

The disability-poverty loop: school exclusion traps disabled workers

by S M Toibir Prosshod

14 April 2026



Students walk to school in Bangladesh
Photo Credit: [Unsplash/Tanvir Ahmed Rahat](#)

In Dhaka's Mirpur district, fifteen-year-old Rahim repairs mobile phones at a roadside stall, earning 200 taka (US\$1.80) daily. Deaf since birth, he hasn't been inside a classroom since age eight. When I ask his mother why he left school, she answers through a neighbour: "The teachers said they couldn't help him. What choice did we have?"

Rahim's trajectory is depressingly common across South Asia: exclusion from education leads to informal labour, which perpetuates poverty, which prevents advocacy, which ensures the next generation faces identical barriers. This isn't random misfortune, it's a self-reinforcing system that traps disabled people and their families across generations.

In Bangladesh, approximately **85% of disabled children of primary school age are out of school entirely**. Those who do attend face inaccessible buildings, untrained teachers, absent curriculum modifications and administrators who view their presence as burdensome. By age 12 or 13, most have "dropped out", though this framing obscures reality. They were pushed out by systems designed to exclude them. Without credentials or recognised skills, they enter the only sector available: informal labor.

South Asia's informal economy employs **80-90% of the workforce** in countries like Bangladesh and India. It's also where rights disappear. No contracts, no minimum wage, no safety regulations and no recourse for exploitation. Data from the International Labour Organization shows **disabled workers concentrated in the most precarious positions**: waste picking, street vending, small manufacturing and domestic work. A **2019 Bangladesh study** found 76% of disabled workers in informal employment, earning on average 34% less than non-disabled workers in identical roles.

The loop operates in both directions. Poverty prevents inclusion, and exclusion

manufactures poverty. Zainab's nine-year-old daughter has cerebral palsy and has never attended school. The nearest accessible school is five kilometres away. Transport costs 150 taka daily, more than half Zainab's garment-factory wage. The school requires a medical certificate; the doctor visit costs 800 taka, exceeding a week's wages. If Zainab overcomes these barriers, the school will likely demand she hire a private aide at 8,000-12,000 taka monthly. Zainab earns 10,000. "They make it impossible," she tells me. "Then they say we don't value education."

In Dhaka's elite English-medium schools, disabled children access resource rooms, therapists and trained teachers. These schools charge 20,000-50,000 taka monthly, ten times what most families earn. For the poor, "inclusion" exists only in United Nations documents. Without education, disabled adults face systematic economic exclusion. A [2021 study across five South Asian countries](#) found disabled adults without education had employment rates 23 percentage points lower than those with secondary education. Among the employed, wage gaps were even starker.

Critically, poverty eliminates capacity to fight for change. Advocacy requires time, resources, mobility, literacy and social capital. Families barely surviving cannot attend school board meetings, hire lawyers or organise protests. The poverty created by exclusion ensures exclusion continues unchallenged.

The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), ratified by Bangladesh and India in 2007, is explicit. [Article 24 requires](#) "an inclusive education system at all levels" and prohibits excluding disabled persons from general education. Nearly two decades later, South Asian governments remain in flagrant violation. The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has repeatedly condemned segregated "special schools" as incompatible with Article 24. Its [2016 General Comment No. 4](#) states unambiguously that segregation in education "constitutes discrimination". No exceptions for "resource constraints" exist.

Yet governments continue funding segregated schools while presenting these violations as "progress" in official reports. International donors share culpability — UNICEF, the World Bank and bilateral agencies continue funding segregated institutions that violate the very convention these organisations claim to uphold. [Bangladesh's latest state party report](#) celebrated training 500 teachers in inclusive methods. What it omitted: 85% of disabled children remain out of school. The Committee noted "concern". Nothing changed.

The cycle doesn't break through awareness campaigns or pilot projects. It breaks when governments face consequences for treaty violations. Trade agreements could include human rights conditionality. The European Union's Everything But

Arms scheme exempts Bangladesh from duty on **trade worth €18.5 billion annually**, predominantly in garment exports. Why not condition this on CRPD compliance? International financial institutions could condition lending on inclusive education implementation. The World Bank and Asian Development Bank fund billions in education reforms across South Asia. Loan agreements should mandate accessibility standards with penalties for noncompliance.

The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities needs enforcement mechanisms beyond issuing recommendations that governments ignore. Countries in systematic violation should face International Court of Justice referral. Most fundamentally, the international community must stop funding segregation. Every dollar flowing to “special schools” in CRPD-ratifying states violates human rights treaties. There should be no exceptions or transitional periods. The CRPD has been in force since 2008.

Rahim, repairing phones in Mirpur, isn't excluded because Bangladesh lacks resources. The country's **GDP exceeded US\$460 billion** in 2022. Resources exist; they're simply not allocated to enforceable rights. Rahim is excluded because his government faces no consequences for violating CRPD obligations, donors continue funding segregation and the UN system treats human rights treaties as aspirational rather than binding.

Twenty-eight-year-old Salma, blind and rolling bidis for 150 taka daily, never attended school. Her six-year-old daughter, also blind, faces identical barriers. Salma cannot read enrollment forms, cannot navigate the city to visit schools, cannot afford fees. Her wages mean every day advocating is a day without income, risking hunger. This is how the loop perpetuates across generations. Disabled parents, denied education and confined to informal work, lack resources to advocate for their disabled children.

The treaty's obligations are clear. What's missing isn't knowledge or resources, it's political will to enforce what has already been agreed. How many more children will age out of education entirely before treaty obligations actually matter?

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