

Women with Disabilities in India: Issues and Concerns

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ABSTRACT

Persons with disabilities comprises the vulnerable section of our society due to the stigma associated with their identity and various barriers that hinder their participation in the society. When these persons are women, the challenge they face is further compounded. This is peculiar in Indian context where both the persons with disability and women form a marginalised section of the society who have historically experienced oppression from a long time. The present paper attempts to highlight the challenges faced by women with disabilities in the various realms of their life in India. It argues that women with disabilities are treated as the least significant member of the society which affects their psychological, social and economic development. Therefore, disability rights and policies embedding gender inclusion is the utmost need of the hour to secure rights of women with disabilities.

Keywords: Women, disability, education, inclusion

There is presently no statistical data available that can provide the estimate of total population of people with disabilities in India. The Census in India is conducted after every 10 years but due to COVID pandemic the process has been procrastinated. Therefore, it is difficult to know the current status of population of persons with disabilities especially after implementation of Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016 which has included various disability categories which were not included while the census 2011 was held. Further, it will be difficult to compare literacy rate, employment, marital status and rural and urban residential status among males and females with disabilities. As per the Census 2011, people with disabilities in India comprises 2.21 percent of the total population. Out of the total population of persons with disabilities, 44 % are females and 56% are males. It included only eight kinds of disabilities while collecting the data related to people with disabilities. The data provided is believed to be highly conservative estimate which is far from ground reality (Vaidya, 2015).

Women forms a crucial part of our society. However, the full inclusion of women in the society is still a topic of debate and concern. In India, women face a lot of challenges that hinders their growth as a human which provides a scope for their subordination. When it comes to women with disabilities, the situation is more complicated as they face double discrimination and exploitation by virtue of their gender and disability. The women with disabilities face double discrimination as the gender superimposes the impact of disability on the physical embodiment, their roles and expectations in the society. As a consequence, women with disabilities form vulnerable population who negotiate in the mainstream society for leading a life with integrity. There are various factors responsible for their condition at risk that locate at both biological functionality and social constructions that determine the gender roles and identity. In India,

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women face discrimination in terms of education, employment, power roles, violence, sexual assault and deprivation of sexual and reproductive rights.

Persons with disabilities are often seen as a common 'sexless' group whose life is affected solely because of their state of being 'disabled'. As a result, when policies and schemes are made for persons with disabilities, the issue of gender in disability is rarely considered. It may be due to the assumptions that the issues of accessibility, rights and nature of challenges for persons with disabilities are similar irrespective of their gender. The socioeconomic status, gender and disability of a person create multiple layers of discrimination faced by him/her in the society. Women with disabilities experience violence more times as compared to their able-bodied counterparts because of the impact of intersectional forces.

According to Ghai (2002), women with disabilities occupy a multifarious and marginalised position in Indian society. Often western disability studies fail to comprehend the complexity of disability in India because of its nature which is defined by the markers like class, gender and caste. Ghai (2002) in her article in *Hypatia* states the intermingling of disablement in the common phrase used for women with disabilities in India like '*ek to ladki upar se apahij*' (one a girl, and that too disabled) which reflects the reality of a woman with disability in India. Therefore, one can comprehend that the situation of women with disabilities in Indian has daunting affect in their life. It is an illusion that people with disabilities forms a homogenous group and the challenges they face can be annihilated by universal means in the form of schemes, policies and acts.

The present paper attempts to highlight the various issues and challenges faced by women with disabilities in India that hampers their inclusion and participation in the society. It argues to have disability policies and rights that consider gender-based markers for inclusion of women with disabilities in the education and society.

Sexual and reproductive issues

The disability rights movement in India have perpetually raised voices for elimination of physical barriers, attitudinal barriers and issues of employment and education. However, in India,

neither the disability rights movement nor the women's rights movement gave much attention to the issues of sexual and reproductive rights, particularly as they applied to women with disabilities (Vaidya, 2015). Society has disregarded the rights to sexual and reproductive desires and hopes of persons with disabilities. They are viewed as asexual or hypersexual people who are incapable of reproducing offspring and unfit for sexual/life partners (Goyal, 2017, Addlakha, Price & Heidari, 2017). People with disabilities are constantly questioned about their need for companionship and their capacity to procreate on the grounds that they lack sexual desires and are unable to lead married lives. As a consequence, they have no access to the information related to sexual lives, personal hygiene, companionship and sexually transmitted diseases. It often becomes the ground for their physical and sexual abuse at home and outside home.

Women with disabilities are often excluded from a "life of femininity, partnership, active sexuality and denial of opportunities of motherhood" (Addlakha, Price & Heidari, 2017). There are also associated negative stereotypes against women with disabilities which restrict them in developing positive sense of self in them. Women with disabilities are seen as having no sexual desire and undesirable for marriage. In India where disability rights movement are male dominated, the sexual and reproductive rights of women were not adequately taken into consideration. Goyal (2017) opines that it is not that girls and women with disabilities do not have sexual desires and dreams, they are excluded from the spaces to think about themselves and their wishes. The myths about the sexuality of women with disabilities restricts them to express their sexual desires and dreams and force them to conform their asexual orientation in the society.

Educational concerns

As per the census 2011, female population contributes 44 % of the total population of persons with disabilities which is 2.21 % of the total population. Out of the male disabled population, 62% are literates and among the female disabled 45% are literates. It highlights the gender disparity in the educational status of persons with disabilities. The data reveals that among the male disabled population, 38 % are illiterate while 55 % of the

female disabled population is illiterate. In rural areas, illiteracy is high among female disabled population.

The difference in the working status of male and female persons with disabilities reflects the pathetic situation of women with disabilities in India. Where 47% of male persons with disabilities are working among themselves, only 23 % of women with disabilities are working among women with disabilities. As the consequences of cultural biases on the basis of gender and disability, the women with disabilities are lagging behind in the educational arena from both the men with disabilities and women without disabilities. According to UNESCO report (July 3, 2019), the number of girls with disabilities in schools in India are fewer as compared to boys (India Today Webdesk, 2019). The government schemes and programmes have been able to bring large number of children with disabilities in the schools, however, significant gaps still remain when it comes to the enrolment of girls with disabilities.

The major reasons for women and girls with disabilities of lagging behind in the field of education from men with disabilities and female counterparts without disabilities include the negative attitude of parents towards female child with disabilities, lack of transportation to access the schools and educational institutions, higher risk of sexual violence faced by girls and women with disabilities and lack of accessible toilets for girls with disabilities (Caleb, 2021). According to the report based on UDISEPlus data analysis, approximately 27 percent of the schools in India have children with special needs (CWSN) friendly toilets. It reflects the accessibility issues in India faced by majority of the CWSN as a consequence of which they have to drop out from school education. As per the RTE Act, 2009 schools should ensure the provision of separate toilets for girls and boys.

The data from 42 countries including India shows that the children with disabilities have limited access to early childhood education. The disparity is greater for girls which is reflected by the fact that only 18 percent of girls with disabilities and 28 percent of girls without disabilities attended an early childhood education programme (UN Women, 2022). The gender inequality in education has been deepened by the transformation in education during

pandemic. The situation of education of women with disabilities is worse in rural areas because of lack of awareness about disability, access to information and spaces, limited income, exposure to disability community and negative attitude of society towards women with disabilities making them invisible as persons in the society (Rawat, 2016).

Body image

The corporeal identity that operates within the medical model is a part of persons with disabilities lives that provides them the label of “abnormality”. The idea of “normal body” in itself is a debatable. It is a social constructed idea that conforms the norm which is contextual. The medical model of disability perceives the impaired bodies of persons with disabilities as inferior, abnormal, deviant and sub-human. The visibility of impaired bodies of persons with disabilities becomes the basis of bullying and mockery by the abled bodied people. It becomes the reason of their denial and exclusion from the ableist spaces that hampers the full participation of the persons with disabilities in day-to-day life activities. The body of persons with physical disability is seen as an “embodiment of corporeal insufficiency” which is created by ableist ideologies that functions through medical, legal, literary and political discourses of exclusion (Ghosh, 2010). Women with disabilities negotiate their body image in the culture where the idea of “normal body” is accepted and endorsed by patriarchal dominated society. Such norms perceive impaired bodies as deficient and inadequate which requires treatment/ technological interventions to become as same as abled bodied people. As Ghai, 2015 says “the myth of the beautiful body defines the impaired female body as unfeminine and unacceptable.”

Ghosh (2010) examines the embodied experiences of women with locomotor disabilities in Bengal and how they internalise socio-cultural construction of “ideal” female body. She opines how the visibility of disability in women with disabilities develops the sense of shame, becomes the marker of difference and their body is considered to be unfeminine and unattracted by the society. Garland-Thomson (2009) says “Women are the proper object of the male gaze, while disabled people are the proper object of the stare”. Objectification of women with disabled body exacerbates their struggle of being considered as

human who has the right to live with dignity in the society dominated by ableist bodied people.

Violence against women with disabilities

Women with disabilities are easy targets for violence in families, institutions and communities. The self-perception of women with disabilities about themselves is low as they struggle to gain positive sense of self right from their childhood. The study conducted in Mumbai on “violence against women with disability” (Daruwalla *et al.* 2013) revealed that negative attitude towards disability especially for girl child are the basis of physical, verbal and sexual abuse in the families. It further confirmed that often girls with disabilities face sexual violence right from childhood in their extended families which are not reported by their parents. The reasons are unwillingness of parents to acknowledge the violence and negative attitude towards girls with disabilities,

Many times, women with disabilities especially women with intellectual disabilities and deaf women where communication is barrier are at high risk of sexual violence. An incident took place in West Bengal where 19-year-old girl with intellectual disability was raped several times by her neighbour but she could not articulate about it to her mother. It was revealed only when she became pregnant (Bhandare, 2018). According to the Human Rights Watch Report (2018), most of the girls and women with disabilities in India do not receive any assistance required when sexual abuse occurs to them. The reasons are lack of understanding that crime has happened to them, difficulty in conveying about the sexual violence experienced by them, struggle in moving away from the danger and seeking assistance while needed.

HRW report, “Treated worse than Animals” (2014) documented the abuse against girls and women with psychosocial and intellectual disabilities in the institutional care of India. It reveals that the girls and women especially with intellectual disabilities are seen as weak and incapable of taking decision related to their lives. Most of them experience forced institutionalisation, physical or verbal abuse, forced medication, involuntary treatment and abysmal hygiene. It is evident that the lack of awareness about disabilities, negative attitude of family members, lack of belief on the complaints

of sexual abuse against women with disabilities add barriers in providing justice to women with disabilities against violence.

Marital concerns

The rates of women with disabilities who are living alone is high as compared to men with disabilities (NSS Report No. 583: Persons with Disabilities in India). Women with disabilities are seen as a burden on the family and least significant member of the family. The values that influence the social norms in India are “productivity, right to property and patriarchy” (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2004). Marriage is a social institution which is seen necessary part of one’s life in Indian context. The primary social unit is the family, comprising of heterosexual individuals without disabilities involved in socially accepted livelihood.

The stigma associated with the people with disability reduces their eligibility to lead a married life. The basic expectation from the person with disability is to earn their livelihood. As compared to women with disabilities, men with disabilities have comparatively more options for relationships. A woman’s disability is not her main disadvantage rather it adds to her already marginalised gender status (Mehrotra, 2006). Women with disabilities are not considered as capable of adopting the role of wife and mother. If woman with disabilities is married, they have pressure of bearing child and fear of transmitting their impairment to the next generation (Daruwalla *et al.* 2013). The charity model of disability perceives women with disabilities with sympathy, considers them to be dependent on others to lead a life. There marital concerns and choices are neglected, as they do not fit into the conventional norms and expectations set by the society for a woman. The type and severity of disability becomes the basis for compensating their marital choices. Money is often used as a luring tool for marrying women with disability and later they face physical abuse and infidelity from their spouses (Banerjee, 2017).

Accessibility issues

Persons with disabilities have to face multitude of barriers including physical, environmental and attitudinal which prevent them to fully participate in the mainstream society. Women with disabilities

face accessibility issues more as compared to their counterparts including male with disabilities and women without disabilities. According to the Rawat (2016), there is dearth of disability friendly toilets especially for women in public spaces, educational institutes and workplaces which adds barrier to their education and employment. As a result of lack of toilets, many girls and women with disabilities are compelled to defecate open either in early morning hours or in the evening making them more susceptible to sexual abuse and violence.

The major issue faced by people with disability in their day to day lives is to access spaces including shops, banks, educational institutions, public premises, recreational spaces including parks, sports complexes, pavements, roads etc. The Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (DEPwD) has launched the Accessible India Campaign for achieving universal accessibility for Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) that ended in June, 2022. The campaign was able to address to only a part of the accessibility issues faced by PwDs, therefore, there is a long way to go ahead to provide universal accessibility for successful inclusion of PwDs. Women with disabilities face double restriction in getting access to the spaces and information as being a woman they are not allowed to move out of the home and barriers to accessibility superimposes their struggle for exposure.

CONCLUSION

It is critical to consider that one cannot see the experiences of all women with disabilities through one lens. Therefore, the context of a women with disability is important to understand the intricacies of their struggles and challenges faced by them in the society. The type of disability is one of the most significant factors that influence their issues of accessibility, body image, marital concerns and education. The pressure of conforming socially constructed gender roles and stigmatised associated with the disability exacerbate the marginalisation of women with disabilities in the society. Subsequently, women with disabilities lose their sense of self and experience a decline in their self-esteem. As a result of gender bias and negative attitude towards disability, girls with disabilities are prone to physical and sexual abuse, face oppression in schools, educational institutions and workplace,

often have negative body image and develop inferiority of not being experienced womanhood as do the women without disabilities. The dependency of women with disabilities on their families because of barriers to the access to healthcare, education and employment are major reasons for their miserable life. They are subjected to violence, mental trauma and exclusion inside and outside their families.

It is essential to sensitize the families of women with disabilities about the significance of health and education for them. There is utmost need to sensitize girls with disabilities about person hygiene, body image and significance of education for their empowerment. Women with disabilities have right to live with dignity and participate in the society to become self-dependent person. It is therefore essential that the policies and schemes for persons with disabilities made must include the gender markers to ensure disability and gender inclusion as well.

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