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Article

An Analysis of Employment Laws and Policies for the Visually Impaired Individuals in Bangladesh

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Abstract

As a lower middle income country, Bangladesh has still been facing challenges in fulfilling the rights of people with visual impairment because the employment opportunities for the people with visual impairment is remain limited despite the government and international donor organizations are providing support to these communities. With approximately one million visually impaired people in Bangladesh, the visually impaired people are facing systemic barriers in education, training and employment because of lacking of accommodations, social stigma, superstition, weak employment policies for the disabled etc. This paper examines the laws and policies for the people with visual impairment in Bangladesh focusing on the major legislatives initiatives including The Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013, The Disability Act 2001, Ratification of UNCRPD, 2007 and other legal frameworks for the people with disabilities in Bangladesh. This study addressed key challenges including inaccessible educational materials, attitudinal barriers, lack of accommodations, weak enforcement abilities, lack of advocacy for the employment of visually impaired in Bangladesh. To explore the legal frameworks of different countries for the people with visual impairment, the study conducted a comparative analysis with employment policies in the UK and the USA that addressed the major gaps in Bangladesh in particular in assistive technology, vocational training, government support and social response. The paper recommended that the government should reform the existing policies and suggested to implement a visually impaired oriented employment act and increase the training programs. The paper also recommended that the government should establish a dedicated Visual Impairment Employment Taskforce to reduce the employment challenges for the people with visually impaired. By addressing these issues and implementing these suggestions, Bangladesh can ensure the inclusive society and minimize the employment discrimination for the people with visual impairment.

Keywords: employment laws; visual impairment; inclusive policies; disabilities rights; accessibility in workplace; employment quota

Introduction

Bangladesh, a lower middle income country in South Asia, is experiencing a dynamic situation regarding economic success and social services. With poor living standards, the country has limited education, health, employment opportunities for its citizens especially for the people with disability (Muzzini & Aparicio, 2013). However, a significant portion of the population lives under the poverty line, which hinders overall development and responsible for systemic poverty (Chowdhury et al., 2013). Reports, particularly from the World Bank, identify Bangladesh as a nation where citizens' rights and disability rights practices are still poorly implemented (Razzaque & Hasan, 2024). The main sources of livelihood for the population include agriculture, the textile and garments sector, fishing, remittances, and cottage industries (Hossain, 2011). Despite these sectors, economic development has not been achieved, resulting in persistent poverty, unemployment, and poor public administration performance. As of 2018, with a population of 171 million, Bangladesh had a poverty rate of 18.7% and a per capita income of around \$2,000, indicating limited economic and social development (The World Bank, 2023). Additionally, the unemployment rate is reported to be high by

various organizations, for instance, World Labour Organisation reported the rate of unemployment in 2018 was approximately 11% (International Labour Organization, 2019). Besides, A 2023 report indicated an unemployment rate of 5.06%, which decreased to 4.49% in 2024. These figures suggest that the country still faces significant economic challenges and a substantial unemployment rate.

With approximately 750,000 visually impaired individuals in Bangladesh, many face challenges in securing employment opportunities (Rahman, 2022). Most visually impaired individuals rely on government and non-governmental support, as well as assistance from families and relatives, for their economic and social needs. In Bangladesh, many blind individuals come from impoverished families and have lack educational qualifications (Dineen et al., 2003). They are primarily employed in fields such as entertainment, teaching, call centers, crafts and handicrafts, and entrepreneurship (Muhit et al., 2007). However, the employment rate for visually impaired individuals remains limited, and they continue to depend on government support and familial assistance (Hosain et al., 2002). To address their needs, the government has implemented policies aimed at ensuring employment across various sectors. Nonetheless, the unemployment rate remains concerning, highlighting the need for more robust employment policies to guarantee equal opportunities for visually impaired individuals. This paper aims to provide an overview of the employment policies, laws, and social service initiatives for people with visual impairments in Bangladesh.

Legal Frameworks for People with Visual Impairment

The employment laws and policies for blind people in Bangladesh are shaped by the context which emphasizes the rights of disabled people and needs for inclusive workplace practices. The government has been taken several laws and policies to support them and ensure their rights. Among them The Disability Welfare Act 2001 is one of the prominent acts which aimed to protect the rights of people with disabilities and ensure equal rights of education and employment in Bangladesh (CSID, 2002). This act considered as the milestone for the rights of people with disabilities because it ensure the employment opportunities in public and private field for the people with disabilities (Siddiquee, 2021). Though many countries have taken inclusive employment practice policies for the people with disabilities, the inclusive workplace concept is relatively new in Bangladesh which responsible for the misunderstanding, discrimination regarding employment opportunities for the people with disabilities (UN Volunteers, 2024).

Laws and policies are crucial for ensuring an inclusive society where all individuals can enjoy their lives, regardless of their abilities or disabilities. Many countries have established several disability acts to guarantee equal opportunities for people with disabilities, making their lives easier and less burdensome. However, in Bangladesh, although there are several existing laws and policies for the people with disability, these are often deemed ineffective in safeguarding the rights of people with disabilities in particular people with visual impairment. The existing laws and policies mainly focus on disabilities without specifically addressing visual impairment or the rights of visually impaired individuals. The prominent disability acts include The Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013, the Disability Welfare Act 2001, and the Ratification of the UNCRPD in 2007. The laws and policies have brought crucial consequences in the rights of people with disabilities in Bangladesh.

The Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013

This act is considered a milestone in disability rights, encompassing human rights, human dignity, fundamental rights, and social equality by the Constitution of Bangladesh (Narayan & John, 2017). The Act defines visually impaired individuals as those who experience either partial or complete visual impairment (Nuri et al., 2022). The act acknowledges that visual impairment significantly affects an individual's communication, development, and learning ability. Islam & Juhara (2021) articulated that the Act guarantees the rights to inclusive education and vocational training tailored to the needs of visually impaired individuals and emphasizes the necessity for accommodations in the workplace to promote employment opportunities. The act highlights the need for support and interventions for the visually impaired and calls for developing policies and

programs to address their needs. Therefore, this act ensures the protection of rights, prohibits discrimination and promotes accessibility for visually impaired individuals.

Disability Welfare Act 2001

The Disability Welfare Act 2001 focuses on safeguarding the rights of individuals with disabilities in Bangladesh. Enacted to protect the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities, it ensures their participation in state and social activities and makes provisions for ancillary matters (Mitsuhiko et al., 2014). This act aims to guarantee that persons with disabilities have equal opportunities in education, training, and employment. The ultimate goal is to promote disability rights and encourage their involvement in creating an inclusive society. Thus, the act aims to protect and safeguard the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities by ensuring their active participation in national and social programs and improving their overall welfare.

Ratification of UNCRPD 2007

The Bangladesh government ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2007, affirming its commitment to disability rights on a global scale (Jamil & Masum, 2008). The main objectives of the treaty include promoting equal employment opportunities and ensuring disability rights across all sectors. From Bangladesh's perspective, the ratification of the UNCRPD encompasses several aspects, including alignment with international standards, periodic reporting and monitoring, promotion of disability awareness, and fostering international cooperation (Smith et al., 2021).

Disability Rights and Protection Rules 2015

The act articulated that “no people with disabilities shall be deprived of, discriminated against or hindered from engaging in any work they are otherwise competent to do” and “the National Coordination Committee shall determine whether or not any particular employment is suitable for any person with a disability if questions are raised in this regard” (Efat, 2024). This suggested that all employers are required not to discriminate against people with disabilities. According to this act, disabilities people have right to employment at government and private institutions and they have right to appropriate accommodation and rehabilitation.

Article 28(4) of the Constitution of Bangladesh

Article 28(4) emphasizes fundamental rights and mandates that the state must not discriminate against citizens based on religion, race, caste, or any ability (Haque, 2020). Although the article does not directly specify the rights of individuals with disabilities, it ensures equal rights for all in public and state spheres, prohibiting any form of discrimination. This constitutional provision allows the state to enact special measures for the benefit of women, children, and disadvantaged groups to promote equality and advancement.

Marrakesh Treaty, 2022

Bangladesh government signed in the Marrakesh Treaty in 27th June, 2022 to facilitate the access to publicized works for the people who are visually impaired (Harpur & Stein, 2024). Engaging with this treaty, Bangladesh can be able to increase access to accessible books (Braille books, audiobooks) for the people with visual impairment. The Marrakesh Treaty allows for the international transfer of accessible books to people with visual impairment. This treaty allows visually impaired people of Bangladesh to share the ideas and strategies to access in education as well as employment.

Disabilities Quota: Individual with visual impairment

It is considered one of important legislation to ensure equal employment access for the people with visual impairment. Such government initiatives extend the career opportunities as well as

developed the social status of people with disabilities in particular visually impaired. In Bangladesh, the National Disability Act 2004 and Bangladesh Civil Service Rules 2015 announced 1% of government jobs would be provided to persons with disabilities. The Quota initiatives applied to all types of disabled people that sometimes bring confusion in implications. Because the range of disabilities are different and that's why there is needed a comprehensive definition and portion of quota percentages. The visually impaired who are considered as the most vulnerable in Bangladesh also include in the disability quota scheme that often hinder the inclusion in employment sector. In addition, visually impaired people who are willing to enter in the job market are often facing challenges due to the lack of accommodation, accessible resources and environment. During the job exams, they are totally depends on scribe even the people with visual impairment have to manage their own scribe while the government do not supported effectively. The braille documentation or materials also absence in many job sector that also hinder their employability. Therefore, the Quota system has brought significant impact on disability employment, however, there is needed a robust policies which include specific accommodation, support and effective environment to work.

Social Protection Initiatives

The social protection initiatives are crucial to support the persons with disabilities and particularly the visually impaired people need to incorporate with diverse social initiatives. The social protection initiatives have different forms those enables people with visual impairment to engage themselves in the society. The social protection initiatives can be disability income support, assistive technology grants, specialized education programs, accessible transportation subsidies, employment support services and public awareness campaigns (Banks et al., 2017). The social protection initiatives can be taken by government, social organizations, educators etc. (Rustamova et al., 2025). In the case of Bangladesh, the social protection initiatives are taking by government and NGO mainly which includes special education programs, allowances for visually impaired people, education and training support etc. According to the Department of Social Service, Bangladesh, the government designed allowances for Disabled Persons programs which offer financial support monthly basis to people with disabilities and the visually impaired people also received highest number of financial support (Rahman et al., 2023). Apart from the government support, in Bangladesh, the common people of Bangladesh often donated money to visually impaired people so that the person can be financially solvent or investing on their business.

As a part of social protection initiatives, the government has provided specialized education and training support to people with visual impairments. For example, the Bangladesh Braille Press offers braille books to elementary students. Besides, visually impaired organizations including Bangladesh Association for the Welfare of the Blind offer training and vocational programs to visually impaired people. These educational and training programs enables to visually impaired people to gain skills and prepare for the jobs. However, the university level education is still do not considered the braille system as a educational method for the people with visual impairment instead the students are forced to follow audio materials and others support that impede their education as well as hinder the chance of getting jobs after completing their education.

Employment Opportunities

Though government have taken several initiatives to ensure equal employment opportunities for all people regardless their disabilities, the visually impaired people are still facing challenges in accessing employment sector in Bangladesh. Primarily, many NGOs including Visually Impaired People's Society (VIPS), National Society of the Blind and Partially Sighted (NSBP), Young Power in Social Action (YPSA) etc. offer different supports to the people with visually impaired to ensure their equal access in employment. Apart from these, government's initiatives is just bound in providing educational support instead proper training. As a result, the people with visually impaired has been facing challenges in accessing employment field.

In addition, the people with visually impaired are relied on government and NGOs support and their employment opportunities are still limited. However, the employment opportunities for them are being expanded than the past. The visually impaired involved them in education field, recreational field, services industry and self-entrepreneurship. Though the visually impaired are employed in these field, the leading sector including ready-made garment industry has less access of employment to visually impaired people in Bangladesh. Therefore, accelerating tech based support and training to the visually impaired people, the employment rate of them can be increase in the future.

Challenges and Barriers

The person with disabilities are welcome in many sectors in today's world because the technological advancements enable them to compete with normal people. However, the people with visual impairment have been facing critical challenges to access in employment in Bangladesh, while developed countries offer diverse opportunities to them.

Educational Challenges

Proper educational qualifications are essential to access in employment field for the people with visual impairment. The major qualifications include industry based educational knowledge and understanding in diverse field. However, people with visual impairment in Bangladesh has been experiencing significant barriers in accessing education. One of the significant barriers is inaccessible educational materials. Just few numbers of educational institutions provides necessary books materials to students with visual impairment in the elementary level (Hossen et al., 2023). The students are depend on scribe and academic support assistant to continue their preparation that hinder their educational journey. In addition, many schools have still not followed braille books that discouraged to admit schools to them. The schools, in particular, Special Education Institution offer mainly grade one braille that enable them to learn basic knowledge and they do not learn advanced curriculum like Mathematics and Science. As a result, many students are deprived from educational facilities and ultimately they could not fill up minimum educational qualifications for the prospective jobs or career. One report published by Asmerom and Fituma (2024) found that children with visual impairments could not study in schools due the schools not being disabled friendly and 21% participants said that braille was not used in school in rural and urban school. In addition, in Bangladesh, there are lack of educators who are specialised in braille, special education teaching methods that hinder the proper education. Teacher of visual impairment are relied on audio books and grade one braille formatted that is n According to Asmerom and Fituma (2024), 28% of those surveyed said that there was no specialized teacher in school while 41% were of the opinion that there was a lack of educational equipment in schools. According to BLAST report (2015), Government and NGO websites are not yet accessible for people with visual impairments. The ICT Policy does address many accessibility issues for people with visual impairment but these provisions are rarely put into practice. As a result, barrier free access to information is still a challenge for visually impaired. Although some school buildings have ramps, most, especially government buildings do not have lifts and stairs are usually very steep. There are no audio facilities in any public places or lifts making it impossible for a person with visual impairment use such premises.

Attitudinal Barriers

These types of barriers comes from societal aspects of the country where person with disabilities are depends on society and state support. Many people are considered visually impaired as the curse and they have no ability to works. The massive presences of negative stereotypes in Bangladeshi society regarding the disabilities particularly visual impairment employment led to low rate of their employment. The people think the visually impaired people could not perform well and most of time they ignored their employment rights. Apart form such attitudes, people have also low awareness

and lack of trust on ability of visually impaired people in Bangladesh. Many employers also priorities sighted people over the visually impaired even though their ability to work in such position. Therefore, negative stereotype, lack of awareness and social stigma often bring challenges to enter in employment sectors.

Environmental Barriers

The employment environment is a significant aspect for not only company or organizations but also employees because a sustainable environment allows to bring positive outcomes within the organizations. The people with visual impairment have needed accessible workplace, transportation, technology in the working place. However, the visually impaired people in Bangladesh has facing challenges in their working place through various ways that impede their career as well as living standards. One of the important barriers for the people with visual impairment is lack of accessible workspace. In Bangladesh, the workplace designed for sighted people where accessible braille signage, ramps, and tactile paths are limited. The visually impaired people are mainly find braille signage in elevator or lift in company but this is not much to ensure a better workplace for them. To overcome this, there is needed specific policies from government and private companies. In addition, the visually impaired people in Bangladesh facing transportation challenges massively. The tactile paths are crucial to ensure safe and comfortable movement from home to office. However, the capital city of Bangladesh, Dhaka, offers some opportunities of tactile path while other cities have limited options. The government road and transportation agencies including BRTA (Bangladesh Road and Transportation Authority) have not signed or formulated any acts regarding transportation for person with disabilities. Besides, in the public transportation including bus, train, launch etc. has limited number

Perspective on Employment Policies

Bangladesh employment policies are significantly influences by political decision or political choices. The Ministry of Labour and Employment is responsible for formulating and implementing employment acts and policies to this country. Employees with disabilities tend to get paid less than others, particularly in manual or field based jobs. Employees with disabilities commonly face bullying, harassment and misbehavior at work. Often quotas for PWDs are established regarding jobs which have advanced educational eligibility requirements. Even when PWDS meet these criteria and can apply for such jobs, they are not always offered the position. Most training institutes providing training and skills for specific vocations do not have facilities for people with disabilities. In addition, most factories and offices are physically inaccessible to people with disabilities. Disabled people are usually not involved in disaster relief activities. They are often denied access to short term loans or employment which are provided to non-disabled people to help them regain financial independence after a disaster.

The perspectives on Bangladesh's employment policies for visually impaired individuals are mixed. While there have been significant legal and policy advancements, the implementation of these policies remains a challenge. Advocacy groups and organizations continue to push for greater inclusivity and accessibility in the workforce. The UN Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 emphasizes the need for suitable working conditions and equal incentives for persons with disabilities

Comparative Analysis of Employment Policies

USA Perspectives

The USA has reputation in protecting rights of employment for the people with disabilities which guided by different laws and policies including the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. The ADA protects the rights of employment by eliminating discriminations due to people's disabilities. The ADA's employment policies are applied to employees in local and state government

to ensure the participation of disabilities including blind people in the workforces. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) enforces these provisions in many sectors including accommodations, transportation, telecommunications, public services etc. According to EEOC, many people with visual impairments can work safely with or without accommodations as long as these accommodations do not impose an undue hardship such as being too costly or disruptive on the employer. EEOC also outlines when employers can inquire about vision impairments and handle voluntary disclosures; reasonable accommodations for those with visual disabilities; addressing safety concerns involving such employees and ensuring non-discrimination against employees with visual impairment. In addition, the Department of Justice (DOJ) works for implementing the policies of ADA against the discrimination in different levels including state and local government programs. The ADA emphasizes on different employment practices for the people with disabilities in particular people with visual impairments such as recruitment, interviews, pay, hiring, firing, promotion etc.

The UK Perspectives

The Equality Act 2010 protects blind and partially sighted people at workplace in the UK. According to this act, the people with visual disabilities could not discriminate directly and indirectly to employees by employers. Besides, the act suggested that an employer is under a statutory duty to remove physical barriers in the workplace and provide an auxiliary aid to people with visual disabilities. The UK Parliament also passed a scheme named as Access to Work in 1994 to provide practical and financial support to help disabled people find or stay in work. The scheme includes several elements including communication support to people with disabilities for interviews, special aids and equipment, adaptations to premises and vehicles and mental health support. Apart from the government policies and supports, many organizations also provide support to people with visual impairment to access in employment. Royal National Institute of Blind People is such organization which offers guidance to employers and staff on working with blind and partially sighted colleagues. In addition, Gov.UK also offers disability friendly employment seeking opportunities to people with visual impairment. The job website offers Braille formatted job post that allows to get easy job news accessibility for people with visual impairment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The people with visually impaired in Bangladesh are facing challenges to access in employment over the decades and even most of the people are out of economic activities and fully depends on others support though the support is insufficient. The visually impaired people are facing many barriers including inadequate educational resources, social stigma, inaccessible workplace environment, less government support and limited training opportunities. The government support is also inconsistent and insufficient to meet the needs of these people to facilitate the employment. The legal frameworks and policies of disabled people are complex and could not address the key barriers of ensuring employment of people with visual impairment. The disabilities laws included all disabled communities which could not able to address the needs of people with visual impairment in employment sector. Though government has offer 1% of Quota in employment field for the people with disabilities, but it did not address specific proportion rate of quota for the people with visual impairment.

To ensure the equitable employment policies for the people with visually impaired in Bangladesh, the government and donor organizations should take comprehensive frameworks which must be incorporated accommodation, financial benefits, training and specific laws. The paper addressed critical challenges of employment opportunities to the people with visually impaired in Bangladesh and to overcome these challenges, the paper suggested some recommendations for the government and other people who are involved in visual impairment field.

Act for Visually Impaired

Though Bangladesh government signed several treaties with international disabilities organizations and also have national acts of disabilities protection, there is needed specific acts for the people with visual impairment in Bangladesh. With more than 1 million visually impaired people in Bangladesh, they have been facing challenges in education, healthcare, employment etc. They are getting government support but these are limited to ensure their basic rights. The complexities of disabilities laws often hinder to get their rights due to the absence of specific laws for the people with visually impaired people. To ensure their rights in particular increase the educational rate and employment rate, the government should implement new acts for the visually impaired people in Bangladesh. The laws would be safeguard of their rights and promote inclusive society.

Inclusivity in Policies

Millions of Bangladesh experience low vision and the rate of blindness also are increasing day by day. To ensure their rights, there is needed inclusive policies in not only public sectors but also in private sectors. Under the policies, the government should provide accessible materials, accommodation and other support to the people with visual impairment. The inclusive policies should emphasizes the fairness, accessibility and proactive measure to ensure the rights of visually impaired people in Bangladesh. The inclusive policies would consider legislative inclusion, workplace accessibility standards, equal opportunities in recruitment, reasonable accommodations, public and private sector cooperation, and enforcement mechanisms and monitoring. By implementing these inclusion approach, the rate of description would be reduce in employment sectors as well as other field.

Training Opportunities

The study found that there are lack of training facilities to people with visual impairment in Bangladesh and even the inclusive training is limited. The study emphasizes the proper training for empowering people with visual impairment in Bangladesh to equip them in workplace. The study recommended that the government should implement a well structured training framework focusing on accessibility, skill development and modern technology. To implement the training program, the government can consider several factors including vocational skill development, assistive technology training, entrepreneurial support, internship program, workplace readiness training etc. Implementing these training opportunities for the people with visual impairment, visually impaired people would be high in number in the employment field in the future.

Visual Impairment Employment Taskforce

Bangladesh government has already an agency for the people with disabilities, but it is not sufficient to deal with large number of disabled people in Bangladesh. The country has still no specific government agency for the people with visual impairment. The study recommend that the government should establish a dedicated taskforce to monitor the employment conditions, advocates for the policy improvements and support visually impaired people. The agency should connect stakeholders whose linked with visual impairment field like visual impairment specialist, orientation and mobility specialists, braille educators. This taskforce will collaborate government and private organizations to increase the opportunities and address potential challenges for the people with visual impairment.

Employment in SMEs

With more than 170 million of population in Bangladesh, a significant number of people lived in a poverty line since over the decades. Among these people, most of them are engaged in agriculture and SMEs. Though the visually impaired people are depended on government support, some visually impaired people have showed their artisan abilities in particular their entrepreneurship

reflected their abilities. The government should provide necessary support and training to visually impaired people those wanted to be entrepreneurs and emphasizes their ideas.

Strengthening Policy Implementation

The visually impaired people are being neglected in all sectors in Bangladesh because of absence of laws and policies for them. While laws and policies exist to protect the rights of blind individuals, the effectiveness of policies including Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act 2013, Disability Act 2001 are often compromised by slow implementation and bureaucratic inefficiencies. The study recommended that the government should strengthen the existing laws and policies and allocate adequate funding for the disabilities services. To measure the policies goals, there is needed continuous evaluation, receiving feedback from the visually impaired people and taking necessary steps to bring actual outcome.

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