



SRI LANKA FORUM OF UNIVERSITY ECONOMISTS

SRI LANKA ECONOMIC RESEARCH CONFERENCE (SLERC) 2020

PROCEEDINGS

Volume IX

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**Uva Wellassa University of Sri Lanka, Badulla,
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21 – 22 January 2021

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Sri Lanka Forum of University Economists

National Library of Sri Lanka – Cataloguing-In-Publication Data
Proceedings of the Sri Lanka Economics Research Conference 2020

ISSN 2279-2406

Published by Sri Lanka Forum of University Economists (SLFUE)

Uva Wellassa University of Sri Lanka,
Sri Lanka.

Tel: +94 55 222 6168

Web: www.slfue.org

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Printed by

Indesign Advertising

Lower King Street, Badulla

900000

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Telephone: 0552225600

This publication is sponsored by



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IN A QUEST FOR ‘WHAT THEY VALUE THE MOST’: PERSONS WITH VISUAL IMPAIRMENT AND BLINDNESS IN A CLUSTERED COMMUNITY IN SRI LANKA

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Introduction

The community engagement and the resource requirements of a community would vary on the nature of the community. If one would broadly recognize persons with visual impairment and blindness (VI&B) as community per se, it is expected that their needs, resource requirements and the activities they engaged-in would differ from the rest of the population in general. This research aims to explore the nature of resource requirements and the activities commonly engaged-in by a ‘community’ of persons with VI&B, in a ‘clustered village’ in Southern Sri Lanka.

Though sociologists interpret the term community in various ways, this study adopts the definition of Sylvia Dale, (1990); “Community is a body of people living in the same locality...Alternatively, a sense of identity and belonging shared among people living in the same locality, Also, the set of social relations found in a particular bounded area” (Dale, 1990, p. 562). Accordingly, the ‘*Siyanehugama*’ 55th model village was developed by the National Housing Authority in 2018, where 27 families having at least one person in each with VI&B, would very well be embraced as a “community”. Each family is allocated a 10 perch land with a basic one-bedroom house.

Visual impairment or vision impairment, is the degree of reduced vision level from low vision to total blindness that impedes a person’s ability to function at certain or many tasks. As at 2018, among the Sri Lankan population of 21 million (worldometer, 2020), considerably 1.7% of individuals carry a visual impairment (Devapriya, 2020).

A study is yet to be performed in the Sri Lankan context based on the theme “Resources and activities that VI&B people value the most in their lives”. The

preference of an individual's resources and activities may vary according to their demographic characteristics.

This empirical study focuses on deriving what types of resources and activities the VI&B people ascertain the most in their lives, and how the demographic characteristics affect their lives based on their visual impairment type. This study contributes to draw attention from the government towards the VI&B people and types of actions the government can take, to improve the lifestyle of VI&B people in Sri Lanka.

Research Problem

Thus, to date no broad investigations conducted in a Sri Lankan context on the types of resources and the activities that VI&B people value the most, as well as the impact of demographic characteristics on their lives. Hence, this research signifies the findings to this empirical gap.

Objective

The main purpose of this research is to ascertain the types of resources and activities that VI&B people value the most in their lives and how demographic characteristics affect their lives.

Methodology

A two-day data collection camp was conducted at “*Siyaneethugama*” model village in the Hambantota District during 09-11 December 2019. Purposive sample technique was used for selecting the sample. One to one interviews were held with the persons with VI&B and the family members totaling 41 respondents, lasted for 30 - 40 minutes. The discussions focused on resource and diverse activity areas like demography, education, resource requirements, education, health facilities and transportation. Main resources were segregated into six: the government funds, vocational trainings, infrastructure facilities, types of news media, private and public transportation; Similarly, activities into five: outdoor activities, shopping for goods, preparing meals, doing homework and taking care of themselves. Measures of variance calculated and graphically represented.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 shows demographic characteristics of VI&B people.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of VI&B people

	Frequency (%)	
	Blind n =19 (46.34%)	Visually Impaired n=22 (53.66%)
Gender		
Male	10 (52.63%)	16 (72.73%)
Female	9 (47.37%)	6 (27.27%)
Age		
20-39	1 (05.26%)	6 (27.27%)
40-59	17 (89.47%)	12 (54.55%)
60-80	1 (05.26%)	4 (18.18%)
Marital Status		
Married	10 (52.63%)	14 (63.64%)
Bachelor	9 (47.37%)	8 (36.36%)
Education Level		
No schooling	2 (10.53%)	1 (04.55%)
Grade 1 - 8	3 (15.79%)	3 (13.64%)
Passed Grade 8	4 (21.05%)	6 (27.27%)
Passed GCE O/L	4 (21.05%)	7 (31.82%)
Passed GCE A/L	3 (15.79%)	2 (09.09%)
Graduate	3 (15.79%)	3 (13.64%)

Source: Authors' calculation based on the primary data.

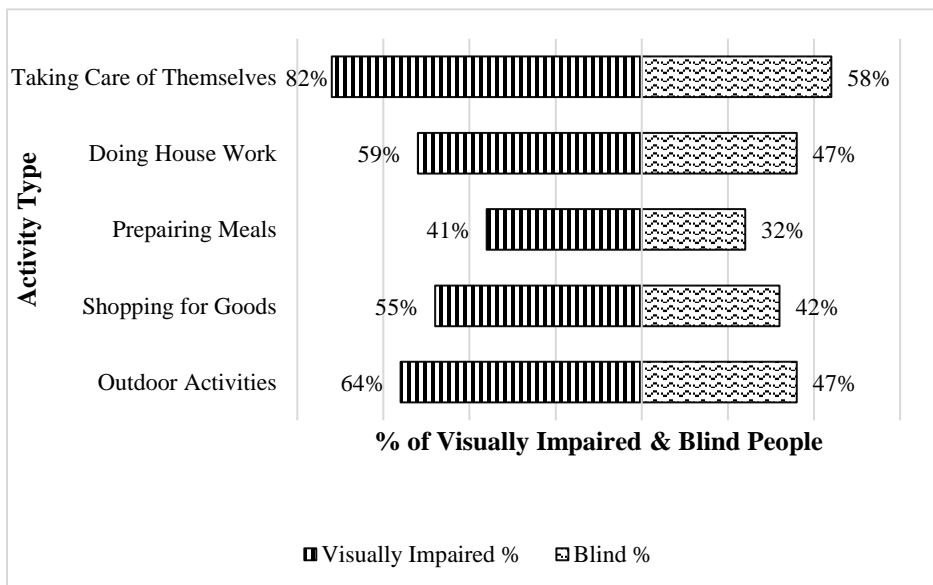
Among the 41 interviewed, 19 blind and 22 visually impaired represent 46.34% and 53.66% respectively, of the total sample population. Male population is 26 of the total sample, where 10 are blind, representing 52.63% of the total blind population. The remaining 16 visually impaired make up 72.73% of the total visually impaired population. Female population is 15 of the total sample, where 9 being blind represent 47.37% of the total blind population. The other 6 are visually impaired, representing 27.27% of the total visually impaired population (Table 1).

Most of the VI&B people tend to be older, where majority were between the ages of 40 to 59 years. Accordingly, 17 blind people consist 89.47% of the total blind population. Twelve people from the visually impaired sample between age group of 40-59 carry 54.55% of the visually impaired population (Table 1).

Most of the visually impaired are married, with 14 in the sample population, thus, representing 63.64% of the visually impaired population. Most of those blind are bachelors, with 9 in the sample population, forming 47.37% of the blind population (Table 1).

Most of the blind people were educated. Consisting 21.05% each of the blind population were GCE O/L qualified and those passed Grade 8 (4). Among the visually impaired, 31.82% were GCE O/L qualified (Table 1).

A majority of interviewees were males (26) and the rest being females (15) with 63% and 37%, respectively. Additionally, 24 were married and 16 were single. Seventeen are totally blind and 20 with a visual impairment. Respondents were in the age category of 33-66 years. Despite their visual impairment, some blind people have their own source of income, some are painters, carpenters and making bricks. Also, 78% of the people were not using spectacles while 22% were using spectacles.

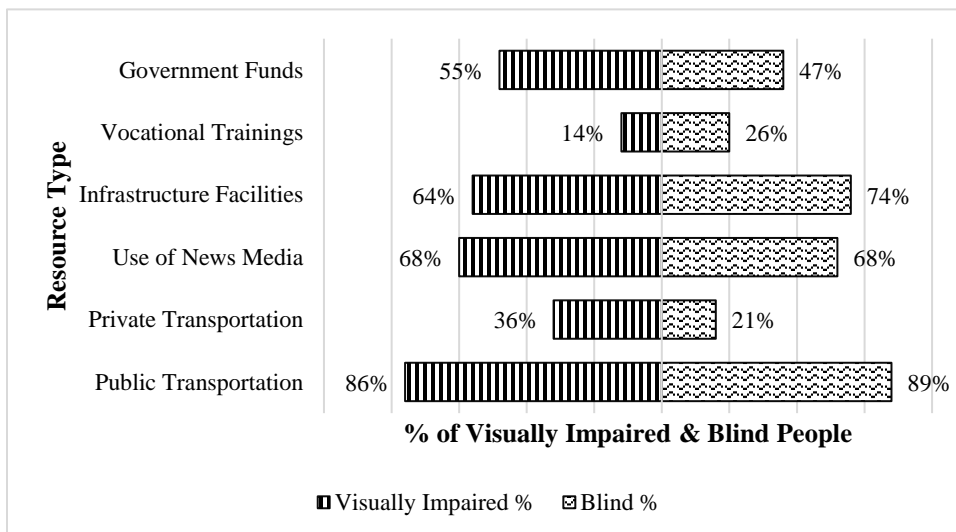


Source: Authors’ illustration based on the primary data.

Figure 1: Results of activities that VI&B people engage in the most

The least number of visually impaired (9) preparing meals consist 41% of respondents. The highest number of blind (11) taking care of themselves is 58%, while the least number (6 people) prepare meals by themselves.

Here, 82% of visually impaired (18) and 58% of blind (11) taking care of themselves means that they can manage their own daily tasks including washing, cutting nails & hair, toileting, dressing & undressing, eating & drinking etc. In addition, 59% of visually impaired (13) and 47% of blind (9) managing household tasks - cleaning and washing (dishes and laundry) depict the ability and effort to perform their tasks themselves. Additionally, 55% of visually impaired (12) and 42% of blind (8) can do shopping to buy goods. About 64% of visually impaired (14) and 47% of blind (9) are engaged in sports, handicrafts, entertaining activities, religious activities, cultivation etc., are identified as the main activities that they engage with.



Source: Authors' illustration based on the primary data.

Figure 2: Results of resource types that VI&B people value the most

Six major resource types that VI&B people value the most (under Methodology) indicate the highest number of people (19 visually impaired and 17 blind people) use public transportation, where 86% visually impaired and 89% blind. Figure 2 signifies the least number of visually impaired people (3) enriched with vocational trainings as 14%, while the blind population shows the least in using private transportation (4) as 21%. Furthermore, 36% (8 visually impaired people) travel by their private transportation methods, and 68% (15 visually impaired and

13 blind people) use media sources like television, radio and mobile phones etc., to access daily information; 64% of visually impaired and 74% of blind (14 people in each category) have proper infrastructure facilities with a mode of satisfaction; 26% (5 blind) enhanced their ability by undergoing vocational trainings; 55% visually impaired and 47% blind (12 visually impaired and 9 blind) receive government grants like “Samurdhi” & “Jeevanadhara”.

Conclusion

A high number of visually impaired people take care of themselves, while the least number prepare meals themselves (activities). The majority of people (19 visually impaired and 17 blind) use public transportation (resources). The majority of VI&B people between 40 to 59 years age categories tend to be older. Of the total sample population, 89.47% blind peoples are between 40 to 59 ages (17). In addition, this represents 54.55% visually impaired and it includes 12 people. This research assists the government and the society to implement facilities for inclusion of VI&B people into the society.

Keywords: *Demographic Characteristics; Resources & Activities; Visually Impaired & Blind People (VI&B people)*

Acknowledgement

Authors acknowledge the SLIIT Business School for guidance provided, including the AHEAD research project targeting the VI&B people. Gratitude extends towards the citizens of “*Siyanethugama*” village for data provided.

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