

Recapturing Inclusive Education as a Shared Responsibility: Experiences of Women with Disabilities in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

While the concept of inclusive education promotes access and equity for all learners, Sri Lanka still struggles to realize its full implementation, particularly for students with disabilities. This paper explores how women with disabilities in Sri Lanka experience and understand inclusive education as a shared responsibility, drawing on their dual identities as both individuals with physical disabilities and disability rights activists. The study is based on a qualitative pilot study conducted as part of a broader research project on Sexuality and Intimacy among Women with Disabilities in Sri Lanka. The research examined their experiences in educational settings and beyond using semi-structured interviews with six participants.

Findings highlight critical gaps in the inclusive education framework in Sri Lanka, especially the tendency to focus on the mere placement of students with disabilities in classrooms without addressing structural, attitudinal, and institutional barriers. Participants emphasized that inclusive education must go beyond classroom integration. It should engage families, peers, educators, school administrators, and the broader community. The mainstream education system in Sri Lanka can be seen as shared responsibilities among stakeholders, and there is a lack of supportive infrastructure and positive attitudes towards students with disabilities.

This paper argues that inclusive education should be recaptured as a shared, collective responsibility, spanning Policy, practice, and culture, rather than confined to a classroom-level goal. It calls for a reorientation of the mainstream education discourse in Sri Lanka. Social workers must continue to advocate for an inclusive education system that ensures the educational rights of all children, especially children with disabilities, emphasizing that every learner matters.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Inclusive Education is a widely accepted policy framework that has been advanced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, 2015). Considering the challenges and limitations of currently recognized Education, inclusive Education promotes the full participation of all learners in quality education, regardless of ability (Ruhela, 2023). However, despite the National Policy on Disability (2003) and educational reforms, the actual implementation of inclusive education in Sri Lanka remains fragmented and inadequate, especially for students with disabilities (Ministry of Social Welfare, 2003; Ministry of Education, 2006, 2013, 2022). Likewise, the National Policy on Disability (2003) in Sri Lanka recognizes education as a right of persons with disabilities. It emphasizes the removal of all physical and attitudinal barriers in the education system. These policies advocate for equal access and inclusive policies.

Moreover, to implement the National Disability Policy on Inclusive Education for children with Disabilities, the Ministry of Education in Sri Lanka strategically prioritized inclusive education under the Education Sector Development Framework and Programme (ESDFP) for the period 2006-2010. Promoting teacher training is a key role in integrating children with disabilities into mainstream schools and making inclusive education meaningful (Ministry of Education, 2006). Furthermore, the Guidelines for Special Education further identify the importance of teacher training for inclusive classrooms, special education units in mainstream schools, and curriculum guidelines (Ministry of Education, 2013).

Additionally, the international policy framework for inclusive education in Sri Lanka, as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD, 2016) and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG, 2015), also provides evidence for inclusive and equitable education for all (United Nations, 2006).

The Ministry of Education is working to identify significant barriers and limitations, as well as misunderstandings and disagreements, among stakeholders in implementing the existing inclusive education policy, with the goal of creating equal opportunities for all children in education. Accordingly, a new inclusive education policy was prepared in 2022 based on factors such as gender and disability, which are the intersections of inclusive education (Ministry of Education, 2022). It has been further developed in a way that further reflects the rights of persons with disabilities and the 4 Sustainable Development Goals (UNCRPD, 2006; SDG, 2015).

According to UNESCO (2025), one in five children globally is excluded from school. Poverty, disability, gender, social status, religion, ethnicity, migration, and displacement keep them out of inclusive education. Global education condition reveals that this is a persistent situation when it comes to children with disabilities. Hence, Inclusive education is a vast and in-depth topic.

Citing UNESCO (1994, “The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education has crafted in 1994” Rapp and Corral-Granados (2021) show that inclusion recognizes institutions that include every student, highlight diversity as an asset, support learning, and respond to individual needs (Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021, p. 425).

According to UNESCO (2017) and Kis-Glavas (2023), including diverse learners in education is a fundamental principle of education. When the system incorporates the core value of education, it stresses overcoming all barriers. Access to education is a process of overcoming barriers that hinder participation and achievement. In addition, the principle of equity is an attitude that considers education equally important for all learners.

In the history of inclusive education in Sri Lanka, a significant shift in education occurred in 1997, following the establishment of the Presidential Task Force. Children with disabilities have been allowed to receive education in regular classrooms. More doors in education opened with the introduction of the National Education Policy in 2003, promoting inclusive education, ensuring equity, and supporting community-based rehabilitation. The Disability Act of Sri Lanka (2003) and the need to better ensure education make this integration a foundation for policy and practice (Aturupen & Little, 2021). Since the interpretation and implementation of inclusive education practices vary across different countries, it is essential to investigate whether the Salamanca Declaration is being applied correctly (Hernández-Torrano, Somerton, & Helmer, 2020; Rapp & Corral-Granados, 2021).

Policy and practical issues, knowledge sharing, and dialogue continue to occur in various ways, encompassing multiple aspects of inclusive education. For example, key issues can be highlighted by focusing on recent research, which provides insight into current challenges. Lack of teacher training, education and infrastructure; Strong community support, partial inclusion practices, recognized cultural/environmental barriers, need for local models, hybrid teaching methods prove effective in engaging students, access barriers and narrow academic options hinder participation (Dharmawardena, 2021; Sivarasa, 2025; Ferdinando & Perera, 2021; Thadchanamoorthy, 2024; Chandrasiri, 2016; Somasundaram & Padmanathan, 2022).

The UN bodies focused on accessing inclusive education. Based on the Mapping of Disability-Inclusive Education Practices in South Asia, UNICEF's regional mapping report highlights current inclusive education practices in Sri Lanka, identifies existing gaps, and provides recommendations to advance disability-inclusive education in the country (UNICEF, 2021). Furthermore, UNICEF's National Education Programs have engaged with the government to promote equitable, inclusive, and child-centered education across all age groups, updating curricula and pedagogy to meet the needs of children with disabilities, and supporting teacher training in inclusive participatory methods (UNICEF, n.d.).

As Serrano (2021) has shown, inclusion is a social and dynamic process of constructing, deconstructing, and reconstructing practices that tend to generate connections and long-term relationships between individuals, whether planned or emergent. Specific contexts and cultures influence those practices, and the meanings of inclusion are understood in terms of individual experiences, focusing on diverse populations with diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, Serrano (2021) outlined the primary stakeholders in inclusive education and their respective roles.

When focusing on stakeholders in inclusive education, the key groups include students, teachers, school leaders, school administrators, parents, school development clubs, other schools, policymakers, and the broader society. In both global and local literature, inclusive education is a holistic system that involves various stakeholders (UNESCO, 2009, 2020; Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Serrano, 2021). Coordinated action among families, peers, teachers, administrators, and communities is needed to ensure meaningful participation and learning for all (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011)

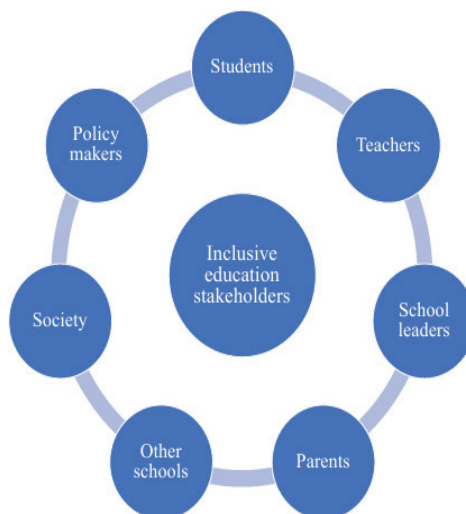


Figure 01: Stakeholders involved in inclusive education
Source: (Serrano, 2021)

When focusing on stakeholders of inclusive education, sustaining the system is crucial. Stakeholders include students with disabilities, teachers, school leaders such as principals and administrators, parents of students with disabilities, society, including the community, religious leaders, the media, and policymakers who play a crucial role in sustaining the inclusive education system.

The main themes identified from the global literature can be summarized as follows. In particular, in inclusive education, the roles and gaps of stakeholders have been identified. Accordingly, students with disabilities are rights holders, activists, rarely consulted or viewed passively, parents and family support and decision-makers are not empowered or involved in planning, teachers and administrators are implementers: lack of training, attitudinal barriers, policy makers, policy and funding, poor implementation, poor accountability, community and religious leaders, cultural influencers are rarely involved in inclusion efforts, NGOs/DPOs are consultants, service providers, fragmented, donor-dependent, social workers are facilitators not integrated into the education system, peers, colleagues or barriers: lack of awareness, empathy training (Serrano, 2021; UNESCO; 2009; Booth & Ainsco, 2011).

Identified Stakeholder Roles and Gaps in the Literature Review in Sri Lanka

As indicated by DOJF (2017), the statistics from the 2011 census (Department of Census & Statistics, 2012) reveal that 34% of school-age children with disabilities are not receiving any education. Furthermore, 20.3% of primary school-age children are not receiving primary education. Despite the commitment made by the government under Article 24 of the UNCRPD (2006), the government has failed to adequately implement inclusive education. Similarly, NGOs working on inclusive education of children with disabilities train teachers, develop assistive technologies, and advocate for inclusive policies. However, since NGOs operate on a project basis, the projects are not long-term. The programs are also unsustainable since they depend on donors (Akurugoda et al., 2017).

When inclusive education is considered a shared responsibility, peers also play a crucial role in inclusive education. Nevertheless, Perera (2021) and UNICEF (2013) state that peer bullying is common and insensitive towards children with disabilities. Positive interactions with peers are important for every school-aged child. It is an important psychosocial and group-bonding relationship. However, these studies highlight the form of discrimination that occurs within peer groups.

Based on this situation, stakeholders are failing to fulfill their shared responsibilities in shaping the implementation of inclusive education in Sri

Lanka. There is a need for further research to understand the responsibilities and gaps of multiple stakeholders in inclusive education. A stakeholder analysis can provide opportunities for greater collaboration to achieve better engagement and efficient service delivery among stakeholders.

While the concept of inclusive education promotes access and equity for all learners, Sri Lanka still struggles to achieve its full implementation, particularly for students with disabilities. This paper examines how women with disabilities in Sri Lanka experience and understand inclusive education, drawing on their dual identities as representatives of the disability community and as advocates for disability rights. This research paper examines the lived experiences of women with disabilities who are currently involved in advocacy for the rights of women with disabilities in Sri Lanka. Those who understand the current state of formal education and the need to rethink inclusive education. Their life narratives and understanding of advocacy for the rights of women with disabilities shed light on the gaps and limitations of inclusive education and the need for inclusive education as a broader social responsibility.

2. RESEARCH CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

This paper is part of a larger doctoral research project that explores sexuality and Intimacy among Women with Disabilities in Sri Lanka, adopting a feminist and disability-inclusive lens. During this broader study, education emerged as a recurring theme in shaping self-perception, agency, and social inclusion.

The participants in the study experienced structural exclusions, both in formal education and in their own lives, that had a lasting impact on their identity and activism. While this pilot study aimed to understand the common challenges faced by women with disabilities in Sri Lanka, it also highlighted the need to understand the real implications of education that prioritizes these challenges.

It specifically aims to explore how women with disabilities in Sri Lanka interpret and experience inclusive education personally and politically. The primary objective of this research is to investigate how WWDs experience and perceive inclusive education, and to understand the intersection of gender, disability, and activism in educational contexts. Furthermore, to identify gaps between the Policy Framework and practical realities.

3. METHODOLOGY

The pilot phase of a larger PhD project on sexuality and intimacy among women with disabilities in Sri Lanka, *Reclaiming Inclusive Education as a Shared Responsibility: The Experiences of Women with Disabilities*, is a

by-product of this research. Hence, the pilot study in qualitative research helps refine data collection tools, study feasibility, strengthen the research design (Ismail, Kinchin, & Edwards, 2018), and identify emerging new themes. Accordingly, it was easier for the researcher to select vulnerable women working for the rights of the disabled community as a more effective approach. The aim of the above-mentioned pilot project was to evaluate the interview tools, identify key themes, and assess the feasibility of the main study area.

Based on the above background, this study employed a qualitative research approach and conducted in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guideline (Cresswell & Poth, 2018) with six women with disabilities, selected through purposeful sampling, to explore the profound, lived experiences of women with disabilities (WWDs) in Sri Lanka. In selecting participants for the study, the researcher paid attention to women who could provide constructive critiques of systemic issues based on their experiences of physical sensory or mobility impairments, disability rights activism, and as women.

The researcher employed an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) (Eatough & Smith, 2017) to explore the intersectionality of disability through the participants' perceptions, capturing rich and profound narratives. Hence, an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was employed to understand the intersectionality of inclusive education, poverty, gender, and society in relation to disability. In addition to the issues of inclusive education in Sri Lanka, this pilot study also provided insights into the socio-economic context of women with disabilities. The study focused on the location where they live and the socio-cultural issues that intersect with disability.

3.1 Data Collection

As this study is qualitative, data were collected using in-depth semi-structured interviews. In-depth semi-structured interviews are an appropriate method for exploring complex and sensitive experiences in qualitative research (Kallio et al., 2016; Padgett, 2016; Seidman, 2019). The participants in the study were women with disabilities who work to empower people with disabilities, which allowed the researcher to develop rich and detailed themes (Bryman, 2016). As this was a pilot study, the research guide was prepared in accordance with the research objectives (Kim, 2011). It encouraged open-ended discussions of their field experiences and lived experiences to protect comfort, privacy, and cultural appropriateness (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Padgett, 2016) and focused on emerging themes.

The study team conducted one of the five interviews via Zoom, and the remaining interviews face-to-face, encouraging them to follow their flow.

Approximately two hours were spent on each interview, allowing participants to share their experiences freely and confidentially. The researcher used Sinhala, the language spoken by the participants. Following Cresswell & Poth (2018) and Padget (2016), taking the participants' consent, the study team recorded the research data for later analysis and to ensure the reliability of the study. This study team conducted a pilot phase of a broader study on the lived experiences of women with disabilities in April 2024.

This interview guideline was developed following a thorough review of the literature on women with disabilities, with a specific focus on inclusive education, disability rights, and the gendered experiences of interacting with the social system in Sri Lanka. To capture their narrative of a whole lived experience, the researcher used the earliest experiences of schooling, their perception of accessing school, the nature of support groups such as family, teachers, peers, school leaders, and community engagement promoting inclusive education, as well as their experiences of exclusion and inclusion during the schooling period. Ultimately, this focuses on the cultural context of Sri Lanka and offers recommendations for promoting inclusive education in the country. The proper way to get rich data researcher observation, as well as getting data from participants, is to notice their perceptions of disability and societal attitudes towards PWDs, available services for inclusion education, and mainly concerns about the support system in Sri Lanka.

This approach ensured that individual lived experiences and broader socio-cultural dynamics were captured, providing a nuanced understanding of inclusive education as a shared responsibility in Sri Lanka.

The context of the participants is given below,

- Participant 1 – A visually impaired activist who lost sight after marriage, overcame family resistance, and now works on employment advocacy for persons with disabilities.
- Participant 2 – A self-employed woman whose family initially resisted her vocational training, now engaged in disability rights activism.
- Participant 3 – A university graduate with experience in inclusive and special education settings advocates for WWDs' rights.
- Participant 4 – A teacher who overcame multiple educational barriers and now supports children with disabilities in her school.
- Participant 5 – A mother of two sons with hearing and speech impairments, actively engaged in promoting the rights of the deaf community.
- Participant 6 – A WWD faced repeated school rejections and is now involved in state and community-level advocacy.

3.2. Data analysis and interpretations

The study team followed the thematic analysis method proposed by Brun and Clarke (2006). Employing their thematic analysis framework, they followed six steps: familiarization, coding, theme generation, theme review, definition, and reporting. Following the thematic analysis framework, the ultimate aim is to interpret the rich narratives through in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

Initial coding captured participants' lived experiences across multiple dimensions of inclusive education. Codes used into preliminary categories such as educational access (e.g., denial of school admission, distant school placement), classroom experiences (e.g., lack of sign language, inaccessible facilities), family and community attitudes (e.g., overprotection, stigma), structural barriers (e.g., absence of teacher training, policy enforcement gaps), and activism and empowerment (e.g., advocacy for women with disabilities, peer mobilisation).

When refining and reviewing themes, ensure that both participants' intersectional realities (Crenshaw, 1991; Frederick & Dara Shifrer, 2019; Evans, 2022), such as gender, disability, class, structural inequalities, and socio-cultural and economic background, are captured to recapture the inclusive education role of stakeholders. Furthermore, critical disability theories integrate the final thematic framework of five major themes.

1. Tokenistic Inclusion in Education- classroom placement without meaningful participation
2. Attitudinal and cultural Barriers- Deep-rooted stigma from peers, teachers, and parents.
3. Infrastructure and curriculum gaps-Lack of accessible facilities, materials, and trained staff.
4. Family and Community as Double-Edged Influences: Supportive and Restrictive Roles.
5. Activism as Resistance- Transforming Exclusion into Advocacy and Leadership.

The study also examined patterns across impairment types-mobility, visual, hearing, and speech-to identify how inclusive education barriers manifest differently. For example, hearing-and-speech-impaired participants highlighted the absence of sign language in mainstream classrooms as their primary exclusionary factor. At the same time, those with mobility impairments emphasised physical inaccessibility and transport challenges.

The analysis reflected participants' individual voices and illuminated systemic patterns that hinder the realisation of inclusive education as a shared responsibility in Sri Lanka.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

The study team conducted the pilot study in accordance with research ethics before commencing the main study. The study team obtained written and verbal consent from participants in the pilot study for further understanding. Accordingly, guidelines for social science research, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, informed consent, and cultural sensitivity, were followed (Creswell, 2018). Given the nature of the extensive research on sexuality and intimacy in women with disabilities, participants received additional information about their right to withdraw at any time and how the study will use their data to build an honest and transparent relationship between the researcher and the research participant.

To protect participants' identities, the research team assigned pseudonyms to them. The study team stored all audio recordings and transcripts securely on password-protected devices. Given the sensitive nature of discussions about disability, gender, and education, the researcher was concerned about the participants' comfort.

4. FINDINGS & DISCUSSIONS

This research presents the main findings of the study, highlighting factors beyond inclusive education as a shared responsibility. Although inclusive education plans in Sri Lanka are included in legal documents, they often lack comprehensive coverage. This study reveals that cultural and structural barriers to disability in Sri Lankan society limit inclusive education. In inclusive education, the neglect of various disabilities is highlighted. The participants' narratives show how this neglect has consistently led to the marginalization of disability. Therefore, this study contributes to a broader discussion of disability and agency in inclusion, recognizing it as a shared responsibility, as reflected in these narratives. These experiences of exclusion, acting as a form of resistance, highlight the importance of leadership and agency.

The themes can be categorized as follows.

1. Symbolic Inclusion in Education: Classroom Placement Without Meaningful Participation

Previously, the education of children with disabilities was characterized by segregation. There were two educational approaches: inclusion and exclusion. A significant turning point in the field of education for children with disabilities was the emergence of the concept of inclusive education, which coincided with the rise of the human rights movement in the 1960s (de Beco, 2022; Francisco, 2020; Hornby, 2024; National Council on Disability, 2018; UNESCO, 2021). 'Segregation' refers to the provision of educational

facilities for children with disabilities in special schools or institutions outside the regular school system (National Council on Disability, 2018). Inclusive education refers to the inclusion of children with specific disabilities in regular classrooms within schools. However, the most widely accepted educational approach to educating children with disabilities, both internationally and nationally, is the inclusion approach. That is, providing education to children with disabilities in regular classrooms and schools (de Boco, 2022; Francisco, 2020; Hornby, 2024).

Many times, teachers are unaware that if a child with special needs attends, they will be grouped with the other children. Tell the other children in the class about this child. Even when teaching, they take the other children and move forward. Such children are marginalized. Due to the Teacher's negligence, these children are often bullied by their peers in the class. Parents often dislike having such a child in the class. (Participant 4, 52, Mobility Impairment, Teacher)

Inclusion is the central concept discussed in this study. Inclusion is a process that enhances the participation of individuals and groups in society, thereby improving the capabilities, opportunities, and status of those who experience disadvantage due to their identity (World Bank, 2025; UNESCO, 2025). An inclusive classroom is always diverse. Students from diverse backgrounds acquire skills in the classroom with the support of their Teacher and other stakeholders in inclusive education (UNESCO, 2021; Hornby, 2024).

By interacting with different social groups, students lay the foundation for living in society. However, it does not happen. Despite the implementation of numerous policies on inclusive education, numerous practical problems persist. Teachers often lack a good understanding of and skills in the education system. Divisions among stakeholders in inclusive education hinder the implementation of inclusive education. These study findings emphasize that what has happened is symbolic inclusion in education. It is the placement of students with special needs in classrooms without meaningful participation. In it, the Teacher, as well as other stakeholders, create healthy relationships in inclusive education in classroom placement, but without genuine inclusion.

2. Attitudinal and Cultural Barriers

There are four models of disability: the medical model, the social model, the welfare model, and the rights-based approach (World Health Organization, 2022; Shakespeare, 2018). Disability is a subset of the category of persons with disabilities. Reclaiming inclusive education as a shared responsibility: Analyzing stakeholders' shared responsibilities in inclusive education is crucial for discussing the experiences of women with

disabilities in Sri Lanka (UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2025). The medical and social models have been criticized in particular. The medical model has medicalized disability, and disability is an individual problem, arising from the functional and psychological problems of a person with disability (Shakespeare, 2018; Oliver, 2013). The social model of disability suggests that the problems faced by people with disabilities are not personal; that is, any problem or problems of the person with the disability do not cause them. The social model suggests that many of the problems faced by people with disabilities are caused by problems created by society (Oliver, 1990).

The experiences of women with disabilities and rights activists involved in this study indicate that there are many negative situations that children with disabilities experience within the educational system, including school (UNESCO, 2021; World Bank, 2025). This social model suggests that insensitivity to the needs of children with disabilities is a contributing factor (Oliver, 2013; Shakespeare, 2018).

The social model encompasses both structural and attitudinal barriers, as well as deep-seated stigma from peers, teachers, and parents. This relationship is characterized by resistance from both the family and the community, which tries to overprotect their child, and a lack of awareness about inclusive education and children's rights. Peers try to stigmatize them. Bullying by peers makes school an unwelcome place for children with disabilities. Therefore, these children become socially isolated.

Discrimination by schoolchildren is common. Women with disabilities in the study experienced being teased by peers based on their disability.

“They say you cannot see” (Participant 3, 28, Visually Impaired).

Regardless of the legal framework, children with disabilities experience social attitudes in school during socialization. These social attitudes negatively affect children with disabilities. The social norms of these stakeholders in inclusive education undermine their interactions with others. These negative behaviors by peers, physical barriers, or disabilities can lead to children with disabilities rejecting school. Parents and families may also experience disappointment due to the social stigma attached to the development of a child with disabilities and the skills they should acquire in the classroom. Inclusive education is not only about including students from diverse backgrounds in the classroom, but also about understanding teaching strategies effectively and addressing issues raised by stakeholders (Oliver, 2013; Shakespeare, 2018; World Bank, 2025).

Article 7(1) of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) requires States Parties to take all appropriate measures to ensure that children with disabilities enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with other children. Article 7(2) of the

Convention requires that the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in all actions taken on behalf of the child. Furthermore, as set out in articles 24(1)(a), (b), and (j), States Parties shall recognize the right of persons with disabilities to education. This right shall be ensured without discrimination and on an equal basis with others and shall ensure the integration of inclusive education systems at all levels (United Nations, 2006; UNESCO, 2021).

“The common experience that children with disabilities who come to me for counselling describe is the marginalization of children with disability in the classroom. It is a state of disgust, frustration, and ultimately stress.” (Participant 1, 56, Visual Impairment, Disability Activist)

Such circumstances can also undermine the aspirations of inclusive education as a human right. Socially constructed barriers can highlight the vulnerability of children with disabilities. However, they are not truly incompetent children. The lack of empathy for children with disabilities in the system creates temporary obstacles and challenges in implementing inclusive education in practice.

Such negative social attitudes can severely limit educational participation, skill development, and self-esteem. If the whole is affected, the whole person is undermined. At the broader community level, discrimination, negative attitudes and beliefs, and cultural stereotypes can reinforce barriers to participation and learning.

The legal provisions emphasize the recognition of the right of children with disabilities to education, and the public should also be aware of this right. This right should be ensured without any discrimination and on an equal basis, and inclusive education systems should be provided at all levels (United Nations, 2006; UNESCO, 2021). There should be a good understanding among stakeholders about the concept of inclusive education. The following points should be addressed:

The full development of human potential, human dignity, and self-worth; Strengthening respect for human rights as fundamental to human diversity. Developing the personality, talents, and creativity of persons with disabilities, as well as developing their mental and physical abilities to their full potential;

Ensuring that children with disabilities can participate effectively in a free society (World Bank, 2025; Oliver, 2013).

As is clear from the above, children with disabilities have the right to education without any discrimination. There is currently a wide-ranging international and national discussion on the right to education of children with disabilities through a rights-based approach. This discussion should

be expanded to the village level. Awareness should be raised among stakeholders. Children with disabilities are part of social diversity. Then all the human rights that other children are entitled to are also available to children with disabilities.

3. Infrastructure and Curriculum Gaps

A common theme highlighted by the study findings is the problems with infrastructure and syllabus. When inclusive education is a fundamental right, the gaps in infrastructure and syllabus need to be identified. Otherwise, merely establishing legal norms is not enough. When this theme is taken seriously, it becomes clear that this situation is a cause of unrest among stakeholders. When educational resources are limited, students with multiple identities are often automatically excluded. There are problems with the lack of accessible facilities, materials, and qualified staff, as well as the role of teachers. Teachers do not understand sign language. Often, all that the speech and hearing-impaired student does is sit.

Their voices, no one knew sign language, so I sat there. “

“The teacher was like, ‘You’re lucky to be here.’”

“They didn’t expect anything from her, so they never included her.”

(Participant, 05, 57, Activist in Deaf Community).

The experience of women with disabilities involved in the study of students with speech and hearing impairments was similar to that of those who promoted the rights of the disabled community. 90% of children with speech and hearing impairments are illiterate. Teachers often lack understanding of sign language, so they teach very little. Language is not developed.

“I am talking about the totally deaf who do not have O/L passes. There are those who pass in a subject like Art. They are not even at the pass level in Maths, Sinhala, and English. There are very few who pass in other subjects. As far as I can see, that is the main problem in Sri Lanka.”

(Participant 01. 56, Visually Impaired, Disability Rights Activists)

“The majority of people in Sri Lanka, about 99%, cannot read. They cannot give an idea. When you ask a child to underline the correct answer, see what kind of answer they give. I have tried that. Even when you ask them to underline the following, they do not know, they have learned words” (Participant 4, 52, Mobility Impairment, Teacher.).

The above experiences highlight the situation of children with speech and hearing impairments. The lack of sign language interpreters in mainstream classrooms (for hearing and speech impairments). Additionally,

when discussing accessibility, they have highlighted gaps in transportation, access to the school, access to the classroom, and the devices used. They felt that sanitation facilities were particularly worrisome. Mobility-impaired participants lack physical access. Lack of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) practices.

Their experiences highlight that such gaps in the existing education system create structural barriers. The entire education system, in both urban and rural areas, needs to address the gaps in accessible facilities, technological support infrastructure, and curricula.

3.2 Stakeholder Gaps

Stakeholder	Role	Gaps
Teachers	Implement curriculum	No sign language, limited UDL training
Parents of Children with Disabilities	Primary caregivers	Overprotective, unaware of rights
Peers	Social support	Bullying, exclusion
School Admin	Resource	Poor infrastructure, weak policy enforcement
NGOs/DPOs	Advocates	Fragmented, donor-dependent

The experience of women with disabilities and disability community activists who participated in this study was that there are insufficient physical and human resources for the education of these children in rural areas. Also, traditional ideas and the social stigma associated with them, economic difficulties of the family, the difficulty of spending extra time, and financial costs for the education of these children, and the problematic conditions regarding the safety of children in places outside the home are the fundamental factors that contribute to the education of children with disabilities. Accordingly, it is further confirmed that many factors other than their personal factors are considered for the disadvantages faced by children with disabilities in relation to their education.

The potential for mainstreaming children with disabilities in education exists. However, due to several factors, these opportunities are often missed because of weaknesses and crises in the country's education policies. In particular, the social status of children with disabilities, poverty, and gender, disability is an intersectional situation. Therefore, WWDs face compounded marginalization.

My sister and I cannot afford to go to school. Our mother sent us to a nearby school. However, our mother had to stay with us until we finished school. There were no proper toilet facilities. If our mother had taken us

with her, she would have had no use for us. So we stopped going to school (Participant 2, Woman with Mobility Impairment, 42).

Experiences like these demonstrate the intersectionality associated with disability. In particular, the intersectionality of being a woman with a disability, gender, and poverty should be taken into account when implementing inclusive education in policy and practice. Need for an intersectional lens in policy and practice

In the context of renegotiating inclusive education as a shared responsibility, the gaps in practice can be summarized as follows: a classroom layout without any sensitivity to inclusive education. Lack of accessibility. Problems with infrastructure. Lack of resources, including teachers. Sign language problems—attitudinal barriers. Challenges from teachers, peers, and parents, along with the lack of implementation of sound policies, can be cited as institutional weaknesses. The lack of implementation of sound policies can be cited as an institutional weakness

04. FAMILY AND COMMUNITY AS DOUBLE-EDGE INFLUENCES- SUPPORTING AND CONSTRAINING ROLES.

As an extension of the above discussion, the role of parents of children with disabilities, as well as parents of all children in a classroom, is significant in inclusive education. This role is crucial in adapting children with disabilities to education and integrating them with their peers. How to recognize and work together with peers in recognizing the diversity of peers? Families and communities can socialize at the family level about their responsibility to prevent social stigma. The assessment system in inclusive education can foster inclusion by providing positive support from families and the broader community. Discrimination in inclusive education and social stigma can be nurtured through their support. Here, social work interventions can have a dual impact on community-based inclusive education.

05. ACTIVISM AS RESISTANCE-TRANSFORMING EXCLUSION INTO ADVOCACY AND LEADERSHIP.

I was someone who could not go to school. I saw other children going to school. My sisters and brothers were going to school. I worked as a toy farmer until I was 17. My family understood that school was not suitable for a disabled girl like me. Later, I wanted to leave home. After my own struggles with my family, I pursued vocational training. After that vocational training, I thought I should serve our community. My exclusion made me an activist. (Participant 6, 53, Mobility Impairment, local and national level Disability activist)

The 2008 Status Report on Women with Disabilities in Sri Lanka indicates that most women with disabilities, regardless of whether they are rural or urban, have access to schooling. Similarly, rural girls with disabilities have been given the privilege of inclusive education. This is because other special schools, educational facilities, or human resources for children with disabilities were not sufficiently available in rural areas. In addition, it is noted that girls with disabilities are directed to regular school education, while girls with visual and hearing impairments are directed to special schools or sixth forms (Akasha, 2008, p. 26).

The underlying meaning of the above narrative should be further focused on. The ingrained attitudes within the family violate the rights of girls with disabilities, even though all children have rights. This narrative illustrates the intersection between gender and disability. Such experiences serve as a form of resistance for the rights of the entire disability community. Her experience further reflects the social model.

6. CONCEPTUAL SHIFT NEEDED

Inclusive education must be a shared responsibility. It should involve a Policy change. To what extent do children with disabilities contribute to social inclusion and education policies in Sri Lanka? Reclaiming inclusive education as a shared responsibility: A key point that emerged from the experiences of women with disabilities in Sri Lanka. Children with disabilities are part of diversity. There is a lack of awareness in the community about the formulation of written policies, as well as about these policies. When a child with disabilities is referred to inclusive education, it is a fair intervention that allows the student with disabilities to be aware not only of the Teacher but also of their peers, parents, and school administration.

A mother came to me for advice. Her son is autistic. His first-year Teacher diagnosed him as autistic. The Teacher observed the child and informed the mother. Accordingly, the child was taken to the children's hospital and started treatment. Now the child goes to school every day after taking medicine. Now there is a new teacher. The mother has informed the new Teacher that it is good to tell the child's details. One day, he is unable to go after taking medicine. His behavior changed that day. Therefore, the children and parents are informed that the child has taken medicine. Because of that, the other children tease the child. "Did you come after taking medicine?" If the behavior changes even slightly, the parents ask, "Didn't you come here after taking medicine?" That is not very pleasant for the child. The Teacher, not understanding the child's disability, often accuses the child of misbehavior. Saying that he is disturbing the other children

in the class. The mother is also mentally stressed because of this. The mother stated that, despite visiting the school's guidance counselor, she was never able to meet with her. (Participants 6, Women with Mobility Impairment, 54).

In sharing the above experiences, it becomes clear that despite the inclusion policy being in writing, there is a lack of awareness among stakeholders. The Teacher, parents of students from diverse backgrounds, and the students themselves are often unaware of the concept of inclusion. As the leader of the classroom, the Teacher is not able to integrate students from different backgrounds in a way that does not harm them. Therefore, to bring about a cultural transformation in the inclusion policy, there must be a potential for positive communication and coordination among stakeholders. This experience underscores the importance of rebuilding the school as a collective social commitment, not just a family, to refer students with disabilities to inclusive education.

7. ROLE OF SOCIAL WORK

A fundamental point that is seen in focusing on the education of children with disabilities is that they are not excluded from the education system because there are various policies and programs for them. However, due to the inadequate implementation of these policies and programs, they are marginalized in the education system. Therefore, the contribution of social workers in the school system has been well recognized. In general, the study participants indicated that the role of a social worker is essential in managing the challenges that arise in inclusive education for teachers, parents, and students. In this way, the social worker can also communicate and coordinate with other stakeholders.

Social workers can play a leading role in emphasizing the “every learner matters” approach. It leads to better coordination with schools, families, parents, peers, and policymakers by advocating for whole-system reforms. Reclaiming inclusive education as a shared responsibility: The experiences of women with disabilities in Sri Lanka highlight the need to promote disability rights and inclusive practices. Positive cultural transformation is needed to create awareness of shared responsibilities among stakeholders. Social workers play a significant role in emphasizing that every voice matters in building inclusive education beyond the classroom.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Recapturing inclusive education as a shared responsibility among stakeholders, the pilot study highlights the need to address the hidden aspects of inclusive policies in Sri Lanka. Comparing the roles of all

stakeholders, including students, teachers, school leaders, parents, other schools, society, and policymakers (Serrano, 2021), is necessary to identify their exact contributions to promoting inclusive education in Sri Lanka. Additionally, there are considerable barriers to promoting inclusive education due to structural, attitudinal, and cultural barriers within stakeholders' roles and responsibilities in inclusive education. Broader social, familial, and policy dimensions of inclusive education cannot ignore the responsibilities of students, teachers, and school administration alone. Through their lived experiences and activism, the narratives in this study demonstrate the unique challenges faced by inclusive education in Sri Lanka. These narratives also offer unique insights into the strengths and limitations of inclusive education systems. Inclusive education promotes seriously without name-promoting. The education system should reassess its challenges and address them based on the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, including students, teachers, peers, student leaders, other schools, society, and policymakers, while coordinating and cooperating with all parties involved. This study recommended a highly social worker's role in recapturing stakeholders in the inclusive education system.

The study's findings suggest that recapturing inclusive education requires policy and practice changes aligned with theoretical orientations. That shift should depend on theoretical orientations, especially critical disability theory and feminist disability theory. The findings of this study affirm that inclusion cannot be realized without addressing the intersectionality of disability. Incorporating intersectionality tools deeply will help transform the educational system into a more practical one, one that includes diversity, equality, and collective responsibility for all stakeholders.

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