DATA GAPS STALL DISABILITY INCLUSION, EXPERTS CALL FOR UNIFIED NATIONAL DATABASE TO BOOST EMPLOYMENT

DISABILITIES - BANGLADESH

TBS REPORT

Efforts to ensure inclusive development for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh are being hampered by gaps in reliable data, fragmented policy implementation and weak coordination. The absence of a unified national database continues to undermine evidence-based planning and effective service delivery, according to experts at a multi-stakeholder discussion.

The policy discussion titled "Data matters: Numbers and evidence are key to disability inclusive society", held at TBS office in Dhaka on 20 May, was jointly organised by Bangladesh Business and Disability Network (BBDN) and BRAC Bank PLC in collaboration with The Business Standard (TBS). Rejaul Karim Siddiquee, Advocate, Disability Inclusion Expert presented the keynote, and the session was moderated by The Business Standard Senior Executive Editor Sharier Khan

Speakers stressed that despite policy progress and growing institutional attention, Bangladesh continues to face deep structural challenges in disability data collection, with prevalence estimates ranging widely and labour market inclusion remaining significantly low.

Experts discuss challenges in disability-inclusive development, including gaps in reliable data, fragmented policy implementation and weak coordination, at a roundtable titled "Data Matters: Numbers and Evidence are Key to Disability Inclusive Society" at The Business Standard office in Dhaka on 20 May. The event was jointly organised by the Bangladesh Business and Disability Network (BBDN) and BRAC Bank PLC in collaboration with The Business Standard. PHOTO: MEHEDI HASAN

TAREQ REFAT ULLAH KHAN
MANAGING DIRECTOR & CEO, BRAC BANK PLC

The banking sector has significant opportunities to advance CSR through investments in education, healthcare, climate resilience, and other priority areas. Last year, we supported nearly 100,000 people through eye surgeries, vision treatment, kidney dialysis, artificial limbs, glasses, and employment initiatives.

To ensure these interventions are targeted and impactful, they must be guided by reliable data. For persons with disabilities, understanding their numbers, demographics, employment status, and access to services is the basis for effective action. A unified national database can help institutions design evidence-based programmes, expand opportunities, and allocate resources more effectively, fostering a more inclusive society.

MD MAHBUBUL MUNIR
SECRETARY GENERAL, SWID BANGLADESH

Major structural gaps still exist in disability data collection, particularly for women and adolescent girls, as many families hide information due to social stigma and misconceptions. The Department of Social Services database currently includes around 3.9 million registered persons with disabilities, representing nearly 2.16% of the population.

Weak monitoring and budget shortages often result in estimate-based data entry instead of direct field collection, creating gaps between urban and rural data. Many persons with disabilities in tea gardens, char areas and slums also remain outside national registration. Incorrect classification of neuro-developmental disabilities continues to affect data accuracy, highlighting the need for stronger coordination, research and awareness.

ADV. REJAUL KARIM SIDDIQUEE
ADVOCATE, DISABILITY INCLUSION EXPERT

In his keynote presentation UNCRPD Article 31 makes disability data collection, analysis and dissemination a binding obligation for State Parties, requiring disaggregated data by disability type, gender and age, along with ensured accessibility and data protection. Proper implementation of this framework can significantly reduce existing data inconsistencies in Bangladesh and strengthen national planning, policy formulation and CRPD reporting. The Disability Rights and Protection Act 2013 is also highlighted as a progressive, CRPD-aligned law, comparable to or more comprehensive than those in many developed countries.

Prevalence data still shows major variation, ranging from 1.43% to 7.14% across different surveys -- a gap of about 5.71%, representing nearly one crore people. This inconsistency is driven by methodological differences and varying definitions. Direct questioning such as "are you disabled?" is considered problematic due to stigma, while Washington Group functional difficulty-based questions are recommended for internationally comparable data.

Globally, disability prevalence is estimated at around 16% by the World Bank, while Bangladesh figures remain much lower at 1%-2% in some surveys. The 2022 Labour Force Survey by BBS introduced Washington Group questions, showing 98.81% of the population as non-disabled, reflecting low labour participation of persons with disabilities.

Key recommendations include building a unified national data ecosystem, ensuring meaningful inclusion of Organisations of Persons with Disabilities in all stages of policy and planning, and strengthening inter-ministerial coordination and accountability to achieve an inclusive and effective disability data system.

AZIZA RAHMAN
DEPUTY DIRECTOR, INDUSTRY AND LABOUR WING BANGLADESH BUREAU OF STATISTICS

Disability-related data has been prioritised through the inclusion indicators in the population census, labour force survey, HIES. However, differences in survey objectives and methodologies continue to create variations in findings. Although Bangladesh officially recognises 12 types of disabilities, international practices largely rely on the Washington Group's six functional difficulty indicators, while a fully harmonised framework is yet to be established. The 2021 NSPD recorded a 2.8% disability prevalence rate.

The 2023-24 Labour Force Survey showed labour participation among persons with disabilities at 22%, compared to 62% for others. Participation among women with disabilities stood at only 11%, with an average income of Tk 10,470. Future efforts will prioritise accessibility, working hours, mobility constraints and database integration for a more reliable data system.

EKRAM KABIR
SENIOR EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, BRAC BANK PLC

Under Bangladesh Bank's Policy Guidelines on CSR, banks are directed to allocate CSR investments to education, health, environment, and other sectors. Based on our bank's framework, our focus is on prioritising healthcare support and creating an enabling society for persons with disabilities within the health sector. Among other efforts, advocacy to highlight disability as a national issue and to ensure evidence reaches policymakers is crucial.

The lack of reliable data on persons with disabilities remains a major concern, emphasising the need for data-driven planning. Strengthening evidence-based approaches is regarded as essential for building a more dignified and inclusive society, with calls to translate discussions into policy-level action.

SYED ATIKUL ALAM
TEAM LEADER, INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANIZATION (ILO)

The adoption of the Washington Group Set of Questions in Bangladesh has been viewed as a positive step, with the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics continuing related work. However, reliance on the short version still gives greater emphasis to the "medical model", which often fails to fully reflect the real experiences of persons with disabilities.

Beyond questionnaires, identifying social barriers, accessibility gaps and the lack of reasonable accommodation in the labour market remains essential. Limitations in transport, workplace infrastructure and supportive environments continue to restrict participation. Better training for data collectors and behavioural changes is also needed. Examples from Vietnam's improved questionnaire system and Sri Lanka's 3% quota policy highlight pathways toward a more inclusive labour market.

QAZI MUTMAINNA TAHMIDA
ADDITIONAL DIRECTOR, FINANCIAL INCLUSION DEPARTMENT, BANGLADESH BANK

Since 2008–09, Bangladesh Bank has strengthened inclusive banking, prioritising persons with disabilities under the national financial inclusion strategy. Banks have been instructed to open "no-frills accounts" with deposits as low as 10, 50 or 100 Taka, alongside a 7.5 billion Taka refinance scheme. As of December 2025, around 8.2 lakh no-frills accounts exist in the names of persons with disabilities.

However, deposits and loan usage remain very low, with most accounts used only once or twice a year for withdrawing government allowances. A major data gap persists as SME loan reporting does not separately capture disability-related information. Stronger coordination among banks, government institutions and stakeholders is needed to improve data quality and expand meaningful financial inclusion.

ANIKA RAHMAN LIPY
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, TRAINING, CENTRE FOR DISABILITY IN DEVELOPMENT (CDD)

A major reason for the underrepresentation of persons with disabilities in national statistics is the lack of knowledge and coordination between statisticians and the disability community. Field-level data is often not properly verified or analysed, which affects overall data quality. A past survey from 1992-93 showed that although 1,900 persons with disabilities were initially identified, around 400 households later moved and withheld information.

Social stigma and the tendency to hide mental health-related disabilities also remain key barriers. Limitations in the Washington Group short set mean some physical disabilities are not fully captured. Among the 12 officially recognised disability types, unclear definitions of "multiple" and "other" categories create inconsistencies in documentation. The absence of regular coordination meetings further weakens effective data management.

AZIZA AHMED.
DIRECTOR OPERATIONS, BBDN

Greater engagement from the private sector, alongside development organisations, is essential through employment generation, skills development and job fairs. Such initiatives can help transform social attitudes and institutional mindsets while expanding opportunities for persons with disabilities.

Media-driven awareness campaigns can further strengthen inclusion and encourage positive change. Continued advocacy, stronger partnerships and inclusive initiatives remain crucial to sustaining progress.

ALBERT MOLLAH
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ACCESS BANGLADESH FOUNDATION

Disability-related employment and data discussions have acknowledged BBS for introducing disability indicators in the 2022 Labour Force Survey, marking a significant step forward. However, concerns remain that the DIS system's employment-related report is not regularly updated, limiting information on job changes, promotions and retention. Key gaps also exist in informal sector data, job quality, reasonable accommodation and private sector employment.

Although the GEMS system covers over 1.4 million government employees, disability-specific data is not separately recorded. Lack of coordination between BBS, DIS and public administration is identified as a major challenge. A single indicator and integrated system aligned with UNCRPD and SDG 8 are seen as essential for building a unified data ecosystem and inclusive employment tracking

SHAH MOHAMMAD MAHBOOB
DIRECTOR GENERAL, DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

Creating and updating an accurate disability database remains a major challenge due to limited manpower and the large number of social allowance recipients. With millions already receiving various government benefits, it is not always possible to conduct door-to-door verification in every area. An open online database has therefore been introduced, allowing applicants to submit information directly. Identity verification is carried out through NID-linked APIs, while local committees at the upazila level assess disability status before approval.

Disability prevalence estimates in Bangladesh still vary significantly, ranging from 1.4 per cent to 7.14 per cent, translating to roughly 23.8 lakh to over 1.21 crore people. According to BBS, the rate stands at 2.8 per cent, or about 47.6 lakh, while the Department of Social Services has registered around 39-40 lakh persons with disabilities. However, many eligible individuals remain unaware of services such as the "suborno card" and related benefits.

Data collection is further complicated by inaccuracies in proxy-based assessments and inconsistencies in survey methods. Although Washington Group indicators are used, challenges remain regarding proper classification and local adaptation. Social stigma, lack of awareness, weak coordination and limited digital integration continue to affect reliability, making a unified, verified and accessible database essential