



## Disability, poverty and poverty dynamics: a preliminary analysis of panel data, policies and politics in Bangladesh

### Executive Summary

Andrew Shepherd<sup>i</sup>

#### Key Messages:

- Data sources on the extent of disability and its relationship to poverty may vary widely, which makes it a highly political issue: policy makers can make good use of the richer picture achieved by disaggregating the extent of both disability and poverty, and the dynamics of both over time.
- In Bangladesh, a large proportion of households - around one third - experience disability within the household. The disadvantages related to disability – in terms of access to labour markets, marriage and social protection – are widespread.
- Having a severe disability is closely linked with being extremely poor.
- Being a poor, woman with disability makes it especially difficult to escape poverty. This is an argument for the disability and women’s movement and related government ministries to work together.
- Chronic illnesses have similar effects to those of disability
- The relationship between poverty and disability is not only instrumental (one causing another), but also constitutive insofar as a disability may be seen as comprising a dimension of multidimensional poverty.
- The policy environment in Bangladesh has improved according to Disabled Peoples’ Organisations there, partly due to high level political interest, and there are programmes which have reached poor people with disabilities. But the real extent of disability and poverty is not yet acknowledged by government as it would challenge current budgetary allocations, for example in social protection.



Disability and poverty lie in much debated relation to each other, a relationship recognised in the composition of the Sustainable Development Goals. This special synthesis provides a new approach to the analysis of the relationship, one which is useful for policy purposes – a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the dynamics of poverty and disability using panel data and life histories, and sets this alongside a more conventional quantitative analysis using one point in time survey analysis. This both permits a methodological discussion of what can be gained through a q-squared dynamic analysis compared to a static analysis; and creates a rich picture with significant benefits for policy.

The papers produced for this project all examine the relationship between disability and poverty in Bangladesh, one of the 50 plus countries to have used the internationally standard Washington Group survey questions in its regular national Household Income and Expenditure Survey. Bangladesh also had a longstanding panel survey which included some questions on the activities of daily living which were capable of shedding light on disabilities, which had already been linked with qualitative life history analysis which could be revisited, and fresh links to new qualitative analysis created. These were the three data sources used for this project.

While there is a growing consensus on the challenges faced by persons with disabilities, there is still much debate in most developing countries about the extent of disability and its role in the construction of poverty. This research found that the data sources in Bangladesh vary wildly in their estimates of how many persons with disabilities (PWD) there are. There is a politics of this which has meant that the government does not accept the evidence of its own household survey because this would create too great an expectation of public policy response and expenditure. This research found that one third of all households include a PWD, and that this figure might be a useful one for the disability movement to focus on since it is suggestive of a very large ‘constituency’ for disability issues.

Of course, not all these households or PWDs are poor. However, the research showed that being severely disabled was closely associated with extreme poverty: persons with severe disabilities are much more likely to be poor and disadvantaged than PWD generally, for example, in terms of

education. Disability, not surprisingly, is also an important factor in keeping people poor, especially if you are a woman. So, the first key finding is that disability is often an important dimension of life for the poorest people, and poverty a facet of life for many of the people with severe disabilities.

Secondly, being or becoming disabled is strongly associated with falling into poverty. Downward mobility is especially common among women and children with disabilities. Along with other extra costs, household spending on medical expenses for persons with disabilities is a significant factor in downward mobility into poverty. While participation in labour markets, marriage and social protection are all lower on average for all persons with disabilities, especially women, than for those without disabilities, indicating a sense in which the disadvantages of disability are very widespread, there is a ‘triple discrimination’: being poor, a woman, and having a disability makes it very hard to escape extreme poverty.

Women with disabilities are likely to be vulnerable at the individual level, and at the household level if they are in a female headed household. They may be vulnerable within a household to marriage problems, threats of divorce, abandonment and dowry problems. And they may have a weak fall-back position in intra-household bargaining or conflict because if they are divorced or abandoned their situation may be more difficult.

Poor disabled women still have to work: among the chronically poor, women with disabilities are seven times more likely to be employed than men with disabilities; and this number increases to fifteen times more likely for women with severe disabilities. This extraordinary finding is most likely a result of women needing to work even if the work is insecure and low paid possibly due to their greater depth of poverty, and adverse social norms.

Disability is therefore an issue women’s movements and disability movements could usefully act on together.

The policy environment in Bangladesh for disability issues has definitely improved during recent years, according to the perceptions of Disabled People’s Organisations (DPOs) in Bangladesh who were involved in this project, due to the advent of the Sustainable Development Goals and also interest from national political leadership at the highest



levels. The ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Person with Disabilities (CRPD), the advent of a Disability Act in 2013, and the improved accessibility of the budget process to DPOs, the greater willingness of the private sector to take on employees with certain disabilities, are all significant, though there is much more work to be done to reform the labour market. Out of all these, it is the SDGs which could best draw the links between disability and the eradication of poverty. This has not been a massive topic in the national discourse on disability or poverty. The evidence presented in this and related papers should help to change that.

Specific policies which have worked for poor persons with disabilities are the Disability Allowance and the Disability Stipend in education. The constraint on such schemes, however, is the government's overall unwillingness to expand social protection provision beyond 1.8% of GDP. A strong alliance of anti-poverty and special interest organisations will be needed to overturn this resistance.

This is linked to the question of the proportion of the population which is disabled and poor. A recognition of the Household Income and Expenditure Survey figures, based on current global 'best practice' Washington Group short set of questions on the prevalence of disabilities would challenge the ceiling of 1.8% of GDP. The finding that a third of households have a person with a disability is a further way of challenging this. However, the analysis presented here suggests that most persons with disabilities are not in poor households, and are in fact in households which have never been poor since the late 1990s.

Our qualitative research has shown that chronic illnesses have the same sort of effects on wellbeing

as disabilities. Again, the disability movement could widen its focus to include advocacy for this group, which is otherwise unrepresented.

The analysis also suggests that disability can be a strong factor in both impoverishment and chronic poverty. A broad and inclusive poverty- and vulnerability-targeted approach to social protection which covers poor and vulnerable persons with disabilities and their households may be manageable with relatively small increases in the % of GDP devoted. One specific suggestion in this regard would be for the government of Bangladesh to develop the health insurance scheme it has been considering recently to reduce the generally burgeoning medical expenses, but also targeted to vulnerable households, including those above but close to the poverty line which include persons with disabilities. This would help to address the needs of those with chronic illnesses too.

These findings could also contribute to question advocacy strategies of the disability movement; the suggestion here should be that advocacy could gain greater momentum and relevance by addressing a wider constituency of households directly affected by disability related barriers and discrimination as well as chronic illness, without losing the leadership of persons with disabilities themselves. This broader constituency, together with an alliance with the women's movement among others, could generate more support for policies aimed at barrier removal such as accessibility, non-discrimination, coverage of extra cost, access to education or employment. On the other hand, there might also be a need for a more specific agenda aiming at securing significant increase of targeted support for persons with severe disabilities and high support requirements who experience higher forms of poverty and vulnerabilities.

---

Photo Credit: Panos Picture



**Australian Government**  
**Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade**



<sup>i</sup> This research was made possible through the support of the International Disability Alliance (IDA) and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT). The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Responsibility for the content rests entirely with the writer.

