

# **Disability and Workplace(s): Special Emphasis on Women with Disabilities of Urban West Bengal**

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## **Abstract**

Independence and participation seem to be key concepts in today's society. Employment in turn provides an income that is necessary for survival but also a sense of belonging because of the ability of giving back to society. Women with disabilities are more likely to be employed in low-status jobs which partially help them out of their dependence. This paper focuses on experiences of women with disabilities at different workplaces including formal and in-formal sectors across urban West Bengal. Despite gender sensitization programmes at workplaces, some form of discrimination on gender still slips from various sections. Here, the focus will be on the double discrimination faced by physically disabled women at workplaces especially in the in-formal sector. The stark reality of urban Bengal is that women with disabilities are more likely to be employed in low status, lower paid jobs.

The PwD (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act (1995) and The Rights of Person with Disabilities Act (2016) emphasize on inclusion of disabilities specially women with disabilities. They should be given equal opportunities and full participation in all sectors for greater dignity of life. This paper discusses impact of such reservation and legislation on job; in general, they have not reached equality in the labor force with their male counter-part (with disabilities). In a nutshell, it can be said in this perspective that women with disabilities have not been given any social justice.

The discussion is based on field survey (qualitative and quantitative methods), and we examine certain well known theoretical assumptions regarding Women with disabilities. The paper emphasizes various kinds of environmental barrier and the role to modify stereotypical attitudes towards Women with disabilities by coworkers, peer groups and authority. Lastly, policies and laws have not always been able to encompass complex realities of women with disabilities, leading to its inability to bridge the gap between law, policy and practice.

**Key Words:** Gender, Disability, Workplace, Discrimination

## **Introduction**

In course of last few decades, India seems to have become more empathetic to the voices of marginal people than in the previous century. One of these representations is from 'persons with disabilities'. Nowadays, there is not only a separate ministry dealing with the problems of these marginal people, but also looking forward to generate wider social space to render disable people more visibility percolating through different politico-social arenas. It is argued that disability is a social construct and it is possible to remove stereotypical attitudes with help of technology thereby facilitating better understanding of disability.

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Government of India often underlines talks about inclusive growth. This dream can't be realised unless people with disabilities are included in the process of development. According to the Indian constitution all citizen have equal rights. The preamble to the Constitution does not discriminate among the able and the disabled. The census of 2011 suggests that around 2.26% people are affected by some sort of disability in the countries. In West Bengal, more than two million people are disabled. Societal attitude towards persons with disabilities has been changing with time. In most countries of the world, people with disabilities are the largest minority group. They are subject to a long history of neglect, segregation, isolation, deprivation, charity, welfare and even pity. It is also true that disabled people are not homogeneous. Within disabilities women with disability are most vulnerable parts of the society. Woman with Disabilities are assumed to have less of human needs at all level- physical, biological & psychological. In their daily lives, they continuously battle exclusion and restriction to their full participation in society, facing discrimination in working sector and workplace.

**Aim of the study:**

The aim of this study is to explore how the experience of multifaceted discrimination at workplace affects the employment opportunities of women with disabilities. It will also evaluate how the *Persons with Disabilities Act of 1995* and the *Right of Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016* address this issue in order to provide policy recommendations to improve the situation of female workers with disabilities. The study also emphasises on a few case studies in urban Bengal to better understand discrimination of women with disabilities.

**Research Objectives:**

1. Explore and analyse current status of women with disabilities (personal, familial and social aspects).
2. Assess the educational and economic status of women with disabilities.
3. Assess provisions and entitlements of Women with disabilities and the existing gaps therein.

**Methodology**

The paper is based on a field survey (both qualitative and quantitative) through which we examine certain well-known theoretical assumptions regarding the daily experience of women with disabilities. The article goes through interviews of more than twenty persons from diverse occupational and social backgrounds (such as right activists, teachers, hawkers, and beggar) in

urban West Bengal exclusively in the district of Kolkata, Howrah, Midnapore/Medinipur Hooghly. The interviews were conducted from March 2014 to June 2019. This paper is an attempt to juxtapose theoretical and empirical research with regard to everyday experiences and daily practices of women with disabilities in the above mentioned areas of West Bengal.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study of Mays (2006) posits that domestic violence and disability inadequately explain several features that lead women who have a disability to experience violent situations. Mays argue that material feminist interpretations and disability theory, with their emphasis on gender relations, disabilities and poverty, should be used as an alternative tool for exploring the nature and consequences of violence against women with disability. It also discusses that women with disabilities are seen as imperfect, incomplete, inferior, asexual, non-productive and thus denied recognition as women or, human beings. Meekosha (2002) argued that there are three realms of social being - individual, society, and the state - that interact in the making of the identities of disability. Morris, feminist and activist with disability, provides a feminist analysis of the experiences of women with disabilities. Basing her arguments upon the feminist principle that the 'personal is political', Morris (1991) eloquently discusses such issues as abortion, and challenges the prejudice and notion about people with disabilities leading lives that are apparently not worth living.

This provides an essential context and exposes the need of research on economic condition and working experience of women with such condition(s). There are differences of issues for women with disabilities depending on education, economic status, categorization, culture and government policies in every state and country. According to the 'Rights of Persons with Disabilities', 2016, 'violence against women with disabilities have unique forms, unique causes and unique consequences.'

### **The Marginalization of women with disabilities**

In order to consider the two main grounds of discrimination suffered by women with disabilities, a gender gap (the difference between women and men with disabilities) and a disability gap (as the difference between women with and women without disabilities) have been computed for the main indicators relating to access to education and training, labour market, poverty risk and financial conditions. Existing data shows that women with disabilities are discriminated in

labour market and at workplace preventing them from accessing their full citizenship rights.

This occurs in ways that are similar to discrimination faced by women *without* disabilities and men *with* disabilities, but they also suffer additional discrimination due to intersection of gender and disability. In addition to a high disability gap compared to women without disabilities, women with disabilities often also suffer a gender gap in comparison to men with disabilities. The disability gaps are generally higher than gender gaps for all the dimensions considered. Both gaps are particularly high for indicators of labour market participation, employment and working conditions, employment segregation, and poverty risks.

### **Work and Employment**

Economic independence of Women with Disabilities is instrumental to their empowerment. However, they are systematically excluded from the mainstream workforce, and misleadingly projected as incapable of productive work and a consequent burden on society. Stereotypes frame such women as unfit, both in traditional role of homemakers or that of being wage-earners. While the employment rate of persons with disabilities (both men and women) compared to those without disabilities is low, women tend to be seriously under-represented in vocational training.

The PwDs Act, 1995 failed to fully recognise the working capabilities of all persons with disabilities and did not put in place any special provision for women with disabilities. Furthermore, no scheme covers the fast-growing private sector. The problems within PWDs, particularly women, which prevent them from participating in the labour force and acquiring a modicum of economic self-reliance, include lack of requisite skills (linked to inadequate and inappropriate vocational and skill development programmes) discrimination and doubts regarding their working capacity by employers, lack of accessibility, absence of representation of persons with disabilities and women with disabilities in decision-making positions, absence of monitoring of reservation policy in the government sector and non-implementation of affirmative action programmes in the private sector.

### **Workplace of Employment:**

Employment is of prime importance to everyone as a basis for independence and self-sufficiency. Despite laws and policies which have been established in some parts of the world addressing equal rights for both women and men, workplace gender discrimination still prevails. The

double discrimination faced by women with disabilities is even less addressed. People tend to discuss gender differences but often not discrimination stemming from the intersection of gender and disability. According to the United Nations estimates, workforce participation rate of women is only around 25 percent and literacy rates for women with disabilities are very as low as one percent in some regions.

The expectations of conformation to able-bodied normative and narrow standards of beauty make it more difficult for women with disabilities to be recognised and included in society. This includes having a specific body type, and/or looking young as well as being an able-bodied individual. The able-bodied normative effectively polices any deviations from it with othering mechanisms that take various forms of open discrimination at one end of the spectrum to pity at the other end. The naturalization of able-bodies and the exclusion of lived experiences of disabled in the social discourse lead to venomous, discriminatory and self-reinforcing assumptions regarding the capabilities of those with disabilities.

Women with disabilities are more likely to be employed in low- status, lower-paid jobs in poorer working conditions, negatively influencing their ability to achieve independence. Even in countries such as Canada where ‘the duty to accommodate’ is the law, which ensures that individuals with disabilities are provided with employment that meets their capabilities, the hegemony of the ability narrative leads to incomplete implementation or even outright disregard of these policies by many employers, in practice. This is compounded in the case of women for whom work is assumed to represent a means of filling time rather than offering a guarantee of independence. Occasionally, women with disabilities inhabiting the patriarchal, able-bodied landscape also develop this negative idea.

#### **Case Study of West Bengal:**

In this part, I will discuss the present picture of women with disability within a socio-economic, political and cultural historical perspective. These pictures may provide a reasonable idea about the attitude of civil society towards women with disability over the first and second decades of the twenty first century. Here, we discuss few case studies which came up during survey period which help us understand daily life and lived experiences of women with disabilities in urban West Bengal.

1. Bidisha Rudra, a woman with locomotors disability, cleared the medical entrance examination

in 2012 but was denied admission by principal of a government medical college, presuming that she would be unable to cope with physical challenges of the training. However, many accomplished practitioners held a different view about the matter. Here, we find that contrary to the proposal of the Persons with Disability Act 1995 that a disabled person should be allowed full participation and protection of rights in any activity which she thinks she is fit for participation, the unfortunate candidate had to bear the brunt of an able-normative society.

2. Amala Mondal, a woman with Blindness (100%) was recruited at a government-aided school through a School Service Commission examination held on 2007 on basis of her merit. Upon her joining, it was brought to her attention how she being blind has ushered in disappointment to one of her colleagues' expectation about the new appointee. . This incident proves that able-normativity is not simply a function of low educational achievement.
3. Keya Nandi, women with locomotor disability, belongs to a very poor family. In spite of her educational qualifications, she faced lots of difficulty in getting any job. First she joined as an Anganwadi worker after being refused several times at the time of interview due to her disability. Now she is an assistant teacher in a government primary school. She initially faced a lot of discrimination, but her excellence of work has made her one of the most popular teachers among students.
4. Kanika Dutta, a state award winner, is wheelchair-bound, her experience is grimmer by the day. . When she worked for an NGO for disabled persons, she did not face any kind of discrimination. However, problems started when she joined as a data-entry operator in a government hospital on contractual basis. She was traumatized by her able colleagues and had to handle much greater workload than others.
5. Dinanjana Banerjee of Howrah district performed extremely well in the School Service Commission examination and was appointed as an assistant teacher in a government-aided school. Dinanjana has visual impairment. After her job she was looking for a partner.. But her repeated advertisements on matrimonial sites of all leading dailies yielded no result. Her accomplishments as an individual were demeaned and she was judged by each prospective groom only on her physical traits.

Like family, marriage is a behemoth of an institution. But entry to that institution also happens

to be restricted for disabled persons. This might be based on the popular misconception that the child borne by a disabled person inherits his or her disability.

This situation of disabled women is worse than that of men in this respect. Any relationship is greeted with questions such as 'is the partner also disabled? Or 'are both same?'

The case studies here concentrated on different kinds of disabilities. However, though their forms of disability are different, the social reactions are quite similar. Moreover, the body image of physical disability transcends wealth, education and social status, and thus becomes the most important factor in determining social attitude towards a person. Finally, I must mention that people with mental illness are worse affected. People with cerebral palsy, autism and multiple disabilities are marginalized even within the disabled community. Disabled people encounter a variety of incidents in their lives which are ignored by the 'able-bodied' or 'normal' people who often label them inconsequential.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, I must underline that this research has also shown the importance of gender when discussing attitudes towards disability with a society such as found in urban Bengal. From both primary and secondary evidence, it is clear that the quality of life and even the chance of survival are far worse for women than for men with disabilities. The severity of impairment is more accentuated for women than for men, before it is socially acceptable for women to stop providing domestic support, thereby making a positive contribution to the household. Policies and programmes should be developed in close partnerships with women and girls with disabilities and with disability organisations and any other organisations with an in-depth know-how of the nuances of complexities which paves everyday lives for the concerned group of people. And such policies should never have knee-jerk implementations. It should be gradual with an eventual goal in mind, not some kind of instant gratification or that of half-baked disproportional charity. Outlook and perception of society can be a good place of change to start with, but that's a discussion for another day.

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