

Embracing the Differences: Social Stereotypes and Stigma towards Disabled Women

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Abstract: An individual is part and product of his own social environment and so is a person with disability. The relationships, attitude and behavior patterns are vitally affected by the nature and extent of the harmony or disharmony of an individual's relationship with the family members, relatives, friends, community members, workplace colleagues and employers etc. The social stigma still attached to persons with special is prevalent in society which not only restricts their activities but also damages their psycho- emotional well being as persons with special are less handicapped by their own disability than by the social attitude meted out to them in every sphere of their life. The individual who is differently abled often does not know when he/she enters a social situation whether he/she will be an object of curiosity, pity, sympathized with, helped, patronized, exhibited, praised for his abilities, avoided or actively rejected. This develops the feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, insecurity and frustration among the person with special needs and makes their day to day life a challenging job. Thus society's attitude and behavior play a crucial role in the inclusive development of disabled persons. The present paper is an attempt to understand the various societal stereotypes and stigma towards women with special and its impact on their all round development. This paper will also discuss the various challenges faced by them based on social stereotypes in Jammu District.

Keywords: Disability, Stereotypes, Discrimination, Prejudice, Exclusion.

I. INTRODUCTION

Disability is not a weakness, it is strength. It is not a burden, it is a unique perspective. When we embrace our differences and celebrate the abilities of all individuals, we create a society that is truly inclusive and welcoming for all. Public attitudes have an impact on the lives of persons with disability especially women. The natural human attitude towards people with special is usually sympathetic. Our first reaction towards any disabled person is '*bechari*' or '*bechara*' and we mark them as 'strange', 'wierd', 'dangerous', 'freak'. In a culture where women are targeted with bodily expectations, women with special suffer additional stigmatisation because of the gap between ideal feminine bodies and disabled women's different bodies.

Women with special 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 more handicapped than they actually are. 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) in '*Women and Disability in India*' argues that the patriarchal social structure has always remained oppressive to women because of gender discrimination.

The society tends to avoid, isolate, reject, and segregate persons with special 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 special victims of two fold discrimination- as women and as persons with special (Dendena Sona, 2015).

Social attitudes and stigma play an important role in limiting the opportunities of persons with special for full participation in social and economic life and even within their own families. Media and cinema are also the agents which produce certain 'stereotypes' of the perfect image of disability and in case of women they are left with no scope for major inclusion within popular cinema in contrast to the disabled men who are lucky enough to find a place within it.

II. OBJECTIVES

1. To analyse the various societal stereotypes and behaviours towards disabled women
2. To explore the various challenges faced by women with special based on social stereotypes.

III. METHODOLOGY

The research design chosen for the present paper is exploratory and descriptive in nature. The present paper has also used the concept of 'stigma' as given by Goffman and Becker's labeling theory. Sociologists also argue that disabled people experience 'stigma', which is a powerful discrediting label "that can change and 'spoil' the way in which the individual is perceived. This idea was proposed by the sociologist Erving Goffman (1963), who argued that there are two types of stigmatising conditions. Firstly, discrediting conditions which are readily obvious to others e.g. eczema, psoriasis, physical disability, stammering. Secondly, discreditable conditions, those that are usually not visible to others, or can be easily concealed e.g. epilepsy, HIV or depression. Discreditable people can conceal their status to avoid discrimination. Goffman also argued that a person's condition can become their 'master status' i.e. whatever else he or she might be or accomplish, the condition is the first thing that other people see. Goffman defines stigma as the devaluation of an individual and the exclusion from full societal acceptance. Stigma is created when there is a 'gap' between what the other looks and behaves and how we think they should look and behave (Goffman, 1963). He also uses the concept of 'courtesy stigma' to show that not only the disabled, the family of the disabled experience equal embarrassment and shame. "Goffman defines 'courtesy stigma' as a tendency for stigma to spread from the stigmatised individual to his close connections" (Sarah, 2003). Both highlighted that discrimination, stigma and cultural bias based on gender and disability are the key factors for creating different barriers for persons with special needs such as rigid gender roles accompanied by the stigma of disability which devalues the importance of education for specially abled, high rates of violence and abuse among disabled women resulting in safety issues, issues of distance to school accompanied by inaccessible transportation systems, and limited access to assistive devices such as wheelchairs and ramps, inaccessible school buildings and unsanitary facilities, disabled girls have more limited access to special education services and supports, gender and disability bias in curriculum which paves the way for invisibility of women with special. women with special needs are perceived to be incapable of studying or working due to the existing stereotypes which are promoted through families, schools, neighbourhood and mass media. Women and girls with special as compared to boys and men with special face discrimination within the family and are denied access to health care, education, vocational training, employment and income generation opportunities, and are excluded from social and community activities (Biwako Millennium Framework, 2002)³. Thus despite the multiple barriers they face, there are many women with special who fight for their rights and do not cripple with what they have. During field work many persons with special needs shared that "they may be disabled in one way or the other but their circumstances make them tough and help them to fight for themselves.

Important findings

A variety of societal barriers have contributed to several challenges faced by disabled women. The major challenging areas included education, health, transport, social life, money, safety, marital problems. One of the major challenges faced was the issue of selection of mates which is found to be more problematic for females with special as they are considered incapable of taking on sexual, reproductive and maternal roles as compared to able bodied women. Unmarried women had a fear of getting married to a disabled man and being dependent for life on someone after marriage was the biggest fear for not readily getting married. In this context stigma and discrimination prevents families from making marital relations with disabled members.

Being disabled is considered a major obstacle by the respondents. Among other obstacles education is considered as a major challenge among women with special needs, followed by other challenges such as transport, health, social life, money, safety. Lack of inclusion in these areas creates a hindrance for PWDs. It was also found that various forms of abuse (physical, sexual, verbal) were encountered by women in their homes, work place, public etc. and were at a higher risk of abuse and harassment.

Divorced women encountered all the types of abuse. Abuse from their husband's side such as threats, misuse of money, damaging property, humiliation, emotional abuse and isolation. Women with physical special appeared to be at risk for emotional, physical and sexual abuse to the same extent as women without physical special. Parents, husbands and close family members were the most common perpetrators of emotional or physical abuse.

Females with special needs were more abused by their family members especially in laws, care takers as compared to males with special needs who were victims of abuse by neighbours / friends. Health was also considered a biggest challenge in among females. Women shared 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.

According to Ecumenical Disability Advocates Network (EDAN) inaccessibility of medical facilities and amenities in terms of built in environment is a major challenge for persons with special needs while seeking medical care. These difficulties include lack of ramps, steep steps, lack of assistive devices to walk (Crutches, Wheel chairs, Callipers etc.).

A case of a woman with movement (leg) disability reveals that the entire burden of body is on one leg and she mostly needs someone to lift her up. Despite advancement in science and technology disabled are not given appropriate treatment and have less access to health care. Transportation acts as a life line for persons with special 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 with special shared that while using public mode of travel they encountered more problems and informed that transport is the basic necessity for travelling to office, home, shopping, and hospitals. Most of the women reported that due to overcrowding of public buses there is lack of proper seating, non availability of bus stops where they can wait, and there is no one to help them while climbing high and incompatible steps of vehicles. As one of the respondents informed that sometimes conductors don't allow them to board the mini bus and as a result they are either pushed or thrown out.

Another challenge was their social life. A respondent who was deaf and dumb shared that his family members don't take him out in social gatherings due to which he always feels socially excluded. Another respondent shared that she has been socialised since childhood that she should not go anywhere otherwise she might face abuse and assault by someone and this leads them to have a very lonely life.

Women shared 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.

Another important finding was that as a result of oppression women with special needs experience discrimination and stigma which is a powerful discrediting label in their lives. women having special are considered a burden on society, on themselves and their families. It was found 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. Women respondents also shared that the reaction of people towards disabled working woman is worse. They are viewed as victims of double discrimination both in private and public sphere. Besides all these they face societal, marital and personal problems and they are considered as incompetent.

Thus the social stigma still attached to persons with special is prevalent in society which not only restricts their activities but also damages their psycho- emotional well being.

Hence it is important to mainstream persons with special which can only be achieved through change in public attitudes, by removing social stigma, providing a barrier free environment and making reforms in the area of policy and institutional level.

IV. SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The different suggestions and recommendations based on the present paper are listed as under.

- Involvement of persons with special 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 specially abled persons especially women and girls with special.
- Media and films should promote and encourage real life persons with special so that the stigma attached to persons with special needs is changed.
- Special schools for specially abled should be opened and curriculum should be framed keeping in mind the needs and issues of disabled.
- There should be free provision of aids and equipments for persons with special.
- 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 exclusively for women with special needs to create awareness among people about the issues and problems faced by them.
- All the offices, educational institutes, hospitals, parks, social forums should have accessibility especially 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.
- The government should focus on the implementation of schemes and programmes for the welfare of persons with special.

V. CONCLUSION

“Thus Disability as a socially and culturally constructed phenomenon is the by product of social environment. Conceptions related to disability have undergone changes from time to time, still persons with disability are one of the most vulnerable and marginalized section in present day world. We need to develop a better understanding of their lives in order to remove the obstacles that still remain in their way to equality. There is a need to understand the real causes for the exclusion of PWDs through academic discussions, studies and contributions to the literature on disability studies.”

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