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Increasing employment of people with disabilities

Places of work and education must be more disability-friendly

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Bangladesh has long been suffering from lack of employability among its vast population, but this situation is worse for people with disabilities (PWDs), despite the fact that in the modern era, the IT revolution has led to jobs that are less traditionally physical and office-oriented. It is estimated that around 16 million disabled people live in the country, making up almost 10 percent of the population.

PWDs are often socially excluded and treated as outcasts in our society – a scenario that intensifies when the PWD is a woman due to patriarchal notions of a woman's primary role as a caregiver. This is often compounded by the prejudice that disabled women are not able to bear children. On top of that, there is the stigma surrounding disabled children and their mothers, who are held "responsible" for their disability and are often powerless in pushing for their children's education.

Although the prejudice is more intense when it comes to women, all PWDs suffer harshly as the world we live in is inherently "ableist." However, they could be valuable human resources and contribute to the economy if we could only develop their efficiency and skills from the very beginning and create an adjusted work arrangement to make workplaces more accessible for PWDs.

Employability is a form of social inclusion where PWDs are being neglected. Currently, if you're disabled, getting a job is like looking for a needle in a haystack. Research conducted in Bangladesh among PWDs showed that 70 percent of them were not satisfied or partially satisfied with

the accessibility of jobs. As a result, they are often forced to be unemployed and dependent on others, even if they have employable skills. As a result, PWDs can suffer from social and psychological problems, since life satisfaction is correlated with employment, and making economic contributions can lead to acceptance and dignity within families and societies.

However, it is not just poor accessibility in workplaces; PWDs can also face high levels of direct discrimination in their workplace. They are often passed over for promotions and easily considered unworthy of more senior positions. Unfair wage rates, bullying and harassment are other common issues that a disabled person faces at work in Bangladesh. These are likely to be one of the main reasons for most Bangladeshi PWDs being self-employed, but they can face discrimination from buyers of their products or services too.

We can look to other countries to find how they have included PWDs in their economy. For example, the German government has more than 40 specialties for training disabled people for professions such as trade, wood and metal processing. They have also trained PWDs in the basics of programming, radio engineering and electronics. All work arrangements in Germany for disabled people are done in compliance with ergonomics aspects to get the best work efficiency. But it is a matter of great sorrow that such work arrangements are a mere dream in our country.

It is a formidable task to ensure a financially secure and dignified lifestyle for PWDs without practical efforts to create an adaptable workplace for them. One adjustment could be to design tasks in a way that PWDs can perform in their condition. In this regard, ergonomics can be the best solution, but this is often neglected in Bangladesh. Ergonomics is the process of arranging a workplace to make it more suitable for the people working in it. Ground floor facilities, wheelchair accessibility, adapted equipment and timing, and disability-friendly training modules are some of the facilities that organisations can provide. Accessibility is equally important for educational institutions, which only a few Bangladeshi universities have so far, such as University of Dhaka, University of Chittagong, Rajshahi University, and BRAC University.

Before, there was a 10 percent quota on government jobs for people with disabilities, but this ended with the abolishing of the quota system. Although the government has announced there will be a quota for PWDs in future recruitment, we had seen before how a lack of clarity on the term "disability" made this mostly futile. Additionally, this will not suffice for the large number of disabled people we have. In the most recent fiscal budget, the allocation for disabled people was a mere 0.37 percent, and 2.07 percent of the safety net budget. So without public spending, without opportunities for work, and without accessible educational institutes and workplaces, how can PWDs have a chance of earning their own livelihoods and living with dignity and respect?

It is high time that every workplace in different industries, such as banking, RMG, farming, tourism, pharmaceuticals, textiles and so on, focus on including PWDs in their institutions. Along with creating an accessible and adjusted workplace, adequate job training and the creation of modified jobs in mainstream industries might be the changes they need for their employment. Due to the pandemic, the digital economy has been blooming, and technological training for PWDs could boost their employability in tech-oriented jobs. Freelancing jobs could also turn PWDs into assets. Given that the number of disabled persons in the country is increasing for a number of reasons, including deaths in road crashes, it is high time for us to at least begin to have conversations on how to increase the employability of people with disabilities in Bangladesh.

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