

Women with Disabilities in Bangladesh: Accessibility in the Built Environment

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Abstract

Bangladesh is one of the signatories of United Nations Conventions on Rights of People with Disabilities (UN CRPD) that ascertains accessibility of disabled people to all sorts of physical facilities including but not limited to transports and public institutions. In accordance with the National Building Code (NBC), Dhaka City Construction Rule 2008, Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act 2013 and Road Transport Act 2018 Government of Bangladesh and different authorities are obligated to ensure an accessible environment for Women with Disabilities (WWDs). Transport facilities and infrastructure are invariably inaccessible for Women with Disabilities, prohibiting their movement around their local area as well as around the country. Therefore, assessing the accessibility of women with disabilities to public transport and institutions in the built environment is the focus of this study. No study was conducted systematically on this specific area of Women with Disabilities. So, this study aimed to assess the Accessibility Rights of Women with Disabilities in public transports and public institutions in order to include them in mainstreaming development of Bangladesh. In this study, data were collected through one to one interview to Woman with Disability Development Foundation's (WDDF) staff and Disable Peoples Organizations' (DPO) activists, and FGDs from randomly selected 50 Women with Disabilities from WDDF database. Relevant legislation, rules, regulations, policies, circulars, and related literature were reviewed. The respondents of the FGD noted that as Women with Disabilities faced multifaceted challenges to avail basic civil rights and essential services such as education, healthcare, treatment, employment, communications, banking services and so on from Government and Non-Government Organizations more than Male with Disabilities due to existing inaccessibility in public transports and institutions. Key Informants (KI) focused on strong monitoring and mechanism system, implementing and actualizing existing legislation and policies including adopting time required and effective initiatives. Existing legislation, policies and orders for accessible public institutions and transports should be implemented properly and monitoring and mechanism system should be strong enough to enforce these legislations, policies and orders.

Key Words: Equal, Constitutional Rights, Road Transport, Protection, Strong Monitoring

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Introduction

The term "**disability**" summarizes a great number of different functional limitations occurring in any population in any country of the world. Disability is defined as an evolving concept results from the interaction between persons/women with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others (Ahmed et. al. 2018, Ramanna 2016, Baris & Uslu 2009, Weweldenige 2012). People may be disabled by physical, intellectual or sensory impairment, medical conditions or mental illness (Helender 1993, Rao 1990, Gasper 1999, Sen 1990). Such impairments, conditions or illnesses may be permanent or transitory in nature. The United Nations Standard Rules on Equalization of Opportunity for Persons with Disabilities 1994 mentions that for persons with disabilities of any kind, States should (a) introduce programs of action to make the physical environment accessible; and (b) undertake measures to provide access to information and communication. In Sustainable Development Goal 11, target 2 states that "by 2030, provide access to safe, affordable, accessible and sustainable transport systems for all, improving road safety, notably by expanding public transport, with special attention to the needs of those in vulnerable situations, women, and children, persons with disabilities and older persons"; where Target 7 states that "by 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities".

The estimated number of Persons with Disabilities (PWDs) in Bangladesh is around 24 million which constitutes 15 % of the total population, 50% of them are female (WHO, 2011). They are incapable of accessing the facilities of the public institutions and transportation systems. The presence of environmental barriers prevents Persons with Disabilities specially women from accessing health care, educational, cultural and recreational facilities such as educational institutes, health care facilities, shopping centers, worship places, convention centers, parks, historical monuments, public gathering places etc. Transport facilities and infrastructure are invariably inaccessible for Women with Disabilities, prohibiting their movement around their local area as well as around the country. Social attitude and practical norms never allow Women with Disabilities to receive support except family members. People with disabilities have generally poorer health, lower education achievements and higher rates of poverty than that of others due to the lack of services available to them (WDDF, 2017, Rao 1990). The implementation of "Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act 2013" is an obligation for the Government and the society also. The concrete actions are required for the inclusion of people with disabilities to promote the social and economic development of the country and the achievement of the human rights of persons with disabilities (WHO, 2011). Bangladesh has been allocated the second highest percentage of the budget to improve the condition of road and transport system for the citizen. Since Independence of Bangladesh in last 46 years, many revolutionary developments have been made in various sectors of Bangladesh, and those outstanding achievements have enabled the country graduated from Least Developed Country (LDC) to a developing country. However, very little has been changed with regards to the accessibility of persons specially Women with Disabilities in the built environment. It is indivisible to ensure accessibility rights of an integral part of population i.e. 12 million of Women with Disabilities for utilizing their contribution by turning them into efficient and

effective manpower. Otherwise, it will be very difficult for the state to advance leaving behind this large number of inactive and backward.

This study intends to expose the real scenario of Women with Disabilities due to very limited access in public transports and institutions and to assess the essentiality and effectiveness of removing the limitations through finding out the attitudinal, speculative and systematic gaps that hinder the process of incorporation of this population in mainstreaming development of the state. Therefore, this study aimed at assessing the Accessibility Rights of Women with Disabilities in public transports and public institutions in Bangladesh; and; identifying the challenges of accessibility. The study will also endeavor to find out the gaps between policies and implementation strategies of Government specially Ministry of Social Welfare and other agencies in implementing accessibility rights of women with disabilities to avail public transports and institutions.

The regulatory framework for disabled persons in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2013 has been enforced with accessibility provisions to ensure and protect the right of disabled persons. In section 2 (13) 'Accessibility' has been defined as "the right of persons with disabilities to get access, opportunity and treatment on an equal basis with others in all facilities and services available to the general public, including physical infrastructure, transportation, communication, information, and information and communication technology." In section 34 of the Act public places are explained as "such public and private buildings, parks, stations, ports, terminals, and roads where the public has access to." The section 32 enforced accessibility in all public transports, where public transports have been defined as "any transport on land, water or air that transports passengers in exchange for fare" (The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2013). The National Building Code has been made inclusive of accessibility issues following internationally accepted accessibility guidelines. The Building Construction Code for the Capital City has included the concepts of universal design. The Dhaka Mahanagar Building Construction Rule 2008 has been adopted under the Building Construction Act 1952 (E.B Act II of 1953). This Rule recognized Universal Accessibility and Universal Design. In the section-2 'Universal Design' is defined as a design where the necessity of all persons will be considered from the physical point of view. Section-75 of this Rule guaranteed the accessibility rights of persons with disabilities stating special provision concerning universal accessibility including persons with disabilities. According to this section, each building must ensure universal accessibility from parking space to lift lobby, there should be at least one accessible toilet in each floor or 5% of total toilets. Schedule 3 provides a detailed description of universal accessibility. There are nine sections in this schedule to ensure accessibility of all including persons with disabilities. These are general principles, doors, railings, stairs, ramps, and lifts, washroom/toilets, parking, and sitting areas.

Methodology

The study was carried out through interview of the Women with Disabilities who were working for improving their situation and students of different areas of Dhaka City. The area consisted of Adabar, Boxibazar, Azimpur, Mirpur, Monipuripara, and Rajabazar of Dhaka City Corporation. The primary data was collected from the members, beneficiaries of the Women with Disabilities

Development Foundation (WDDF) and Women leaders of Disabled Peoples Organizations (DPOs). For the one-to-one interview, the interviewee was selected randomly from the database provided by the Women with Disabilities Development Foundation (WDDF). They maintain the database of only 15 years and above old female. The Key Informant Interview (KII) was conducted with the experts and longtime experienced on rights of Women with Disabilities and representatives of stakeholders engaged in activities related to women with disabilities. Various related reports, studies, a database of WDDF were used as secondary sources. The data were qualitative in nature. The recorded data from each interviewee in the form of transcriptions were analyzed. Different charts, diagrams were used to analyze the data. The study included a sample size of 50 Women with Disabilities, randomly selected from the abovementioned areas.

Results and Discussion

Profile of the respondents:

The different particulars of the respondents especially age, type of disability, occupation, and household size, how Women with Disabilities were interrupted to include in the development process and what types of dilemmas they face in family and society to enjoy the basic rights of leading lives due to inaccessibility in public transports and institutions were analyzed. The age group of the respondents was categorized into five groups and these were 15-19, 20-25, 26-30, 31-40 and above 40 years for easy interpretation. It is revealed that thirty percent (30%) of the respondents were under the age group of 15-19 who were visually impaired and intellectually disabled, while thirty percent (30%) were under the age group of 41-50 who were physically disabled (Figure 1 & 2).

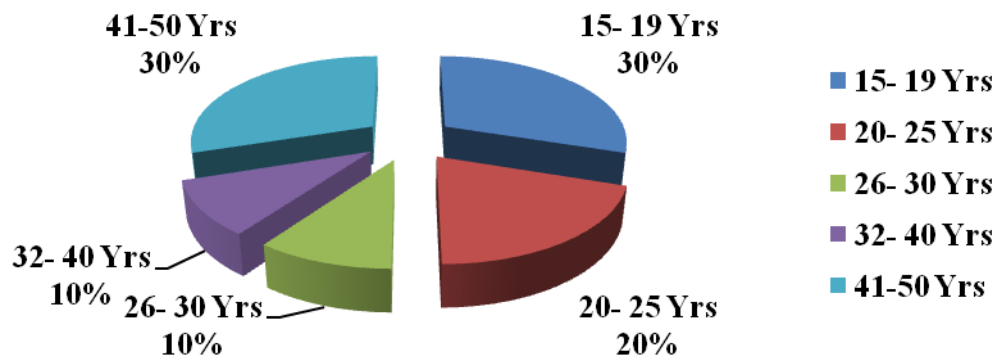


Figure 1: Age group of respondent women with disabilities

The figure-2 shows that thirty percent (30%) of the respondent women were physically disabled and 20% of the respondents had hearing and speech impairment.

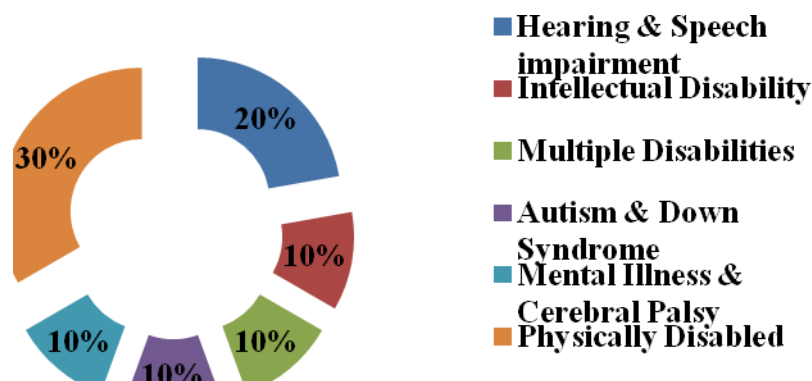


Figure 2: Type of disabilities among respondent women with disabilities

The figure-3 shows that only 6 % of the women with disabilities lived in a family of 2 members while the majority (80%) of the women with disabilities in the family of 3-6 members. It was further identified that about 14% of the women with disabilities had a family size of 7-9. It is, therefore, can be perceived that because of disability, none of the respondents can live alone. The number of women with a disability was more in the larger family than a smaller one.

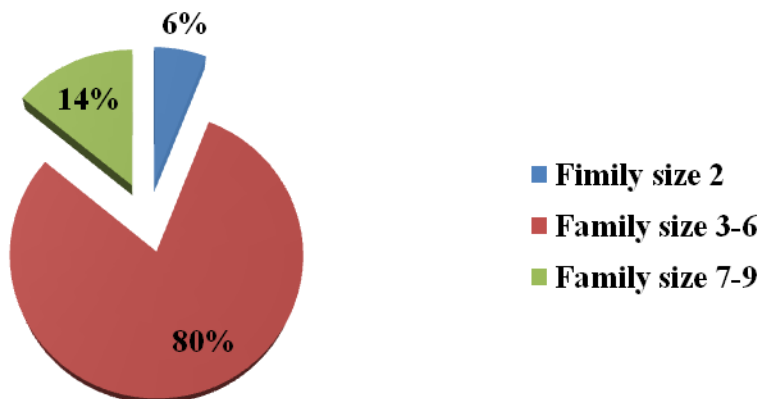


Figure 3: Family size of the respondent women with disabilities

Status of using public transports:

It was found that usually, it was very difficult for Women with Disabilities to get access to the public and private transports since those were not accessible and not meant for disabled people. Therefore, more than 60% of respondents were not able to use the bus as the buses were not accessible by the Wheel Chair and Crutch users and buses were overcrowded. The means of

transport that availed by the respondents found that most of them were using rickshaw for traveling close distance with the help of family members and friends while for traveling far distance they were depending on the train and buses though those were not also disabled accessible (Figure-4).

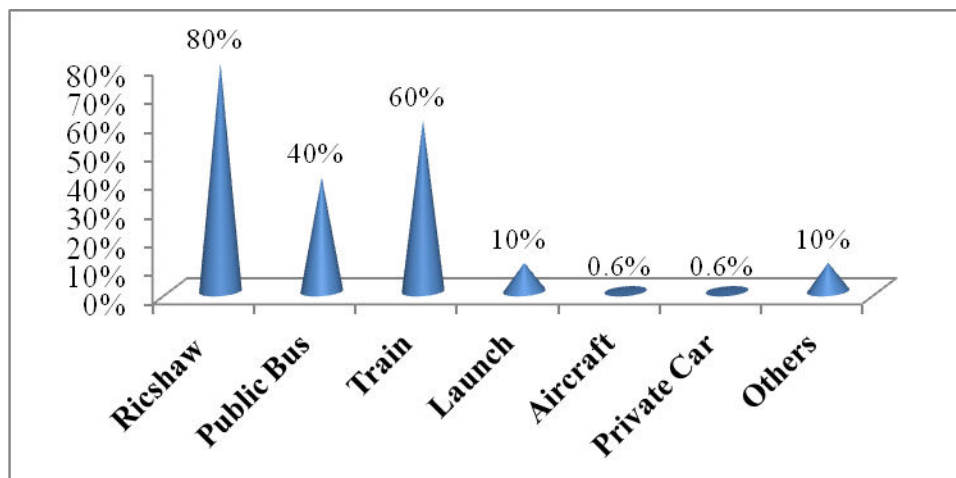


Figure 4: Means of Transport usage rate by the Respondent Women with Disabilities (WWDs)

Though 40% were struggling to use bus as they had mentioned that they were to get on the bus with the risk of life as at the time of getting on and getting down of passengers buses were not stopped in bus stands or terminals properly rather these were stopped in the middle of roads and passengers had to run to catch the running bus. Most of the bus drivers and helpers showed a negative attitude. In most cases they were not able to enjoy the facility due to an inappropriate conception of disability and improper sitting management. It is also noted from the respondents who were using a train that, there was no accessible compartment in any train for Women with wheel Chair and Crutch Users and despite having different types of complexity, 60% were trying to use trains for their mobility. Though the very limited number of rail stations had created ramps but ticket counters, waiting room and washrooms were completely inaccessible and insecure for all types of WWDs. It is further noted that, express inter-city trains had two reserved seats for PWDs and tickets for these seats had were distributed to PWDs on a 50% discount price but in most cases, 80% WWDs respondents were not able to enjoy this facility for being gender while less than 20% WWDs were hardly benefited from this facility. The respondents, who were using rickshaw notified that they can use rickshaw for covering close distance and reducing transport cost but nowadays, rickshaws were not allowed in many VIP roads in order to reduce traffic jam and this had created a great limitation for the mobility of PWDs/WWDs. It is further noted from the respondents, who were using launch that, the launch is not only inaccessible but also very risky for almost all types of WWDs and less than 10% WWDs had to use launch with the close support of their relatives or co-passengers. While a very low percentage of WWDs had got the opportunity to get on ship occasionally but it was not easy at all. Though 5% respondents noted that, they were using the private car but most of the respondents mentioned that, due to inaccessible transport system they were to use the private car which was very difficult for them to afford the expenditure. Financially solvent PWDs were able to use private car though their

number was extremely limited. All the respondents noted that, footpath, foot over bridge, underpass and zebra crossings were inaccessible for Persons/Women with Disabilities, especially Wheel Chair and Crutch users, Visual Impaired Persons due to not having ramps, guide block, elevators except a very low less than one percent footpath in Dhaka city which were also blocked by pillars. So, these inaccessible establishments which were inevitably related to mobility imposed a great limitation for mobility of Women with Disabilities independently and securely. The respondents also revealed that, at the time of using so busy and inaccessible public transports, 90% WWDs became a victim of mental, physical and sexual harassments which had not ever been expressed publicly (Figure-5).

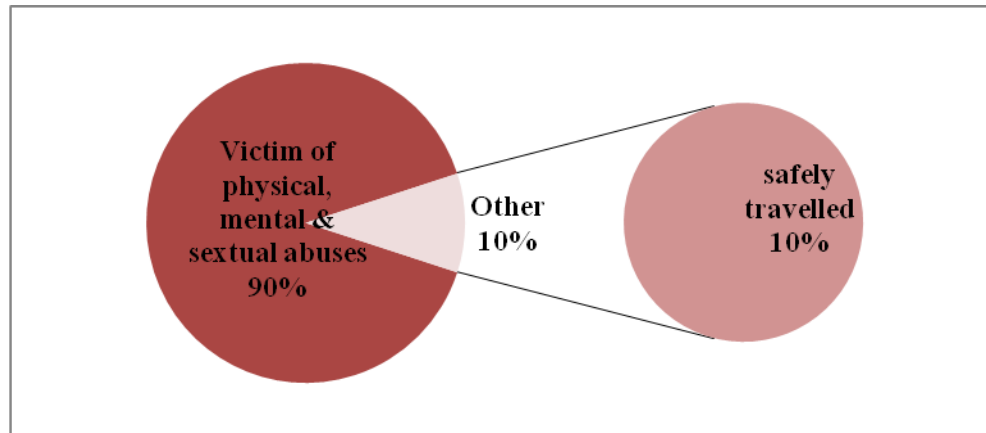


Figure 5: Rate of abusive cases of WWDs in availing public transports

Essentially, due to this challenging, risky and insecure mobility environment, most of the Women with Disabilities were deprived of their basic needs including very essential services for leading their lives and in this consequence, a larger portion of the population was becoming inactive simultaneously family and society were going to be overburdened.

Accessibility situation of WWDs in public institutions:

Almost 90% public institutions such as school, college, university, technical educational institutes, hospital, and workplaces were inaccessible for WWDs and they were deprived of enjoying basic rights including education, government services, and facilities. The respondents mentioned that, though ramps were built in less than 10% of the public institutions but having no elevator, washrooms, waiting room/common room, classroom, office room including educational and working equipment were inaccessible for WWDs. So, only a ramp in the entrance was not sufficient and cannot create accessibility for PWDs.

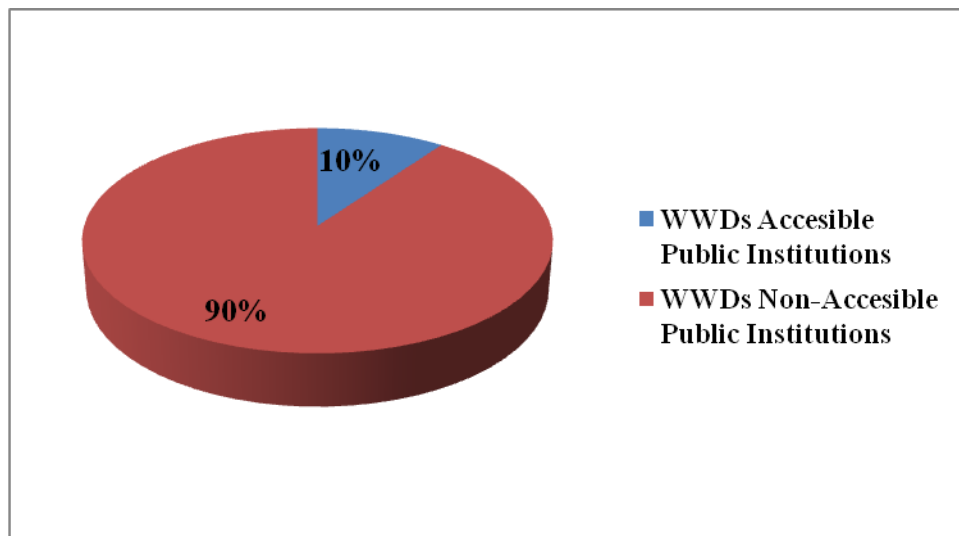


Figure 6: Accessibility of WWDs in Public Institutions

Only 4% of Children with Disabilities were getting the opportunity of going to school (CSID, 2004). Less than 1% female Children with Disabilities were getting the opportunity of going to school (BLAST) 2017). More than 90% respondents mentioned that, they were deprived of getting basic civil rights and facilities such as education, health care, employment, treatment while more than 80% doctors had no idea about Persons/Women with Disabilities and in some cases, they were becoming victim of misbehavior, negative attitude, and wrong treatment. Besides, 10 % respondents noted, they had to face multifaceted challenges for obtaining equal civil rights like others. The study revealed that the accessibility scenario of Women with Disabilities in public institutions is extremely susceptible. Inaccessible infrastructures had imposed more limitation for WWDs of remote and rural were as than Dhaka city. So, this inaccessible situation in public institutions had was excluded not only WWDs but also children, pregnant and baby carrying mother, elder people and patient from the development process and in this consequence, proper development of society and state will extremely be interrupted. Almost all bazars, markets, bus terminals, parks, and marriage centers were inaccessible. The respondents noted that, though very limited shopping centers and community centers had installed elevators billing counters, washrooms and other important facilities of these shopping centers and community centers were not accessible for more than 95% of the respondents/WWDs. Ninety five percent (95%) respondents mentioned that, almost 99% worship places such as Mosques, Temples, Church and Pagoda, recreational and cultural centers including social festivals were totally inaccessible for Women with Disabilities and less than 5% WWDs were getting opportunity to access in these places or enjoy these facilities. Ninety percent (90%) respondents mentioned that they were deprived of receiving essential public services from government institutions such as Bank, Post office and other Government or Non-Government offices due to being gender and disability and these difficulties were influencing their livelihood unanimously.

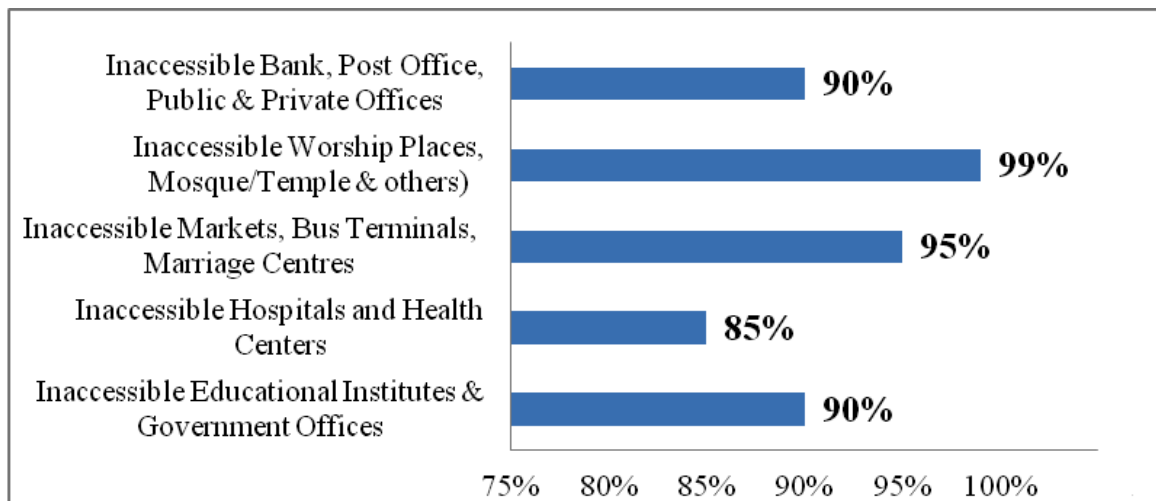


Figure 7: WWDs inaccessible Infrastructures

Seventy-five (75%) of the respondents notified that, they were getting the opportunity to use Aircraft sometimes and domestic aircraft were not disability inclusive while staffs of the aircraft had shown negative attitude for due to being gender and disability and they were not properly trained to deal with the passengers with disabilities. All the respondents noted that, there was not any accessible immigration counter or desk for Wheel Chair Users/Persons with disabilities and though an accessible washroom was created for PWDs but the door of the washroom cannot be locked. According to the 30% respondents, it is noted that, in domestic flight, need-based equipment for PWDs such as Cabin Chair and so on. The staffs of Airport and Aircraft were not trained to handle PWDs and their assistive devices properly while international aircraft including their staffs were responsible and sincere for ensuring accessibility of PWDs.

Awareness about Regulatory Framework:

Forty percent (40%) of the respondents were not aware of the legislation and policies regarding the accessibility of Persons/Women with Disabilities (P/WWDs) in public transports and institutions while 60% of the respondents noted that, though a number of legislation and policies were enacted addressing the special requirements of P/WWDs in terms of accessibility but these legislations and policies were not implemented properly in both the sectors public transports and institutions. While hundred percent respondents strongly mentioned that, Government should take time required, effective and strong initiative through addressing the special requirements of Persons especially Women with Disabilities and with consultation with Disabled Peoples Organizations (DPOs) and PWDs to reduce the barriers of accessibility in public institutions and transports. The respondents also noted that Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), international Non-Government Organizations (INGOs), Civil society, media, and the general public can play a contributive role for reducing the barriers of accessibility in public transports institutions and institutions for making inclusive society through extending their support and cooperation to help the Government. Otherwise, it was not only difficult for Government alone but also impossible to bring positive changes in the barrier-free and accessible environment for WWDs. The respondents of the FGD noted that as Women with Disabilities faced multifaceted

challenges to avail basic civil rights and essential services such as education, healthcare, treatment, employment, communications, banking services and so on from Government and Non-Government Organizations more than Male with Disabilities due to existing inaccessibility in public transports and institutions. They mentioned that the barriers of accessibility deprived them of cultural, recreational rights, contributing to social activities and social festivals including public gatherings. As a result, being disconnected from all development processes they were not able to contribute in family and society and in the consequence, they were becoming isolated and victim of discrimination by their family and society. They also focused that, inaccessibility was one of the most important factors of insecurity; due to inaccessibility, Women with Disabilities had to take cooperation from others to move around and in most cases, they faced the risk of security. Hence, this situation prohibited Women with Disabilities to move alone and independently. Key Informants (KI) focused on strong monitoring and mechanism system, implementing and actualizing existing legislation and policies.

Recommendations

Public transports such as bus, human hauler, rickshaw, rickshaw van, train, boat, launch, ship etc. should be made accessible for Persons especially Women with Disabilities for reducing their barriers of mobility in public transports. Footpath, foot over bridge, underpass and zebra crossings should be made accessible for the mobility of Persons/Women with Disabilities so as to ensure independent and secure movement of Women with Disabilities. Public institutions such as schools, colleges, universities, technical educational institutes, hospitals, and workplaces should be made accessible for Persons especially Women with Disabilities to ensure their right to education and employment. Public institutions such as Bazar, market, shopping center, park, bus terminal, airport, community centre etc. and Worship places such as Mosque, Temple, Church, Pagoda, recreational and cultural centre and places of social festivals should be made accessible Persons/Women with Disabilities to ensure their access to public services, facilities of social protection and recreation that in turn allow the state to attain by the large portion of population. Government institutions such as Bank, Post office, hospital, and other government or non-government offices should be made infrastructural accessible for Women with Disabilities to get access to all the essential public services including health services as their basic right. Public institutions and transports should have required accessibility for Women with Disabilities and consequently, they will be able to lead humanitarian and dignified lives. On the other hand, Women with Disabilities should have the opportunity to move without any risk through this accessible environment and they will become free from facing any risk of mental, physical and sexual harassments.

Legislation, policies and orders for making accessible public institutions and transports should be adopted, formulated and modified with considering special requirements of Persons/Women with Disabilities and through consultation with Disabled Peoples Organizations (DPOs) including this group of the population. Existing legislation, policies and orders for accessible public institutions and transports should be implemented properly and monitoring and mechanism system should be strong enough to enforce these legislations, policies, and orders. City development/public institutions and transports development related authorities, departments and ministries should work on the basis of coordination simultaneously considering the requirements of Persons with Disabilities. Required Budget should be allocated in order to improve the situation of public

institutions and transports considering the special requirements of Persons/Women with Disabilities in the National budget. Accurate statistics and data Of Persons/Women with Disabilities as well as modified public institutions should be preserved. The responsibility of Persons with Disabilities should not only be the matter of the Ministry of Social Welfare. Women with Disabilities and their special requirements should be addressed by “Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act 2013” through amendment of this legislation. As Bangladesh is a signatory and ratified country of “United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD)”, enacted “Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act 2013” and firmly committed to actualize “Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)” so in order to implement and actualize these legislation and convention successfully; it is immensely important to improve accessibility situation of Persons/ Women with Disabilities in public institutions and transports. Private sectors, Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), International Non-Government Organizations (INGOs), Civil Society and media should play a strong and proper role in removing the barriers of accessibility for Women with Disabilities. Women with Disabilities should be allowed to be empowered economically and to contributive to socio-economic development through including them in the current workforce instead of making them inactive and burden for family and society. In order to develop a sustainable, safe, resilient and inclusive city to meet Sustainable Development Goal 11 accessible public transport and institutions for Women with Disabilities is a prerequisite.

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