

# “Putting sweet buns with Mixing dance and human

VisAbility is a Sri Lankan/German non-profit association focused on the empowerment of disabled people in Sri Lanka through mixed-abled dance and rights education. In the conversation that follows, **Gerda König, Mahesh Umagiliya, Helena-Ulrika Marambio** (VisAbility), **Vipavinee Artpradid, Hetty Blades** (Coventry University) and **Lars Waldorf** (University of Essex) reflect on VisAbility’s practice and their collaborative work

**Helena:** We came together from different perspectives. We were observing different things (the situation for disabled people, mixed abled-dance, need for legal awareness) from different angles with different backgrounds. From the arts perspective and from the rights perspective, we saw a possibility to work together. But at the same time, there was a tension between these fields, and we were experimenting with how to bring them together.

**Mahesh:** I think at the beginning, we didn’t know what to do because we didn’t have an idea how to put these things together. It sounds like you are putting sweet buns with chilli sambal (a type of chilli paste). We really didn’t know what to do...

For me, everything started with the understanding that we don’t have justice in Sri Lanka for disabled people. This was the realisation I came to while

working with disabled people, with the influence that I gained from Gerda and her dance company. I understood that there’s no justice, we have to do something, but there was no clear idea what we could do and how. Because I had (knowledge of) dance, Helena of human rights, and Gerda worked as a choreographer with disabled people. So, that is what we had. We had to start with that, so this was the beginning. Somehow, we were growing by coming together and exchanging experiences, the three of us. There was only the aim for us to transmit to people the understanding that they have human rights, but we had the tool of dance to address that issue.

**Gerda:** The initial point for me was also that and (the fact that) I’m disabled, and to see the inequality for disabled people all over the world.

The first exchange with Mahesh was more through



Vipavinee Artpradid.



Gerda König. Photo: C. Meyer.



Helena-Ulrika Marambio.  
Photo: David Schmenger.

# “chilli sambal”: rights in Sri Lanka

the arts because he was in the first project with me in Sri Lanka. I love the country, and I understood several things also politics-wise because it was part of the piece we were doing – so I had another understanding from the beginning about the country and the problems for disabled people.

And then, when Mahesh took over and started to do his own mixed-abled production, and we were aware of all these problems for disabled dancers in the project, I remember that I got very frustrated, angry, sad about the stories I heard. And for me, this was: “Wow, this cannot be. I want to change that. I want to do something to give them the support somehow with my knowledge and my background.”

Mahesh and I started to think all day, “How can we use the dance for that?” For me, dance is always a kind of language I can use to put together different perspectives, where I can make the audience understand society’s problems in a different way – to bring (these perspectives) into another concept. And this is also the approach for my artistic work. I found that bringing them together is to break borders, to understand each other in different ways.

It was also about changing something and building a new community. I think there is the power of what we are doing to bring people together, work together, and understand each other differently... to bring a seed that can grow in different directions.

Then we came together with the idea of mixing human rights and rights for disabled people as a concept and adding performances (VisAbility does performances at the end of the workshops in public spots to create awareness of the ability of disabled people). The work in a group can empower people to support each other. That, for me, is the power of VisAbility.

**Helena:** Somehow, we clicked at different stages because we needed to develop and come together. Over time, another issue that we also saw is the need to overcome the tension between rights and the arts. I think there was also tension between cultural backgrounds. So, we needed to understand the Sri Lankan history, the culture, different cultures, the Sinhalese, and the Tamil people and their communities. And then the issues with caste, religion, how women are differently seen (i.e. cultural norms), how disability plays into gender etc. That took a while because it’s different.

And this feeling of being stared at... especially when we were with Gerda (in her wheelchair), and being foreigners... I don’t know how disabled people feel when they are constantly stared at... Sometimes people are smiling, but that’s not always happening.

**Mahesh:** During Gerda’s first stay in Sri Lanka, these situations also happened. If you can remember, Gerda, people were staring at you, and then we tried >>



Mahesh Umagiliya.



Lars Waldorf. Photo: Sebastian Potthof.



Hetty Blades. Photo: Andrew Bailey.

to turn this situation into a little performance; there were a bunch of artists around Gerda, and we started performing around her to re-create that situation... We tried to change this situation into something else rather than people staring at a disabled person. So, I think these kinds of moments also gave us this idea, "Okay, we can use it. We can change the situation using dance as a tool that helps people perceive disability differently." Then I can remember the people looking at Gerda, they started smiling, and they started talking to us and reacting differently.

**Gerda:** I would not say it like this. Of course, they are looking at me because not many have seen a powered wheelchair like mine, and it is not usual for people in this country to see a disabled person just travelling with somebody else. Because I'm still a European person, I'm white and I'm privileged, and it doesn't matter what country, I am something else.

So, I think I had a privilege in all these countries, but in a way, it could be a negative aspect. But on the other hand, it can be a positive aspect because I think that even if everybody knows I'm privileged because I'm white, they have also the feeling of... and this is what people also were telling me, especially disabled people, they said, "Well, then if you can make it, then I can also do something." And this is another privilege I have, but you have to take it very sensitively in a way to work with this issue.

**Mahesh:** We wanted to give society another chance to see a different perspective. And to do so, we had to present people with disabilities in another way to society. So that's why it became VisAbility, with the theme of making ability visible.

**Hetty:** I'm curious about how the work has developed from this place of, "Okay, well we've got these different perspectives" to the work you're doing now, which really comprehensively combines movement principles and rights education.

**Mahesh:** I think you and Lars played a big role because you came in when we were growing. We finished our pilot project and then you came in when we were experimenting with how to combine and how to put everything together. So, the pilot project was giving us kind of an idea, but we still didn't have a proper idea of how to mix them seamlessly. But there you came on board, and it was a big help for us - to see that what we were talking about through dance language is the same in the rights language - but they use two different words. So, it was helping us to bring those two words together and exchange the words between rights and dance fields. So, this was the first step.

Those are the moments when we started growing up to mix them. And then we found our own recipe to put this sugar bun with chilli sambal.

"The participants did a dance among themselves that they later showed us about the discrimination that disabled people face getting on a bus."

**Gerda:** There were also some moments when we had extensive discussions. And these discussions were important because they revealed different points of view, but also to make them... let's say, to bring it into words? To make things clearer for us, this was an important point because we are also working intuitively and sometimes it is good to understand why I'm doing that and bring it into a real word or a sentence to make it clearer.

**Helena:** We were in our boxes, but we started to go beyond them. We began to look beyond our comfort zone and our fears. And we also started to talk to each other differently.

**Vip:** How would you respond to the critique that this is an instrumentalisation of dance?

**Hetty:** It's something we talked a lot about during Performing Empowerment (1). On the surface, one could think that dance is being used to teach human rights but in my experience, that isn't quite what is going on in VisAbility's practice because the workshops are so much about the practice of dancing together, the practice of mixed-abled dance. Increasingly, the rights-based principles were integrated into the language of the dance workshops, as Mahesh has said. So, the connections became more explicit over the course of the project to show how what it is that happens when we dance can also help people to gain a better understanding of their rights. And the connection between the two kind of grew out of the way that dance has these properties.

**Lars:** The workshops and the performances were very abstract, very artistic. And I think one of the things that I kept asking of Mahesh and Gerda was, "Why don't you do something that's maybe a little more message-y?" And they were very resistant to that. And there are interesting debates we can have about that, but I think that also made it seem less instrumental. It wasn't a dance that told a story.

The participants did a dance among themselves that they later showed us about the discrimination that disabled people face getting on a bus. It was a dance that tells a story. And then a few of them got together and did a dance for Disability Day around alcoholism in their communities. So, again, it was

a more didactic dance. And so that's much more instrumental, it's art for communicating a message. And the message I think that VisAbility was doing was, in a sense, a more abstract, implicit message: "Hey, folks can do this stuff." And you can interpret it the way you want, but certainly, whatever you think the dance means, you'll come away with the fact: "Hey, this is unusual. We don't see people doing this and we're being invited to stare," as Gerda has said in another context, "and we're being invited to think about people with disabilities differently." And so, again, perhaps audiences are more receptive, in a way, because they're not being kind of told, "hey, think about it in this way".

**Gerda:** You are right, and this is maybe also my background as an artist. I never wanted a disabled dancer on stage mentioning a problem with a disability, you know? Because then I'm not reaching the audience. I'm reaching out to the audience to shift perspectives, that you don't see the disability, that the disability is not important anymore, that you see this person as a human being, as an artist, as somebody who can move in a different way that is interesting, that they have another point of view.

I give them a chance to watch people because they are hidden. And if you go with them on the streets, a mixed-abled group, we bring them in a different way of being visible, and people have the chance to look at them. Yeah, they are staring at them, or they look away, or they even don't see them. But to be as a crowd there, with so much power. And it doesn't matter if they understand the meaning; it's just the feeling when they see it and realise something is different. This is important, to change your mindset.

**Mahesh:** I think Gerda was right because, from my perspective, also as a local citizen, Sri Lankan people are used to seeing storytelling through performances. They were expecting storytelling, and they had this feeling of empathy towards disabled people already. So, personally, I didn't want to bring that to the stage or to the performance. So, if you try to tell a story there will be like, again, this storytelling and, 'Oh, poor disabled people' kind of attitude.

So, that is my problem with telling a story or giving a clear message to them. I wanted them to understand the existence of disabled people in society alongside non-disabled people. It's like an 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.

If you see the performances we did online (for a Training of Trainers project in 2020-21 funded

by the British Council in Sri Lanka), they are also quite abstract. So, as an example, if you see the performance of Good Touch and Bad Touch, it talked about disabled children and how they are physically abused in society. And, at the same time, it taught them to understand what the 'good touch' and what the 'bad touch' looks like. But if you see the dance piece, it's an abstract piece. It is not giving you a clear story. So, we stick to this little information like, "What is the feeling of 'bad touch' and what is the feeling of 'good touch'?" So, they are abstract, but it gives you this nice blend of movements and the message you want to present. What do you want to tell the audience?

**Gerda:** For me, what's important in general, besides disability, is the diversity, the diversity of all the people we are working with in all the different levels of society as well and to understand that diversity is a good thing to make them aware, even in the dance workshop, that a different body with a different movement potential is super interesting, super powerful – and to understand this between disabled people and non-disabled people and different castes and social backgrounds. This is the thing of coming together to understand and from there, I mean you cannot empower somebody if you do not understand the diversity.

Diversity is part of society, and if people are not aware or have never had the chance to feel that they can be brilliant or strong, or that it is ok how they are, it's not bad, then you cannot make them aware of their laws. Then you will not reach somebody – even if they understand a law brilliantly – and make them fight for themselves. I think they would not do much if they would not have had the feeling "I am part of the community, I am part of society". And allow non-disabled people to reflect on it, too. Even if it was just for a week of workshops, they will always remember this experience... it doesn't mean that they're empowered and they do everything right after the workshops... It's something that grows over time.

---

#### Info

[www.performingempowerment.wordpress.com](http://www.performingempowerment.wordpress.com)  
[www.visability.social](http://www.visability.social)

---

#### Reference

1. Performing Empowerment was a research project that examined whether combining dance and human rights education might lead to greater legal empowerment for disabled people in Sri Lanka. The project was funded by Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC)/ Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF) through the Partnership for Conflict, Crime and Security Research (PaCCS).