


MENCAFEP


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A semi annual publication for friends of MENCAFEP


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Mahesh



Deve recovering after a wheel chair race



Chamini



Sudu with her balloons

Much Has Happened – But Little Has Changed - Disability In Sri Lanka.

Facts and Figures

In Sri Lanka Law the able child comes under the Probation and Child Care Department. Where as, the disabled child comes under the Social Services Department. Two Government Agencies to work with and for children, one for the able child, one for the disabled child. To MENCAFEP's knowledge this seems to be quite a unique way of functioning with children.

Government or Civil Society organisations do not seem to know the exact numbers/percentages of disabled children in Sri Lanka.

A survey conducted by the Social Services Department in 2001 was inconclusive; due to it not being carried out in the correct manner. From the information received, the Social Services Department estimate that between 8 – 10 % of the population in Sri Lanka are disabled. There are no breakdowns for the number of disabled children.

The above figure would fit in with the WHO figures that in Developing Countries 10% of the population are disabled. Again these figures do not give the number/percentage of disabled children.

However in Sri Lanka's case the figure mentioned does not take into account 20 years of Civil War. The consequences of this war in terms of disability for both combatants and the civil population, especially children, due to fighting, bombs, mines and trauma.

With the WHO figure, no account has been taken of the HIV/Aids pandemic sweeping Africa and Asia, which is causing massive disability (to a certain extent this could also be taken into account in Sri Lanka's case also).

Both Departments come under the Ministry of Social Services. It would seem that historically that this has always been the case, although if a disabled child and their family comes into a Probation and Child Care Office they should be seen, due to it being a child. However, what happens is that the child and the family are told to go to the Social Services Department, as they are the Department that deal with disability.

In MENCAFEP's experience the main factors for mental underdevelopment of children are poverty, not enough nutrition given to the mother during and after pregnancy - not enough nutrition given to the child. Neglect of the child; same family relationships/marriages; chromosomal abnormalities e.g. Downs syndrome.

The Sri Lankan Government has signed and enshrined into it's own law the Convention on the Rights of the Child. These rights are universal and take into consideration all children, that is to say, able and disabled children. The Social Services Department has guidelines to be endorsed on behalf of the disabled child as well as what services the Social Services should provide.

Social Service Guidelines:

- Early identification of the disabled child and her/his rehabilitation.
- To protect the disabled child and give her/him all his/her rights.
- The disabled child to be integrated into her/his family and the community.
- Development of the disabled child to be worked at.
- The disabled child should attend school.
- The disabled child once adult should have an independent life.
- The disabled child/adult should have social skills training.
- The disabled person should have an income.

Services Provided by the Social Services:

- Services Provided by the Social Services:
- Mobility aids.
- Vocational training.
- Finding jobs.
- Income generation/Self help/Self employment.
- The development of pre- schools for hearing impaired children.
- Help with housing needs.
- Rehabilitation centres.
- Hearing aids.
- Spectacles.

All the above is on paper, however MENCAFEP has little or no evidence that this is being put into practice. Examples of this would be; a child attending MENCAFEP does not get free school uniforms or books, like a child attending a State school. Schools actively discriminate and discourage families of disabled children from joining a State school. An able child in a residential institution receives a small per-diem of Rs. 300.00 while in care. A disabled child in a similar situation receives Rs. 50.00

As has been mentioned, in Sri Lanka there are two Departments that look into and after the welfare of children. If the child is classed as disabled then she/he will come under the auspices of the Social Services Department. If the child is able and the welfare of the child needs to be looked into, then she/he will be seen through the Probation and Child-Care Department. MENCAFEP believes that this division is a crucial factor into how the Law is enacted towards disabled children and attitudes towards them in the overall society.

Within the Social Services Department there is also a division on how a physically disabled child and a mentally disabled child are perceived. It has been MENCAFEP's experience that the Social Services would rather deal with a child with a physical disability than a child with a mental disability. Feedback on this has been interesting and perhaps puts into a nutshell Sri Lankan (Worldwide?) societies attitude to disabled children... "A physically disabled child who looks normal (apart from her/his physical disability) and can communicate, is less frightening than the mentally disabled child who looks wild and mad."



Mohamed sharing a smile

In general Sri Lanka societies attitude to the disabled child is as above plus that other common attitude that is worldwide... "Out of sight, out of mind." To the majority of severely physically disabled children and mentally disabled children in Sri Lanka this phrase is very apt. Some children are hidden away in family dwellings, sometimes in appalling conditions, that not even animals would be kept in. MENCAFEP is aware of cases that involve the death of severely disabled babies, soon after birth, being killed or abandoned and left to die.

Within Sri Lankan culture families of disabled children, especially the mother and the child are seen to have done something wrong in a previous life. This 'wrong doing' is the cause of the disability; therefore in the traditional way of life sympathy and understanding are at times rare commodities within the Sri Lankan social order. In some cases families of disabled children can be ostracised from their communities.



Mahesh's favourite sport

The other "out of sight, out of mind" technique used in Sri Lanka and again with communities worldwide is the large residential institution for the disabled child/adult. Where in the majority of cases the conditions and the rights of the child/adult have to be seriously questioned.

However, it is not all negative, but it is very sad how Sri Lankan people have to confront and come to terms with some disabilities. A civil war that has cost thousand of lives has also left thousands of casualties. Children, women and mainly young men with limbs missing, sight and hearing destroyed and mentally disabled through psychological trauma. Slowly, very slowly Sri Lankan society is beginning to acknowledge that disability and especially the disabled child are part of their fabric.

Apart from the emotional shock and strain, of a mother giving birth to a disabled child. The underlying factors of embarrassment, shame and guilt are very heavy burdens on the mother and child. These factors very much hinder the development of the mother, family and especially the child.



Babu on the MENCAFEP Home programme, from Shantipura (the highest village in Sri Lanka).

To work with the mother, family, child and community on the above, is the key to community-based rehabilitation (CBR). This allows the child and mother to care for each other in their home environment. For them to be with their extended families and for the child and mother to gain acceptance and dignity within their own communities.

In developing countries, like Sri Lanka, the disabled and especially the special needs/intellectually challenged are a very disadvantaged group. With very little access to education, health care, training and the job market.

The relationship between the different problems faced by the special needs/intellectually challenged is, the basic acceptance into the human race and the dignity that goes along with that acceptance.

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