

Safe and easy access to public services: awareness of facilities available for the visually impaired

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Introduction

In keeping with the theme of the 11th SAARC Congress of Ophthalmology, it is appropriate to address the issue of improving the quality of life of the visually impaired.

Enhancement of the facilities and services available in public places for the above group of population, encourages independence, improves safety and empowers them to contribute to society by reaching their full potential.

Objectives

- To evaluate awareness and availability of the facilities and services that are available in public places for the visually impaired at provincial level in Sri Lanka.
- Compare these with countries in the region and the developed world.

Methodology

Three groups were interviewed with an investigator administered questionnaire.

1. Visually impaired persons - O/L students, teachers and past pupils of 2 blind schools in the country (Ratmalana and Monaragala).
2. Medical personnel - Doctors and Nurses.
3. Members of general public.

Awareness of public facilities in 5 areas (accessing health care, public facilities, public transport, pedestrian movement and education) were assessed and studied.

A literature search was done to explore the facilities in Sri Lanka at a provincial level, countries of the SAARC region and those in the developed world.

Data was collected from 78 subjects.

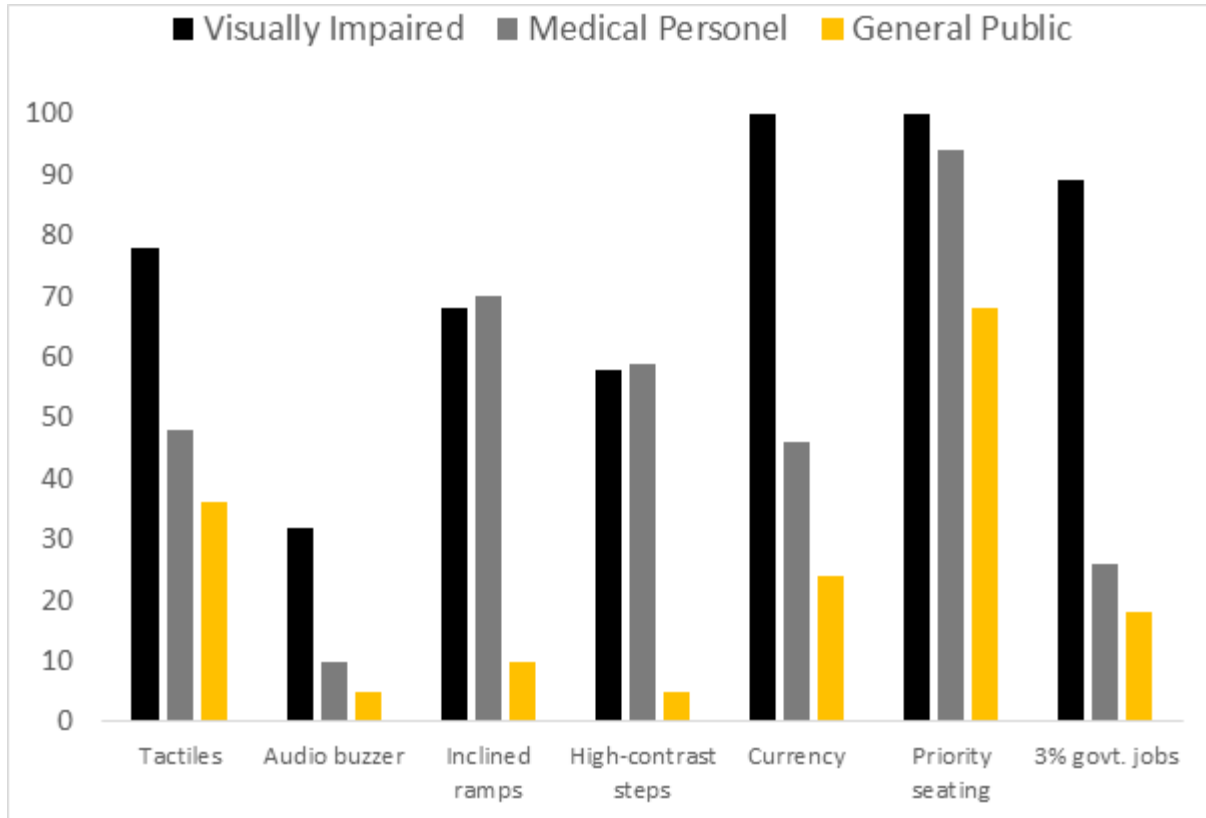
- 32 visually impaired persons
- 17 Healthcare workers
- 23 Members of general public

	Visually impaired	Medical Personnel	General public
Mean age	24.7	32	38.5
Male: Female	17:7	3:2	5:2

All of the visually impaired were aware of all facilities available for them in Sri Lanka. Only 60% of medical personnel and 47% of the general public were aware of their existence.

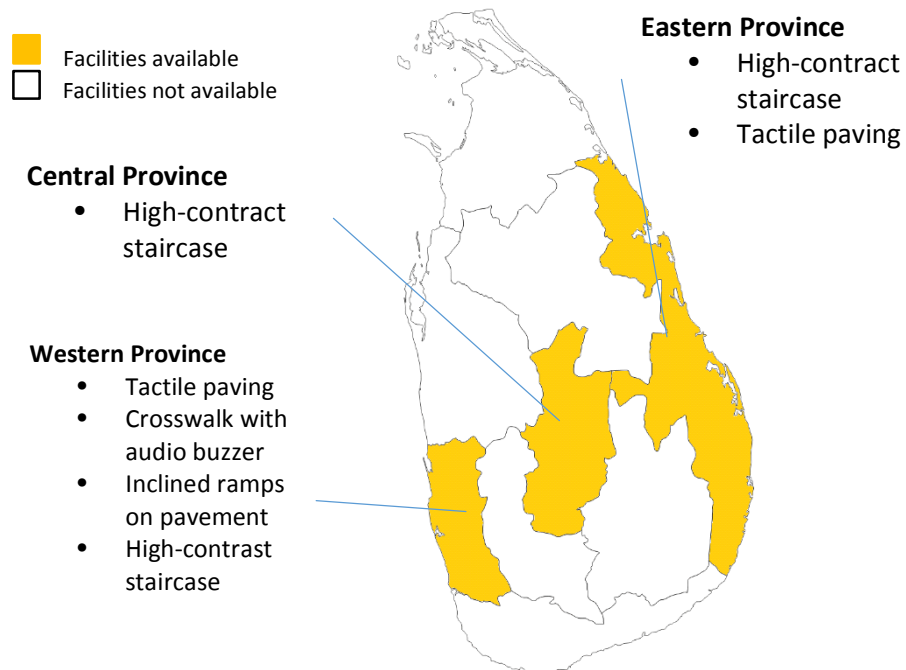
Most of the general public were aware of the disable seating in buses. Knowledge about the 3% govt. job quota, currency features and audio buzzer was very low amongst both healthcare personnel and the public.

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General facilities for the visually impaired include priority disabled seating on buses, tactile denominations of currency notes and the 3% quota of jobs reserved for the disabled.

The Sri Lankan data revealed that facilities for the visually impaired were only seen in the Western, Central and Eastern provinces.



Many countries in the SAARC region had passed acts, guidelines and circulars affording the visually handicapped equal rights and access to public services. However the practical implementation of these have been quite limited.



These include

- Tactiles - India
- Audio ATMs - India, Pakistan
- Braille signage - India, Pakistan
- Audio alerts for public transport - India
- Auditory devices at traffic signals - India
- Braille bank forms - Pakistan
- Free postage for braille material - Pakistan



Developed countries have been implementing these systems a few decades. Japan started installing tactiles back in the '70s. Some of the newer facilities include

- Universal Design in public buildings - Australia, USA, Sweden



- Alternative forms of important information (large print, audio tape, braille or electronic format) – Japan, UK, Australia, USA



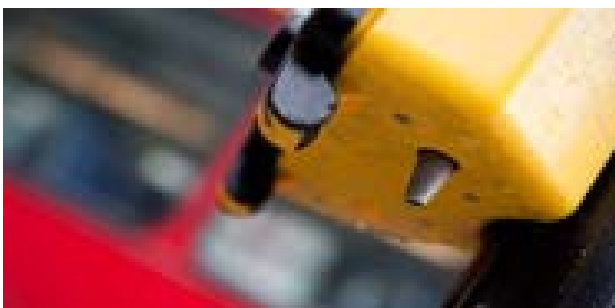
- Braille signage – Japan, Singapore, UK



- Tactiles – Japan, Singapore, UK, Australia, USA



- Audio ATMs – Japan, Singapore, UK, Australia, USA



- Audio alert for MRT and train – Japan, Singapore, UK, USA
- Braille and Audiobook Libraries – Singapore, USA, UK
- Barrier-free public pathway – UK, Australia

Conclusions

Awareness of facilities for the visually impaired amongst the general public is very poor. The visually impaired appear to be poorly educated about the newer facilities that are being incorporated in to public works.

The few facilities that are available in Sri Lanka are concentrated around Colombo and a few other major cities. Though facilities are being incorporated in the other SAARCC countries as well, more work needs to be done to reach the level of services that are available in the developed countries.

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