

Speech for Minister Zobaida Jalal
National Consultation on the Draft Plan of Action to Support the National Policy for
Persons with Disabilities

Honourable Minister, distinguished guests and participants.

I would like to extend my profound thanks to all of you for responding to our request to attend this workshop. You have heard about the process which brought us here. I will not dwell on that – but rather discuss *why* we are here. Our goal is simple: to finalize the National Plan of Action to support the 2002 Policy for Persons with Disabilities to ensure its effective implementation. We must shift the view of treating ‘disability’ as a welfare issue, and work together to empower affected persons and their families to support their genuine social and economic participation.

We have a unique opportunity to make a real difference. Gathered here in this room are predominantly national, and a few international experts. There are concerned citizens from all arenas: politicians, government officials from federal offices down to the district levels. Also, there are nongovernment organizations, academics, practitioners and persons with disabilities who serve as our teachers and role models. Most importantly, we at the Ministry of Social Welfare and Special Education know that the issue of disability cannot be addressed by any one ministry or department. It is a cross sectoral issue which affects all areas of society. The causes of disability such as poor health conditions, lack of education, malnutrition, unsafe working conditions, poor road safety – must become the responsibility of all ministries from Health, Education and Social Welfare to Justice, Interior, and Commerce and more. My staff are here to listen and learn.

The Government of Pakistan has made efforts to support the rights of Persons with Disabilities. It has (i) ratified several international conventions, (ii) promulgated the National Policy in 2002; (iii) begun revising the ordinance on employment which would raise the employment quota of PWD to two percent to ensure more job opportunities; (iii) we have taken initiative to develop ‘inclusive education’ pilots to mainstream children with mild to moderate disabilities to ensure achieving the MDG of “education for all,” and (iv) we are interacting vigorously with International Development Agencies such as UNICEF, UNESCAP, the World Bank and JICA to seek their support and cooperation in developing programs to empower persons with disabilities. An infrastructure for Special Education and Training was established in Pakistan in the 1980s which, I have been told by international experts, far exceeds that of most developing countries.

However, despite these efforts, the sad fact is that most people with disabilities and their families remain completely unserved by government – and even NGO resources – and our knowledge about the depth and extent of disability remains far from optimal. Still, only 1.7 percent of the estimated persons with special needs are served by the network of Special Education Centers and other nodal institutions. The 1998 Census estimates that approximately 2.4 percent of the population is afflicted with some form of disability.

This is significantly lower than the WHO estimate of approximately 10 percent, which is likely due to a different definition of ‘disability.’ There are acknowledged weaknesses with the census definition and data, which we will be working to overcome in the next few years. However, they still provide some insights. For example:

- There is a greater *propensity* to have a disability in urban areas, but 66 percent of persons with disabilities live in rural areas. How can we provide appropriate, decentralized and rural-based services?
- Cohort analysis indicates an extraordinarily high mortality rate among people with disabilities: of the 1,257,000 persons with disabilities counted in the 1972 census, only 26 percent survived until 1981.
- However, the 1998 census indicated a five-fold increase in the number of persons with disabilities, which means more people are acquiring disabilities as they progress through life.
- The 1984-85 survey on disability revealed that over 49 percent of disabilities resulted from **disease** – more than birth (35 percent) and accidents (just under 14 percent) combined. It would be interesting to see if this has changed with the government’s extensive efforts and large scale immunization programs.

The available data, which makes rather conservative estimates, tells us that, one in eight households in Pakistan is inhabited by a person with disabilities. It is a poverty issue: only 28 percent of persons with disabilities are literate and only 14 percent are actually working (with 5 percent looking for work). Nearly 70 percent of persons with disabilities are dependent on their families for complete financial support.

These statistics aside, the stigma of disability remains the greatest impediment to changing the way towards empowerment of persons with disabilities. Stigma remains in society at large, within communities, and even, in many cases of uneducated segments of society, within families who see a disabled person as a loss of productive potential – a drain on family resources. So, while on the one hand, the strong cultural family network ensures their financial security, on the other, the stigma often results in their remaining invisible members of society. I especially look forward to hearing the recommendations of the Advocacy and Awareness group to see how we can tackle this issue.

Clearly we need more accurate data and research on causes, prevention, and curative efforts to understand the social and economic realities and possibilities with regards to disability. In the meantime, we must make sure that the policies, laws, programs and coordination mechanisms are in place. Eminent politicians, concerned federal, provincial and district officials are here. Respected NGOs, academics and other technical specialists are here. Within these groups are several persons with disabilities who have flourished despite the obstacles. We are grateful to you all for your input, and look forward to a productive workshop ahead.

Thank you all again for being here.