

Disabled Women Empowerment and Miles To Go

Ms.Oendriila Dutta

**Guest Lecturer, Department of Sociology, Hiralal Mazumdar Memorial College For Women, Dakshineswar, Kolkata-700035, West Bengal, India.
Mob- 9903427581, E-mail: oendriila.d@gmail.com**

Dr. Prodip Das

**Assistant Professor and HOD, Department of Education, Hiralal Mazumdar Memorial College for Women, Dakshineswar, Kolkata-700035, West Bengal, Mob-8335970739,
Email: pd43002@gmail.com**

Introduction:

Gender discrimination is not only inequitable but also hampers the development of the nation. We are very aware of the inequalities of men and women in a patriarchal society. Through the ages, women are fighting hard for equal rights, but disabled women are rarely recognized as persons till now 21st century. The society that accepts the able-bodied norm subjects, the disabled girls and women are treated to the most inhuman way. They are very much backward and marginalised compare to other women in all sorts of social, economic and political equality in India. Basically, Empowerment is a multi-dimensional process that helps people to gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power in people, for use in their own lives, their communities and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important. But in case of disabled women and girls, social exclusion, stigma and prejudice are a routine aspect of their lives. Autonomy, rights, equality and respect of personhood are denied to them. Moreover, the general societal mentality is still that a disabled woman has little hope of becoming a wife or mother, or of getting a productive and rewarding job. Surprisingly, women with disabilities also face discrimination at the hand of the feminist world, which as a frame to understand women's life and position in the society.

Aim of the Paper:

Through this paper, I intended to analyze mainly below mentioned subjects:

- 1) To understand disability and gender in India.
- 2) In the feminist framework, there are some differences between women empowerment

issues and disabled women empowerment issues.

- 3) What are the challenges faced by disabled women in the society?
- 4) How successful are the strategies and legal measures to uplift the position and status of disabled women in the society?
- 5) What changes are needed to empower disabled girls and women in all sector of societies?

Methodology:

The methodology of the paper is analytical and descriptive. The source of the data in this paper is mainly secondary data. All these are collected from different e-journals and web-search.

Disability and Gender:

Discrimination is a companion for all people with disabilities. However, disabled women are facing double discrimination, particularly gender stereotyping and disability bias. Yoder and Kahn indicate that generally women are discriminated against in most societal issues and disciplines because they are considered inferior.

Data, both from governmental and non-governmental sources are silent on both disability and gender. Disability does not figure in the routine macro-data collection endeavours of the state, such as the Sample Registration System (SRS), the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) and the National Family Health Surveys (NFHS). As per the latest World Bank/ WHO report 15% of the global population has a disability with female prevalence at 19.2% (WHO and World Bank 2011:261). The lack of data is important to the understanding of the situation of women with disabilities.

Using gender and disability lens, disabled women have far greater difficulty- in public, and private sphere- access to housing, health, education,

vocational training and employment. They experience inequality in living, access to credit and rarely participate in economic decision making.

In Indians culture, a woman's main role is still to be a wife, mother and home-maker. In case of disabled women, the role of motherhood denied the possibility of fulfilment, as marriage and procreation both difficult achievements in a socially restrictive environment. The denial of women's 'traditional role' to disabled women creates what Fine and Asch (1988) term 'hopelessness' a social invisibility and cancellation of feminist activities that can force the disabled women to pursue. There is a symbol of imperfection towards the impaired body, because any aberration from a normally accepted archetype is seen as a marked of deviation. Besides this, the representation of a disabled body is opposition to the ideas of beauty. In India, activists for women with disabilities, such as Dr. Anita Ghai, successfully advocated for more positive images of women with disabilities in the media.

In case of domestic violence and sexual violation, the disabled women and girls are exposed largely in the family and other social institutions. There is a normal tendency in the family to visualize the women with disabilities as a burden on her family and her mother also feeling guilt to give birth a disabled child.

'Women Empowerment' Vs. 'Disabled Women Empowerment':

According to the United Nations, women's empowerment mainly has five components:

- Generating women's sense of self-worth.
- Women's right to have and to determine their choices.
- Women's right to access to "equal" opportunities and all kinds of resources.
- Women's right to have the power to regulate and control their own lives, within and outside the home.
- Women's ability to contribute in creating a more just social and economic order.

So, considering these points, there are mainly three indicators for women's empowerment- security, decision making power and mobility.

In case of disabled women, there are also three indicators but a little different- right to bodily integrity, secured from exploitation, violence and abuse and right to found a family and to

reproductive freedom. So, empowerment for women and disabilities is much needed to change their situation and achieve their rights.

Generally, there are two way to enabled women to bring about changes in their personal relations. One is the development of "power within". In this context, Rowland(1998) outlined that the development of power within can enable an individual to maintain a point of view or continue an activity, in the face of overwhelming opposition or take a serious risk.

Another development is the power to bring about changes in their lives to meet their own interests and needs. According to Mazumdar, development interventions that promote women's power to participate more effectively in the wider process of socio-political development to wrest from society the right, the dignity and the resources to which they were entitled for their own development, through collective action to increase their voices in the development decisions that affect their lives. This could be achieve through vocational training, political participation and economic self-sufficiency.

Challenges of Disabled Women Empowerment in Indian Context:

There are many challenges that are plaguing the issue of Disabled women's right in India. Target these issues will directly benefit to the empowerment of disabled women in Indian perspective.

† Lack of Education Empowerment:

Education is a milestone of women empowerment because it enables them to responds to the challenges, to confront their traditional role and changing their life. In India, where the most women perceived as a liability, women with disabilities are always facing difficulties in case of access to education. The 2011 figures show that the literacy rate for person with disabilities are much lower than that of the non-disabled population of the country and even within that, certain disabilities and women across disabilities have a lower percentage. The literacy level of women with disabilities is 59% compared to 74% for the general population. The literacy level of women with disabilities in urban areas is 61%, which is 9% lower than their male counterparts. While women with disabilities in rural areas are worse with a literacy rate of 38%, 20%

lower than disabled males. And people with multiple disabilities fare the worst, with a 35.8% literacy rate.

The access to education by girls with disabilities is also affected by their type of disability (like intellectual, speech and hearing disability), the socio-economic status of the family, their area of residence (mainly rural or urban area) and many other factors. There is a mutual relationship between poverty and disabilities. Because, the limited resources like food and medicine are less available for girls compare to son in the same family. Also disability related equipment sometimes can't afford the cost.

In the inclusive education system (where individual differences between students are considered a source of richness and diversity, not a problem) adopted teachers are not necessarily trained, particularly girl with hearing impairments suffer due to non-provision of sign language interpreters in different schools. For this reason, lowest educational enrolment and attainment are found among person with multiple disabilities primarily due to communication barriers. Architectural inaccessibility of school buildings (stairs, narrow corridors, inaccessible desk and equipment) are play the most challenging part in education system. Besides this, sometimes school environment is not secured and safe especially for disabled girls. Sexual and disability harassment by teachers and others are severe problems in many residential schools. Considering this situation, parents are sometimes reluctant and feel insecure to send their daughters in school, particularly when schools are a long distance away from home. Inaccessible toilets and menstruation problem also consider a major barrier for girls with disabilities.

✚ **Lack of Economic Empowerment:** Disabled people find difficult to seek a job because their disability comes in the way of their functioning. Mainly it is social and practical obstacles that prevent them from joining the workforce, such as inadequate access around the workplace, oppressive working conditions, lack of proper educational degree and training, male chauvinism and the reluctance of employers to hire people with disabilities etc. Sometimes women with disabilities were not aware at all of all career options available to them. In this context, disability rights activist Jeeja Ghosh (with cerebral palsy) said that,

“Women with disabilities in the employment sector are more vulnerable to abuse and they are taken advantage of. Women are often reluctant to take up jobs in a sheltered environment instead of going outside to work.”

In case of home-based economic activities, Piece-work (including weaving, sewing, basket-making, the assembling of toys and production of handicraft items) is the most common form of income generation among disabled women. Since the lack of mobility, the raw materials are delivered to their homes and finished products are collected by agents. There is no legal or social protection. Disabled women and girls may be exposed to unsafe materials, poor pay and subjected to excessive hours of work under harsh conditions.

Most cases of complaint to the Ombudsman (National and State Commissioners for Disability) are related to the unfulfilment of the special provision on quota for disabled (even here women with disabilities are not specifically mentioned), promotions, appointments etc (Office of the Chief Commissioner for Person with Disabilities Vol 1-3).

✚ **Lack of Political Empowerment:** In political participation, the disability sector has been largely left out. As per the UNCRPD (UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities), which India had ratified, the state should give chances equal political rights to people with disabilities that includes both the right to vote and be elected. UNCRPD is also the basis for India's RPD (Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016). But situation is remaining same as was before, because most of the time disability consider as a reason of disqualification. Moreover the most basic rights of voting and contesting in elections remain an uphill battle for people with disabilities. There are barely any women with disabilities in the local governments which ensure 75% of seats for women.

✚ **Lack of Socio-cultural Empowerment:** In India, especially in rural areas most of the women with disabilities faced to social stigma and disability bias within their community, which leads them to feel devalued, isolated and ashamed. A study conducted demonstrated culturally appropriate form independent group living to have a beneficial impact on the women's level of sociability and their

confidence to venture out in public or to social functions.

Besides social exclusion, women with disabilities exposed different human rights violations. According to Meekosha and Frohmader, violation of disabled women comes with legal, social, cultural, economic and psychological dimensions and costs. Despite increasing recognition of, and attention to, gender based violence as the 'most widespread human rights abuse in the world', violence continues in a culture of silence and a denial of apathy.

The forms of violence for disabled women are most of the time similar to those for women generally, but unfortunately disabled women often experience different dimensions to physical, psychological and sexual violence. Sexual violence within mental hospitals still is a largely unaddressed area apart from the other forms of mental and physical violence that is experienced by the women housed therein. In this context, disabled women who dependent on their personal care assistance may be subject to frequent violence and abuse, ranging from neglect, poor care and rough treatment through to verbal, physical and sexual abuse. Discrimination in health services for women with disabilities is a reality that needs to be looked into. Forced sterilization, forced abortion and forced use of contraceptives especially for particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged women and girls. Sometimes AIDS poses a bigger threat to disabled women.

Another important factor of lack of social empowerment is beggary problem among disabled women. In India, disabled girls are regularly used to generate income through begging. They may also be considered 'good catches' by prostitution ring as their disabilities can prevent them from escaping. The practice of 'infanticide' occurred in many states where disabled children may be killed either immediately at birth or at some point after birth and sometimes years after birth. Disabled women also face economic, social and environmental barriers to their parenting role. The lack of financial support, coupled with the higher cost of parenting with a disability is a substantial barrier. A shocking and unethical scheme is in operation contributing to increasing violence on women with disability in the guise of enhancing their matrimonial opportunities. States like Maharashtra, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh etc. are running schemes of paying financial benefits ranging from 5,000 up to 50,000 rupees to non-

disabled persons to marry disabled person. Women with disabilities are highly prone to being used as a means to access this incentive money. Many women with disabilities are married to as second wives, with no legal standing to claim any matrimonial benefits or protections, thus getting entrapped in marriages where there are exploited, abused and violated with no system of checks.

Analysis of Government policies and legislations for the disabled women:

- Article 41 of the Constitution of India which forms part of the Directive Principles of State policy explicitly mentions "disablement" as a condition for which the state is to strive, to provide assistance in certain matters including education, work etc. However, the existing legal regime systematically marginalises women with disabilities in India.
- Although disability does not figure a prohibited ground of discrimination under Article 15 on Fundamental Rights in the Indian Constitution, Supreme Court has recognised person with disabilities (PWDs) as being vulnerable group to whom all the principles of equality and non-discrimination apply equally. But unfortunately schemes like Right to Education (RTE) and the National Rural Employment Guarantee (MGNREGA) are the two where Women with disabilities group were absent.
- Person with Disabilities Act, 1995 (which ensures equal opportunities, protection of rights and full participation for education and employment), National Trust for Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities Act, 1999 (which ensure legal guardianship of four categories and living as independent person as much possible) and Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992 (which deals with the development of manpower for providing rehabilitation services) –all of these acts are trying to fulfilled disabled peoples' economic and employment rights, but not up to the mark because there are no special provision or any quota for disabled women.
- In case of education sector, till now Government has not taken any monitoring programmes which reduce inequalities in

educational institutions. There is still a gender-bias curriculum and has no changed.

- Considering the current percentage of disabled women being employed, there is no affirmative steps have been taken which ensure the equality of opportunities for disabled women.
- In case of political field, there are exist no such fruitful steps which ensure that disabled women enjoy all aspects of their civil and political rights and there are no measures for their fewer participation.
- In case of health sector, there are no measures are being undertaken to protect women and girls with disabilities from forced sterilisation in public and private hospitals. Clearly, there are no specific measures which address the issue of unrestrained violence and abuse in institutional settings for care, protection and treatment of disabled women like mental health facilities.
- In case of domestic violence with disabled women, there are surprisingly less number of awareness and sensitization programme are being taken to ensure security and protection from all sorts of violence and abuse.
- There are almost no monitoring process are being undertaken from government regarding forced and trapped marital relationship among disabled women. Although few reports were submitted in this issue.

Recommendations:

Although many strategies and policies have been made in India to integrate the women with disabilities into the education, employment and many other sectors also, there is a gap exist. between Government and disabled women. To bridge the gap, If we take below mentioned suggestions, then it would be better from today. These are:

- 1) Create awareness about their rights and organised a sensitization programme is necessary among disabled women communities. Once these issues are addressed effectively, there is no doubt that the women with disabilities at large will march ahead in the direction of progress and development and in turn Disabled women will realize the real

dream of equality of status and empowerment and their basic rights and others.

- 2) In the education system, every school community should incorporate a fundamental change about their programmes towards disabled children. For example, teachers in inclusive school must consider a wide range of learning modalities (visual, auditory, kinaesthetic etc.) in designing their instruction. The curriculum should be designed so, that it promotes identification and creativity and besides this it should be free from gender-bias. Most significantly, teacher should acknowledge disabled or deprived learners 'home language' instead of the language which they are introduced.
- 3) In vocational school, a supportive, empathetic and appropriate administrative management is essential to help the disabled women reach their full potential. There must be a commitment to the fact that adequate aids and equipment to be provide to all course pursuing disabled women.
- 4) Providing special allowance to poor families to meet the educational expenses, covering transport costs and scholarships also may be considered. This facilities may be check the whole percentage of drop out students among female disabled communities.
- 5) To facilitate self-empowerment, should be develop appropriate home-based income generation programmes for the women with disabilities. Simple and smart design for machinery and work atmosphere both are necessary mechanisms for disabled women to operate without barriers in training centres, factories, industries and offices.
- 6) The right to Gainful employment (gainful employment is an important means of promoting the social integration through education and training of disabled women.) that is public and private sector should be upheld and recognize the principle that women with disabilities must be empowered to exercise their human right to employment in both rural and urban. Besides this, it is important to look at the existing statuses that have been enacted to ensure equal opportunities irrespective of gender and disability find the gaps and plug them.
- 7) To ensure disabled women civic and political rights, state must be taken some steps to remove of discrimination in case of political participation.
- 8) In case of violence against women with disability, it should be updated and review all legislation, policies and programmes related to it and special measures are taken for generating

awareness regarding Domestic Violence Act, from a disability sensitive perspective.

9) Sensitization of medical professionals, staff and personal care assistance on how to behave carefully and softly interact with disabled women and ensure that accessible health care services are provided based on the dignity and integrity of women with disabilities . Moreover, create a consciousness that the right to control their own fertility.

10) In this context, movies and media could be play a vital role to regulate the mentality of the audiences throughout the entire nation. Specially, the media(mainly television advertisement) , which are mainly focusing on women’s external beauty to promote the brands; may be change their presentations and content for the facilitate of disabled women empowerment. For example, Joyalukass jewellery advertisement in youtube is a step in the right direction and stated a clear deny that societal recognition and legitimacy are closely linked to one’s ability to participate in any societal functions.

Conclusion:

Empowerment of women with disabilities is still an illusion of reality in our society. The disabled women’s educational and economic backwardness makes it necessary for policy makers to take urgent and immediate steps to uplift their present miserable conditions. The inclusion of women, especially , calls for a thorough analysis, leading to understand their basic rights, followed by multi-dimensional and multi-prolonged actions to ensure equality and remove discrimination as guaranteed by the Constitution of India and to reach to the ultimate goal of even development.

References:

1. Employment Rights of Disabled Women in India. Society for Disability and Rehabilitation Studies. 4-5. From: http://ncwapps.nic.in/pdfReports/EMPLOYMENT_RIGHTS_OF_DISABLED_WOMEN.pdf.
2. Dawn, Ranjita. Inequalities in Education of Women with Disabilities in India. 1-3, from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309349484_Inequities_in_Education_of_Women_with_Disabilities_in_India.
3. Mapuranga, Bamba; Musodza, Blessing and Gandari, Esther.(2015). Empowerment Challenges Faced by Women with Disabilities in Zimbabwe. Development Country Studies, 12(5), 2-4. From: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.998.5669&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.
4. Meekosha, Helen; and Frohmader, Carolyn. (2010). Recognition, Respect and Rights: Disabled Women in a Globalised World. Women with Disabilities Australia. 5-9. From: <http://wwda.org.au/wpcontent/uploads/2013/12/FrohmaderMeekoshaChina2010.pdf>.
5. Narasimhan, Nirmata. The Quest for Education- Person with Disabilities, Severely Challenged. From: https://yourstory.com/2016/11/education-persons-with-disabilities-severelychallenged?utm_pageLoadtype=scroll.
6. Rao, Indumathi. (2012). Equality to Women with Disabilities in India. National Commission for Women, India. 3-5. From: <http://standindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/7667871Equity-to-women-with-disabilitiesin-Indi2012-october.pdf>.
7. Rousso, Harilyn. Education for All: A Gender and Disability Perspective. CSW, Disabilities Unlimited. 11-13. From: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000146931>.
8. Shenoy, Meera. Persons with Disability and The India Labour Market: Challenges and Opportunities.(2011). Indian Labour Organization (ILO). 3-4. From: https://www.ilo.org/newdelhi/whatwedo/publications/WCMS_229259/lang-en/index.htm.
9. Strategy The Empowerment of Women and Girls with Disabilities. Towards Full and Effective Participation and Gender Equality. (2018). UN Women. 12-16. From: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2018/12/the-empowerment-of-women-and-girlswith-disabilities>.

10. Women with Disabilities in India. WwD India Network. 117-118. From: <https://womenenabled.org/pdfs/mapping/Women%20with%20Disabilities%20in%20India.pdf>.
11. <https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/west-bengal/disabled-women-at-risk-says-disability-rights-advocate-jeeja-ghosh-in>.

Journal of Engineering Sciences