quinn, 2016). Additionally, during crises such as natural disasters, individuals with disabilities experience exacerbated conditions due to inadequate infrastructure and lack of advance warning systems, significantly hindering their ability to secure safety and maintain livelihoods (Shakil Mahmud et al., 2014). The recent COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted and intensified these vulnerabilities, particularly in terms of economic stability and access to healthcare, underscoring an urgent need for comprehensive research in this area (Das et al., 2021).

This investigation is crucial not only for documenting and understanding these barriers but also for identifying effective interventions that could significantly improve the lives of people with disabilities in Bangladesh. By examining these experiences through qualitative research, this study aims to contribute valuable insights that can inform policy developments and enhance the integration and quality of life of individuals with physical disabilities.

## Background

Bangladesh presents unique challenges for people with disabilities due to its high population density, frequent natural disasters, and pronounced socioeconomic constraints. These factors exacerbate the hardships faced by this vulnerable population, highlighting an urgent need for robust and effective policies and programs (Quinn et al., 2016; Shakil Mahmud et al., 2014). Cultural perceptions and societal stigmas have long influenced the treatment and recognition of disabilities in Bangladesh, often leading to exclusion and discrimination, particularly against women and girls with disabilities (Quinn et al., 2016).

This research utilizes qualitative methods, including interviews and participant observation, to capture the personal experiences of individuals with disabilities, providing a platform for their voices and unique insights into the challenges they face. The study builds upon existing literature that underscores prevalent challenges in securing employment, accessing education, and obtaining healthcare, especially during crises such as natural disasters or pandemics (Das et al., 2021; Shakil Mahmud et al., 2014).

Moreover, while Bangladesh has enacted several policies aimed at improving conditions for people with disabilities, such as the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act 2013 (Government of

Bangladesh, n.d.), the real-world efficacy of these policies remains in question. Our study examines the gaps between the intentions of these policies and their actual implementation, highlighting the need for continuous evaluation and adaptation based on empirical evidence and community feedback. Through this research, we aim to contribute valuable insights that can inform future policy developments and improve the integration and quality of life of individuals with disabilities in Bangladesh.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to gain deep insights into the challenges faced by individuals with physical disabilities in their daily lives. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of their social, mental, economic, educational, and familial issues.

The central research question is: "How do individuals with physical disabilities experience daily life and social interactions, and what interventions can be implemented to improve their quality of life?" To gain a more comprehensive understanding, this study also explores six sub-questions:

- a) What daily life challenges do individuals with physical disabilities face?
- b) How do these individuals perceive societal attitudes toward them?
- c) What support systems are currently in place for these individuals?
- d) What barriers do these individuals face in accessing the existing support systems?
- e) What changes would most improve the quality of life for individuals with physical disabilities?
- f) How effective are current policies and regulations in improving the lives of individuals with physical disabilities?

### Research Site

Barisal has been selected as the research site, providing a relevant context to examine the experiences of physically challenged individuals.

### Participant Selection

A total of 14 participants were purposively selected for interviews based on their unique experiences and insights. This selection aims to enrich the research with diverse viewpoints and in-depth personal narratives. The participant groups include:

- Physically challenged individuals (ages 18-50): They provide firsthand experiences of the challenges they face.

- Parents/Guardians: They offer a family perspective, providing a broader view of the challenges faced by physically challenged individuals.
- Officials/Teachers: They contribute insights about the rights of physically challenged people, their current situations, and suggestions for improvement.

## Data Collection

Qualitative interviews were conducted as the principal data collection method, with a strong emphasis on participant anonymity and confidentiality. Additionally, a demographic data collection section was implemented to gather more meaningful and richer data.

## Data Analysis

Upon completing all the interviews, transcripts were analyzed using ATLAS.ti software. Data were categorized based on their relevance. To ensure validity, the findings underwent a critical review by the research team, enhancing the reliability and credibility of the research findings.

## Ethical Considerations

In accordance with the ethical research principles outlined by the American Psychological Association (2017), this study adhered to stringent guidelines to ensure participant confidentiality, data security, and minimal participant discomfort. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

## Findings

This research highlights the multifaceted challenges faced by individuals with physical disabilities in Bangladesh, focusing on societal attitudes, infrastructural barriers, and the effectiveness of support systems. The findings are organized according to the central research question and sub-questions to provide a comprehensive understanding of these challenges and potential interventions.

## Daily Life Challenges

Individuals with physical disabilities face significant challenges in daily activities, including mobility issues, difficulty performing household chores, and accessing essential services like healthcare and education. These challenges severely limit their independence and quality of life. One participant noted the difficulty of performing everyday tasks, stating, "I face many problems like not being able to work, not being able to earn an income, and difficulties in doing everyday tasks." Another participant highlighted the lack of accessible infrastructure, mentioning, "It's difficult for me to go up the stairs; there are no ramps in most places."

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## Societal Attitudes

Societal attitudes towards individuals with physical disabilities range from supportive to discriminatory. Many participants reported experiencing social exclusion and cultural stigmas, such as being seen as a burden or a result of familial sins. These negative perceptions significantly affect their mental health and social integration. One participant shared, "People often call me a beggar. It hurts when they look at me with pity or disdain," while another noted, "There's a belief that disability is a punishment for sins. This kind of thinking makes life even harder for us."

## Existing Support Systems

Government support systems exist but are often undermined by delays, administrative inefficiencies, and procedural obstacles. Family members are the primary source of support for most participants, assisting with daily activities, providing financial support, and offering emotional care. One participant remarked, "Government support is there, but it's often delayed or insufficient." Another highlighted the critical role of family support, saying, "My family is my main support. They help me with everything."

## Barriers to Accessing Support Systems

Participants face significant barriers in accessing existing support systems, including bureaucratic challenges, procedural inefficiencies, and lack of awareness about available resources. A participant pointed out, "Applying for support is very complicated and often requires informal payments," while another noted, "Many don't even know how to access the support programs."

## Improvements Needed

Participants identified several changes that would most improve their quality of life, including better infrastructure, more inclusive education and employment opportunities, and increased community support. One participant emphasized the need for accessible infrastructure, stating, "There are no ramps in most public places, making it very difficult to move around." Another highlighted the importance of inclusive education, saying, "Schools need to be equipped with facilities that cater to all needs."

## Policy Effectiveness

While policies exist to support individuals with disabilities, their effectiveness is often undermined by delays, procedural inefficiencies, and inconsistent enforcement. Participants expressed a need for more effective policy implementation and stricter enforcement of existing laws. A government official noted, "We have policies in place, but the implementation is slow and often gets bogged down in bureaucracy." Another participant emphasized the need for policy reform, stating, "Policies need to be implemented properly, and there should be more funding for disability services."

These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and policy reforms to improve the quality of life and societal participation of individuals with physical disabilities in Bangladesh. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts to enhance public awareness, infrastructure, and support systems.

**Table 1: Key Challenges for Individuals with Physical Disabilities in Bangladesh**

This table presents a comprehensive overview of the key challenges faced by individuals with physical disabilities in Bangladesh, derived from qualitative interviews.

Challenge	Experience 1	Experience 2	Experience 3
Societal Attitudes	"People look through me as if I'm invisible." - P4	Exclusion from community activities	Negative perceptions leading to isolation
Accessibility	"No ramps at my workplace." - P6	Inaccessible public transportation	Inadequate educational facilities
Employment Barriers	"Turned away from jobs despite qualifications." - P12	Lack of accommodations in workplaces	Limited career advancement opportunities
Educational Challenges	"Schools need to cater to all needs." - P5	Untrained teachers and staff	Lack of specialized resources
Financial Constraints	"Financial aid needs to be more accessible." - P9	Economic hardships due to unstable employment	Inadequate government allowances
Support Systems	"Support doesn't reach us on time." - P9	Bureaucratic inefficiencies	Need for continuous policy evaluation

*Table 1: Summary of major issues identified from qualitative interviews with individuals with physical disabilities, parents/guardians, and officials/teachers in Bangladesh.*

## Discussion

Our study highlights significant socio-economic challenges faced by individuals with physical disabilities in Bangladesh, including barriers to education, employment, and healthcare access. These challenges are exacerbated during natural disasters or pandemics and align with broader systemic issues identified in

existing research. By examining these findings, we explore the implications for policy and practice and identify strategies to improve the quality of life and societal participation for individuals with physical disabilities.

## Societal Attitudes and Stigma

Our study reveals that individuals with physical disabilities in Bangladesh frequently face societal stigma and discrimination, significantly impacting their mental health and social integration. These findings are consistent with existing research indicating that negative societal attitudes and cultural stigmas are pervasive issues (Quinn et al., 2016; Shakil Mahmud et al., 2014). The belief that disability is a punishment for sins or a burden to society exacerbates the isolation and psychological distress experienced by individuals with disabilities. This underscores the need for public education campaigns to change perceptions and promote inclusivity.

## Accessibility Challenges

The lack of accessible infrastructure is a major barrier to the independence and quality of life for individuals with physical disabilities. Our findings align with research highlighting the inadequate facilities in public transport, buildings, and workplaces (Shakil Mahmud et al., 2014). The absence of ramps, elevators, and accessible public transport restricts mobility and access to essential services. Addressing these infrastructural challenges is crucial for improving the daily lives and autonomy of people with disabilities in Bangladesh.

## Support Systems and Policy Implementation

While government support systems exist, their effectiveness is compromised by delays, procedural inefficiencies, and inconsistent enforcement. This gap between policy intent and actual implementation mirrors findings on the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on disabled individuals (Das et al., 2021). Strengthening policy implementation and ensuring timely and adequate support is critical. Continuous evaluation and adaptation of policies based on empirical evidence and community feedback are necessary to bridge this gap.

## Employment and Educational Barriers

Employment opportunities for individuals with physical disabilities are severely limited by both physical inaccessibility and societal prejudice. Our findings corroborate the identification of barriers faced by disabled entrepreneurs (Dhar & Farzana, 2017). Inclusive employment policies and practices are urgently needed to provide equal opportunities. Educational barriers also persist, with inadequate facilities and support in schools hindering the academic and personal development of disabled students. These barriers reinforce social exclusion and limit future opportunities.

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## Financial Constraints

Economic hardship is a recurring theme, with many participants struggling to access financial aid and support. This financial instability exacerbates vulnerabilities, making it difficult to afford necessary medical care, education, and other essential services. The need for accessible and responsive financial aid systems is highlighted, consistent with other findings (Das et al., 2021).

## Broader Implications

These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and policy reforms to improve the quality of life and societal participation of individuals with physical disabilities in Bangladesh. Coordinated efforts to enhance public awareness, infrastructure, and support systems are essential. Strategies should include promoting inclusive public infrastructure (Quinn et al., 2016), developing community-based support systems (Shakil Mahmud et al., 2014), and implementing effective policy measures to protect the rights of people with disabilities (Das et al., 2021).

## Recommendations

The findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions to address the challenges faced by individuals with physical disabilities in Bangladesh. This section outlines actionable strategies for policymakers and stakeholders to enhance integration and quality of life. By focusing on public awareness, infrastructural accessibility, employment, education, and policy enforcement, these recommendations provide a comprehensive framework for creating a more inclusive and supportive environment.

- **Promote Inclusion and Diversity:** Initiatives should be launched to integrate individuals with disabilities into all aspects of social, economic, and community life. This includes educational campaigns to change public perceptions and reduce stigma (Quinn et al., 2016).
- **Enhance Accessibility of Public Spaces:** Improve physical accessibility in public areas by installing ramps, widening doorways, and ensuring accessible public transportation systems (Shakil Mahmud et al., 2014).
- **Equal Opportunities for Employment and Education:** Implement measures to eliminate discrimination in employment and educational settings, providing necessary support and accommodations to help individuals with disabilities succeed (Dhar & Farzana, 2017).
- **Vocational Training Programs:** Develop specialized vocational training programs designed for individuals with disabilities, enhancing their skills and employment prospects (Das et al., 2021).
- **Accessible Financial Support Systems:** Establish a financial aid system that offers low-interest loans and adequate government allowances, providing essential financial support to individuals with disabilities (Das et al., 2021).



- **Increase Disability Awareness and Understanding:** Launch public education campaigns to deepen societal understanding of disabilities, aiming to dismantle stigma and reduce discrimination (Quinn et al., 2016).

**Policy Enhancement and Enforcement:** Ensure strict enforcement of laws and policies that protect the rights of people with disabilities, enhancing existing frameworks to eliminate discrimination and improve living conditions (Quinn et al., 2016).

## Table 2: Strategic Action Plan for Addressing Challenges Faced by Individuals with Physical Disabilities in Bangladesh

This table presents a strategic action plan for addressing key challenges faced by individuals with physical disabilities in Bangladesh. It categorizes these challenges into social isolation, infrastructure accessibility, employment and educational barriers, economic hardship, stigma, and policy enforcement. For each challenge, the table outlines targeted actions, responsible actors, and expected outcomes, providing a clear roadmap for implementing effective interventions aligned with the needs and experiences of individuals with physical disabilities.

Identified Challenges	Action	Responsible Actors	Expected Outcomes
Social isolation and lack of awareness about disabilities	Promote inclusion and diversity	Government, NGOs, community organizations	Enhanced societal inclusion, reduced discrimination
Inadequate public infrastructure and limited access to transportation	Enhance accessibility of public spaces	Local governments, urban planners	Improved physical accessibility, increased independence
Employment discrimination and educational barriers	Provide equal opportunities for employment and education	Employers, educational institutions	Increased employment and educational opportunities
High unemployment rates and lack of specialized training	Develop vocational training programs	Vocational training centers, NGOs	Improved job skills and employment rates
Economic hardship and insufficient government support	Establish accessible financial support systems	Government, financial institutions	Access to financial resources, reduced financial strain
Stigma and negative societal attitudes towards disabilities	Increase awareness and understanding of disabilities	Media, educational institutions, NGOs	Reduced stigma and discrimination, increased public awareness
Ineffective or poorly enforced disability policies	Enhance policy enforcement	Government, legal institutions	Strengthened rights protection, improved living conditions

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*Table 2: Strategic Action Plan for Addressing Challenges Faced by Individuals with Physical Disabilities in Bangladesh - Summarizes targeted interventions linked to identified challenges, detailing the responsible actors and the expected outcomes.*

## Conclusion

This study has highlighted the multifaceted challenges faced by individuals with physical disabilities in Bangladesh, encompassing societal attitudes, infrastructural barriers, and the shortcomings of support systems. Through qualitative interviews, we uncovered the profound impacts of discrimination, social exclusion, and inadequate accessibility on these individuals' lives. The persistent stigma and lack of accessible infrastructure severely limit their independence, mental health, and social integration.

Our findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and policy enhancements to improve the quality of life and societal participation for individuals with physical disabilities. This includes the necessity for public education campaigns to alter negative perceptions, infrastructural improvements to enhance accessibility, and more effective implementation of support policies. Addressing these barriers is crucial to fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for individuals with physical disabilities in Bangladesh.

## Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. The sample size of 14 participants from Barisal may not fully represent the experiences of individuals with physical disabilities across Bangladesh. The qualitative nature of the interviews introduces subjectivity, and the findings reflect the conditions and policies at the time of the research, not accounting for subsequent changes.

Future studies should include a larger, more diverse sample from various regions of Bangladesh to provide a broader understanding. Combining quantitative methods with qualitative approaches could offer more generalizable findings. Longitudinal studies are necessary to evaluate the long-term impact of policy changes and interventions. Further research should also focus on specific types of physical disabilities to gain detailed insights into their unique challenges and needs.

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## Declaration of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest. This study was conducted independently, with no financial or personal relationships influencing the outcomes. The findings and conclusions are solely based on the data collected and analyzed during the research.

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