

**Towards an Inclusive Society:  
Access of Females and People with Disabilities to Public Space**



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Thanks also to all the leaders of women's organizations and organizations for people with disabilities who provided us with your information, ideas, and comments for this report.

This report is less of a technical research report than a compilation of stories of individuals who feel excluded in the current society but who wish to have more of a place. They wish to feel that they are welcome and included. This report is about them and dedicated to them.

A note on terms: Throughout this report we refer to "people with disabilities". We realize that some people object to the phrase and prefer more empowering phrases. However, we continue to use this expression for a couple of reasons. People with disabilities do have special challenges that cannot be ignored and must be addressed, and empowering terms may seem dismissive of those needs. Further, the term easily lends itself to the opposite: "people without disabilities". While everyone in society has special needs, challenges, and abilities, it is easier to distinguish between those with and without disabilities. Our use of the term by no means suggests any belief that the people we write about are incapable of contributing as fully to society as those without the same obstacles, though their ability to do so would vastly increase if we did far more to facilitate their inclusion and contribution.

## Introduction

A woman can become Prime Minister or leader of the opposition. A man in a wheelchair can attend major international events. A blind person can visit the Prime Minister and be awarded for his work. But does this mean that our society is truly equal, or simply that a few women and people with disabilities can have extraordinary achievements while some others are essentially prisoners in the home?

We need an inclusive society for many reasons, not least of which is that everyone should have the right to be a full participant in society. But a society also cannot be truly developed, cannot achieve its true potential, if it discounts or refuses the contribution of a significant portion of its population.

In order to understand the situation thoroughly, we should look at the situation of women and people with disabilities throughout society: in schools, colleges, and universities; in workplaces; and in the home. We have chosen here to look at the situation of girls, women, and people with disabilities in public spaces, specifically parks and playing fields. We chose to look at public spaces partly because of their easy access for us as researchers. We also chose them because, theoretically, everyone should have access to public spaces (though clearly not everyone does), so who is present and who is absent will tell us something important about society. Finally, we chose to look at public spaces because they serve as a microcosm of the larger society. They give us an accessible window to the larger world, and thus an idea of the problems and challenges women, girls, and people with disabilities face in their efforts to become integrated into society and to make their contribution.

There are other reasons as well why it is important for females of all ages and people with disabilities to have access to outdoor public spaces such as parks and playing fields. Vibrant public spaces strengthen the social fabric. They enhance social networking for the local community. They provide a place where people can be active or passive participants depending on their level of comfort, which itself can change over time. They increase social bonds between families in the same neighbourhood, and they help neighbours to work together on joint problem solving. When they are well-maintained, public spaces can provide a sense of security and inclusion. They can help with the adjustment of new community members. They provide a convenient space for community events. By serving as a place where different kinds of people can meet and interact, they can help to change social norms, paradigms, and behaviours. Public spaces also tend to be activity spaces where residents come together for exercise as well as socializing; this results in better physical and mental health for community members. Perhaps most importantly, they can be people's favourite place, where they experience a sense of freedom and a sensation of joy and deep happiness.

A dwarf acts as a bowler in a cricket game on a playing field. Women sit on chairs in a circle at Dhanmondi Lake Park, doing group exercise; in other groups, a handful of women join men in exercise classes. A woman takes her young daughter, who has an intellectual disability, to a playing field; the girl watches everyone around her in fascination. A young boy with a bad limp chases a cricket ball, enthusiastically playing with other local children. Girls in uniforms walk through Dhanmondi Lake Park on

their way to and from school. At a playing field, girls usually are not welcome when boys play cricket, but when a local school or NGO organizes a program, girls appear and eagerly join in, suggesting that girls would love to use public space--as long as they are invited and made welcome.

## **Research questions**

To what extent are young girls, young women, and older women, as well as people with disabilities, able to visit and interact in parks and playgrounds? If they do not visit, is this because of lack of desire or because of other problems such as physical or social obstacles? What suggestions do they, and do experts in the field, have for addressing any challenges in accessibility to public spaces by these groups?

## **Methodology**

From 4 July to 3 August 2017, the research team visited five parks and six playing fields (see list below). During the visits, we noted how many females of three different age groups (child, youth, and adult) and how many people with disabilities were present and what activities they were engaged in (sitting, walking, playing, selling, begging, etc.). The form used for observation is given in Appendix 1. These observations were further supported by years of observation by research team members who have regularly visited some of the parks and playing fields mentioned in this report.

In July and August 2017, the team interviewed seven people with disabilities (four male and three female). We also interviewed seven women without disabilities. The question guides are given in Appendix 2.

We also conducted in-depth interviews, both in person and over the phone/by internet, with several women leaders and key people with disabilities. The list of people interviewed is given in Appendix 3.

The observational data was compiled into a chart and is discussed below. For the interviews, we looked for key themes such as: obstacles to visiting public spaces, negative/positive experiences on visits, desire to visit, and suggestions for improving access. The key messages found are presented and discussed below. The data analysis occurred in August 2017. The team members are listed at the start of this report.

## Selected Parks and Playgrounds



*Boishakhi Playground*



*Kolabagan Playground*



*Jagannath Hall Playground*



*Mohammadpur Playground*



*Dhanmondi Playground*



*Mirpur Majar Road Football Playground*



*Dhanmondi Lake Park*



*Shyamoli Park*



*Sohrawardi Park*



*Ramna Park*



*Mohammadpur Park*

## Results

### Observation

Our visit to five parks and six playing fields revealed that most of those present at these public spaces are men and boys. Most of the women present were over the age of 25 and were engaged in either walking or sitting; none were playing games. A small number of women joined in group exercise, but there were far more men involved than women, and no women below the age of about 40. *We found virtually no adolescent girls or young women (aged 13-25) at the public spaces except during certain specific hours and accompanied by a man. While women were present at parks, very few were present at most of the playing fields, and generally only because they were escorting their sons to play. The one exception is Rayer Bazaar playing field, where women regularly walk in the morning and evening, thanks to the presence of a paved path.*



*Girl students are seen in Dhanmondi Lake park*



*Women comes to Ramna Park for walking*

In addition, some girls, with their guardians, walk through Dhanmondi Lake Park on their way to and from school. Women are also comfortable walking in Ramna Park, and families go to parks together, including with young daughters, but there are no such recreational facilities at playing fields; the only exception is the rare mother who might take her child for some fresh air. Evenings at Dhanmondi Lake Park, especially on holidays, the park is full of people. There are also times when young couples go to parks, but it would be difficult for adolescent girls or young women to go without a male escort. *We found virtually no people with disabilities, whether male or female; those that were present were beggars, and included the blind, people with leprosy and rickets, and wheelchair users.*

Shunil is a wheelchair user; as a child he lost the use of his legs from polio. He spent eight years as a virtual prisoner in the home. Too often, Shunil has been the victim of abuse: people tease him and treat him badly. Despite all the abuse, he is now a medical student. Shumil explains: "I don't go to parks, and can't remember the last time I went. The main reasons are difficulty moving about, lack of safety, and the bad behavior of other visitors. I went to a park many years ago. Someone asked me,

‘What are you doing here alone? Didn’t anyone come with you?’ I was astonished. He thought that since I can’t walk, I can’t go to a park by myself. I want to go alone, but the infrastructure makes it difficult. Not just people with disabilities, but everyone wants independent movement. It is one of our basic rights. But given the current conditions, virtually no people with disabilities can independently visit our parks.”

Men and boys, in contrast, were engaged in a greater variety of activities and were present in much greater numbers. (For more information about the activities conducted by males in public spaces, please see WBB’s excellent report, ...) Men mostly walked or sat, but some also played football, cricket, volleyball, and badminton, or engaged in group exercise. Men can be seen laughing together in group yoga. Boys play cricket and football, play in the mud/in mud puddles, ride bicycles, and otherwise engage in active play. Teenage boys have similar activities to younger boys but also use outdoor body building equipment where provided, such as at Dhanmondi Lake. While occasionally women do participate in group exercise, more often it is only men who do so. The paucity of women of different ages and people with disability highlights a broader social problem in terms of their access to formal jobs and other income sources.



*Women come for walking in Boishakhi Playground and some bring their children*

***If young women visit a public space alone or in a group of women, they will often be harassed by men. Young women thus may not feel safe visiting a public space unless they are accompanied by a man.*** Above a certain age, solo women may feel safer, especially in public spaces that are more welcoming such as Ramna Park, Dhanmondi Lake, and Rayer Bazaar playing field. In such places, many women are present, though usually their activities are restricted to walking and sitting, and though there are usually far more men present. Rayer Bazaar playing field is unusual in that there is a paved path around the field, which encourages people, including women, to come and walk. It also makes walking possible even when the field itself is muddy. However, even there, young or teenage girls are almost never present. This may also be because many people do not start exercising until they are diagnosed with diabetes!

People with disabilities said that of three issues (accessibility, jobs, and recreation), all three are important. Just because they have a disability and need jobs does not mean that recreation is not also important for them. But even the best-designed park will be of little use if they are unable to access it.

*Elias is a student at Dhaka University. He is a wheelchair user. He tries to visit places independently, but the lack of accessibility in the city makes this difficult. He has been to various festivals at public spaces, which was made possible by the assistance of others. He has also been to the stadium to watch games. However, his friends are not always ready to assist him. The lack of accessibility discourages people with disabilities from using them. The physical obstacles send a strong message that people with disabilities are not welcome here! He also finds that other park users look at him funny and make him feel uncomfortable. "We need to educate others about everyone's right to use public spaces, so that they will welcome us, not harass or mistreat us," says Elias. Even the campus of Dhaka University is not entirely accessible, and he has fought hard to improve the situation. "If Dhaka University is not even accessible, how on earth will we get accessible parks?" he wondered. He wishes there were a separate ministry to address the issues of accessibility, including accessible public spaces.*



*Toilet of Mohammadpur Club and park is not opened for all*



*DNCC has provided a accessible public toilet in Shyamoli Park*



*Walkway in Sohrawardi park is not well maintained*



*Mirpur Majar Road Football Playground has a wide walkway*

There is a lack of facilities at playing fields and parks. Drinking water is rarely available, if at all. Toilets are available at a few parks but not in sufficient quantity. At Mohammadpur Club and Children's Park, the toilet is kept locked and is only for members. Shade is often insufficient to protect users from heat and rain.

Some of the playing fields we visited were not open to the public, such as Kala Bagan playing field.

<b>Places visited</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Comments on use</b>
Boishakhi Playing Field	Rayer Bazaar	Mostly boys playing cricket; women walk around it
Kalabagan Playing Field	Kala Bagan	Access restricted
Jagannath Hall Field	Dhaka University	Boys play and use the pond; no girls present other than sitting on benches
Mohammadpur Field		No girls playing
Dhanmondi Field	Next to Abahani playing field	Guardians wait for their sons
Mirpur Majar Road Football Playing Field		Some girls cross through the field but do not play there
Dhanmondi Lake Park		While mostly used by men, large numbers of women and, at some hours, teenage girls present; families go together
Shyamoli Park		Girls chat there but no girls seen playing
Sharwardy Park		Entrance limited (one small gate; other remains locked); park used for anti-social activities; has a good path but is not maintained; some female university students visit but possibly due to availability of drugs
Ramna Park		While mostly used by men, large numbers of women and, at some hours, teenage girls present; families go together
Mohammadpur Park		Some girls play on the equipment; otherwise women and girls visit just to chat, not play

## Interviews

Wheelchair users said that their access to parks and playing fields is limited or impossible for a number of reasons. Gates are often designed to keep motorcycles out, but as a result also do not allow for wheelchair access. In addition, mobility in Dhaka City is so difficult for wheelchair users that various changes would be needed in order to allow them to reach parks, even if they could then use them. *People with various disabilities expressed a strong desire to visit public spaces with their friends, but in the current situation they feel that they are too much of a burden on their friends and thus are reluctant to go, even when it is physically possible.* They also find difficulties in the reaction of others to their presence, as many park users are not used to the idea of people with disabilities and thus may stare at them or make them uncomfortable.



*Entrance of Dhanmondi Lake park is not accessible for all*



*Gate that blocks motorbike handlebars but allows wheelchairs to enter*

White cane users (the visually disabled) say they have no great problem accessing parks as long as they go with friends. While they wish to go, they do not feel comfortable alone, but neither do they wish to be a burden on their friends or family members.

A young woman with a physical disability shares her memories of greatly enjoying going with her family to various parks when she was young. As a child, they could easily carry her. She loved seeing the trees and being around so many people. Now that she is an adult and lives in a neighbourhood without parks, she no longer is able to visit them as the expense to reach them is too high. But she misses those childhood experiences.

In sum, people with disabilities expressed a wish that they could easily visit parks so that they could enjoy the environment, green trees, and quiet.

Mahsum, a 23 year old young man with an intellectual disability, studies in Class 3. He loves going to parks and spending time in them. But the environment in parks is not friendly. Some people tease him, poke him, grab his clothes, spit on him, or throw things at him. *His mother says, "The environment in parks is so negative that though he would like to go on his own, I don't allow him. All parks and public spaces should be safe and accessible for all people, so that they feel safe and comfortable."* Despite all these problems, he is eager to go to parks, and constantly demands when he will have the opportunity to do so.

## Seeing through Darkness

-- Shafiqua Nawrin Oishi, AUW student and Institute of Wellbeing intern



When I was a school kid, nothing was scarier than sleeping without nightlights. Privileged with eyesight, the thought of being in darkness filled me with horror. Yet for many, their whole world is darkness.

Sumon<sup>1</sup> was waiting in front of New Market to cross the road to catch a bus. Crossing a road in Dhaka can be scary for anyone; imagine doing so when you cannot see, but only hear the roar of traffic and the nonstop horns seemingly coming from all directions. He asked several people but nobody agreed to help him cross the road. Suddenly he felt a small hand grab his hand and heard a childish voice firmly saying, "I will help you cross the road." *Sumon believes that for those like him, the true limitation is not in their eyesight, but in the attitude society shows them. He believes if people with disabilities are given the support and chances they need, there is nothing that they cannot achieve.* But in which direction are we going? Years ago in Dhaka University there were parks specially equipped for blind people. Sumon recalls how he used to go with his friends, roam around, and thoroughly enjoy himself. Alas! As he continues the story his voice drops with disappointment. There isn't much that blind people can do in public spaces and parks these days.

Like Sumon, Ishtiaque is blind; he lost his sight as a teenager. One day as an adult he visited Ramna Park. He started climbing the children's play equipment. As he climbed higher up, his age seemed to decrease. The smile on his face turned into laughter. The joy took him straight back to his childhood, before he lost his eyesight. *The darkness that bounded his world filled with colour. People gathered around to witness him daring to break the barriers and have some fun. Ishtiaque wishes to have more such joyous experiences. He wishes regularly to enjoy a peaceful walk in the park but limitations hold him back.* He too is trapped within the boundaries of darkness, boundaries made so much worse by the unwelcoming physical environment.

Ishtiaque dreams of a park where not just blind people but people with all different disabilities can move freely without hesitation or fear. He dares to dream that as all people gain better access to parks, so other doors will open to them. *He sees parks as the microcosm of our society: when he is welcome in parks, so he will be welcome everywhere.*

As for me, I am no longer scared of the darkness. Darkness has its own beauty, and the people living within that darkness have their own lights to which we are blind. Facilities like parks and playgrounds should be reconstructed so that they are open to all -- not just for those who see in light but for those who see through darkness.

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1 Names in the story are changed to protect the privacy of our interviewees.

## Does Every Child have the Right to Dream?

-- Delufa Tuz Jerin, AUW student and Institute of Wellbeing intern



When we do not see any possibilities for people with disabilities, then we ourselves are blind. We stay in a society where most of us are focused more on money and power than on nourishing each other's dreams; the situation is even worse for people with disabilities. Muhit was a typical six-year-old boy who dreamed of one day being a footballer or cricketer. Suddenly he became blind as a result of typhoid. His dreams faded away, as he knew that in Bangladesh there are few facilities for the blind to fulfill their dreams.

But Muhit was not a quitter. He was determined to pursue his dreams despite repeated discouragement. He tried playing with a group of blind cricket players. Alas for Muhit, the other players had been blind from birth; he needed assistance to learn how to overcome his disability, but nobody knew how to help him. Worse, his relatives told him every single day that he could never do anything in life, simply because he was blind; this made him lose confidence in his dream of playing sports.

Several years passed. Then Muhit moved to Dhaka due to the transfer of his father. He now had a new struggle: to cope with a new environment where he again had to prove to others that he was capable. His dream was still strong. Every afternoon he visited a playing field in Mirpur, wishing that here in Dhaka there would be a better situation, and that he might somehow, at last, get an opportunity to be a cricketer. But every day ended in disappointment. He encountered not opportunities, but rather a muddy field full of obstacles and a lack of facilities or cooperation.

Throughout his high school and college life, Muhit was unable to play any kind of outdoor games. Only after getting admitted to university did his dream revive. The opportunities, though minimal, were at least better than nothing. He joined the university's blind cricket team and later on was promoted to president of the club for being an outstanding player.

But this is not just Muhit's story; it is the story of thousands of children with disabilities. They are all around us, though we may rarely see or notice them. They may never have the chance to gain colorful childhood memories. They usually cannot go to parks and playgrounds. They cannot play with other kids. *Even if they were to go, some parents do not let their children play with children with disabilities. Most of us are blissfully unaware of the way our social behaviors harm them, or of how casually we destroy their dreams of a normal, happy childhood.*

Fortunately the solution is not impossible; it is not even particularly difficult. We need to change our perspective towards people with disabilities and recognize that they are fully human, with needs just like ours, including the need for recreation. We need to provide better facilities in our public places and create better access to them. We can make a few small changes to allow people with different sorts of disabilities to feel welcomed and to be able to participate in a range of activities. By doing so, we can create a richer society in which all individuals have an opportunity to realize their dreams.

## Meeting People's Right to Recreation

-- Dr KM Muzahidul Islam, Director, Bangla Academy



Public spaces are places we should be able to visit every day. Everyone, including women, adolescent girls, and people with disabilities should be able to visit. We all need recreation. Although there is much to do and it will be difficult, we should gradually make progress. *We should not accept that adolescent girls or people with disabilities cannot use our public spaces; this is a problem that we must address. The walking path, benches, shade/shelter, clean water, and toilets all should be in good condition. We should make videos about the importance of recreation in public spaces for women and people with disabilities*

*so as to make others aware about the issue.* The Prime Minister has an important role to play in raising this issue so that other government officials will take action.

## Outdoor Recreation for Autistic Children

-- Sabina Hossain, Principal, Society for the Welfare of Autistic Children



I am well aware of the issues facing people with disability, as I have a 33-year-old son with autism. I am well aware that, just like other children, they need the opportunity to play and move around freely. But this is by no means easy. There are social difficulties, negative feelings, and the poor physical environment.

Parents are often reluctant to take their children with autism to parks, because they become overly excited, and this can scare other park users. Some enjoy the experience while others are afraid and can scream, making it difficult for their guardians.

We do not have adequate space in our homes; we need outdoor recreational facilities. Many children and adults greatly enjoy visiting public spaces. We need more accessible public spaces. We can learn from the experience of other countries which have made public spaces that are accessible for everyone. It would be helpful if there were a quiet space within public spaces where autistic children could calm down if they become overly excited. Autistic children are particularly in need of public toilets. They also love water features.

There have been significant improvements in people's attitudes towards people with autism over recent years. Thanks to all the national attention to the issue, people are much more tolerant than in the past of the different behaviours of children with autism.

Seating places, a quiet and clean environment, healthy foods, play equipment, and clean toilets are all important in public spaces. We should all give priority to the needs of people with disabilities and work together to create accessible, enjoyable public spaces for all.

## Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls

--Kamrun Nahar, Lawyer, Naripokkho:



Women and girls have trouble using public spaces as they are not friendly or safe for them. Women and girls are not even safe in their homes! But it is true that women would like to be able to visit and enjoy parks and other public spaces. They do not get support from their families. Family members worry about their safety. Many playing fields are also illegally occupied. Various anti-social activities occur in parks. We need community involvement to restore our public spaces to their proper use. We need public spaces as they are a vital part of our physical and mental health.

## Improving Parks in India: the Nagpur Experience

-- Phaeba Abraham, Regional Manager – South Asia, HealthBridge



Nagpur is the largest city in central India and third largest city in Maharashtra, with a population of 2.4 million. The Canadian NGO HealthBridge partnered with two local NGOs, ESAF and Kilikili, in order to improve the situation in parks for girls and children with disabilities. The local NGOs in turn sought the support of government for the physical changes.

The main activity was community discussions about the existing parks, desire to use them, and envisioned changes. Those involved in the community discussions were children, parents, teachers, local residents, and other professionals; together they developed a vision for the play space. Other activities included group cleanup, tree plantation, summer camps, group activities such as skating and cycling and games in the park, and Sunday evening in the park events. Although it did not prove feasible, there was also discussion about establishing exclusive park timings for women. Physical changes were made to the selected parks: smooth brick paths, new gates that are accessible for wheelchair users, ramps instead of steps, small buckets on some swings so that children with autism can use them, and special elements such as braille on the wall, a xylophone, and a bell, for enjoyment of blind children. Another important aspect of the program was the continuing involvement of the community as well as local government in ongoing maintenance of the public spaces.

## Making High Quality, Inclusive Public Spaces for All

-- Julia Ahmed, Executive Director, Nova Consultancy Bangla



When I was studying medicine in Sofia, Bulgaria, I had the opportunity to enjoy lovely parks. Those parks had a big impact on my lifestyle. I also noticed that my Bulgarian friends considered it a regular and enjoyable part of life to spend time in parks. After joining them repeatedly, it became an enjoyable routine for me as well.

*In Bangladesh we do not have the custom of visiting parks as a regular part of our lives. We are not brought up to see parks as an important aspect of community life, or as something special which can enhance our quality of life. Rather, people tend to visit parks only when instructed by the doctor to start getting exercise. We tend to prioritize our work and studies but not recreational activities. This is particularly true for women and adolescent girls, who are doubly burdened with their productive and reproductive work. This leaves them with no time for visiting parks or even for any other recreation. Even when time and interest are there, women and adolescent girls may be reluctant to visit public spaces due to fear of sexual comments or violence.*

Although our city corporations are undertaking important and praiseworthy efforts to improve park conditions, the scale of those improvements is still limited. We need a larger and multi-dimensional approach to improve the use of parks by women and adolescent girls. This includes:

- Building a mindset, from early childhood, about the importance of active outdoor recreation for a healthy life (physically, mentally, and socially). Both families and institutions could play a role here;
- Improving park facilities, taking in mind community expectations;
- Launching a public awareness campaign for local resource mobilization for improvement of public spaces and other civic amenities;
- Increasing safety in public spaces, specifically addressing the fear of bad comments, sexual assault, sexual harassment, stress from travel, and so on.

Even more needs to be done to improve access for persons with disability conditions (PDC), who are excluded, hidden and marginalized in our society. Unfortunately, park use by PDC is still a distant concept here; much needs to be done in addition to creating the basic conditions that are needed to make parks accessible for them.

## Discussion

From our research, as described above, we found several key issues. Public spaces such as parks and playing fields are extremely popular especially with boys and young men. They are also highly used by men and some adult women for exercise. But men and boys are far more present in public spaces, and engaged in far more activities, than women. Girls and young women are virtually absent, as are people with disabilities (except as beggars). If we accept that public spaces are a microcosm of greater society, then it is clear that women, girls, and people with disabilities are largely excluded from our society. As bad as the situation is for men with disabilities, it is even worse for women with disabilities, who suffer from the double burden of their physical disability and the safety concerns that affect women.

The exclusion of girls and people with disabilities, and limited activities by women, could be due to lack of interest in visiting parks and playing fields. However, our research found otherwise. Many people expressed an unwillingness to go to parks and playing fields given their existing condition (dirty, unsafe, too many men and too few women, difficulty with physical access due to gates, etc.) but would very much like to visit them if the conditions were better.

Nusrat, a young blind woman, is studying at Dhaka University. She has five siblings; three of them have a physical disability. She regularly goes to parks with her friends, but when she does go, she does not play. Her friends tell her what they see, which she enjoys, but she feels shy and embarrassed to keep asking them to describe the surroundings, so often she keeps silent. Nusrat said that parks in Dhaka are not easily accessible or usable for people with disabilities.



*Ramna Park has a kids zone*



*Playing Equipments in Shyamoli Park is not well maintained*

Interestingly, even in Western European cities, girls may use parks less than boys. This is the case in Vienna, Austria, where the government sponsored a design contest to change city parks in order to make them more welcoming to girls. Changes included adding clearly designed spaces (rather than a single open field), good visibility in the pathways, sufficient lighting, and avoidance of areas where people might easily hide.

It is also important to organize activities that specifically welcome girls so that they can feel a sense of belonging in public spaces<sup>2</sup>.

Hillol is a player of blind cricket. He faces problems getting to events: although there are special seats for people with disabilities and they are free, sometimes the helpers will not allow him to get on a bus as they would rather have a paying traveler. He also finds a lack of interest in better design. He explains that while it is possible to design a field and games to accommodate people with disabilities, most people/places fail to do so, and thus exclude people with disabilities. Difficult as the situation is for men, it is even worse for women. There do exist special sports teams for the blind or people in wheelchairs to play cricket; no such facilities exist for women, so most women and girls with disabilities have no chance to play sports.

## Recommendations

A fully inclusive society is one which welcomes the participation and contribution of all its citizens. A fully inclusive society is more likely to prosper, and to meet the basic human rights and needs of its citizens, than a less inclusive one. For all these reasons, we feel it is important to address the non-inclusive nature of our public spaces. From our own observations, our international research on this subject, our compilation of information from international colleagues, and from the interviews done in this report, we have come up with the following recommendations.

Parks should be accessible such that people with disabilities can visit them without having to rely on others. Not only is it important for people to be able to use the playing field, but they must be able to access it easily from the surrounding roads. Parks also need to be designed so that people with disabilities can have something to do or at least are able to move around freely. *Special activities for people with disabilities would be helpful.*



*Chess is enjoyed only by men in Shaymoli Park*



*Two public toilets are closed among three in Kolabagan Playground*

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<sup>2</sup> See <http://policytransfer.metropolis.org/case-studies/gender-sensitive-park-design>

An important government initiative has been to create a playing field at the southwest corner of Parliament, specifically for people with disabilities. Although not the ideal solution, a special park would at least encourage people with disabilities to experience outdoor recreation and thus, perhaps, lead to greater demand for inclusive facilities throughout the city. The playing field had an official opening, but since then no work has been done to make the playing field accessible or usable.

Tamanna lost her eyesight in an accident while studying in Class 10. As a child she loved playing outdoors. Since the accident, security concerns have kept her mostly indoors; she no longer visits parks or other outdoor places. Tamanna's family has heard about a girl with autism whose family took her to a park one day, but she was harassed. This incident has made her family reluctant to let her visit popular places. *Tamanna dreams of having a small park near her home which she could easily visit on her own, within view of her neighbours, and thus could be outside among others but feel safe.*

Issues of access include being able to reach the public space, being able to get inside it, and feeling comfortable moving around it. Key issues thus include:

#### 1. Accessibility for people with disabilities:

- Improve the transport system in order to enable more independent transport for people with disabilities. This could include starting a special rickshaw disability service which would provide non-polluting, door-to-door transport for those with disabilities. Given the cost, it would be helpful if such a system were subsidized. People with disabilities could themselves be hired and trained to operate the rickshaws, thus creating job opportunities for vulnerable groups while also increasing their mobility.
- Provide safe street crossing facilities at public spaces, with crossing signals that beep for the visually impaired. Street crossings need to be safe and level. It is not possible for someone in a wheelchair to use a footover bridge, and such bridges are also difficult or impossible for people with other disabilities and are generally disliked and thus under-utilized.
- Accessible gates. As the photo in this report shows, it is possible to design gates to block motorbike handlebars while allowing access by people in wheelchairs.
- A sound or tactile system to find the entrance, exit, benches, etc.
- Level entrances (avoid stairs) with ramps if needed.
- Smooth paths within parks that are navigable by wheelchair users.

#### 2. Ease of use for females and for people with disabilities:

- Provide better facilities within public spaces, e.g. lighting, bathrooms, and drinking water.

- Well-designed, accessible and adequate public toilets with doors that are not too heavy and that swing both ways; sinks that are low enough to be used by people in wheelchairs.
- Create smooth walking paths around the edge of playing fields; this will encourage use by women.
- In order to attract girls, organize events and activities which are inviting for them. Similarly, organize events and activities that allow people with and without disabilities to mix freely and to enjoy social interactions. One group organizing such inclusive events is InclusionX<sup>3</sup>.
- Add special play areas or other features to playing fields, as girls are unlikely to play cricket but will enjoy using outdoor spaces if they feel they are welcomed there.
- Learn from better places: Ramna Park is better designed for people with disabilities and Dhanmondi Lake is well used by women and used for many different activities.
- Anti-social activities occur in various parks. Measures are needed to make parks safer especially for women and girls. This includes adequate lighting, areas that have good visibility (fewer trees and other obstacles or places that people can hide), and possibly the presence of guards, as at Dhanmondi Lake. Vendors can also increase security by ensuring that people are always around, and their license could be conditional on their keeping the area around themselves clean.

### 3. Encouraging inclusiveness and broader use:

- Given that many people fail to get exercise until they are diagnosed with diabetes, it would be useful to incentive a cultural shift towards regular exercise. Messages should deliberately target women as well as men. This approach should complement, rather than replace, efforts to encourage active transport e.g. by walking and cycling.
- Consider creating family-specific park times.
- Investigate the possibility of having stalls that loan out sports or play equipment. Those stalls could be operated by a person with a disability so as to help integrate them into society while also increasing recreational opportunities by different users.
- Conduct further research, including collecting international and local best practices and looking for creative solutions, to increase integration and inclusivity in parks and playing fields.
- Girls and people with disabilities tend to participate actively in open street events organized by WBB Trust in Dhaka. More open street events (blocking motorized vehicles and opening the street to cycling and play) could be an effective way to enable broader usage. Given the shortage of parks and playing fields, this would also mean having nearby play spaces for far more of the city's residents.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, <http://www.thedailystar.net/shout/event/inclusionx-volunteer-orientation-programme-194602>

#### 4. Other issues

- Better implementation is needed of existing policies for people with disabilities including of reserved seats on buses and accessibility issues.
- Practical steps are needed, not just theory and strategy.
- More small neighbourhood parks are needed so that people can visit public spaces near their home. Such parks should be designed with the needs of a variety of users in mind.
- It is important to create awareness about the importance of active outdoor recreation for a healthy life (physically, mentally, and socially). Various cities have had success with the introduction of so-called pocket parks (small neighbourhood parks). Where it is not possible to build new parks due to limited space, temporary conversion of streets to create playing spaces, or use of parklets (temporary or permanent conversion of some car parking spaces into a small park) would be an appropriate and much-needed solution.
- A public awareness campaign should be launched on welcoming people with disabilities in our public spaces, and to generate local resource mobilization for improvement of public spaces and other civic amenities.

## Conclusion

Tulsi cannot walk; she uses a wheelchair. Teachers did not want to allow her in their classroom, as they said the other students would be afraid of her. She also could not climb stairs to reach the classroom. Despite all the obstacles, not only did she attend school, but she received a Masters degree. "There's no park near my home so I never go. I can't say what advantages I would like. I've spent the last ten years as a prisoner in my home due to my disability. Thus my room is my park, my playing field, my place for recreation. If I want to go anywhere for recreation, it is a real struggle for my family. I don't go anywhere alone due to concern about my safety. *Everyone should have access to a park, playing field, or other place of recreation for their social development.* But this is not possible for women or people with disabilities; imagine the obstacles for a woman with a disability! But we too are people; we have the same need for recreation as everyone else. People need to become aware of this need so that they can help others to enjoy public spaces. *We need spaces where men, women, and people with disabilities are all treated the same. We need inclusive parks.*"

The ability of women and people with disabilities to reach the highest echelons of society is evident from the remarkable achievements of a few of its members. The fact that such people are exceptional is made clear from the lack of full participation of women and people with disabilities in different fields of society. This report looked only at one easily accessible subset or microcosm of society: parks and playing fields. We found a lack of full participation, or even presence, by girls, women, and people with disabilities. The interviews we conducted revealed that their absence is due not to lack of interest but due to a number of obstacles. Those obstacles include physical ones, as people with disabilities have difficulty reaching, entering, and moving about in parks and playing fields. They, and particularly women and girls, also face social difficulties include fear of harassment, lack of safety, and societal discouragement of their use of public spaces.

We hope that this report will serve to shed light on this issue, raise awareness of the need to address it, and lead to further research as well as active efforts to remedy the problem. Addressing the lack of inclusiveness in public spaces would be an important step along the way towards creating the inclusive society in which all members feel welcomed, integrated, and fully involved. We look forward to doing our part to help create just such a welcoming and inclusive society.

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4 For more information about the importance of public spaces and examples of successful ones, please see Efroymson, D, TTKT Ha and PT Ha. Public Spaces, How they humanize cities. HealthBridge and WBB Trust, Dhaka, October 2009 and Efroymson, D and U Fernando, Public Space and Quality of Life, A case study of Mount Lavinia Beach. Sri Lanka, July 2013, both available for free download at [www.healthbridge.ca](http://www.healthbridge.ca)



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