

*In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful*

## **International Day of Persons with Disabilities**

*Keynote paper*

**“DIGNITY AND JUSTICE FOR ALL – OF US – MEANING WE  
INDIVIDUALS AS PART OF HUMANITY”**

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The United Nations has designated December 3<sup>rd</sup> as the International Day for Disabled persons to acknowledge, pledge and generate cumulative efforts for mitigating the challenges that people with disability face in day to day life at personal and work environment and at individual and collective level, worldwide. This day is meant to promote an understanding of disability and related issues, mobilize support for dignity and rights of the disabled persons and, implement programs with tangible results.

The theme for this year is – **Dignity and Justice for all of us**. As we express our solidarity to this significant day to concede the rights of the persons with disability we must pay attention to this year's theme that ends with 'us'. In accordance to the teachings of Islam the Institute of Hazrat Mohammad (SAW) defines this 'us' as mankind – and persons with disability an integral part of humanity and all that it implies. The perception of dignity and justice is fundamental to human rights as granted by God irrespective of physical or mental challenges.

Every year, countries, governments, private and public sectors, professional and business organizations, media and academics across the globe express their solidarity with United Nation's work for disabled persons in various ways.

According to the United Nations estimates there are 650 million people with disabilities in the world today and 80% of this population lives in developing countries. According to reports by UNESCO, 90% of disabled children in developing countries do not attend school.

In the face of the challenges for addressing issues of human rights and its implementation for disabled persons the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Optional Protocol was adopted by consensus in the UN General Assembly on 13 December 2006. And on 30 March 2007 the Convention and Optional Protocol opened for signature at UN Headquarters in New York.

Bangladesh signed the convention on 9 May 2007 that creates an obligation to uphold and follow the objectives of the treaty. Hence, we now examine the disability related situation in Bangladesh in light of the development in the United Nations and advances made on the International Day for Disabled Persons, 2008.

Over population, poverty, illiteracy, lack of awareness, social stigma, economic marginalization and inadequate medical care and related services determines the overwhelming prevalence of disability in Bangladesh.

As early as 1995 Bangladesh developed the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities that deals with the rights of the people with disability. To protect and promote the rights of people with disabilities the Disability Welfare Act was enacted in April 2001 by the Government of Bangladesh.

The National Coordination Committee was strengthened and an Inter-Ministerial Taskforce was formed to effectively undertake and coordinate different activities on concerned aspects of disability. From prevention, identification and early intervention to special education, social

services – which includes transport facilities and building codes to vocational training and employment benefits; the Disability Welfare Act recognizes all possible impediments in the way for establishing the basic rights of persons with disability.

The following points highlight the Disability Welfare Act as being a document that has very little substance due to lack of implementation and accountability on the legislation's part:

**Disability has been incorporated as an integral part of the National Primary Education Development Program (PEDP-II)-;** Provisions to include disabled children in the mainstream or specialized primary education system and the teachers training curriculum is still limping at the formative stage.

**The national building code states about accessibility for people with disabilities in all built infrastructure-;** Have the national and city building planning and construction code of requirements imposed such provisions as mandatory – because most of the buildings do not have special access system.

**In the transport system, arrangements are being undertaken to reserve seats for people with disabilities and special ticket counters are also being created-;** Does the public and private road transport have ramps or other means for disabled people to board and the seats designated for disabled people to remain exclusively for their use and not taken up indiscriminately by other passengers.

**The government has emphasized strongly in following the 10% quota for the employment of people with disabilities-;** To realize this legislation the above three acts have to be implemented and additionally proper public facilities e.g. rest room provisions needs to be provided.

**The State run television network has recently introduced sign interpretation in its weekly news round-up, on an experimental basis, for the benefit of people with hearing disability-;** The right to information is one of the fundamental charters of the universal declaration of human rights that has not been introduced as mandatory requirement for the media in the country.

Comparing the progress of other countries on these very critical tenets of establishing access to exercise citizen's rights is essential now for Bangladesh as a signatory to the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disability:

- ✓ Bangladesh should have special provisions or body who would investigate and represent disabled persons in cases of deprivation of rights and failure to implement the law like the Commissioners for Persons with Disabilities in India.
- ✓ The law of inheritance in the constitution of Bangladesh does not effectively enunciate persons with disability like the 1985 law of succession in People's Republic of China.
- ✓ The rights of people with disability to own property needs elucidation and modality for protection like the constitutional rights of all the citizens of Maldives.
- ✓ There are no formal and legislative systems of social security, health insurance or financial assistance to help persons with disability in Bangladesh like the constitutional statement of Turkey for integration of people with disability in the society.

- ✓ And most significantly to exercise the right to vote – that requires the access of the disabled persons to information and process of voting – which unfortunately has not taken effect as yet.

The Institute of Hazrat Mohammad (SAW) in its humble way initiated the process of establishing the citizen's right for people with disability by developing a strategic plan of action and proposing it by introducing voting rights done through voter id's to the disable. One of the basic projects of the Institute was to start an English language class for the visually impaired youth to prepare them for employment opportunities. This was expanded into computer skills capacity enhancement for self realization options as a process continuum.

On behalf of the Institute of Hazrat Mohammad (SAW) I would like to propose that it is now imperative to assess the National Policy and Disability Welfare Act of Bangladesh based on its implementation, coverage and from the perspective of constitutional rights of citizen – only then we can truly generate the 'us' awareness, attitude and practice of equality.

The cardinal concept of the Holy Quran is based on the principle that the ownership of everything belongs not to any person but to God as He is the universal creator. In simple words ladies and gentlemen, it translates that every human being has the right to a means of living as God has created resources to benefit humanity in general. Persons with disability will only get the requisite social justice and resulting dignity when they are able to exercise their rights as people and citizens.