

Gender And Disability: A Review Of Literature

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Abstract: This paper will give an insight on the concept of disability in India, how the disabled females are stereotyped in Indian society. This paper will make you aware about the profile of disabled women and the problems faced by the disabled women.

Introduction: Historically in India as elsewhere in the world, there has been a deep-rooted cultural antipathy to persons with disabilities. Throughout the ages the disabled have been looked down upon with disdain, almost as if they were sub-human. They have been portrayed as medical anomalies, helpless victims and a lifelong burden for family and society. Disability was said to be a ‘taboo’, viewed by many people as bringing ‘disgrace’ or ‘stigma’ upon a family. In Indian context disability has been linked to a religious belief in ‘karma’, the idea that being born or becoming disabled is a result of wrong doing in a previous incarnation. Persons with disabilities are amongst the most socially marginalized groups. They are constantly faced with discrimination and are subjected to neglect, prejudice, revulsion, rejection and pity. They face economic, educational, architectural, legal and health barriers, which prevent them from leading a fulfilling life and achieving their full potential. Indeed, the majority of persons with disabilities pass their lives in total isolation, abject poverty and absolute misery. Needless to say the plight of women with disabilities is even worse, since they face the double burden of being female and disabled too.

According to RannveigTraustadóttir , although men and women with disabilities are subject to discrimination because of their disabilities, women with disabilities are at a further disadvantage because of the combined discrimination based on gender and discrimination based on disability. (Traustadóttir, 1997, p. 2). Researchers have reported that WWD not only face discrimination but they also suffer from stigma and as a consequence of it they are often socially isolated. Their isolation makes them vulnerable to violence within and beyond the family, and it also precludes their access to education and other opportunities. Many WWD remain illiterate, they are unable to seize the opportunities of empowerment that come their way. Research on people with disabilities (PWDs) in India is very limited and the research focusing specifically on WWD is extremely meager.

Disability is a multifaceted complex concept to define. The meaning of disability as given in dictionaries, describe it as a disadvantage, deficiency-especially a physical or mental impairment that restricts normal achievements i.e. something that hinders, incapacitates or disqualifies. In general parlance it is a physical or psychological condition which is considered to have medical significance (Reddy, 2011). In the context of health experiences, a disability is any restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity in manner or within the range considered normal for a human being.

Concept of disability in Indian context:

According to the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995, "Person with Disability" means a person suffering from not less than forty percent of any disability as certified by a medical authority (any hospital or institution, specified for the purposes of this Act by notification by the appropriate Government). Thus, in the Persons covered under Person with Disabilities Act "disability includes (i) Blindness; (ii) Low vision; (iii) Leprosy-cured; (iv) Hearing impairment; (v) Locomotor disability; (vi) Mental retardation; (vii) Mental illness.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill 2016 replaced the existing PWD Act 1995. According to the Rights given under the PWD Act, (2016) "person with disability" means a person with a long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which, in interaction with barriers, hinders his/her full and effective participation in society equally with others. In the RPWD Act, 2016, the types of disability have been expanded from 7 to 21 conditions and it now also includes cerebral palsy, dwarfism, muscular dystrophy, acid attack victims, hearing impairment, speech and language disability, specific learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, chronic neurological disorders such as multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's disease, blood disorders such as hemophilia, thalassaemia, and sickle cell anemia, and multiple disabilities.

Review of literature

Data indicates that there is a little research on disabled women. Very few studies exclusively focus on LDW.

Review of literature thus focuses on WWD. It has been divided into different headings and sub-headings like profile, stereotypes about disabled women, comparison between disabled women and disabled men, differences in disabled women and non-disabled women, awareness about various provisions, problems faced by disabled women etc.

Profile of the disabled women

Socioeconomic Background

Studies indicate that the prevalence of disability is lower in relatively privileged socioeconomic groups in both developed and developing countries. (Melzer et al. 2000; Parker et al. 1994). In India, the prevalence of polio and blindness is at least four times higher among people who are below the poverty line compared with those who are above it (Ghai 2001). Women with physical disabilities live near or below the poverty line (Mudrick, 1988; Russo & Jensen, 1988).

Marital status

Fewer women with physical disabilities are married, more are separated and divorced, and if they have children, these women often raise them alone (Asch & Fine, 1988).

Educational background of disabled women

Disabled women have a lower level of education (Asch & Fine, 1988). WWD often receive pressure from their counselors to pursue a career in disability related fields such as rehabilitation counseling or special education (Davis & Marshall, 1987).

Employment opportunities for disabled women:

WWD have not been a part of the women's employment revolution. In 1982 only 20 percent of WWD had jobs (Asch & Fine, 1988; Russo & Jansen, 1988). Burke (1999) argues that disabled women tend to have more negative work experiences, possibly due to previous education problems, discrimination and the nature of roles offered which lead to lower income levels in lower status roles.

Problems related to disabled women

Stereotypes about disabled women: The combination of both gender and disability give rise to controversial social attitudes, stereotypes and stigmas; stereotyping, discrimination and prejudice often accompany medical labeling of disability (Rothman, 2003). WWD are perceived as being unable to fulfill a caring and mothering role (Shaul et al. 1985); disabled women also are seen as unfit to reproduce, unable to be caretakers, and as lacking the ability to perform domestic duties (Shaul, et al. 1985).

Cultural barriers: Ramdas and Mishra (1987) have found that the most prevalent view of disability is to see the impairment as an outcome of the past Karma. Based on the Hindu belief of reincarnation, the birth of the disabled child is seen as a punishment for sins committed in previous life. There is cultural bias against WWD leading to preferential treatment and allocation of resources and opportunities to male children. While some view gender bias as the major barrier (Fahd, et al, 1997), many others believe that the disability bias limits opportunities for disabled girls still further.

Marriage related problems: Research findings indicate that marriage of a disabled girl is very difficult. Men with various disabilities are easily accepted whereas a girl with disability remains unaccepted. Societal perception of marriage as the final responsibility towards their daughter leads some families to resort to any means, fair or foul, to find their husbands (Hema, 1996). Baquer and Sharma (1997) argue that a disabled woman gets disqualified on account of her disability in an arranged marriage scenario. Parents of disabled girl are forced to make "a number of compromises" in the selection process. These compromises include marrying their daughter to an older man, widower or as a second wife, as well as offering "exorbitant" amounts of dowry.

Problem of Mobility: WWD tend to have fewer opportunities to participate in community life than disabled men, mainly due to cultural reasons. Restricted mobility and absence of access to provisions in the surroundings environment can also be a hampering factor in the

participation of women with disabilities in community life (Thomas and Thomas, 1997). "Loss of mobility is the greatest of all the real losses of blindness. It intensifies the other greatest loss, social inadequacy, both in its reality and emotional aspects" (Hoover, 1964).

CONCLUSION: While reviewing the available literature it is noticed that disabled women are more marginalized. It is ironical that they are not only ignored by their own able bodied gender but also by disabled men. Among women, disabled women are seen inferior, resulting in isolation and marginalization. A glaring example of their marginalization and neglect is that there is no reliable data available with the regard to the number of disabled women. It was noticed that there is a dearth of the studies exclusively on LDW, especially in Indian context. Most of the studies have been done on those disabled women who are staying in formal institutions, but there are a few studies that focus on disabled women who are staying with their families. Most existing research assessing the perception towards disability has targeted the community, family members or health professionals separately. There is a lack of information on perception of LDW on their disability. There is lack of research on women with locomotor disability in both rural and urban set-up in India. There is lack of research using both qualitative and quantitative methodology on LDW in India.

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