



Transition into formal employment for youth with disabilities in Bangladesh: a qualitative study

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List of abbreviations

FCDO	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
GUK	Gona Unnayan Kendra
IW	Inclusion Works
IDI	In-depth interview
ICT	Information and communication technology
IRB	Institutional Review Board
INGO	International non-governmental organisation

ILO	International Labour Organization
KII	Key informant interview
LMIC	Low and Middle Income Country
MBA	Master of Business Administration
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OPD	Organisation of people with disabilities

Report summary – English and Bangla

Background and objectives

Despite the fact that youth employment is a government policy priority in Bangladesh, young people have higher unemployment rates than the overall working population. Young men and women with disabilities, many of whom live in rural areas, are the most vulnerable. They grow up with stigma and discrimination, low self-esteem and often inequitable access to the services and skills they require to earn a living and be active contributors to their country's economic growth.

As part of a multi-country project focussing on inclusive employment in the formal sector implemented in Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda and Bangladesh, we undertook a qualitative study in Bangladesh. We gathered information on how youth with disabilities are transitioning into formal employment, and the effects of this transition on their lives and livelihoods.

We sought to understand what lessons can be derived to inform policy debates around disability inclusive employment, notably around the adjustments that young people with disabilities have to make to their lives, and how transition into formal employment affects their socio-economic situation.

Methods

Between February and June 2022, we conducted a qualitative study in five districts of Bangladesh. A workplace case study approach was used to assess and capture a range of experiences from a diverse group of participants through in-depth interviews. Participants included youth with disabilities employed at workplaces as well as their co-workers and supervisors.

Participants were interviewed about the journey into formal employment for youth with disabilities and the factors which enable or constrain their transition and adjustment to enhanced opportunities for formal employment. Interview transcripts were coded and analysed using QSR NVivo software version 12 in a team-based general inductive approach.

Key findings

Transition experiences were complex, but key features of transition into formal employment identified by our thematic analysis include the challenges, adjustment processes, and hope for the future. The desire for independent economic and social lives was the key driver of transition into formal employment and underpinned the processes of empowerment and actions for young men and women with disabilities in their journey into formal employment.

Processes of reduced self-stigmatisation were clearly evident in their stories. However, some youth with disabilities continued to struggle throughout the journey into gainful formal employment because they anticipated stigma. Several participants described fearing gossip, rejection and their disability being used against them by employers and co-workers.

Many were struggling economically and psychologically, but getting a job had enhanced their self-esteem and confidence. Support from co-workers, supervisors, friends, and family members had helped them to confront the challenges in their journey more positively and see hope for the future, motivating their efforts to lead independent economic and social lives. Many had also developed a new network of peer support through contacts they had developed during their training but were less likely to be members of organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs).

Conclusions

The study findings presented in this report seeks to build understanding of the transition process into formal employment for youth with disabilities. It also considers the factors enabling or hindering transition processes in a resource-limited setting, notably circumstances of poverty and exclusion.

Our findings show that the process of transition into formal employment for youth with disabilities is not linear and takes time. Better understanding of this transition process, the challenges youth with disabilities face, and the support needed, is important for the success of disability inclusive employment programmes.

প্রতিবেদনের সারাংশ

পটভূমি ও লক্ষ্য

যুব কর্মসংস্থান বাংলাদেশ সরকারের একটি অগ্রাধিকারমূলক নীতি হওয়া সত্ত্বেও, দেশে সামগ্রিক কর্মক্ষম জনসংখ্যার তুলনায় তরুণদের বেকারত্বের হার বেশি। গ্রামীণ এলাকায় বসবাসকারী প্রতিবন্ধী যুবকরা সবচেয়ে ঝুঁকিপূর্ণ। এদের মধ্যে অনেকেই কলঙ্ক, বৈষম্য, স্বল্প আত্মসম্মান, জীবিকা অর্জনের প্রয়োজনীয় পরিষেবা ও দক্ষতার অসম সুযোগ এর সাথে বেড়ে ওঠে। ফলে, দেশের অর্থনৈতিক প্রবৃদ্ধিতে তাদের সক্রিয় অবদান অপ্রতুল থেকে যাচ্ছে।

একটি বহু-দেশীয় প্রকল্পের অংশ হিসাবে আনুষ্ঠানিক কর্মক্ষেত্রে অন্তর্ভুক্তিমূলক কর্মসংস্থানের উপর দৃষ্টি নিবদ্ধ করে কেনিয়া, নাইজেরিয়া, উগান্ডা ও বাংলাদেশে প্রতিবন্ধী যুবসমাজ কীভাবে আনুষ্ঠানিক কর্মসংস্থানে নিয়োজিত হচ্ছে এবং তাদের জীবন ও জীবিকার

উপর এই परिवर्तনের प्रभाव कि से संक्रान्त तथ्य संग्रहे आमरा बांग्लादेशे एकटि गुणगत अधयन करेछि। आमरा बोबार चेष्टा करेछि ये प्रतिबन्धिता अन्तर्भुक्तिमूलक कर्मसंस्थान विषये नीति वितर्क सम्पर्के जानाते की पाठ नेओया येते पारे, विशेष करे प्रतिबन्धी तरुणदेर आनुष्ठानिक कर्मसंस्थाने रूपान्तर करते कि कि समन्वय करते हय एवं कर्मसंस्थान कीभावे तादेर आर्थ-सामाजिक परिस्थितिके प्रभावित करे।

पद्धति

२०२२ सालेर फेब्रुवारी थेके जून पर्यन्त आमरा बांग्लादेशेर पाँचटि जेलाय एकटि गुणगत समीक्षा परिचालना करेछि। कर्मक्षेत्रे केस स्टाडि पद्धति व्यवहार करे एसकल एलाकार कर्मक्षेत्रगुलोते नियोजित प्रतिबन्धी तरुण, तादेर सहकर्मी ओ तादेर सुपारभाइजारदेर अभिज्ञतार मूल्यान करते अंशग्रहणकारीदेर निविड साक्षात्कार ग्रहन ओ पर्यवेक्षण करा हय। प्रतिबन्धी युवकदेर आनुष्ठानिक कर्मसंस्थाने यात्रा एवं आनुष्ठानिक कर्मसंस्थानेर वर्धित सुयोगगुलोते तादेर स्थानान्तर ओ समन्वयके सक्षम करे अथवा बाधा देय एमन कारणगुलो जानते अंशग्रहणकारीदेर साक्षात्कार नेओया हयेछे। QSR NVivo सफ्टवेय्यार संस्करण १२ व्यवहार करे साक्षात्कारेर प्रतिलिपिगुलोके एकटि दल-भित्तिक जेनारेल इन्डाक्टिड पद्धतिते कोडिं एवं विश्लेषण करा हयेछिल।

उल्लेखयोग्य फलाफल

आनुष्ठानिक कर्मसंस्थाने रूपान्तरेर अभिज्ञतागुलो छिल जटिल। आमामेदर विषयभित्तिक विश्लेषण द्वारा चिह्नित आनुष्ठानिक कर्मसंस्थाने रूपान्तरेर मूल वैशिष्ट्यगुलिर मध्ये रयेछे भविष्यतेर जन्य च्यालेण्ज, समन्वय प्रक्रिया एवं आशा। स्वाधीन अर्थनैतिक ओ सामाजिक जीवनेर आकाङ्क्षा छिल आनुष्ठानिक कर्मसंस्थाने रूपान्तरेर मूल चालिकाशक्ति एवं आनुष्ठानिक कर्मसंस्थाने तादेर यात्राय प्रतिबन्धी युवक ओ नारीदेर क्षमतायनेर प्रक्रिया एवं कर्मेर उपर भित्तिक करे। गल्लगुलोते स्पष्टभावे उठे एसेछे तादेर आत्तु-कलङ्क (self-stigma) ह्रासेर प्रक्रिया। तवे किछु प्रतिबन्धी युवकदेर लाभजनक आनुष्ठानिक कर्मसंस्थान यात्रार पुरोटा जुड़ेइ संग्राम करते हयेछे। बेश कयेकजन अंशग्रहणकारी भूतिमूलक कथावार्ता, प्रत्याख्यान एवं नियोगकर्ता ओ सहकर्मीरा प्रतिबन्धी कर्मिदेर प्रतिबन्धिता तादेरई विरुद्धे व्यवहार करेछे- एभावे वर्णना करेछेन। अनेके अर्थनैतिक ओ मानसिकभावे संग्राम करेछिलेन, तवे चाकरि पाओया तादेर आत्तुसम्मान ओ आत्तुविश्वासके बाडिये दियेछे। सहकर्मी, तन्नावधायक, बन्धुबन्धव एवं परिवारेर सदस्यदेर काछ थेके समर्थन तादेर रूपान्तर यात्रार च्यालेण्जगुलिके आरओ इतिवाचकभावे मोकাবেला करते एवं भविष्यतेर जन्य आशा देखते साहाय्य करेछिल, स्वाधीन अर्थनैतिक ओ सामाजिक जीवनयापनेर जन्य तादेर प्रचेष्टाके अनुप्राणित करेछिल। अनेके तादेर प्रशिक्षणेर समय गडे ओठा परिचितिर माध्यमे सहकर्मी समर्थनेर (peer support) एकटि नतून नेटवर्कओ तैरि करेछिल।

उपसंहार

এই প্রতিবেদনে উপস্থাপিত গবেষণার ফলাফলগুলি প্রতিবন্ধী যুবকদের জন্য আনুষ্ঠানিক কর্মসংস্থানে রূপান্তর প্রক্রিয়া সম্পর্কে বোঝার চেষ্টা করে। এটি একটি সম্পদ-সীমিত সেটিং, বিশেষ করে দারিদ্র্য এবং বর্জনের পরিস্থিতিতে পরিবর্তন প্রক্রিয়াগুলিকে সক্ষম বা বাধা দেওয়ার কারণগুলিও বিবেচনা করে। আমাদের অনুসন্ধানগুলি দেখায় যে প্রতিবন্ধী যুবকদের আনুষ্ঠানিক কর্মসংস্থানে রূপান্তরের প্রক্রিয়া রৈখিক নয়। প্রতিবন্ধিতা অন্তর্ভুক্তিমূলক কর্মসংস্থান কর্মসূচির সাফল্যের জন্য, এই রূপান্তর প্রক্রিয়াটি আরও ভালভাবে বোঝা গুরুত্বপূর্ণ, বিশেষ করে প্রতিবন্ধী যুবকদের চ্যালেঞ্জগুলি এবং তাদের প্রয়োজনীয় সহায়তা।

Chapter 1: Introduction

Background and rationale

Compared to the general population, young people in Bangladesh as in many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs), face significant economic uncertainty and are at risk of poverty ^[1, 2].

There is considerable evidence to suggest that poor working conditions, gender inequalities and limited employment opportunities continue to undermine the ability of young people to earn sufficient incomes and contribute to the economic growth of their countries ^[3-7].

Young men and women with disabilities, many of whom live in rural areas, are the most vulnerable ^[8], growing up in a context of stigmatising social attitudes ^[9, 10], low self-esteem ^[11, 12] and inequitable access to public services ^[13, 14].

Disability-related stigma is often grounded in socially produced stereotypes that seek to legitimise the perceived low status of people with disabilities in society, and consequently enabling them to be placed in systems of disadvantage, discrimination or exclusion ^[15, 16].

Despite the presence of legislation specifically targeted at promoting and protecting the rights of people with disabilities and diversity in the workplace ^[21, 22], studies in LMICs over the past ten years, including studies in Bangladesh, show that youth with disabilities do not experience the same access to work opportunities as their counterparts without disabilities ^[23, 24]. Even when employed, youth with disabilities are more likely to report fewer stable jobs and lower pay than their non-disabled counterparts ^[25, 26].

To improve the long-term economic prospects of young people with disabilities and address gaps in knowledge regarding inclusive formal labour market systems, Inclusion Works (IW), a collaborative project focussing on inclusive formal employment, was implemented in Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda and Bangladesh between 2019 and 2022 with funding from the UK AID.

In Bangladesh, this programme was implemented by international non-governmental organisation (NGO) Sightsavers in collaboration with the government of Bangladesh and several consortium partners in multiple districts across the country. The programme worked directly with organisations of people with disabilities (OPDs), other NGOs and prospective employers to promote and demonstrate inclusion of people with disabilities in the workplace

on an equal basis with others [27]. Within this programme, we set out to examine the experiences of transition into gainful employment for youth with disabilities participating in the programme and explore the factors affecting their transition experiences.

In this report, the term transition is used to refer to young people's journey into gainful employment and adjustment towards incorporating greater independence into their lives, including their wellbeing, self-esteem and interactions with others [28]. Transition to work has been the subject of substantial sociological research in the US and Europe [29-31]. However, to date, there has been little research on the transition into formal employment and associated adaptive strategies for youth with disabilities in Bangladesh.

Routine programme monitoring and evaluation of the IW programme has already developed an understanding of the social structures within which inclusive employment for people with disabilities and the systems for its realisation are located [32]. But transition to decent work for youth with disabilities does not just happen after training or after prospective employers have been sensitised about disability inclusion. It is achieved by young people themselves taking action and making changes in various aspects of their lives and relationships [33]. It is therefore important to understand how young people with different impairments adjust to and manage the journey into gainful employment, and how this affects their lives and livelihoods.

The journey into formal employment will have socio-economic repercussions for youth with disabilities, probably for the better in many cases, but perhaps there will be unexpected changes that could in turn threaten their safety and wellbeing. Research on this issue remains very limited, but there are indications, for example, that abuse and exploitation may be exacerbated by differential access to employment opportunities for young women with disabilities [34].

In this report, qualitative research findings narrate and describe how youth with disabilities are transitioning into formal employment, and how they experience the effects of this transition on their lives and livelihoods, with the view of the lessons these may offer for disability inclusive employment policy debates in Bangladesh and similar settings. These data are very timely, given the increased global focus on promoting disability inclusion in formal employment and creating an inclusive workplace environment across economic sectors in LMICs.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Study design and setting

This research was exploratory, both in terms of its empirical ambition and in terms of the methodological design applied. Using aspects of a similar conversational interview methodological design previously applied in rural Uganda with youth with disabilities in the informal sector [35, 36], the study applied a qualitative case study approach, with a focus on the workplace.

Twelve workplaces where at least one youth with a disability had been able to get a job by February 2022 were selected purposefully. These workplaces are spread across five districts: Dhaka, Sirajganj, Mymensingh, Narayanganj and Gazipur.

The selection of these districts was in part opportunistic, reflecting our established relationships and networks with employers and other local stakeholders, but also reflected our desire to engage with organisations based in the capital city as well as those based in more rural districts.

Workplace visits were conducted over a period of four months and the methods of data collection were in-depth interviews (IDIs). The IDIs documented the experiences and work histories of youth with disabilities and assessed the effect of gainful formal employment on their everyday lives, livelihoods and plans for the future.

Sampling

We selected participants using a stratified, purposeful sampling strategy, as described by Palinkas and colleagues ^[37] to achieve our sample size. The sampling categories were chosen to ensure that a mix of experiences could be documented, in terms of gender, type of disability and economic sector for the workplace and whether a youth with a disability remains in active employment with the organisation at the time of the study visit.

This mix allowed for comparison of how different categories of youth with disabilities were adjusting to transition into formal employment. For each of the 12 case study organisations (see Table 1 below), interviews were planned with four key informants – the young person with a disability engaged with the programme, their manager, and any two co-workers identified as playing a significant role in supporting or working closely with the young person in their day-to-day work.

For each workplace, the administrative in charge was first approached for permission for us to conduct fieldwork on their premises. If there was site-level reluctance to participate, the workplace was excluded and replaced by the next workplace on our list. A total of 48 study participants were approached and 38 agreed to participate. Four managers and six co-workers declined participation in the study, as they needed permission from their supervisors, which they could not obtain ahead of the interview.

Table 1: Sample for the qualitative study (38 participants)

Type of employer	Nature of workplace	Location	Study participants
Government department	Busy government office	Dhaka	1 index participant
NGO	Local NGO, employs more than 2,000 staff	Mymensingh	1 index participant 2 co-workers 1 manager
Service company	Diversified conglomerate with more than 1,000 staff	Dhaka	1 index participant 1 co-worker
NGO	Local NGO that works for people with disabilities	Sirajganj	1 index participant 1 manager

University	Private research university with more than 600 staff	Gazipur	1 index participant 2 co-workers
Textile factory	Garments manufacturing facility, employs over 6,000 staff	Narayanganj	1 index participant 2 co-workers 1 manager
Telecom firm	Largest mobile telecoms operator with 3,500 staff	Dhaka	1 index participant 1 co-worker
ICT firm	Public company with more than 1,000 staff	Dhaka	1 index participant 2 co-workers 1 manager
Paint manufacturer company	Global company with nationwide dealer network, employs 800 staff		1 index participant 2 co-workers 1 manager
Designing and washing	Large garments washing plant, employs more than 4,000 staff	Gazipur	1 index participant 2 co-workers 1 manager
Food and beverage	Part of a national chain that manufactures and distributes food and beverages, employs more 2,000 staff	Dhaka	1 index participant 2 co-workers 1 manager
Textile factory	Locally owned fabrics company, employs over 3,000 staff	Gazipur	1 index participant 2 co-workers 1 manager

Data collection

Face-to-face interviews took place between February and June 2022. Most interviews were conducted at the participants' workplace. Two youth with disabilities chose to be interviewed away from their workplace. Data were collected by three trained interviewers (a woman and two men), all of whom had received a tertiary education and were proficient in both Bangla and English. The interviews were conducted in Bangla and lasted up to one hour. Besides audio-recording the interviews, interviewers also took field notes. The interviewers transcribed the interviews and translated the transcripts into English. The transcripts were reviewed throughout the course of the study by one of the co-investigators, to ensure quality and provide continuous feedback on interview content and format.

Based on the literature, a topic guide was developed to address a broad set of topics:

- The transition process
- Experienced socio-economic change
- Youth with disabilities' sense of wellbeing
- Their attitudes towards the job, work environment and co-workers/employers

In-depth interviews with managers (or co-workers) at the workplace provided the opportunity for these study participants to share their experiences, perceptions and concerns about the working environment and relationships at work in their organisations.

The core questions were the same for all participants, while specific probes were added to explore the themes emerging from the interviews with youth with disabilities, their co-workers and managers, with the goal to build upon each interview, to reach saturation within feasible time and resource limits. Specific adaptations and supports (such as sign language interpretation and easy read formats) were provided to enable youth with a range of disabilities to participate fully and safely in the research.

Data analysis

Anonymised data were initially organised into broad codes using QSR NVivo software version 12 [38]. The transcripts were analysed thematically using both deductive and inductive approaches to explore themes and to distil key concepts and patterns from the interviews [39].

A team-based approach was used for iterative data collection and analysis. Team-based debriefs and field notes focused on key themes, observations, and possible revisions to the interview guide. At the first level of analysis, a subset of transcripts was read repeatedly by two investigators, and then coded independently by the two researchers.

Frequent discussions within our multidisciplinary research team encouraged reflexivity: we all had our own lens to look at the data, but through dialogue and constant comparison with the data, we made sure our analysis was grounded in the data.

Themes and subthemes were identified, based on the narrative content itself, examining each transcript line and paragraph in detail, but also based on the research questions and existing theoretical and empirical work. The codebook of themes and subthemes developed were then discussed in more detail by the investigators and the research assistants who collected and transcribed the data.

To enhance trustworthiness and credibility [40, 41], a full day validation workshop was convened with representatives of study participants and the wider research team to explore whether our analysis and the transcripts correspond with their experiences and understanding of transition processes. Sharing preliminary analyses with members of those groups from whom the data were originally obtained for feedback and discussion is a strategy often used by many qualitative researchers to improve validity and credibility.

During these member check sessions, similarities and differences in the coding were discussed, and the codebook was refined, and later applied to the remaining interviews by a senior researcher on the investigator team. Quotes used in the report are the words of the participants. Frequently, repeated expressions across the interviews are not quoted but cited using quotation marks.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Institute of Health Economics, University of Dhaka (IHE/IRB/DU/15/2022). Informed consent was obtained in writing from all participants and any information that might allow individuals to be identified has been deleted to ensure their anonymity. Pseudonyms are used in this report to maintain confidentiality. Those participating in the study were not paid but were served with refreshments during data collection.

Chapter 3: Findings

Participant characteristics

We carried out 38 IDIs (12 with youth with disabilities, 18 with co-workers and eight with managers) in total, distributed across 12 workplaces.

Eleven of the 12 youth with disabilities interviewed were working in the NGO or private sector, ten of them were in their first job, and seven self-reported a physical disability and five a sensory disability.

Only one young man with a mobility difficulty, a lawyer by training, was employed by the government of Bangladesh. Most had been in employment for less than two years, with the shortest period in employment being seven months for a youth who had been engaged on a short-term research assistant contract.

The educational background of these youths, shown in Table 2 below, is similar to the educational background of their co-workers, with young men with disabilities being more likely to have received master's degree or postgraduate training than young women with disabilities.

Five of the eight young men with disabilities stated they were single, and all the four women with disabilities were married. Five of the 12 youth with disabilities were in possession of a disability card, which entitles them to a basic monthly allowance from the government. All the youth with disabilities interviewed had an adequate material standard of living, through their salaries or family support. A few indicated that they had signed a fixed-term contract with their employer, but the majority were not aware or could not recall signing an employment contract.

Table 2. Participant characteristics (38 participants)

Characteristic	12 youth with disabilities	18 co-workers	8 managers
Age in years, mean (range)	26 (20–30)	26 (21–34)	34 (30–46)
Sex, number (percentage)			
Female	4 (33)	10 (55)	2 (25)
Male	8 (67)	8 (45)	6 (75)
Marital status, number (percentage)			
Married	7 (58)	14 (78)	7 (88)
Not married	5 (42)	4 (22)	1 (12)
Education level completed, number (percentage)			
Secondary	1 (8)	0	0
Bachelor's degree	7 (58)	11 (61)	3 (37)
Master's degree	4 (33)	7 (39)	5 (63)
Time in current employment, number (percentage)			
Less than 1 year	5 (42)	2 (11)	1 (12.5)
1–2 years	6 (50)	10 (56)	1 (12.5)
Above 2 years	1 (8)	6 (33)	6 (75)

Among the 18 co-workers interviewed (eight men, ten women), eight had been with the organisation longer than the youth with disabilities interviewed, with the longest period being ten years. Fourteen worked in the same section or department with the youth with disability and eight worked under the same immediate supervisor.

The majority (six out of eight) of the managers interviewed were middle-level supervisors. Two were women, and six were men. Most had been working as managers for four to eight years; only one had been in a supervisory role for less than a year.

Early life experiences and adjustments

Study participants talked about their early life experiences of living with disabilities and how these influenced their journey into formal employment. Their stories revealed two main themes. The first theme described young people's challenges, their household economic difficulties, stigmatising attitudes and anxiety about future livelihood prospects. Some described how their family members and other people in the community doubted their ability to work and prosper:

“He's a blind man and what would he do with his life? I was really upset to hear that, and I didn't say anything in reply, but just quietly put up with everything.” Male, visual disability, Dhaka.

As they grew up, young people with disabilities had to deal with negative social attitudes, labelling and discrimination which often affected their perception of themselves, their confidence and self-belief:

“My two uncles used to tell me that I was blind and could not do anything in my life. When I grew up, I always felt like a burden to my father's family all my life. They always used to say such nonsense to my ears. Many of my neighbours and relatives used to make such negative comments about me.”
Male, visual disability, Dhaka.

The second theme arising from the interviews was coping strategies, adjustments and support. The majority of youth with disabilities managed to deal with the functional challenges they experienced and make the necessary adjustments in their lives.

The data revealed three important factors enabling and supporting this adjustment process.

1. Many participants received significant support from their family members and close friends without whom ‘they would have continued to be held back’ by feelings of anxiety and exclusion.
2. Support from the available NGO programmes, such as the IW programme, was an important step that facilitated their access to vital training and support, which improved their skills and gave them hope. The participants spoke about these programmes as empowering spaces in which they could have important interactions, not just with the trainers, but with other youth with disabilities, to share experiences and encourage each other as they set out to look for jobs and build a livelihood for themselves.
3. Study participants talked about their own courage and confidence, which helped them to actively search and apply for jobs. These personal characteristics helped them to request what they needed from their employers and other support structures. Some argued that they felt determined to “jump into the ring and tussle it out with others” rather than rely on disability quota entitlements.

Feelings about formal jobs and independence

Looking across these young people's stories, they had summoned the confidence to step out and look for jobs, ensure they get employed, and remain gainfully employed, framed in terms of their livelihoods and responsibilities to their family and society.

They talked about having been a burden to their families and being desperate to get a job, and what they saw as options available to them: continue to be a burden to others or aggressively work towards being economically independent. They had been encouraged by learning about and seeing other people with disabilities in gainful employment. They had made the decision to start searching and applying for jobs with different organisations. With time, they started to get invitations to job interviews, attended several, and eventually got a job offer. They can now earn and provide for themselves and their families.

“Finding a good job and staying in that job was a serious job of its own for me.” This frequent expression indicates most young people were determined and committed to getting a job and remaining gainfully employed. Their stories revealed that they felt in control of their situation and, indeed, all but one who was employed in a short-term research assistant role

reported feeling less vulnerable to feelings of uncertainty and anxiety since gaining employment.

This sense of control involved an ability to take decisions, manage change and reduce their dependence on others for livelihoods support. They were, therefore, mostly portraying themselves as ‘empowered young people’, pursuing and focused on finding a good job in a context of high unemployment and competition for jobs. To differing degrees, the young men and women with disabilities interviewed had moved from a situation of uncertainty to renewed hope for improved livelihoods and the future. They could aspire to feasible livelihood prospects which they had previously thought was out of their reach.

“I want to see myself as a team leader after five years. Because of my performance, I have been promoted step by step. I think I can handle everything nicely, know my work, can manage staff and will not face any problems.” Male, physical disability, Mymensingh.

Experiences with wages, promotion and job security

The majority of the youth with disabilities interviewed acknowledged the existence of opportunities for growth and promotion at their place of work – two had been promoted more than once since joining the organisations. Several youth, however, indicated that ‘promotion’ actually meant an increase in workload but not necessarily an increase in take-home pay.

A minority, in contrast, remained partly dependent on family and friends for livelihoods support. For this group, their monthly salary could meet basic needs, but not always, and could not cover additional expenses for items such as daily transport to work or school fees for siblings:

“The salary I get is spent on my own expenses in Dhaka city and my education. Every month I try to save as little as I can by deducting all my expenses and from that I can give very little money to my father. Sometimes when I need money in an emergency, I have to borrow money from my father from time to time.” Male, physical disability, Dhaka.

Salaries are generally very low for most entry-level jobs in this setting. However, youth with disabilities expressed more strongly than their co-workers without disabilities the frustrations around the lower-than-average salaries. We were not able to objectively verify the claims, but common expressions used to describe how they felt about their pay included: “My pay is so little, there has been no increment at all since I joined. I am surviving but not settled because of the meagre pay situation.”

While their co-workers without disabilities could work overtime, and enhance their monthly take-home salary, most youth with disabilities were reluctant to work long hours due to poor health or other functional difficulties related to their disability. The experience of one of the four female youth with disabilities highlights specific functional and security challenges encountered by women around staying behind at factories to work overtime, late into the night.

“There is a problem in leaving the office at night alone and that is transportation. The problem is that most people don’t understand sign

language. It is very difficult to communicate where I am going or to know how much to pay when I am not with friends who usually help me. It happens that the conductor comes and wants to know my destination, but due to not being able to explain it is often a problem. There are also cases where I am standing on the bus stand side of the road for a bus, but the bus is leaving because I can't hear its horn and there are not many friendly people around at night to help. I often get into a minor accident because I can't hear any rickshaw or car coming from behind while passing any road, so staying behind to work overtime is not for me.” Female, hearing disability, Gazipur.

Another constant feature of these young people's interviews was the challenge of job security and the need to be trusted, to be assigned more work by their supervisors. Some young men and women, notably those who had been in gainful employment for less than a year, were keen to keep searching and interviewing for jobs with the government of Bangladesh. Public sector employment was believed to offer enhanced job security, lower likelihood of discrimination and better job benefits.

One young woman, for example, said she would immediately resign her current job with a telecom firm if she were to be offered a job in government, and another had invested a lot of time searching for a public sector job and thought only about the day she would “finally get a job with the government”.

Generally, worries about job security were projected to a distant future and did not appear to undermine performance at the job for the youth with disabilities interviewed.

Processes of transformation and empowerment

Getting a job had profound implications for these young people's social and economic lives. They felt appreciated and empowered:

“I used to get help from my family. Now I am supporting my family. For me, it's a huge matter to become happy. I used to feel bad when I only used to get support and I was only getting help, but I couldn't do anything for them. Now, I decide on family matters. I feel mentally confident now. Socially, even if a little, my dignity has increased.” Male, visual disability, Dhaka.

Family and friends no longer shunned or asked them 'out of group photos'. Some were running small side businesses or trades of some sort in addition to formal employment. Being in gainful employment was important to self-esteem and social identity.

“One of the benefits of my job is that I am now quite well off. I can cover my personal expenses as well as pay for my studies. The people of the village, the neighbours, the friends all respect me very much.” Male, physical disability, Narayanganj.

Overtime, one could re-engage with friends and family as a respected person who was 'working and earning' regularly.

“My parents are very proud of me and the people in my area who are living with different disabilities want to know about me and my struggles in life.”

They want to do something in life, so they try to contact me and want to know different information about the study opportunities available for them and scopes of work for them. This thing creates a lot of encouragement for me.” Male, physical disability, Mymensingh.

Two other young men who had been previously formally employed with other organisations expressed joy about being able to get a new job, about their enhanced status in the wider community and pride in being seen to be providing for their family and other relatives.

They, like the majority of youth with disabilities interviewed, were not earning decent salaries to enable them save or invest in assets. However, being less dependent on others for livelihoods support was an important achievement and source of pride and self-esteem: “Alhamdulillah, I am much better than before.”

However, there were tensions and challenges for the ten in their first job, as they adjusted to the routines of actively looking for a job or being in formal employment. Most had moved to the big urban centres and had to cope with staying alone in storied buildings with no lift, as well as the crowded and fast-paced nature of city life.

They also had to cope with new threats to respectability and the stigma they feared would be enacted as they moved from one office to the other to inquire about job opportunities. They could not predict, for example, how prospective employers would react to ‘seeing’ somebody with a disability walk into their office for an interview, feared gossip at the workplace, and wanted to preserve their self-esteem and dignity in the process.

Experiences of social and organisational support

The material and emotional support provided by relatives and friends had been a critical factor in the journey into formal employment for young people with disabilities and continued to play an important role in their working lives. Encouragement from friends was a prominent theme. Young men and women with disabilities enthusiastically spoke about the practical advice and encouragement that friends had given them while looking for a job.

“I received a lot of help from my friend, and I will admit it as long as I live. Rana, who lives next door to me, helped me with information, lent me money when I needed. Even till this day, I may owe him one to two thousand taka.”
Male, physical disability, Dhaka,

Disability youth networks were the other most frequently discussed source of support beyond friends and the family. Youth with disabilities were active in these small, often unregistered local networks. The networks provided opportunities for them to share experiences, get encouragement to work hard and stand out, tackle challenges, and offer access to information on training opportunities, business initiatives, as well as assistive devices.

These peer networks appeared to have played a profound role in their resilience to joblessness, the economic and social effects of Covid-19, and in their determination to remain gainfully employed after getting a job.

In contrast, of the 12 youth with disabilities interviewed, only one young man reported being a member of a formal organisation of people with disabilities (OPD). Most youth interviewed were aware that membership of OPDs would enable them to access more tangible

resources but in a setting where OPDs reportedly 'exist mostly on paper'. Engagement with OPDs was rarely mentioned during the interviews.

All youth with disabilities interviewed encountered difficulties at times with physical access to the workplace and lack of other relevant accommodations. A few individuals struggled more than the others. One young man, for example, with a physical disability, said he could not move around easily in an overcrowded office space housed on several floors of a storied building. He recalled how challenging it had been for him to manoeuvre his way to the room where the interview for his current role was conducted. In his words, "it was more like a punishment". Nothing has changed more than a year now into the job.

Another said that the absence of any form of sign language support within her work unit made her feel very isolated at the workplace, but that she could not bring herself to discuss the issue with management for fear of losing her job. She could not bear to be "on the streets again" looking for another job.

Some supervisors had sought to help processes of integration for youth with disabilities into the workplace by asking co-workers to be supportive and 'careful' in their day-to-day interactions.

"Some supervisors mentioned that employees with disabilities are very delicate to handle. We need to think before talking to them. Sometimes they cannot take work pressure." Male, co-worker, Gazipur.

The vast majority of the supervisors interviewed had very limited awareness around issues of diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Absence of policies on disability inclusion at the workplaces was evident during the interviews with supervisors. Supervisors' accounts suggested that, where these policies existed, the supervisors did not seem to know about their existence.

"Sorry. I don't have any clear idea about those policies so I would like to skip this question." Male supervisor, Gazipur.

"No, I have no idea. I am basically a production-level supervisor. These are basically the things our HR admin and management can say." Male supervisor, Dhaka.

Similar accounts were provided by youth with disabilities themselves, as well as their co-workers. At the time they started work with their current employers, some youth with disabilities and their co-workers recounted, to different degrees, the absence of any form of discussion or sensitisation around inclusion of people with disabilities at the workplace:

"I do not know whether there is any policy to recruit persons with disabilities in our office." Female, co-worker, Dhaka.

"I don't think there is any awareness about the disabled workers here. The disabled workers are not given any special benefits in their work. All those who come to our factory with disabilities have to survive in the competition by doing the same work as other ordinary workers." Female, co-worker, Gazipur.

“In fact, employers often encourage people with disabilities to apply for jobs, but in reality, they do not take people with disabilities into selection. They may have to say it institutionally, so they say, but, in practice, they never feel motivated to hire someone with a disability. I personally believe so and I have experienced it.” Male, physical disability, Dhaka.

Experiences of self-stigma¹ and discrimination

After getting a job, study participants reported feeling more confident and their self-stigma had reduced. Most youth with disabilities interviewed spoke about their regained self-esteem and positive livelihoods outlook. At some organisations, their self-esteem was strongly reinforced as they settled into their jobs and felt appreciated by their supervisors and co-workers. A powerful theme in the interviews was their joy about being able to earn their own money regularly, which enhanced self-esteem and reduced stigma related to dependency or feelings of burden:

“Life before I got a job was miserable and sad, but life after getting a job is much easier and better than that. Before I got the job, my life was full of sadness, despair and frustration. When I was unemployed, I always had a kind of frustration and deprivation in my mind and I was always upset. Life of unemployment put me in such a bad situation that I was desperate to find a job to get out of there. Now that I have a job, I can at least enjoy the joy of living independently, at least I don't have to depend on anyone.” Male, visual disability, Dhaka.

Study participants also noted a positive effect of interactions with and support from co-workers and supervisors at the workplace. These interactions created a sense of belonging at the workplace which, for many youth with disabilities, was a place where new friends and new positive identities and relationships had been forged:

“My colleagues or co-workers are much more helpful and friendly, and it is because of their cooperative attitude that I am able to do my job properly. From the first day I started working at this place, my co-workers have always been very supportive, so I have been able to do my job properly.” Male, physical disability, Dhaka.

However, in a few cases, the arrival of youth with disabilities at some of the workplaces created ‘murmurs’ and tensions within the workforce at the organisation. There was, for example, a selective ‘resistance’ and unwillingness by some co-workers to support the integration of youth with disabilities into the workplace:

“We didn't need any new worker at our workplace, and yet suddenly one day she was sent to our office to work. My line manager called us and asked to behave ‘normally’ with her. We don't know what was the process of her

¹ When individuals internalise the prevailing values in society which negatively judge and label them, thus eroding their self-esteem

recruitment, and what salary and benefit she is getting.” Male, co-worker, Dhaka.

Most youth with disabilities interviewed still anticipated the possibility of discrimination, which reflected some degree of continuing self-stigmatisation as well as fears of stigma.

“I was not treated well as an employee. When any foreign buyer came to visit our factory, our supervisor and floor in-charge forced us to go to the toilet or hide somewhere for a long time, until the foreign buyers left the factory.” Female, hearing disability, Gazipur.

They therefore adopted a range of strategies as part of their coping and smooth integration. These included choosing to ‘competitively’ apply for jobs with everybody else rather than seeking to be considered via the disability quota system. Coming in through the disability quota would arguably feed into stereotypical beliefs that associate employees with disabilities with a discredited work ethic and ‘problems’.

Others strongly requested that their supervisors and co-workers do not go out of their way to help with daily job routines unless specifically requested for. One female youth with severe hearing loss demanded that she be allowed to work overtime just like her co-workers who don’t have a disability. Some bemoaned the end of Covid-19 transportation arrangements for everybody at the workplace, as that was a strong organisation-wide ‘statement’ that had demystified stereotypical beliefs of ‘special treatment’ and ‘high maintenance’ for employees with disabilities.

They were of course concerned about their support needs, health and wellbeing, but also argued that they could not always be the ones who get less work, are allowed to use the lift exclusively, or go home early because that would serve to reinforce stereotypical beliefs among co-workers. One of the managers interviewed recognised the threat of stigma to the performance and productivity of two female staff members with a hearing impairment in her department:

“They mostly interact with each other as other staff don’t understand sign language. I have noticed that sometimes they look sad when other staff are laughing and they don’t know what it is all about. If they need help, they cannot easily communicate to the others. Sometimes they are not able to do their job properly, and their co-workers give them a lot of awkward insults and abuse them, but they cannot hear and they just become sad. We have a long history of using abusive language when things are not going well. It’s a real shame.” Female, supervisor, Dhaka.

Aspirations for the future

Young people’s future aspirations were consistently framed around further education and employment in a government office.

“I actually want to finish my education. Then I want to be a primary school teacher. I wanted to be a teacher since my childhood. I am currently working as a computer operator in the garment sector. I can’t really do the job for

very long. I am doing this job mainly just to cover my own education and personal expenses.” Male, physical disability, Sirajganj.

With additional qualifications, most were positive about their chances of success at landing government jobs. While these young people held high aspirations for a job with the government of Bangladesh, and to a lesser extent with the private sector, they could not say how this would be achieved in an environment of few public sector formal jobs. The minority who had tried (and failed) to get government jobs in the past talked about their frustrations when they realised that they could not afford to pay the money ‘demanded’ before they could be given the government job, as this young man explained:

“I was looking for a government job under one of the government entities. But they demanded a huge amount of money as a bribe from me. So, I lost interest in the job because I was unable to pay that amount later.” Male, physical disability, Dhaka.

What the above quote illustrates is not necessarily something specific to disability (or a person with a disability) getting a government job. Demands for facilitation payments are, not surprisingly, common in this setting,

Some of the young people also held aspirations that centred on setting up a business themselves. They wanted to ensure that they have something to fall back to when the time came for them to go back to their villages or when their health can no longer permit them to work.

“Because of my physical disability, I may not be able to work as long as others, so one day I must go back to my village and do something like my own. In later life, I would like to run my own business with some savings and, like other people, I want to be self-sufficient and live with my family. I basically want to be an entrepreneur. I want to be self-sufficient through some petty business in my own area. I have plans in the future that if I can build a fairly good business then there will be job opportunities for physically challenged people in my business organisation. I want to do something for the poor, helpless people.” Male, physical disability, Mymensingh.

There were also frequent references to the desire to raise awareness around livelihoods opportunities for other people with disabilities and offer support to them in the community, especially for young men and women with disabilities, just as they had been supported when they first embarked on the journey into formal employment.

“I think the way I survive, competing like everyone else, will serve as a kind of inspiring example to others around our village. When I go to the village, I find that those who are younger than me, physically challenged, come to me and take inspiration and encouragement from me to do great things in life. I try to tell them stories of my life's struggles in various ways so that they can be encouraged to go out of their way and do something independently.” Male, physical disability, Dhaka.

They argued that they are now seen as role models for other youth with disabilities to follow. This offered them a new purpose and sense of leadership among their peers.

Chapter 4: Discussion

Our study explored the journey into formal employment for youth with disabilities in Bangladesh. The research has revealed different dimensions of transition, focusing on the lived experiences of young people before and after getting into formal employment as well as the experiences and practices of co-workers and supervisors at the workplace.

Our study reveals that different factors influence this journey and highlight the importance of young people's context and individual characteristics and ability to adapt. Our findings complement other research, which highlights the role of personal aspirations^[42, 43], skills and supportive environments^[44, 45] in the journey to formal employment and sustainable livelihoods.

Our findings also show that young people's hope for better livelihoods is often mixed with uncertainty, based on the realisation that opportunities to get promoted, earn a decent salary, change roles and have a true career path within an organisation are not guaranteed, an experience found in many settings ^[46, 47].

The types of employment youth with disabilities acquire and the salary they get can vary and often depend on their educational qualifications and skills, as well as their employers' policies and practices. Whilst the supervisors interviewed were keen to be seen to be supportive, recruitment processes and reasonable accommodation policies were not in place; and information about job opportunities was limited or unavailable to those in need. The study further highlighted the importance of education and formal qualifications, which are essential for participation of people with disabilities in an increasingly competitive labour market.

All youth with disabilities interviewed in this study were grateful for the opportunities the IW training and associated support had given them to improve their livelihoods situation. However, they also highlighted that personal determination in searching for a job and adjusting to the routines of a workplace was equally important for success.

Furthermore, in line with other research, our study confirmed that the role of supportive peer networks, friends and relatives was essential in the journey into gainful employment and for physical and emotional wellbeing of young people with disabilities. Other studies have also shown the importance of family and peer support ^[48, 49] and good relationships with co-workers, and supervisors at the workplace ^[50].

Youth with disabilities in our study had opportunities to discuss and reflect on their employment situation and vulnerabilities. Throughout the findings, an ongoing process of adjustment is evident, beginning with seeing themselves as skilled and employable. This gave them hope and courage to embark on searching for jobs, and eventually getting a job, which in turn boosted their self-esteem and reduced self-stigma. These adjustments were not necessarily always one way and positive, because youth with disabilities reported experiencing emotional setbacks that sometimes precipitate a fall back to a sense of uncertainty or loss of confidence ^[51].

As other studies have shown, the social context in our setting mediated young people's strategies and processes of transition into formal employment ^[52]. Household and gender relations were important structural factors influencing young people's decisions to actively embark on the journey into gainful formal employment.

An interesting finding in our study is that youth with disabilities seeking to get jobs appear to have a higher affinity for jobs with the government compared to jobs in the private sector. This reflects a widespread belief in this setting that jobs in the government come with a lot more benefits and stability.

One important aspiration for this group of youth with disabilities identified in our study was to be seen by their family, neighbours and the wider community as working people contributing to and valued by society.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has advocated for increased focus on employability and employment for people with disabilities in the formal economy to reduce the vulnerability associated with informal jobs. Research on transition into formal employment for youth with disabilities can inform such strategies within national disability-inclusive employment and other economic empowerment programmes.

The ILO recognises that “access of persons with disabilities to decent work is important both as an essential right and in terms of the economic advantages it brings” ^[53]. It also highlights the importance of social and organisational support to help young people with disabilities navigate the transition into formal employment. However, emphasis tends to be on technical skills training, legislation, employers’ practices, and social protection. Of course, these factors are of great importance, but building confidence and self-esteem appears to be equally important and helps youth with disabilities to actively engage with the job market ^[54]. Our findings indicate that interventions would need to go beyond skills training, to address questions of self-esteem and self-stigmatisation for jobseekers with disabilities and calls for effective strategies that can foster a bolstered sense of self.

Our study has a number of limitations, which need to be taken into account when interpreting the findings. First, we only had one young person with a disability and no co-workers or supervisors from the government sector. The perspective of such employees and employers may not be fully reflected in this research.

Second, our study participants may not be representative of the majority of youth with disabilities in Bangladesh. Our participants tended to be educated to a relatively high level and received additional training and support as part of an economic empowerment programme. Many study participants reported significant levels of support from their family and friends, which means these individuals may have had substantial levels of social capital compared to other youth with disabilities.

The majority of study participants worked for relatively large private sector employers with over 1,000 employees. The situation with adjustments or willingness to employ youth with disabilities in smaller enterprises may be different.

Finally, all our findings are drawn from the subjective accounts of the experiences described by youth with disabilities or their co-workers/supervisors. We did not have opportunities to collect more objectively verifiable data or do workplace observations in this research.

Implications for programmes

The role of IW in providing skills training and other support that enabled the transition into formal employment for this group of youth with disabilities offers important lessons for other disability inclusive programmes and settings.

- Employers need to better understand young people's transition challenges and work around those.
- Programme support should take into account young people's own economic empowerment perspectives and strategies, looking beyond the simple training initiatives and consider the role of the family and social contexts in which youth with disabilities live or work.
- Some youth with disabilities experience more challenges with integrating into the workplace, especially those with hearing or communication impairments, and employment programmes need to target certain categories of youth with disabilities with career counselling and support, post-entry into a job.
- In this study, we did not find many participants who had significant levels of support or engagement with the established organisations of people with disabilities. It is possible to better understand what types of support structures are most effective to support young people with disabilities in the journey to formal employment and to explore how national and local OPDs can better engage with this process. This may include practical, lived experience guidance which would help youth with disabilities to feel more confident in their journey into formal employment. OPDs may also encourage more peer support in the community and at the workplace and help them to manage other life challenges as they arise. Disability inclusive employment programmes need to strengthen local OPDs and their linkages with jobseekers with disabilities.

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