

# Disability in the public domain

TITLE:

**PORTRAYAL OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES IN PRINT MEDIA IN SRI LANKA**

AUTHOR:

**THILINA SURATH DE MEL**

PUBLISHER:

**NEELAN THIRUCHELVAM TRUST**

As mentioned by Edmund Burke in the way back to 1787, the media has the privilege and power of the fourth estate. In the Sri Lankan context, media has been often highly influential in charging political situations and governments.

This privileged position has somewhat transformed recently from traditional print to electronic media and to social media. Yet, all forms of media are still dominating and influencing on public opinions and attitudes. However, there is no adequate research done on media content and their impact on the audience. Even though most of the universities in the country conduct degree courses in the subject of media, research outcome for the public is rare. The findings of private companies that engage in media research (particularly electronic media) on behalf of the needs of the corporate business entities are often biased and questionable. It is in this context that we understand that there is a lack of studies in Sri Lanka as how media has portrayed the persons with disability.

According to the Department of Census and Statistics, a survey which was carried out in 2012, around 1.6 million persons with disability live in Sri Lanka. Apart from national causes, the three decade-long civil war which was ended in 2009 is one of the main factors for the increase of people with



**Portrayal of Persons with Disabilities in Print Media in Sri Lanka**

THILINA SURATH DE MEL  
RIVAS MOHAMED  
ERANDA FERNANDO

disabilities. However, the remarkable point is that in the local context, a substantial number of statutes has been passed in Sri Lanka to protect the human rights of people with disabilities and to improve their social inclusion.

## Book review

Persons with disabilities are not empowered to be an integral part of the economy. As a result, it challenges the achievement of inclusive development. Regarding the media component, it is impossible to come across people with disabilities working in media institutions. Even if a person with a disability is employed, they are marginalised and limited to only a few underpaid jobs such as selling lottery tickets.

The involvement of the media in Sri Lanka to ensure the human rights,

social justice, inclusive economy, transitional justice or policy influence for persons with disabilities was less in compared to some other countries although there is no much research to prove the aforesaid claim.

Therefore, we really need research to find out how persons with disabilities are portrayed in Sri Lankan print medium. A team of three headed by Thilina Surath de Mel has taken on that gargantuan task. The team includes Rivas Mohamed, Eranda Fernando and Thushara Senaratne. The team has obtained the support of many journalists from across the country. It includes the national level media personalities based in the headquarters of the media institutes in addition to the provincial journalists. They have provided insights and expertise during the focus group sessions held in Colombo, Jaffna, Tangalle and Batticaloa which had finally led to the findings in the report.

In addition, the experts in the disability sector have provided the team with interviews, insights and their publications. They have also taken the team for visits to meet the persons with disabilities and facilitated to interview them.

In today's climate of inclusiveness, with businesses constantly on the lookout for new markets, disability advertising is an important topic but one that is not often discussed. Thilina's study critically explores some of the issues borne out of empirical research that advertisers and the media need to consider when planning communication campaigns involving persons with disabilities.

Central to the disability debate is the issue of economic and social consequences of being different from the majority. In examining the politics of disability J Stubbins maintains that "changes in the relations between disa-

bled and able-bodied persons are often brought about through a political process..." If that is true, the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 should make the last decade of this past millennium the most remembered by the nation's 51 or so million people with physical and mental limitations. This legislation is a historic landmark because it: 1) guaranteed rights in employment, housing, and transportation; 2) signalled a new public awareness that people with disabilities have rights just like other Americans; and 3) spawned a new disability culture that is militant, empowering, and committed to seeking fair treatment for themselves.

Revolutionary changes in the socio-economic and political landscape led to the promulgation National Disability Policy in Sri Lanka. However, the public attitudes are still enshrouded in sentiment, stereotype, ignorance and curiosity.

Society's negative bias toward its members who are disabled is detrimental to the welfare and productive participation of this already marginalized and disadvantaged group. Although unfavourable attitudes are often covert, they are detectable in the use of media stereotypes, prejudicial beliefs, derogatory labels, or lack of care for the well-being of disabled people.

Lead Researcher Thilina de Mel grew up in the 1980s along with this negative public phenomenon. Therefore his attempt to shed light on disability will be a cautionary tale that will change Sri Lanka's traditional attitudinal scope.

- Nimeshi Herath

