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Process evaluation of a disability-inclusive employment programme in Bangladesh: examining underlying mechanisms and contextual influences on the impact of STAR+

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ABSTRACT

Persons with disabilities are more likely to be excluded from employment than those without disabilities, yet little is known about effective strategies to address this gap globally. This study is a process evaluation of a disability-inclusive employment programme STAR+, conducted in Bangladesh alongside a cluster randomised controlled trial. The intervention comprised a six-month apprenticeship for youth with disabilities to develop trade-specific skills, alongside additional disability-inclusive components such as workplace modifications. Using qualitative data from participants and implementers, triangulated with trial endline data and programme documentation, the study examines intervention mechanisms of impact and contextual factors. Findings highlight the acquisition of practical and soft skills (e.g., self-confidence) as key positive mechanisms. However, entry into waged employment was constrained by structural barriers, family resistance, and broader disability- and gender-related stigma. Overall, findings show that STAR+ was successful as a skill development programme but identify barriers to improved waged employment outcomes.

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The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) defines disability as a long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairment that, when combined with various barriers, can obstruct the full and equal participation of individuals with disabilities in society. Approximately 1.3 billion individuals, representing around 16% of the world's population, currently live with a disability (World Health Organization, 2022). However, persons with disabilities continue to face systemic barriers to societal participation, including higher unemployment rates, and disproportionate levels of poverty (Ananian & Dellafrerra, 2024; Banks et al., 2017; Mizunoya & Mitra, 2013; United Nations, 2024).

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Concerning employment, key challenges include inaccessible work environments and transport infrastructure, disability stigma and discrimination and insufficient support at the policy level for hiring and retention of persons with disabilities (Shaw et al., 2022). Persons with disabilities also have lower levels of educational attainment compared to persons without disabilities due to disability-related exclusion from school systems (Mizunoya et al., 2018). This adds to challenges they face in securing employment later on.

Access to decent work is essential for the dignity, well-being, and the social integration of all persons. The CRPD through Article 27 underscores the right to work on an equal basis with others, emphasizing the need for inclusive employment policies. Additionally, Goal 8 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aims to promote inclusive economic growth, full employment, and decent work for everyone, including persons with disabilities. Income from employment is also an important route through which persons with disabilities can mitigate their increased risk of poverty (Banks et al., 2017) as, in addition to raising household living standards, it improves their ability to pay for disability-related extra costs and services like assistive devices (Mitra et al., 2017). Yet, little is known ‘what works’ to improve access to employment for persons with disabilities (Cheng et al., 2018; Wickenden et al., 2020). For example, a recent systematic review identified a lack of high-quality evidence assessing the effectiveness of disability-inclusive livelihoods interventions in low- and middle-income countries (Hunt et al., 2022). Additionally, almost all the interventions that were evaluated focused on ‘fixing’ people with disabilities rather than promoting broader systems-change (Hunt et al., 2022). Consequently, there is a clear need for rigorous evaluations of disability-inclusive employment programmes, particularly evaluations of interventions that use holistic multi-level strategies to support both individuals into work and tackle wider structural barriers to employment.

One such holistic employment intervention is Skills Training for Advancing Resources+ [STAR+]. STAR+ is an adaptation of a mainstream skill development programme that targeted out-of-school youth with disabilities aged 14–35. Skill development programmes have been increasingly recognized as vital tools for fostering economic independence, social inclusion, and improved quality of life for persons with disabilities (Kabir et al., 2024). Overall, the primary objective of STAR+ is to enhance livelihoods and decent employment opportunities for youth with disabilities. It comprised both ‘on the job’ placements with employers at local marketplaces (known as Master Crafts Persons) and classroom-based training over a period of six months, along with other forms of support such as assistive device provision, workplace modifications and sensitization workshops designed to challenge disability stigma and discrimination (Banks et al., 2022). At the conclusion of formal STAR+ delivery, BRAC attempted to place youth into an ongoing waged job placement at their apprenticeship workplace or with another marketplace employer. A cluster randomised controlled trial [cRCT] of STAR+ has been carried out as part of a comprehensive programme evaluation conducted by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine and the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development and funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth, & Development Office. The c-RCT evaluated the 2022 iteration of STAR+ in which the programme targeted approximately 750 youth with disabilities in 39 districts of Bangladesh¹ Findings from the cRCT suggest that the programme had positive impacts

on the employment and earnings of youth with disabilities, driven primarily by increases in self-employment, with limited evidence of impact on waged employment.²

The use of RCTs in evaluation has been critiqued on the basis that they only identify whether an intervention worked and do not explore why it worked (Ogden, 2020). Theoretically, this view is aligned to a realist perspective of evaluations, which emphasises the contextually contingent nature of interventions and the mechanisms and outcomes they produce (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). From the realist perspective, understanding an intervention's effectiveness requires examining the processes surrounding its implementation, including both its mechanisms of impact and the contextual conditions that influence implementation and outcomes (Moore et al., 2015). Process evaluations are therefore essential complements to RCTs, as they can explain how interventions like STAR+ could achieve outcomes such as increased employment participation and earnings. Moreover, while the problem of disability-inclusive employment is extremely complex, where appropriate interventions exist, elements can be shallow or tokenistically implemented particularly in low- and middle-income contexts (Shaw et al., 2022). This means that disability-inclusive employment can be difficult to get right, necessitating trial and error learning (Shaw et al., 2022). Process evaluations are particularly useful to help understand, complex interventions as they help unpack how these interventions were implemented and offer learnings that can be applied to different contexts and future intervention design (Hameed et al., 2022).

The present study addresses these gaps by reporting the findings of a process evaluation of STAR+ conducted alongside a c-RCT of the programme (Banks et al., 2022). The process evaluation findings help to explain the c-RCT results; specifically the mechanisms through which STAR+ was effective and the contextual influences on its delivery and impact. This represents a significant academic contribution, because such rigorous integrated evaluations of disability-inclusive employment programmes are rare (Hunt et al., 2022).

Disability and employment in the context of Bangladesh

A full analysis of context in relation to STAR+ is informed by an understanding of disability and employment in Bangladesh. Recent estimates show that 7% of Bangladesh's population of 169 million people live with some form of disability (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS], 2022).³ As is the case globally, persons with disabilities are highly stigmatised in Bangladesh, with prejudice cited as a key barrier to their employment (Thompson, 2020). Perceptions of traditional gender roles also underpin negative attitudes toward women in the workplace, which produce additional disadvantage for women with disabilities as compared to men (Thompson, 2020). Partly as a consequence of such stigma, the unemployment rate among persons with disabilities is estimated at 66%, climbing to 87% for women with disabilities, while only 3% of all persons with disabilities are estimated to have received any form of skill development training (BBS, 2022). Hence, skill development programmes are one promising strategy to address unemployment and income disparities among persons with disabilities specifically in the Bangladesh context. Moreover, a randomised controlled trial of the mainstream STAR programme also implemented in Bangladesh showed that the intervention produced a sustained impact on earnings through inducing a shift from casual to waged

employment (Das, 2021). STAR did include some persons with disabilities, typically 10% of total participants. Qualitative research has suggesting participating in this intervention increased the social and cultural capital of youth with disabilities (Shatil et al., 2023), but also that mainstream STAR did not adequately identify all eligible youth with disabilities or provide all necessary forms of disability-related support needed for an inclusive programme (Shatil et al., 2024). STAR+ was designed to address these challenges and others prevalent in the Bangladesh context. The need for good disability-inclusive employment strategies in Bangladesh is even more pressing given recent policy changes. Previously, the government required 10% of the public sector workforce to have a disability, however there was concern that this was a surface-level intervention that was not well implemented (Thompson, 2020). However, as of 2024, this quota has now dropped to just 1% of public sector jobs, to be shared by both persons with disabilities and third gender individuals (Iqbal, 2025).

Research questions

- (1) What were the important mechanisms through which STAR+ worked to create increased employment and earnings amongst youth with disabilities?
- (2) How was the delivery and impact of STAR+ affected by contextual factors?

Method

The study is part of a broader process evaluation of STAR+ that adopts the Medical Research Council [MRC] framework (Moore et al., 2015) as its conceptual framework. This was chosen because it provides a framework for evaluators to explore the influence of context on the delivery and outcomes of complex interventions. This is consistent with a realist approach to evaluations, namely that the nature of interventions and the mechanisms and outcomes they produce are contextually contingent (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Specifically, the MRC framework identifies four core aims of process evaluations: i) How delivery is achieved? (e.g. structures and resources used to deliver the intervention); ii) What is actually delivered? (e.g. fidelity [the quality of what is delivered], dose [the quantity of what is delivered], reach [who the intervention reaches]); iii) How does the intervention work? (e.g. mechanisms of impact); and iv) contextual influences on delivery and impact. The focus of this study is on the third and fourth component, with findings from the other components discussed elsewhere. Specifically, Shatil et al. (2024) discussed the structures through which delivery in STAR+ was achieved, and another forthcoming paper will explore what was actually delivered through the intervention.

Procedure

Data were collected at two-time points after conclusion of the core six-month intervention delivery. Data collection procedures for the first time point (March, 2023) are discussed in detail in Shatil et al. (2024) and occurred in three purposively selected RCT clusters of the 45 where STAR+ had been delivered (Darshana and Pirgacha from Rangpur district & Tala from Satkhira district). Selection aimed to maximize variation between research sites with respect to urbanity of location and marketplace

conditions, but consideration was also given to ensuring the clusters selected retained implementers who had been in post during the 2022 STAR+ rollout (Shatil et al. (2024)). Specifically, semi-structured interviews were conducted with youth with disabilities who participated in STAR+ and a range of implementers involved in different aspects of STAR+ delivery.

An additional round of 25 interviews with youth with disabilities and Master Crafts Persons [MCPs] was conducted in March 2024. Specifically, Darshana and Tala were revisited and some participants there were reinterviewed. A new purposively selected intervention cluster, Sherpur Sadar from Sherpur district was also visited to provide further comparison data. The purpose of this additional round of data collection was to follow-up on experiences identified during the initial phase of qualitative data collection (Shatil et al., 2024), as well as investigate mechanisms underpinning longer term changes experienced by participants that may be attributable to the intervention. All interview questions were open-ended to elicit experiential data from participants (e.g. “*What impact do you think participating in STAR+ has had on your work-related skills?, What part of STAR+ was most important in helping you to develop these changes you mention?*”). Study interviews were conducted in Bangla and collected by co-authors based in Bangladesh or trained research assistants affiliated with their institution. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the institutional review boards at London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (UK) and the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (Bangladesh).

The findings of the present paper draw mainly on qualitative data collected via the semi-structured interviews with participating youth with disabilities and the MCPs (i.e. employers) who supervised their apprenticeships with during STAR+. The perceptions of the latter group are of particular interest because, unlike other implementers, many MCPs had contact with STAR+ beneficiaries beyond the formal intervention delivery period, through either provision of waged employment positions or simply through the fact they work in the local marketplace. Additionally, further data sources were used for data triangulation specifically self-reported job outcomes obtained through our c-RCT evaluation endline (see Banks et al. (2022) for a discussion of methodology), data from other implementer types in the wider process evaluation (Shatil et al., 2024), and STAR+ programme monitoring and evaluation [MEL] documents (e.g. research reports). These sources were reviewed to examine consistency with the themes and explanations emerging from the primary qualitative analysis.

Participants

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 youth with disabilities and 19 MCPs in total, identified using lists of youth who were assigned to the intervention condition at baseline. The sample size of youth with disabilities was selected to capture a range of experiences across key characteristics, specifically location, gender and type of disability. The sample size of MCPs was selected to capture a range of experiences across location and trade taught (specifically carpentry, IT Support, mobile-phone servicing, & tailoring which were the four most common trades taught in STAR+). [Table 1](#) describes the main characteristics of these respondents.

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

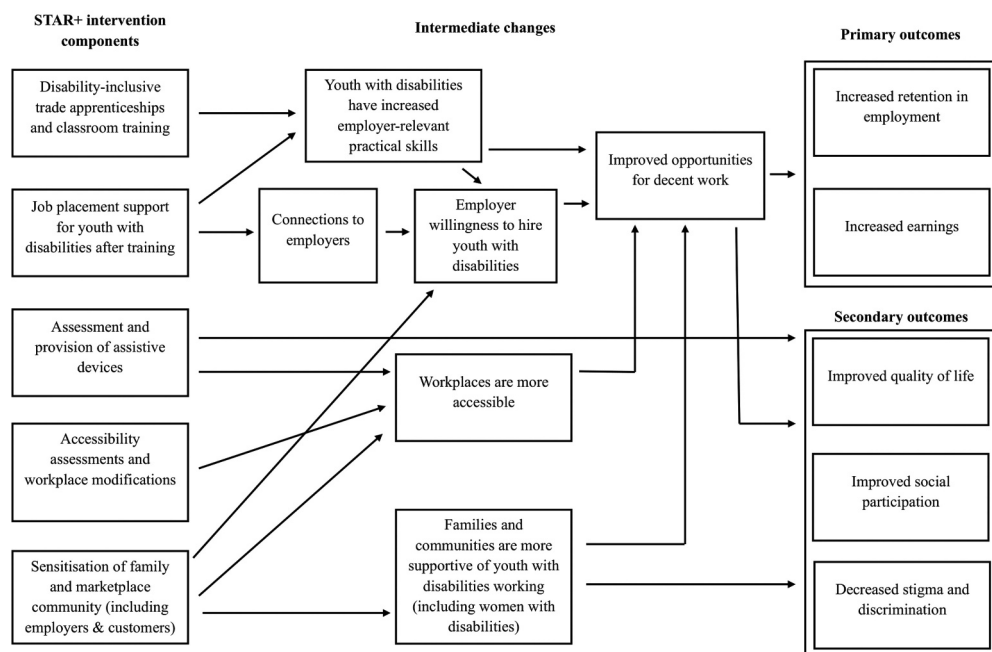
Participant Type	Description	N	Location (N)	Gender (N)
Youth with disabilities	Intervention recipients	24	Darshana (9), Pirgacha(4),Tala (6), Sherpur (5)	Male (12), Female (12)
Master Crafts Persons	Implementers (Apprenticeship supervisors)	19	Darshana (6), Tala (6), Pirgacha(4), Sherpur (3)	Male (17), Female (2)

Of the youth with disabilities, 11 had physical disabilities only (45%), nine (38%) had multiple disabilities (e.g. speech and physical, speech and hearing, physical and hearing), three had intellectual disabilities (13%) and one had a visual impairment (4%). Interviews with youth with speech, hearing and intellectual disabilities were generally conducted with the assistance of family members to interpret. All youth were aged between 14–35, in line with the STAR+ programme inclusion criteria.

Analysis

Our analysis used the STAR+ Theory of Change developed by implementers at the outset of the programme to guide analysis (Banks et al., 2022), as this specified expected mechanisms of impact (see Figure 1).

Interviews were transcribed to Bangla and then translated to English and a proportion quality checked by bilingual members of the study team to ensure

**Figure 1.** Star+ Theory of change.

meanings were preserved. Thematic analysis was chosen for its flexibility and suitability (Braun & Clarke, 2006), meaning that it was well suited to identify mechanisms of impact and contextual influences across diverse implementation settings. Deductive codes were derived from the relevant parts of the process evaluation framework (i.e. mechanisms of impact & context; Moore et al., 2015) and STAR+ Theory of Change, while inductive coding captured unanticipated patterns emerging from participants' accounts. Initial codes from a subset of transcripts were discussed in the team for coherence before the coding framework was applied to the full dataset using NVivo. Codes containing similar content were organized into superordinate themes. Reflexivity was maintained throughout via analytic memos.

Findings

In this section, we explore the mechanisms of impact underpinning STAR+ and contextual influences on its delivery and impact. We interpret our findings against expected changes according to the STAR+ Theory of Change.

Mechanisms of impact

This process evaluation identified several mechanisms of impact that intervened between intervention activities and outcomes. These are listed below.

Acquisition of practical skills

As anticipated by the STAR+ Theory of Change model, this process evaluation identified that youth with disabilities gained practical skills through STAR+ that were relevant to their employment prospects within the local market and more widely. Thus, their opportunities for waged employment as well as for self-employment increased, which naturally also led to increased earning potential:

I learned how to use sandpaper to rub the wood surface. For example, when they made any design, they told me to polish the surface. I did it. In between, they showed me how to make a design. They told me to memorize it so that I could do the same. I learned so many things there.

Male, physical impairment, Carpentry, Rangpur Darshana

Here, the work related to photo editing and then making photocopies, I quite like these things. It means I can do these in the future if needed.

Male, physical impairment, IT support, Rangpur Pirgacha

My daughter could not sew her dresses before, but now she sews them herself. My sister-in-law has three sewing machines. Previously, she was struggling with maintaining the orders. Now my daughter helps her in her work. She sews the remaining dresses and gets money in return. She sews her dresses as well as others. And she is also earning from this.

Female, speech and hearing impairment, tailoring, Rangpur Darshana (interview facilitated by participant's mother)

However, a common piece of feedback from MCPs was that the six-month training period was too short to teach youth with disabilities the full range of basic skills necessitated by their trade:

Six months is not enough for her to learn everything. It would be better if, with the parent's permission, she starts learning again here. Then she may be able to learn everything properly. They need to learn even after those six months, because the work of a tailor needs to be up to the mark. This business runs on people's choice. They can learn working in six months, but the finishing is not up to the mark.

MCP, Tailoring, Rangpur Darshana

If you make it nine months or a year instead of six months, it would be even better. A year would be perfect. With six months, they learn something, but with a year, they learn completely.

MCP, Mobile Servicing, Khulna Tala

In relation, MCPs often perceived that youth with disabilities picked up skills more slowly compared to employees without disabilities, for instance due to communication barriers with youth who had speech and language or hearing impairments or functional difficulties related to physical impairment (e.g. dexterity), exacerbating the perceived need for a longer training period.

Some youth with disabilities further described how being involved in the apprenticeships helped them develop a practical soft skill, namely how to present themselves professionally in terms of clothing and demeanor:

I: Well. Is there any change in your own life [now] that you are doing a job, being associated with work?

R: Yes.

I: What kind of changes came?

R: After joining the work, I keep myself clean and tidy.

I: Staying clean and tidy? Ok ok.

R: I stay tidy and my clothes have to be clean. I sit in a proper and well mannered way in the shop and focus on work'.

Male, physical impairment, Mobile Servicing, Khulna Tala

Securing a waged job placement

At the conclusion of the six-month STAR+ apprenticeship training, implementers tried to ensure that youth would keep working in a paid job with their MCP for at least an additional month or begin one with an alternative employer. MEL data from the programme identified that while 95% of STAR+ youth kept working with an employer for at least 1 month, by three months this had fallen by half (Inclusive Futures, 2023).⁴ According to our evaluation endline, out of 483 youth with disabilities who participated in STAR+, 150 (31%) reported being offered a paid job placement with their MCP after STAR+.⁵ Of these, 50 (10%) said they took up the position. Moreover, of the youth that

said they did take up paid jobs ($N = 51$), around half (45%) said they were employed for 3 months or less. The most common reason for youth leaving their paid jobs were dissatisfaction with salaries (40%), difficulty getting to workplaces (22%) or being asked to leave by employers (16%). Average salary of the paid job cohort was reported as 2690.196 BDT and was lower for females (2,526.67 BDT) relative to males (2,808 BDT).

That our evaluation finds that about half of waged jobs that youth undertook immediately after STAR+ did not persist for at least 3 months agrees with programme MEL which identifies a similarly short duration of paid jobs. The lack of or brief duration of waged placements inhibited the ability of youth to keep learning practical skills in their chosen trade. It also meant employers in the trade were less willing to hire them. As the comments from MCPs indicate, after six months youth still had more to learn to ‘master’ their trade, meaning they could be disadvantaged if they did not successfully acquire or maintain a waged job placement for a sustained period. However, some youth did report that they were able to put skills to good use in pursuing alternative employment, particularly self-employment:

Even though I didn’t get a job after completing the training [and] I didn’t have enough money to start a [computer] shop. . . . I learned skills [in STAR+] . . . One has to do something in life, so I started a small tea shop.

Male, Physical impairment, IT Support Khulna Tala

Purchase or use of resources for self-employment

Several interviewed female youth with disabilities, described purchasing or using sewing machines (e.g. owned by other family members) to support their self-employment. For these women, self-employment at home was generally deemed preferable to waged employment because of the flexibility it offered or due to existing household or caregiving responsibilities:

It was getting problematic to let [my child] stay at the grandmother’s house, so I informed [MCP] who is in charge of the store that I couldn’t come in. I’ll try to find a secondhand machine to continue working from home . . . at that point, I was working from home little by little rather than going to the store, but occasionally I did go to [MCP’s] store if I didn’t understand any task such as work in kameez and he guided me.

Female, physical impairment, Tailoring, Rangpur Darshana

Several women with disabilities who learned tailoring described using family savings or the monthly stipend they received to attend the six-month apprenticeships to purchase the sewing machine. However, some women also felt that buying a sewing machine with these and other resources increased their financial hardship:

I didn’t buy the machine for a long time. It’s been four or five months since I bought the machine . . . I faced a lot of problems to gather the money to buy the machine. Somehow, I bought an old machine. I did a lot of things to buy it. It was an old machine and cost around four thousand taka.

Female, visual impairment, Tailoring, Sherpur Sadar

One MCP suggested that BRAC could provide this financial assistance instead:

Many of these learners cannot continue even after learning to work due to lack of a machine. They cannot remain in a shop permanently because of this . . . In this case, if BRAC could provide any assistance for buying a machine or cutting table through which she can move forward or start a small business then she can start earning her own livelihood . . . So getting financial assistance is a much needed thing for sure.

MCP, Tailoring, Rangpur Darshana

More broadly, some youth with disabilities who had learned other trades described saving up the monthly stipend to open their own business.

Self-confidence, respect and community support

Several youth with disabilities felt that they were respected more by their families and within the wider community due to their newfound experience with work. Economic empowerment of the youth, especially female youth, was perceived by youth to improve their social standing and recognition within the family and community:

It's better than before. Previously, I couldn't do anything, but now I can work. People have started to respect me more. There has been a change in perception. They give more importance. There has been a change in self-esteem as well.

Female, physical impairment, Tailoring, Khula Tala

Moreover, both MCPs and other implementers also attributed changes in the respect afforded to youth with disabilities primarily to a widened economic ability to contribute to the household and within broader Bangladeshi society:

The person who was a burden on a family became an asset. This is a great change. When a burden of a family becomes an asset, they also become an asset for the society and country too.

BRAC Staff, Khulna Tala

The change of perception in the community was perceived by some youth as a reason that they would receive customers and business:

In the village area many come to know now that I can work in this sector and then they give me the work to complete. By Allah's favor, after completing a few works, now my relatives come and give me orders.

Female, physical impairment, Tailoring, Rangpur Darshana

However, some youth with disabilities who did not manage to secure or maintain employment after STAR+ noted that the positive changes they had experienced during training did not persist:

When I used to work [in STAR+], I would go to the tailors in the morning. I needed to spend as much time there as I could . . . I used to be on my own terms. It felt good then. I used to think, 'I have to go again tomorrow, I have to prepare again for tomorrow'. There was always this concern. That time was good.

I: So, what did your neighbours think at that time? When you were involved in a job or going for training, what did they say or think?

R: They were satisfied. They thought, ‘She is doing something, not just idling around, doing something’. So, they showed a bit of respect. Now, even if I go repeatedly [to the market], they don’t show respect. Back then, if I didn’t go, they wondered why I was not coming. And now, no one searches for someone who is unemployed, even more so if they are unwell.

Female, physical impairment, Tailoring, Khula Tala

Context

This process evaluation also identified several contextual factors that influenced intervention delivery and impact.

Structural barriers

Persons with disabilities in Bangladesh face difficulties in accessing the labour market, as well as participating in other areas of Bangladeshi life due to structural barriers, notably the inaccessibility of environments. Much infrastructure and common modes of transportation within and around marketplaces is not accessible to many persons with disabilities, risking dependency and reduced employment opportunities.

No, [*the labour market*] is not PWD-friendly. Let me explain why. The infrastructure in Bangladesh lacks accessibility for PWDs. For example, the buildings. Another example is the lack of traffic signals that cater to the needs of visually impaired individuals . . . The reserved seats on buses are often occupied by others, leading to confusion and difficulties for people with disabilities.

Representative of Organisation of Person with Disabilities, Rangpur Pirchaga

As part of STAR+, the programme implemented some workplace (e.g. seating) and marketplace modifications (e.g. accessible toilets), which were generally well-received by youth with disabilities. However, provision of formal support with transport was limited or absent entirely. Consequently, family members used to accompany youth with disabilities to the locations of apprenticeships and classroom trainings to ensure their safety. For example, 24% of youth needed parental/caregiver assistance to travel to training always or most of the time. However, this was not an accessible solution for youth and also burdened their family members as it meant time away from daily tasks or lost income opportunities:

‘I struggled and walked to the shop. I never got a van . . . So I went there for six months. I was trying very hard. [to learn]

[Mother]: I told them to let me teach her as I knew everything. It was difficult for me to bring her to the shop daily. They didn’t select me’. [as an MCP]

Female, hearing and physical impairment, Tailoring, Rangpur Pirchaga [interviewed assisted by respondent’s mother due to hearing impairment]

In some cases, family members of youth with communication difficulties were also asked by implementers to attend apprenticeships and classroom trainings to help MCPs and

classroom teachers to communicate with them, exacerbating lost income potential for the household as their participation was unfunded. More broadly, some MCPs and implementers noted that the general economic conditions of some marketplaces were poor, posing challenges for all persons, not only youth with disabilities.

Family support and resistance

As suggested above, the support or resistance which youth with disabilities met from their families was a particularly important influence on their engagement with the STAR+ and subsequent labour market outcomes. Although there were many instances of family members supporting the participants, there was resistance from family too, often generated from disability stigma and discrimination. Family perceptions were critical in the decisions of many youth to participate in STAR+:

R: My family encouraged me. If not for them, I wouldn't go anywhere. I'm not someone outside the family. If I don't have permission from the family for any work, I don't go. They don't prohibit me from going there.

I: So, you mentioned encouragement, what specifically did they say to encourage you?

R: At first, I mentioned there's an organization called BRAC where they teach computers, can I do that? They said, 'Yes, since you're at home, you might as well learn. It might come in handy in the future.'

Male, physical impairment, IT Support, Khulna Tala

R: The moment [MCP] came and told her to learn [tailoring], I refused. I said that I won't give my daughter as she could not learn.

I: Why did you refuse?

R: No. I refused as my daughter cannot speak. She has to go there everyday. Who will take her there? . . . then 'X'[BRAC staff] came, he talked with me over the phone again and again. He took my phone number. He said, 'Apa, let us admit your daughter here. Her future will be bright. As she does not know how to speak, let her try if she could learn to work'.

Mother of female with speech and hearing impairment, Tailoring, Rangpur Darshana

As suggested by the second excerpt, the skill and persistence of implementers during STAR+ recruitment was crucial in combating instances of stigma and discrimination that could have eroded participation in the programme. However, beyond the formal part of the programme instances of family resistance were a factor in why some youth, particularly women and girls did not take up or stay in waged employment:

I couldn't go back [to the marketplace] after seeing the problems at home. Dad said that if there were problems with household chores, I shouldn't go anymore.

Female, physical impairment, Tailoring, Sherpur Sadar

Entrenched disability and gender stigma and discrimination

Disability stigma and discrimination underpinned some instances of family resistance (e.g. the belief that persons with disabilities cannot learn or work), but also operated

more broadly to inhibit positive labour market outcomes for some youth with disabilities. Although a component of STAR+ entailed sensitization workshops designed to tackle disability stigma and discrimination in the marketplace, our data suggests that employers, customers and other individuals showed a mixed reaction while dealing with youth with disabilities in the marketplace. On the one hand, some implementers, MCPs and youth with disabilities spoke about attitudes to disability in families and the community greatly improving. However, at the same time, interviewees shared accounts of persisting stigmatising and discriminatory practices related to disability (as well as gender) in marketplaces which contributed to diminished self-esteem and discouraged or prevented youth with disabilities from participating in the labour market:

I: Okay, so do you want to join some other workplace now?

R: Of course I do

I: Where do you want to work?

R: [Speech interpreted by mother]

Mother: He wants to work, he went to one or two places with some woodworkers, but no one really wants to hire him. As he is not normal, he has some disabilities, that's why people wonder if he would be able to work properly or not, so he doesn't get hired.

Male, speech and intellectual impairment, Carpentry, Rangpur Darshana

When disability stigma and discrimination happened during apprenticeships some MCPs spoke about directly intervening to challenge customers and change their minds:

Several customers come into the shop daily and they may have several perceptions. Some of the customers asked me with a very disrespectful tone who they were and what they were doing there. I replied to them that these people come here from BRAC to learn work and I need to train them. I used to explain that they are unemployed and if we don't take care of them, who will? I used to make them understand in this way.

MCP, Mobile Servicing, Khulna Tala

The strategy this MCP uses to challenge stigma and discrimination mirrors a key approach that STAR+ implementers used to recruit MCPs to mentor youth with disabilities, namely selecting altruistic individuals and fostering their sense of social responsibility. This was both because many potential MCPs were reluctant to train youth with disabilities and because social responsibility in MCPs was perceived by implementers as crucial to ensuring good quality apprenticeships (Shatil et al., 2024). In fact, STAR+ monitoring and evaluation research with 47 MCPs conducted after the conclusion of the programme noted that:

Nearly all MCPs are interested in hiring persons with disabilities because they believe that these individuals are left behind in society and are helpless.

Inclusive Futures (2023)

MCP perceptions of this type are close the charity model mindset of youth with disabilities as a burden or objects of pity, which STAR+'s behaviour change workshops explicitly sought to challenge in marketplaces. However, the apparent 'stickiness' of the

perception of disability as a burden may be reason why successful waged job placements made to youth in STAR+ often did not persist past the 3-month mark. In other words, altruism and social responsibility to support youth with disabilities may be helpful in ensuring they get adequate training through STAR+, but perceptions of their workplace skills and contribution matter much more over the long-term for employment. As one MCP put it:

Look, we are in a competitive era now. No one is going to feed someone for free. They will hire based on their work confidence, experience, and performance, and they will pay them a salary for that. Just because someone is disabled doesn't mean they will sit idle all day and get paid. They will be hired and paid based on their work experience and ability to perform tasks. From this perspective, I believe if someone is good at their job, it doesn't matter if they are lame, dumb, or blind; if they are an expert and experienced in their field, can work well, deal with customers properly, and are self-reliant, then they will be in demand wherever they go.

MCP, Mobile Servicing, Khulna Tala

Our process evaluation also found that gender-based stigma and discrimination operated alongside disability stigma to risk disadvantaging female youth with disabilities from participating fully in STAR+ and securing decent work thereafter. For instance, some women and girls with disabilities felt unsafe travelling to apprenticeships due to the risk of sexual harassment on the way to the marketplace. Others felt uncomfortable during apprenticeships due to negative perceptions among colleagues about women. For some, this was a deterring factor in taking up the offer of a waged placement:

R: I don't go to the shop now. I went there for 6 months and all the employees were males. It was challenging to work in that environment.

I: Why was that? Please be open with us.

R: People were gossiping about how a female could work there.

...I: What is the problem if a woman works at the market?

A: I don't know what types of problems they have. For example, most of them are males working there. When a female goes to work, they may gossip about it. Shouldn't I feel shy?

Female, physical impairment, Tailoring, Rangpur Darshana

Discussion

Our findings suggest that participation in STAR+ led to some positive changes for youth with disabilities that were contributory mechanisms to the programmes primary desired impacts, notably increased employment and earnings. As noted, findings from the accompanying cRCT indicate that STAR+ contributed to improvements in overall employment and earnings among youth with disabilities. However, there was no clear evidence of impact on waged employment specifically.

Our process evaluation found that the programme enabled youth to acquire new practical skills and employment-relevant soft skills such as professional self-presentation, particularly due to the experience gained from the MCP-taught apprenticeships. When they could not secure or maintain waged employment,

some youth were able to put these skills to use in self-employment instead. This was particularly the case for women and girls with disabilities, of whom the majority learned tailoring. Specifically, some of these women and girls then went on to purchase sewing machines to operate from home, which many saw as a better alternative to a waged job, given family pressures. STAR+ participants also said they derived a sense of self-respect and confidence from taking part in the programme. At the same time, the participation of youth in apprenticeships improved perceptions of the community toward them which contributed in some cases to a wider customer base.

However, our process evaluation also suggests that STAR+ had limited success at increasing levels of youth waged employment over the short-term, despite operating a 1-month waged job placement support component. Specifically, our process evaluations found that after 3 months had elapsed, fewer than 50% of youth who got a paid job with their MCP after STAR+ were working within these waged placements. This constrained the ability of youth with disabilities to develop practical trade-specific skills further, which in turn restricted the willingness of employers to hire them. This is particularly as, per MCPs, a youth can learn *something* about a market trade in a six-month STAR+ apprenticeship, but they cannot master it, making subsequent on the job experience important.

Furthermore, we consider the willingness of employers to hire youth with disabilities as an important mechanism of impact (See Theory of Change) that faltered in the case of STAR+, because it was not sustained over the longer-term. Although the sense of altruism and social responsibility that STAR+ nurtured among MCPs was crucial at ensuring their engaged participation as mentors during the programme (Shatil et al., 2024), our data suggests this by itself is insufficient to ensure youth are retained as their waged employees after STAR+ ends. Master Crafts Persons in the marketplaces of Bangladesh, like employers around the world, follow primarily economic not moral incentives. Rather than the self-belief MCPs are ‘helping the helpless’ by employing youth with disabilities, what is important for the long-term waged employment prospects of youth is that these MCPs believe they will deliver economic value as employees. STAR+ did have components which aimed to foster this understanding among MCPs and within the marketplace and community, notably the behaviour change workshops, but the short duration of waged placements suggests these perceptions of economic value did not take hold among MCPs/employers specifically. We also identified instances of gender stigma which disadvantaged the employment prospects of women and girls with disabilities after the programme concluded.

Efforts to make workplaces accessible in STAR+ generally worked well, although the programme did not put in sufficient accommodations for youth with communication impairments, instead relying on parent/caregiver support. However, our process evaluation also identified that many youth faced ongoing difficulties with securing accessible transport to workplaces. This issue was not sustainably addressed in the lifecycle of the programme because the intervention relied on parental support to take youth to apprenticeships and classroom training. The accessibility of getting to workplaces was not a factor considered in-depth within STAR+ or its Theory of Change. Thus, our findings highlight the importance of considering transport provision within future employment interventions for persons with disabilities.

Our evaluation has some limitations. First, we lack economic data from the implementation of STAR+ to assess the extent the intervention was cost-effective. Second, we collected qualitative data from only four of the 45 clusters where STAR+ was being delivered. Third, we collected qualitative interview data from only 24 of the 483 youth who participated in STAR+. However, we used purposive sampling at cluster and participant-level to capture a diverse range of perspectives. This approach allowed us to capture a broad range of experiences to examine how and why the intervention worked in different contexts, minimising the risk of omission.

Little is known about ‘what works’ to achieve disability-inclusive employment, including *why*, *when* and *how* such interventions impact target outcomes (Hameed et al., 2022). Taken together, our findings highlight that STAR+ was effective as a skill development programme and youth were able to apply these practical skills to pursue employment, specifically self-employment. However, youth with disabilities often had little opportunity to utilise these skills within waged employment, particularly in their chosen trade, after the programme concluded. Specifically, our process evaluation suggests STAR+ may not have increased the willingness of employers to hire youth with disabilities over the longer-term. Findings in highlight particular the need for disability-inclusive employment interventions to foster contextually relevant economic motivations among prospective employers, in addition to positive attitudes about disability. Moreover, such interventions should sustainably address the problems that persons with disabilities encounter in travelling to workplaces. These are examples of deeper challenges that go much beyond exclusion from skill development and individual-level barriers (Hunt et al., 2022; Shaw et al., 2022). These findings underscore the importance of designing disability-inclusive employment interventions that go beyond skill development by addressing the structural and economic barriers that limit sustainable workforce inclusion for persons with disabilities

Notes

1. Further details of the STAR+ intervention and the c-RCT methodology are available in the published study protocol (Banks et al., 2022).
2. Full results are reported separately in a forthcoming paper.
3. The official disability prevalence in Bangladesh is 2.8% but this could be a significant underestimate given that 16% of the global population is estimated to have a disability (WHO, 2022). In line with other studies (e.g. Kaiser et al., 2025) we cite the prevalence estimate given on p. 146 of BBS (2022) which is derived from the internationally comparable Washington Group methodology.
4. Employment status at 3 months is based on a subsample of N = 275 STAR+ participants and not the full cohort.
5. We asked ‘*After you were finished your apprenticeship, were you offered a paid job there?*’. This is not directly comparable to the programmes 95% statistic which measured how many youth received paid job support given by either their apprenticeship employer or an alternative employer for an additional 1 month. Many youth responding to our endline likely also viewed the 1-month support period as part of the apprenticeship itself and not separate, leading to a smaller figure.

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