

## Definitions on Disabilities - Dilemma on what and what not to use

Definitions on disabilities have been a concern world over. "Handicap", "disability", "impairment", "differently abled", "challenged", to name a few, are used in the day-to-day context to refer to persons with disabilities.

The changes in terminologies basically emerged to create a positive outlook towards persons with disabilities, which is welcome but the need for uniformity in terminologies is also felt. When the terminology handicap was used, it denoted mostly a negative connotation implying that the

individual was not able to perform routine activities and one who required assistance. This perception was not fully true as persons with disabilities could do most of the activities independently with adequate training. The growth in technology too came in handy to contribute to the independence of persons with disabilities.

The term "disability" had a general connotation and we come across people referring to phrases such as "everyone has some kind of disability"



meaning that no one is perfect in all aspects. This terminology is gradually being accepted and same is used in legislations. The legislation in India - the "Persons With Disabilities Act 1995" and the "United Nation's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" use the word "disability" in the respective titles.

Then what about "differently abled","challenged", etc.? Are these terminologies better than "disability"? Are there legislations which use terminologies such as "differently abled"? From the review of literature it seems that these new terminologies emerged basically due to academic interest. They tried to convey to the public that a person with disability too has ability but in a different way. The impression "in a different way" again is a matter of concern particularly among persons with disabilities. While an inclusive society expects everyone to be a contributory member -big or small the connotation "differently" seems to indicate that a person with disability is "different" but has ability. Is it not true with everyone with or without disability? Then why to single out a person with disability to call him/her different? UNESCO in its Teacher Education Resource Pack has taken a stand that "every child is a special child." If so, what relevance the terminology "differently abled" has?

The term "challenged" is mostly of academic interest. It has a meaning that the person has to fight back the effects caused by disability. Is it not true with everyone? Why these terminologies are not used in legislations whereas academic literature uses them vociferously?

It is assumed in general that we should use terminologies such as "differently abled", "challenged", etc., as the word "disability" would

hurt the feelings of the individuals. This perception may be due to lack of interaction of the general public with persons with disabilities. Professionals and those closely associated with disability work recognise that these terminologies do not have a large impact in the field. In a conference, one visually impaired person stood up and expressed, **"Call us by any name but we are blind ; just playing with the terminologies does not elevate the status of persons with disabilities, and therefore, provide real services empowering us to stand up in the society."**

The present day documents mention impairment too. It is customary now to use "impairment" to mean different degrees of disability. For example, the Global Campaign on Education for All Children with Visual Impairment uses the word "Visual Impairment" and provides an explanatory note that the term "visual impairment" means those who are blind, low vision, multiply disabled visually impaired children, etc. In some literature, a clear distinction is made between different categories of children with disabilities. For example, terminologies such as blind and children with visual impairment, deaf and children with hard of hearing, etc., are also used indicating that there are children with specific disabilities having different degrees of impairment - as severe, mild and moderate.

Therefore, it is better to use terminologies which are used in the legislation at the national and international levels. The term "Persons with Disabilities" seems to be the internationally accepted expression and therefore, literature may be consistent in using such terminologies to avoid confusion in the society. What is needed is to create awareness among the general public

to recognise the abilities of persons with disabilities. The terminology "Persons with Disabilities" is positive as it indicates that the individual is a "person" first and "disabled" next. The UN Convention, the PWD Act 1995 (India) use this expression; and many international documents adopt the expression "disability". Why not we use it in the future and educate the public to understand the capabilities of persons with disabilities? War of words has less relevance as long as services reach persons with disabilities.

### Public education necessary to use the correct terminology

Though so many new terminologies have been introduced at the academic circles, the terminology mostly used by the general public to indicate a person with disability is "handicap." It is true that changes in terminologies have not effectively taken place in the society. Changes should not be confined to academic circles and to the literature only. There is a need for mass education to sensitise the general public on how to address persons with disabilities and what terminologies should be used.

### Our national institutes still use the terminology "Handicapped"

The premier institutes for persons with disabilities in the country still cling onto the expression "handicapped." It is high time that the National Institute for the Visually Handicapped (NIVH), National Institute for the Mentally Handicapped (NIMH) and the Ali Yavar Jung National Institute for the Hearing Handicapped (AYJNIHH) change the terminology "handicap" to "disability" as persons with disabilities are no longer considered handicapped and the society at large is positive towards persons with disabilities. Disability is becoming a developmental issue rather than charity.

## Definitions as per the PWD Act 1995

As per the Persons With Disabilities Act 1995, seven categories of disabilities have been defined. They are blind, low vision, deaf, mentally retarded, locomotor disability, leprosy cured and mentally ill.

1. "**Blindness**" refers to a condition where a person suffers from any of the following conditions, namely: *i) total absence of sight; or ii) visual acuity not exceeding 6/60 or 20/200 (snellen) in the better eye with correcting lenses; or iii) limitation of the field of vision subtending an angle of 20 degrees or worse*
2. "**Person with Low Vision**" means a person with impairment of visual functioning even after treatment or standard refractive correction but who uses or is potentially capable of using vision for the planning or execution of a task with appropriate assistive devices.
3. "**Hearing impairment**" means loss of sixty decibels or more in the better ear in the conversational range of frequencies.
4. "**Mental retardation**" means a condition of arrested or incomplete development of mind of a person which is specially characterised by subnormality of intelligence.
5. "**Locomotor disability**" means disability of the bones, joints or muscles leading to substantial restriction of the movement of the limbs or any form of cerebral palsy.
6. "**Mental illness**" means any mental disorder other than mental retardation.
7. "**Leprosy cured person**" means any person who has cured of leprosy but is suffering from *i) loss of sensation in hands or feet as well as loss of sensation and paresis in the eye and eye-lid but with no manifest deformity. ii) manifest deformity and paresis but having sufficient mobility in their hands and feet to enable them to engage in normal economic activity; and iii) extreme physical deformity as well as advanced age which prevents him from undertaking any gainful occupation.*

# UDIS Report Card for May 2008

- ✦ The UDIS Forum facilitated employment for 15 persons with disabilities during the month.
- ✦ 12 girls with visual impairment pursuing higher education were provided laptops for their education at a special function organised at the Avinashilingam University for Women on 5 May 2008 as a part of the 106<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations of Rev. T.S. Avinashilingam, the Founder-Chancellor.
- ✦ The UDIS Forum representatives attended the meeting of the Board of Management of the PRIST University on 30<sup>th</sup> May to plan training programmes to be offered under the aegis of the Department of Disability Management and Services (DDMS) of the University in partnership with the UDIS Forum.
- ✦ PSG college of Arts and Science and CSI Bishop Appasamy College of Arts and Science sent two of their MSW students to the UDIS Forum for institutional field work.



For more details on the activities of the UDIS Forum, log onto [www.davo.in](http://www.davo.in)  
We value your suggestions.

Do you want to write in the Enabling Voice?  
Send your brief write-ups on issues relating to disability to [udis@vsnl.net](mailto:udis@vsnl.net)

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