

Legislation urged to make information & knowledge more accessible for PWDs

Participants of a media sensitization workshop held here on Friday made a resounding appeal for taking concrete steps including legislation and policies towards barrier-free accessibility to information and knowledge for persons with disabilities.

More than 50 media practitioners, representatives and officials of civil society organisations, government, and the United Nations participated in the workshop. Organised by Unesco, in collaboration with Special Talent Exchange Programme (STEP), the workshop focused on 'Enabling Universal Access to Information and Knowledge Platform for Persons with Disabilities.'

The workshop was aimed at bringing together various stakeholders to raise awareness and learn about ways of improving accessibility to information and knowledge platforms and disability-friendly warning systems through information and communications technologies, sign language, policy, technical and design modifications with a particular focus on barriers faced by persons with hearing and visual impairment.

In his welcome remarks, acting UNESCO Director Abdul H A Hakeem, highlighted the importance of accessibility to information and the importance of giving equal access to everyone, which empowers people to make decisions in their daily lives and continue learning throughout their lives, This includes actions such as being able to read price tags, to physically enter a hall to participate in a gathering, to read a pamphlet with healthcare information, to understand a bus schedule, to receive crucial warnings about disasters or to view web pages.

Abdul Hakeem said there were innumerable obstacles and barriers that hinder persons with disabilities such as a lack of information in accessible formats such as Braille and sign language, especially in broadcast media. He said the workshop would be beneficial in providing government officials, media, civil society, and other groups with an insight into simple and widely used solutions to making information and knowledge available to all in Pakistan.

Speaking on the occasion, educationist and researcher Senator Dr. Saeeda Iqbal said proper legislation and its implementation is required for persons with disabilities and all facilities for enabling them to access information and knowledge were vital. She said the government always welcomed legislation but at the same time it was the moral and collective obligation and responsibility of everyone to come forward and work for the betterment of persons with disabilities.

Atif Sheikh, president of STEP, gave an overview of barrier-free information accessibility. He said 10 to 15 per cent of the Pakistani population was living with some form of disability. People with disabilities was lacking of information and having no means of communication for the special persons. Access to information is a major issue for people with disabilities. He said that in Pakistan, the society as well as the media view people with disabilities in a medical or charity context and has never considered them an integral part of the society, and this needed to be addressed in order to treat persons with disabilities as normal citizens.

Explaining problems related to people with visual impairment, the project manager of STEP Ali Shabbar said media outlets including televisions, newspapers and websites were not accessible for visually impaired persons. "Being visually disabled, I cannot read any newspaper or website of any media outlet in Pakistan as they are not being developed keeping in view visually disability," he said.

In our society, women were the most vulnerable and women with disability were worse affected and disregarded by the society. The general population, and women with disabilities in particular, needed to be trained and oriented on means of accessing information and media accessibility," said Aabia Akram, chairperson, National Forum of Women with Disability.

A key point stressed on the deliberation concluded was the importance of creating an enabling environment perspective rather than focus on how to "fix" person with disabilities. Key suggestions and recommendations of the workshop participants were noted which will be incorporated in a study on Barrier Faced by Persons with Disabilities in Pakistan to Access Information and Knowledge.

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