

Performing/Informing Rights: Mixing Inclusive Dance and Human Rights Education for Disabled People in Sri Lanka and Nepal

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Abstract

Over several years, the German/Sri Lankan NGO VisAbility has been pioneering a mix of inclusive dance with rights education and advocacy to empower persons with conflict-related, physical impairments, first in Sri Lanka and, more recently, in Nepal. This article captures both the benefits and challenges of using dance for more transformative human rights education in informal settings.

Keywords: dance; disability; human rights education; Nepal; Right to Information; Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

In November 2022, officials of Nepal's National Network of Disabled Conflict Victims (NNDCV), the human rights NGO Advocacy Forum, and the music school NAAD Sangeet Pathshala came together in an empty gallery space at Kathmandu's Taragaon Museum to learn a novel method of human rights education (HRE). As Amisha Adhikari, one of Advocacy Forum's lawyers, told us afterwards:

When [participants] first entered the workshop venue, they were stunned because they did not see any chairs, any writing materials, projector, all that stuff. So, they kept coming to me asking ... How are you going to talk about rights [without that]? (Interview, 25 November 2022).

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*** Associate Professor at the Centre for Dance Research (C-DARE), Coventry University, Coventry, United Kingdom; co-investigator on the Performing Empowerment and Performing/Informing Rights projects. We want to acknowledge our discomfort that a predominantly Global South project on physical disability is being written up by three non-physically disabled academics from the Global North. Unfortunately, our initial efforts to make this article a conversation among a range of practitioners involved in the project did not pan out as we had hoped. While there is no doubt an element of comparative advantage and division of labour at work here, our authorship underscores the ongoing inequalities within human rights project funding, research, and practice, as well as the differential treatment and recognition accorded certain activities (for example, writing articles versus delivering human rights education).

Rather than being on the receiving end of ‘rights talk’, participants quickly found themselves asked to improvise movements related to the Right to Information (RTI). Adhikari later admitted:

As a law student and as a lawyer, I always felt like law requires seriousness ... Dance is more like entertainment. So, I was confused [about] how the two of them will work [together] (Interview, 25 November 2022).

After the three-day workshop, Mandira Sharma, a human rights lawyer and founder of Advocacy Forum, told us the training had ‘really opened our minds’ as they saw how dance made it ‘easier for a non-legal person to ... understand what the RTI process is about’ (Interview, 23 November 2022). She added that dance is ‘really an empowering tool—even for us [as human rights activists]’ (Interview, 23 November 2022). Indeed, dancing temporarily subverted the lawyer/non-lawyer hierarchy in the room, as well as more pernicious and intersecting ones of caste, colour, disability, ethnicity, and gender.

The Nepal workshop was led by Mahesh Umagiliya, a Sri Lankan choreographer/dancer and co-founder of VisAbility, alongside Vinothine Balasubramaniam, a Sri Lankan RTI practitioner (see [Waldorf 2023](#)). Since 2015, VisAbility has been pioneering a creative combination of inclusive (‘mixed-abled’) dance with human rights education and advocacy to empower¹ disabled people² (including the war-impaired) in Sri Lanka. The workshop was part of the Performing/Informing Rights project, which focuses on RTI as a tool for disabled people in Sri Lanka and Nepal to claim their rights, particularly related to disability-targeted social protection schemes.³ That project also served as a pilot for how VisAbility’s methods might be extended, adapted, and translated to Nepal’s context.

This article uses initial evidence from the innovative Performing/Informing Rights project to argue that dance can help make human rights education (HRE) more transformative—that is, more capable of challenging unjust and unequal power structures/relations (see [Bajaj et al. 2016](#); [Gaventa 2021](#); and [Kabeer 2005](#)).⁴ It also addresses several gaps in the existing literature. While there is some excellent work on dance and peace education (for example, [Pruitt and Jeffrey 2020](#)), less has been written on dance and HRE.⁵ Also, there has not been enough attention on transformative HRE with respect to either disability rights or the Right to Information. Although there has been some scholarship about transformative HRE programmes in South Asia, this has mostly looked at India and Bangladesh (see, for example, [Bajaj 2017](#)), rather than Sri Lanka and Nepal.

The article starts by sketching the recent shift from ‘declarationist’ to transformative HRE and the place of dance in the latter. It then briefly introduces the post-war situation of disabled people in Sri Lanka and Nepal with an emphasis on the legal frameworks. Next, the article presents VisAbility’s projects with disabled people in Sri Lanka and Nepal, offering a preliminary assessment of their early impacts. Finally, the article concludes by looking at next steps and the projects’ larger implications.

1 We recognize that empowerment has, at times, been individualized and neo-liberalized but we prefer ‘to affirm the more collective and emancipatory meaning of empowerment’ ([McGee and Pettit 2020](#); see [Gaventa 2021](#)).

2 Here, we use the common lay term ‘disabled people’ and more legalistic term ‘people/persons with disabilities’ interchangeably. There are political and ethical debates in Sri Lanka and Nepal about terminology that we do not have space to discuss.

3 The project focused on people with physical impairments as we did not have university ethics approvals to work with people with mental impairments.

4 [Houston \(2005\)](#) rightly cautions against romanticized claims about the ability of dance projects to transform individuals and societies.

5 [Manley \(2015\)](#) describes a project that linked dance, human rights education, and indigenous pedagogy among First Nations children in Canada. There are other projects that have explored dance and rights education (e.g. [Kogon 2013](#)).

2. Performing human rights education

2.1 Human rights education

Although the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights called for education to strengthen respect for human rights, it took until 2004 for the UN General Assembly to proclaim a continuous World Programme for Human Rights Education.⁶ The General Assembly followed that up with the [UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training \(2011\)](#), which commits all states to promote education *about, through, and for* human rights (Article 2.2). Education *for* human rights means ‘empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others’ (Article 2.2c). The Declaration encourages the use of the arts for human rights training and awareness-raising (Article 6.2). It also explicitly links HRE with RTI, which gives people access to information held by public bodies. As Article 1 of the HRE Declaration states, ‘Everyone has the right to know, seek and receive information about all human rights ... and should have access to human rights education’ (Article 1.1; see Article 1.3).

The Declaration makes specific reference to HRE empowering persons with disabilities and ‘contribut[ing] to the elimination of the causes of exclusion or marginalization’ (Article 5.2). The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ([CRPD 2007](#)) devotes an entire article to States parties’ obligation to raise awareness, which includes ‘[f]ostering at all levels of the education system ... an attitude of respect for the rights of persons with disabilities’ (Article 8.2.b). The Convention also stresses that the right to education encompasses lifelong learning (which includes HRE), and that education should focus on ‘[t]he development by persons with disabilities of their personality, talents and creativity, as well as their mental and physical abilities, to their fullest potential’ (Article 24.1.b.). Bringing together disability, education, and the arts, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires states ‘to ensure opportunities for persons with disabilities to access cultural life and to develop and utilize their creative, artistic and intellectual potential’ in educational and extracurricular environments (2016, para. 58).

2.2 Critiquing and transforming human rights education

Rather ironically, the Declaration galvanized criticism of HRE for being too universalist, Western, colonial, institutionalized, elitist, top-down, neo-liberal, individualistic, legalistic, technical, and apolitical (see [Keet 2015: 53](#)).⁷ Coysh encapsulates most of these critiques and argues that HRE is a Foucauldian power-knowledge discourse:

the United Nations (UN) has enabled a narrow and manufactured type of human rights education discourse to take shape in practice by validating certain forms of knowledge (institutional, expert, technical) while burying and discounting others (cultural, indigenous, community) ([Coysh 2014: 89–90](#); see [Coysh 2018](#)).

Similarly, [Keet \(2015: 48\)](#) challenges what he calls the ‘declarationist’ approach to HRE: ‘the dogmatic belief that all human rights truths are generated and consummated within human rights instruments such as declarations, conventions and covenants’. He contends that HRE contributes to the current mistrust in human rights by helping human rights become a hegemonic, neoliberal discourse that is now incapable of mobilizing a counter-hegemonic movement ([Keet 2015: 48](#)). As a corrective, these and like-minded scholars propose critical, decolonizing, transformative, and emancipatory approaches to HRE (see, for example, [Keet 2015](#); [Zembylas 2018](#); [Monaghan et al. 2017](#); [Duffy forthcoming](#), respectively).⁸

⁶ For a recent overview of the development of human rights education in international human rights law, see [Duffy \(forthcoming\)](#).

⁷ For an earlier and influential critique, see [Englund 2005](#).

⁸ These approaches owe a debt to Paolo Freire’s pedagogy (e.g. [Freire 1995](#)).

Our approach is more aligned with Bajaj's formulation of transformative HRE (see [Bajaj et al. 2016](#)), which seeks to empower individuals by giving them practical tools to reshape their societies.⁹ It focuses less on the promises of international instruments and more on local, lived experiences of rights. Rather than top-down teaching, it involves bottom-up, participatory, and experiential learning. Through transformative HRE, people acquire knowledge and skills that enable them to be more informed, self-confident, and active rights-holders—and thus to be better positioned to assert individual, as well as collective, rights and to challenge unjust social structures. Finally, transformative HRE goes beyond legal rationality to embrace the affective, emotional, and embodied: 'laughing, playing, singing, and dancing together ... helps participants experience common human feelings, going beyond the social categories that divide them' ([Bajaj et al. 2016](#): 21).¹⁰

As detailed below, the Performing/Informing Rights project shares several features with Bajaj's transformative HRE. It is more bottom-up and involves South-South knowledge transfer, translation, and localization (Sri Lanka to Nepal and back to Sri Lanka). It focuses on domestic RTI laws and processes rather than universal instruments. It challenges local, socio-cultural norms around impairment. But, most importantly, it uses dance to promote playful, experiential, dialogic, and embodied learning.

2.3 Dance, human rights, and HRE

Dance is a way for people to express themselves using body movements, either alone or, more frequently, in shared spaces. Dance is inevitably political ([Kowal et al. 2017](#)) and has been used in public performances for human rights ([Mills 2017](#): 99–115). A well-known example is the One Billion Rising campaign around violence against women ([Mills 2017](#): 83–98). Another, more grassroots, example that started off in Chile and then spread transnationally is 'A rapist in your path' ([Serafini 2020](#)).

We think dance is well-suited for transformative HRE in general and disability rights education in particular. This is because dance has the potential to draw attention to the way each body is simultaneously different and equal.¹¹ Dance's 'performance of differences between human bodies ... may illuminate the inequalities that may deem some bodies unequal' ([Mills 2017](#): 102). At the same time, dance may promote kinesthetic empathy: 'Those moments of shared empathy enable the recognition through the body of the underlying assumption of the human rights doctrine: *that all human beings are equal in dignity*' ([Mills 2017](#): 114–15; see [Pruitt and Jeffrey 2020](#)). There is some evidence that inclusive dance, where disabled and non-disabled people dance together, may lead to increased acceptance and understanding of impairments, helping to overcome social stigma ([Artpradid 2022](#)). This echoes the claim that 'dancing together [in transformative HRE] ... helps participants experience common human feelings, going beyond the social categories that divide them' ([Bajaj et al. 2016](#): 21).

We have encountered two main challenges when combining rights education and dance. First, law privileges words, whereas dance relies on embodied expression. As Umagiliya explained, one of the biggest challenges is that RTI training involves 'a lot of information you have to deliver' which is 'really hard to put into a dance task' because it needs to be learned 'as information, not as something else, not as something realized in a symbolic way' (Interview, 11 April 2023). He wryly notes that 'at one point they have to submit the [RTI form]—they can't send a video with their dance to the information officer' (ibid). Second, there is an ever-present risk of instrumentalizing dance and thus losing some of its creative potential and its value as an experience in and of itself.

⁹ For critiques of Bajaj's approach as insufficiently transformative, see [Keet 2015](#): 57 and [Monaghan et al. 2017](#): 210, 212.

¹⁰ For more on critical/decolonizing/transformational HRE's turn to affect, see, e.g., [Zembylas 2018](#): 42–43.

¹¹ For a helpful look at various ways that dance and human rights can overlap, see [Jackson and Shapiro-Phim \(2008\)](#).

VisAbility is still experimenting with how best to mix dance and rights—something that Umagiliya has likened to ‘putting sweet buns with chilli sambal’ (König et al. 2022: 44). Initially, its workshops had separate sessions on each. Gradually, VisAbility started explicating dance movements through rights language and teaching rights using those movements (König et al. 2022: 46). With the current project, VisAbility is aiming for a more ambitious synthesis of dance and rights. To accomplish that, VisAbility’s choreographer learned to become an RTI trainer and VisAbility’s RTI consultant learned about teaching dance. Together, they worked on breaking down lengthy RTI procedures into smaller, naturalistic movement exercises.

3. The situation of people with disabilities in post-war Sri Lanka and Nepal

Performing/Informing Rights takes place in two post-war states. Despite the end of their long-term armed conflicts in 2006 and 2009 respectively, Nepal and Sri Lanka have not successfully transitioned to post-conflict democracies (Gomez 2023; Jeffrey 2021). Both countries have been undergoing economic and political turmoil, which was exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Kandasamy et al. 2021; Sarker et al. 2022). The national crises have aggravated existing inequalities and poverty, particularly for people with disabilities.

Disabled people make up approximately 8.7 per cent of the Sri Lankan population (Department of Census, 2012) of which some 40,000 were impaired by war (Perera 2015). Despite Sri Lanka’s ratification of the CRPD in 2016, the government has retained a 1996 law that is marked by an outdated charity approach to disabled people. Disability-based discrimination is not prohibited by the country’s Constitution. Social protection schemes for disabled people are under-resourced, weakly implemented, and hardly transparent. Many disabled people are unfamiliar with those schemes due to a lack of inclusive awareness programmes. Those that do try to navigate administrative processes often find them too complicated and too costly (Marambio 2020; 2023b).

In Nepal, disabled people make up approximately 2.2 per cent of the population (National Federation of the Disabled 2023), including some 4,305 with war-related impairments (Uppadhya 2010). This includes people who became disabled after the signed peace agreement in 2006 due to mines and explosive remnants. Those disabled after the end of the war have had difficulty gaining recognition as conflict victims. As one officer of Nepal’s NNDCV stated: ‘They are not aware of the process of getting justice—and even they are unaware of whether they are a conflict victim’ (P2 Interview, 10 November 2022).

Nepal ratified the CRPD in 2010 and finally passed implementing legislation in 2017. Although that law provides for a disability identity card to obtain disability-targeted social protection, many disabled conflict victims run into obstacles (Banks et al. 2019). Another NNDCV officer notes:

There are some facilities we are supposed to get, like identity cards and health services, which others are getting, but we are not receiving anything ... The government is acting as if it doesn’t even see us. The government is well aware of our situation. They know that we are suffering because of them. The reason for the conflict is the government, and the government should be responsible for its consequences (P3 Interview, 10 November 2022).

The NNDCV has focused mostly on doing peace education in schools, teaching students about their experiences related to the conflict and disability through stories and photos (P2 Interview, 17 April 2023). Until this project, it had not done human rights education per se.

3.1 Right to information

Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR 1966) provides the public with a right of access to information held by public bodies (Human Rights

[Committee 2011](#), paras. 18–19). Hence, States parties need to enact freedom of information laws that require public bodies to set up ‘open, accessible internal systems for ensuring the public’s right to request and receive information’ ([Article 19 2016](#): 9), and to guarantee access for those individuals who cannot read or write for various reasons. RTI has become an important tool for rights-based approaches to sustainable development that tackle inequality, discrimination, poverty, and corruption ([Sustainable Development Goal 16](#)). RTI also promotes people’s active participation in society, attempts to close the gap between public bodies and ordinary persons, and seeks to make public bodies transparent, accountable, and less corrupt ([Gomez 2019](#); [Gurung 2021](#)).

Sri Lanka introduced an [NRTI Act \(2016\)](#), which is one of the strongest worldwide ([Centre for Law and Democracy 2019](#)). The Act established an RTI Commission with considerable powers ([Gomez 2019](#)). There is growing evidence of its effectiveness regarding access to information for citizens, including people with disabilities who have asked about the status of their applications for disability-specific social protection benefits and reasons for interrupted payments of the poverty scheme (*Samurdhi*) ([Marambio 2020](#); [Natesan 2021](#)). However, despite increasing RTI requests, there remains low awareness of the law within society ([Gomez 2019](#)). As in Nepal, public authorities struggle to provide information in an accessible format for disabled people. Unsurprisingly, Sri Lanka’s outdated [Disability Rights Act \(1996\)](#) is silent on the right to information.

Nepal’s Constitution was the first among South Asian countries to recognize the right to information in 1990. Almost two decades later, the government introduced the [RTI Act \(2007\)](#) and established the National Information Commission to protect, promote, and implement the law and procedures. Over the years, Nepal’s RTI Act has been criticized on several grounds ([Article 19, 2015](#)). It obligates citizens to provide a reason for their information requests and requires them not ‘to misuse the information’ ([Article 31\(1\)](#)). Citizens lack awareness of the law and so RTI submissions are low. Public bodies are not equipped with knowledge and resources on RTI and appear hesitant to share information ([Gurung 2021](#); [Kasajo 2013](#)). Finally, the [RTI Act \(2007\)](#) may create serious barriers to accessible information for people with disabilities due to its restrictive provision to share ‘information in the format as demanded by the applicant [only] as much as possible’ ([Article 7\(5\)](#)). [Nepal’s Disability Rights Act \(2017\)](#) refers to the right to information to a limited extent.

4. From Performing Empowerment to Performing/Informing Rights

Performing/Informing Rights arose as a follow-on project of the Performing Empowerment project. The Performing Empowerment project examined whether combining inclusive dance and human rights education might lead to greater legal empowerment for disabled people in Sri Lanka. The project primarily focused on people whose physical impairments are related to the civil war in Sri Lanka. During this project, VisAbility ran week-long workshops in Batticaloa and Jaffna in June to August 2017, followed by a second round of workshops in the same locations in December 2017 and January 2018. The workshops involved dance activities and human rights education and culminated in performances in highly public spaces, such as a park, beach, and market. Waldorf and Blades observed the workshops and analysed the experiences of participants through observation, interviews, and surveys. For some participants, the workshops led to greater rights awareness and confidence to act on this knowledge. Some went on to claim rights and disability benefits (as well as challenging unfair decisions and behaviours) and to use their dance and rights knowledge in activities in their communities (see [Blades 2021](#)). However, we observed there was often a lack of information from government institutions about applications for benefits and support once they had been submitted. The team recognized the potential that RTI knowledge would have to enable disabled people to ensure their claims for rights, benefits, and social protection are processed in a more fair, transparent, and timely manner.

To explore that potential, the authors developed a follow-on impact project, *Performing/Informing Rights*, that combined RTI training with inclusive dance.¹² The project involved workshops in Sri Lanka (Wattala and Vavuniya) and Nepal (Kathmandu and Nepalgunj).¹³ Monitoring and evaluation was conducted by local researchers—principally, Amisha Adhikari, Sivatharsini Raveendran, and Woshika Ruchini—through interviews and participant observations. In this project, Waldorf and Blades decided to take a less active role in data collection than in *Performing Empowerment*. In the earlier workshops and interviews, we were aware of the power dynamics created by our positionality as white, non-disabled, university researchers from the Global North. Thus, we designed our roles in this project to be more facilitative, aiming for the project to offer a framework through which practitioners and researchers in both Sri Lanka and Nepal could work together, develop partnerships, and experience South-South exchange. Furthermore, we hoped this South-South partnership might enable more lasting impact than is often possible through short-term research projects led from the Global North.

Performing/Informing Rights worked differently in the two countries.¹⁴ In Sri Lanka, VisAbility ran the workshops in collaboration with the local Meranga Fine Arts Ensemble in Wattala and the Organization for the Rehabilitation of the Handicapped (ORHAN) in Vavuniya. In Wattala, VisAbility worked with 13 disabled people over four days in January 2023. At the end of the fourth day, the group did a public dance-theatre performance about a disabled person making an RTI claim to find out the status of her application for disability allowance. The group reconvened after 15 days for a follow-up, one-day workshop to refresh their memories on the RTI process, reflect on the earlier workshop, and discuss any actions taken as a result of the earlier workshop. The Vavuniya workshop in June 2023 applied a similar format and involved 15 disabled people.

In Nepal, Advocacy Forum partnered with NNDCV, which was created in 2017 and now has approximately 700 members across the country. For the Nepal workshops, Advocacy Forum and NNDCV worked alongside Umagiliya from VisAbility and two dancers from the music school NAAD Sangeet Pathshala. In April 2023, three-day workshops were held in Kathmandu with 18 disabled participants and then in Nepalgunj with 21 disabled participants.¹⁵ We are still analysing data about those workshops.

Workshops involved leading participants through a series of movement activities that participants did alone, in pairs, or in groups. These activities were often open and improvisatory, meaning that the workshop leaders did not prescribe a particular routine but offered starting points and prompts through which participants could find their own ways of moving. The workshops drew on movement exercises as a way to: (1) explore concepts of difference, dignity, power, and rights; (2) empower participants; (3) remember processes for asserting rights; and (4) co-create public performances.

4.1 Exploring power: the ribbon dance

Some movement activities provided a way to connect dance and rights by reflecting on embodied experiences and making a link to concepts of difference, dignity, power, and rights. Activities like the ‘ribbon dance’ offered embodied ways to think about topics such as strength, power, and cooperation. The ribbon dance involved participants working in pairs with two ribbons. They each held the end of a ribbon (so it stretched out between

12 Put differently, this project was a way to connect (disabled people’s) empowerment with (government) accountability (see [Gaventa and Oswald 2019](#)).

13 We had initially planned to hold workshops in Batticaloa, Jaffna, and Polonnarwa, but Sri Lanka’s ongoing economic and political crisis (which badly affected transportation networks, electricity, etc.) made it necessary to relocate workshops to communities near where key VisAbility staff live. The Wattala workshop had no conflict-impaired participants while the Vavuniya workshop had several.

14 Some differences were due to how funding had to be apportioned between a partner organization (VisAbility) and an International Co-Investigator (Advocacy Forum).

15 Other participants were carers or supporters.

them) and were tasked with maintaining the balance between themselves while they moved, so that the ribbons remained taut. This gave participants the experience of moving with another person's body. The ribbons represented the perceived power of each person. The focus on maintaining equilibrium between the two participants drew attention to the potential relationships, including cooperation, between participants and government officials. The activity highlighted the need to maintain balanced relationships, the responsibility of each person involved to achieve this, and the way that each person is capable of exercising power (Marambio et al. 2023a: 18).

A participant in the Wattala workshop¹⁶ described how the ribbon dance was one of the things they most liked:

If I give my strength, the other person's balance will be maintained. If the other person gives his/her strength, then I can balance myself. It's like the government mechanism. It shows the connection between government employees and the public. When the government officer pulls, we pull. When we pull, they pull (PW3 Interview, 26 February 2023).

Woshika Ruchini, a VisAbility team member who took notes during the Wattala workshop, made the following observation:

Before the ribbon dance activity, Mahesh explained how the power flows around us and government officers. Through the ribbon dance, he demonstrated how we can control power. [H]e explained how we gain the power ... so we don't have to surrender all the time (Ruchini 2023).

A key part of VisAbility's work is group discussion after each activity. This gives participants and the team a chance to reflect on what they enjoyed about the activity, what the challenges were, and how the movement task related to rights principles. During group feedback after the ribbon dance, Ruchini's notes describe how one participant explained that

while doing the activity, she could pull others. She experienced her strength. Before this, she hadn't experienced it like that. So, she felt happy (Ruchini 2023).

Another participant suggested that 'his inner strength was released through this activity' (Ruchini 2023). Yet another stated during the group discussion that 'although all of them are not in equal health conditions, it didn't make any [difference] while doing the activity. All of them had strength in them[selves]' (Ruchini 2023). As the interview and observation notes demonstrate, the experience of strength occurs in different ways for participants, who recognize their physical or 'inner' strength or perhaps both.

4.2 Empowering participants: the yes-no exercise

VisAbility sees its workshops as offering a more holistic form of legal empowerment, which brings in both somatic and psychosocial elements (see Marambio 2023a). Some movement activities are explicitly geared towards empowering workshop participants. For example, the yes-no exercise encourages both 'power within' (self-confidence) and 'power to' (agency) (Marambio et al. 2023a; 2023b). Taking turns, participants face off against the rest of the group and alternate between saying 'yes' and 'no' at different volumes and in different tones. If a participant loudly shouts 'yes', then the group loudly shouts back 'no'; if a participant softly says 'no', then the group softly responds 'yes' (see VisAbility 2023).

16 Wattala participants' interviews are coded PW.

Participant PW9 led the yes-no exchange during the final performance. After the performance, they summed up their sense of empowerment:

Society's opinion is that disabled people are useless. They think that we can't do anything. But this programme taught us that we should also have the same privileges as others. We also have a right to those privileges. Through the RTI process, information can be found. I got the courage to go forward and speak with any government official without fear after participating in this programme (Ruchini 2023).

In a follow-up interview, PW9 expanded:

We don't need to be afraid anymore. We have been thinking for so long that we cannot talk to the officials. I thought they were powerful. But that idea got changed. I understood that I, too, can speak up for my rights (Interview, 25 February 2023).

Another participant also talked about how the workshop had increased their self-confidence:

I got self-confidence in applying for an RTI. I learned that I can stand up for myself to solve my problem ... I also learned that we can educate others about the RTI law and how they can use it to solve their problems (PW3 Interview, 26 February 2023).

Ruchini described how the Wattala and Vavuniya participants changed over the course of the workshops:

Most exhibited shyness during the initial sessions, hesitating to propose movements and refraining from making substantial gestures. They appeared tense, confused, and lacked positive energy. This dynamic shifted as the workshop progressed. Participants became more comfortable with their bodies, expanding their movements and personal space. They also grew more proactive in suggesting movements, participating in role plays, and engaging in exercises overall. While some participants remained reserved about pushing their physical boundaries ... [we also] observed that the movement exercises facilitated quicker openness among participants. They began sharing their experiences with the social welfare system and other disability-related matters and started raising questions about various issues. This transformation was reflected in their facial expressions, physical gestures, movements, and overall positive responses (Ruchini presentation, 25 August 2023).

These findings are consistent with those from the earlier Performing Empowerment project (Blades 2021).

4.3 Co-creating mnemonic movements: remembering how to make an RTI claim

One workshop exercise involves co-creating and then learning a sequence of movements that illustrate the stages involved in making an RTI claim. These five key stages are: (1) identification of the Information Officer, (2) submission of the RTI request to the Information Officer, (3) confirmation of receipt from the Information Officer, (4) decision outcome by the Information Officer, and (5) appeal to Designated Officer if dissatisfied (Marambio et al. 2023b).¹⁷ Participants are introduced to these stages and then co-create movements corresponding to each stage (Ruchini 2023). The repetition of that sequence throughout the workshop and in any subsequent performance

¹⁷ VisAbility introduced participants to the entire RTI process but focused on these five stages due to their importance for initiating the RTI process at the local level.

is designed to create a ‘muscle memory’ of the RTI process. As Adhikari, the Advocacy Forum lawyer, recognized: ‘The law is very complicated, right ... but once they perform it by themselves through movements, through gestures, they will be able to remember those gestures and movements even if they don’t remember the legal provisions’ (Interview, 25 November 2022). An officer of Nepal’s NNDCV expressed similar views based on her experience in the initial training:

When we start [a typical training] in the morning ... it will be headache [and] ... what I learn in the morning I forget at the end. [But with dance] we act, and we learn it very easily, and once I learn it’s very difficult to forget (Interview P2, 10 November 2023).

A Wattala workshop participant added: ‘Movements made the RTI process easier to remember’ (PW12 Interview, 11 March 2023).

However, interviews conducted after the follow-up workshop in Wattala produced a more mixed picture in terms of how much people remembered the RTI stages. Participants were asked whether they could list the stages of making an RTI application. Some demonstrated some of the movements and related these to the relevant stages, and two appear to have recalled multiple stages without demonstrating the movements. Some participants recalled the movement more easily than the stages, with one person claiming: ‘I can remember the dance movements representing the stages. But I can’t remember the meaning of the movement’ (PW8 Interview, 9 March 2023). Two participants explained they found it easier to remember the information when with the group. Some people remembered the relevant stage when shown the movement by the interviewer and/or were reminded of some stages verbally and were able to remember the next stage in response. Overall, participants with lower levels of education and participants who did not file RTI applications after the workshop were more likely to forget the movements and RTI process (Ruchini presentation, 25 August 2023). Further research will be required to look into the potential of embodied learning by testing different groups and scenarios.

4.4 Co-creating public performances

In both Performing Empowerment and Performing/Informing Rights, VisAbility ended its Sri Lankan workshops with dance performances, including at parks, outdoor markets, and street junctions. The performances serve three important purposes. First, they build cohesion and solidarity as workshop participants advance towards the performance. Second, they may help empower participants: having danced in public spaces, some participants may feel less shy about claiming rights and benefits before government officials. Finally, they challenge the stigmatizing, shaming, and invisibilizing of disabled people in everyday life. As Gerda König, the disabled German choreographer and VisAbility co-founder, has said:

if you go with [workshop participants] on the streets, a mixed-abled group, we bring them in a different way of being visible, and people have a chance to look at them. Yeah, they are staring at them, or they look away, or they don’t even see them. But [for the workshop participants] to be as a crowd there [gives] so much power (König et al. 2022).

Indeed, there is some evidence that these public performances shifted spectators’ attitudes, at least temporarily (Blades 2019).

In the past, VisAbility’s dance performances have been mostly abstract or non-representational. There was some resistance to using dance didactically to perform HRE—that is, to tell stories of challenging discrimination and claiming rights to the general public. As Umagiliya explained:

Sri Lankan people ... were expecting storytelling, and they had this feeling of [sympathy] towards disabled people already. So, if you try to tell a story there will be like, again, this storytelling and ‘Oh, poor disabled people’ kind of attitude ... [Instead] I wanted [the audience] to understand the ... unconditional relationship between disabled people and non-disabled people rather than telling of the oppression of disabled people or giving them a story about how you win your rights or something like that (König et al. 2022).

But with this project, Umagiliya has been trying out more representational movements (partly due to more co-creation with workshop participants) and then integrating that with verbal storytelling about RTI. This may prove more resonant for workshop participants and audiences as there is a rich tradition of using street theatre to challenge injustices in Nepal (Premaratna 2018: 187–232) and Sri Lanka (Perry 2019). Furthermore, street theatre has been used to promote RTI awareness in Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka (for example The Social Architects 2020).

The Wattala workshop, for example, concluded with a public performance in a nearby park popular with joggers. Ruchini described the performance in her observation notes:

- A person [PW9] comes in front and says ... ‘I am a person with a disability. I also applied to get the allowance provided for disabled people by the government. But no information was received. So I am going to put in a request for information to get the relevant information’ ...
- Then 5 key stages of the RTI dance were done by the group.
- To indicate the struggle between both the government officers and citizens, the ‘Yes No’ activity was included here. When PW9 said Yes, others said No.
- Then she said: ‘I didn’t get any information. Now I am going to file an appeal’.
- Next, the rest of the RTI dance was done ...
- The group did the Ribbon Dance to represent the struggle between Information Officer, Designated Officer, Commissioner, and RTI applicant.
- Then PW9 said: ‘The Freedom of Information Act is your right. As a citizen, you have the right to request the information you need from the government’.
- PW9 came in front of the participants and led [them in] the RTI dance (Ruchini 2023).

One of the participants described how the performance affected her:

When I went to the jogging park on the day [of the performance], I wondered whether it was necessary to dance in such a public space. It was embarrassing to have to dance in front of people in such a public place. ... Anyhow, after the performance, the shyness disappeared ... There was joy when the people who were watching the performance applauded. Then I realized I should not be ashamed about performing in front of such a group (PW7 Interview, 25 February 2023).

When asked what they liked best about the workshop, another participant said: ‘During the performance, I came to the village and shared what I had learned with the villagers—I taught people about the RTI process’ (PW9 Interview, 25 February 2023).

VisAbility had also invited two local social service officers and the chief physiotherapist from a local rehabilitation hospital to attend the performance. This was a subtle way of educating civil servants about disability rights and RTI. For many participants, it was also their first time meeting a social service officer and, as such, an opportunity to present their problems. The VisAbility team was also able to connect one of the workshop participants with the rehabilitation hospital.

5. Conclusion

Initial findings from Performing/Informing Rights show dance's potential for making human rights education more transformative. There is some evidence that embodied learning through dance can aid some participants in remembering processes for asserting rights. There is somewhat stronger evidence that combining inclusive dance and human rights education can increase participants' self-confidence and self-advocacy (see [Blades 2021](#)). Perhaps most importantly, the workshop exercises and public dances themselves constituted an embodied and performative rights-based approach to disability and information—that is, disabled and non-disabled attendees had a safe space in which to perform participation, accountability, non-discrimination, empowerment, and legality.

Following the workshops in Sri Lanka and Nepal, several participants filed RTI applications related to their own social welfare benefits, while a few others made RTI requests to gather information about government policies and practices (including, for example, on public transport, health care, and university admissions) that affect disabled people more generally. As of September 2023, Nepal participants had filed 18 RTI submissions and received 17 responses, while Sri Lankan participants had made 29 RTI submissions (including three group submissions) but only received 17 responses. Four participants agreed to send their appeals to the RTI Commission, while nine were hesitant to approach the Commission. Several Sri Lankan participants faced challenges when making RTI requests, including lack of support from family members as well as threats from local officials. This points to the need to make more concerted efforts to include both groups in future HRE workshops.

We will need to do further, comparative analysis of data from the Sri Lanka and Nepal workshops. We also hope to find additional funding so that VisAbility and Advocacy Forum can conduct longitudinal research into what workshop participants do with the knowledge, skills, and self-confidence acquired from the workshops, including the sharing of RTI knowledge with others in their community and the filing of RTI claims. Realistically, though, we cannot expect several one-off workshops to generate transformative outcomes in participants' lives or the larger structural barriers for disabled people. As Sara Houston recognized:

The complexity of dance practice necessitates some caution in proclamations of transformation. At the same time, the [UK] community dance sector might feel confident in its ability to act in creating a space where something empowering might happen ([Houston 2005](#): 176).

Sustainability is a real challenge as this project's short-term funding does not allow for periodic, follow-up workshops over a longer period. VisAbility and Advocacy Forum will also need to find additional funding to assist and accompany workshop participants through what is often a lengthy and frustrating process for making successful RTI claims. In the meantime, though, the project team has developed and disseminated a training resource on dance and RTI ([Marambio et al. 2023a, 2023b](#)): <https://performinginforming.uk/training-resource/>. In September 2023, after a presentation from VisAbility, the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka decided to add dance and rights education to its 2024 action plan. That same month, Sri Lankan workshop participants did public performances in Colombo and Vavuniya to mark the International Day for Universal Access to Information (28 September).

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Conflict of interest

None declared.

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