

THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY IN SOCIAL INCLUSION FOR THE BLIND AND VISUALLY IMPAIRED PERSONS IN SIERRA LEONE BY RAYMOND CHRISTIAN JAIA, PROJECT SUPERVISOR SIERRA LEONE COMMUNITY BASED REHABILITATION AND EMPOWERMENT FOR THE BLIND PROJECT

The case for BVIPs for social inclusion is often framed in terms of accessibility to services, human rights and justice. However less attention is given to the role of the family in ensuring the BVIPs access these services. In this article I'll present measures to encourage family members to be involved in promoting participation of Blind and visually impaired persons in family and community life to achieve social inclusion in all arenas of life.

In most developing countries like Sierra Leone, Social inclusion of PWD's is yet unclear. The predominant negative perceptions about Blindness result in BVIPs being socially rejected left out of decision making processes, academic achievements and access to medical facilities. As human beings, the needs of BVIPs should be met in order for them to become active members in society. Unfortunately, most families don't care because these members are 'disabled'.

There are lots of problems faced by Blind and visually impaired persons when they are not socially involved in the family or community. Many Societies in Sierra Leone look at blindness as a curse or punishment inflicted upon blind people for sins committed. For instance some call them witches and this not only demoralizes blind people but also denies them the opportunity to participate in certain Socio-economic activities like decision making in the home, education and the job market.

Blind people need all the support from the family in order for them to accept their situation. They can perform many activities equally as most sighted do. Through exercising their rights as individuals, and through accessing forms of social support from the family their participation in community life can be achieved.

However, in order to achieve social inclusion by the BVIP, it is of paramount importance that the family allows opportunities for interaction with family and community members, for people with visual impairment in the home.

There are many steps in achieving this interaction. One major component is the involvement of family members in training of daily basic skills. These are routine skills performed on a daily basis by the Blind like personal hygiene and good grooming i.e.: bathing, brushing of teeth, washing, care of hair, care for nails, oral hygiene, etc.

Another way in which to achieve this interaction would be for the Blind to get involved in social interactive skills like communication: Their mannerisms, head and facial posture, gestures etc. Also, other community involvement skills like making and keeping friends, etiquette and manners are important. In performing these activities, it helps restore their self-confidence and self esteem.

Activities such as walking around one's home, preparing food are also important aspects in daily basic skills. Working around one's house, which is also known as

mobility and orientation, is of vital importance to the blind person. This helps him to be aware of his situation especially in his immediate environment.

The family plays a great role in serving as a guide to the blind person and they too should participate in the training process. When a person gets blind, his/her perception and actions change automatically that is why they act differently. Family members should understand this.

Also, another way the family can be involved in promoting social inclusion for BVIP's is through the practical facts from the field. Often times, you hear about the problems young people with blindness face within their communities when their situation is new. Yet some do overcome the significant challenges and live a successful life. Family involvement has created a great impact in the lives of their blind relations especially in building their confidence and rendering their moral support.

Below are some examples which explain exactly the role the family play in bringing about social inclusion of Blind and visually impaired persons.

My first field experience was during a base line survey identifying people with visual impairment. A blind man Mr. Hassan Gbondo (not real names) was identified in one of the communities, he was traumatized, and he could not move around and was just treated like a baby. His perceptions and feelings changed

towards people and only his aunt was there to assist him. Asked how he came about his present state, he explained that his aunt who was his only hope now bought him a sport shoes and his cousin grew jealous. At night he had a dream of somebody pouring something on his face and when he woke up in the morning he could no longer see.

After three months of encouragement, counseling from the aunt and the Community Based Rehabilitation field staff he realized that although visually impaired, he might be able to make a life for himself. Through our social support services he learnt mobility, orientation and daily basic skills. He can now go to the mosque every morning with his white cane, move around his community conveniently and can now attend community meetings. The role of the aunt was so vital that it aided the speedy involvement of Hassan in the community.

In another situation, a blind client was also identified during a base line survey within central Freetown, Pa Fattah Sanu aged 65yrs. He got blind as a result of Glaucoma, he had never been empowered and at his age his children thought he could not do any thing in the house and that they should do everything for him. Upon our arrival, the children were interested to know the kind of service we would render to the old man. After thirty minutes discussion with the children, they saw that it was possible for social inclusion if trained. After three months of training with the help of the children, he was able to operate his cell phone, go to

the mosque alone which he has not done for years. His children for him served as his strength and he is now very much useful at home.

It is also clear that drama is a strong tool that can be used to encourage family members for social inclusion of their blind relations. This fact was achieved during a focus group discussion held with community members involving family heads. The usefulness of Blind and visually impaired persons within their community is often not known. A role play was organized by the volunteers and other field staff demonstrating how sighted people feel when they are blindfolded. Some family members were involved and their experiences were different. For some balance loss was a major concern, they lacked self- confidence and many other negative feelings. With the aid of a sighted guide they became confident in everything they did. Those among the group that had blind relatives at home appreciated it so much and there was a positive impact on their attitudes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have been compiled from our interviews and other sources. I hope they will help to promote positive Social Interaction.

- There should be opportunities for awareness raising and discussion of social inclusion issues for the family. (E.g. attending family meetings, community gathering etc.)
- There should be regular training and updates for family members and the BVIP. (E.g. In daily basic skills when new techniques are invented.)

- There should be opportunities to develop mobility and independent living skills in and around the home. (e.g. Identifying land marks within the home i.e. trees, potholes , foot paths etc)
- The family should ensure that pupils with a visual impairment get the opportunity to meet others who have visual impairment (e.g. via clubs and the Internet.)
- The family should encourage the inclusion of pupils with visual impairment in playground games and activities. (e.g. draft, Ludo)
- The family should help create 'circles of friends' for the Visually impaired person to provide support for attending school discos, dances.
- There should be specific social skills for family members, including analysis and discussions of social situations and use of role-play.

CONCLUSION:

The family and community all do play vital roles in the social inclusion of Blind and visually impaired person's active life at any age. When people realized that a disability, their own or that of a loved one, is going to be permanent, they may express a variety of reactions from shock, to fear, to grief, to anger there is no right way to respond. People generally react according to what this disability means to them and just how much it is going to affect or change their lives.

After the intervention of the Sierra Leone Community Based Rehabilitation project in the blind community, I have the vision! "The family plays a great role by

involving BVIP's socializing and they will over come diverse constraints and inequalities, which they face at home." In this ways, negative social attitudes towards Blindness do continue to be evaporating slowly but surely.

Hence this is a clear indication that the rights of the Blind for equal access to his Civic Rights, Education, Health, Information and a greater role in the development process are on track when the family is involved.