



Comprehensive Event Overview

Bangladesh: Observance of International Day of
Persons with Disabilities 2024



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Social Security Policy Support (SSPS) Programme

Cabinet Division and General Economics Division (GED) of Bangladesh Planning Commission

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Bangladesh: Observance of International Day of Persons with Disabilities 2024

Theme

Amplifying the Leadership of Persons with Disabilities for
An Inclusive and Sustainable Future

Draft

4th December, 2024

BICC, Carnival Hall, Agargaon, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Organizers: UNDP SSPS Programme, Sightsavers and UNPRPD



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Inaugural Session

Ms. Amrita Rejina Rozario
Country Director, Sightsavers Bangladesh

Honorable guests, distinguished participants, and esteemed members of the disability community,

Good morning and welcome. It is truly an honor to stand before you today as we observe the International Day of Persons with Disabilities 2024—a day that serves as a powerful reminder of our collective responsibility to build a more inclusive and sustainable future.

This year's theme, "Amplifying the Leadership of Persons with Disabilities for an Inclusive and Sustainable Future," is not just a slogan. It is a call to action. It reminds us that true inclusion is only possible when persons with disabilities are recognized as leaders and changemakers—not just beneficiaries of policies, but architects of them. Too often, we talk about inclusion, yet we fail to truly listen. The voices of persons with disabilities are frequently overlooked, their needs ignored, and their aspirations sidelined. But if we are to create a society that values diversity, we must actively ensure their participation in every step of our development journey. We must listen. We must act. We must invest.

The youth of today—including those with disabilities—are not just the future; they are the present. We must invest in their education, their skills, and their opportunities—not as an act of charity, but as a national imperative. Their leadership is not a distant dream; it is already a reality, and we must nurture and strengthen it.

Bangladesh has made significant strides in disability inclusion, and the current Interim Government has expressed its commitment to improving the lives of persons with disabilities. But let's be honest—history tells us that persons with disabilities have long been viewed through a charity lens, rather than as individuals with rights, potential, and agency. That approach must change. A holistic, rights-based approach is not optional—it is essential.

As we look ahead to 2025, two critical global milestones demand our attention:

- The Global Disability Summit, where nations, including Bangladesh, will be held accountable for their commitments.
- The Voluntary National Review (VNR) of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where we must ensure that persons with disabilities are not just discussed, but actively present and engaged in shaping policies.

Bangladesh made strong commitments in both 2018 and 2022 at these global platforms. But let's ask ourselves—have we truly delivered on those commitments? Progress has been made, yes, but at a painfully slow pace. This time, let's change that narrative. Let's ensure that persons with disabilities are at the table, not just in conversations but in decision-making.

Inclusion is not just a word. It is a principle. It is a promise. It is a commitment. And today, I call upon each and every one of you—governments, organizations, development partners, and society at large—to take real action.

Let us build a Bangladesh where persons with disabilities lead, inspire, and transform—not just for themselves, but for the betterment of our entire nation.

Thank you.

Keynote Presentation on the National Social Protection Framework for Persons with Disabilities

Presenter: Mr. Aminul Arifeen, SSPS Programme, UNDP

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honor to be here today to discuss the National Social Protection Framework for Persons with Disabilities—a crucial initiative developed through collaborative efforts under the leadership of the SSPS Programme of UNDP. This framework is not merely a policy document; it represents a commitment to fulfilling the social contract between the State and its citizens, ensuring that persons with disabilities are fully integrated into the social protection system.

Challenging Misconceptions and Social Stigmas

Unfortunately, misconceptions and deep-rooted stigmas continue to shape societal perceptions of persons with disabilities. Harmful beliefs, such as:

- "People with disabilities are cursed,"
- "Children born with disabilities are a result of their parents' wrongdoings,"
- "People with disabilities are entirely dependent and always need help,"
- "They should only marry within the disabled community,"
- These biases not only marginalize individuals with disabilities but also hinder their access to equal opportunities in education, employment, and social life.

Understanding the Scale of Disabilities

To better grasp the reality of disability in Bangladesh, let's consider some data:

- 1 in every 5 people has some form of disability.
- 1 in every 4 experiences moderate or severe disability.
- 2 in every 5 have mild disabilities but still face challenges.

Disability, Marriage, and Vulnerability to Abuse

One of the most concerning realities is the gender disparity in marriage and the increased vulnerability of women with disabilities:

A man with a disability is more likely to marry a non-disabled woman.

However, women with disabilities often face dowry demands, sometimes in the form of cash, assets, or land.

Alarmingly, 33% of married women with disabilities report experiencing physical and verbal abuse from their husbands, while 42% face abuse from their in-laws.

Education and Accessibility Barriers

Despite progress, participation in education among persons with disabilities remains alarmingly low:

- Primary school enrollment: 50% of children with disabilities complete primary education.
- Secondary school completion: Only 2 in every 5 students completes secondary education.
- Higher education: A mere 1 in 10 students with disabilities complete a tertiary degree.

- Even when children with disabilities are enrolled, barriers persist, making education far from inclusive:
- Inaccessible washrooms, creating difficulties for students with mobility impairments.
- Classrooms and exam halls located on upper floors, making it impossible for students with physical disabilities to access them.
- Limited availability of Braille books and lack of trained scriptwriters, leaving visually impaired students at a disadvantage.
- Lack of awareness among invigilators about the extra time allocated for students with disabilities, as mandated by government policies.

Poverty and Vulnerability Among Persons with Disabilities: A Call for Inclusive Action

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today, I want to bring your attention to a stark reality—poverty hits the hardest for the poorest persons with disabilities. Using the Lower Poverty Line of the HIES 2022, we see a national headcount poverty rate of 5.6%. However, among the poorest, this rate soars to 29%—meaning that 1 in 3 of the poorest individuals is a person with a disability.

Employment Disparities: A Gendered Divide

When it comes to employment, the gap is alarming. Males with disabilities are four times more likely to find jobs than their female counterparts. This gendered disparity in economic participation must be addressed to ensure equal opportunities for all.

Exclusion from Political and Decision-Making Processes

Beyond economic challenges, persons with disabilities are grossly underrepresented in the political sphere:

- Only 0.17% have involvement in local government.
- Only 0.53% have participated in electoral processes.

This lack of representation in decision-making spaces underscores a critical need for inclusive policies that amplify their voices and ensure their active participation in governance.

Social Protection: Progress and Gaps

We have seen progress in disability allowances, which have increased from 200 taka to 850 taka over time, covering 90.7% of registered beneficiaries under the Subarna Card. However, there is a significant flaw—this allowance is not adjusted for inflation, diminishing its real impact over time.

The Vulnerability-Disability Framework: Addressing Systemic Barriers

The discrimination and vulnerabilities faced by persons with disabilities are not uniform. They vary based on:

- Age
- Gender
- Political identity
- Geographical location
- Type and pattern of disability

To break these systemic barriers, we must embrace a transformative approach—one that shifts from mere protection to empowerment.

Our Plan is to Follow the **Transformative Model based on** the following three pillars:

- **Protect:** Ensure robust social protection systems to shield persons with disabilities from extreme poverty and exploitation.
- **Prevent:** Strengthen anti-discrimination laws and policies to eliminate barriers to employment, education, and participation.
- **Promote:** Facilitate skills development, job placement programs, and leadership opportunities to create an equitable society.
- **Transform:** Shift societal attitudes and redefine the narrative—persons with disabilities are not burdens; they are agents of change and contributors to national progress.

Here, goes the framework: An Attachment

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Revisiting the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Priorities in the Changed Context

Presenter: Mr. Ayon Debnath, Campaign Adviser, Sightsavers

With the changing context, we will focus on the discrimination aspects. Ultimately, the poorest of the poor are persons with disabilities, even in developed countries. A brief overview of the **Equal Bangladesh Campaign** highlights the importance of addressing these issues. The UN took a long time to formulate the **UNCRPD** (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities). However, despite the lengthy process, we still face challenges in translating these commitments into effective action.

In the context of Bangladesh, one of the strong aspects is that it has legal frameworks in place, such as the **Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2013**, and the **National Action Plan**. The **SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals)** also incorporate the localization of issues related to persons with disabilities. Bangladesh has made **11 strong commitments** to support persons with disabilities. However, despite these frameworks, there remains a significant gap between policy and implementation.

Bangladesh has accessed the **Marrakesh Treaty**, yet we have not taken concrete steps to implement its provisions, particularly when it comes to rights-based approaches. While **OPDs (Organizations of Persons with Disabilities)** exist across the country, the question remains: are we harnessing their potential effectively? We have a large, vibrant youth community, and there is a digital transformation underway, but are we ensuring that persons with disabilities are included in the IT sector and other emerging industries? The challenges are multi-faceted and demand urgent attention.

One of the most critical issues we face is the **lack of accountability and transparency** in the implementation of disability-related policies. Monitoring efforts are weak, and many ministries do not have designated **disability focal points**. In addition, **OPDs** often lack the necessary **funding** to carry out their work effectively. Disability is frequently seen as the responsibility of the **Ministry of Social Welfare**, but this view is flawed. It is impossible to address the needs of persons with disabilities effectively if ministries like **Education** and **Health** are not providing comprehensive, inclusive support. Stigmas related to disability are still pervasive in many sectors, and agencies responsible for disability inclusion need to be activated. Furthermore, **government officers must be sensitized** to disability issues to create an inclusive society. A **monitoring mechanism** is urgently required to ensure that commitments are being fulfilled.

The **Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC)** states that accessible infrastructure is necessary, yet accessibility remains a challenge in practice. **Data discrepancies** also persist, which impedes accurate planning and implementation of disability-related programs. Political representation for persons with disabilities remains extremely low. For instance, is the **voting process** truly accessible? If we are not ensuring that **Braille is available in ballot papers**, how can we expect a person with visual impairment to cast their vote?

Justice for persons with disabilities must be ensured. Research consistently shows **violence against persons with disabilities**, yet concrete actions to address this violence are often lacking. The **Action Plan** for disability inclusion talks about a **rights-based approach**, but in practice, many of the committees responsible for implementing the plan are **non-functional**. Immediate action is required to activate these committees and ensure they work towards real change.

To effectively implement disability inclusion, each ministry must allocate a **specific budget** for disability-related issues. A **disability-specific budget** must be created to ensure that resources are directed to those in need. Ministries need to appoint **focal points** for disability issues, and inter-ministerial coordination must be improved to ensure that all sectors are working towards the same goals. We also need **Members of Parliament (MPs)** to actively raise the issues of persons with disabilities in the legislative process. The **interim**

government must ensure that disability inclusion remains a priority, and that actions are taken to address the needs of persons with disabilities.

Lastly, we must ensure that the **Voluntary National Review (VNR)** report is not fabricated. It should be based on the **real needs and priorities** of persons with disabilities. The government must commit to **real actions** that lead to **real change** for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh. The time for action is now.

Remarks by H.E. James Goldman, Deputy High Commissioner of the British High Commission & Development Director

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honor to be here today at this significant event. **Diversity and disability inclusion** are core priorities for the UK, and gatherings like these allow us to **raise awareness and strengthen our collective commitment** to ensuring a more inclusive world. We are **proud to be a part of this initiative** and to support efforts that uplift the voices of persons with disabilities.

The UK's Global Leadership in Disability Inclusion

The UK has been a **global leader** in advancing disability rights. We **co-founded the Global Action Disability Network** of donors. We **co-hosted the first Global Disability Summit**, which sparked a **new movement**, galvanizing **stronger commitments worldwide** for advancing disability rights. These initiatives have **mobilized communities and driven real change** in ensuring a more **inclusive and accessible future**.

In Bangladesh, the UK is deeply committed to supporting disability inclusion through a range of key initiatives. The Disability Inclusion Development Programme stands as a flagship initiative, concentrating on the generation and development of disability-inclusive policies and programs. In partnership with the Government of Bangladesh, we are working to mainstream disability across all sectors, ensuring that inclusion is an integral part of national development. Additionally, through a bilateral education framework, we provide technical assistance to the Ministry of Education to develop a Special Education Needs framework. As part of our ongoing efforts, we have trained 2,000 government primary school teachers to better support inclusive education, empowering educators to create more accessible learning environments for all children.

Our focus is centered on achieving meaningful progress in several key areas to foster an inclusive future. We are committed to advancing inclusive education, ensuring that all children, regardless of ability, have access to quality learning opportunities. In the realm of global health, we aim to create healthcare systems that are accessible to all, particularly those with disabilities. Women's empowerment remains a priority, as we strive to enhance the opportunities and rights of women with disabilities. Furthermore, we are dedicated to disability-inclusive development, ensuring that policies and practices reflect the needs of people with disabilities in all aspects of society. Finally, we emphasize climate action, with a specific focus on addressing the unique challenges faced by persons with disabilities in the context of environmental change. Together, these goals form a foundation for a more inclusive and sustainable future.

Together, we have the **power and responsibility** to create an **inclusive world**. Let us use this moment to **deepen our cooperation**, strengthen our commitments, and ensure that the **voices of persons with disabilities are heard and acted upon**.

Thank you.

Ms. Sonali Dayaratne

Deputy Resident Representative, UNDP Bangladesh

Good morning, everyone!

It is truly a privilege to be here today to share insights and engage in discussions about the rights of persons with disabilities and the importance of ensuring inclusion in our societies. As we gather here, I want to start by highlighting some critical global statistics: approximately 1.3 billion people—16% of the world’s population—live with significant disabilities. This means that 1 in every 6 individuals around the globe faces daily challenges related to their disabilities.

At UNDP, we are fully dedicated to ensuring the rights of persons with disabilities as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and to ensuring that the SDGs are achieved for, with, and by persons with disabilities. Guided by the United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy (UNDIS), we apply a twin-track approach, which includes mainstreaming disability considerations in all areas of development and providing targeted support to persons with disabilities.

We focus our efforts in three key areas:

1. **Cross-Sectoral Leadership:** We support legal reforms and strengthen organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) to ensure their active participation in political and decision-making processes.
2. **Sectoral Mainstreaming:** We work on embedding disability inclusion in key areas such as gender equality and climate action.
3. **System-Wide Coordination:** We promote coordinated UN action and advocate for disability inclusion in various multilateral forums.

As a partner in the UNPRPD Multi-Partner Trust Fund, UNDP collaborates with other UN entities, governments, and OPDs to advance the CRPD and the disability-inclusive SDGs globally.

Now, let’s talk about the progress Bangladesh has made and the challenges that remain. The total number of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh is 3.54 million. Here’s a gender-wise breakdown:

- Male: 2.14 million (approximately 60.5%)
- Female: 1.40 million (approximately 39.4%)
- Hijra (Transgender): 2,909 (approximately 0.08%)

Bangladesh has made significant strides, from adopting disability-friendly policies to improving access to education and healthcare. However, many persons with disabilities still face barriers in education, employment, and social participation. These are the areas where we must focus our efforts to ensure that every person with a disability can lead a full, independent, and dignified life.

UNDP is honored to partner with Bangladesh in its journey toward disability-inclusive development. This year, under the Social Security Policy Support Programme (SSPS), supported by the Cabinet Division, the General Economics Division, and the Australian Government (DFAT), we developed a Social Protection Framework for Persons with Disabilities. This framework is built around three key principles: Economic Capital, Human Capital, and Social Capital. It was crafted through active collaboration with stakeholders, including civil society,

development organizations, and, most importantly, OPDs, ensuring that their voices and perspectives were fully integrated.

The framework provides a clear pathway for integrating disability inclusion into the upcoming National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) 2026+. It has two key objectives that aim to create tangible impacts:

1. **Empowering Through Employment:** This involves investing in skills development, promoting inclusive workplace practices, and ensuring digital accessibility, so that persons with disabilities can contribute meaningfully to the economy.
2. **Enhancing Accessibility for All:** This focuses on inclusive access to education, public services, and technology, ensuring that persons with disabilities can live independent and empowered lives.

These efforts are about more than just addressing challenges—they are about unlocking opportunities for a more resilient and inclusive future, where everyone, regardless of ability, has the tools to succeed.

As we reflect on today's discussions, I urge all of us to prioritize inclusion in every aspect of our work and policies. Governments, the private sector, and civil society must integrate disability perspectives into every decision. By doing so, we ensure that persons with disabilities are not left behind, and they play an active role in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, ultimately building a Bangladesh where no one is excluded.

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Guest of Honour Mr. Syed Haider
First Secretary and Head of Development Cooperation
Australian High Commission, Bangladesh.

Thank you.

Good morning, everyone.

It is truly an honor to join you today at this important event, which serves as a timely reminder of our collective responsibility to build a world that is equitable, rights-based, and upholds the dignity of every individual. As we gather to discuss the rights of persons with disabilities, we must remember that this is a crucial step toward ensuring no one is left behind.

In Australia, approximately 5.5 million people live with disabilities, and in Bangladesh, it's estimated that around 10% of the population faces similar challenges. The Australian Government places disability at the heart of its development priorities. We adopt a twin-track approach in all our programs, ensuring that disability is mainstreamed while also providing targeted initiatives to address the specific needs of persons with disabilities. This is reflected in our commitment to inclusive policies that go beyond just ensuring participation—our focus is on equality, rights, and addressing the structural barriers that prevent individuals from living lives of dignity and self-reliance.

The Social Protection Framework for Persons with Disabilities, tailored to the needs of persons with disabilities and developed by the SSPS program, is a pivotal achievement in advancing and transforming the rights of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh. The Australian High Commission is proud to partner with UNDP's SSPS in ensuring that no one is left behind. This framework is a remarkable step toward ensuring true inclusion, but we recognize that there is still much work to be done.

Too often, persons with disabilities face barriers to accessing education, healthcare, and housing. While disability allowances are an important step, they are just a starting point. For true inclusion, we must move beyond allowances and address broader challenges. This includes harnessing the potential of persons with disabilities as skilled, empowered, and valued assets for the workforce. This is where the SSPS program, with support from the Australian Government, plays a crucial role.

Through dialogues, consultations, and the formation of a joint committee, this stakeholder engagement has been instrumental in developing a framework that seeks to address these issues and ensure that persons with disabilities can live independently and contribute meaningfully to society. It is also encouraging to see the strong leadership and commitment of the Bangladesh Government in driving this agenda forward, working toward an inclusive and sustainable future for all.

We must remember that inclusion is not a destination but a journey. While there is still much to be done, we remain resolute in our efforts. Australia is proud to assist Bangladesh in this journey through the SSPS program. Together, we can amplify leadership and work toward a society where inclusion is not just an aspiration but a reality for all.

As we look to the future, let us reaffirm our collective commitment to creating a world that is just, equal, and inclusive for everyone. By materializing the robust Social Protection Framework, we can ensure that no one is left behind, and that the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities are respected and celebrated. Thank you.

A Performance by the Down Syndrome Society

The members of the Down Syndrome Society delivered an extraordinary performance, with Rafan Razzaque, Rafid, Ayesha, Adrita, Atanu, Alvi, Labib, Tanjila, and Namira coming together to present a heartwarming rendition of the song “We Are Equally Bangladeshi...” Their performance served as a powerful reminder of the importance of inclusion, equality, and the shared identity that unites all Bangladeshis, regardless of individual challenges.

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Panel Discussion 1

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Breaking Barriers - Leadership and Empowerment

Discussion Topics:

- Overcoming societal barriers and stereotypes
- The importance of self-advocacy and peer support
- The role of education and employment in empowering people with disabilities
- The role of development partners in advancing disability inclusion in Bangladesh

Moderators:

Mr. Vashkar Bhattacharjee, National Consultant, A2I

The panel discussion began with a powerful personal story shared by Mr. Vashkar Bhattacharjee. He recounted his experience as the president of an international club, when he went to a government office and was denied entry simply because of his assistive device—a white cane. The officials assumed he was seeking financial assistance, highlighting the persistent societal stereotypes and prejudices against persons with disabilities. Vashkar's plea, "I did not come to take something from you. Please, allow me to enter into the room..." was a poignant example of how deeply ingrained biases impact people with disabilities. This personal story set the tone for the discussion about the need to break barriers and challenge these harmful perceptions. The first question to the panelist was, **what are the rigidity and stigmas prevailing against persons with disabilities?**

Mr. Khandaker Jahurul Alam, Executive Director, Centre for Services and Information on Disability

Mr. Jahurul Alam responded to the moderator's question about prevailing stigmas and barriers by reflecting on his own experiences. He pointed out that the struggle for disability rights has been ongoing for decades, mentioning a specific incident in 1991 at the Ministry of Social Welfare. In that year, two cheques were offered to persons with disabilities, assuming they were in need of charity. This, he emphasized, was an example of the stigma and charity-based mindset that has persisted for too long.

Since then, progress has been made with the introduction of two important laws, including the Action Law and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). However, Mr. Alam underscored the need for continued advocacy, especially in the implementation of these laws. He highlighted the critical areas that still need attention:

1. **Implementation of the Laws:** It is crucial that the laws meant to protect the rights of persons with disabilities are not only passed but fully implemented.
2. **Rules of Business:** Ensuring that government processes include accessibility and inclusion for persons with disabilities.
3. **SDG Implementation:** Ensuring that disability inclusion is fully integrated into the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
4. **Recreation:** People with disabilities should have the same rights to leisure and recreation as everyone else.
5. **Action Plan:** Developing concrete action plans for inclusion.
6. **Rights and Dignity:** Protecting the dignity of persons with disabilities, and addressing how they are referred to—"persons with disabilities" rather than the outdated and disrespectful terms sometimes used.

He concluded by emphasizing the importance of correctly addressing persons with disabilities, urging that the terminology should always reflect the dignity and respect they deserve.

Moderator: Addressing Tokenism and the Role of Self-Advocacy

Mr. Bhattacharjee addressed the issue of improper and disrespectful addressing of persons with disabilities, stressing that such language and treatment would persist unless there is a systemic change, such as incorporating a disability curriculum into the training modules for government officials. He raised the issue of tokenism in disability-related events, where persons with disabilities are often presented with trophies or symbolic gestures, instead of being given real opportunities for participation. He asked the panelists how marginalized groups, particularly persons with disabilities, could challenge such tokenism and become self-advocates in these situations.

Ms. Mohua Paul, Cofounder of Access Bangladesh Foundation, responded passionately. She reflected on her 42 years of experience in the disability sector, noting that real change must begin at home. She pointed out that many families lack the financial resources to care for all their children, especially those with disabilities, and that the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) should not be solely responsible for the welfare of persons with disabilities. She emphasized the need for disaggregation in areas such as education, health, and nutrition to ensure equal rights for all, particularly those with disabilities.

Ms. Paul also highlighted the accessibility issues in Bangladesh, pointing out that aside from the metro rail, there is no accessible public transport. She questioned whether the government truly implemented the themes of International Days for persons with disabilities year-round or if these themes were just celebrated for a single day without long-term action. She stressed the importance of ensuring equal rights for persons with disabilities, starting at the family level and expanding to societal and governmental levels.

This discussion touched upon key themes of tokenism, societal barriers, and the need for self-advocacy, with Ms. Paul emphasizing that real empowerment for persons with disabilities must start with comprehensive and continuous efforts at the local and national levels. It was clear that addressing these issues requires long-term commitment and an inclusive approach that goes beyond symbolism.

Moderator: The moderator raised a critical point: despite the slogan "Nothing about us, without us," even within international organizations like the UN, persons with disabilities are still not recruited into senior positions. He posed the question regarding the main challenges in education and employment, particularly why education for persons with disabilities remains the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) instead of the Ministry of Education (MoE).

Mr. Saidul Haque, Executive Director of BERDO, responded with a detailed analysis of the progress and ongoing challenges. He started by acknowledging the improvements in the education sector for persons with disabilities, highlighting that while there was once no access to Braille materials, now 100% of Braille books are available for students from classes 1 to 10. Furthermore, he pointed out that although persons with disabilities were previously excluded from the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) examination, they are now eligible to sit for it.

However, Mr. Haque emphasized that despite these positive developments, the implementation of laws and policies remains a major hurdle. He noted that the National Coordination Committee and Executive Committee meetings on disability issues do not occur regularly, which undermines the effectiveness of existing laws. Additionally, he raised concerns about the current allocation of the reserved quota for persons with disabilities, pointing out that all disabilities are grouped under physical disabilities, which fails to address the diverse needs of the disability community.

He argued that education for persons with disabilities should be under the Ministry of Education (MoE) rather than MoSW, as the MoE is responsible for ensuring the rights of all students, including those with disabilities. While MoSW can play a supporting role, it should not be the sole body responsible for disability-inclusive education.

In terms of employment, Mr. Haque lamented the lack of representation of persons with disabilities in the workforce. He requested the attention of government officials, urging them to increase the Disability Allowance to 5000 takas until full employment opportunities for persons with disabilities are realized. He also highlighted the added costs that persons with disabilities face, including transportation and medical expenses, which further complicate their ability to participate in the workforce.

This segment of the panel discussion underlined the need for more robust implementation of laws and policies, as well as a structural shift towards ensuring that persons with disabilities are fully integrated into both the education and employment sectors.

Moderator's Question:

“We have the UNCRPD and the Disability Inclusion Strategy. If the UN has a strong voice, our government will be more aware. Our people are not connected with the global world, and there is a digital divide. While the government is providing wheelchairs and assistive devices, why are they not providing laptops and smartphones to change the lives of people with disabilities?”

Ms. Nasima Akhter's Response:

On this day, I would like to remind everyone of the Constitution of Bangladesh, which speaks about the equal rights of all citizens. However, despite the constitutional provision, I still cannot access public transportation. We often talk about equality, but it remains just a slogan unless it is implemented in reality. The work scope remains largely Dhaka-based, leaving individuals with disabilities in rural areas without the same opportunities or support.

Moreover, not every person with a disability in Dhaka has access to proper shelter or resources. There is a pressing need to create opportunities and support systems across the entire country, not just within Dhaka.

I would also like to highlight that international organizations, particularly INGOs, seem reluctant to raise funds for disability initiatives in Bangladesh. For example, India has allocated a digital accessibility budget of 500 crore rupees, while Bangladesh's budget is only 50 lakh BDT. This stark contrast shows a lack of sufficient investment and initiatives from both international organizations and private entities in addressing the needs of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh.

To truly bridge the digital divide and improve the lives of persons with disabilities, we must create a nationwide approach, ensuring equal access to opportunities and resources. Without substantial efforts from both local and international actors, meaningful change will remain elusive.

Moderator's Question:

"Mr. Haque, we have the Act of 2013, but it seems we have been unable to implement it effectively at the grassroots level. The committee meetings at the divisional level are ongoing, but what needs to be done to ensure the Act reaches every corner of Bangladesh? Furthermore, the education system for children with disabilities still seems limited to special schools up until class 10. Do you believe the Ministry of Education should take over the responsibility for higher education and mainstreaming?"

Mr. Azmul Haque's Response:

We have the Disability Act of 2013, but unfortunately, its implementation has not reached the grassroots level as we had hoped. While we have conducted orientation sessions at the divisional level and have been working with field-level officers, much more needs to be done to ensure the law has a direct impact on people's lives. The 2019 Action Plan is one step in the right direction, and organizations like JPUF have established the NDD Trust, but I believe we need a stronger, more unified approach.

In terms of education, I firmly believe that the Ministry of Education (MoE) must take the lead in the education of children with disabilities. Currently, our children with Subarna Nagarik Cards (Disability Cards) are only able to receive education up to class 10 in special schools. For higher and more advanced education, MoE's involvement is crucial. Without it, mainstreaming children with disabilities into regular educational institutions will remain a distant dream.

The data we have on persons with disabilities in Bangladesh is alarming, with estimates ranging from 46 lakhs to even 1 crore individuals. This highlights the vast need for resources and attention across the country. For example, JPUF has 103 centers nationwide and 74 schools, but these should fall under the Ministry of Education to ensure better integration and quality education. Teachers need to be better trained and motivated to work with students with disabilities, and we must address the lack of research and development in this area.

We are facing a manpower crisis, and I call on all of you to assist with research and findings. We are also working to transform some of our special schools into colleges to allow students to pursue higher education. While this may take a few more years, we are committed to this goal.

Furthermore, we should establish a National Award to honor those who have contributed significantly to the empowerment of persons with disabilities. As we continue working together, I believe we can make meaningful progress. There are approximately 700 persons with visual impairments and about 12,000 individuals with physical disabilities, and it is imperative that we create opportunities for them to thrive in society.

Thematic Presentation

**Development of UN County Team Bangladesh Disability Inclusion
Strategy 2025-2030**

Presenter: Mr. Mosharraf Hossain, Consultant, UN RCO

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Core Areas of the Strategy

- **Leadership & Strategic Planning Management**
 - The strategy emphasizes strong leadership in championing disability inclusion across all UN programs and operations.
 - Strategic planning will ensure disability inclusion is deeply embedded into all frameworks.
- **Inclusiveness**
 - This core area focuses on making disability inclusion a priority within the UN and government frameworks.
- **Programming & Organizational Culture**
 - The culture within UN organizations will be shaped to prioritize and foster disability inclusion in every aspect of programming.

Key Objectives of the Strategy

- **Champion Disability Inclusion in UN Programmes and Operations**
 - The UN Country Team will be at the forefront of advocating for and implementing disability inclusion in all areas of its work.
- **Collaborate with Stakeholders for Disability Inclusion in Bangladesh's 9th Five Year Plan**
 - Collaboration with national stakeholders, especially organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs), to integrate disability inclusion in the national development plan.
- **Collaborate to Amend the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act 2013**
 - Work towards ensuring that the 2013 Act aligns with international standards and fully supports persons with disabilities.
- **Lead Disability Inclusion in the UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF)**
 - Integrating disability inclusion as a cross-cutting priority in the UNSDCF. The upcoming UNSDCF (2027-2031) will feature disability inclusion as a central pillar.

UNCT Strategic Planning: Disability Inclusion in UNSDCF

- **UNSDCF 2022-2026:** Initially, there was no specific focus on disability inclusion in the framework.
- **UNSDCF 2027-2031:** The future framework will focus heavily on disability inclusion, aiming to address the needs of persons with disabilities across all sectors.

Implementation of the Strategic Plan

- The **UN Country Team** will be responsible for implementing the strategy, ensuring that disability inclusion is a cross-cutting issue.
- The **UN Resident Coordinator** will oversee the overall coordination and implementation.
- **Heads of UN Agencies** will play a key role in making sure each agency contributes to disability inclusion efforts.

Inclusiveness

- **Consultation with OPDs:** Continuous engagement with organizations of persons with disabilities to ensure their voices are heard in decision-making processes.
- **Accessibility:** Ensuring that UN operations and programming are fully accessible to persons with disabilities.

- **Inclusive Procurement:** Making sure that procurement practices are inclusive, ensuring persons with disabilities have equal access to opportunities and services.

Disability Inclusion Strategy Consultation Process:

UN Country Team Launches Disability Inclusion Strategy in 2025:

The UN Country Team (UNCT) will formally launch the Disability Inclusion Strategy in 2025, ensuring that disability inclusion becomes an integral part of its programs and operations.

Disability Inclusion Task Team (DITT) Consults OPDs for Joint Programme:

The DITT will actively engage with Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs) to design and implement a joint program, ensuring that the needs, aspirations, and feedback from persons with disabilities are reflected in all interventions.

UNCT Consults OPDs, NGOs, and Business on Key Issues of Cooperation Framework:

Consultation will extend beyond just the disability community. The UNCT will also consult with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and businesses to create a comprehensive and inclusive Cooperation Framework that addresses disability-related issues in a holistic manner.

OPDs Participate in Consultation on Emergency Response:

The consultation process will involve OPDs in discussions surrounding emergency response plans, ensuring that the needs of persons with disabilities are incorporated in disaster preparedness and response strategies.

UNCT Partners with OPDs to Create Impact and Scale Up Change:

The partnership between the UNCT and OPDs will aim to create tangible impacts, with a focus on scaling up change to ensure broader, more sustainable results for persons with disabilities across Bangladesh.

People with Disabilities Participate Meaningfully:

The participation of persons with disabilities will not be tokenistic but will be meaningful, ensuring that they are not just consulted but are integral to the decision-making and implementation process.

From Consultation to Meaningful Participation: Nothing About Us Without Us:

The approach will move from simple consultation to full, meaningful participation. This reflects the core principle that any policies, programs, or actions that affect persons with disabilities must be designed with their direct involvement — "Nothing About Us Without Us."

Interagency Collaboration for Accessibility:

Foster interagency collaboration to promote accessibility across all UN programs, ensuring that systems, services, and environments are inclusive and accessible for persons with disabilities.

Interagency Collaboration for Reasonable Accommodation:

Collaborate between agencies to ensure that reasonable accommodations are provided for employees with disabilities, enabling them to perform their roles effectively and with dignity.

Consult with Employees with Disabilities Working in UNCT:

Regularly consult with employees with disabilities within the UN Country Team (UNCT) to understand their needs and experiences. This input will guide policy and workplace adjustments for better inclusion.

Awareness and Advocacy for Accessibility Policy:

Advocate for and increase awareness of the UN's accessibility policies, ensuring that all employees, partners, and stakeholders understand the importance of accessibility and the resources available to support it.

Inclusive Procurement:

Ensure that the UN Country Team incorporates accessibility criteria into external procurement processes for goods, services, and venues, making them accessible to persons with disabilities.

Full Employment for Persons with Disabilities:

Attract, recruit, and retain persons with disabilities, ensuring non-discrimination in all stages of employment.

Provide reasonable accommodations and ensure that the work environment is accessible, both physically and digitally, to enable persons with disabilities to work effectively without anxiety.

Meaningful Consultation & Respectful Communication:

Conduct meaningful consultations with persons with disabilities, ensuring respectful communication at all levels, fostering a culture of inclusion and dignity.

Survey Disability Status of Employees & Set Aspiration Target:

Conduct regular surveys to assess the disability status of employees and set an aspiration target of 5% of jobs in the UN to be held by persons with disabilities by 2030, ensuring greater representation and inclusion.

These steps aim to create an environment within the UN system that is accessible, inclusive, and empowering for persons with disabilities, paving the way for meaningful participation and equal opportunities in the workforce.

External Action

Promote Affirmative Action in the Labor Market:

Promote affirmative action in the labor market, as recommended by the CRPD Committee, to ensure that persons with disabilities are actively included in employment opportunities.

UN Women, UNDP, and WFP have set examples by recruiting UN volunteers with disabilities, showing leadership in diversity and inclusion.

UN Country Team Implementation of UNSDCF:

The UN Country Team will implement the UNSDCF and influence its partners to adopt disability-inclusive practices across all sectors. This includes ensuring that disability rights and needs are addressed in every aspect of development cooperation.

Key actions include supporting Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) led by women with disabilities, aligning strategies with Non-Discrimination Acts, and ensuring that employment and skill development policies are disability-inclusive.

Capacity Development for UN Staff:

Inclusion of Disability in Staff Orientation Toolkit:

Ensure that disability inclusion is integrated into the staff orientation toolkit, so new employees understand the UN's commitment to disability rights from the start.

Invest in Capacity Building:

Make significant investments in capacity building to ensure that UN staff are well-equipped to engage with disability inclusion. This includes offering online or in-person training in various areas:

Communication: Provide training on how to effectively communicate with people with disabilities, including the use of accessible formats.

Accessibility and Reasonable Accommodation: Educate staff on how to create an accessible environment and provide reasonable accommodations to employees with disabilities.

Intersectionality: Study the intersectionality of gender and disability to ensure that policies and programs address the unique needs of women with disabilities, recognizing the compounded barriers they face.

Mentorship for Employees with Disabilities:

Implement a mentorship program for employees with disabilities, helping them to integrate fully into the workplace, access career growth opportunities, and receive guidance and support in their professional journeys.

These efforts ensure a holistic approach to disability inclusion, enhancing the capacity of UN staff and external stakeholders to advocate for and act on behalf of persons with disabilities, aligning with global best practices and human rights standards.

Panel Discussion

**Roadmap of Amplifying the Leadership of
Persons with Disabilities for An Inclusive and
Sustainable Future**

Draft

Moderator: Farjana Reza, NPO, ILO

Panelists:

- Ms. Sharna Shah, Centre for Disability in Development
- Ms. Salma Mahbub, General Secretary, B-SCAN
- Tuomo Poutiainen, Country Director, ILO
- Gitanjali Singh, Country Representative, UNWOMEN
- Mr. Jahirul Islam, Team Inclusion Bangladesh

Question: How do you want to see the young leadership? How can youths be engaged in the decision-making process?

Sharna Shah:

Thank you for this opportunity and for providing me with this platform, which has truly bolstered my confidence. At first, I questioned if I was worthy of speaking alongside such experienced individuals. My journey has been filled with learning, and I've realized that the understanding of disability wasn't always clear to me.

However, for youth with disabilities, we have the potential to contribute fresh ideas and approaches. Change starts with us. While we talk about change, it's important to recognize that perceptions around disability have been constructed over time and shifting those can be challenging. But the youth with disabilities today are taking up the role of change-makers in this ongoing movement, bringing a renewed spirit to it.

We need guidance, mentoring, and capacity-building training to equip us for leadership roles. Ensuring that there is a consistent leadership pipeline is critical to making sure that the rights of persons with disabilities are upheld in Bangladesh and globally. If we create spaces where youth can take part, we can build sustainable solutions. The leadership pipeline must be inclusive and structured, so youth with disabilities can rise to these challenges, not only in Bangladesh but also on the global stage.

Question: You have long been fighting for disability rights. How has your advocacy effectively ensured policy changes? Particularly when it comes to women, are the policies addressing the needs of women with disabilities?

Ms. Salma Mahbub, General Secretary, B-SCAN:

I want to start by sharing my own journey. When we started our movement, I wasn't aware of the rights-based approach. Both Subrina and I were wheelchair users, and we initially started our advocacy online. We've had many discussions over the years about the issues we face, but very few concrete steps have been taken to implement the UNCRPD. Even though SDGs talk about leadership for persons with disabilities, we were, in the beginning, essentially self-learners, trying to understand how we could become change-makers. However, the current generation of youth lacks proper learning materials to equip them in similar ways.

When it comes to women with disabilities, while the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWCA) works on women's empowerment for women without disabilities, there's no distinct focus or program for women with disabilities under the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW). MoSW handles many segments, but they do not have specific initiatives for women with disabilities. The JPUF can play a significant role in this area, but they are not as engaged with persons with disabilities as they should be.

While there is talk of a gender budget, I question if there is a specific disability budget. Today's discussion should have centered around how we can implement the leadership of persons with disabilities, specifically the

progress we've made. Can we quantify the achievements of the last years? I believe the most pressing issue now is how we can translate these discussions into commitments—how, when, and what actions will be taken.

Regarding women with disabilities, the current law does not specifically address the needs of women. Reforming the existing law is critical. The Ministry should take the lead on a project focused specifically on women with disabilities to ensure their voices and needs are addressed.

Question: UN Women has been a key player in promoting gender equality. How does UN Women integrate gender equality into its programmes in Bangladesh? How is UN Women based on the UNPRPD intervention planning addressing the challenges and ensuring leadership access for women with disabilities in decision-making?

Gitanjali Singh, Country Representative, UN Women:

We are working to understand the root causes of the challenges faced by women with disabilities, especially young women with disabilities. Representation and voice truly matter in this context! We emphasize gender and intersectionality as key areas of focus in our work.

UN Women follows a Global Strategic Plan for inclusion, which includes a Task Team where we prioritize seven groups of excluded women. One of our central efforts is supporting intergenerational movement-building, where women across generations engage in dialogue. Through this process, they have formulated a Charter of Demands, which has been shared with political parties. Currently, we are also focusing on updating the Beijing +30 Platform to reflect the evolving needs of women.

At the Asia-Pacific level, women with disabilities have developed a very progressive Charter of Demands, which has been instrumental in pushing forward the agenda of inclusion and leadership for women with disabilities. This work aligns closely with the UNPRPD intervention plan and strives to ensure that women with disabilities are not only included but can actively participate and lead in decision-making processes.

Question: As we know, ILO is globally recognized for promoting social justice and internationally recognized human and labor rights. ILO is advocating for disability rights globally and in Bangladesh. What specific strategies has ILO implemented in Bangladesh to ensure that persons with disabilities have equal access to decent work? What role does the private sector play? Can ILO influence the private sector on this issue?

Tuomo Poutiainen, Country Director, ILO:

Human rights and adherence to international standards are crucial when discussing issues like accessibility. Accessibility isn't just about creating a quality environment—it's about upholding rights. When we fall short of these obligations, we must ask ourselves what can be done to rectify the situation. Bangladesh is a party to the Convention on Non-Discrimination in Employment, which requires the government to take measures to ensure persons with disabilities are included in the workforce.

However, if vocational institutions, technical institutes, and capacity-building programs do not ensure accessibility, then how can skilled persons with disabilities be prepared for the job market?

The role of the business community is significant here. We have worked on the Bangladesh Business and Disability Network, which is active and focused on sharing lessons learned and providing opportunities for persons with disabilities. There is still much more to be done.

When I arrived here, many people were on the same page regarding this issue, but have we made tangible progress in policy implementation? Honestly, not much. Reality can be changed through practice. What I mean by practice is that when organizations actively work on improving access to the workforce for persons with

disabilities, and when business organizations engage in disability inclusion, we can bring about meaningful change. We don't always need to change policies first—sometimes, change can happen through active efforts within organizations and the private sector. We shouldn't wait for policy changes to take action; we need to start implementing now.

Question: We say that OPDs aspire to work together. According to you, what should be the mechanism for ensuring collaboration when all organizations have different goals and visions? Also, I would like to hear how students with disabilities can become transformative leaders. How can we bring new leaders, and how can we bridge the gaps?

Jahirul Islam, Team Inclusion Bangladesh:

I am wearing black today because, in power psychology, black symbolizes power and credibility. There is a gap between generations, and we need to acknowledge that. The younger generation is tech-savvy, and we're talking about artificial intelligence (AI). Now, who will lead these sectors? The previous generations of disability activists are not as familiar with these areas, and we need to bring them on board.

Inclusion and accessibility are often seen as just buzzwords, but in reality, they are frequently reduced to checkboxes to be filled. When it comes to academic institutions, there are hardly any initiatives to ensure accessibility. From a gender perspective, we do not have an open platform for discussion or action.

In terms of bridging these gaps, Bangladesh doesn't have a concrete database or resource platform. To make progress, we need a comprehensive, accessible platform for sharing resources and knowledge.

For students with disabilities to become transformative leaders, it is essential to create an environment where they can thrive. We must equip them with the tools and opportunities they need, fostering an inclusive education system, providing mentorship, and offering platforms where they can actively participate in decision-making and leadership roles.

Final Thought: One Key Action for the Biggest Impact in Amplifying Leadership

Jahirul Islam, Team Inclusion Bangladesh:

We all need to come together, persons with disabilities and without disabilities, in unity and solidarity to amplify leadership.

Salma Mahbub, General Secretary, B-SCAN:

We will have 64 leaders coming from 64 districts, forming a strong network that ensures representation and collective action for disability inclusion.

Sharna Shah, Centre for Disability in Development:

A shift in perception is crucial, and meaningful participation should be prioritized—it should not be just ornamental but truly transformative.

Gitanjali Singh, Country Representative, UN Women:

Investing in women, particularly young women with disabilities, is the right approach to creating a more inclusive and sustainable leadership.

Tuomo Poutiainen, Country Director, ILO:

We must move from general commitments to tangible results. The real change happens when we translate promises into concrete actions and outcomes.

Special Guest, H.E. Ms. Gwen Lewis
UN Resident Coordinator to Bangladesh

It is a privilege to join you here today. The messages shared by the esteemed panelists have been powerful and thought-provoking. I would like to thank the organizers for bringing us together for this important discussion.

The theme of today's event is a timely reminder of the transformative power of leadership. Leadership by persons with disabilities is not just about representation—it is essential for creating a truly inclusive society. This day holds deep significance for the United Nations as we continue to work towards building a world where no one is left behind.

Last year, we made a commitment to develop the UN Disability Inclusion Strategy for Bangladesh, and as you have heard today, the strategy is well underway. This initiative is designed to ensure that disability inclusion is integrated across all UN programs and processes, in line with our global commitments. The aim is to ensure that persons with disabilities can participate equally and meaningfully in all aspects of life.

This morning, someone mentioned tokenism, and it is crucial that we recognize that disability inclusion must go beyond superficial gestures. It is not enough to check off a box or give the appearance of inclusion. It must be real, substantive, and empowering.

The inclusion of persons with disabilities is not only an essential priority for the UN but a moral imperative. It is deeply rooted in our commitment to leave no one behind, a principle that is foundational to the Sustainable Development Goals.

In 2007, Bangladesh made a significant step towards inclusion by ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD). In 2013, the Disability Rights and Protection Act marked a transformative shift, moving from a charity-based approach to a rights-based framework.

Despite these strides, we must confront the reality that there is still much work to be done. As highlighted in the recent White Paper on Economic Reform, persons with disabilities continue to face widespread human rights abuses, discrimination, and isolation. Recent surveys show that between 4.8 million to 12 million people in Bangladesh are living with disabilities, but only 35% of them are registered for essential services. This is a stark reminder that these issues go far beyond mere statistics. We need to strengthen our systems, services, and support to ensure full inclusion.

The laws need to be strengthened to ensure that persons with disabilities are fully protected and empowered. The education sector, too, must guarantee that all children, regardless of their abilities, have access to quality education. Any legal provisions that hinder justice for persons with disabilities must be rejected. We must all work tirelessly to ensure equal opportunities for employment and livelihoods.

Despite having a legal framework, Bangladesh still faces many barriers that hinder the participation of persons with disabilities in the workforce. The lack of a specific quota system and the scarcity of opportunities in the private sector are significant challenges that we need to address together. There are thousands of educated individuals with disabilities who are willing to contribute but face obstacles in entering the job market. This is an area where the UN Country Team is committed to working both inside and outside of the UN in the coming months.

It is also vital that all citizens, including persons with disabilities, can fully participate in the democratic process. Too often, individuals with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities are excluded from voting because they lack

the necessary tools for confidential voting. With the renewed commitment from the people of Bangladesh for free and fair elections, we must work toward creating a system where everyone, regardless of ability, can express their voice freely and confidently.

While we celebrate the rights of persons with disabilities, including the universal coverage of allowances, we must acknowledge that many still do not receive these benefits. Awareness and accessibility are critical in ensuring that every person with a disability knows their rights and how to access the resources available to them.

Bangladesh has the potential to be a leader in the disability rights movement, and it has many influential individuals and organizations to drive this change. Together, we can build a country where all individuals, regardless of their abilities, can thrive and contribute meaningfully. We will work together to ensure inclusive policies, dismantle barriers, and guarantee that every person with a disability lives with the dignity they deserve. Together, we will build a future where no one is left behind, and communities are enriched by the potentials of persons with disabilities.

Nargis Khanam

Additional Secretary and Director DSS

Nargis Khanam, Additional Secretary and Director of DSS, representing Sharmin S. Murshid, welcomed the guests, OPDs, media personnel, and the organizers. She also offered condolences for those who were killed and injured during the July-August revolution. Addressing the persons with disabilities, she emphasized that they are invaluable potentials for the country. She highlighted that the Bangladesh government has ensured and acknowledged the rights of persons with disabilities, citing the Constitution's Articles 15, 17, 20, and 29, which ensure that persons with disabilities have equal rights, just like all other citizens.

The Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) has launched a system called the Disability Information System, aimed at identifying persons with disabilities, with 3.5 million persons already registered. The DSS is running 54 activities, of which 16 programs related to education, allowances, stipends, and training benefit 3.3 million people. The budget allocated for these activities is approximately 3500 crore BDT. Furthermore, there are various institutions dedicated to persons with disabilities, including the National Special Education Centre, Centers for Specific Children and those with NDD syndromes, Government Schools for Children with Visual Impairments, Speech Impairments, and PhD Centers, as well as Coordinated Education Facilities, Employment and Rehabilitation Centers for persons with physical disabilities, Braille presses, Artificial Organ production centers, Rural Rehabilitation Centers, and more. Other initiatives are also in progress under MoSW, DSS, and JPUF.

However, she acknowledged that these initiatives are insufficient considering the actual needs of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh. She assured that all speakers throughout the day have rightly pointed out the critical issues at hand, and that the government is empathetic and equally committed to addressing the needs of persons with disabilities.

Referring to the panelists, she stressed that if proper training, education, and support are provided to children with disabilities, they can be better prepared to engage in decision-making processes, as they have firsthand experience of the challenges. She emphasized that the rights of persons with disabilities and the discussions around them should not be confined to a single day of celebration but must involve a permanent change in mindsets. She concluded by expressing her desire to be an equal warrior in the journey toward a more inclusive Bangladesh, where everyone, regardless of ability, has equal access to rights and dignity.

Thanksgiving & Closing of Morning Session

Session Chair

Mr. Monsur Ahmed Choudhuri, Trustee, Impact Foundation

In his closing speech, Mr. Monsur Ahmed Choudhuri began by addressing the audience with a warm welcome and heartfelt thanks to all the guests present. He reminded the attendees that it is the month of victory, and yesterday, we celebrated the 33rd International Day of Persons with Disabilities. He acknowledged the mixed emotions that the day brings, while expressing hope for better days ahead. He emphasized that the movement for the rights of persons with disabilities must not be confined to speeches alone; it must be an active, collective effort rooted in discipline and righteousness.

He urged everyone to not only seek rights but to document and write about their struggles and achievements. "For writing, we need to study," he remarked, stressing the importance of equipping oneself with the knowledge and tools necessary for survival in the era of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. He pointed out the growing relevance of technology and the need to embrace it, especially for persons with disabilities, who must navigate and leverage technology to thrive.

A poignant reminder was given to those in good health today: "Is there any assurance that you will not be disabled tomorrow?" Mr. Choudhuri urged everyone to treat persons with disabilities as human beings first, acknowledging their dignity and worth.

For the activists in the room, he called for a unified effort to ensure that both the National Day for Persons with Disabilities and the International Day for Persons with Disabilities continue to be observed meaningfully. Reflecting on the changes that have taken place, he pointed out that the two days had once been separate, but now they are celebrated together. However, he called for a return to more distinct celebrations, recognizing the significance and importance of both days in the ongoing fight for inclusion and equal rights for persons with disabilities.

In closing, he emphasized the need for unity and commitment to the cause, urging everyone to keep pushing for the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities, ensuring their rightful place in society.

Second Half

Documentary: Asharunnesa Mishti

Draft

Thematic Presentation

**Towards Inclusion of Rights of Women with Disabilities: A
Legal Analysis in the Context of Bangladesh**

Draft

Dr. Taslima Yasmin, Associate Professor, Department of Law, University of Dhaka

Dr. Taslima Yasmin, Associate Professor in the Department of Law at the University of Dhaka, presented a critical analysis of the legal rights of women with disabilities, focusing on Bangladesh's legal framework and its alignment with international conventions, particularly Article 6 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

The Discriminatory Realities for Women with Disabilities

Dr. Yasmin began by acknowledging the **multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination** that women with disabilities face in Bangladesh. These women experience not only the challenges posed by their disabilities but also compounded discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, religious identity, and minority status. Dr. Yasmin emphasized that **mainstreaming the rights of women with disabilities** into the legal and policy framework is essential to address these compounded issues.

Article 6 of the CRPD: A Mandate for Gender-Sensitive Disability Inclusion

Dr. Yasmin referred to **Article 6 of the CRPD**, which specifically mandates that state parties recognize the **multiple discrimination** experienced by women and girls with disabilities. The article requires countries to take measures to ensure that these women can fully and equally enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms. This provision underscores the need for legal frameworks to address the unique challenges faced by women with disabilities while promoting **equality** and **non-discrimination**.

The Gaps in Bangladesh's National Legislation

Dr. Yasmin pointed out the shortcomings in Bangladesh's **Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPPDA)**. While the RPPDA acknowledges the rights of persons with disabilities, it **does not adequately address the specific challenges faced by women and children** with disabilities. The law treats all persons with disabilities as a **homogeneous group**, failing to account for the **intersectionality** of discrimination that women with disabilities face.

Discrimination: CRPD vs. RPPDA

The presenter elaborated on the **definition of discrimination** in both the CRPD and RPPDA. The CRPD defines discrimination as **any distinction, exclusion, or restriction** that impairs or nullifies the equal recognition, enjoyment, or exercise of human rights and freedoms. The CRPD's definition takes a **comprehensive, intersectional approach**, recognizing that discrimination can occur based on multiple factors such as gender, disability, ethnicity, and religion.

In contrast, the **RPPDA defines discrimination** more narrowly, simply as **“unfair treatment of disabled persons compared to ordinary persons”**. This definition does not reflect the full spectrum of discrimination as understood in the CRPD and fails to consider the **intersectional nature** of discrimination experienced by women with disabilities. As a result, the **RPPDA does not fully recognize persons with disabilities as subjects of rights**.

The Need for Legal Reforms

Dr. Yasmin emphasized the urgent need for **reform** in Bangladesh's national laws and policies. The current legal framework does not adequately protect women with disabilities or align with international standards set

out in the CRPD. A **revised legal approach** that acknowledges the intersectionality of discrimination and provides **gender-sensitive** provisions is essential for ensuring that the rights of women with disabilities are fully realized.

Absence of Anti-Discrimination Law

In Bangladesh, while the Constitution guarantees equality and non-discrimination, statutory laws fall short in addressing discrimination across multiple intersectional grounds such as disability, age, gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality, and more. The Anti-Discrimination Bill, introduced in Parliament in 2022, remains pending, and there have been significant concerns raised regarding its provisions. The absence of a comprehensive anti-discrimination law that effectively tackles these forms of discrimination hinders the protection of marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities.

Equal Recognition Before the Law (Article 12 of the CRPD)

One of the critical concerns in Bangladesh's legal framework is the denial of equal legal capacity to persons with disabilities, particularly on the grounds of 'unsoundness of mind'. This vague and derogatory term is used in several laws to label individuals with neuro-divergent, mental, and intellectual disabilities. As a result, individuals with disabilities are denied the right to make decisions and are often subjected to substituted decision-making, which violates their fundamental right to act as full legal persons.

Moreover, certain laws declare 'unsoundness of mind' as a disqualification for individuals with disabilities from holding statutory posts, further reinforcing discriminatory practices.

Right to Participation in Political and Public Life (Article 29 of the CRPD)

Discriminatory Concept of 'Unsoundness of Mind' and Its Impact

The concept of 'unsoundness of mind' remains discriminatory within both the Constitution and various statutory laws in Bangladesh, particularly in the area of voting rights and political participation. According to Article 66 of the Constitution, individuals declared as unsound of mind by a competent court are disqualified from being elected as Members of Parliament. Similarly, Article 122 disqualifies such individuals from being enrolled on the electoral roll. These laws also extend to local government elections under the Voter Enrolment Act, 2009 and other related legal provisions.

These restrictions disproportionately affect persons with intellectual and mental disabilities, effectively denying their right to participate in political and public life. This creates a barrier to their political rights, preventing them from voting, running for office, or holding elected positions, which undermines their inclusion in the democratic process.

Right to Participation in Political and Public Life (Article 29 of the CRPD)

Despite international commitments, implementation challenges persist in ensuring the political participation of persons with disabilities, particularly during elections. Key obstacles include:

- Inadequate training of electoral officers, resulting in poor preparedness to accommodate the needs of voters with disabilities.
- Inaccessibility of polling centers, with insufficient provisions such as sign language interpreters, Braille materials, and accommodations for various other disabilities.
- Physically inaccessible polling stations that hinder persons with disabilities from casting votes or engaging in the election process.

Additionally, while the Voter Enrollment Rules, 2012 provide for recording the 'nature of disabilities' in voter registration forms, these details are frequently not recorded properly, limiting their effectiveness in supporting disabled voters. Women with disabilities, in particular, face compounded discrimination due to the intersection of gender and disability, making their political participation even more challenging.

Freedom from Exploitation, Violence, and Abuse (Article 16 of the CRPD)

Women and children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, violence, and abuse, due to gaps in legal protection. For example, the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act (WCRPA) of 2000, which is intended to prevent violence against women and children, fails to address the specific needs of women with disabilities. This oversight places them at an increased risk compared to women and girls without disabilities.

Key gaps include:

- Lack of provisions for women with disabilities to have a companion or an expert in court to facilitate communication, particularly for those with hearing impairments or psychosocial disabilities.
- Absence of accessible trial procedures, such as the lack of sign language interpreters or experts on psychosocial disabilities during examinations and court hearings.
- Court documents and case information are often not provided in accessible formats (e.g., Braille, audio, or easy-read formats), which prevents victims from fully participating in their own cases.
- These legal and institutional gaps leave women and children with disabilities vulnerable to violence and abuse, while also restricting their access to justice and the right to a fair trial.

Access to Justice (Article 13 of the CRPD)

Access to justice for persons with disabilities is severely hindered by several factors, violating their rights under Article 13 of the CRPD. Key barriers include:

- Physical inaccessibility of court buildings, judicial facilities, and courtrooms, making it difficult for persons with disabilities to participate in legal proceedings.
- The unavailability of legal information in accessible formats, such as Braille, Easy Read, and sign language, preventing persons with disabilities from understanding their legal rights and the judicial process.
- Difficulty obtaining case records and other legal documents in accessible formats, further obstructing the ability of persons with disabilities to engage fully in their cases.
- Lack of sign language interpreters or other support persons to facilitate communication in court, making it difficult for persons with hearing impairments or those with communication barriers to effectively participate.
- The absence of guidelines or protocols for recording testimony from persons requiring sign language interpreters or psychosocial experts, further undermining their ability to provide testimony effectively.
- Lack of awareness among police, court officials (including judges), and jail authorities regarding the specific needs and rights of persons with disabilities, which results in inadequate support and discrimination.

Challenges in Testimony and Legal Processes

Additional challenges for persons with disabilities in accessing justice include:

Testimony given by sign language interpreters is often undervalued or not recognized as credible evidence, undermining the legal standing of persons who rely on interpreters for communication.

- Stereotypical and gender-insensitive approaches by court officers, lawyers, and judges, particularly when dealing with women and girls victims of sexual offences. This leads to further victimization and mistreatment during legal proceedings.
- Women and girls with disabilities face additional risks, including threats and intimidation from the accused parties, attempting to force them into dropping their cases or agreeing to out-of-court settlements.
- Undue delays in the disposal of cases in the Women and Children Repression Prevention (WCRP) Tribunal, which further prolongs the suffering of victims and reduces their confidence in the justice system.

Lack of Accessible Legal Protection and Support Services

Further gaps in the legal system include:

The absence of accessible and effective legal protection for victims and witnesses with disabilities appearing before courts, which increases their vulnerability and discourages them from pursuing justice.

One-Stop Crisis Centers (OCCs), Victim Support Centres (VSCs), and government shelter homes remain largely inaccessible to persons with disabilities, particularly for women. This lack of accessible support systems further isolates victims, depriving them of the necessary services and protection.

These systemic barriers prevent persons with disabilities, especially women and girls, from fully accessing justice and receiving the support they need to navigate the legal system effectively.

Discrimination in Family Law

In Bangladesh, family law continues to discriminate against persons with disabilities, especially through traditional personal laws that are rooted in gender and disability biases.

Marriage and Legal Competency

Under traditional rules of personal law, entering into a marriage contract is contingent on both parties being legally competent. This excludes persons with disabilities, particularly those deemed to be of ‘unsound mind’, from entering into marriage contracts. This discrimination arises from the concept that persons with disabilities lack the legal capacity to marry, thereby undermining their right to personal autonomy and relationships.

Child Custody and Guardianship

The Guardians and Wards Act, 1890 (GWA), Section 17(1), asserts that when deciding custody of a child, the court must consider the ‘character and capacity’ of the proposed guardian. This legal framework often disadvantages persons with disabilities, as their ability to act as a guardian is questioned based on perceived incompetence rather than their actual capabilities or fitness as caregivers.

Adoption Laws

Traditional Hindu adoption law in Bangladesh is gender discriminatory and discriminates based on disability. Under this law, boys with physical or mental disabilities are excluded from being adopted, a practice that reinforces harmful stereotypes and denies children with disabilities the opportunity for a family environment and care. Moreover, the law does not permit the adoption of girls, further compounding gender and disability-based discrimination.

Divorce Law and Insanity

The Divorce Act 1869, applicable to individuals of the Christian religion in Bangladesh, provides grounds for the annulment of marriage if either party is considered a 'lunatic' or 'idiot' at the time of the marriage. This provision stigmatizes individuals with mental disabilities and excludes them from the legal right to enter or remain in marriage.

Inheritance Law

The Hindu Inheritance (Removal of Disabilities) Act, 1928, explicitly excludes persons categorized as 'lunatics' or 'idiots' from inheriting or receiving a share in Hindu joint-family property, reinforcing the notion that persons with mental disabilities are incapable of participating fully in societal or familial duties.

Muslim Family Law and Insanity

Under the Muslim Family Law Rules (Section 6 of the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance, 1961), provisions such as 'insanity', 'sterility', and 'physical infirmity' are considered valid grounds for permitting polygamous marriages. This adds to the stigma surrounding mental health and disability, perpetuating harmful societal views. Additionally, under the Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act, 1939, a Muslim wife can obtain a divorce if her husband has been insane for two years or suffers from leprosy or a virulent venereal disease, further marginalizing those with mental disabilities.

Work and Employment (Article 27: Right to Work and Employment)

In Bangladesh, the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 (BLA) fails to adequately address the needs and rights of persons with disabilities in the workplace. The Act does not incorporate key provisions from the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), particularly the mandate to ensure reasonable accommodation for workers with disabilities. There are several gaps in the BLA that hinder the ability of persons with disabilities to enjoy equal employment opportunities and to work in a safe, supportive, and non-discriminatory environment.

Lack of Provisions for Reasonable Accommodation

The Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 mentions persons with disabilities only in passing, failing to address their specific needs in the workplace. Despite international commitments under the CRPD, the Act does not require employers to provide reasonable accommodation for workers with disabilities. The lack of specific provisions hinders individuals with disabilities from accessing equal opportunities, as the absence of necessary accommodations, such as accessible workspaces or assistive technologies, limits their participation in the workforce.

Dismissal on Grounds of Physical or Mental Incapacity

Section 22 of the BLA allows employers to discharge a worker based on 'physical or mental incapacity' or 'continuous ill health'. While the law mandates compensation for workers dismissed on these grounds, it does not obligate employers to provide an alternative suitable position or rehabilitation for the worker. This omission leaves workers with disabilities vulnerable to unjust dismissal, without the prospect of securing a position suited to their abilities, thereby undermining their right to employment.

Compensation and Rehabilitation

Chapter 12 of the BLA addresses workers' compensation in cases of workplace injuries or occupational diseases. While it requires employers to compensate workers, it does not stipulate the employer's responsibility to offer an alternative job or rehabilitation opportunities for injured workers, including those with disabilities. This lack of specific guidance on rehabilitation or job placement results in persons with disabilities being excluded from the workforce or remaining in unemployment after workplace accidents or illnesses.

Absence of Internal Remedial Forum for Disability-Based Discrimination

The Bangladesh Labour Act does not provide a remedial forum within the workplace for workers with disabilities to file complaints related to disability-based discrimination. Without such mechanisms, workers have limited options for addressing grievances or seeking redress for discrimination. Moreover, the BLA does not impose a legal duty on employers to ensure a workplace free from disability-based discrimination. This lack of protection leaves disabled workers vulnerable to unfair treatment and exploitation, reducing their job security and workplace well-being.

Gender-Based Violence and Harassment (GBVH) in the Workplace

The Bangladesh Labour Act does not include provisions for protecting workers from Gender-Based Violence and Harassment (GBVH) in the workplace, particularly for persons with disabilities. Women and girls with disabilities in the informal sector are especially at risk, as formal procedural and substantive labour law protections do not apply to them. This vulnerability increases the likelihood of these workers facing violence and discrimination, without access to legal recourse or support systems.

Reservations in Employment for Persons with Disabilities

In Bangladesh, the issue of employment for persons with disabilities has seen some positive changes, particularly with the Supreme Court decision reserving one percent of positions for persons with disabilities and the third gender. However, the implementation of these policies and their effectiveness in promoting inclusive employment remains a significant challenge.

Historical Background: 1% Quota System

A circular from the Ministry of Public Administration in 2012 introduced a 1% quota for persons with disabilities in first and second-class government public services. Additionally, the National Action Plan (2019) reiterates the provision of a 1% quota for persons with disabilities in government jobs. Despite these developments, the system has faced significant challenges in implementation, with reports indicating that these positions remain unfilled due to a lack of proactive recruitment practices for persons with disabilities.

Moreover, there is no official data available to assess how many persons with disabilities are actually employed through the quota system, contributing to a lack of accountability and transparency. The enforcement of the quota remains a critical issue, as many disabled individuals are unaware of the opportunities or face barriers in accessing government jobs.

Private Sector Employment

While the public sector has seen the introduction of a disability employment quota, the private sector does not have any legal requirements to reserve positions for persons with disabilities. This creates a disparity in employment opportunities between the public and private sectors, further marginalizing persons with disabilities in the workforce. The absence of inclusive recruitment policies within the private sector leaves disabled individuals with limited opportunities for meaningful employment.

Disability-Based Discrimination in Public Service Examination Rules

Another significant issue is the discriminatory nature of the Bangladesh Civil Service Rules (BCS Rules) and the Bangladesh Judicial Service Appointment Rules (BJS Rules), which impose medical clearance conditions that exclude persons with disabilities.

Bangladesh Civil Service Rules (BCS Rules)

Under Schedule II of the BCS Rules (2014), the medical clearance required for direct recruitment in government services includes several conditions related to physical fitness that exclude persons with physical or sensory disabilities. While Rule 18 allows for relaxation of these requirements for persons with disabilities, it is subject to government discretion, meaning that the implementation of this provision is not guaranteed and depends on individual cases. This subjective application creates an inconsistency in the hiring process and may result in qualified individuals being discriminated against.

Bangladesh Judicial Service Appointment Rules (BJS Rules)

Similar to the BCS Rules, Schedule III of the BJS Rules (2007) mandates a medical examination for judicial service candidates with specific physical and sensory fitness requirements. However, like the BCS Rules, there is no provision addressing the unique needs of persons with disabilities. The medical clearance process does not consider reasonable accommodations or the capacity of persons with disabilities to perform judicial duties with support, resulting in further exclusion from the judicial system.

Right to Accessibility (Article 9 of the CRPD)

The Right to Accessibility is a critical aspect of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), ensuring that persons with disabilities can fully participate in society, access public services, and enjoy equal opportunities. However, Bangladesh faces significant challenges in enforcing accessibility provisions, particularly in public transportation, buildings, and information technology.

Public Transport Accessibility

Section 32 of the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPPDA) mandates that 5% of seats in all public transportation be reserved for persons with disabilities. While this provision exists, its enforcement has been lackluster. There is no clear guideline regarding accessibility issues in public transport, such as:

Additional time for persons with disabilities to board the vehicle

Adaptable seats designed for persons with disabilities

Clear marking of priority seats

Additionally, there is no formal mechanism to monitor how well this 5% seat reservation is being implemented in public transport systems. As a result, persons with disabilities continue to face significant barriers when attempting to use public transport, often unable to access the seats reserved for them or find that the transport is not adequately equipped to accommodate their needs.

Inaccessibility of Public and Private Buildings

In 2020, Bangladesh adopted the National Building Code with provisions aimed at ensuring universal accessibility. This included standards for making buildings accessible to people with disabilities, including ramps, elevators, and accessible toilets. However, implementation of this Code has been weak, and most offices and institutions remain inaccessible to persons with disabilities. This lack of enforcement means that people

with disabilities continue to face difficulties in accessing public buildings, impeding their full participation in various aspects of life, including education, employment, and healthcare.

Digital Accessibility

Another significant barrier is the inaccessibility of government websites and public service-related platforms for persons with disabilities, particularly those with visual impairments. Despite the 2018 Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Policy which includes universal access to information and technology for persons with disabilities, most government websites are not yet compliant with accessibility standards. Persons with visual impairments, for example, often cannot access essential services online, such as applying for government documents or accessing healthcare information.

Recommendations for Improving Disability Rights and Protection

To align Bangladesh's legal framework with the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) and ensure better protection for persons with disabilities, especially women and girls with disabilities, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Revision of the RPPDA (Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act)

The RPPDA should be revised to include stronger provisions for protection against disability-based discrimination. This includes specific measures to address the multiple discrimination faced by women and girls with disabilities due to gender and disability.

The revision should emphasize the equal legal capacity of persons with disabilities, ensuring that they are not discriminated against in legal matters, such as marriage, custody, and inheritance.

2. Repeal of Discriminatory Laws and Terminology

Discriminatory laws and provisions should be repealed and replaced with more inclusive legal frameworks that recognize the equal rights of persons with disabilities, particularly the legal capacity of women with disabilities.

The use of derogatory terminology such as "lunatic," "idiot," or "insane" in existing laws (including in the RPPDA) should be eliminated and replaced with respectful language that acknowledges the dignity of persons with disabilities.

Laws that use terms like 'unsoundness of mind' as a ground for ineligibility (such as in marriage or guardianship) should be reviewed and replaced with non-discriminatory criteria.

3. Inclusion of Reasonable Accommodations

Laws and regulations should include specific provisions to ensure reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities in various sectors, including employment, education, and justice.

Reasonable accommodation should be clearly defined and its implementation should be mandatory in workplaces, educational institutions, and public services to ensure full participation of persons with disabilities in society.

4. Development of Alternative Supported Decision-Making Provisions

The legal system should establish alternative supported decision-making provisions for persons with intellectual and mental disabilities. This would allow individuals to make their own decisions with the support of a trusted person, rather than being deemed incapable based solely on their disability.

These provisions should respect the autonomy and will of persons with disabilities while ensuring they have the necessary support to make informed decisions.

5. Expedited Enactment of Anti-Discrimination Legislation

The anti-discrimination law must be enacted without delay, ensuring that persons with disabilities are protected from all forms of discrimination in public and private life.

The 2022 Anti-Discrimination Bill should be reviewed and revised, addressing gaps identified by civil society organizations, particularly organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs). It is critical that OPDs are consulted during the review process to ensure the law reflects the lived experiences and needs of persons with disabilities.

Recommendations for Addressing the Overlapping Barriers and Promoting Rights for Women with Disabilities

In order to ensure the empowerment and full participation of women with disabilities in society, it is essential to address the multiple barriers they face across various sectors. The following measures are proposed to ensure their rights, dignity, and accessibility in key areas such as political participation, legal protections, violence prevention, and social integration:

1. Promoting Political Participation

Measures should be taken to address the overlapping barriers that women with disabilities face in becoming electoral candidates or elected officials. This includes removing physical, procedural, and societal barriers that prevent their participation.

Support systems should be established to promote the inclusion of women with disabilities in political and public decision-making processes. This may involve awareness campaigns, training programs, and accessibility adaptations in political spaces and procedures to ensure equal opportunities for women with disabilities at all levels of governance.

2. Revision of Criminal Laws for Women with Disabilities

The Women and Children Repression Prevention Act (WCRPA) and other relevant criminal laws should be revised to specifically include provisions that accommodate women and girls with disabilities at all stages of the criminal justice process, from filing complaints to medical examinations, trials, and case disposal.

Reasonable accommodations should be ensured for persons with disabilities in all proceedings, including the use of accessible communication methods, sign language interpreters, and physical accessibility to justice facilities.

3. Law of Evidence

Changes should be made in the law of evidence to ensure reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities, particularly women and girls with disabilities, during legal proceedings.

Measures should include the flexibility of presenting evidence in ways that do not disadvantage persons with disabilities (e.g., providing alternative methods for testimonies, ensuring physical accessibility of courts, and offering accommodations for communication).

4. Addressing Violence Against Girls with Disabilities

Girls with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to violence from family members and caregivers. Domestic violence-related laws should be revised to include specific remedies and sanctions against violence directed at girls and women with disabilities.

The relevant authorities should be trained on recognizing and addressing the particular vulnerabilities of women with disabilities to ensure adequate protection and remedies in cases of domestic violence.

5. Prevention of Child Marriage Among Children with Disabilities

There is a need for more evidence-based data to understand the vulnerabilities and risks of children with disabilities, particularly girls, to child marriage. This data should inform the development of specific interventions aimed at protecting children with disabilities from early marriage.

Special guidelines should be formulated to ensure that concerned government agencies and child marriage prevention committees address the unique needs of children with disabilities who fall victims to child marriage, with provisions for social protection, reintegration, and long-term support.

6. Prohibition of Harmful Practices

Harmful practices such as shackling of persons with mental disabilities, forced medical and/or psychiatric interventions, involuntary psychiatric admissions, forced sterilization, and forced marriages should be strictly prohibited and penalized in law.

Laws should also provide clear penalties for perpetrators of such abuses and establish support systems for survivors, ensuring their rehabilitation and social reintegration.

Recommendations for Enhancing Access to Justice for Persons with Disabilities

Access to justice is a fundamental right for all citizens, including persons with disabilities. To ensure that persons with disabilities, particularly women and girls, can access justice, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance the legal framework, infrastructure, sensitization efforts, and support services:

1. Formulation of a National Policy

The National Coordination Committee, established under the RPPDA, should take proactive measures to formulate a national policy focused on ensuring access to justice for persons with disabilities. The policy should include specific provisions to address the unique challenges faced by women and girls with disabilities, ensuring that their needs are prioritized within the justice system.

2. Infrastructure Development

The government should adopt comprehensive action plans for infrastructural developments within court premises to ensure they are physically accessible for persons with disabilities. This includes wheelchair ramps, accessible toilets, and other modifications that create an inclusive environment for all individuals with disabilities.

3. Sign Language Interpretation and Training

Funding should be allocated for the training of sign language interpreters. This can involve establishing training institutes that specialize in providing professional training for interpreters in the Bangla official sign language.

A standardized Bangla official sign language should be developed and implemented across all government institutions and legal systems to ensure effective communication for persons with hearing disabilities.

4. Accessible Legal Information

The government should allocate funding for the development of mechanisms to provide legal information and case documents in accessible formats, such as Braille, audio formats, or easy-to-read formats for persons with disabilities. This ensures that persons with visual, intellectual, and other disabilities can fully engage with legal processes.

5. Sensitization and Awareness Training

Police, prison, and court officials should undergo awareness and sensitization training on disability laws and the rights of persons with disabilities. These training programs should be incorporated into the official training manuals and courses for these officials to ensure they are equipped with the knowledge to handle disability-related issues in the justice system.

6. Victim and Witness Protection

A Victim and Witness Protection Law should be enacted with a special focus on women and girls with disabilities. This law should include protections against further victimization, privacy safeguards, and the provision of necessary accommodations during legal proceedings.

7. One-Stop Crisis Centres and Safe Homes

One-Stop Crisis Centres (OCCs), Victim Support Centres (VSCs), and government shelter homes and safe homes should make provisions for reasonable accommodations for women and girls with disabilities. These accommodations should include accessible facilities, trained personnel, and specialized support to ensure that women and girls with disabilities can receive the care and support they need in a safe environment.

8. Guidelines for Court Procedures

Detailed guidelines need to be developed for all courts and special tribunals regarding the recording of statements from persons who require sign language interpreters, special educators, or psychosocial experts to facilitate communication during court proceedings. This ensures effective participation by persons with disabilities in the judicial process.

9. Capacity Building of Disability Services

The capacity of women, children, elderly, and disability services should be increased to provide effective support for persons with disabilities involved in legal proceedings. This includes the training of specialized staff who can assist persons with disabilities in navigating the legal system and ensure their access to justice.

Recommendations for Reforming Family and Employment Laws for Persons with Disabilities

To foster inclusive legal frameworks that provide equal opportunities for persons with disabilities, particularly women and girls, the following reforms in family law and employment law are essential:

Family Law

Review Religion-Based Personal Laws

All religion-based personal laws and relevant statutes governing personal matters such as marriage, inheritance, and custody should be reviewed. This is necessary to eliminate provisions that endorse disability-based discrimination. These laws should align with the CRPD and ensure that persons with disabilities, especially women, are treated equally in all personal matters.

Employment Law

Amend the Bangladesh Labour Act (BLA)

The Bangladesh Labour Act (BLA) should be amended to impose a legal obligation on employers to provide reasonable accommodation for workers with disabilities, particularly women and girls with disabilities. Employers should be required to make adjustments in the workplace to enable these individuals to fully participate and contribute to the workforce.

Enhance Health, Safety, and Hygiene Provisions

The BLA should be revised to include specific provisions related to health, safety, and hygiene for workers with disabilities. These provisions should address the unique needs of disabled workers, ensuring that their working conditions are safe, accessible, and supportive.

Prohibit Discrimination in the Workplace

The BLA should explicitly prohibit all forms of discrimination in the workplace, including discrimination based on disabilities. The law should outline clear mechanisms for redress against discrimination and provide legal obligations for employers to ensure that workers with disabilities are protected from discrimination.

Enact Legislation Against Gender-Based Violence and Harassment (GBVH) in the Workplace

Separate legislation should be enacted to prohibit all forms of gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) at workplaces. This law should include a non-biased, effective redress mechanism for victims, ensuring that women with disabilities are specifically protected from such violence and harassment at work.

Revise Quota Provisions for Employment

The existing quota provisions for persons with disabilities in both the private and public sectors should be revised in close consultation with Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs). Special attention should be given to women with disabilities, ensuring their prioritization in any new strategies for recruitment reservations.

Adopt a National Strategy for Employment

The government should consider adopting a national strategy to ensure access to employment for persons with disabilities in both the public and private sectors. This strategy should focus on creating inclusive work environments and supporting the integration of disabled persons into the open labor market.

Amend Civil and Judicial Service Laws

Laws regarding the examination and appointment procedures in both the Civil Service and Judicial Services should be amended to guarantee reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities. Discriminatory provisions, including inflexible medical fitness requirements, should be removed to facilitate equal participation by persons with disabilities in these services.

Recommendations for Enhancing Accessibility and Strengthening Functional Committees under the RPPDA

To ensure full inclusion and equal access for persons with disabilities, particularly women, the following recommendations focus on accessibility and the effective functioning of the National Coordination Committee and related bodies under the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPPDA).

Accessibility

Adopt a General Accessibility Guideline

A comprehensive accessibility guideline needs to be adopted under the RPPDA to ensure physical accessibility for persons with disabilities, including women, in all public buildings and premises. This will support the creation of accessible spaces that meet the needs of all disabled individuals.

Enforce the National Building Code

The National Building Code, which includes provisions for universal accessibility, should be rigorously enforced. This enforcement will ensure that public and private buildings are constructed or renovated with the necessary accommodations for persons with disabilities.

Universal Access to Information and Technology

The government should prioritize the implementation of strategies to ensure universal access to information and technology for persons with disabilities. This includes the development of accessible websites, digital platforms, and public services in accordance with CRPD and RPPDA guidelines.

Functional Committees

Formulate Guidelines for Implementation Challenges

The National Coordination Committee should take the lead in formulating guidelines to address the implementation challenges of the RPPDA provisions. These guidelines should focus on ensuring that disability rights, especially the rights of women with disabilities, are respected and promoted at all levels.

Proactive Directions by the National Executive Committee

The National Executive Committee must proactively issue procedural directions to district and sub-district level committees to ensure that they effectively fulfill their duties as outlined in the RPPDA. These directions should provide clear frameworks for action and accountability.

Monitoring Guidelines for District and Sub-District Committees

The National Executive Committee should also issue procedural guidelines for monitoring the activities of the district and sub-district level committees. This will ensure that these local bodies are effectively fulfilling their functions and are aligned with national policies.

Increase Representation of Women with Disabilities

The number of non-governmental representatives in each committee should be increased to ensure adequate representation of women with disabilities. This can be achieved by including women's organizations and disability advocacy groups that represent the needs and concerns of disabled women.

Implementation of Provisions Against Discrimination

Identify Challenges in Implementing Discrimination Provisions

The specific challenges related to the implementation of Section 36 of the RPPDA (which deals with discrimination against persons with disabilities) should be identified. Based on these challenges, strategic guidelines should be adopted to ensure the effective implementation of these provisions and combat discrimination.

Create a Separate Disability-Focused Department

The government should consider establishing a separate department within the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) dedicated to disability issues. This department would coordinate the functions of the various committees under the RPPDA and ensure a focused approach to disability rights and services.

Collect Reliable, Disaggregated Data

The government must take effective measures to collect reliable, consistent, and disaggregated data on disability. This data is crucial to develop informed implementation plans for the RPPDA and to monitor progress in achieving disability-related goals.

Allocate Necessary Budget for Implementation

The government should allocate sufficient budget to support the implementation of the proposed actions under the RPPDA. Funding should be directed towards capacity building, infrastructure development, and awareness-raising initiatives that align with disability rights.

Implement the National Action Plan for Disability (2019)

The National Action Plan for Disability 2019 must be effectively implemented. The implementation status of the action plan should be publicly available and regularly updated to ensure transparency and accountability. This will also allow the public and stakeholders to track progress on disability inclusion.

Documentary: How to Call Persons with Disabilities

Will write details.

Draft

Panel Discussion

Leadership and Advocacy for an Inclusive Future

Draft

The Role of Leadership in Advancing Disability Rights: Strategies for Effective Advocacy and Policy Change

Discussion Points: Caregivers, The Importance of Intersectionality in Disability Rights SDGs & Disability, Bangladesh's International Commitments Related to Disability Rights (GDS'25 & VNR 2025)

Moderator: Mr. Ayon Debnath

Question: What needs to be done for ensuring the employment of persons with disabilities?

Murteza Rafi Khan, CEO, Bangladesh Business and Disability Network (BBDN)

The Bangladesh Business and Disability Network (BBDN) is an initiative by the Bangladesh Employers Foundation. We have submitted recommendations for amendments in the labor law to the Ministry of Labor and Employment, and we are hopeful that these issues will be addressed soon.

In the RMG sector, we are currently piloting an Employment Injury Scheme in collaboration with ILO and GiZ. This initiative has three pillars: rehabilitation, compensation, and prevention. Its goal is to ensure that if workers are injured in the future, they can return to work with the support they need. Importantly, this scheme also includes an economic component to sustain workers' livelihoods.

When discussing employment, the focus so far has been primarily on the formal sector. The RMG sector has already incorporated inclusive policies. However, there is criticism about why other sectors have not followed suit. We want to create models demonstrating how employers can promote inclusion in their workplaces. Recently, private companies like BRAC Bank have stepped up, making efforts to be more disability-inclusive. This initiative should be replicated across other sectors.

Another key focus is on skills development. We organize job fairs every year, but we've observed that for high-end jobs, there is often a lack of applications from persons with disabilities. Addressing this gap is essential, as employers often cite accessibility as a major barrier, particularly when it comes to reaching office premises. It is important to note that ensuring access to the workplace — from housing to office locations — is primarily the government's responsibility. For women with disabilities, there are specific needs that must be addressed.

A coordinated approach is required here. While businesses are making strides, the government must take the lead in providing the infrastructure and policies needed to facilitate this inclusivity. Ultimately, the government should bear the responsibility of ensuring accessibility and inclusion in both public and private sectors.

Question: We know that caregiver support is needed for persons with disabilities. What can be done for them? And what is the situation right now?

Mr. Mahabubul Monir, Secretary General, SWID Bangladesh

Yesterday was International Disability Day, but did we see any significant coverage in the print or social media? Often, government officials are appointed to departments working for persons with disabilities, but many of them lack understanding and orientation about disability. We engage with them, explain the situation, and try to educate them. However, by the time they begin to grasp the issues, they are often reassigned, and a new officer, with little understanding, takes their place. This becomes a cyclical problem, making it a significant challenge.

There's also a debate on the number of persons with disabilities in Bangladesh. But beyond the numbers, there are people working behind the scenes — caregivers. Caregivers are crucial for persons with disabilities, but they face significant challenges, and we must ensure they receive adequate support. The government has enacted two laws, and the implementation of these laws is essential for addressing these challenges.

On 29th October 2024, we will observe International Carer's Day. This year, we also celebrated this day, acknowledging the importance of caregivers. However, caregivers and care are two different aspects. The caregivers, who often work on a daily basis, provide care for persons with disabilities around the clock. They face severe challenges and are often sacrificing their own happiness and well-being to take care of their loved ones.

There needs to be an act passed that acknowledges the sacrifices of caregivers. Just as society respects doctors and nurses, caregivers should be given equal respect. Providing better services to persons with disabilities will be easier if caregivers are supported and appreciated for their work.

Furthermore, privilege cards should be introduced for caregivers, similar to Golden Citizen Cards, to recognize their efforts. These cards could provide caregivers with certain privileges, such as priority in accessing health facilities. When caregivers have to wait for hours in long queues, who will take care of the persons with disabilities they've left behind?

We also need to think about specific disabilities, such as Autism, Down Syndrome, and Cerebral Palsy. These conditions require specialized care, and we must ensure that caregivers have the necessary support to provide the best care for persons with these specific needs.

Question: What are the challenges faced by women with disabilities, particularly those living in rural areas and working at the grassroots level?

Ms. Rokeya Begum, Executive Director, SPONDON (Narsingdi)

The challenges for women with disabilities often begin in the family, then extend to society and the community. These challenges are deeply ingrained in the social fabric of our society.

For many women with disabilities, the challenges include deprivation of education, which limits their ability to keep pace with development pathways. Looking back, women with disabilities have had to endure significant sacrifices. Many of us could not even form a family due to societal barriers and discrimination. The situation for women with disabilities is vastly different from that of men.

One of the critical issues is financial dependence. Women with disabilities often lack financial independence, which makes them more vulnerable to various forms of discrimination and violence. Additionally, there are information gaps that further hinder their ability to access resources and opportunities.

In 2023, I received the Joyeeta Award in the category of enduring domestic violence, and this recognition sheds light on the struggles that many women with disabilities face, particularly in abusive situations.

To address these challenges, training and capacity-building programs for women with disabilities are essential. There needs to be representation of women with disabilities across the country, which could be facilitated through umbrella networks that bring together various organizations and individuals working to improve the lives of women with disabilities. Ensuring representation at all levels of society will help create a more inclusive environment and provide opportunities for these women to thrive.

Question: We would like to know your experience, how dignified you feel as you are a Paralympian, and what are the prevailing challenges for persons with disabilities in participating in such activities?

Mr. Boshir Al Hossain, Bangladeshi Paralympian

Although it is widely believed and expected that the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) should be the driving force for leadership and positive changes for persons with disabilities, in reality, the MoSW is often one of the main impediments to our progress and flourishing. When we attempt to open an organization or Organization of Persons with Disabilities (OPD), these are supposed to be registered through the MoSW. They also have a loan program to support entrepreneurial initiatives by persons with disabilities. However, one of my female colleagues, who sought a loan for a business, was instead advised to apply for a grant from the Beggar Rehabilitation Funds, as loans would require repayment in installments. This reflects the systemic barriers that exist for people with disabilities seeking economic empowerment.

When it comes to sports, there is a negative perception surrounding the involvement of persons with disabilities. For example, the wheelchair cricket team and various chess competitions exist, but there are severe limitations. We lack proper practice venues, and there are constant budget shortages. Despite our participation in such events, we continue to face discrimination and lack of support. The challenges extend far beyond mere participation — they affect our dignity, respect, and recognition in society. The overall systemic neglect in providing adequate facilities and opportunities for people with disabilities to excel in sports remains a significant challenge.

Question: You know, when it comes to inclusive advocacy, where does the state need to work particularly for ensuring their leadership?

Mr. Dr. Nafeesur Rahman, Disability Rights Researcher

Article 37 of the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPPDA) 2013 clearly states that any public materials that are derogatory or insulting towards persons with disabilities are a punishable offense, with a penalty of up to three years in jail. This is an important aspect of the state's role in protecting the dignity and rights of persons with disabilities. However, the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) needs to appropriately address such issues, particularly on International Day of Persons with Disabilities, ensuring that the ministry's actions and statements align with the themes of the event.

Since 2016, the UN has declared a theme each year for the observance of this day, with many of these themes directly linked to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In 2021 and 2022, for instance, the theme also incorporated the impact of COVID-19. However, the MoSW has been translating the theme of leadership passively, which has contributed to a lack of clear leadership in addressing disability issues.

Historically, the MoSW was more engaged with persons with disabilities, involving them in discussions and decisions. But now, despite the clear allocation of responsibilities to each ministry, including the MoSW, their efforts have remained limited. For example, in 2017, a review of the MoSW revealed that they were still using outdated terminology such as 'handicapped' rather than the more appropriate 'persons with disabilities'. This kind of language misuse undermines the respect and dignity of the community.

Therefore, the state needs to prioritize leadership by persons with disabilities. The government must rely on their leadership, trust their expertise, and build confidence in their capabilities. This is the only way we can create a society where persons with disabilities can truly thrive.

Question: Addressing the challenges discussed, especially the disability allowance of 850 taka, where do you think the government needs to work to improve these conditions?

Mr. Samir Mallick, Director, Department of Social Services

One of the most pressing issues for persons with disabilities in Bangladesh is the insufficient disability allowance, which is currently set at 850 taka. This amount is far below what is necessary for persons with disabilities to meet their basic needs, let alone thrive in terms of education, healthcare, or social participation. In a country where poverty is already a significant barrier for many, persons with disabilities are disproportionately affected by economic hardships, particularly when it comes to securing decent living conditions. The current allowance does not provide a sustainable foundation for them to meet even their basic needs, let alone pursue opportunities for self-reliance and empowerment.

The government needs to prioritize increasing the disability allowance to a level that is more reflective of the actual cost of living for persons with disabilities. This increase should not only be a monetary adjustment but should also come with a commitment to providing additional social welfare programs aimed at addressing the broader needs of persons with disabilities. These programs could include better access to education, healthcare, housing, and employment opportunities, which are key to ensuring full participation in society.

Furthermore, while increasing allowances is critical, the government must also restructure its approach to social welfare for persons with disabilities. This involves creating comprehensive policies that ensure long-term sustainability for individuals. For instance, the government could introduce employment initiatives that are tailored to the skills and needs of persons with disabilities, providing opportunities in both the public and private sectors. Creating accessible workplaces, improving mobility, and offering reasonable accommodations for workers with disabilities would go a long way in integrating persons with disabilities into the labor market.

However, infrastructure challenges remain a key barrier. The government must take the lead in ensuring accessible public spaces, including buildings, transportation systems, and communication platforms, all of which should be designed with the needs of persons with disabilities in mind. The development of a unified accessibility strategy that encompasses urban planning, housing policies, and transportation reforms will help create a more inclusive environment for persons with disabilities to thrive in all aspects of life.

Finally, the government must collaborate closely with organizations of persons with disabilities (OPDs) to ensure that their voices are not only heard but acted upon in the formulation of policies. These organizations often have a deeper understanding of the challenges that persons with disabilities face, and their expertise should be integrated into policy development processes. This approach will ensure that policies and programs are not only well-intentioned but also effectively meet the real needs of persons with disabilities.

In sum, the government must not only address the immediate needs of persons with disabilities but must also create an enabling environment for their long-term empowerment. Increasing the disability allowance is just the first step; a comprehensive, inclusive approach is required to ensure that persons with disabilities can live with dignity, fully participate in society, and lead independent lives.

Closing Session

Draft

Chief Guest H.E. Ms. Lamiya Morshed
Principal Coordinator (SDG Affairs), Chief Advisor's Office

I am here to encourage and support the important work that is being done today. I am actively involved in the UN Voluntary National Review (VNR), which will be submitted next year. For the VNR this year, our goal is to ensure that the report is participatory and inclusive. At present, we are working with ministry-level data, but our vision is to bring in a broader range of stakeholders, including the private sector, NGOs, and Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs), to ensure that we capture the full spectrum of experiences.

We must ensure that the report reflects the true picture of the progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is crucial that we make the report as inclusive as possible, because I do not want to portray anything that is overestimated or does not reflect the reality on the ground.

Your work and voices must be part of the conversation. All your efforts, your progress, and the challenges you face need to be represented in the SDG progress report. This is why I am here today—to underscore the significance of your contributions to this ongoing process. The work you are doing is extremely important for the Interim Government, and we want you to be a part of this critical conversation. Your challenges and achievements must be included, as they are central to ensuring that no one is left behind in the pursuit of the SDGs.

Let us work together to ensure that the progress made for persons with disabilities is captured and highlighted in a way that truly represents the efforts and challenges faced by the community. Your voices and experiences matter deeply in shaping the future of inclusive development in Bangladesh.

Speech by Special Guest Mr. Mohammad Khaled Hasan
Additional Secretary, Cabinet Division

I would like to take a moment to highlight a few key points. First, I want to truly acknowledge the theme of this event and its significant importance. It is a matter that requires our collective effort, and I urge all of us to work together on this issue.

The allocation of business is an important aspect of the rules of business, and the Cabinet Division is the guardian of it. During my recent visit to Vietnam, I encountered a term used for people with disabilities—'invalid'—which I found deeply offensive. This is a strong reminder of the importance of using respectful and accurate terminology. I would like to request the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) to raise the issue of the term 'handicapped' used in the law, so that we can work together to amend it to 'persons with disabilities'.

In terms of leadership, persons with disabilities need to be fully mainstreamed into the leadership structure. It is crucial to note that 15% of the global population lives with disabilities, yet often, they are excluded from the mainstream. As someone who requires spectacles to see clearly, I can personally relate to the challenges of not being recognized as having a disability, and I am fully aware of the importance of inclusion.

The number of persons requiring allowances is significant—approximately 4.5 million people—yet we are still not able to cover the entire population that requires support. However, we are committed to making strides

toward inclusion. The Cabinet Division has a dedicated committee that scrutinizes all government infrastructures and building plans to ensure they are accessible to persons with disabilities. Although we do not claim to have all the solutions or the full authority to implement everything, I can assure you that we will continue to work tirelessly to ensure the utmost inclusivity.

We also have the National Social Security Strategy, which outlines the needs of persons with disabilities, and we will ensure that these needs are integrated into all other national documents and strategies.

The SDGs are clear on the importance of inclusion in every aspect of life. We must ensure the dignity of persons with disabilities, and through collective efforts, we hope to empower them socially and economically.

I am confident that by working together, we will create a society where persons with disabilities are fully included, their rights are respected, and their dignity is upheld. Thank you.

Ms. Murshida Sharmin

Joint Secretary, SVRS and Social Protection Branch, Cabinet Division

The Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) is primarily responsible for working with persons with disabilities. All the laws, rules, and regulations related to persons with disabilities are formulated by the MoSW. Once they are drafted, they are scrutinized and approved by the Cabinet Division (CD). The Cabinet Division also takes the lead in monitoring the implementation of these laws.

The National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) has outlined a specific action plan for the MoSW to follow. This action plan ensures that relevant work policies are in place to support persons with disabilities. Additionally, the Central Management Committee (CMC) plays a role in ensuring that any new initiatives or provisions related to persons with disabilities are included and thoroughly reviewed.

I can assure you that any initiative related to persons with disabilities is given utmost priority by the Cabinet Division. We are fully committed to ensuring that our efforts are always directed toward making persons with disabilities empowered, supported, and included as active citizens. We will continue to uphold this priority in all our actions and policies.

Speech by Special Guest Mr. Monirul Islam

Additional Secretary (SDG Affairs), Chief Advisor's Office

We have been discussing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for a long time, but there is still much to be learned about their essence and full scope. For example, SDG 4 speaks about quality education, but the spending required for education is often discussed under SDG 1 (no poverty). Eradicating poverty sustainably, therefore, also involves eradicating illiteracy. Now, let's talk about Social Protection—it's not just about providing allowances; it's an investment plan.

Sustainable development, by definition, means developing in a way that does not compromise the well-being of future generations. All actions we take must be considered with this perspective in mind to ensure that our future generations have a safe and secure environment. The logo of SDG 1 (No Poverty) depicts a family of six people, one of whom is holding a stick. If poverty is about having no belongings or living in deprivation,

why does the logo show a family photo? This symbolism likely aims to reflect the need for reducing poverty throughout the entire life cycle—starting from childhood, to the elderly, to persons with disabilities.

Seven SDG goals directly address disability. In fact, the SDG Declaration mentions the term disability 11 times. The core aspiration of the SDGs is "Leave No One Behind" (LNOB), and the first group to benefit from this principle is persons with disabilities. The Declaration repeatedly emphasizes LNOB and includes terms like "for all", "equal", "equitable", "rights", and "universal"—all of which are in direct alignment with the inclusion of persons with disabilities.

The government of Bangladesh has made a strong commitment to these principles. For instance, the 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh defines social security and the National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) was initially named the National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS). However, in alignment with the Constitution, it was later renamed NSSS.

Looking ahead, our future plans must focus on identifying stakeholders who will work practically on implementing these SDG commitments. These stakeholders will help ensure the inclusion and empowerment of all, particularly persons with disabilities, in line with the promises of the SDGs.

Regarding the Voluntary National Review (VNR) for SDGs, the government will undergo this process for the third time in 2025. It is important to clarify that the VNR is not just a progress report but a process report. Our aim is to ensure a vibrant participation of various stakeholders, including NGOs, CSOs, OPDs, and the private sector. We have already conducted 16 consultations so far, and we intend to continue this momentum to ensure broad engagement.

The UN ESCAP reports that Bangladesh has made 31% progress toward the SDGs. To continue tracking this progress, we regularly request reports from various stakeholders. I encourage you all to participate in this process, especially by presenting your activities, evidence, and best practices—innovative initiatives that have the potential to be replicated globally. These efforts can be shown as global examples of success and innovation.

The Citizen's Platform is already working on this initiative, and we encourage everyone here to contribute. I assure you that your reports and contributions will be included in the VNR process.

Furthermore, I commit to ensuring that in July 2025, at least one person with disabilities will be part of the Bangladesh delegation at the United Nations. This would be a unique example globally, showcasing the leadership and participation of persons with disabilities in international forums.

Closing Remarks by Conference Chair Mr. A.H.M. Noman Khan

Executive Director, Centre for Disability in Development

Mr. Khan began his closing remarks by expressing his gratitude to all participants and acknowledging the event's theme. He reflected on the context of both global and Bangladesh perspectives and commended the systematic and timely structure of the sessions. He noted that the tone for the event was effectively set by Amrita Rozario, while Mr. Arifeen presented the Social Protection Framework for Persons with Disabilities. Additionally, Mr. Ayon Debnath raised important points on the changed context, identifying necessary actions and areas for improvement.

He mentioned that the presence and voice of persons with disabilities in the national symposium was one of the event's most remarkable aspects. Reflecting on the past, he noted that when their work began, there were only a few leaders in the disability rights movement. Today, however, leaders can be found throughout the country, even at the grassroots level, tirelessly working with passion and dedication. He emphasized that the event had a unique representation of young leaders, demonstrating the intergenerational bridging of experiences in the disability rights movement.

Mr. Khan acknowledged the meticulous discussions on SDGs and UN Inclusive Strategies during the event, particularly on the rights of women and women with disabilities. He thanked all involved for their informative and thoughtful contributions, which will help in raising awareness and ensuring progress for persons with disabilities.

While he noted that it would have been beneficial to have more officials from the Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) present, he commended the government officials who attended. He expressed confidence that the Interim Government has instilled a sense of hope by adopting reform agendas across sectors. He believed that reforms would come, particularly highlighting the need for implementation of all four existing disability laws.

One area for change he emphasized was the clarification of the rules of business. He pointed out that the MoSW cannot shoulder all the responsibilities alone. Other ministries, such as the Ministry of Education, should also take responsibility for inclusive practices. He called for a reform where the entire government embraces the idea of shared responsibility for all citizens, not just the MoSW focusing on persons with disabilities.

In closing, Mr. Khan expressed his optimism for next year, envisioning a reformed Bangladesh where leadership for persons with disabilities is fully integrated into national frameworks. He ended with a hopeful note, wishing for a progressive change that would pave the way for an inclusive and equitable future for all citizens.