

SYSTEMATIC CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES IN PUBLIC POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND ADVOCACY

A Joint Effort of the Department of Policy Formulation and the
Department of Disabled and Vulnerable Communities
Representation of Hype Sri Lanka



FOREWORD

This Sri Lankan study on the challenges faced by women with disabilities for public political participation and advocacy has been conducted in response to the call for input on Girls and Young Women's Activism by The United Nations Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls. The purpose of the report is to contribute to the research conducted by the working group in preparation for its thematic reporting to the 50th session of the Human Rights Council in June 2022.

Hype Sri Lanka has taken up the aforementioned contribution to the thematic reporting in the capacity of a Non-Governmental Organisation serving as the only Youth Empowerment Incubator in Sri Lanka. Hype Sri Lanka strives to establish a value system that will encourage an equitable culture where all women (especially young women) are given equal opportunity to thrive in society. They achieve to do so through a process of understanding their ability to practice their fundamental rights, access to justice and reparation, access to technology, and the diversity of girls' activism & inclusion in all human rights activism initiatives.

Hype Sri Lanka, being the only youth empowerment incubator in the country has produced this report with the hope of seeing a bright and discrimination-free future for women with disabilities. The organization has also made it a point to remain completely unbiased while producing this report, with the sole goal of empowering women with disabilities in the country and ensuring that their rights are upheld with the utmost integrity.

Hype Sri Lanka as an organization takes complete responsibility for the provisions made in this report and holds the sole intellectual property rights for all provisions that have been made in this document. Furthermore, certain recommendations provided in this report have been duly incorporated in the review report submitted by Women Enabled International to The United Nations Working Group on Discrimination against Women and Girls, of which Hype Sri Lanka serves as a co-submitter.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

C1 to C7: Consultant 01 to Consultant 07

CWC: Children with Disabilities

GWD: Girls with Disabilities

MwD: Men with Disabilities

PwD: Persons with disabilities

UNCRPD: UN Convention on the rights of Persons with disability

WEI: Women Enabled International

WWD: Women with Disabilities

W3Standards: Minimum web accessibility standards for persons with disabilities



1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale of the Report

Women with disabilities are generally excluded on two grounds of being persons with disabilities and women. Hence, they are subjected to dual discrimination. Due to societal and other barriers that exist in the environment they live in; they encounter great discrimination and exclusion. If we are looking at inclusion it is important to have a diverse and fruitful discussion leaving no one behind. Therefore, we need women with disabilities when we discuss women's rights and women in political participation. As they are systematically excluded, we have brought their concerns into this document so that they are factored in future advocacy initiatives.

1.2 Aim of the Report

The aim of Hype Sri Lanka in this report is to first analyze the several problems that women with disabilities face in advocacy and activism as well as in public and private development. Upon understanding the gravity of these challenges, Hype Sri Lanka will propose comprehensive recommendations with a holistic approach for the safety and well-being of all women with disabilities.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Primary Research

To fully understand the obstacles faced by women with disabilities it is important to engage in qualitative research with women with disabilities at a grassroots level. The primary data that has been collected to produce this report is from semi-structured interviews, based on a discussion guide that can be found in 5.0 Appendix. The discussion guide was designed with the support and knowledge of the Hype Sri Lanka Disability advocacy team.

These questionnaires were then used at the several organized consultations that HYPE SRI LANKA had arranged with women with disabilities and those advocating for women with disabilities from around the country from 28th September to the 4th October 2021. At these consultations, they were asked a series of questions about the challenges that they face in society, in terms of having access to their rights and to organizations that help them advocate for their rights. This allowed Hype Sri Lanka to fully understand how marginalized and discriminated against women with disabilities in Sri Lanka are.

No	Consultant Name (This will be removed and is only for our reference)	District	Consultant profile (Add age, work background, any disability)	Date	Time Taken
C1	Dr Samitha Samanmalee	Colombo	Medical Officer Physically disabled	28th September	7 pm - 8 pm
C2	Lasanthi Daskon	Colombo	Independent Disability Rights Activist	4th October	5.30pm - 6.30pm
C3	Manique Gunaratne	Colombo	51 years Visually impaired Manager at Employers' Federation of Ceylon	2nd October	10am -12 noon
C4	Narayana Gedara Kamala	Anuradhapura	63 years Physically disabled President of AKASA (Association of	2nd October	2pm - 4pm

			Women with Disabilities)		
C5	Nisha Shariff	Kandy	Physically disabled Entrepreneur	3rd October	10am - 12 noon
C6	Rasanjali Pathirage	Colombo	Physically disabled President of Disability Organizations Joint Front	4th October	2pm - 4pm
C7	Ishan Jaleel	Colombo	Independent Disability rights advocate and Disability advocacy consultant. He is visually impaired	3rd October	1:00 pm - 1.30pm

2.2 Secondary Research

This report is primarily based on in depth interviews that were conducted in the aforementioned consultations. However, after the primary discussions the primary research has been supplemented with secondary research findings to further define, justify or provide context to the findings of the primary research discussions. This secondary research has been referenced where appropriate.

3.0 RESEARCH FINDINGS

3.1 Intersectionality of The Feminist Movement to the Needs of Women with Disabilities

Situation Analysis:

PwDs, WwDs are often victims of discrimination which leads to the lack of intersectionality in feminist movements. According to C2 and C4, WwDs are often not recognized under the gender movement and the movement does not have to cater to them as their needs are seen as different. With regards to representation and support of WwD's in advocacy spaces for women's rights C2 explained that there are movements that exist that cater to these missions, however, they have not been satisfactory.

The perception towards PwDs in Sri Lanka does not promote inclusion, but rather it is focused on the viewpoint that PwD's are recipients of charity and are not those that should be advocates, activists and leaders on behalf of the rights of women. This is evident from the example given by C3 in response to Question 1.

Furthermore, there is evidence to show that WwD's face unique challenges that merit their representation in feminist forums. For example, families are less likely to educate their GwD's when compared to their boys with disabilities. "If the daughter of the family is disabled, she is not given the opportunity to go to school, but it is different for the son who is disabled", says C3.

Most often than not WwDs right to marry is also violated because parents view their disabled daughter as a burden who will not be fit for a marital home and who are likely to be discriminated against by their mother-in-laws. According to C4, men do not like to enter into a marriage with a WwD.

Key Recommendations:

The intersection of disability with the feminist movement and social integration is recommended to better understand and consider concerns specific to WwD's. According to C3, empowerment of WwDs and a change in social attitude is necessary to promote the representation of this segment of women in feminist movements.

Furthermore, to promote the inclusion of wD's in the feminist movements, the use of assistive technology and network forums are also areas in which leaders within these movements should be considering. Parents of CwDs must be sensitized about disability and must be educated about the importance of empowered PwDs and CwDs in our society and the rights they are entitled to.

They should be encouraged to move away from the charity-based model to a rights-based approach.

Support systems need to be further mainstreamed into other areas of life. The caregivers' system also needs to be reviewed and improved because current support systems are unable to cater for the individual needs of PwDs.

3.2 Accessibility Challenges of Women with Disabilities to Public Political Spaces and Advocacy in Sri Lanka

Situation Analysis:

Generally, public places and forums are not accessible or inclusive. The right to vote is inherent, as a citizen all persons must be allowed to choose a suitable representative through their vote. This, however, is seen as an issue because there exists no adequate infrastructure, systems and education to allow disabled persons to vote.

C2 commented on the fact that when a PwD goes to register themselves to vote they need to mention if they are disabled or not to ensure accessibility in polling stations. However, during last year's election no mention was made of this support system in public (the emphasis given on awareness was not sufficient).

To be eligible for certain assistance as a disabled person, there is a requirement for the Gramasevaka and the doctor to sign off for accessibility services, disabled voters are discouraged from voting for that reason.

The to be provided but most often than not the vote casted by the PWD is no longer a secret vote as the staff are often uninformed of the procedure and tend to check the ballot of the PWD.

In terms of infrastructure, the lack of washrooms with accessibility for WWDs and not having enough assistive devices are some other issues that have been identified. Sometimes, WWDs might need the support of a caregiver due to lack of safety measures and accessibility of physical infrastructure in respect to public political spaces.

Therefore, they often must depend on the support of family members or friends who are often male. This dependency attitude has made them more vulnerable to exploitation and undue influence on their political beliefs and decisions. However, there are efforts to improve access to these spaces such as making polling booths accessible.

Key Recommendations:

To address the needs of PwD, the state needs to make immediate and urgent changes. The system that is used needs to be updated to fit the needs of disabled voters to promote them to vote. Social participation means WwDs also have the right to be involved in all social spaces on an equitable basis with others. They must be given accessibility mechanisms. WWD's should be

empowered to get involved in decision making and be given the guidance and encouragement to be an active participant in the social and political spaces.

A recommendation to do that would be to educate voting officials about how they are inclined to protect the secret vote and give access to proper facilities needed by PwD. On the topic of secrecy of a person's vote they can use biometrics to prevent voter fraud, this could be an island application, along with the recommendation made in Section 3.3 of this document, immediate implementation would be feasible; its implementation was recently seen in Uganda, a nation of a similar economic and social condition to Sri Lanka (Macdonald, 2021). The state also needs to help promote political participation and traditional methods like that employed to promote Māori people in New Zealand by establishing specific electorates or wards (depending on the election) will not suffice as disabled populations are scattered throughout the country. Instead, a state must try to lessen the barriers to political participation in matters such as access to funds by establishing a framework to monitor and limit fund usage, further the eight recommendations made by OSCE in 2016 on state legislature changes such as removing legal and administrative barriers need to be considered (Gísladóttir, 2019).

In addition to those structural changes need to be made some of them include

- Wheelchair Access for physically impaired people
- Ballot Papers written in Braille for visually impaired people
- Election Officials versed in sign Language for deaf-mute people to help individuals navigate through the choices available to them.
- Vehicular Access in Polling Stations for Individuals who have people/elders with disabilities
- Special Transportation in place for people living in Elder Homes or Disability Centers

Addition of a Clause in the Elections (Special Provisions) Act, No. 28 of 2011⁶² to allow an option of Proxy Voting for people with certain mental disabilities, including dyslexia and other such disabilities which need to be reviewed.

3.3 Understanding of Women with Disabilities in their Individual Political Rights

Situation Analysis:

WwDs are generally unaware of their individual political rights and require empowerment. According to C2 there are limited statistics to support this finding but in general WwDs are unaware of their rights, civic duties and accessibility because there is a general lack of awareness and understanding.

According to C2, according to Section 89 2 of the Sri Lankan Constitution - the "insanity clause" states that if you are certified as a person with an unsound mind then you cannot vote nor can

you come forward as a political candidate, so it can threaten the civic rights. These are indirect ways in which your participation as a citizen is denied. In terms of political participation the Election Commission has made inclusive provisions but haven't introduced it as a policy. According to C3 when PwD go to cast their vote, they follow the general policy of voting for a party, instead of voting for a candidate that will further their interests. Furthermore, according to C4, even though activists know of the rights of an average woman, they may not know about the rights of a disabled woman. Hence, they worry about how they will vote etc. It was also noted that only Colombo centric people have the knowledge about rights and only about 10% of the women outside Colombo have knowledge of the rights. Furthermore, NGOs don't have the financial capacity or the necessary partnerships to empower WWD's through grassroot projects. As there is no specific mechanism created by the government to empower WWD. (Election Commission of India, 2018).

According to C2, Women rights activists ask for a proportion of political representation for women but have not factored in under-represented groups like WwDs when fulfilling these quotas. Furthermore, Political parties don't allow PwDs to come forward as political candidates. Parliament looks at PwD as beneficiaries of political spaces as opposed to active participants. Systematic barriers do not create an enabling environment for a WwDs to contest in elections, i.e. even on the national list there is no place allocated for a WwD. C4 bears witness to the fact that political factions within ministries see WwDs as a liability.

Key Recommendation:

The repurposing of the national list to allow for seats for PwDs voted in by other PwDs (Hype Sri Lanka, 2021), using better voter identification; this ideally would allow disable people to choose those who represent their intent and also acts as an incentive for them to vote in all elections.

The consultation of PwDs to promote inclusive political participation to improve youth engagement. A National database for PwDs can also be made when a system is created to issue priority cards. For instance, in India Disability ID cards are in use. A similar system could be implemented here where the disabled cards can be used at polling stations, airplanes etc. When implementing projects for PwDs these projects should be taken to the grassroots.

3.4 Lack of Access to Justice and Reparations for Women with Disabilities

Situational Analysis:

The lack of access to justice and reparations is a barrier to PwDs, which is exacerbated for WwDs in Sri Lanka who face multifaceted challenges in accessing justice due to gender based discrimination. It is gathered from the statement of the Consultants that the main factors contributing to their lack of access to justice include the physical inaccessibility of courts, the lack

of access to information, limited knowledge of their rights and the process of seeking legal redress, high legal costs, lack of representation of WwDs in the Judiciary and communication barriers. According to C2 and C3, the injustices faced by WwDs are rarely reported due to communication difficulties as police stations and courts often lack sign language interpreters and supporting officers who are trained and sensitized to work with vulnerable communities. They lack facilities such as the use of Braille and assistive technology to help WwDs during court proceedings and reporting crimes.

Key Recommendations:

Firstly, WwDs are subjected to higher rates of gender-based violence than women without disabilities, mostly due to their vulnerability and lack of understanding. For instance, as explained by C2, a deaf raped victim would struggle to report the crime as most police stations are not equipped with officers trained in sign-language, and even during court proceedings where there may be an official translator, the victim would struggle to understand as they are most often not aware of the official sign-language. Communication barriers are a leading cause of the lack of access to justice to WwDs, therefore in order to bridge this gap, the GoSL must ensure that all Police Stations and Courts in the nation, are equipped with trained personnel and assistive technology that would accommodate the needs of these WwDs in enabling them to seek justice.

Secondly, WwDs face many difficulties due to the physical inaccessibility of most courts in Sri Lanka, as the standards set out in the Disabled Persons (Accessibility) Regulations No. 01 of 2006 have not been implemented in most courts to date. Furthermore, with the threat of Covid-19 the participation of WwDs in public places pose a greater threat to their lives. Therefore the use of alternate platforms such as video conferencing platforms and video testimonies as an interim measure would mitigate these risks and enable such persons to participate in court proceedings until the Courts are brought up to standard in accordance with the accessibility regulations.

3.5 Access to Technology for Activism of Women with Disabilities

Situational Analysis:

As PWD's are a vulnerable group and are rarely included, they face digital illiteracy and non-contextual or unaffordable assistive tech solutions. According to C3 and C7, the lack of access to technology, lack of smart devices and a lack of technical know-how, all work to the disadvantage of female activists with disabilities, in terms of publishing powerful messages on social media and being panelists on online webinars through zoom platforms. Assistive technology and ICT cast niche solutions in response to the needs of WwD and most of them only partially meet the requirements of WwD at best and fail to achieve higher impact, as often users are forced to adopt more than one solution to actualise their potential (LIRNEasia,2020). Furthermore, lack of digital awareness such as the ability to identify fake news, deep fakes, digital fatigue and knowledge on data protection are issues associated with the lack of technical

knowhow of PWD's. On the other hand, the government and NGOs find it difficult to access WwD to give them awareness, training about the use of technological devices due to various factors which include lack of awareness about digital accessibility standards, the pandemic and the lack of financial affordability.

Key Recommendations:

According to C7, interventions from the government and NGOs to make technology accessible through using W3 standards and assistive technology/ devices such as electronic text, screen reading, voice software (Jaws), large frame resources, braille writers and video magnifiers are necessary. C4 further states that when implementing these alternate formats for activists with disabilities, it should be done through a consultative process with them (Nothing about us without us). Further, C3 states that 'blind' cannot be equated to 'braille', and the accessibility format of each individual must be recognized from the beginning and the necessary device should be provided as the 'one-size fits all' approach was not sensitive to the degrees of disability experienced by the women. Prosthesis and orthoses, wheelchairs, crutches and white canes must also be provided for those who need it. The GoSL must ensure the provision of high-quality and customized Assistive Devices to disabled girls and women (ICES, 2017). Finally, C7 states that there must be campaigns for safe space for activism especially in repressive regimes to encourage activists with disabilities to carry on their work. Through all this WwDs can be more involved in advocacy and raise their voices to better the lives of WwDs and others.

3.6 Threats and Risks Faced by Women with Disabilities Engaging in Public Political Spaces

Situational Analysis:

Article 29 of the CRPD stresses on the responsibility of the state to ensure that PWDs can effectively and fully participate in political life including the right and opportunity to vote and be elected. Women in general face risks in the society on a day-to-day basis, for WwD this situation is further exacerbated, as C2 explains discrimination, abuse and sexual violence issue they face. Specific to WwD internalized stigmatization was expressed to be severe issue.

Meanwhile, political representation of PWDs is non-existent in the country, with one C5 as one instance of a PWD activist explaining how she recalls how her team was verbally told that their input was not welcomed at a government forum. Similarly, campaign smearing is as issue that exists for PwD and WwD specifically; C4 illustrated this by talking about her experienced in the 2005 Local Government Election where her competency was question only on the grounds of her disability. As discussed throughout this report, Sri Lanka's charitable mindset towards PWDs as a helpless/dependent group of people who are incapable of being represented in politics, is the key reason inhibiting PWD participation in the political space.

Furthermore, given the potential for election violence in the country, WWDs are reluctant to become political activists due to high concerns on their security; supporting information for this claim can be found while reviewing the 2019 Presidential election more than 40% of the crime committed were serious and included things like arson (CMEV, 2019).

Key Recommendations:

WWD's face challenges and threats to their rights in public political spaces due the lack of reasonable accommodation. There is also a lack of awareness and a violation of privacy. According to Article 29 of the CRPD state has a responsibility to ensure that PWDs are treated equally and are given equal opportunity to participate in an equal status in the society. For that to materialize there should be systematic interventions and systems should be altered to facilitate participation of WWDs in the political sphere.

3.7 Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on The Public Political Participation and Advocacy of Women with Disabilities

Situation Analysis:

According to C2, there are a lesser number of women with disabilities who actively participate in civic activities. Due to the complexities of existing health guidelines and protocols that are often not inclusive for PWDs there appears to be some apprehension toward public political participation. Reasonable accommodation is a basic need for PWD's when it comes to public political participation and without such support it is likely that PWD's would feel vulnerable. C6 explains that there should be an exception to Covid-19 rules in order to be supportive of the circumstances of PWDs while being conscious of health guidelines. For example, those that are blind need assistance which may go against social distancing guidelines, those that are deaf may no longer be able to read lips, due to masks, having to wear gloves affects the blind who touch surfaces to move, sinks to wash hands are too high and foot paddles are out of reach for those with a physical disability. Therefore, whenever they go out to exercise their civic rights adhering to the hygiene protocols presents a dilemma that can frustrate PWDs and presents issues that public political processes have not taken into consideration.

Key Recommendations:

When it comes to advocacy and political participation the government should introduce mechanisms where Women with Disabilities also could actively engage in advocacy without facing any challenges because of their disabilities. To improve their social and political engagement, the Health Ministry can take the lead and introduce hygiene protocols that are appropriate to the needs of PWDs. In order to do so as the C6 suggested the Health Ministry could establish a focal point that includes and represents PWDs. So that the Ministry has knowledge when coming up

with Covid-19 protocols. The focal point establishment should not only be limited to the Ministry of health but should be included in other ministries and line ministries as well.

3.8 Inclusion of Women with Disabilities in Human Rights Activism

Situational Analysis:

According to C7, the activism field is currently dominated by men who are constantly questioning the capabilities of WwDs and are disregarding the sentiments brought up by WwD, because they are uncertain if WwDs are competent. C4 noted that people in the activism field fail to recognize that WwDs are equally capable to those who aren't disabled, and therefore they are excluded from human rights activism initiatives.

C3 stressed on the fact that even when WwDs are invited to participate in forums and discussions, even though the organisations that host these events claim to be inclusive, most often WwDs attending these events feel like they “are included merely for social status”, making them feel the invite was merely an act of tokenism. The consultant further added that when WwD collaborate with organizations participation from these organisations is low. C3 further noted that WwDs did not have a representative at the Ministry of Women, making it harder for them to have a say at the discussion table. Lastly, C3 mentioned that because of the lack of reasonable accommodation provided to WwD when forums and conferences are being organized, these women are excluded. Parental counselling can help decrease the discrimination within the family units. In addition, support systems and caregiver systems should be mainstreamed in relation to different aspects of life.

Key Recommendations:

WwDs must have a representative at the Ministry of Women in order to effectively communicate their needs to policy makers. When forums and conferences are being organized WwDs must be given equal status to those who are non-disabled. This means that the viewpoints and opinions of WwDs must be treated with equal respect and when necessary must be given sign language interpreters so that their message can be accurately passed. WwDs who are attending forums and conferences must be given a participation allowance and the organisers must arrange reasonable accommodation for them. The Sri Lankan Parliament must enact the enabling legislation so that the provisions made in the UNCRPD, which the country ratified in 2016, can be implemented.

3.9 Sexual Abuse and SRHR Barriers for WWDs in Activism

Situational Analysis:

WWDs face a high risk of being victims of sexual abuse due to a combination of various factors. First and foremost, as noted by C1, Women with physical disabilities have to depend on males to carry out their day-to-day activities which not just affects their independence, but also places a sense of fear in unknown settings (where the male counterpart is a stranger). This also puts WWD's in a position of vulnerability, as women often face abuse and violence in Sri Lanka.

Due to the highly patriarchal society in the country, WWDs are most likely to be dependent on a male income earner, especially in a spousal setting. Notably, spousal domination acts as a barrier to WWDs in exercising their SRHRs (Law and Society Trust, 2016) and WWDs are likely to silently bear the abuse of their rights, given their physical, mental and financial dependence on their spouses. Furthermore, WWDs with intellectual disabilities lack capabilities in understanding and communicating instances of abuse to authorities (Wellassa Organization of Persons with Disabilities, 2016) which makes them a highly vulnerable group for sexual abuse. Furthermore, WWDs who have been sexually assaulted face a lack of mainstream medical services (UNFPA, 2013) due to physical inaccessibility and non-availability of information in the majority of healthcare institutions in the country. On this background, WWDs are inhibited in their activism and social and political life due to the lack of a safe space for them in society.

Recommendations:

As discussed under section four of this chapter, an equitable justice system supported by efficient authorities plays a pivotal role in the detection and prevention of the abuse of SRHR of WWDs. WWDs face barriers in accessing and communicating with authorities which should be addressed by training authorities in PWD communication (notably for those with communication disabilities) and as well as increasing their awareness of PWDs as a marginalized and vulnerable group that can potentially be subject to sexual abuse and violence. As discussed throughout this report, increased dialogue in society on PWD rights as well as Gender equality is required to minimize the cultural stigma faced by WWDs which largely inhibits their political and social activism.

4.0 CONCLUSION

The larger infrastructure for accessibility created for WwDs is a cause for concern. This inhibits Public Political Participation to a great extent and therefore there is a lack of inclusion of WwDs and PwDs at large. Any systems and procedures that have been put in place to support and protect WwD have not been communicated effectively to this community/ segment. These factors need to be corrected, as WwD culturally have been placed in a position where they are viewed as dependents in society and not those who are at the forefront of advocacy and public political participation. To curb this perception and increasingly support their role in the gender movement, as well as other channels of advocacy it is crucial to create systems, processes, structure, and awareness that cater to their basic needs and human rights.

Increasingly the public and private spaces need to provide reasonable accommodation, even as a part of reconstruction during Covid-19 or macro environmental factors. Sri Lanka has signed and ratified UNCRPD, however there are many steps that need to be taken to further work towards a truly inclusive society. Furthermore, NGO networks provide attention increasingly to the need of PWD's, however WwDs are a vulnerable group which face different challenges, risks and threats than MwDs in Sri Lanka. Therefore, further research, support and awareness needs to be created within the NGO network, private corporates and the public systems at large to promote holistic inclusion of WwDs.

5.0 APPENDIX

5.1 Research Discussion Guide & Consultation Transcripts

1. As a woman with a disability, what barriers/ challenges have you faced in life (Specific to women with disabilities)?

C1: - Lack of safety measures. Women with disabilities can't go anywhere alone unlike men with disabilities. Women need extra support for an example to carry their wheel chair etc. In that case they need the help of a man.

C2: Women with disabilities aren't recognized by the gender movement. Women with disabilities are seen as being different, and that the movement does not have to cater to them and their different needs. In terms of representation and support, there aren't any movements by women with disabilities but there are organizations that work with women with disabilities and there are prominent activists who are raising a voice for WwD, but this is still not enough.

C3: Cornered as a PwD, WwD and if they are not empowered, they are cornered thrice over. They are cornered socially, economically, politically and culturally. Safety of a WwD is very less as they are more likely to be harmed. Eg: If a blind person is hit and run, they can't see, they can't be eyewitnesses. Those on wheelchairs are harmed and they can't catch the perpetrator. Those who can't talk can't say it out loud if harm occurs. The disabled girl does not know that she has even been abused.

Those with disabilities think that everything should be given to them, they must be empowered to think otherwise. When a lunch is given to PwD, it is called a Danaya, and it's called a lunch when given to friends. The social attitude must change. They shouldn't be told that it's a *daney* (giving for merit) that they are receiving but a lunch.

If the daughter is disabled, the son is given all the benefits and sent to school on time, whilst the daughter is not. Parental counselling is less in SL and hence they do not realise that they need to put their daughter into school at the right age. Some parents even want the consultant to take their disabled children and put them into a home, as they cannot take the child to their village as their mother in laws will corner them. Some parents don't keep images of their disabled child, but keep those of other children. They don't have the knowledge that the child can do so much in the future and the media is also not helping with this issue.

C4: Women haven't been given the due place, WwD also have not been given their due place. Women are scared to respond, embarrassed to give opinions. Only a few women are activists for WwD. Only a few organizations work for WwD. WwD faces difficulties in joining politics. Political leadership and society do not understand the lives of WwD and the fact that they have the same capacities. Over 50 years of activism and yet disabled persons have not been given the due place, that's why they still have to fight for it.

The way people look at PwD and treat them is wrong.

Eg: The consultant was waiting outside the bank and someone gave her 50/=

People think WwD can't do their own work.

Eg: Security person asked about her '*barakaraya* (guardian)' and said that "I thought she was a disabled person, but she is a madam".

When a '*daney*' is given to disabled persons as opposed to lunch being given to friends, the ones who get the daney have to give merit to those who gave them the '*daney*, even though it's the same food that is offered to the friends. People give things to get merit, not to facilitate WwD. Further, people putting images of those they give food to on social media embarrasses the poor/ disabled person.

Even though international treaties are ratified, still the rights aren't there for WwD. Therefore, there are issues with the domestic law.

There are children with disabilities who are kept at home, but no one petitions anyone to take these children in. Do all children have the same rights? Does the Education ministry look into these rights? Every ministry has meetings, but they are only meetings and no action is being taken.

C5: Was deprived of education, as her family believed that she wasn't capable of handling such a responsibility. After she started working, she experienced sexual and verbal harassment. She encountered a lot of issues with accessing public transport. She didn't have the sufficient protection and family support once she started her course. And appearance was also a challenge due to social perceptions. Most challenges she faced are due to social issues

C6: Faced issues with enrolling into a normal school due to the segregation targeted against PwDs. As a physically disabled person, she couldn't directly participate in extracurricular activities, especially sports while she was a student. However, through constant dedication and hard work while taking the existing barriers as challenges, she was able to become an Asian Games medal winner in 2002.

2. As a woman with a disability, what are the specific interventions that are needed in your life?

C1: The lack of washrooms with accessibility for women with disabilities. And not having enough assistive devices

C2: Convince the gender movement that they have to include women with disabilities in their scope of activism and they must give them political representation, "Women with disabilities should be supported, empowered and given a voice", Women with disabilities and girls must get access to services - hygiene, sexual and reproductive information, Women with disabilities should get support when they advocate for themselves

C3 - Social attitude must change as it is the cause of many issues. Platform to better skills must be provided. Places of employment must look at the ability and not the disability of the WwD and give WwD an opportunity to show their skills and abilities. That is very important for WwD.

If the child is a slow learner kid, extra support is necessary, but just like the other kids they should be given the rights. Education and disability are interlinked and parents of children with disabilities must be educated so that they can move away from the charity-based model. More than financial issues, an attitude change is what is necessary.

Next, it's the lack of accessibility that is an issue, therefore extra costs and hence financial issues for those with disabilities. Hence support systems by the government are essential.

Hospitals must have a help desk for PwD as everyone with a disability goes to the hospital first. Leaflets with CSOs working in this area, schools for children must be provided at the desk and a sign language employee must be present at the desk. If WwD don't have this information, they will get isolated without the information.

Blind is not equal to braille; each person is different. Medical colleges must teach students about rehabilitation and IT systems etc. as most doctors in SL do not have this knowledge. Medical colleges must have a compulsory section on how to treat PwD.

Work has to be done to increase self-confidence of women; they must be empowered.

C4: WwDs should be given their due place. Women's organizations must work with WwD.

C5: Lack of accessibility of transport services for WWD, and the limited concessions from the government to get wheelchairs/ bikes for differently abled persons to assist in their travel.

Sufficient washroom facilities for PWD, Economic support from the government to develop businesses, Education for differently abled persons, Technological devices and educating them on technical knowhow, Sensitization of police forces.

C6: Lack of available Accessibility devices, assistive devices with high technology are identified as a common issue with PWDs in Sri Lanka.

3. **As a woman with a disability, what are the specific rights that you need in your life?**

C1: The right to education. Everyone should be given the right to study the areas/streams they like despite their disabilities. When selecting jobs, I always have to pick my jobs according to their accessibility. My choice doesn't depend on a work place I like but on the availability of facilities it has for PWDs.

C5: We need the right to education, Accessibility rights, Freedom of movement without restrictions, Safety and Security.

C6: The country has not given recognition to any specific rights regarding WWDs.

4. **Have you had exposure to the support systems available in society?**

C1: Other than accessibility haven't used any support system

C2: Very few support systems exist. And even if they exist Wwd aren't aware of their existence and therefore do not use their services. In society, in some sectors provisions are made, but there are simply not enough. For example, ramps are being installed but not enough of them. Some sectors are totally inaccessible, like the educational sector. About 95% of society is not inclusive.

C5: Yes

C6: No identified, properly functioning support systems in the country.

5. **Have you faced difficulty in accessing the aforesaid support systems?**

C5: Rs.5000 given for low-income earners is insufficient for WWD to meet their needs as

they spend a lot on transport, she spends on diapers and catheters therefore insufficient to fulfil basic needs.

Rs.5000 is supposed to be given to low-income earners (less than 6000 monthly income) yet for differently abled people and families their expenses are higher. Hence the system has failed to take this into account.

Jobs aren't given based on skill/ likeliness - giving mismatched jobs (mismatched labour) Relief is given to WWD to uphold a publicity-based system. Lacks sustainability -the provincial councils do one thing the government does another thing

Ex. Distribution of wheelchairs which are not conducive to fulfil the needs of PWD

C8: No experience in regard to using support systems.

6. **If you answered Yes to the above question, please state examples.**

7. **What does social and political participation mean to you?**

C2: The citizenship of PwD is not directly denied but there are legal provisions that stop them from taking part in the political sphere, for example, people with psychosocial disabilities. According to Section 89 2 of the Sri Lankan Constitution - the "insanity clause" states that if you are certified as a person with an unsound mind then you cannot vote, cannot come forward as a political candidate, so it strips PwD off their civic rights. These are indirect ways in which your participation as a citizen is denied. In terms of political participation, the Election Commission has made inclusive provisions but haven't introduced it as a policy. But their efforts are good (ex-making polling booths accessible). Political parties don't allow disabled people to come forward as political candidates. Parliament looks at PwD as charitable cases

C3: Social participation means that just like persons without disabilities, WwD also have the right to be involved in all social spaces. If persons without disabilities can have the right to employment, entertainment, sports and recreation, so should WwD, but they must be given accessibility mechanisms. Same with political spaces. At least 1/225 seats must be allocated to a PwD. PwD always wonder how to get PwD involved, others are less likely and that needs to change so that everyone can participate in the social and political space.

C6: Shared her experience as a former candidate for Provincial Council Elections in 2011. Stressed the importance of inclusion of PWDs in terms of decision-making process as a step for the representation of the PWDs community. Further, stated the need to make allocations for PWDs in elections to encourage their participation.

8. **What challenges have you faced when you tried to participate in society/ public places/ political forums?**

C1: Haven't participated in political forums. But face difficulties in engaging in other social activities like sports.

C2: Generally, these public places and forums aren't not inclusive at all. PwD face more discrimination, abuse, sexual violence, and have less access to education.

Most often, WwD don't even try to take part in these conferences and forums because of internalized stigma. Their male relatives do not want them to take part. Some WwD don't take part because of things like poverty.

C3: Politically and socially there is a responsibility on politicians and society to give WwD their due rights. Women rights activists ask for a proportion of political representation, but never ask for at least 1% of that to be given to a WwD. The system does not enable a WwD to contest and win, even on the national list there is no place given to a WwD. Polling stations lack accessibility to WwD. The entire political sphere must adapt to giving accessibility to WwD and should not exclude them based on their disability.

In social spaces there is an incorrect recognition of the disability, due to lack of knowledge and awareness. Further, facial expressions being used or notes written and given to another in secret are caught to the senses of the PwD and they know that it is about them. In some spaces, the person who goes to aid the PwD, leaves the PwD and goes on to make their own contacts.

C4: Disability is seen as an obstacle by politicians.

Eg: In the 2005 Anuradhapura Local government election, the consultant was asked how she can work when she has a disability and how she can meet people and be close to them. Further, it was stated that when there are so many people, why are they putting disable people to contest?

Thus, an attitudinal change is essential. WwD also must show that they can do so much and change the way people think of them. Activists and youth must work towards an inclusive society where everyone is treated the same.

WwD should not be cornered.

Eg: She was not hit when she was disabled, although her friends were punished and she felt cornered and asked the principal why she was not hit. However, her brother would ask her to help the sister and do the work, and she felt like she was treated the same.

C5: The PWD team that worked with CMB was treated in a degrading manner, as if they didn't belong at the table and this was even communicated verbally at a CMB meeting. Furthermore, during elections, the election officers have not allowed certain PWD to vote and they are looked down upon them when they come to cast their vote. The Reason is that the system looks down on PWD as useless people and that they don't deserve what others enjoy, the social perception is that differently abled persons should be sympathized, differentiated, treated as the other.

9. Do you understand the political rights that a woman with disabilities have?

C1: There's no such specific rights as rights for disabled women. Common rights are there.

C2: No statistics to support this but most often don't know about their rights, their civic duties and how to get access because there is a general lack of awareness and understanding

C3: A WwD who should have got a seat through the nomination list was not given a seat as she was disabled.

All PwDs must be listed in the election list, if they were not listed earlier, they should be listed next time.

Braille and large print can't be read by all blind people. They must be given the accessibility method suitable to them.

You can take someone to guide you to the polling station. However, the staff there don't know that they can take someone and they take the ballot and go to check which makes the ballot no longer a secret ballot.

Those who know their rights can go vote. Ex: Aid to go with you to the polling station, use of the white cane. The government should provide railing bars and a person who knows sign language at each polling station. Any PwD can put the cross if the names are in braille or large print on the accessible form that can be sent to the home before the election date. The support system must be better.

C4: Activists know of the rights, but the average woman doesn't. Hence, they worry about

how they will vote etc. Only Colombo centric people have the knowledge about rights and only about 10% of the women outside Colombo have knowledge of the rights.

Projects should be taken to the grassroots. NGOs don't have the financial capacity or the necessary partnerships. If projects are taken to the grassroots, they can do so much more. We don't have a mechanism by the government to empower WwD. Thus, NGOs should take the projects to these women in the way they can.

C5: No specific answer was given

10. Are you aware of the support system available for you to access your political rights such as voting?

C1: When we register ourselves to vote, we have to mention if we are disable or not to ensure accessibility to the polling station. But during last year's election there wasn't any mention of that. I personally only know about this support system.

C2: No statistics to support this. But the Deaf Women's Federation engages in activities like vote education and civic education programs and engage in some activities with the Election Commission and they work with a technical working group called DIESL (Disability Inclusive Elections in Sri Lanka). So, there is this sort of participation but it isn't enough, especially there aren't enough women from outside Colombo and the Western province.

C3: The assisted voting procedure is not user friendly. The *Gramasevaka* (Local Government Officer) and the doctor have to sign off for accessibility services to be provided. The process should be more simplified than this.

Disability ID cards are used in India. Here too such a priority card would be useful. Disabled cards can be used at polling stations, airplanes etc.

Eg: It's hard to keep the child in a polling line, if the priority card can be used, they can get it done soon if the card was available.

National database for PwD can also be made when the system that will issue priority cards is made.

11. Have you utilized such support systems?

C1: No. not really

**12. What are the risk factors associated with participating in social and political life?
Please give examples.**

C1: Haven't experienced that. No experience.

C2: They are challenges but they can't be identified as a risk.

C3: WwD who are using public transport are at risk as there is much sexual harassment on the streets. Further, incorrect directions have been given to PwD. Exploitation of WwD when the disability is seen. Hence, sometimes WwD won't tell the disability out loud due to the fear of being exploited. Some drivers don't have the patience to wait till a helper comes to get the WwD. Pink taxis, which are taxis for women, are a solution to reduce the risk. Further, "Pick me care" should be implemented by Pick me for PwD.

C5: Yes, the system to bring a person to support PwD is lengthy and complicated and prevents a lot of PwD from voting. The lack of a braille system for blind people to cast their own vote deprives them of voting. This lack of inclusivity has made PwD rely on the person who comes to support to cast their vote.

C6: As a former candidate for Provincial Council elections, she has faced difficulties with the campaign and public participation due to her disability. She recalled an instance where in one of her campaigns she did not have access to an elevated podium due to being a physically disabled person. Instead of providing accessible methods to get into the podium, she has been lifted by a few men where she has felt humiliated in front of the audience. She stated that the particular incident highlighted her disability and gave people the idea that she cannot work on her own and that she is not suitable to be a public representative. She stated that while there are limited opportunities for women in politics, WwDs are further discriminated against in regard to politics due to not receiving the necessary support and encouragement.

13. How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected the political and social participation of the lives of women? What are the specific challenges that you have faced due to the pandemic?

C1: I avoid going outside, because it is hard to take precautions.

C2: WwD have faced more issues for a multitude of reasons. This includes a lack of access, health risks and other vulnerabilities.

In terms of political participation, the space has been restricted because not everyone can go out or will go out because of existing hygiene challenges. The current hygiene protocols are made for people without disabilities and people with disabilities are just supposed to follow it without it being reconsidered or altered.

C3: Covid safety rules are to 'wear masks, wash hands and social distance'. Social

distancing discriminates against those who need sighted guidance. Those who are deaf can no longer read lips. Those who are blind can no longer recognize others from their voice. Having to wear gloves affects the blind who touch surfaces to move. Sinks to wash hands are too high for those who are disabled with a spinal cord injury, they also can't use the foot paddle. Transparent masks have not been that successful even with transparent masks. Those with spinal cord injuries have been unable to go for their physiotherapy appointments.

C4: Knowledge about the pandemic is less for WwD. Due to social distancing rules WwD are unable to get help from another. Difficult for someone on a wheelchair to wash hands or some PwD to stay in queues. All household issues including financial difficulties are blamed on the WwD (*'Ube musala kamak'*). Probability of WwD getting covid is high as some are unable to wear masks etc. Unemployment rate is high as WwD have lost the work they were doing. Some WwD have been afraid to take the vaccine as it will worsen the disability, however, this misconception is better now.

C5: Covid-19 has affected women economically, psychologically, and health wise. PWD are always under pressure from family and society. they cope through their PWD/ support groups. if they are individualistic, they go to work/ to temples etc. Covid deprived them of their coping mechanisms.

Although only 2 PWD died from covid and some PWD were infected the social perception was that PWD would spread the virus.

Also, in most cases the WWD pulled the weight of families as women are more industrious and headstrong. However, they were prevented from engaging in their business due to Covid. Also, the lack of door-to-door vaccines given to PWD which was promised by the government wasn't implemented.

C6: It affected the social lifestyle based on different aspects. Women with spinal cord injuries don't have access to Catheters. Especially women of rural areas do not have access to food and other necessities when the national lockdown was lifted. Women who use catheters have to always be careful with their hygiene. There have been instances where some women had to use the same catheters for several days because of not being able to afford such medical necessities.

Another issue is that when decisions were taken by the health professionals regarding the pandemic, no special attention was provided for WWDs and their concerns were not given any importance.

Recommendation: To provide a hotline which can be used by PWDs to contact health professionals to receive any medical advice.

14. What do you know about women's disability rights?

C1: I don't have an idea on that.

C3: Article 6 of UNCRPD has been ratified. However, there is a gap in implementation. The Disability rights bill has not passed as yet. Unaware of any other rights or assistance by the government.

C5- No clear answer.

C6: Highlighted the fact that WWDs have been neglected in different aspects of life during the past.

As a disability rights activist, she and the other activists have made requests to open a focal point according to article 33 of the UNCRPD.

Under Mr. Dalas Apahapperuma, the Minister of Mass Media, initiatives have been taken to implement a focal point in the ministry. It opened on Sep 23rd. She stressed the importance of coordination among all the ministries in order to succeed in this initiative.

15. Are you satisfied with the emphasis given to women's disability rights?

C1: The concern on that is very low. Especially women with intellectual disabilities. There are instances where people would physically abuse them and nobody pays attention to these matters

C2: Not really

Look at it holistically, we must empower disabled women, give them opportunities, leadership skills, access, space, financial support, education for them to become leaders and take part in society/ civic space.

The society and the infrastructure need to become more inclusive. Programs that look at inclusion must also look at the layers of marginalization within people with disabilities (different types of disabilities, age, sexual orientation, can't read and write).

C3: No

C5: No

C6: No

16. Have you been included in the discussion on women's rights?

C1: Have been to 1 or 2 of those

C5: I haven't personally been invited, but if we were invited, we are asked to come as display items and most events to discuss women's rights don't include differently abled women.

C6: Yes. However, necessary facilities have not been provided to them during these discussions/meetings. There have been instances where access to such discussions have been difficult for her as the venues have been placed in storeyed buildings without elevator facilities.

She has been a part of the CEDAW discussion which took place for the CEDAW report and also National Women's committee discussions. Yet she has never been updated or received feedback about the progress regarding such discussions. She further stated that on Women's Day, she has received an invitation but it has been more like a tokenistic invitation. Nevertheless, she felt that inclusion of the PWDs in public forums is now more developed than in the past. She finally mentioned the importance of updating those who participate for the discussions in terms of the progress.

17. Have you been excluded in the discussion on women's rights?

C3: WwDs are rarely included, even though many organizations say that they do not discriminate and that anyone can enter their events. WwD are included merely for social status. They are not included in all the agendas of the work done by these organizations. The consultant has been invited for around 1% of the work of other organizations. Mostly Charity based projects are done by CSOs. When WwDs collaborate with organizations, participation from these organizations is less. WwD is not included in policy level participation such as the Women's development committee in the Ministry. Nor at many other policy level meetings. If they are discriminated against at the above committee, they will be discriminated against in all the meetings below that.

C5: The subject of PWD is not in the agenda of organizations mainly due to the lack of understanding on PWD and the lack of discipline to know about us.

C6: She stated that she has never neglected any invitation to participate in discussions/forums and that she always provides her contribution in those.

18. What are the barriers you have faced pertaining to activism on women's disability rights?

C1: Media coverage is pretty low; it is hard for a woman to take part in these all by themselves. They have concerns about their security.

C3: Printed material at advocacy events is given on the day. That is too late for some WwDs. Meaningful participation of WwD is necessary.

C6: Stated that WWDs opinions are limited in most forums.

19. What methods of accessibility would make activism easier for a woman with disabilities?

C1: The women in villages are cornered. They are very timid. Authorities can create peer groups for them. Australia for an example has beaches which are called accessible beaches for disabled people. Sessions can be booked to come and enjoy the beach, there will be volunteers to take you to the beach where one could relax and enjoy. Even when it comes to sports, disabled women have to depend more on others than disabled men. Even though there is a 3% quota for disabled persons in the job market. It is harder for disabled people who are in wheelchairs to get a job. It is easy to train people with intellectual disabilities. So, measures should be taken to focus on the above.

C3: Financial difficulties, no accessible transportation, no accommodation in Colombo, no sighted guide leads to low attendance at the training centre, therefore one to one connected online session are necessary. WGC standards should be used for accessibility. Zoom is accessible for computer screen readers and android phones. While the apps are accessible, there is no money to buy a smartphone. If it's possible to afford, connectivity is lacking. Further, women's family commitments make it difficult for them to be involved in activism, thus assistance must be given after asking them what they need.

Eg: Reasonable accommodation and equitable measures, inclusion event checklist by PwD to the organizers, disability sensitization for volunteers.

C5: improved Technological facilities, sufficient technical knowhow, traveling facilities and accessibility of public places, health equipment (pampers/meds), water for consumption, communication of PWD to be included in modes of communication within society Ex. braille system for blind persons.

20. What difficulties have you faced in accessing justice?

C1: The path to justice is difficult. But being a disabled woman, I personally believe it has become a bit easier. Because they look at us with sympathy. It was a positive factor for us. When we request and talk about inequality, authorities think we are demanding.

C2: Yes, they do have challenges when accessing justice

These challenges are multifaceted and complex because their legal capacity, autonomy come into question.

Deaf women, who are raped, who don't know the formal sign language and go to courts, most often don't get recognized because they don't use the official sign language understood by the translators in courts.

And in a case that their perpetrator could be someone they know or is somehow related to the victim, it is even harder for them to convince people to come testify against the perpetrator in courts because of the power dynamic.

If a woman with intellectual disabilities is raped, she may not even understand what has happened to her, making the crime harder to prove in court.

C3: Lack of knowledge about where to find a lawyer, high costs and delay, lack of police officers that have knowledge on sign language are issues to accessing justice. Furthermore, blind people can't be eyewitnesses.

Training of trainers (ToT) needs to be done on GBV, so that they can take the message to many. Disabled and abled people must join the sessions, both men and women as the support of all is needed. Rehabilitation centres, care homes/ shelters are lacking for WwD and they need to be made by the Government. As children are cornered if they have faced violence, they must be given assistance in the form of vocational training.

Mobile apps such as 'be safe' for WwD with the necessary accessibility, where the screen talks back, screen magnifiers and sign language are used (interpreter can be chosen), and accessibility to those with physical disabilities is provided must be used.

Yareli app is also used for legal help.

FPA services are also on the 'be safe' app with regards to SRHR

ToT must have a SRHR component as there are many issues for WwD, even on how to manage their periods and pregnancies. As SRH information is not in accessible language, they face hardships at clinics and this must be remedied. Information on SRH for those with Spinal cord injuries is not done in SL, such information is there in other countries and should be provided here too. Difficulties in getting those without disability to be part of awareness on GBV of WwD. More effort must be put into dealing with WwD by the Ministry and CSOs.

Person who helps a WwD should be allowed to stay with them when they are getting help and special reasonable accommodations must be provided.

C4: Access rights to police, especially women's desks at the station are lacking, sign language is unknown by most police officers and court officers, bad language is used by the police officers on WwD (*abaditha gani*), delay in court cases leads to WwD forgetting what they said at the last court date.

C5: Police attitude is very discriminatory towards WwD , they treat WwD women really badly. She went to report a nuisance call and the police initially disregarded her but treated her better when she explained who she was. The women's division in the police treat them very inhumanely. Female police officers lack empathy in comparison to male

officers. Also, the police can't write down a blind/ deaf persons report as they lack the facilities thereby preventing such a person from making entry.

When considering the law, the lack of information, knowledge and knowhow is prevalent within PWD, lawyers are reluctant to appear on behalf of PWD and no PWD has gotten redress through the legal aid commission. *Samatha Mandalaya* (Mediation Board) is the only recourse they can go to as they don't have sufficient funds. Furthermore they are unaware of the specific laws concerning PWD and are unable to pay lawyers fees.

C6 : When deaf women become victims of an abuse case, the verdict is given as if she was abused with her consent. These types of mistakes happen because there are no sign language interpreters. *Similar to C1 and C2 answers*

21. Do you have the technology to engage in activism as a women's activist?

C2 : Technology can be used to provide information in accessible format, sharing and awareness amongst WwD.

C3 : Assistive devices are essential, as most WwD do not have someone to read a document to them due to a lack of human resources. Accessibility format must be recognized from year 1 and the device provided. Blind is not equal to braille. Therefore, one should always ask if a blind person can read braille. Lack of devices due to lack of affordability is an issue. Necessary devices are Braille writer, video magnifier. Word documents should be sent to blind persons. WwD have to keep sets of clothes together.

C4 : Lack of smartphones for WwD, hence difficult for the government and NGOs to access them to give knowledge/ awareness and technology assistance.

C5 : Lack of technological devices and technical knowhow create a negative impact of PwD.

C6 : Assistive devices are not accessible to all.

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