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CREATIVE EMPOWERMENT

**The Role of the Arts in Advancing
Disability Rights in Sri Lanka**

RITHU MUNASINGHE

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**International Centre for Ethnic Studies
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Disability Rights in Sri Lanka**

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Introduction

This piece will delve into whether the arts can be used as a tool to advance disability rights in Sri Lanka and to what extent. Firstly, it is vital to understand the term “human rights,” defined by the United Nations as “rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more.” (UN, 2023).

Secondly, the term “disability” is defined by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) as “persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments, which in interaction with various attitudinal and environmental barriers hinder their full participation in society on an equal basis with others.” (UNRWA, 2013).

Third, it is important to note that the term “arts” in this context refers to all forms of art, including visual/fine art such as drawing and painting, drama, and music.

The intersection of the arts and disability rights is a dynamic field that highlights the value of creative expression as a tool for advocacy and empowerment. The disability rights movement challenges stereotypes and strives for more inclusive and authentic representation. Arts can be utilized to raise awareness about disability challenges and promote societal change.

The objective of this piece is to examine three Sri Lankan organisations: Sunera Foundation, VisAbility and Chitra Lane to understand how different forms of art are being used to help persons with disabilities and to determine whether and to what extent the arts are successful in furthering disability rights in Sri Lanka. It will also conduct a comparative analysis of the three organisations and their varied approaches before looking at a wider global context, concentrating on the United Kingdom and comparable initiatives there, to provide insight on how other countries use the arts to advance human rights. This will be followed by recommendations from the above three organisations providing tangible and practical guidance to assist persons with disabilities improve their quality of life.

Sunera Foundation

The Sunera Foundation was established in 2000 by Sunethra Bandaranaike, a philanthropist and socialite. Having attended a workshop for persons with disabilities using music, dance and drama by Wolfgang Stange (the founder and director of Amici Dance and Theater company, founded in 1980 in the UK, which included dancers with disabilities) and Rohan Deva, inspired Bandaranaike to start Sunera foundation. Sunera Foundation's mission is to "enhance the quality of life of persons with disability." Their vision is "a society that recognises and accepts the contributions of persons with disabilities." Sunera uses theatre and performing arts as a tool to help persons with disabilities express themselves in a safe space and build confidence while facilitating social integration.

Workshops are conducted island-wide, targeting the very poor who do not have access to such workshops. Those with disabilities from birth are the main target at the moment. At the time of writing this article, 37 workshops were being conducted every week around the island in areas such as Jaffna, Batticaloa, Anuradhapura and Galle and the workshops have had approximately 5000 participants since 2000.



An image from a workshop conducted by Sunera Foundation.

Source: <https://sunerafoundation.com/workshop>

The workshops have children aged 12 and above and employ a variety of mediums such as dance, music, and yoga. The workshop starts with yoga, which is inclusive and relaxes participants. This is followed by a 30-minute session conducted by trainers where participants engage with each other, improving cognitive and speech skills. The tasks include activities like asking participants for their names and how they are feeling. The goal is to make the sessions enjoyable and something they look forward to. The sessions end with snacks (provided by Sunera) and music or dancing to boost their moods and ensure they leave on a positive note. Art therapy such as drawing and painting is also occasionally used, allowing participants to express themselves through different creative mediums. Sunera's multifaceted approach is holistic since participants have a wide array of disabilities that need to be accommodated.

Sunera's concerts are famously known not just in Sri Lanka but also internationally. The drama festival – “Samanalayaya” is a chance for workshop participants to elucidate their talents in their regions, and some are staged in Colombo, as well as internationally and have even won awards. “The Last Two Minutes” was a play by workshop participants performed at the Biennale of Theatre and Psychiatry in Italy in 2006, which won the Special Jury Award at the Biennale. Each performance and play are choreographed and put together by the trainers and aims to deliver a small message regarding a human rights issue being faced by persons with disabilities. For example, in 2002 the production “Journey Into The Subconscious” highlighted the role that persons with disabilities can play in society.



A picture from one of the shows done by Sunera Foundation

Source: https://sunerafoundation.com/theatre_performances

Over the years, Sunera has helped many people build their self-confidence. One of the success stories shared is about a 14-year-old boy, diagnosed with autism and a learning disability. He played a leading role in the performance at the Chilaw Regional Drama Festival 2023. “When he first joined our Chilaw workshop four years ago, he even struggled to get instructions from our trainers to do workshop activities. Over the course of his time at the Sunera workshop, he was assisted to discover his inborn talent for dancing. He was gradually able to follow instructions he receives from the trainers and engage in activities. As a result, he grew more at ease, became more friendly and social” (Sunera Foundation, Art Hope newsletter, issue 36, 2023).

Additionally, four participants of the workshops have become trainers, which shows how they have grown throughout the workshops and have even found employability through it.

Disability rights face many challenges in Sri Lanka and organisations like Sunera find it difficult to cope. One of the main challenges is funding. Given the state of the Sri Lankan economy, it is difficult to find donors and sponsors. However, funding is a crucial element that keeps these companies afloat and allows them to continue doing such remarkable work. Founder, Ms. Bandaranaike expressed the other issue of the stigma present in Sri Lankan society. The idea is that persons with disabilities should

not be associated with and should be hidden away from the public, as they are not openly accepted. Changing this illusion and demonstrating how people with disabilities are still able to be actively involved in society, have talents and should be celebrated, is one of the main goals of the foundation. She describes how their lack of rights is affected by these obstacles. She goes on to say that there is a need for more awareness to be created to tackle these issues which make daily life challenging for persons with disabilities and do not allow them to fully enjoy their rights and lives. The concerts and performances are Sunera's way of demonstrating how persons with disabilities should be celebrated and accepted into society.

VisAbility

The next organisation is VisAbility, a Sri Lankan-German alliance which employs dance and rights awareness to empower people with physical disabilities. VisAbility was set up in 2015 by Mahesh Umagiliya, a Sri Lankan choreographer and dancer alongside Vinothine Balasubramaniam, a Sri Lankan RTI (Right To Information) practitioner. Their mission is the “empowerment of people with disabilities to become actors of change, promoting equal opportunities for people with disabilities in society, fighting discrimination and demanding tolerance, strengthening the human rights of people with disabilities through education and networking of local actors and institutions.” Umagiliya was inspired by his time abroad working with dance and persons with disabilities as a form of empowerment. He identified a need for a new type of mixed-abled creative approach in Sri Lanka, which meant including those both with and without disabilities. VisAbility works with both people with and without disabilities as a way of enabling persons with disabilities to better integrate into society by forming connections with others and to display how they should not be shunned and should be openly accepted. Their vision is to create a world with equal treatment, access and opportunity for people with disabilities.

Marginalised persons can leverage human rights as a potent instrument to gain more social, legal, and cultural inclusion as well as government accountability. The importance of teaching human rights is a top priority at VisAbility. Rather than teaching participants about human rights the traditional way, they use dance as a creative means of breaking down human rights language into more relatable and understandable terms. They believe that dancing offers an integrated, hands-on learning method that can aid in participants' retention and application of newly acquired knowledge. At VisAbility, dance is seen as an instrument that can stimulate teamwork, confidence and agency. This type of "inclusive dance" can promote diversity and aid in bridging the gap between individuals with disabilities and those without them.

One of the main aspects of human rights that VisAbility focuses on is the Right To Information (RTI). They believe this concept can be of vital assistance to persons with disabilities as it can help them gain agency and tackle issues that disabled people face daily such as accessing information about processing of disability allowances for

example. RTI makes information accessible and can help individuals exercise their rights and can make governments more accountable and transparent. The aims of the workshops are for participants to express themselves creatively and freely, understand the Right To Information process and develop the “power within” (self-confidence), “power to” (agency) and “power with” (collaboration) to submit RTI applications. RTI can be a useful tool “for rights-based approaches to sustainable development that tackle inequality, discrimination, poverty, and corruption” (Waldorf et al., 2024).

VisAbility works by setting up workshops in rural areas of Vavuniya, Jaffna and Anuradhapura districts which run for three consecutive days. They start with simple exercises to make introductions, with participants saying their names accompanied by an action- creating a sense of identity. This simple task of incorporating an action encourages movement and confidence while introducing the “right to identity” in a more memorable way. This also helps participants build connections and relationships with each other. They also conduct other exercises such as the “ribbon dance.” Participants are paired up and given 2 long ribbons. Each person holds the ribbons and pulls them in opposite directions while trying to maintain their balance. Trainers explain that the ribbons represent the power of each person. It teaches participants the importance of maintaining balanced relationships and the awareness that each of them can exercise power. Mr. Umagiliya explained how some people had never felt that kind of power and did not know they were capable of it, which filled them with a sense of fulfilment and gave them a new outlook on their lives.

In the three-day workshop trainers get to know participants and try to help address the daily difficulties they face. If issues can be solved, trainers teach participants how to fill out RTI applications and appeals. After the workshop, trainers follow up with participants, helping them with additional steps. Typically, appeals filed by participants are granted according to Mr. Umagiliya. Many participants use the information they have learnt and file RTI requests following these workshops. The workshop wraps up with an introduction to human rights terms, following which participants are encouraged to share their daily issues and create a link to the human rights terms introduced earlier. All workshops conclude with a public performance to raise awareness of RTI and disability rights. When interviewed, Mr. Umagiliya mentioned one such performance: “there was a lady with a disability in her legs which

made it difficult for her to walk normally. She used to get teased in her village for the way she would walk. We put together a performance that showed the beauty in her walk, where all the participants of the workshop did an elaborate dance down a public road. Once the performance was over everyone clapped and cheered and this lady felt such a sense of happiness and learned to appreciate her disability.” He said it “changed her entire outlook on life and made her so much more confident.”



An image of a public performance in Anuradhapura

Source: <https://visibility.social/visibility-in-sri-lanka/anuradhapura/>

One of the challenges faced by VisAbility is dealing with the popular idea that help is given in the form of a physical (dry rations) or monetary benefit (Waldorf et al., 2024). When people hear that no such benefit will be provided, they may be unwilling to attend these workshops. Explaining that help can come in other forms which will provide a more lasting benefit is challenging due to the Sri Lankan culture and mindset. A common issue faced by all three organisations is the lack of funding. This may be for a myriad of reasons but the idea that disability is not an important issue in Sri Lanka is a large part of the problem which severely needs to be tackled.

Chitra Lane

Founded by Mrs. Delysia Gunewardene in 1967, Chitra Lane is a charitable organisation devoted to children with special needs. She continues to work closely with the school today, consulting on issues and meeting with the new students to assess them and gauge what areas they need to focus on and how best to achieve this.

Their goals include the early intervention and detection of global developmental delays in children and aim to provide the life skills needed to find employment and generate income for them to lead independent lives. In addition, Chitra Lane also seeks to empower parents and caregivers and create more awareness about special needs by sharing knowledge and experiences with other organisations both local and international. “The Chitra Lane Way,” is the unique take the organisation has on dealing with children with special needs, which is explained in depth in their book published in 2018.

Chitra Lane Welfare Society located in Colombo consists of 4 different sections- the school for children with special needs, the resource center, the sheltered workshop and the Chitra Lane Academy. The first is the school for children with special needs which is the main section. The children’s resource center was established later, which has over 500 children attend annually, as it offers different types of therapy such as speech therapy, art therapy, parent counselling, IQ testing and more. The resource center opened up a whole other avenue for parents who could not send their children to school every day, encouraging families from all over the country as well as from abroad to travel to Chitra Lane. The sheltered workshop allowed students above the age of 16 to learn vocational skills such as cooking and sewing so that when they graduate at 21, they are equipped with the skills to help them lead independent lives. Teaching children vocational and life skills helps them integrate into society smoother beyond Chitra Lane. Simple tasks like adhering to meal times at home, tidying up after themselves, and respecting others’ feelings and opinions are taught and parents are encouraged to implement such tasks at home as well. Lastly, the Chitra Lane Academy offers help and training for parents and caregivers on how to manage the special needs of children. Today over 130 children are enrolled at Chitra Lane school and some graduates of the school are employed by the school itself.

Chitra Lane's art room is a special place, which offers one-on-one 30-minute sessions for children, focusing on developing fine motor skills, muscle control, hand-eye coordination and writing skills through the use of visual art tools like crayons and paint brushes. Teachers are trained to work with children, tailoring tasks based on each child's abilities. Visual art can be a relaxing and enjoyable experience, promoting diversity and allowing children to express themselves in different ways. Diversity is at the heart of "The Chitra Lane way," and as such, visual art can be used to teach children that people express themselves in different ways and to open their eyes to alternate ways of doing things. The dedicated art teachers say that children feel a sense of accomplishment and joy from completing their artistic endeavors as art fosters imagination and curiosity, allowing children to express themselves in a safe environment and teaching them how to handle their emotions.

Furthermore, music is another tool utilized at Chitra Lane as it can be a way of calming or expressing joy in children with special needs. Music can stimulate all aspects of development in children, allowing the body and mind to work together. Dancing can also aid develop motor skills and encourage self-expression. Music is recommended for children with learning disabilities because they can benefit from multisensory experiences. Drama is also helpful in boosting confidence, concentration, language and communication skills, as well as teaching co-operation (The Chitra Lane Way, 2018).

Chitra Lane has an Annual Arts and Crafts exhibition where the arts and crafts of the students are sold. This is another way of boosting children's confidence and empowering them as they are delighted at exhibitions and fairs seeing their work displayed for sale according to Mrs. Gunewardene.

Comparative Analysis

As explained above these three organisations' missions are quite alike but their uniquely different strategies allow for a comprehensive mix of distinct approaches to promote disability rights through the arts in Sri Lanka.

Sunera Foundation's use of theatre coupled with VisAbility's use of dance and Chitra Lane's use of various forms of art provides a diverse range of arts programs, each with their methods catering to persons with special needs. A common factor of all three organizations is their culture of inclusivity and goal of creating a community. An issue people with disabilities commonly face is scrutiny from the public and thus are sheltered making it difficult to form connections and friendships. At these organisations establishing relationships and bonds is a key factor of their programs. It is in these workshops and classes that persons with disabilities are made to feel accepted and loved. They gain a sense of community which most haven't experienced before and it has a huge impact on their lives. Mrs. Bandaranaike accentuated the fact that joy is an undeniably vital factor in our lives and persons with disabilities should be given the same opportunity to experience this joy. Moreover, a common goal at the heart of each organization is the potential to empower persons with disabilities and teach them the skills needed to enter society as independent individuals. These skills are taught in different ways using different techniques. At Chitra Lane, students are encouraged to use their creativity and express themselves through their art which can be a liberating experience, and when praised can boost their confidence. Whereas at VisAbility, using different carefully designed exercises such as the Ribbon exercise mentioned earlier, participants are exposed to the idea that each of them has a certain amount of power and strength which they may have never encountered before.

Even though all three organizations focus on persons with disability, there are slight differences in their target audiences. For example, VisAbility mainly deals with adults with physical disabilities, whereas Sunera and Chitra Lane on the other hand work with children mainly but also some adults who have continued to come over the years and work with both physical and mental disabilities. Chitra Lane works mainly with children with special needs. Chitra Lane is located in Colombo but has an outreach across the country with students from as far as Hambantota, Chilaw & Kegalle as well as from other countries like UK, Maldives etc. coming in for classes. They also conduct classes and counselling online for those who are unable to physically visit due to long

distances. Sunera Foundation and VisAbility have workshops around the island and target the poorest in rural areas who have no other access to such help.

The success stories of each organization are just a handful out of the many lives they have changed and are proof that the arts can be used to empower disabled people and thus advance their rights. As more awareness is being created and through word of mouth these workshops and organizations are gaining more participants. Mr. Umagiliya explained how word of mouth is an incredibly powerful tool, especially in rural areas where there is minimal awareness about disability rights. He says it drew lots of new participants as they had heard the experiences of past participants and were encouraged to join.

While all three organisations' approaches are incredibly well executed, VisAbility's strategy of teaching people what human rights and disability rights are is an important practice which could be perhaps absorbed by the other organisations as well. By teaching people these terms, they are being educated and made aware of the theory of rights and what that entails, allowing them to take the skills learned and apply them practically which can in turn help advance their rights.

Global Comparatives

This section will compare the work and strategies of the three local organisations above with similar initiatives in the UK to better understand the global landscape for using arts for disability rights.

The adaptation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2006 marked a significant turn in establishing cultural participation as a human right. Art and disability have gone hand in hand historically as it enables a form of dissemination that may not otherwise be an option for persons with disabilities. The global movement for inclusivity set off by the CRPD inspired initiatives worldwide like those below.

Looking at the UK specifically, there are multiple slightly different initiatives towards inclusivity in the arts such as Project Ability. It is a Glasgow-based visual arts group, that offers disabled individuals the chance to develop their art skills through workshops. Founded in 1984, they provide a safe environment for individuals with learning and behavioral challenges to express themselves and build confidence. They conduct three main workshops, the first being “ReConnect” catered to adults with mental ill health. The second is “Aspire” which is a visual arts program catering to adults with learning disabilities. “Create” is an arts program for children and young adults between the ages of 5- 28 who have disabilities. These all-inclusive workshops coupled with the many other projects and classes provided by Project Ability help create a network for disabled people around the UK and exhibitions carried out by them highlight artists with disabilities and publicise their work to create awareness.

Another group with a similar objective is Shape Arts, a disability-led art organisation that seeks to increase access to culture for disabled people by generating opportunities and fostering greater acceptance of disabled people. Their areas of operation include creative activities, heritage programs, and consulting. It was founded in 1976 to provide creative possibilities for people with limited opportunities to participate in an artistic life with the goal of pushing for fair access and representation in the cultural sector.

The British Council's Disability Arts international website is another platform created to showcase the work of disabled artists and aims "to share the ways arts organisations are increasing access to the arts for disabled people." It was created in 2013 as part of the European Union Culture Programme-supported project, Unlimited Access. The website has a section on "Best Practice case studies" which looks at organisations doing work on access and disabled artists. One case study titled, "Unlimited: Making the Right Moves" was a program by the British Council and Candoco Dance Company involving both disabled and non-disabled persons and included performances, workshops and research aimed at "shifting perceptions of disability within the arts and beyond."

There are notable distinctions between the objectives and approaches of the UK and Sri Lankan projects. Initiatives in the UK like Project Ability, Shape Arts, and the British Council's Disability Arts International place more of an emphasis on systemic integration and representation within established cultural sectors, whereas Sri Lankan groups like the Sunera Foundation, VisAbility, and Chitra Lane prioritise grassroots empowerment through inclusivity and skill-building workshops. Programs in Sri Lanka, for instance, place a high priority on establishing basic access, empowering underprivileged rural communities, and eradicating long-standing social stigmas associated with disabilities. On the other hand, UK programs that are supported by more robust disability rights frameworks, such as the CRPD, function in a more receptive social environment, and thus focuses on increasing the exposure of handicapped artists on international platforms and encouraging professional growth in the arts sector. With Sri Lanka emphasising foundational support and the UK on wider cultural acceptability and policy-driven inclusion, these disparities underscore the developmental gap in resources and public attitudes. Despite being tailored to their particular social circumstances, both strategies highlight the universal relevance of the arts in promoting disability rights.

When compared, all these organisations have common missions and use similar initiatives and practices to implement them. The overall aim is to create awareness of disability rights in the hope of creating an inclusive and equal society where disabled persons with- talents are appreciated and celebrated and the stigma around them is broken. Collaboration and building networks are key tools in this task. Information

and resources must be shared between local organisations as well as international ones. VisAbility and Chitra Lane's resources on RTI and tackling children with special needs (respectively) enable access for a larger audience and create awareness. Additionally, VisAbility's work in Nepal with Advocacy Forum Nepal, a human rights research and advocacy organisation, is a prime example of creating international networks.

Recommendations

Speaking to various members of these local organizations, opened up the conversation into what the future of arts as a tool for disabled rights would look like. In terms of those interviewed, the founders of the three organisations were the main points of contact, however other members of the organisations such as the trainers at Sunera Foundation and the art and music teachers at Chitra Lane were interviewed as well. None of the participants were directly interviewed, although through the interviews mentioned above, the stories of participants were shared. Having heard all these stories of persons with disabilities thriving through the arts, cemented the notion that the arts are effective in advancing disability rights.

One of the main attributes raised was the need for more awareness and an accentuation of the importance of disability rights (mentioned in a local Sri Lankan context). Challenging the tainted concept of disability is where efforts are needed and as these organisations work towards these goals, they point out that to make such large change requires individual action at the most grassroots levels. Disability is something that can happen to anyone at any point in their lives and is not always something you are born with, understanding this may help move a step closer towards a more inclusive Sri Lankan society.

Educational programs such as those provided by Chitra Lane should be promoted by governments and there are countless other programs online through which people can learn such as short courses for example. , through which people can learn. This coupled with more awareness campaigns by governments, media and these organisations themselves, highlighting the contributions of disabled artists and the importance of inclusive arts could be useful. Additionally, there is a need for more early detection and intervention facilities by trained professionals (The Chitra Lane Way: 2017).

Secondly, Sri Lankan policies around disability rights are weak and have gaps that urgently need improvement. Mr. Umagiliya (VisAbility) mentioned that some of the most rudimentary systems are still not in place in Sri Lanka. He mentioned the example of how public documents are not being published in all three languages (Sinhala, Tamil and English) which is a legal requirement. He went on to explain how at every step the organisation faces pushback and resistance from policymakers which makes their jobs infinitely more difficult. Regardless of the several national

policies and legislation such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 1999, Disability Rights Bill 2006 and National Action Plan for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights, we are yet to see actionable change. It is essential to start with the basics in this case strengthening disability laws and creating access to general information published by the government.

Another proposal is to improve accessibility via digital inclusion. Developing digital platforms and technologies to make information and even art initiatives available to persons with disabilities, independent of their geographic location or impairment type.

In terms of infrastructure, particularly transportation, people with disabilities have significant challenges in Sri Lanka. Infrastructure improvements is another aspect that needs attention. Improving access to wheelchair spaces on buses through ramp access can undoubtedly improve the quality of life for disabled individuals. Moreover, developing physical accessibility in cultural settings such as theatres, galleries, and other art installations can also be immensely helpful.

Employability is a further problem that must be addressed. Even though the 1988 Public Administration Circular No. 27 states that 3% of vacancies in public services and public companies should be filled by persons with disabilities (Disability:IN, 2024), many disabled people struggle to find employment and thus require government assistance. People with disabilities make up 8.7% of the population according to a report in 2012, and out of this 70.9% of the employment age do not engage in any economic activity, which is well below the 3% requirement (Disability:IN, 2024).

Conclusion

As seen above, this piece synthesizes the insight gained from analysing the intersection between arts and disability rights locally and within a global context. By developing a first-hand understanding of the three organisations it is evident that the arts are a powerful instrument for advancing the rights of persons with disabilities. The advancement of rights occurs over time, it is not something that happens immediately, thus by effectively utilizing creative expression, it is possible to challenge societal perceptions, empower individuals and advocate for their rights. Every initiative had its specific strategy consisting of multiple techniques, which, as indicated in the success stories, significantly improved the quality of persons with disability's rights. It is however vital to note that the level of so-called measurable "success" depends from person to person and depends on the type of disability and how severe it was to begin with. The very extreme cases may not see a great deal of change but simply including them in workshops and other activities creates inclusivity and encourages diversity which is part of the goal of creating a welcoming society. The main goal for the above three local organisations is to contribute to the wellbeing and happiness of participants in order to boost their confidence and help them integrate into society

When looked at within a global setting, the work and goals of these local organisations align with larger international ones and are inspired by international movements. The global comparatives section reinforces the importance of cross-cultural exchange and collaboration in advancing disability rights through the arts, illustrating how small local initiatives can benefit from and contribute to global discourse. While legal and policy frameworks present certain challenges especially locally, they also open up windows for advocacy and change, especially when reinforced by powerful narratives and the visible proof art provides. As we move forward, the recommendations provided suggest avenues for strengthening these initiatives. Change starts everywhere, and as these local organisations have demonstrated, every individual can contribute to this change. Ultimately this piece emphasizes the crucial role of the arts in promoting a more inclusive society where the rights of persons with disabilities are fully recognized and respected.

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Creative Empowerment

The Role of the Arts in Advancing Disability Rights in Sri Lanka

Rithu Munasinghe

This essay delves into the transformative role of the arts in advancing disability rights, with a focus on Sri Lankan grassroots initiatives like the Sunera Foundation, VisAbility, and Chitra Lane. It highlights how these organizations use creative expression to foster empowerment, inclusion, and advocacy for individuals with disabilities, tackling deep-seated societal stigmas and fostering independence. A brief comparison with UK initiatives underscores the global importance of cultural participation as a human right, providing a broader context. Through compelling success stories and practical recommendations, the essay illustrates how the arts can drive societal change and create a more inclusive future.



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