

How Active are the Residents of Dhaka?

Perceptions and Challenges in Maintaining Physical Activity in Urban Bangladesh

By Umme Salma Anee & team



Dhaka, the bustling capital of Bangladesh, is home to over 23 million residents who live in an often intertwined web of slum, non-slum, and elite residential areas (STEPS survey, 2018). Many migrants, driven increasingly by rural poverty and the economic promise of the city, move both within the city as well as in and out of it to make a living. Staying healthy in this dynamic yet challenging urban environment is not easy and recently, there have been growing concerns about the rise of non-communicable diseases across both rich and poor communities (T Hasan, 2022).

CHORUS is a Research Programme Consortium that brings together health researchers from Africa, South Asia and the UK. CHORUS works with communities, health professionals and city level decision makers to develop and test ways to improve the health of the poorest urban residents.

Limited participation in physical activity, along with poor diet and tobacco use, is a significant risk factor driving this pandemic of NCDs such as diabetes and hypertension.

Additionally, unhealthy lifestyles and food habits, excessive mobile browsing, lack of interest in physical activity, and societal norms have led to significantly higher rates of overweight and obesity, particularly among girls compared to boys in the child and adolescent population. Among adults, females also show higher rates of overweight and obesity than males (Katzmarzyk et al., 2022).

Although physical activity is imperative for maintaining a healthy lifestyle, many urban residents in Dhaka struggle to incorporate it into their daily lives due to a number of challenges. Personal perceptions, lived experiences, and the

constraints of urban planning and the environment make regular exercise difficult.

Additionally, a lack of awareness, societal barriers, cultural norms, gender issues and inadequate facilities further limit opportunities for physical activity. This blog explores the importance of staying active for overall health and examines the obstacles faced by Dhaka's urban population. The insights shared are based on qualitative research findings, which will be published soon. We conducted interviews with seven males and eight females from diverse groups in different areas of Dhaka city.



Perception/Understanding Physical Activity and Its Benefits

In Dhaka city, physical activity or exercise is primarily associated with walking. However, perceptions vary across different social classes. For instance; day laborers may consider their daily work as physical activity, while students recognize multiple forms, including walking, gym workouts and yoga, with the most common being walking to and from school. Office workers, particularly those in sedentary jobs, often associate physical activity with walking and following a diet plan. So, it shows that, ultimately, perceptions of physical activity vary from person to person, gender, age and profession.

Physical activity improves blood circulation, boosts energy levels, and can enhance overall well-being. Regular activity can help prevent common health issues such as hypertension and diabetes, which are becoming increasingly prevalent in urban areas. Doctors recommend at least 20 minutes of daily physical activity to maintain fitness, with the World Health Organization (WHO) advising 150 minutes per week as part of the physical activity guidelines.

"In our country, physical activity or exercise mainly refers to walking. People From different societal classes define it differently. For example, a day laborer may consider his work as physical activity. Students like us know many aspects of physical activity; like walking, exercise, gym workouts, and yoga etc. Office (sedentary) often associate physical activity with walking and following a diet plan. Everyone has a different perception."

-Working woman, community member.

"We all know that after a certain age various ailments begin to affect our bodies. Hypertension and diabetes are very common among these conditions. They can also occur at young ages too. As a hypertension patient myself, I have experienced fluctuations in blood pressure and have had to adjust my medications. My doctor has advised me to walk on the treadmill for at least 20 minutes daily. As I've told the doctor that I don't have the time to walk in a park."

-Guardian, community member.

"I wake up in the morning, put on my school uniform and walk to the school. It's a long walk that takes 10 minutes."

-Guardian, community member.

In contrast, a common mistake made within the community is confusing physical activity with exercise. These terms are often used interchangeably, leading to widespread misconceptions. Parents, in particular, may not fully understand the difference, which affects both their own engagement in physical activity and their ability to encourage their children to stay active. Many are uncertain about what physical activity truly involves or how to integrate it into their daily routines. When asked about physical activity, people often assume it refers to going to the gym, an option they may perceive as costly or time-consuming.



"There is a common misconception among many that physical activity and exercise are the same thing, but they are not. We often mix these terms up. Parents, in particular, are often unaware of the difference and hence do not engage in physical activity themselves. They also lack understanding of what physical activity is and how to incorporate it into their lives. As I previously said, there's significant confusion between physical activity and exercise."

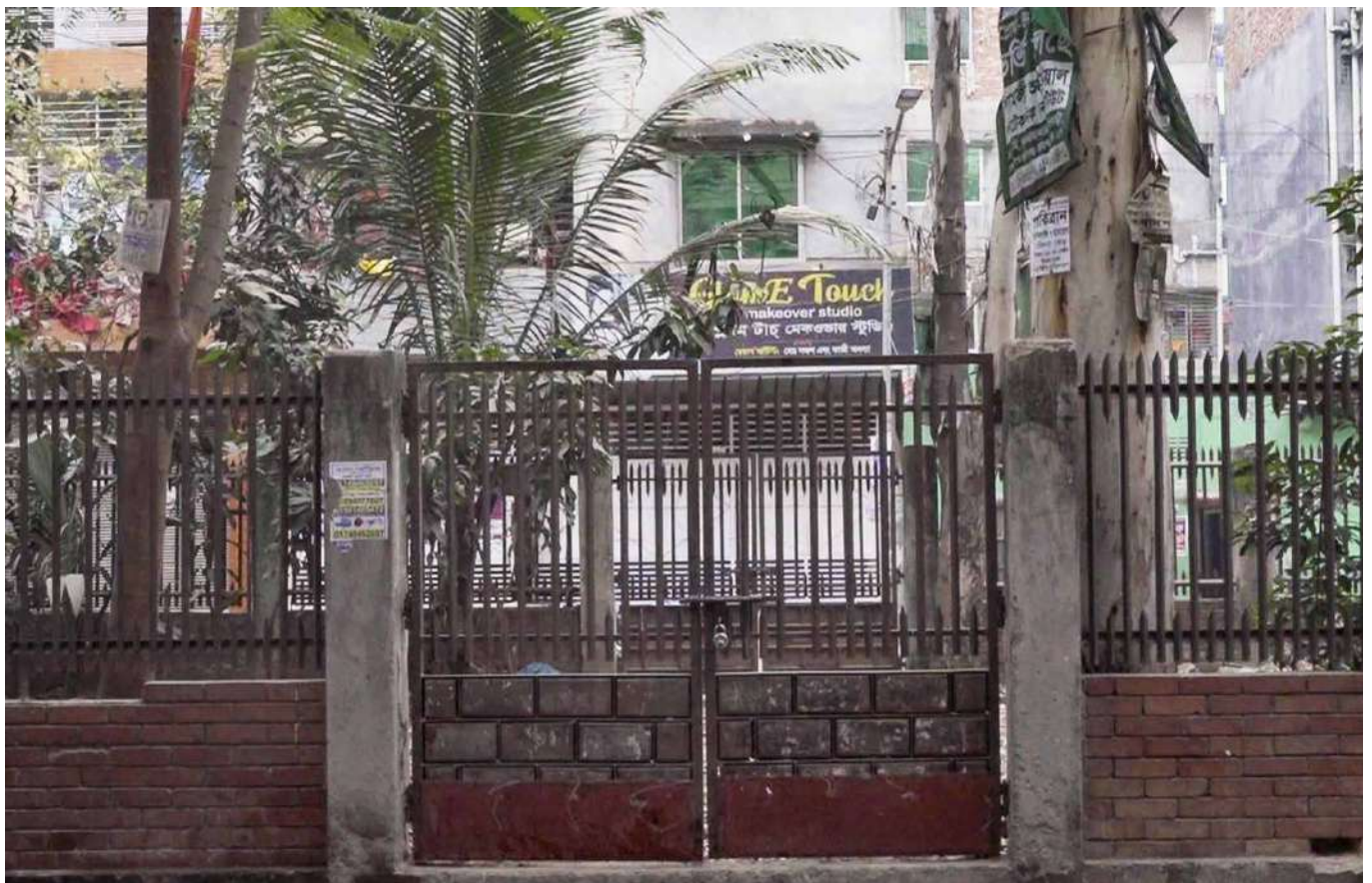
When you ask people about physical activity, they often respond by saying they need to go to the gym, but they don't have the time and money to do. So, the understanding of physical activity is not there"

-Male, sports teacher, community member

Barriers to Promote Physical Activity in Dhaka

Despite the numerous benefits of physical activity, adopting an active lifestyle remains challenging for many urban residents in Dhaka. A major barrier is the lack of safe and accessible spaces for physical activity. Parks and open fields are limited, and those that do exist are often poorly maintained or unsafe, particularly for women. Parks that are well-designed and secure typically operate on restricted schedules some open only for a few hours in the evening or during the day and are often located in affluent areas.

As a result, many urban residents, particularly those from lower-income communities, struggle to access these facilities. Additionally, social stereotypes discourage women from participating in outdoor activities, especially after dark, due to fears of criticism or harassment.





“As I’m busy all day what I can do is, I can walk from my office to my home. When I step out of the office, I see that the footpath is damaged and there are no proper walkways. There are muggers around and I fear for my safety. Given this situation, why would I choose to walk”

-Working mother, community member

Limited access to safe and open spaces for physical activity is another significant barrier, particularly in crowded areas where public spaces are limited. Urban areas often lack parks or recreational facilities that accommodate women’s needs. Even when such spaces exist, they are often overcrowded, poorly maintained, or perceived as unsafe. One respondent mentioned gender-related concerns, stating that girls often cannot walk freely due to safety issues in many areas.

“If I talk about gender issues, it is not always possible for a girl to go out and walk freely. It is not safe in many areas. We may simply be walking when a boy starts singing a vulgar song after seeing them.”

**-Adolescent's girl,
Slum dweller, community member**

Furthermore, household responsibilities and busy schedules often leave little time for planned physical activities, particularly for working women and caregivers.

For individuals with physical disabilities, the infrastructure is inadequate for engaging in physical activity. Many footpaths are broken or too muddy, making it difficult for them to move around easily. Additionally, ramps are either absent or built too high, preventing wheelchair users from accessing public buildings or parks.

CHORUS BLOG: Physical Activity

These barriers significantly limit their ability to navigate public spaces and participate in physical activities. One respondent stated that:

“There is no ramp for wheelchair users to access various public buildings. Some ramps are so high that it is difficult for people in wheelchairs. There is no slow-moving facility for them. Ultimately, due to the access barrier, they can go nowhere. The roads and footpaths are either broken or too muddy now. They can't come easily. The roads are difficult for them to move. There is no space, even for walking”

-Physically challenged woman, community member

“I have walked in my village. But I never walked in the cities. My son never let me walk in the city. There are various vehicles that might hit me.”

-Elderly woman, urban dweller

In slum areas, there is little to no space available for physical activity. Even when small spaces do exist, they are often overcrowded, making it difficult and uncomfortable for pregnant women to walk or engage in any form of physical activity, despite their willingness.



“Walking in a small space means living in a crowded environment where many people move together. The only available path is a short stretch from my door to the corner of the road. That's it. There is no other space to walk. If there was an open field, we could walk peacefully in a better environment”

-Pregnant woman, slum dweller, community member



Socio-Cultural Norms and Gender Issues

Physical activity was generally perceived positively, especially as a counterbalance to sedentary lifestyles. However, societal attitudes, particularly those discouraging girls from outdoor activities, posed a significant challenge. A young girl recalled being told by an older person that she should focus on preparing for marriage rather than play outside. Despite these barriers, participants believed that everyone, including themselves, should engage in physical activity.



“In Bangladeshi law, a child is still a child from 0 to 18 years old. We know, but we don't follow it. We know, but we don't accept it. When my child goes to play, they say that such a big girl has come to play; they will say it must, normal. What's up, sister? Such a big girl will get married after a few days; now she is coming to play”
-Housewife, slum dweller, community member



Though there were noticeable societal discomfort with boys and girls engaging in physical activities in the same vicinity. Many respondents pointed out that cultural norms often discourage girls from being active outdoors. Traditionally, girls are taught to engage in indoor activities, such as playing with dolls, while boys are encouraged to be physically active outside.

“There are some cultural contexts also. Girls are taught to be timid. Girls are taught knitting while boys are taught outside work. In such a context, generally girls like playing with dolls in their home, instead of playing outside like boys. So, culturally we need to build that habit”
-Working woman, community member

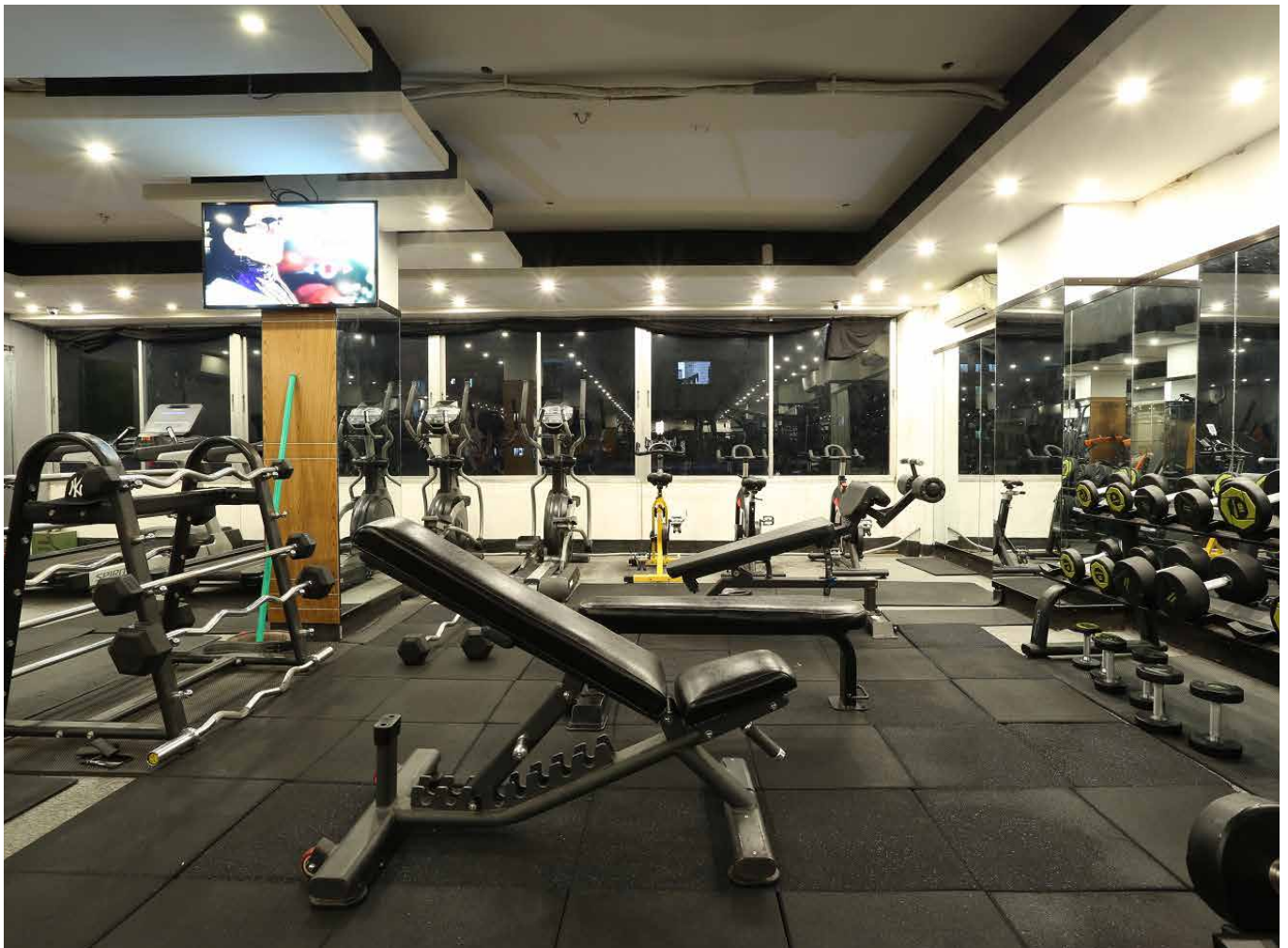


“There are social taboos against women going outdoors. Women also feel shy and stay indoors. Due to social stigma and reluctance, females don't feel like going outdoors and doing physical activities much. Parents don't encourage them much. The females lack self-motivation. Even if spaces are allocated, females may not visit. It's a cultural issue. In my area, I don't see a single girl coming out to walk”
– Male, urban planner,
Dhaka North City Corporation

Economic Challenges

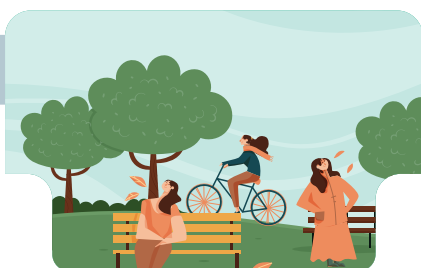
Economic constraints also play a role. Respondents from lower-income backgrounds noted that their communities lack resources to support physical activity. The stigma associated with wearing exercise attire in conservative neighborhoods further discourages women from engaging in physical activities.

“A gymnasium has maintenance costs and subscription fees. Only a small percentage of people can afford that. The same is applicable for swimming pools. The general populace can’t access gyms. Public facilities are free of charge. We can’t ask people to pay 1 lakh taka subscription fee every year. We can only give them free access. But gymnasiums are not publicly suggested facilities”
-Sports Physician, male,
Bangladesh Cricket Board



Potential Solutions and Recommendations

The findings suggest that promoting physical activity for women and girls requires a multifaceted approach:



Developing women-friendly recreational spaces

with a green environment, ramps, seating areas with roofing, a drinking water system, well-designed washrooms with a continuous water supply, special walkways, and other amenities for specific groups such as physically challenged individuals and senior citizens. Ensuring privacy and safety in public parks and gyms.



Developing well-designed and wide footpaths

with ramps and cycling lanes for all communities, ensuring they are used exclusively for walking or physical activity. Removing informal markets or street vendors from these spaces.



Developing and implementing policies

that promote gender-inclusive planning in urban spaces, such as designated playing times for boys and girls or female-only areas in parks and other recreational facilities.



Challenging patriarchal norms and cultural stigmas

through awareness campaigns to normalise women's participation in physical activities within society.



Introducing and prioritising physical education

in schools and encouraging girls to participate in various sports programs or competitions to build lifelong habits of engaging in physical activity.



Conclusion

Physical activity is vital for a healthy lifestyle, but motivation alone is not enough to overcome the barriers faced by Dhaka's urban population. A supportive environment, societal acceptance, and accessible facilities are essential to enable individuals, particularly girls and women of all ages, to engage in regular physical activity. By addressing these challenges through collaborative efforts from policymakers, urban planners, and the community members, we can make Dhaka a healthier and more active city for all.

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