

Disabled women and Social Exclusion: Issues and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Women with disabilities in India face double discrimination and are socially excluded due to the prevalence of traditional gender roles and expectations. This paper explores the concept of exclusion and explains how disabled women form a socially excluded group in our society. It further describes the problems/challenges faced by disabled women in the context of Jammu city and the government initiatives and schemes implemented for including disabled women in the mainstream. The study was conducted among 30 disabled women of Jammu city.

1. Introduction

Social exclusion is often the effect of the process of discrimination based on cultural, social and racial identity. It is conceptualised as a multi dimensional process in which various forms of exclusion are combined: participation in decision making and political processes, access to employment and material resources, and integration into common cultural processes. Discrimination and exclusion occurs through social, economic, political structures and actions. All disabled person's men and women, share similar experiences of isolation, marginalisation, and discrimination. They often lack the opportunities of the mainstream population and are usually among the most marginalised and oppressed in the society. On the other hand women face barriers to full equality and advancement because of factors such as race, age, language, ethnicity, culture, religion or disability.

Thus, persistence of certain cultural, legal and institutional barriers makes women and girls with disabilities the victims of two-fold discrimination: as women and as persons with disabilities. The world report on disability (2011)¹ describes women with disabilities as the most marginalised and excluded group in the society as the prevalence of disability is higher among women than men. Deedgan (1981)² considers disabled women as members of a 'multiple minority group' since they are the recipients of discrimination and prejudicial attitudes from several groups simultaneously. He further views that disabled females are the victims of a "less than whole" attitude held by the able bodied women and men, as well as a "sexist" attitude held not only by able bodied persons but also by disabled men in their own sub culture.

Women with disabilities are disadvantaged because women's work is seen as secondary to men's. A woman's main role in most communities is still to be a wife, mother, and homemaker while the man is the main decision maker and income earner and as a result a woman with disability is perceived as one who is unable to perform her traditional roles of wife, mother and home-maker because of her disability and is perceived as one in need of physical assistance in self care and grooming, and is usually unable to carry out the day to day domestic tasks that require mobility and physical labour. Thus

disabled women and girls live at the corner of disability and womanhood- two "minority" identities, a double dose of discrimination and stereotyping and multiple barriers to achieve their life goals (Fine and Asch, 1988)³.

Disability often adds to and worsens discrimination and exclusion against women and negatively impacts their gender roles, and perceives them as weak and helpless. Wendell (1989)⁴ views that disabled women struggle with both the oppression of being women in male dominated society and the oppression of being disabled in societies dominated by the able-bodied. In spite of the existence of legal safeguards persons with disabilities especially women are always treated as "special", "challenged" and "different" and always marginalized and excluded inspite of having the right to enjoy the same status as the other 'abled' citizens.

2. Social stereotypes and Stigma

Disability is often seen as a form of social oppression and social exclusion. Public attitudes have an impact on the lives of persons with disability especially women. The natural human attitude towards people with disabilities is usually sympathetic. Our first reaction towards any disabled person is 'bechari' or 'bechara' and we mark them as 'strange', 'wierd', 'dangerous', 'freak'. People are often judged by their physical appearance especially women and being born as a disabled woman becomes a curse as she is unable to fulfill the rules of femininity. Hence Reeta Bagchi (2008)⁵ in '*Women and Disability in India*' argues that the patriarchal social structure has always remained oppressive to women because of gender discrimination. In a culture where women are targeted with bodily expectations, women with disabilities suffer additional stigmatisation because of the gap between ideal feminine bodies and disabled women's different bodies.

A disabled woman in Jammu is stigmatised in her society. The society often stigmatizes the differently able persons as separate from able bodied persons and labels them as physically challenged, handicap, asexual, retarded, unlucky etc. Women with disabilities are subject to additional disadvantages and discrimination as a women's role in most communities is still to be a wife, mother, and homemaker.

Women with disabilities are often disliked, rejected and could experience violence, abuse, harassment, discrimination in one form or another. Women having disabilities are considered a burden on society, on themselves and their families. Most of the women revealed that despite their families supporting them, the society does not allow them to live peacefully which makes them automatically excluded from participating in daily activities of life. This is reflected in the local sayings. Some of these are: saying '*ye toh apne maa baap par bhoj hai*', '*Wo dekh Wo bechari ne bacha uthaya hai*', '*how will you live with this*', '*this job is not for you*', '*iss bechari se kaun shaadi karega*,' *Agar ye aisi hoti to better hoti*', '*Ab iss bechari ka kya hoga*'.

Thus women with disabilities in India are subject to deprivation of various forms in their lives. The multiple barriers faced by them are due to the ignorance and attitudes of society and individuals towards disabled people. Barnartt (1987)⁶ in an article on 'The multiple minority status of Disabled women' examines the situation of women with disabilities as a group with multiple minority status. He argues that women with disabilities are considered doubly disadvantaged when compared to non disabled woman as well as men with disabilities.

Social attitudes and stigma play an important role in limiting the opportunities of persons with disabilities for full participation in social and economic life and even within their own families. Women with disabilities are often seen as 'separate individuals' in society. The marginalization of seeing them as separate human beings is stigmatized upon them by society which makes them disabled than they actually are. The society tends to avoid, isolate, reject, and segregate persons with disabilities especially women who often face attitudinal and environmental barriers that prevent their full, equal and active participation in a society. Various cultural, legal and institutional barriers make women with disabilities victims of two fold discrimination- as women and as persons with disabilities (Dendena Sona, 2015)⁷.

3. Problems/Challenges

Women with disabilities are at disadvantage because of the combined discrimination based on gender and disability. Though men and women suffer equally because of disability but some issues are exclusively women's issues. S.Vidya (2016)⁸ in "*social status of women with disability*" argues that in a patriarchal society if disability affects boys and girls in almost identical fashions, female child faces more humiliation than a boy. In India usually birth of a son is always celebrated and the birth of a girl never has such celebration and a disabled boy is more acceptable than a disabled girl. If a family has a disabled boy they will do their best to make him a productive male which is not so when it comes to girl.

Jeeja Ghosh (2014)⁹ examines that the status of disabled women is not only inferior to that of non disabled women but also to their male counterparts. She indicates variables such as position in the family, access to education and health care services, opportunities to find employment, knowledge regarding existing legislation and facilities for disabled people

and fulfilling the role ascribed to women due to which women with disabilities stand at a disadvantageous position in the society and are thus socially excluded.

Some challenges that are holding them back are lack of accessibility to all the places e.g. some buildings cannot be constructed with wheel chairs, ramps, and other things like that due to limited space. The difficulties generally encountered are getting out of the bed, getting into their chair, dressing, moving from chair to toilet and back, reaching for any item on or above the standard height, using common furniture, entering through closed doors, driving, using any form of public transport (Bus, Train ,Air etc). Challenges for person who can't see would be that signs outside of doors don't always have the brail underneath the writing. So, that would make it difficult for them to navigate themselves around a building or find the place that they need to be. A challenge for a person that can't talk is that it would be very hard for them to get a job and if they go somewhere alone there might not be a person at the place where they're going that knows sign language. So, that would make it difficult for them communicate with others and tell them what they want".

Thus they continue to face challenges in many areas of their lives and many of these challenges involve education, health, money, safety, transport, social life. As regards the challenging areas of life, respondents revealed that "being disabled is itself a biggest challenge in life". Among various areas majority women with disabilities considered health as the biggest challenge in their life. Women revealed that due to lack of health centres for disabled, they are not being properly treated by doctors and they tend to stay away from doctors to avoid stigma both in and outside hospitals. Transport was another important challenge in the lives of disabled women. Transportation acts as a life line for persons with disabilities to access employment, education, health care, leisure and community life as it allows them to live independently within their communities. Lack of accessible means of transport creates social exclusion for the disabled. Women reported that due to overcrowding of public buses there is lack of proper seating, non availability of bus stops where we can wait, and there is no one to help us while climbing high and incompatible steps of vehicles. As one of the respondents revealed that sometimes conductors don't allow them to board the mini bus and as a result they are either pushed or thrown out.

Social life being another challenge in the life of disabled woman it was found that if they ever wished to talk to people in social gatherings, people mostly discussed about their disability and never judged them beyond their disability. On the other hand only few disabled women reported education as a challenge in their lives. Women revealed that their whole life is a challenge; everyday is a new challenge which they need to overcome themselves. The fear of being harmed physically, psychologically and financially in homes and public does not allow them to enjoy their lives.

Marriage is the basic right of every individual still another major issue which women with disabilities face is while getting married. Both married as well as unmarried disabled women respondents encounter problems in getting married. Married

women revealed that the most basic obstacle in their marriage was rejection from in laws as they were not ready to accept a disabled woman as their family member whereas unmarried disabled women revealed that the fear of getting married to a disabled man and being dependent on someone after marriage is the biggest fear while getting married. They perceive marriage as a burden which would curb their rights.

Women with disabilities have always been portrayed as less than the able bodied individuals with regard to the contributions they make in the society. Disabled women are usually at a higher risk of abuse/harassment. Various forms of abuse (physical, sexual, verbal) encountered by women in their homes, work place, public etc. such as such as criticism, insult, calling names, screaming being put down by someone in family or office, slap, hitting, and physical injury and being pushed or touched specially while travelling in buses and matadors, threats, misuse of money, damaging property, humiliation, emotional abuse and isolation.

4. Government and non- government initiative and schemes

In order to include disabled persons including women with disabilities in the mainstream development, both government and non-governmental organisations have adopted a number of welfare measures. The social welfare department informs that Jammu & Kashmir has more people suffering from varied disabilities than the all India average due to the ongoing political turmoil in the state.

The department of social welfare is responsible for the welfare of persons with disabilities in Jammu & Kashmir. The Social Welfare Department plays a key role in addressing the problems of the weaker and vulnerable sections of the society, like old aged persons, women and children in distress, Physically Challenged persons, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Classes and other socially & economically weaker sections. It provides benefits to these target groups through various schemes like scholarships, financial assistance, pension schemes, etc. the various schemes in the state of Jammu & Kashmir includes the following:

- ❖ **State disability pension scheme-** also known as Integrated Social Security Scheme in the state of Jammu and Kashmir which is administered by the social welfare Department in which the monthly grant for the pension is amount Rs.400 for persons with 40% or more disability.
- ❖ **Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme-** The Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme is provided to differently able persons in the age group of 18 to 64 years, who belong to Below Poverty Line (BPL) category with severe or multiple disability as defined in '**Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995 (PWD Act 1995)**' and the '**National Trust for the Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities Act, 1999 (National Trust Act 1999)**'.
- ❖ **Scheme for Physically and Mentally disabled women for establishing income generation units-** A scheme to uplift the living and income standards of

physically and mentally disabled women with more than 40% disability between the age group of 18-45 years with relevant educational qualification(in case of technical grade) is a beneficiary of the scheme.

- ❖ **Bus concession-** There is no provision for free travelling in Jammu & Kashmir.
- ❖ **Educational scholarship-** The state has divided scholarship into two categories: Pre matric Scholarship for students with disabilities and the post matric scholarship for student with disabilities. Pre matric scholarship is given to students enrolled in class 1st and up to class 10th. The scholarship is given only for nine working months of academic year. For class 1st to 5th the amount is Rs 50/- and 75/- for boys and girls respectively, for class 6th to 8th the amount is Rs 100/- and 150/- for boys and girls respectively, for class 9th to 10th the amount is Rs 150/- and 200/- for boys and girls respectively.

5. NGOs Working for PWDs in Jammu City

NGOs have an active and effective role at the grass root level by creating awareness among people. NGOs operate in variety of fields like children, people in distress, disabled persons, taking care of elderly, employment, animals, environment, health, women and human rights. It was clearly found that there are 11 NGOs exclusively working for the betterment of persons with disabilities including women, children, and persons from poor socio-economic background in Jammu city. The NGOs included J&K Samaj Kalyan Kendra, J&K Welfare Handicap Association, JRC Home for Handicap, Atam Vallabh Jain Clinic, Aasra, School for Blind Girls, School for Blind Boys, Panchkarma and Herbal Research Kendra, Sahyog India, Jiger institute of Education. Women reported that they received majority of the support like providing artificial limbs, callipers to amputees and polio victims, rehabilitation centres, free medical aid, medicines, neuro therapy.

6. Conclusion

Disability is a global burden and in a country like India where the number of disabled population is so large, the problems also vary from individual to individual. Women with disabilities face double discrimination and marginalisation in society due to gender and their disability. In many cultures disability is perceived as a source of stigma and that to having a disabled daughter is seen as a double liability which devalues the status of the whole family. Despite many efforts made by the government to ensure equality among persons with disabilities impoverished conditions still persist. There is a continuing economic inequalities and social exclusion of the persons with disabilities including disabled women which severely call for effective action.

The persons with disabilities have a lot of potentials if they are provided with some specialized training, vocational or skill up gradation training. Although various rehabilitation measures have been taken by government and non-government organizations, but policies and schemes did not provide the desired results which need immediate attention. These include ignorance of women with disabilities, empowerment programmes for women do not include issues of disabled women, development programmes rarely address the needs of

disabled women or include them in community development programmes, disabled women are seen as imperfect, incomplete, inferior, asexual, and non-productive and denial recognition as women and as human beings.

Suggestions and recommendations for including disabled women in the inclusive policy:

- Involvement of women with disabilities in major decision and policy making processes such as the Panchayats and the Parliaments.
- Special institutes and training centres should be opened in the state for women and girls with disabilities.
- Media and movies should promote and encourage women with disabilities so that the stigma attached to persons with disabilities is changed.
- Special schools for disabled girls should be opened and curriculum should be framed keeping in mind the needs and issues of disabled women.
- There should be free provision of aids and equipments for persons with disabilities.
- Working women should not be transferred to far flung areas.
- There should be free transportation access from home to workplace for working women with disabilities.
- Policies and acts should not be just confined to papers but there should be implementation of the same.
- Growth of NGOS in the state for women with disabilities to create awareness among people about the issues and problems faced by them.
- All the offices, educational institutes, hospitals, parks, social forums should have provision for ramps.
- Focus should be on compulsory free education, financial assistance in health, more special schools should be opened, assistance in higher education, free treatment in hospitals depending on the degree of disability.
- State government should focus on the implementation of schemes and programmes for the welfare of persons with disabilities.

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