

6. C O U N T R Y R E P O R T

SRI LANKA

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Sri Lanka is an Island situated in the Indian Ocean. Though it is categorized as a tropical country due to the monsoonal rains and oceanic influences etc., which she receives, tropical climatic conditions do not prevail uniformly throughout the land. The country divides itself into two major climatic zones called the west zone and dry zone. The average temperature is between 15.6^oc. and 21.9^oc.

Sri Lanka is heir to a great culture and history. Her civilization goes back to the sixth century B.C. for its beginnings and she is the proud possessor of two thousand years of recorded history. Sri Lankan culture is sustained by Buddhist thought and culture. Ancestors of Sri Lankans came from north India and South India. The total population in Sri Lanka is 15.5 million, out of which 74% are Sinhalese, Tamils 18.1%, Moors 07.1% and others 0.8%. Sinhalese are mostly Buddhists, though there is also an important Christian community amongst them, as well as amongst Tamils who are mostly Hindus. The Moors and Malays are Muslims by religion. The above details would show that Sri Lanka is a Multi-communal, Multi-religious and Multi-cultural society. For four and half centuries Sri Lanka was under the Western powers, and they added their own cultural and political influences to the Island's already complex background.

After independence was achieved from the British in 1948, successive governments turned their attention to uplift the standard of living of the country's population, their health and their education. Subsidies were granted for food, state education was provided free of charge, health facilities of similar nature were extended throughout the Island. On the whole, the results have been remarkable and praiseworthy. The level of literacy 86.5% is the second highest in Asia and average life expectancy 68 years is on par with developed countries. While Ministries of Education, Health and Food tackled problems in their respective spheres from the view-point of general social

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welfare, a Ministry of Social Services has come to concern itself more specifically with human problems which require specialized attention and since 1948, the Department of Social Services has been the implementing arm of these various activities. The constant endeavour of the Department is to give as many as social services to needy persons in the country as possible.

Since 1948, the concept of Social Welfare Services for mentally handicapped was stagnating and not given a prominent place. Welfare organisations and the Department of Social Services considered merely the provision of relief and residential care to the mentally handicapped, and little progress was made in this connection. But, during the past five years, the concept of Social Welfare Services to the mentally retarded has changed considerably. It was realized that preventive measures and rehabilitation for mentally handicapped were very important. The Department too, did not have long term policies and plans regarding the care of mentally handicapped. Apart from this, there were a number of other problems regarding treatment of the mentally retarded.

- i. It was difficult for the Government to start without dedicated employees who were specially trained for the task,
- ii. Magnitude of the problem was not known and no proper survey of the mentally retarded had been done,
- iii. The country's economic growth rate did not permit government to expand its services to mentally handicapped.

Due to these reasons, voluntary organizations had the monopoly of this sector with Government assistance and grants. Since 1981, after the declaration of the Year of the Handicapped, the Department of Social Service has

opened a new Secretariat to give a better service and upliftment for the handicapped. Our mass media has enlightened the public on this important aspect of social service. Participating in discussions and seminars both locally and internationally, has also enlightened the public. This has led to an increased awareness of the problems of rehabilitating the mentally handicapped.

Meanwhile the Department of Social Services and the Department of Census and Statistics conducted a survey and gathered valuable data. This survey has drawn the attention of the Government and welfare organizations to this problem. The survey has helped to get valuable data for pre-planning and modernization of the service for the mentally retarded. The survey was done in 1980 and has given us the following data. According to the survey there are 30,190 mentally handicapped persons in Sri Lanka. Out of this total, 18,051 are males and 12,139 are females. When we consider these figures from the new point of the age group, we can understand the gravity of the problems. On the basis of age, figures as follows:-

T A B L E

Mentally Handicapped on age and sex
basis in Sri Lanka

<u>Age</u>	<u>Males</u>	<u>Females</u>	<u>Total</u>
00 - 01	20	18	38
01 - 05	772	548	1,320
05 - 10	1,793	1,298	3,091
10 - 15	2,310	1,611	3,921
15 - 20	2,708	1,629	4,337
20 - 25	2,373	1,613	3,988
25 - 30	1,722	1,165	2,887
30 - 35	1,396	862	2,258
35 - 40	1,158	690	1,848
40 - 50	1,445	1,021	2,466
50 - 60	1,026	690	1,766
60 and above	1,328	992	2,320
	<u>18,051</u>	<u>12,137</u>	<u>30,188</u>
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These figures show us some very important facts:

- i. Children and youth are seen suffering from mental retardation in considerable numbers.
- ii. Compared with the elderly mentally handicapped, numbers of mentally handicapped youth are relatively higher.

In any society the younger generation is the greatest asset to the country and they will take charge of the country in the future. Therefore, the Government and policy makers should take firm action regarding this problem. The causes for the problem of the mentally handicapped in Sri Lanka can be found in social and economic structural backgrounds.

They are as follows:-

- i. Due to malnutrition
- ii. Due to inter-marriage
- iii. Alcoholism
- iv. Addiction to narcotics which is becoming an important factor. During the past few years, drug addicts have been increasing rapidly.
- v. Taking strong drugs during the period of pregnancy.

Out of the total number of 30,188 mentally handicapped, approximately 1,031 persons are receiving institutional care and 1,067 are in the waiting list. The balance are unattended. Due to social structural influences some mentally handicapped prefer to take indigeneous treatment.

Their numbers are not recorded. Some people do not like to tell that they are having a mentally handicapped person in the family. Therefore, unattended numbers can be very large. Anyway, these statistics show the gravity of the problem now and also in the years to come.

Treatment of the mentally handicapped in Sri Lanka; shortcomings remedies:

- i. Most of the mentally handicapped are from poor families and they cannot be looked after at home.

Therefore, a good number of the handicapped are seeking institutional care. The Government should increase financial assistance to mentally handicapped patients or should increase financial assistance to mentally handicapped patients or should increase homes and rehabilitation centres for the mentally handicapped. The Government can also promote (voluntary) organisations to start homes for rehabilitation with Government assistance.

- ii. Except in the case of those who receive Western treatment, there is no way for early detection of the other mentally handicapped. Our medical services and Health Services are capable of handling the problems. Therefore reorganisation and replanning has to be done and a comprehensive scheme of treatment according to the needs of each individual should be provided.
- iii. Voluntary institutions and state homes are providing merely a custodial care, with no proper rehabilitation or vocational training to improve the mentally handicapped. Therefore a comprehensive scheme of integrated educational services with facilities for vocational training should be provided.
- iv. There is lack of co-operation between Medical and Social Service personnel after detection of the mentally handicapped. There is no way for the social worker to know about them. Therefore, the Departmental welfare institutions should establish co-ordinating centres or data collecting centres, then it would be easy to work for upliftment of the mentally retarded. These centres can work as data collecting centres for other handicapped also.
- v. Lack of modern (techniques) methods and training personnel is a set back to achieving progress in service to mentally handicapped. Welfare institutions and the Department of Social Services should work in collaboration with International Organisations and Developed Countries to gain new (techniques) and methods.

Besides these reasons, there are some structural weaknesses in our economy, as a poor per capita income, a poor consumption rate and weak capital formation. These reasons help to increase the malnutrition problem in Sri Lanka. Recent years have seen economic policies of the country been basically changed and a free trade policy has increased national growth rate by 05.1%. This good sign will help to bring down the malnutrition problem in the country.

Economic standards in the country do not permit an increase in the facilities for the mentally handicapped. Existing facilities are more or less in the towns. The Government should widen the facilities to suburbs so as to give better protection and service to the mentally retarded. Our education and medical services are quite capable of handling this problem of the mentally handicapped but the financial position of the country is the main hindrance to every aspect of the problem. Therefore, the country has to depend on foreign assistance.

Under these circumstances, the Department of Social Services already has drawn plans to (uplift) the mentally handicapped in the country. Family counselling based on genetics has to be accepted as a (pre-requisite) to meet the challenges that the family would face. Educational reforms have also made provision for education services to reach the mentally retarded by trained personnel.

Social Services Department has already started two Departmental Institutions for mentally handicapped, one at Pelawatte in the Kalutara District and the other on at Mirigama in the Gampaha District. These two institutions are still in the inaugural stage. Mr. K.M. Weerakoon who was trained by Jica, Tokyo is in charge at Mirigama. Mr. Senanayake who was also trained in Japan, is in charge at Pelawatte Centre. In addition to these, the Department is ready to start training and re-habilitation schemes when the necessity arises.

Under these circumstances, voluntary and foreign assistance is very vital to increase the available services to the mentally handicapped. There are seventeen voluntary

organisations helping the mentally retarded, with Government assistance at present. The Government spent a sum of Rupees 3,080,320.00 per year on grant to these voluntary organisations for providing the necessary services to the mentally handicapped.

The declaration of the Year of the Child and Disabled Persons by U.N.O. has brought a tremendous impact on the awareness of the problem of the mentally handicapped throughout the country.

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