

# **Baseline Survey on Public Attitudes towards Persons with a Disability 2010**

## **Executive Summary**

### **Background**

1. A study on “Baseline Survey on Public Attitudes towards Persons with a Disability 2010” was conducted by the Policy 21 Limited at the request of the Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC). The survey was undertaken during the period from June to August 2010. A total of 1,800 households were randomly selected from the sample frame, and 1,011 respondents aged 15 or above were successfully enumerated, constituting a response rate of 65%. Last birthday method was applied to select a target respondent for interview if a household had more than one eligible person.

2. The data were analysed and presented in tables and charts for easy understanding. Furthermore, a comparison of findings between 1998 and 2010 surveys was conducted in order to evaluate any changes in the public attitudes towards persons with disabilities after the enactment of Disability Discrimination Ordinance over a decade ago. It is noteworthy that only a qualitative comparison was undertaken due to the use of different questionnaires in tandem with changes in Rehabilitation Programme Plan and definition of disabilities and implementation of the Integrated Education System in Hong Kong.

### **General views**

#### *Awareness of the disability groups*

3. With and without prompting, most of the respondents indicated that persons with physical impairment (100%) or sensory impairment (98%) had a disability. When prompted, there was substantial increase of awareness in some disability groups. About 80% of the respondents considered persons with intellectual disability or visceral disability having a disability. More than half of the respondents indicated that persons with mental illness (59%) or specific learning difficulties (53%) having a disability. However, persons with autism (46%), ADHD (41%), HIV/AIDS (33%) or chronic illness (37%) were comparatively harder to be defined having a disability even when prompted.

4. Without prompting, higher percentages of the respondents were found in the 2010 survey than in the 1998 survey who regarded persons with physical impairment, sensory impairment, intellectual disability or mental illness having a disability. With and without prompting, the findings were similar in the 2010 and 1998 surveys with the exception that only 37% of the respondents in the 2010 survey indicated that persons with chronic illness had a disability. The figure was significantly lower than 53% in the 1998 survey. This might be due to enhanced public awareness of chronic illness as a disability when the Rehabilitation Programme Plan was discussed in 1998.

### ***Recognition of persons with a disability***

5. It is the fact that most categories of disabilities may not be easily identified without professional medical diagnosis. However, people are usually diverted to the physical appearance and behaviour of the persons with disabilities, and project negative attitudes of prejudice and stereotyping. A question on recognition of persons with disabilities was therefore purposely set to collect information on the public understanding of disability as a characteristic of an individual person, which distinguishes that person from a non-disabled person, in assessing any fallacy in their perception.

6. Most of the respondents indicated that they could be able to recognize persons with physical impairment (99%), sensory impairment (94%), intellectual disability (84%) or visceral disability (75%) immediately or after watching for a while. For persons with mental illness, 56% of the respondents stated their recognition. A minority of the respondents indicated that they could recognize persons with chronic illness (17%) or HIV/AIDS (6%) immediately or after watching for a while.

### ***Beliefs about persons with a disability***

7. There was still a strong belief that persons with specific disabilities implied having some forms of incapacity or dependence on others. About half of the respondents agreed that persons with intellectual disability (59%), visceral disability (55%) or physical impairments (50%) would lead to incapacity and increased dependency on others even if treatment was received. Conversely, more-or-less the same portions of respondents perceived that persons with chronic illness (56%), HIV/AIDS (55%) or ADHD (50%) would not lead to incapacity and increased dependency on others if treatment is received.

8. Over half of the respondents agreed that persons with chronic illness (62%), ADHD (61%), specific learning disabilities (60%) or autism (59%) would be able to lead a happy and fulfilling life if treatment or assistance was received. A certain number of the respondents perceived that persons with HIV/AIDS (31%), visceral disability (30%) or physical impairment (26%) would not be able to lead a happy and fulfilling life even if treatment was received.

### ***Contact and relationship with persons with a disability***

9. More respondents had regular contact with persons with chronic illness (32%), while contact with persons with other disabilities was not common (6% or less). It was rare for the respondents to contact persons with HIV/AIDS (1%), autism (2%), ADHD (2%) or specific learning difficulties (2%). Among those who were in regular contact with persons with disabilities, most were family members or relatives.

### ***Perceived importance of equal opportunities***

10. About 95% of the respondents considered equal opportunities very important or quite important. The main reasons were that it was important to ensure justice for individuals and it would help individuals' personal development.

## **Public perception of discrimination against persons with disabilities in various societal fields**

11. Direct discrimination occurs when, on the ground of disability, a person with a disability is treated less favourably than another person without a disability in similar circumstances. On the other side of the coin, indirect discrimination occurs when a condition or requirement is applied to everyone, but in practice affects people with a disability more adversely, is to their detriment, and such condition or requirement cannot be justified.

12. Public perception of discrimination against persons with disabilities in four societal fields was solicited. The societal fields included: (1) employment; (2) public access, services and facilities; (3) social interactions; and (4) education and training. For each societal field, four statements were raised to solicit respondents' agreement or disagreement. One statement would probe for respondents' social acceptance/disapproval<sup>1</sup> and another statement would probe for respondents' sense of the rights of persons with disabilities. The rest two statements would delineate respondents' degree of misconception and pessimism about persons with disabilities.

13. In the employment field, respondents generally indicated acceptance of persons with disabilities in the workplace and recognized their right of same wage for the same workload. Certain respondents still showed disapproval of persons with mental illness (35%) or HIV/AIDS (20%). Misconception was obvious for over 50% of the respondents considered that simple repetitive work was appropriate for workers with disabilities. Pessimism was also noted for a quarter to one-half of the respondents disagreed that workers with disabilities could be expected to fit into competitive society.

14. In the field of public access, services and facilities, respondents primarily showed acceptance of persons with disabilities sitting nearby in public transport and recognized their right of having a service centre in the residential neighbourhood. However, certain respondents still indicated disapproval of persons with mental illness (33%) or HIV/AIDS (16%), and respectively, 36% and 25% of the respondents rejected their rights of obtaining social services in the neighbourhood. Misconception was obvious for over 40% of the respondents considered persons with disabilities were more accident prone than other people. Nevertheless, pessimism was not serious as less than 4% of the respondents agreed that it was a waste of money to have special facilities or services for persons with disabilities.

15. In the field of social interactions, respondents commonly indicated acceptance of persons with disabilities living in the neighbourhood and recognized their right of dating and marriage. However, a large proportion of respondents showed disapproval of person with mental illness (55%) or HIV/AIDS (34%) in the neighbourhood, whereas about a quarter of the respondents disagreed at their right of dating and marriage. Misconception was obviously against persons with mental illness for 70% of the

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, "disapproval" means "when you feel that something or someone is bad or wrong"; "misconception" means "an idea which is wrong because it has been based on a failure to understand a situation"; "pessimism" means "emphasizing or thinking of the bad part of a situation rather than the good part, or the feeling that bad things are more likely to happen than good things".

respondents considered that they were unpredictable and expressed impulsive behaviours. Pessimism was also noted that person with HIV/AIDS (52%), mental illness (37%) or intellectual disability (36%) were identified to be prevented from having children.

16. In the field of education and training, over 40% respondents did not accept that integrative schooling was more preferable than special school for persons with disabilities, as well as their rights of attending general public sector secondary schools. The exception was that a lower percentage was noted for persons with chronic illness (26%). However, misconception was not particularly serious for less than 25% of the respondents agreed that student with disabilities were often unmotivated. Pessimism was mild as less than 10% of the respondents agreed that persons with disabilities could not really benefit from education.

17. In relation to specific disabilities, persons with mental illness or HIV/AIDS were considered less favorably because they were primarily viewed causing dangers or adverse effects to others, rather than not knowing how to respond if they required assistance, or affecting the property price / school fame in the area. Relatively, the general public was more ready to accept persons with chronic illness in various societal fields.

18. Towards persons with mental illness or HIV/AIDS, the proportion of discrimination was significantly higher for respondents who possessed one or more of the following demographic characteristics: female, aged 35 or above, had primary or secondary educational attainment, were homemakers or retired (named "People Group of Specific Views").

### **Public perception of equal opportunities available for persons with disabilities in various societal fields**

19. Public perception of equal opportunities available for persons with disabilities in four societal fields was also solicited. Respondents were asked if they considered persons with disabilities having more or fewer opportunities than persons without a disability. A majority of respondents considered that persons with disabilities had fewer opportunities in the fields of employment and social interactions. Although most respondents indicated persons with disabilities had fewer opportunities in the field of education and training, a certain proportion perceived that there were equal opportunities. Interestingly, in the field of services and facilities, less than half of the respondents indicated that persons with disabilities had fewer opportunities while one-third considered there were more opportunities and one-fifth perceived equal opportunities.

20. It was noted that persons with HIV/AIDS or chronic illness were perceived to have a better position of obtaining equal opportunities, though they were still regarded having fewer opportunities in the fields of employment and social interactions by most respondents.

## **Comparison between 1998 and 2010 survey findings**

21. In the field of employment, 91% of the respondents in the 1998 survey perceived that persons with disabilities had fewer/far fewer employment opportunities than persons without a disability. There was a tendency of fewer negative views on persons with disabilities in the 2010 survey as a lower proportion of the respondents (around 85%) indicated the same perception. Only 40% of the respondents in the 1998 survey indicated that colleagues would accept persons with mental illness or HIV/AIDS. In the 2010 survey, more people would accept persons with mental illness or HIV/AIDS as colleagues and only a certain proportion of the respondents did mind working with persons with mental illness (35%) or HIV/AIDS (20%) in their company.

22. In relation to public access, services and facilities, about 80% of the respondents in the 1998 survey perceived that persons with disabilities had fewer/far fewer opportunities than persons without a disability. There was significant change in the 2010 survey for not more than 50% of the respondents indicated the same perception. About 30% of the respondents even considered that persons with disabilities had more opportunities in the use of services and facilities than persons without a disability. In a range of one-third to one-half of the respondents in the 1998 survey perceived that persons with disabilities are quite often discriminated against when using services and facilities. However, the 2010 survey findings indicated that less than 10% of the respondents could not accept persons with disabilities in using services and facilities, with the exception that higher percentages (16-36% of the respondents) were noted for persons with mental illness or HIV/AIDS.

23. In respect of social interactions, 82% of the respondents in the 1998 survey perceived that persons with disabilities had fewer/far fewer opportunities than persons without a disability. There was not much change in the 2010 survey as around 70-90% of the respondents indicated the same perception. However, exceptionally lower percentages were noted for persons with HIV/AIDS and chronic illness.

24. With regard to education and training, 77% of the respondents in the 1998 survey perceived that persons with disabilities had fewer/far fewer opportunities than persons without a disability. There were some slight changes in the 2010 survey for around 50-70% of the respondents indicated the same perception. However, exceptionally lower percentages were noted for persons with HIV/AIDS (38%) or chronic illness (33%).

25. The attitude towards integrating students with disabilities into mainstream schools varied as regards different disabilities. In general, about 70-80% of respondents in the 1998 survey perceived that the public was more receptive to integrating students with physical impairment or chronic illness into mainstream schools, and least receptive to students with intellectual disability (29%) or mental illness (38%). In the 2010 survey, people were still sceptical about integrative schooling after the implementation of inclusive education over a decade. Over 40% of the respondents disagreed that for students with disabilities, integrative schooling was more preferable than special school, with much higher percentages for persons with intellectual disability (75%) or mental illness (69%).

## **Social distance**

26. The *disability social distance scale* was used to assess respondents' level of closest relationship with persons with disabilities. Towards persons with autism, ADHD, specific learning difficulties, visceral disability, chronic illness, sensory impairment or physical impairment, about one-tenth of the respondents were willing to have the closest marital or kindred relationship. Around one-half of the respondents would have them as next door neighbours, whereas one-third of the respondents would accept them as casual friends.

27. The proportion of the respondents who showed "avoidance and repulsion" towards persons with disabilities (i.e. "would avoid contact", "would have them kept in an institution", "would keep them out of Hong Kong") were higher for persons with mental illness (47%) and HIV/AIDS (33%).

28. Analyzed by demographic characteristics of respondents who were not willing to contact persons with mental illness or HIV/AIDS, the proportion of avoidance and repulsion was higher for the "People Group of Specific Views" (refer to para. 18).

## **Key findings and recommendations**

29. With and without prompting, there was substantial increase of public awareness in some disability groups including intellectual disability and mental illness, on top of more visible disabilities like physical impairment and sensory impairment, when compared to the 1998 survey. However, persons with autism, ADHD, HIV/AIDS or chronic illness were not commonly considered as disabilities even when prompted.

30. Most of the respondents were over-confident that they could recognize persons with disabilities and even a few could recognize persons with chronic illness and HIV/AIDS immediately or after watching for a while. In reality, most categories of disabilities may not be easily identified without professional medical diagnosis. The most easily noticeable disabilities are those related to physical impairment. Public perception is diverted to the behaviour of the persons with disabilities, and stereotypes are then mistakenly formed. These stereotypes lead to groundless beliefs. For example, most respondents perceived that persons with specific disabilities implied having some forms of incapacity or dependence on others, and were likely unable to lead a happy and fulfilling life. It is quite strange to note that most respondents had no regular contact with persons with disabilities to substantiate their own viewpoints.

31. A majority of the respondents considered equal opportunities important. The main reasons were that it was important to ensure justice for individuals and it would help individuals' personal development. This view of equality was adopted by the respondents as illustrated in their acceptance of persons with disabilities and recognition of their rights in the field of employment, public access, services and facilities, and social interactions (but not in the field of education and training). Misconception, pessimism and public perception of fewer opportunities available for persons with disabilities were still common, particularly in the field of employment.

32. Amongst the persons with disabilities, persons with mental illness or HIV/AIDS were considered less favorably because they were primarily viewed causing dangers or

adverse effects to others, rather than not knowing how to respond if they required assistance, or affecting the property price / school fame in the area. Considerable proportion of the respondents indicated an attitude of avoidance and repulsion towards persons with mental illness or HIV/AIDS. Analyzed by demographic characteristics, the proportion of avoidance and repulsion was higher for “People Group of Specific Views” (refer to para. 18).

33. Some recommendations are made to redress the afore-mentioned views of stereotyping, discrimination, misconception and pessimism:

- (1) Promotion channels should be formulated to educate the general public so as to make known the needs and rights of persons with disabilities, particularly autism, ADHD, HIV/AIDS or chronic illness, which are rarely identified by people as disabilities at present.
- (2) Activities should be organised to enable the general public to interact with persons with disabilities with more dimensions for a longer duration so that people not just take a glance at the behaviour of the persons with disabilities, and wrongly frame them in stereotypes and groundless beliefs. Certainly, stories of overcoming difficulties and leading happy lives told by persons with disabilities will be convincing and overwhelmingly welcomed. These affective ties including forming close friendships appear to be very effective in reducing prejudice.
- (3) Disability awareness training should be considered, during which the unconscious thinking about “normal” and “not normal” is brought to the surface through the training approach without blame or guilt. The discussion will empower people to understand that the individual and society are intimately connected to the socialization process from childhood to adulthood, and discrimination towards persons with disabilities is often based on unquestioned, deeply held negative assumptions or stereotypes.
- (4) In the employment field, people primarily accept persons with disabilities and observe their rights. However, misconception, pessimism and public perception of fewer opportunities available for persons with disabilities are still common. To redress these negative feelings, some team-building training programmes or sharing workshops might need to be administered, probably by the employers in order to enhance the spirit of cooperation and harmony in the workplace.
- (5) In the field of education and training, the general public show reservation in accepting integrative schooling more preferable than special school for students with disabilities as well as observing their rights of attending general public sector secondary schools. Interestingly, misconception and pessimism about education are not commonly identified. Most people believe that education can benefit students with disabilities and motivate them to learn. In summary, the public still hold a segregationist view that students with disabilities should be educated in special institutions instead of integrative schooling, albeit the implementation of inclusive education over a decade. To redress the balance, it is important to conduct a comprehensive review of the shortcomings of the existing educational practices. Based on the findings, measures have to be formulated to plug up the loopholes and empower people with positive images of students with disabilities, in order to alleviate their grievance.

- (6) It is alarming that discriminatory views towards persons with mental illness or HIV/AIDs are prevalent, in which they are considered to cause dangers or adverse effects to others. Under the *disability social distance scale*, quite a number of people will adopt an “avoidance and repulsion” attitude towards persons with mental illness or HIV/AIDS. These discriminatory views should be indirectly derived because people seldom encounter people with persons with mental illness or HIV/AIDS, as revealed respective 3% and 1% in this survey. Furthermore, the people of discriminatory views tend to be the “People Group of Specific Views” (refer to para. 18). To combat the discrimination, further studies have to be undertaken so as to identify effective channels and strategies to outreach these people, other than general promotion via the media.
- (7) In the absence of personal experience and contact, the media may play an important role in determining attitudes and knowledge about persons with disabilities. To tackle stigma associated with persons with disabilities, intervention should be undertaken by the government to encourage responsible and accurate media reporting, particularly in cases of mental illness and suicide. Guidelines of upholding good quality and reliable information should be disseminated to media professionals and scriptwriters, and the general public are encouraged to provide feedback on stigmatizing media coverage.