



Research Article

## Breaking Barriers: Enhancing the Engagement of Persons with Disabilities in Policy Making of Bangladesh

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**Abstract.** Disability is any physical or mental condition of a person that makes it more difficult to do certain activities and interact with all over the world. Although several policies have been taken by the government and are being implemented for disabled persons where 10% of the total population of Bangladesh are facing disabilities. This study reveals how to enhance the engagement of persons with Disabilities (PWD) in policy-making in Bangladesh and also will have the capacity to achieve the 10th objective of sustainable development Goals (SDGs). The research paper utilizes qualitative and quantitative methods. Purposeful sampling is employed by the researchers. The researchers intentionally selected eligible participants. The criteria comprised (1) participants with disabilities, (2)

participants from various regions of Bangladesh who migrated to Rajshahi for educational purposes, and (3) participants aged between 18 and 35 years. The researchers gathered information from a total of 67 eligible participants through a survey. Drawing upon the collected data, this study aims to establish a suitable framework that guarantees the involvement of individuals with disabilities in the process of policy formation. Utilizing both Qualitative and Quantitative data, this study will formulate informed decisions concerning the circumstances of individuals with disabilities within a nation. This study offers theoretical and practical solutions for disabled individuals' challenges in policy-making in Bangladesh. The aim is to enhance the involvement of disabled people in the policy-making process.

**Keywords:** Engagement, Persons with Disabilities, Policy Making, Rights, Sustainable Development Goals.

## INTRODUCTION

In the ever-changing realm of governance and the formulation of policies, the concept of inclusivity emerges as a crucial cornerstone for the flourishing of a society. The ability of a nation to effectively utilize the various perspectives and skills of its whole population is a fundamental aspect of its overall strength. Among the various societal groups, individuals with disabilities constitute one distinct category. To gain a comprehensive understanding, it is imperative to acquire further information about this particular demographic. Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. (UN CRPD, Art.1). However, for a long time, persons with disabilities have faced systematic barriers that obstruct their active participation in the policy-making process of Bangladesh. The Rights and Protection of Persons with Disability Act 2013 (the Act) was enacted by the government of Bangladesh aligning it with the principles outlined in the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability. Although the Disability Act 2013 has been enacted, this Act was not able to achieve its main purpose. Over 190 million persons with disabilities (PWD) struggle to maintain their everyday activities, and over a billion people worldwide live with some form of disability (WHO, 2018). Bangladesh is ranked as the nation with the eighth highest population density globally (1119 population/km<sup>2</sup>), boasting an estimated populace of approximately 165.15 million where 4.6 million people are disabled (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2022). The GDP is estimated at \$303.51 billion as of 2022 with an annual growth of 7.10% (The World Bank 2022). In recent decades, Bangladesh has achieved significant advancement in alleviating poverty. According to Bangladesh Statistics Bureau, it reduced poverty from 24.3% in 2006 to 18.7% in 2022. Despite this success, the country still faces daunting challenges participation in the policy-making process of disabilities process is one of them. Nevertheless, it is commonly known that, both domestically and globally, people with disabilities (PWD) have worse health, worse educational achievement, less economic prospects, and greater levels of poverty and deprivation than people without disabilities (WHO & WB, 2011).

The involvement of individuals with disabilities in the policy formulation procedure of Bangladesh carries immense significance. Consequently, they will have

the capability to acquire the essential advantages and establish novel legislation based on the challenges they encounter on a day-to-day basis, thereby enabling the eradication of these predicaments. Transform individuals with disabilities into the workforce and create new long-term disability laws that align with global norms. These measures will properly enforce laws that directly benefit the disabled, ultimately fostering social justice, improving policy efficacy, and promoting inclusivity in Bangladesh.

## Literature Review

The issue of disability rights and the process of policy-making in Bangladesh is situated within a complex historical and socio-cultural context. Understanding the progression of disability rights and the creation of associated policies necessitates an investigation of significant historical occurrences social attitudes and governmental reactions.

This literature review aims to offer insights into the historical advancement of disability rights and policy-making in Bangladesh examining the significant events, obstacles, and evolving perspectives that have shaped the current landscape. Here is some historical context according to the period given below-

### 1.1. *Pre-independent period*

Before the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971, the rights of individuals with disabilities were shaped by the regulations and socioeconomic disparities inherited from the colonial era. The prevailing societal perception towards disability often stigmatized and ostracized those with disabilities. Regrettably, there were only limited endeavors to cater to the distinct requirements of this particular demographic, resulting in a dearth of policies concerning disability.

### 1.2. *Post-independent phase*

After the emancipation of Bangladesh, the administration shifted its focus towards the construction of the nation and process. Nonetheless, the issue of disability rights continued to be disregarded. It was not until the late 20th century that disability rights started receiving a certain attention with the interference of civil society and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) actively campaigning for the rights of persons with disabilities. These entities have contributed to building awareness, influencing policy decisions, and providing support to persons with disability.

### 1.3. *International perspective*

According to CRPD (2006), the global disability rights movement, illustrated by the United Nations (UN) adopting of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, had a notable effect on Bangladesh. The country officially approved the CRPD in 2007, indicating a commitment to align its policies with international standards. This international framework established a basis for shaping national policies regarding disabilities.

#### 1.4. *Policy milestone*

In recent decades, Bangladesh has made progress in formulating policies to solve the needs of persons with disabilities. The Persons with disabilities rights and Protection Act, which was passed in 2013 aims to advance and defend the rights of the people with disabilities in one of the key cornerstones. The legislative development marked a crucial step towards recognizing the rights of persons with disabilities in the country. Participation in the Policy-making process is necessary to ensure that the rights and needs of all citizens, including those with disabilities are adequately addressed. However, individuals with disabilities often face obstacles that hinder their effective participation in Policy-making. Here we examine some of the main challenges they encounter. Accessibility barriers such as inaccessible infrastructure and communication difficulties can prevent individuals with disabilities from participating in policy-making venues. Negative attitudes and underestimation of capabilities can also exclude them from discussions. Limited access to technology and digital literacy gaps create additional barriers. Complex language and lack of plain language versions of policies make it difficult for individuals with cognitive and learning disabilities to participate. Limited representation and insufficient accommodations further hinder their inclusion. Financial constraints and lack of consultation also limit their participation. Inadequate transportation options and limited awareness contribute to their exclusion. Addressing these barriers requires a multi-faceted approach to create a more inclusive environment.

#### 1.5. *People with Disabilities in Civic Society*

According to Donoghue (2003), People with disabilities have been isolated both from general society and from each other, which has restricted opportunities to participate in public domains or to politically organize. Braddock & Ritzier state that, Disability policies have typically been developed for people with disabilities, rather than with their direct participation. K. Scotch describe in his paper, People with disabilities continue to be marginalized in all aspects of the policy-making process, including lobbying efforts, voting, and serving as elected representatives.

Inequalities are still alive in basic areas like public accessibility and transportation, which prevents people with disabilities from full civic and social participation. According to Schur (2003), People with disabilities may have lower self-efficacy than others, and even when accounting for differences in employment and education, people with disabilities do not believe that they can impact the political system. Bai & Silverstein illustrated that, Elected officials rarely solicit the input of people with disabilities, so people with disabilities must be able to engage in public policy debate.

Research acknowledges the importance of direct involvement of people with disabilities in all aspects of policy debates, and civic engagement is one means by which to create or influence change. According to Zola (2005), For people with disabilities, civic engagement can help to create self-efficacy, promote social integration, and develop personal interests. Like other citizens, people with disabilities want an equal voice in democratic debates and the opportunity to advocate for change. Lewis state that, Such participation and involvement in public

policy efforts can have an emancipatory effect, as marginalized groups can feel they are part of something, and in turn become more aware of their civic rights and responsibilities. Disability advocate and scholar Jim Charlton cites civic engagement as a vital strategy for people with disabilities to develop a raised consciousness as they engage in grassroots advocacy for change in local communities. Charlton in his books, the title of his book, *Nothing about Us, without Us*, is a mantra frequently heard in disability rights movements and calls for people with disabilities to be involved in decisions made about them. Increasing the engagement of people with disabilities will ensure that new policies do not continue the cycles of political marginalization historically experienced by this population.

### 1.6. Disability Rights

It is important to include people with disabilities in the decision-making process, particularly when those decisions affect them so that people with disabilities are subjects of the political process rather than objects of policy decisions (Quinn 2002). People with disabilities at present do not have equal rights in the policy-making process. Political participation of people with disabilities or their nomination as members of the national parliament is an 'unrealistic demand' for the state. Although the demand to ensure this right is long. The title of an article published in the newspaper in July 2013 comes to mind, 'Persons with disabilities demand reserved seats in Parliament; Social welfare minister said 'unrealistic'. The then social welfare minister's speech revealed the negativity towards disabled people in the state (Sabrina Sultana 2024). In the light of section 16 (1) g of the Rights and Protection of Persons with Disabilities Act-2013, where full and effective participation in social, economic, and governmental spheres, according to the type of disability. There has been a tendency in the current or previous parliaments to include various communities, ethnicities, and religious minorities in the process of giving reserved seats. However, the representation of persons with disabilities has not been taken into consideration. According to the World Bank and the World Health Organization, 15 percent of the world's population is disabled. In that case, there are about two crore disabled people in this country. In the last 12th National Parliament election held in Bangladesh, there was not a single disabled member out of the total 350 members of Parliament. In the post-Covid-19 pandemic, disabled people are facing more challenges, falling further behind. The bureaucracy is also throwing them away on various pretexts. They cannot reach the various political leaders. If they can't meet the demands of our rights or talk about problems, where can they go to ask for their rights?

## METHODOLOGY

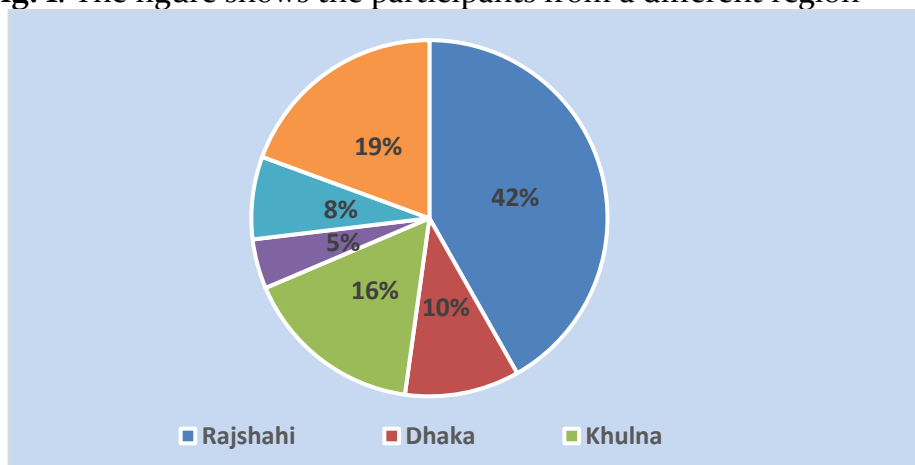
The design of the study was informed by a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis. One cannot expect to generate a satisfactory report by relying solely on one technique. The primary approach employed in this study involved the use of a survey administered to individuals with disabilities throughout the entire nation. We carried out an online survey in which a set of questions were formulated and subsequently circulated among individuals with disabilities. Participants

included individuals with disabilities who are pursuing their education at universities across various regions of the country, all of whom shared their perspectives. Upon analyzing the collected data, we have arrived at the subsequent conclusions. There is a lack of inclusion for individuals with disabilities in the process of policy formation within our community. Consequently, they are lagging behind the general population. Addressing this issue requires providing them with opportunities to engage in policy-making. To achieve this objective, it is imperative for the government to undertake various measures. The implementation of comprehensive policy-making mechanisms, such as accessible communication channels, proactive outreach strategies, and tailored accommodations, will significantly enhance the involvement of individuals with disabilities in the policy-making procedures in Bangladesh. The eligible volunteers were purposefully chosen by the researchers. The inclusion criteria for the study included: (1) individuals with disabilities; (2) individuals from different parts of Bangladesh who relocated to Rajshahi for educational purposes; and (3) individuals between the ages of 18 and 35. Through a survey, the researchers collected data from 67 eligible participants in total. The fundamental elements of social research methodology encompass various techniques for data collection, statistical analysis, experimentation, investigation, as well as sampling and testing. The participants themselves directly contributed the data for the study. The data for the year 2024 was collected from the 5th to the 12th of February. To scrutinize and analyze the data, the researchers utilized Microsoft Office Home (2019).

## RESULTS

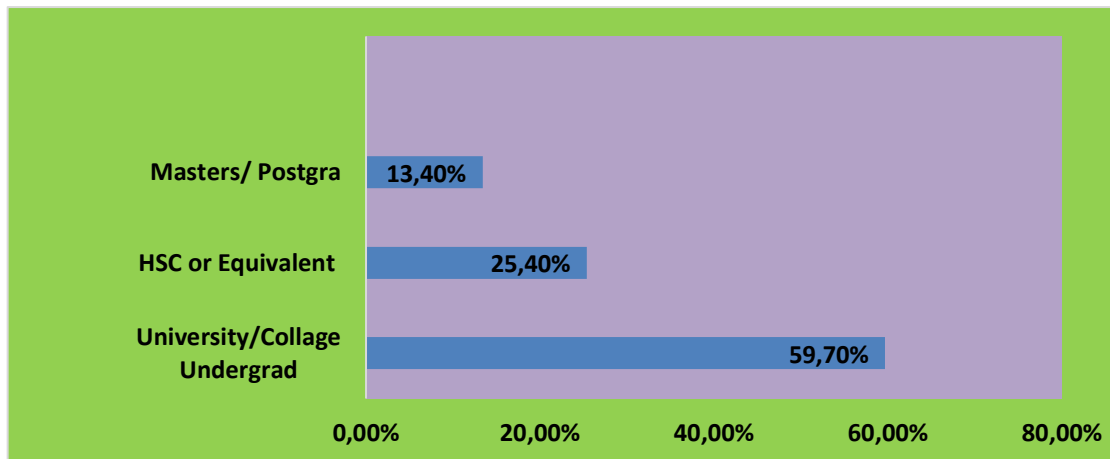
As previously mentioned, the main individuals involved in this research are young individuals residing nationwide. In this case, 30% of the survey participants are female, while the remaining 70% are male (Fig 1). We have specifically chosen educated individuals with disabilities from various regions within the country who can comprehend standardized inquiries.

**Fig. 1.** The figure shows the participants from a different region



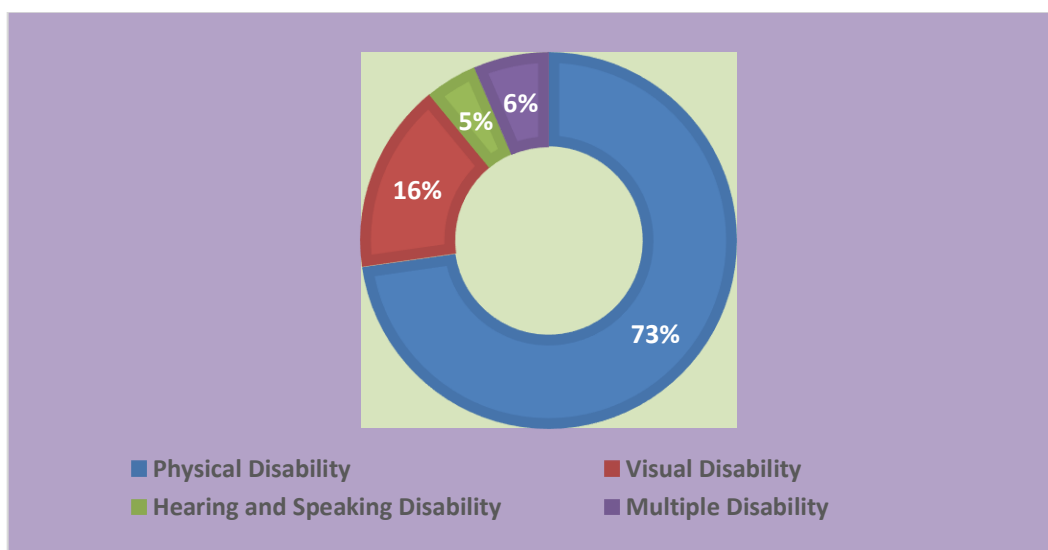
The figure (Fig 2) mentioned above shows the number of people with disabilities participating in the survey from different parts of the country. Where there are 42% from the Rajshahi division, 10 % from Dhaka, 16% from Khulna, 5% from Mymensingh, 8% from Chittagong, and 19% from Rangpur Division.

**Fig. 2.** Indicates the educational qualification of participating persons with disabilities.



In this mentioned context (Fig 3), individuals with disabilities who engaged in this survey and their educational qualifications are discussed. In this particular scenario, 13.4% have successfully attained a Master's or Postgraduate degree, 59.7% are currently pursuing higher education at the college or undergraduate level, and 25.4% have accomplished a High School Certificate or an equivalent level of education from various regions.

**Fig. 3.** Types of disability



Persons with disabilities who are actively involved in the process of participating (Fig 4) in this particular survey possess a wide range of various types of disabilities. In this specific case, it has been observed that a majority, specifically 73%, are individuals who have physical handicaps. Furthermore, a notable percentage of 16% consists of individuals who have visual impairments. Another percentage, which accounts for 5% of the surveyed population, consists of individuals who are both speech and hearing impaired. Lastly, it has been determined that a smaller percentage of 6% of the participants have multiple disabilities, indicating that they are facing multiple challenges simultaneously.

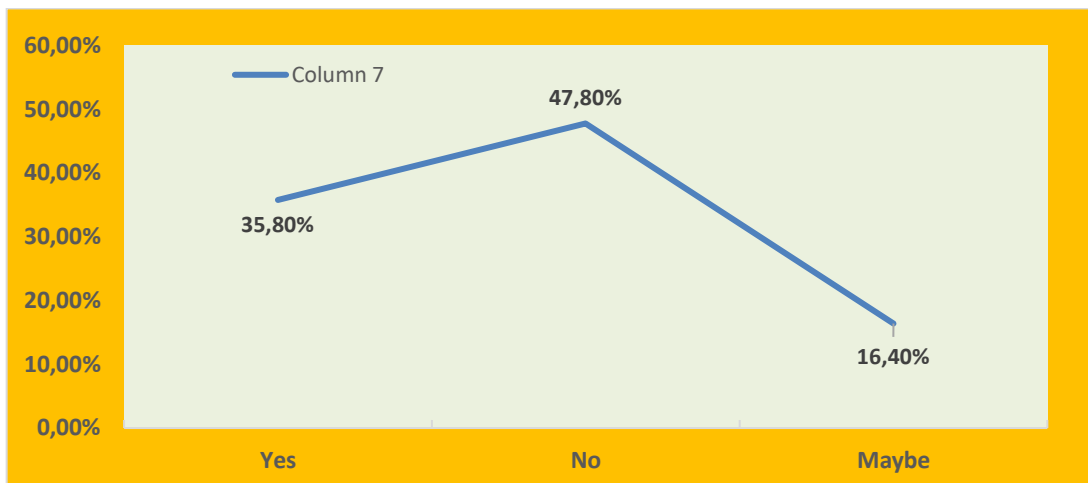
Fig. 4. Persons with Disabilities Rights and Protection Act-2013.



The government of Bangladesh has implemented legislation known as The Rights and Protection Act 2013, which outlines the rights of individuals with disabilities. As stated in article 16(g) of the Rights and Protection Act 2013, individuals with disabilities are afforded equal opportunities to engage in the policy-making process. Nonetheless, within the survey participants (Fig 5), it was found that 75% of individuals possess knowledge of this legislation, while 15% are uninformed and 10% have only partial awareness of its provisions.

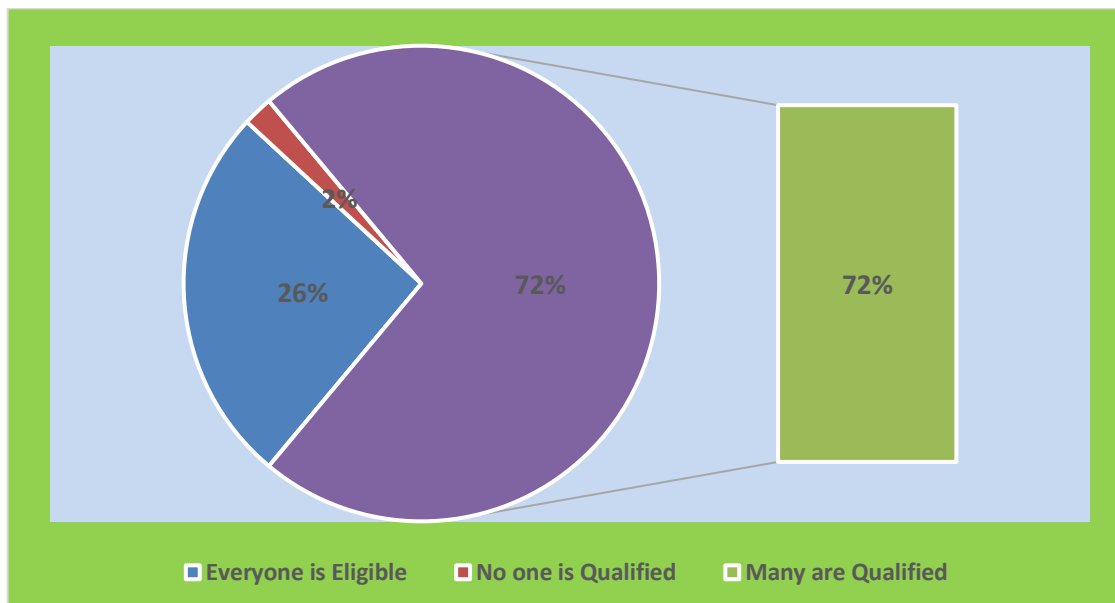


**Fig. 5.** Engagement opportunity in the policy-making process of PWDs.



The survey inquired individuals with disabilities about the presence of an avenue for their participation in the policy-making process of Bangladesh. Out of the respondents (Fig 6), a significant 50% opined that individuals with disabilities lack the opportunity to partake in the policy-making process. Conversely, 35% of the respondents believed that there is indeed ample opportunity for participation. Additionally, 15% of the respondents expressed that they are provided with the chance to participate in certain specified domains.

**Fig. 6.** Eligibility of PWDs in the policy-making process



As previously mentioned in the study's introduction, Bangladesh is home to a staggering number of over 4.5 million individuals with disabilities. However, regrettably, these individuals are currently excluded from any involvement in the policy-making process of the nation. According to the findings, a median of 2% of the respondents expressed a belief that there are no suitable candidates for participation in the policy-making process. In contrast, 26% of those surveyed thinks that all individuals possess the necessary qualifications. The vast majority, amounting to 72%, firmly believe that numerous qualified individuals deserve the opportunity to actively contribute to the policy-making process.

## DISCUSSION

The policymaking process in Bangladesh is regarded as the product of the incentives created by patronage politics, rather than the obligation of the government to fulfill an effective developmental role. Several factors exert a strong influence on the process of formulating and implementing public policies. These factors include the assistance and level of pressure and persuasion exerted by international development partners, as well as the ability to mobilize and manage resources. The utmost level of political commitment is identified as the most crucial determining factor in the formulation and implementation of policies (Fig 7) in Bangladesh.

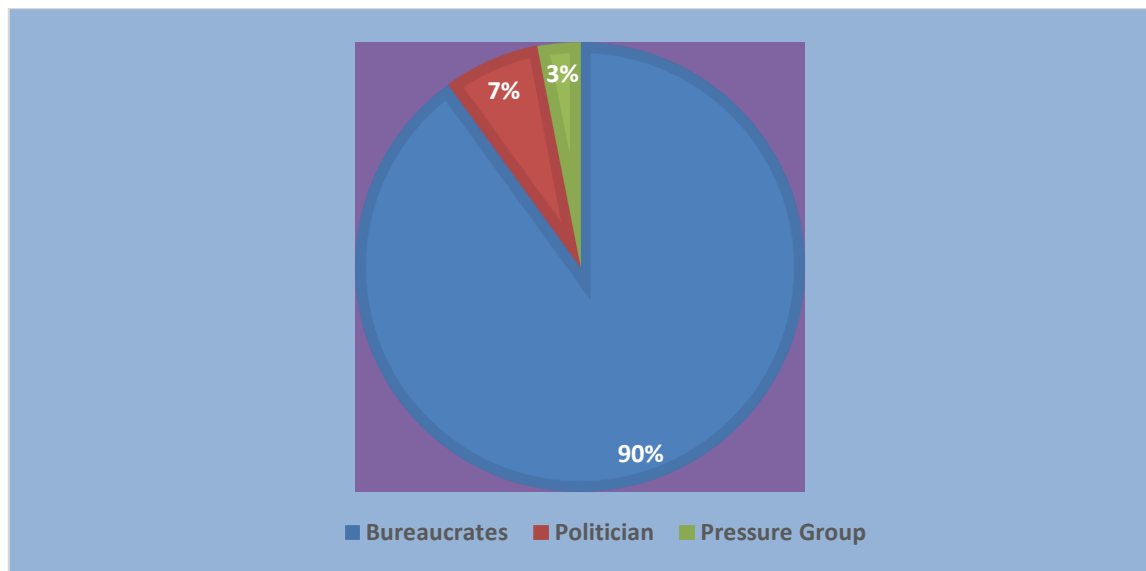
Fig. 7. Policy enacting process.



There are a total of 9 organizations that are actively engaged in the policy-making process of Bangladesh, which is a significant number. These organizations include the Cabinet, Parliament, Political Parties, Bureaucracy, Private Sector, Non-Government Organizations, Pressure Groups, and Government Ministries. Each of these organizations plays a crucial role in shaping and implementing policies in the

country. The Cabinet, for instance, is responsible for making collective decisions on important policy matters, while the Parliament is the legislative body that debates and passes laws. Political Parties, on the other hand, represent different ideologies and participate in the policy-making process through their elected representatives. The Bureaucracy, which consists of government officials, ensures the proper implementation of policies and regulations. The Private Sector, comprising businesses and industries, also has a significant influence on policy-making as it represents the interests of the business community. Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) are another important player in the policy-making process, as they often work on specific social issues and advocate for policy changes to address those issues. Pressure Groups, meanwhile, are organizations that aim to influence policy-making by putting pressure on the government through various means such as protests, lobbying, and advocacy. Government Ministries are key organizations involved in policy making as they are responsible for specific policy areas and provide expert advice to the government. These organizations collectively contribute to the policy making process of Bangladesh, each bringing their own perspectives, expertise, and interests to the table. The diversity and range of these organizations ensure a comprehensive and inclusive approach to policy making, although it also requires effective coordination and cooperation among them to ensure coherent and effective policy (Fig 8) outcomes.

**Fig. 8.** Stakeholder involvement in public policy-making in Bangladesh.



In this particular figure, which effectively portrays the intricate dynamics of the public policy formulation process in Bangladesh, it becomes readily apparent that a substantial portion, or rather an overwhelming majority, amounting to a staggering 90%, is attributed to the bureaucrats. Conversely, when it comes to the allocation of stakes, pressure groups and politicians can only claim a meager 3% and 7%, respectively. It is quite evident from this diagram that the policymaking process is

primarily dominated by the bureaucrats, who hold a commanding position and exert significant influence over the decision-making procedures (Shakil 2016). To achieve efficient and successful policy-making, it is imperative to undertake a variety of crucial measures. These measures encompass but are not limited to, guaranteeing the active involvement and engagement of individuals with disabilities in the bureaucratic processes, ensuring that they are granted their political rights, and advocating for equal rights of individuals with disabilities within all other policy-making establishments and organizations. It is only through the comprehensive implementation of these essential steps that the realization of an effective and impactful policy can be attained. This article aims to pursue the challenges faced by persons with disabilities (PWD) in engaging with the policy-making process in Bangladesh, shedding observation on the existing gaps and advocating for transformative measures. Bangladesh is a democratic Country, everyone has equal rights to participate in every aspect of this country. PWDs are not out of this context. By understanding the perspective of this demographic, we can work towards maintaining an environment that does not respect their rights but actively engages them in shaping the policies that directly impact their lives. Through a comprehensive analysis of the present situation and taking inspiration from useful models of inclusive policy-making from various countries, we aim to establish a roadmap forward for a governance system in Bangladesh that is more accessible and encourages active participation. Overcoming obstacles is not just a mere request for action; it is a dedication to forming a society where every individual's perspective is not only acknowledged but also plays a crucial role in the country's sustainable development and advancement.

### **Policy Recommendation**

After identifying the issue through an assessment of a nationwide survey, the subsequent recommendations can be implemented.

- Existing act amendment and fairly implemented- The Act of 2013 is a good step, but it needs continuous review and amendment to be effective in promoting PWD engagement in policy-making. Amendments should strengthen provisions for PWD participation in policy formulation and implementation.
- Capacity building program- Develop capacity building initiatives to improve the understanding and abilities of individuals with disabilities in policymaking. These initiatives should concentrate on advocacy, leadership, and communication to empower individuals with disabilities to participate effectively in policy discussions and decision-making.
- Infrastructure and Technology Development - Invest in accessible infrastructure and technology to enable full participation of people with disabilities in policy-making. This involves offering accessible transportation, ensuring digital accessibility, and removing barriers in public spaces and buildings, especially Ramp, elevators, Disable friendly washrooms.
- Public Awareness Build-up- Awareness should be raised among the population of the nation. Individuals with disabilities also possess the entitlement to engage in

all domains. They not only have the ability to assert their rights but also to partake in the policy formulation process. It is imperative to inform everyone of this.

- Media Campaign- The media can have a significant impact on promoting individuals with disabilities. The media should consistently emphasize the positive aspects of disabled individuals. Disabled individuals should be supported in all areas, including policy making, and continuously celebrated for their abilities.
- Enhance Education Facilities- A conducive environment should be established for the education of individuals with disabilities. All essential amenities should be made available to them. Education serves as a crucial tool for their involvement in the policy-making process.
- In order to build an inclusive society, the participation of people from all walks of life is needed. None of the policy-making organizations we mentioned earlier included individuals with disabilities. To address this issue, it is essential to allocate reserved seats for disabled individuals in all instances. For instance, Parliament is a significant policy-making institution in Bangladesh, but disabled individuals are not involved. By providing reserved seats for disabled individuals in Parliament, they will have equal participation in policy-making.
- Monitoring and observation board- For the aforementioned solution, it is of utmost importance that a governing body is established with the primary objective of overseeing and ensuring the efficient and effective execution of the various measures implemented by the government in order to address the issue at hand, thereby guaranteeing its successful resolution.
- International Collaboration and Knowledge Sharing Collaborate with international organizations and governments to exchange knowledge on disability rights and inclusive governance. Adopting successful models from other countries can inform policy development in Bangladesh.

## CONCLUSION

The 2013 Act passed by the Government of Bangladesh must be revised and properly implemented for equal participation of persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities must be educated about their rights and all barriers must be removed. The public must also dispel any misconceptions about them. The media should campaign regularly to bring about these changes. To ensure educational facilities, a separate reserve seat should be provided for persons with disabilities in policy making organizations. The government has taken steps to establish a separate board. Other countries should follow successful steps to create a productive environment for people with disabilities. According to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2022), A nation cannot move forward if it leaves 10% of its population with disabilities behind. Ensuring the participation of all is crucial for an inclusive society. This includes disabled people's participation in all fields and policy making. By involving disabled people in policy-making, they can contribute to the country's progress. Thus, their participation is essential. Our study aims to assist us in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 10, which were established by the United Nations in 2015. The focus is on addressing societal inequalities, particularly in

relation to the participation of individuals with disabilities in the policy-making process. This study is dedicated to enhancing their involvement in policy formation and contributing towards the realization of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 10 by the year 2030.

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### Data availability statement

The data supporting the study findings can be requested from the corresponding author, [Abdur Rohim]. The data is not publicly accessible due to containing sensitive information that could breach privacy. University authorities may penalize individuals for sharing information in the study.

### Funding statement

There is no fund for this research.

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