

COVID-19 Pandemic: A Difficult Time for Persons with Disabilities in Bangladesh

10 June, 2020

**Funded by
The Royal Embassy of Netherlands**



Background

Over
1 BILLION
people globally
experience
disability



1 in **7** people

- **15%** of the total population (WHO, 2011)
- **82%** are from the developing countries (WHO, 2014)
- In Bangladesh, the proportion of persons with disabilities is estimated to be **6.94%** (HIES, 2016)
- Bangladesh Disability Information System maintained by DSS, MoSW till date enlisted **1804009** persons with disabilities

Background

Persons with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic

- Persons with disabilities are at increased risk of COVID-19 infection because:
 - Maintaining social distance and separation from caregivers may not be possible for them
 - Many of them have limited access to information
 - Access to WASH measures and facilities might be difficult
- If someone gets COVID-19, he/she may find it difficult to access health services because of the existing physical, attitudinal and institutional barriers
- Not receiving adequate assistance for health-related concerns, may result in life-threatening situations



Background

Persons with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic

- A lack of health, social and economic support may lead to:
 - Poor physical and psychological wellbeing (distress, anxiety, negative thoughts etc.)
 - Loss of income and opportunity
 - Increased food insecurity
 - Increased poverty



Rationale



- During the COVID-19 pandemic PWDs are bleaker than others due to physical and economic vulnerability

- Such vulnerabilities aggregate in resource constrain settings

- 82% PWDs are from resource constrain settings where challenges and mitigations are diverse and contextual

- To initiate effective actions it is crucial to generate contextual evidence

- In response to the COVID-19 GoB has initiated mass aid services and health care vigilance

- However, PWDs access to available services are questionable even though these are their citizen rights

- Although governments are suggested to put attention towards the vulnerable, targeted services are still inadequate

- To adopt effective plan of actions it is critical to understand the impact of COVID-19 on PWDs



Objectives

Objective 1: Exploring knowledge about COVID-19 among persons with disabilities and the challenges they experience in maintaining hygiene and social distancing practices to avoid COVID-19 infection

Objective 2: Understanding the immediate effect of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of persons with disabilities including the key aspects such as employment, education and social security

Objective 3: Exploring the effect of COVID-19 on the food security status of households with a disabled member

Objective 4: Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on the physical and mental health of persons with disabilities', their adopted coping strategies and barriers in accessing health services

Methodology

Study design

- Exploratory qualitative study

Study Settings

- 5 different geographical locations in Bangladesh

Sampling

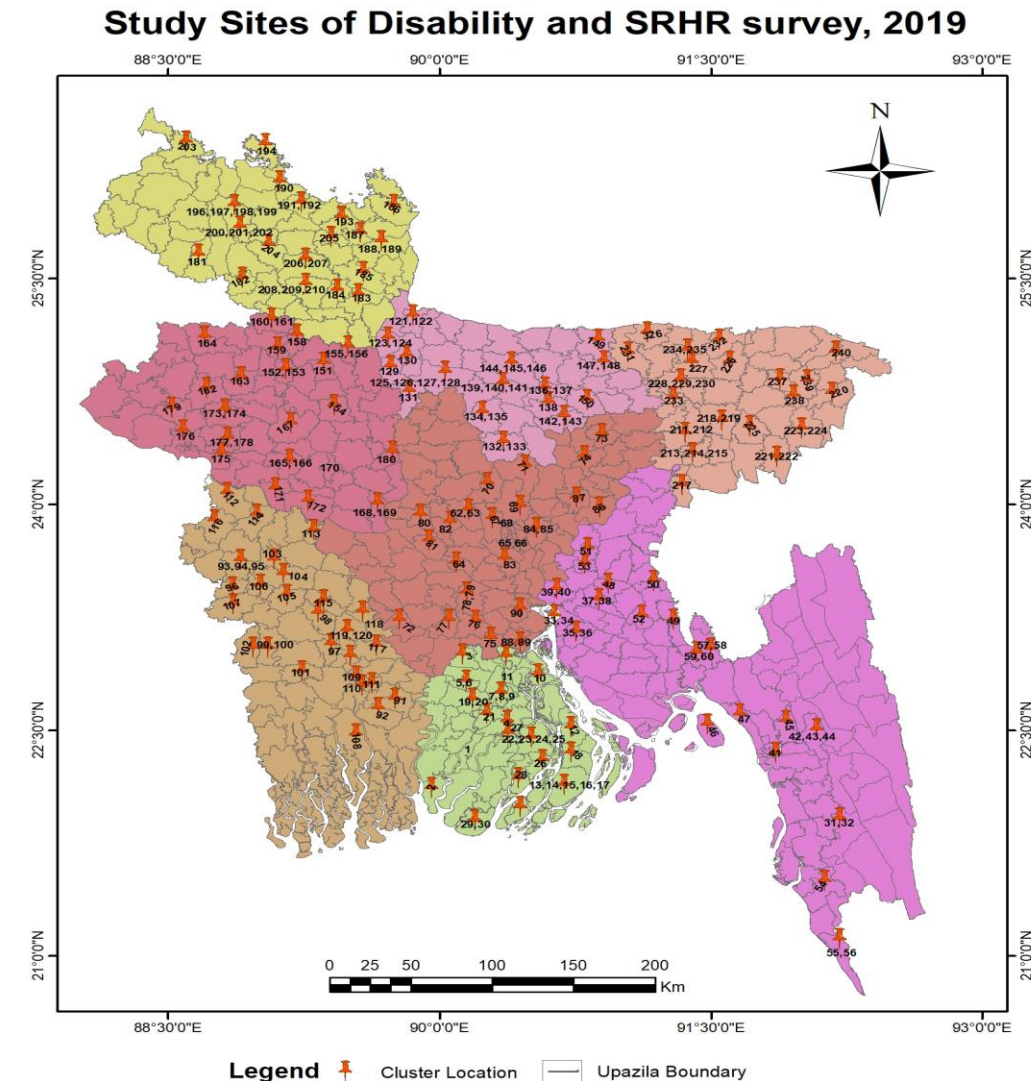
- 20 persons with disabilities (10 male & 10 female) were purposively selected from the sample (n=5,000) of nationwide survey on SRHR of persons with disabilities

Data Collection method

- In-depth interview over phone

Analysis

- Thematic analysis



Methodology

Respondents selection criteria for COVID-19 study

- Disability type and duration
- Geographical location
- Gender
- Employment status
- Communication ability
- Availability of phone

Types of Disabilities covered

- Physical Disability
- Visual impairment
- Mild Hearing impairment
- Cerebral palsy
- Multiple Disability



Location Covered

- Dhaka
- Mymensingh
- Sylhet
- Chittagong
- Rajshahi

Methodology

Respondents selection criteria for COVID-19 study

- Disability type and duration
- Geographical location
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Employment category covered

Female

Tutor

Shopkeeper

Tailor

Maid

Student

Housewife

Jobless

Male

Agriculturalist

Businessman

Rickshaw puller

Daily wager

Student

Beggar

Jobless

Results

Knowledge about COVID-19 and challenges to maintain safety practices

Source of knowledge

- Television
- Radio
- Newspaper

- Facebook
- Relatives
- Neighbor's

"I have got fever for 10/15 days; I feel pain in all body. I need to go to doctor, but neighbors suggested me not to go the doctors, if I go, they will inject me to die in suspect of that disease (corona)."

30y old female with physical disability

Barriers to practices

- Many of them do not have access to information
- Many do not have money to buy safety materials
- Caregiver dependence
- Not capable to stay home due to livelihood search
- Cannot avoid gathering because this is identified as a way to stress relief
- Others do not practice

Knowledge about COVID 19

Symptoms

Fever, sneeze, cold, dry cough, throat pain, chest pain, headache, body pain, breathing problem, diarrhea etc

Prevention

- stay home
- Avoid social gatherings
- Frequent hand washing with soap or sanitizer

To do if shown symptoms

- Television
- Radio
- Newspaper

Results

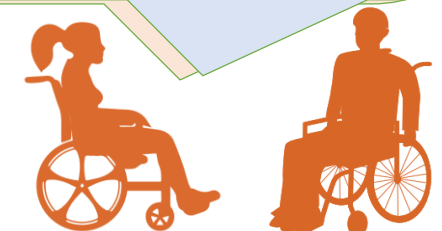
Effect of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of persons with disabilities

Income loss, impoverishment during the COVID 19 pandemic

- Among the 20-respondents interviewed only one respondent informed that he has income stability and savings.
- Rest are dependent on informal economy, income loss has become common phenomenon. They are trying to cope up with this situation in different ways, like:
 - depending on savings,
 - taking loans,
 - seeking relatives help,
 - begging,
 - depending on agriculture and domestic animals etc.
- Daily wage earners are facing more difficulties
- Some of them are trying to continue their jobs with life risk

“Corona is directly hitting my income. Not that I was wealthy before. But I could at least buy food for the family. Now the prices are even hiked. If you have money you can enjoy the corona sitting at home. How can I sit at home when my family is starving! I am the sole breadwinner of the family. Every morning, when I worry about all these, I think that I should go out with my auto rickshaw. But because of the locked down situation, I can’t.”

(Idl, 35y male, auto rickshaw driver with physical disability)



Results

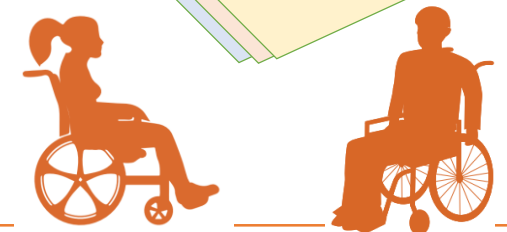
Effect of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of persons with disabilities

Deprived of relief, social security and safety net

- Out of 20 respondents, most were unaware of any aid or relief
- Some respondents got food item relief from some unofficial sources such as local politicians, local police officers, family friends and neighbours
- Few heard about the general stimulus package but only 2 respondents received relief from the government through municipality, local government or local police
- Most of them did not get allocated aid due to political bias, discrimination on the basis of gender and/or disability

"Few days ago, I heard about a relief program by BRAC. I heard that they will provide 1500 taka to each person. I went to our commissioner. He said that, my name was not included in the list. Other than BRAC, I went to him for availing the relief facility from the government as well, but he did not incorporate. I got deprived. I went to him four or five times. He did not help me even for once."

(46y Male with visual impairment)



Results

Effect of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of persons with disabilities

Lack in disability sensitive social security and safety net services

Many of them cannot reach to avail the aid services. One respondent informed that food aid is being distributed to their area at night and the distribution point was far from his residence

- Many of the persons with disabilities are not even approaching for aid. Especially educated, middle class families are in dilemma now, neither they can seek help nor can bear poverty
- Two respondents informed that the allowance allotted for the persons with disabilities has been postponed

"I don't know about social safety and security for us during a crisis. I only know about the monthly allowance that we get after three months, but at this moment I did not get any allowance. I have heard that one donation has arrived at the social welfare office for us."

30y old female with physical disability



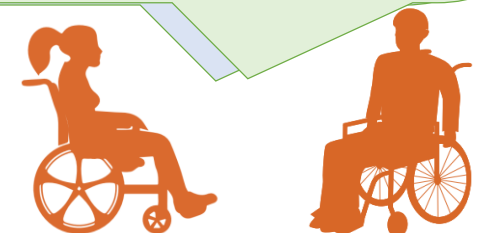
Results

Effect of COVID-19 on the food security status of households with a disabled member

Persistent food insecurity aggravated

- 19 out of 20 respondents informed that they had persistent food insecurity
- Food insecurity aggravated due to the income loss during COVID 19 lockdown
- Since they cannot buy enough food they are trying to cope up with this situation in different ways, like:
 - decreasing protein consumption,
 - decreasing food quantity & quality,
 - relying more on vegetables,
 - skipping meals or starving,
 - depending on home growing vegetables, etc.

“Rice with dal, that's what we eat every meal. We are not having any fish/meat or vegetables for quite a long time..... as there's no income and the stored food is almost over, sometimes my mom doesn't eat thinking one of her children will be able to eat next time. My siblings are doing the same. To sum up, we are trying to utilize two meals worth of food into three meals.”
(35y male with visual impairment)



Results

Effect of COVID-19 on the food security status of households with a disabled member

Reduced availability and accessibility to food

- Due to transportation crisis they cannot visit market, especially in rural and hilly areas
- Due to price hike food items are often beyond their purchasing capacity
- Relief goods are another source of food that they barely accessed

“We are facing the most devastating famine in our lifetime. We take just one meal a day. Previously we had to cook over 2 kg rice each day, now we cook only around 1 kg. We eat the rice with only salt. We don’t have any savings or food stock. Someday I just fast.”

(18 year old twins with physical disability)



Results

Impact of COVID-19 on the physical and mental health of persons with disabilities

Physical and mental health of persons with disabilities and health service accessibility

- Chronic health issues like heart diseases, chronic pain are deteriorating due to lack of care, mobility and caregiver support. Emergency cares is also inadequate
- Regular check-ups are being disrupted due to financial crisis, lack of transportation and limited service
- Financial crisis and strict law enforcement also became the barriers to service access

“I am not being able to earn to feed my family. This worries me so much that I feel like something is stuck in my throat, and I can’t gulp or move it. I often feel suffocated.”

(40 y male with physical disability)



Results

Coping strategy for better mental health and psychosocial well-being

- Trying to be in a positive mindset
 - They have started to fasting, praying, reading of religious scriptures. As they believe that only God can solve this problem, it helps them to get rid of the anxiety
 - They also started to spend time with others especially the neighbors and family
- Many have started to listen to radio programs and watch television to divert the mind from unwanted thoughts
 - Besides, indoor games such as 'ludo' have become popular to pass the leisure hours
 - Some of them are utilizing this time to develop a relationship with relatives and friends through mobile phone and social media



Recommendations

- Targeted aid and services are required for the persons with disabilities
- Ultra-poor households with a disabled person must get emergency aid from the government
- Government aid should be provided at doorstep, considering their caregiver-dependence
- Persons with disabilities recommended to develop a biometrics-based system, through which various allowance beneficiaries can withdraw their money without any hassle
- Law enforcement agencies need to be sensitized about the persons with disabilities and assist them while accessing any services
- Targeted healthcare services should be made available for persons with disabilities
- More relevant vocational training and collaboration are required to promote self-employments among persons with disabilities

Thank You