

Women Inspiring Women – A Peer Group in Sri Lanka Improves the Lives of People with Disabilities

The Challenge

When she was 22, N.G. Kamalawathie left her parents' home and her village to take a job in the city. It was a huge step for a young woman in Sri Lanka, especially one with a disability. Most girls who have disabilities hardly have an opportunity to finish school, and they rarely receive encouragement to leave their parents' home unless to marry. Women with disabilities in Sri Lanka participate in meaningful activities far less than other women.

In the city, the young woman, also known as Kamala, struggled to find a landlord willing to rent to a person with a disability and an employer willing to hire one. Even when she did, she struggled up and down the stairs to her apartment and to her office. Having coped as a child with her mobility impaired by polio, she learned to pick herself up time after time and create her own opportunities. Seeking access to public services that would benefit women with disabilities proved to be an incredibly tough struggle for Kamala – at least on her own. “Why do we women in Sri Lanka, we who are using wheelchairs, have such difficulty in getting about? Why are there no facilities to help us?” she was left asking. These were questions not many women asked publicly in 1994. Kamala needed more than answers – she wanted change.

Meeting the Challenge

After months of confronting government officials and lobbying on her own for improved public access, Kamala recognized that it would take a chorus of voices to bring about change. So in December 1995, she organized a group of women with disabilities from various districts to discuss what could be done. The group called itself AKASA, a Sinhalese word for “the Heavens”. It is also the acronym for Aabathitha Athi Kanthavange Sanvidanaya, or the Association of Women with Disabilities. AKASA is a self-help support group devoted to creating new opportunities for its members. Since its inception, AKASA has evolved into a network of women's groups in the district of Anuradhapura, which is located in north-central Sri Lanka. In small village groups, women with disabilities, who are accustomed to experiencing alienation, have an opportunity to discuss day-to-day issues affecting their lives. The groups offer the women friendships while shared experiences generate moral support. And, in the context of a group, the women help each other find solutions to problems that can

range from family relationships to income earning. Through a larger district organization, women connect to training opportunities or financial resources to start businesses.

The Good Practice: Women empowering women through a support network that allows them to exercise their rights and gain access to services, skills training and self-employment.



• Background •

Women with disabilities in Sri Lanka have few opportunities for economic independence. Most are confined to their homes, protected by their families from a society that stigmatizes them. The situation is most severe for women residing in rural areas, where negative religious and cultural beliefs remain much stronger than in urban areas. The few existing organizations of women with disabilities are small, weak, charity-oriented and urban-based. In fact, some of the organizations were established by men, who may not fully understand the needs of women.

AKASA started with no money and only a few members. It grew into an organization that receives financial and moral support from the Swedish Handicapped International Aid Foundation (SHIA) and other funding agencies. AKASA members are rural women aged 18 to 40 years. They come from families that are among the poorest of the poor, with incomes ranging from 760 (Sri Lankan) rupees to 1,140 rupees (US\$8 to \$12) per month. More than 75 per cent of members are unmarried, and most have no more than a grade five or six education; they left school because of poverty and disability.

• How AKASA is Structured •

The organization. AKASA follows the bottom-up approach to development used by other grassroots NGOs in Sri Lanka. Working within their own villages, volunteers who trained as “mediators” organize small groups of three to seven women with disabilities. A total of 371 women have trained as mediators. Initially, all mediators were nondisabled women, but now mediators are women with and without disabilities. The mediators identify women with disabilities and then talk with them and their families about the possibilities available to them. The mediators encourage women to

come out of their homes and participate in the mainstream life of their communities by attending cultural, social, sporting and other activities. The women meet regularly in small groups to discuss their individual problems – from difficulties at home to the desire for employment – and then help each other find solutions. For instance, the women organize training workshops to learn specific skills. As members of a peer group, they feel empowered to interact with their community.

Sometimes as many as eight small groups within a village form a village society. Representatives of the village society meet as a district association and elect an executive committee consisting of a president, secretary, treasurer and committee members. All grassroots members constitute the general assembly; members not only have the power and authority to elect officeholders but also the right to contest any post at the district level.

Vocational training and income-generating activities. Initially, AKASA's objective was to organize women with disabilities and to study their situation and needs. When it became clear that poverty and the need for an adequate income were the women's most pressing problems, AKASA shifted into a second phase and began formulating appropriate and relevant strategies to help improve members' economic status. After several years of organizing and mobilizing, AKASA now focuses on developing income-generating activities for its members in Anuradhapura, where, according to an AKASA survey, women with disabilities are among the most impoverished individuals in Sri Lanka.

The AKASA Executive Committee appealed for help to the then-Minister of Social Services, who also hailed from Anuradhapura. In 1999, the women received ownership of a five-acre plot of land with a few old buildings. With additional support from SHIA, the buildings were repaired and renovated into an office, a dormitory for 20 women and a simple training centre.

To find additional funding for its employment-related projects, AKASA turned to the District NGO Forum, which processes all NGO proposals and recommends them to sponsors. With funding eventually in hand from different sources, AKASA established the following four projects:

Vocational Training Centre for Rural Women. At the vocational training centre, trainees choose courses in sewing, home gardening and animal husbandry; the courses last two years. The Sri Lanka-Canada Development Fund (SLCDF) supported the training effort with a grant averaging US\$200 per month until June 2002; at that time, the SLCDF terminated its programme in Sri Lanka. Since then, AKASA registered the training centre with the Department of Social Services, thus entitling the centre to receive a grant of about US\$0.40 per day per trainee, which is quite inadequate even to meet costs of food and other incidentals. As a result, each trainee now pays fees, which can be in the form of monthly rations – 10 kilograms of rice, 1 kilogram of sugar, 250 grams of lentils and

milk powder. The total market value of the package is about 300 rupees (US\$3), although very poor people receive the rations at rates subsidized by the state. In addition, parents often contribute a portion of home-grown vegetables.

Income Generation for Poverty Alleviation. Started in August 2001, the income-generation project provides both rural women with disabilities and women with a disabled child with financial support for setting up a self-employment activity. CARE Sri Lanka provided US\$6,200 to be used as a revolving fund for loans.

AKASA village groups selected the first 77 participants for the project, including 48 young men.

If an individual's disability is so severe that he or she is unable to participate in an income-generating activity, a family member assumes responsibility for the activity. The AKASA Divisional Association and each project participant sign a loan agreement, with repayment made to AKASA's Revolving Loans-Fund bank account. The interest goes to the village society. Upon selection for a loan, project beneficiaries are eligible for training in livelihood skills, marketing and leadership (see box). In offering the training courses and workshops, AKASA works with other community-based organizations that focus on social, religious, cultural and other mainstream activities.

Of the income earned by participants, a third must be deposited into a savings account held by the family member with a disability and a third must go to repayment of the loan from the revolving fund. The participant can spend the remaining third according to his or her needs and wishes. Since the project started, repayments have allowed 20 new beneficiaries to receive loans, bringing the total number of participants to 97 in two years.

Interest income derived by the village societies is used to support activities that benefit people with disabilities. Some societies, for instance, meet the travel costs of a village's community-based rehabilitation workers.

Traditional Medicines Plantation. A traditional medicines plantation occupies three of the five acres of land given to AKASA. The Ministry of Indigenous (Ayurvedic) Medicine that provides AKASA with technical advice has also agreed to purchase, for its own use, the medicinal herbs and plants produced on the plantation. The Ministry of Environment is supporting the project with a grant of US\$5,500. AKASA will use the profits from the project to cover its operating costs and ensure its financial sustainability.

Economic Upliftment and Improvement of Health Status. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees sponsors AKASA's most recent undertaking. The Economic Upliftment and Improvement of Health Status project targets very poor people as well as people with disabilities who were displaced as a result of civil conflict. The project's initial six-month phase is made up of two components. The first involves poverty alleviation support for 90 individuals in the form of a loan of 10,000 rupees

(implemented on the same basis as the poverty alleviation project previously described). The second component allows for grants of 6,000 rupees for 45 individuals to upgrade temporary housing. The project employs eight field staff, conducts workshops to strengthen support for the project and involves people with disabilities and family members, village leaders, government officers and bank managers. The initial phase will benefit a total of 150 people with disabilities when it concludes in December 2003 at an estimated cost of 3 million rupees (US\$30,000).

Helping Families

Dasa is a 15-year-old boy with severe and multiple disabilities who was fed only milk. His mother cannot go out to work because she has to look after him. For years, his father, a farmer, rejected Dasa because he required so much of the mother's time. The family is poor and badly needs the income that the mother could earn as a farm labourer. Parental tensions have affected Dasa's two siblings. Dasa was selected to receive a loan of 5,510 rupees (US\$58) from the AKASA project. His mother used the money to cultivate land owned by the family, which now earns an annual income of about 76,000 rupees (US\$800) from her labours. The father's attitude toward his disabled son has softened since the family's economic situation improved. Tensions have ceased, and the family has grown more close-knit.

Accomplishments

AKASA has 800 active individual members in 133 small groups in 10 subdistricts. It is a member of the District NGO Forum and the only disability-related member organization among the forum's 54 NGOs. Its representative was elected honorary secretary of the forum in 1999 and again in 2001. AKASA members participate in social, sports and cultural events, both in their local communities and nationally. In 1998, members won two gold medals and two silver medals in swimming events at the National Sports Festival for Persons with Disability.

Vocational training. The average monthly income earned by AKASA members who have completed training and set themselves up in self-employment is about 998 rupees (US\$10.50). In most cases, even this small amount will double a family's income.

In the first year of the AKASA Vocational Training Centre, eight trainees graduated; of them, three now work at the training centre, two are self-employed and one works in a garment factory. In 2002, 15 trainees completed the centre's training. Of those trainees, nine had intellectual disabilities; each received a cow as a donation from an NGO in the district. Three are employed in garment factories, and the other three received

sewing machines for use in self-employment. They now earn about 1,000 rupees (US\$11) per month. Sixteen new trainees were recruited in June 2003.

Income-generating projects. Individual women's economic status has improved by 20 to 55 per cent. The average monthly income for a woman ranges from 998 rupees to 6,365 rupees (US\$10.50 to \$67) for self-employment activities that include animal husbandry, carpentry, bicycle repair, dressmaking, inland fishing and fish net weaving. Eight project beneficiaries have started savings accounts, six have purchased land and two have invested in gold jewellery as a form of savings, as is common in some areas of Sri Lanka. Another two have purchased sewing machines; one bought a refrigerator and another has invested in a water pump. SHIA continues to help AKASA in its efforts to strengthen itself. For the period 2000-2002, SHIA provided US\$20,000 for AKASA's activities.

Lessons Learned

AKASA started from scratch with no role model; its success is a testament to the power of determination. AKASA's experiences in organizing and creating training opportunities offer the following lessons:

Grassroots decision making encourages empowerment. By involving themselves in all decision making related to AKASA projects, members have increased their self-confidence in making decisions about their lives.

Informal support networks encourage peer counselling. AKASA members help one another cope with daily life. The sharing of insights and new ideas among members helps individuals deal with their difficulties.

Working in a difficult and under-served area can encourage donor funding. By successfully implementing its pilot projects under severe socio-economic conditions, AKASA demonstrated the capacity of rural disabled persons to change their situation – given a certain level of outside support. Accordingly, AKASA has dispelled several myths about, first, the helplessness of women; second, the helplessness of rural women; and, third, the helplessness of rural women with disabilities. AKASA has used its successes to attract new and renewed funding.

The Woman Behind the Idea

As a young girl struggling to go to school and keep pace with siblings and friends, N.G. Kamalawathie (Kamala) learned to pick herself up and press on despite her mobility impairment. Her difficulties strengthened her, she says.

A bout of polio at age four severely weakened Kamala's legs. Most of the time, Kamala gets around on crutches. For long trips, she uses a wheelchair. After graduating from high school in 1980, Kamala enrolled in a gem-cutting course at the Vocational Training Centre for Disabled Persons. She then found a job at the Gem Corporation in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka. While working there, Kamala became active in sports for disabled persons, which provided opportunities to travel abroad and participate in wheelchair races. The travel experiences and exposure to foreign cultures stirred up questions about why women with disabilities in Sri Lanka need to struggle and why public access is lacking.

The determination she found in her youth drove Kamala to raise her adult voice in protest. In the mid-1980s, Kamala started campaigning for disability issues. Seldom did she find a sympathetic ear. When she did, there was no follow-up. Kamala then confronted the cold face of reality. Change would occur only when others who shared her needs joined forces. Kamala would find other disabled women and, believing in strength in numbers, they would discuss what they could do.

Meanwhile, Kamala answered an advertisement for a gem-cutting instructor at a school for physically disabled children and was hired. Again she found resistance. She learned that nondisabled officials and authorities made all management decisions at the school, which contradicted her belief that disabled people have a right to participate in decision-making processes that involve them.

Kamala pushed on, organizing a group of peers to discuss how they could bring about change. At that time, in 1995, Kamala was one of 56 women from Sri Lanka (and the only one with a disability) who was selected to attend the Beijing Conference for Women. Her interactions with women from other parts of the world filled Kamala with ideas about organizing and mobilizing women with disabilities.

Upon her return from Beijing, Kamala moved swiftly to register Aabathitha Athi Kanthavange Sanvidanay, or AKASA, as an official organization. And "the heavens" began to open for hundreds of disabled women in Sri Lanka.

Now 44, Kamala works full time as AKASA's president. In 2000, she received a presidential award for "the work rendered by her to the country in spite of being a woman who has disability". The following year, she earned recognition as "the woman who had contributed most" to her province.

Looking Forward

AKASA has earned the recognition and respect of local communities. By demonstrating its ability to plan and implement projects with efficiency and effectiveness, AKASA also has gained the acceptance of the NGO community and government officials and has started to challenge colleagues in the District NGO Forum. AKASA's next goal is the integration of women and others with disabilities into mainstream poverty alleviation and social development activities in district projects and programmes.

Replication

Organizing people with disabilities into support groups requires little funding. It does, however, require the involvement of people who want to work together to make changes in their lives. A strong leader can help create a cohesive group and lead others to form a vision. Replication of AKASA's self-help approach requires consideration of the following measures:

- Study the status of a target group with disabilities and formulate clear strategies that respond to that status;
- Get to know the community and the available resources;
- Link with other organizations and the government in strategic partnerships to share resources and exercise influence; and
- Identify donors, prepare grant proposals and approach donors regularly.

For More Information

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