



Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) of Persons with Disabilities in Bangladesh

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DONOR: Embassy of the Royal Kingdom of Netherlands in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Why persons with disabilities are among the most neglected and discriminated population group? Given that more than one billion people live with some form of disability worldwide, which is not quite insignificant, it is very strange to not have focused on this population's needs and demands. These concerns have bothered us for some time, when finally, we decided to dig deeper. What we found is that even though the basic rights of this vulnerable population have been brought to attention in recent times, their sexual and reproductive health (SRH) needs, sufferings and rights remain unattended. This is mostly due to the lack of social awareness and appropriate knowledge regarding their SRHR.

In fact, there is a myth that persons with disabilities are asexual, or less sexually active, therefore less likely to have SRH needs or to be exposed to sexually transmitted diseases and/or different types of violence. This myth exists globally including Bangladesh; there are persistent stigma and taboo around both disability and sexuality in the country. SRHR services of person with disabilities in Bangladesh are limited if not restricted to pregnancy related services, family planning and a handful of

screening and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). While there is a huge shift of the understanding of SRHR and health needs for person with disabilities globally, only a handful of organisations are working to establish a robust SRHR service provision in Bangladesh.



This gap has also in some way affected the amount of research done on the field of disability-sexuality and vice versa: the area where we wanted to focus on. We, a group of researchers from the Centre of Excellence for Gender, Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (CGSRHR), BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University had conceptualised a nationwide study to generate evidence-based solution to the above mentioned problems. Our aim was to understand the SRHR needs, knowledge, sufferings, perception around sexuality, interventions available and perceived facilitators and barriers in accessing those services and existing laws and policies relevant to SRHR and disability in Bangladesh.

RESEARCH METHODS

We conducted a mixed-method nation-wide research study, where face-to-face interviews were done with 5,000 persons with disabilities covering whole Bangladesh. To strengthen the quantitative findings, we also undertook a mini ethnographic qualitative study. Desk reviews, key informant interviews, site visits and policy mapping were also done as part of investigating the current services and policies present to meet the SRHR needs of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh.



KEY FINDINGS

Overall, we have found some key areas of concerns, firstly most people including persons with disabilities did not know much about the SRH rights entitled to them. Secondly, the lack of training for the healthcare providers to ensure disability inclusive services at all levels, thirdly a lack of disability friendly infrastructures and equipment to support targeted services, and finally a dearth of disability integrated data at all levels which makes it really difficult to propose or plan any disability focused mandate. A few of the positive findings include free and low cost healthcare services, availability of public healthcare facilities even in remote places and steps taken by the Government to introduce disability friendly services in some facilities.

The study findings were conveyed to the key stakeholders (high government officials, programme managers and non-government executives) including persons with disabilities via policy dialogues, national dissemination event and other research outputs like video documentary, pictorial booklet, policy infographics, blogs, and newspaper articles. We expect to work with the Government and concern bodies to utilize these findings to improve the SRHR services for person with disabilities in Bangladesh, which would help the country fulfill its commitment towards the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) and achieve several of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related to disability and SRHR.



RESEARCH OUTPUTS AND POLICY INFLUENCE

Policy infographic 1: “*Inclusive Health Services for Persons with Disabilities in Bangladesh: Challenges and Prospects*”

Policy infographic 2: “*Current Situation of SRHR of Persons with Disabilities in Bangladesh in the Context of SDGs and UNCRPD*”

Pictorial Booklet: “*Inherent Burdens of Disability and Moving Ahead of It*”

Scientific Publication 1: “Documenting the challenges of conducting research on sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) of persons with disabilities in a low-and-middle income country setting: lessons from Bangladesh”. Authors: Amina Amin, Adity Shayontony Das, Adrita Kaiser, Raia Azmi, Sabina Faiz Rashid, Md Tanvir Hasan. Published: 17 December 2020 in BMJ Global Health. DOI: 10.1136/bmjgh-2020-002904.



Scientific Publication 2: “COVID-19 in Bangladesh: an especially difficult time for an invisible population”. Authors: Md Tanvir Hasan, Adity Shayontony Das, Adepto Intisar Ahmed, Ahmed Mushtaque Raza Chowdhury, and Sabina Faiz Rashid. Published: 31 May 2021 in Disability & Society. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2021.1929080>.

Newspaper Articles: Several newspaper articles were published in renowned national Bangla and English newspapers and print media, highlighting different key research findings at different time points. Three newspaper articles were published on 29th October 2019, three articles were published on 28th October 2020, and six articles were published on 24th November 2020.

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ATTENDANCE:

- 4th World Disability & Rehabilitation Conference 2019, Thailand- Best presenter award;
- World Disability & Rehabilitation Virtual Conference 2020, India- Best presenter award;
- 7th International Conference on Gender & Women's Studies 2020, Singapore- Best presenter award;
- 5th World Disability & Rehabilitation Conference 2020, Sri Lanka- Abstract published.

RESEARCH IMPACT

- The study filled SRHR related data gap of persons with disabilities at the national and sub-national levels in Bangladesh.
- We provided useful recommendations to the policy makers and senior government officials on how to advance disability inclusive healthcare services in Bangladesh.
- The key government stakeholders found the study findings and evidence very important for future programming and planning of activities. Directorate General of Family Planning (DGFP) is working to implement the Adolescent Reproductive Health Strategy 2017-2030 and adolescents with disabilities have been identified as a “special vulnerable group” under this strategy. Senior officials from DGFP acknowledged the need of implementing age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education and the promotion of menstrual hygiene management for young adolescent girls and women with disabilities.
- Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) and Ministry of Health and Family Planning (MoHFW) acknowledged that they will make sure that disability specific indicators are included in their SDG targets especially targets 3.7, 4.7, 5.2, 5.3, 5.6. These will ensure that persons with disabilities get appropriate SRHR knowledge and services they need; receive age appropriate comprehensive sexuality education; remain free from experiencing violence and discrimination such as early child marriage, forced abortion and/or sterilization, physical, emotional and sexual violence.
- The study significantly contributed towards having a positive effect on ensuring the SRH rights of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh, in order to realize SDG goal of equity and 'Leaving no one behind'.