



Women with disabilities in India

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Abstract: People with disabilities face many hurdles in their fight for inclusion and equality. Although, both men and women with disabilities are subjected to discrimination, it is the latter who are at a further disadvantage. Women with disabilities face "double discrimination" given that these women are subjected to not just disability limitations but also gender oppression. The paper explores the issues pertaining to women with disabilities in India. Drawing from the existing literature and statistics the article attempts to highlight the barriers faced by disabled women in India. It describes the abuse, violence, unemployment, discrimination, exclusion and other obstacles that these women face given their gender and disability. Based on this analysis the necessary conclusions are drawn.

Index Terms - Disability, women, women with disabilities, marginalised, discrimination, abuse.

I. INTRODUCTION

Limited is known about the experiences of people suffering from disabilities during the early periods of history. But it isn't hidden that life in the ancient world was unpleasant, brutal and short, especially for those less abled. It was a common belief amongst the Romans, Greeks and other ancient societies that disability was an impurity. It was a sign of punishment inflicted on them by the angry Gods. They also believed it to be the result of sins of one's previous births and was to be accepted as divine punishment. However, the earliest history of disability is also one filled with pity and compassion for the disabled but with no recognition of social equality.

It is a well-known fact that for centuries disabled people have been a repressed as well as an oppressed group. They have been isolated, stigmatised, institutionalised and also written about. That is because we live in a world full of norms. Norms which are more a feature of a certain kind of society than being a condition of human nature (Davis,2006). Human beings have a tendency to analyse themselves as either normal or deficient. This dire need of homogeneity lies in societies concept of normalcy, for people want to belong.

Disability is a conundrum that we all experience at some given point in our lives but don't always understand. While there are some people who are born disabled, some experience disability when they are young but most of us become familiar with it later on in life as we age (Albrecht, Seelman, and Bury,2001).

It is a widely known actuality that people with disability face multiple hurdles in their fight for equality. Also, the effects of social exclusion that both genders face is profound. Although both men as well as women with disabilities are subjected to discrimination, it is women who are at a greater disadvantage - given their gender. This results in them being more vulnerable to sexual and verbal abuse, physical violence, economic barriers, greater risk of poverty as well as fewer opportunities in education, healthcare, employment, as compared to their male counterparts.

Marginalisation, stigmatisation, discrimination, social exclusion, inability to participate in public life are a few of the stringent hardships that women with disabilities face as compare to men with disabilities and women without disabilities (United Nation Population Fund, 2019).

II. WHAT IS DISABILITY ?

Terms like handicap, impairment and disability have many a times been used interchangeably. However, World Health Organisation (WHO) in the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps (1980) has made a distinction between the three terms. Impairment refers to “*any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function.*” Handicap, on the other hand, is defined as “*a disadvantage for a given individual that limits or prevents the fulfilment of a role that is normal*”. Lastly, disability means “*any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being*”

Given the complex, multidimensional and dynamic nature, the definition of disability is a highly debatable issue. This is because the term does not refer to a homogeneous category. Its meaning has varied from time to time and person to person. It has been acknowledged as an “*evolving concept*” (UNCRPD,2006). Therefore, difficult to define in a single definition. However, it has been defined by various scholars and organisations based on their best understanding of the term. Since there is no single definition some of it's more acceptable definitions are given below:

As per the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD,2006) persons with disabilities include those “*who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others*”.

According to WHO's the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health (ICF), disability “*denotes the negative aspects of the interaction between an individual (with a health condition) and the individuals contextual factors (environmental and personal factors)*” (WHO, 2001).

It is clear from the above-mentioned definition by ICF that functioning and disability is a multidimensional concept that analyses an individual's level of functioning as a dynamic interaction between the health conditions, the environmental factors and personal factors.

The above given definitions also shed light on the fact that disability is not so much of a physical construct as it is a social construct. A person's disability may be visible to the eye or be invisible. Its onset can be at birth, during childhood, during their working age years or even at old age. Disability can broadly be divided into physical, mental, sensory, developmental and nonvisible disability.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 (RPwD) of India has provided 21 categories to identify disability

- Blindness
- low vision
- Leprosy cured persons
- Hearing impairment
- Locomotor disability
- Dwarfism
- Intellectual disability
- Mental illness
- Autism spectrum disorder
- A liberal policy
- Muscular dystrophy
- Chronic neurological conditions
- Specific learning disability
- Multiple sclerosis
- Speech and language disability
- Thalassaemia
- Haemophilia
- Sickle cell disease
- Multiple disabilities including deaf blindness
- Acid attack victims
- Parkinson's disease

Under the Indian Constitution, a “*person with benchmark disability*” means a person suffering from not less than 40% of any specific disability, as certified by a medical authority (RPwD,2016).

III. CAUSES

The concept of disability is ever evolving. We are aware that disability is an impairment that restricts or limits the functional abilities of a person. It can happen in any given social environment at any given age (before birth, during child birth or after birth). And therefore, it is important to understand the factors That give rise to these disabling conditions.

Disability can be categorised into two parts –

- Disability at the onset of birth – comprises of those disabilities that arise due to injuries or complications during birth such as lack of oxygen supply to the brain, prolonged labour, premature birth, etc that result in disabilities such as mental retardation, cerebral palsy, locomotor disabilities and more.

It also includes congenital malformations (such as club foot, cleft lip, cleft palate, spina bifida) that might happen due to the presence of chemical agents with high potency. Maternal malnourishment, maternal infection, maternal glandular and Rh factors also form a part of it.

It also includes genetics or any form of gene abnormality.

- Acquired disability - on the other hand includes factors such as accidents, crime, natural calamity, poverty, wars, occupational hazards, ageing, Environment, pollution and/or malnutrition.

IV. PREVELENCE

There are over 1 billion people in the world living with some form of disability. That constitutes about 15% of the world's population, 2-4% of which experience significant difficulties in functioning. There are approximately 300 million women and girls around the world suffering from either mental, sensory, intellectual or physical disability. Also the global prevalence for disability is higher for women (19%) as compared to that of men (12%) (WHO and World Bank 2011).

India has the second largest population in the world. It is also home to the second largest number of people with disabilities after China. According to the Census of India (2011) around 2.21% (2.68 crore) people out of the 121 crore population has disability. Amongst the disabled population, there are 44% (1.18 crore) females while men constitute 56% (1.5 crore) of the population. The 2011 census also revealed that 20% of the disabled population has locomotor disability, 19% as visual disability, the other 19% has hearing related disability, 8% has multiple disability and so on.

The survey conducted on persons with disabilities by the National Statistical Office (2008) states the prevalence of disability in India at 2.2%. Amongst men the percentage of disability was 2.4% while the percentage for females stood at 1.9%. According to World Bank Report (2009) on people with disability in India, there is an increasing evidence that disabled people constitute between 5 to 8% of the Indian population.

However, the Registrar General of India (2001) agrees that the Indian data on disability can be unreliable due to issues of social stigma, also a range of other socio-cultural variables and the availability of only a handful of well-trained field investigators.

V. WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES IN INDIA

In India being born a male is usually celebrated however when a girl is born there are no such celebrations. Moreover, if the girl child is born with any kind of disability, it's considered a curse. (Vidhya,2016). It isn't hidden that for ages people with disabilities in India have been seen as victims requiring sympathy and charity. The situation for a woman with disabilities is much worse. Not only are these women looked down upon, considered useless but are also treated as mere objects. There is a lack of voice, proper rehabilitation systems and access to adequate healthcare (Philippa,2005). The gendered nature of the Indian society is evident in the fact that women and girls with disabilities generally receive lesser care than disabled male members and are also more likely to be abandoned or even killed. (Mohapatra & Mohanty,2004; Erb and Hartis-white,2002).

Women with disabilities are a socially invisible category. As stated earlier their plight is worse than non-disabled women and men with disabilities (Addlakha,2008). The most punishing handicap is not just the attitude taken towards them by the society itself (Das,2012; Nayak,2013) but the problem of social exclusion barriers they face, depending on their disabilities

In the Indian society there exists a 'corporal standard' for able-bodied people and any kind of disability is regarded as a personal flaw (Kumari,2009). As a result, women with disabilities constantly struggle against negative stereotyping even when trying to embrace a positive sense of self given the bodily and societal restrictions. It is a struggle that limits the celebration of difference and the pride one feels in one's individuality. In a most of cases the society does not expect women with disabilities to embrace the role of a mother, a wife and a homemaker, given their lack of physically measuring up to the able-bodied standards (Addlakha,2006). A research conducted by Ghosh (2010) on women with locomotor disability in Bengal found that there in fact does exist certain images of the 'ideal' woman. These images are socially constructed through common gender ideologies, which are experienced and interpreted by disabled women who grow up negotiating their disabled bodies while internalising the "normal" female body. It also explores as well as highlights the ways in which women and their bodies are being controlled and oppressed by these age-old patriarchal ideologies. Therefore, she is someone who is unable to confirm to the stereotypical standards of beauty and femininity in terms of their physical appearances (Limaye ,2016). A report by the Women with Disabilities India Network (WDIN, 2019) revealed that women with disabilities are not just consider a burden, deprived of decision-making powers, frequently abused and harassed against, they are also not considered to be 'woman enough'.

Women with disabilities in India are often denied their sexuality. They're seen as being incapable of producing children and/or looking after them, thus being separated from them when they do happen to give birth. Similarly, many non-disabled women who happen to birth disabled children specially girls are often left by their husbands or abused (Philippa,2005).

A supportive family in the lives of women with disabilities is an important factor in their growth. However, not all families are as supportive as they would like them to be. Many disabled women in India are restricted to their homes given the shame, overprotectiveness of the family, inaccessible environments due to their disability, not allowing the disabled woman to work in order for them to start a self-dependent life, disrespecting them and portraying negative attitudes towards them are some of the very common problem that a woman with disabilities faces in India (WDIN,2019). Exclusion from religious and/or social events in the communities as well as in the families given the stigma that surrounds them, is another common phenomenon that Indian women with disabilities encounter many a times (Mohapatra & Mohanty 2004). All this therefore leads to disabled women experiencing extreme neglect, isolation and unawareness of their options for participation in a more vocational life. (Buettgen, Gorman, Rioux, Das and Vinayan, 2015). Similarly, a study conducted in Andhra Pradesh, India found that women with disabilities have a lot lesser autonomy and decision-making power with regards to their own lives as compared to their male counterparts with disabilities (Disability Rights Promotion International, 2009).

Indian women, in general, remain disproportionately untrained, un/undereducated, poor as well as un/underemployed. The situation is worse for women suffering from disabilities. A research undertaken by the Society for Disability and Rehabilitation Studies (n.d), on the employment rights of disabled women in India, found that when it comes to employment women suffering from any kind of disability is often treated unequally, as though their particular disability has affected all their other abilities to work. In the eyes of the community, they are not capable of earning, let alone live an independent life. Likewise, work carried out by D'Souza and Singhe (2019) in Raichur district of Karnataka, on rural women with locomotor disability, discovered that these women experienced problems of underemployment, unemployment, no training, low incomes, lack of opportunities as well as societal prejudice. Low enrolment and workforce participation of disabled women can be attributed them being frequently marginalised in the areas of education and employment (WDIN,2019)

A study embarked upon by Mitra and Sambamoorthi (2006) in India found that a man with disabilities had a three times higher employment rate as compare to women with disabilities. Though, according to them, this could also be a reflection of a man's unacceptability towards '*women's work*'. This results in women with disabilities earning the lowest wages as compare to the disabled men and non- disabled women. Even while working full time jobs they merely earn only 56% of the salary of a disabled man who is employed full time (Rao,2004). Another reason being that women with disabilities in India are way more likely, than their disabled male counterparts, to be absorbed in as 'cheap labour' on contractual basis with almost no social security benefits (UNNATI, 2011).

In the views of Mohanty & Schmidt (as cited in Sightsavers, 2018) some of the more major obstacles, for disabled women to getting employment, were low levels of education, a lack of vocational skills, inaccessible infrastructure, no official training, amongst other things. The negative attitude of the employees has also been stated as one of the reasons. Due to the stigmatisation and insecurities that these women feel they prefer staying at home and therefore not engaging in economic activities. Women in general, and disabled women in particular, are not only less valued as workers they also paid lesser than their male counterparts as established earlier.

In the India society, women and girls are perceived to be a burden for their family, disabled women are a greater liability. This lies in the fact that there are very limited opportunities related to productive work or gainful employment for them. Therefore, this enforced financial dependency makes them the most vulnerable group, not just in India but in the entire world. Even though it may seem like the disability sector in India has made progress however, providing proper employment opportunity still remains one of the main concerns of the sector. For employment is the key to empowerment as well as inclusion of women with disabilities in the society. (Society for disability and rehabilitation studies, n.d.)

In India, poverty is considered to be both the cause as well as consequence of disability. A study carried out by Phillipa (2005) found that most of the informants, especially female informants, reported becoming poorer due to their disability. Disabled women also tended to experience poverty more intensely given the lack of opportunity to escape it, as compared to the disabled men or even the non-disabled female population. It is not hidden that women with disabilities suffer from discrimination given their gender and disability which in return affects the economic aspect of their lives leading to poverty. According to the World Bank report a quarter of these disabled women in India are rarely able to manage three complete meals in a day (World bank 2007; Addlakha, 2008). Therefore, a large number of women with disabilities in India, end up facing what is known as "triple discrimination" - gender, disability and poverty. (World bank 2007; Addlakha, 2008 ; Vidhya 2016).

Disability is often another excuse for domestic violence as they are perceived to be '*more dependent*'. Though a disabled woman's disability itself is not her primary problem, it is actually an added strain to their already marginalised position as a woman in the Indian society (Mehrotra,2004). Many hurdles faced by women with disabilities is due to the precarious attitude of the society towards them and this very mindset, that largely prevails in Indian society, is due to illiteracy as well as ignorance. As a result, many of these disabled women are subjected to violence, betrayals as well as abuse by near and dear ones (Nayak,2013). Rao (2004) in her report state that disabled women and girls, in India, are especially vulnerable to violence in their family situation. For women with mental/hearing disabilities, sexual abuse is quite common especially by the hands of their caregivers. According to her, women with disabilities also fall common preys to incest. A study carried out in Odisha by Mohapatra and Mohanty (2004) reported that majority of women with disabilities faced physical abuse which included denial of basic rights such as access to food, social participation,

education etc. The most common culprits for such physical, emotional, and sexual abuse were parents, husbands as well as close family members.

Physical violence, threats of abandonment, emotional abuse, verbal insults, forced marriages, disputes with in-laws, threats of abandonment and spousal alcohol use are some of the many problems that a woman with disabilities experiences in her marriages (Daruwalla, Chakravarty, Chatterji, More, Alcock, Hawks and Osrin, 2013). Data by 2002 National Sample Survey Organisation (2003) indicated that in India disabled women are four times more likely to experience widowhood as compare to non-disabled women, both in rural and urban settings. Also, the proportion of disabled women who are currently married is much lower than women without disability. This is due to the fact that most women with disabilities are married off to men who are much older than them resulting in higher rates of divorces and abandonment as well as spouse deaths (UNNATI and Handicap International,2004)

On the contrary however, a study conducted by Mehrotra (2004) in rural Haryana describes how disabled women, though stereotyped to be incomplete, insufficient are not treated any differently. She is expected to do all the work and more regardless of her disability. It also describes how disability after marriage not just lead to conflict but also estrangement in many cases.

It doesn't come as a surprise that women with disabilities face a higher risk of sexual assault. 'Gazing', inappropriate touching and sexual 'misbehaviour' usually by members of the family, is not an unknown phenomenon in the lives of disabled women. However, most of these episodes often times go unreported (Daruwalla, et al.,2013). According to Human Rights Watch (2018), this is due to the fact that there are significant barriers that disabled women and girls, in India, face when seeking justice. These barriers include difficulties in reporting the abuse to the police, in obtaining proper medical care, having their complaints investigated as well as navigating through the court system and difficulty in obtaining compensation. They also tend to face humiliation at the police stations and hospitals. The reality is that these women have very limited access to the justice system because getting proper access to the system is difficult for disabled women mostly due to the stigma associated with their disability and sexuality (WDIN,2019). According to Lalitha Kumaramangalam, former chairwoman of the National Commission for Women once said "*One of the biggest challenges for women [with disabilities] is access [to services], not just physical but access across the board.*" (as quoted in Human Rights Watch,2018).

Lack of awareness and proper education to women with disabilities is one of the many reasons as to why disabled women are unable to ask for correct aids for themselves. Under the 86th amendment of the Indian Constitution 2002, Right to Education is a fundamental right of the Indian citizen which promises free and compulsory education to all children between the ages 6 to 14. However, in actuality, the story is quite different in case of the female population specially those suffering from disabilities, as the barriers are not always monetary in nature. (Nair,2010).

In a country like India there is a lack of published information in order to show in detail the exact data as well as the extent of illiteracy experienced by women with disabilities, amongst other things. ActionAid (2003), estimates that there are 20 million disabled women in India out of which 98% are illiterate and less than 1% can utilize the rehabilitation and healthcare services available for them in the country. Similarly, in a study done in Gujarat it was discovered that 43% of the disabled people interviewed were found to be literate, however only 35% of these were women. This indicates towards a strong gender disparity in the Indian education system, where girls with disability are far less likely to attend school as compare to other disabled and non-disabled children. Their dropout rates also tend to be on the higher side, thus resulting in a high number of uneducated disabled women (Unnati,2004). In the Raichur district of Karnataka it was found that the literacy rates of disabled women was around 7% in comparison to the general literacy rate of the disabled in the state which stands at 46% (D'Souza and Singhe, 2019). Not only are they deprived of quality education but also a chance at quality livelihood, making them feel neglected and marginalised (Nayak 2013).

The published literature on the reproductive health status and needs of women with disabilities in India is also very limited as compared to other aspects of their lives. Human Rights Watch (2014) found that there was a huge scarcity of accessible and appropriate government services for women suffering from intellectual or psychosocial disabilities. Apart from this, it was the general lack of awareness and support which often results in women with such disabilities to be dumped in mental hospitals or institutions, where they may experience all different kinds of abuse. These women often face abuse by the hands of their physicians who suggest forced sterilisation. (Rao,2004) Furthermore, a study administered by Murthy, John, Sagar & South India Development Evidence Study Group (2014) found that women with disabilities reported significantly lower pregnancy rate when compared to able bodied women. They faced significantly higher pregnancy outcomes and complications as compare to women without a disability. Evidence also highlights the fact that women with disabilities have an increased rate of premature delivery as well as infant low birth weight. The study demonstrates that women with disability have higher rates of pregnancy related complications, urinary tract infection and also higher chances of co-morbidities such as depression and diabetes.

The World Bank Report (2007) stated that one of the main reasons that women with disabilities in India sufferer from many gynecologically related health issues is due to the fact that there are no bathrooms inside most of the houses in rural areas of our country. It is not just women with disabilities, but women in general, who have to face humiliation and discomfort, not just in their houses but also outside. Even though disabled women are included in healthcare, rehabilitation, education and employment schemes, but in actuality they often lack meaningful access to these basic services. (Human Rights Watch 2014). In addition to this, Bacquer and Sharma (1997) have also reported that a large number of disabled women and girls in India are continuously in poor health. They

have a constant risk of falling ill over and over again. Furthermore, a research conducted by Mohanty (2005) discovered that in case of disasters no special preference is given to women with disabilities and they struggle to get relief or help during such an event.

In a country like India, men and their concerns have dominated the disability movement. Therefore, male centric concerns have been guiding the developments of the movements and disabled women are seen as invisible elements in this general movement (Ghai,2003; Hans and Patri,2003). It is ironic how even though the women's movement emphases on issues such as class and caste inequality, patriarchal ideologies, domestic violence, sexual abuse and much more, it does not include the injustice and hardships experienced by disabled women. This is despite the fact that disability cuts across all these categories of repression that the women's movement is fighting for (Ghai,2002). For Chaudhuri (2006) it did not come as a surprise when the research conducted revealed that disabled women are not considered a priority group in any kind of rehabilitation programmes, mass movements, research as well as state policies and programmes. Moreover, they are further cut off from any kind of political and social participation given the stigma and discrimination tied to disability. Hence, women with disabilities are neither fully represented nor completely integrated with their society, with the disability movement nor with the women's movement (Ghai,2006).

VI. CONCLUSION

Disability whether acquired naturally or by accident is considered to be the most unwanted gift of nature. It is not only a challenge to the legal system, the state, the medical field but also to the society and the people who have to live with it. Persons with disabilities, especially women, are considered to be the most marginalised and vulnerable sections of the society. More often than not they are humiliated, discriminated against, stigmatised and also isolated. They are denied the basic rights to live with dignity, to employment, to proper education, adequate healthcare and more.

Millions of women are present all around the globe that are suffering from physical, sensory, intellectual or any other impairments/disabilities. They are not just subjected to socially and culturally constructed ideologies that our patriarchal in nature but are also discriminated against as compared to their peers. They face attitudinal, economic, and infrastructural barriers that hinders their prospects of enjoying equal access to opportunities and basic rights. They are often seen as inferior, non-productive, incomplete and denied any recognition as a woman and human being.

In a country like India the situation of an individual with disability is bleak. It is even worse for a woman with disability. However, these difficulties and obstacles faced by them seem to be more due to the attitude of the society towards them rather than structural problems.

Our society at large is too indifferent and harsh to understand the condition of women with disabilities in general. Many of these disabled women and girls are unable to make valid contributions to the community and economy due to the lack of skills, support and opportunities. Even though the Government has laws, acts and policies to address the needs of the disabled, these are more general and male centric rather than taking into account gender specific issues. Too often these women with disabilities are the ones who end up fighting with the system that is complex and fragmented in nature. Rather understanding and putting the needs of women with disabilities at the heart of the policies for improving their chances in life as well as social inclusion, these legal and political frameworks often result in their social exclusion.

The most notable finding from this literary review is that almost all research on disability has used a gender blind approach. They have presumed the insignificance of gender and other social dimensions in this field. In an approach to therefore examine the lives of women with disabilities they have failed to take into account the influence that their gender has in their lives.

Another prominent characteristic that can be found in this study is that majority of the literature, from around the world and specially India, is devoted to the barriers faced by women and girls with disabilities. There is a dearth of literature that brings to notice the positive aspects of their lives. Despite all the difficulties and limitations how these disabled women have empowered themselves. Therefore, the literature is somewhat limited in its scope.

In the end women with disabilities are the most unsafe and excluded category in today's society. Therefore, there is a need to have a better understanding of their lives in order to make progress and also to provide for them a life more equal, socially inclusive and just.

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