



Exploring Challenges of Women with Disabilities in Accessing Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

The review paper explores the difficulties that women with disabilities face in accessing higher education in India. There is an urgent need to identify and overcome the significant barriers faced by women with disabilities in accessing higher education. According to research, students with disabilities are less likely to complete their university degrees, and there are fewer women with disabilities enrolled in higher education. This article identifies the causes of the low participation rate of female students with disabilities in higher education. Due to their color, age, language, society, culture, and religion, as well as their impairment, women with disabilities frequently face tremendous obstacles of injustice and prejudice. Higher education institutions frequently exclude and devalue women with disabilities. It has been proven that women with disabilities are capable of having the same success as those who are not disabled. For women who have disabilities, the risk of sexual, emotional, and physical abuse is three times higher. The most significant ones among the many that contribute to the mistreatment, discrimination, and exclusion of women in or from higher education in India are poverty, sexual abuse, rigid policy, indifferent reactions, limited learning resources, a lack of technology, untrained faculty, negative peer and staff attitudes, inaccessible library and infrastructure, inadequate transport options, a lack of accessible housing, and others.

Keywords: *Women with disabilities, higher education, accessibility, challenges, overcoming strategies*

INTRODUCTION

The World Report on Disability (2011) estimates that one billion people worldwide- at least one in ten of them are children- live with a disability, with 80% of them residing in developing nations. Disability is described as a condition that limits a person's capacity to engage in activities that are considered "normal" in their everyday culture. This condition may be physical, cognitive, mental, sensory, emotional, locomotor, or the consequence of a mix of these. About half of the world's population is made up of women, but India has an uneven sex ratio, with a female population that is significantly lower than a male population. Women typically experience public, cultural, and economic situations, which makes it more difficult for them to participate in social life. Women of all ages who have disabilities of any kind are considered to be the most defenseless and mistreated members of society (Albert & Miller, 2005; Glover-Graf & Reed, 2006). Women with disabilities are really underrepresented among those who support the rights of people with disabilities as well as those who promote gender equality and the advancement of women. Yet, there are also numerous blatant instances in the disability community that have disadvantaged the living circumstances of people with

impairments. Social issues such as ignorance, carelessness, misperception, and distress have historically overlooked people with disabilities and slowed down their progress (Stanley & Venkatesh, 2006). They face a serious danger of forced marriage, forced sterilizations, forced abortions, and greater risk of HIV both inside and outside the family. They are also more likely to experience emotional, physical, and sexual abuse (Glover-Graf & Reed, 2006; Sands, 2005; Harare, 2019).

In India, 2.68 billion people, or 2.21% of the 121 billion people, are classified as "disabled" according to the 2011 Census. 22% of disabled people in the 20-39 age range have a movement disability, and 18% have a hearing impairment. 15% are blind, 8% have speech impairments, and 6% have several impairments. According to Census 2011, over 55% (1.46 Cr.) of all disabled people are literate. Only 13% of the impaired population has matriculated or completed secondary school, and 5% have a degree or higher. Of all disabled people, 45% are illiterate. It is clear that such a large population cannot even be used after looking at the percentage of illiterates. It's a significant loss of human capital and a major cause for worry. Here, the question of why such a large percentage of people even chose not to attend the educational institution arises despite Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and Right to Education. The number of students with disabilities (SwDs) enrolled in higher education, in particular, is quite low. The AISHE report estimates that 38.5 million people would be enrolled in higher education nationwide in 2020, up from 85,877 in 2019, when 92,831 SwDs were. If we compare this statistic to

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the other disadvantaged group, it is the lowest of all, plainly demonstrating that very few of these individuals pursue higher education. Their number has also decreased with time. The number of women students with disabilities enrolled in and completed higher education, in particular, is alarming and highly shocking.

According to the Sustainable Development Goals, education of individuals with disabilities, with special focus on women with disabilities (WwDs), has grown to be a serious concern in academic circles across the World (Jahan, 2015). Similar to this, the Incheon Declaration said that education goals should not be met until and until they are met by everyone. As a result, it is pledged that the marginalized, particularly those with disabilities including WwDs, must be the focus of all education policy (UNESCO, World Education Forum, 2015). Early in the 18th Century, various countries developed the idea of an inclusive education system to teach all children, regardless of their differences (Bano et al., 2013). In order to treat students with disabilities equally in terms of facilities and opportunities, research studies have emphasized the necessity for inclusive education rather than differentiated education (Schmidt and Cagran, 2008). For treating students with disabilities equally in terms of facilities and opportunities, research studies have emphasized the necessity for inclusive education rather than differentiated education (Schmidt & Cagran, 2008) at all levels. Students with impairments, according to Hall, Healey, and Harrison (2002), are disadvantaged groups in society who deal with a variety of issues like exclusion, loneliness, and discrimination (Palmer & Roessler, 2000). Additionally, the women with disabilities are the most disenfranchised and marginalized groups in the society and education sector (Fleming, et al, 2017). The enrolment and retention and success rates of women with disabilities in higher education in India are alarming and highly shocking (Jeffery and Singal, 2008). The biggest obstacles to their learning and development are their disabilities and gender, which also prevent them from assimilating into society at large (Konur, 2000; Szymanski & Bilius, 2011). People with impairments and specially the women with disabilities are recognized to be deserving of particular learning support, both theoretically and practically (Tinklin et al., 2004).

NEED OF HIGHER EDUCATION FOR WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

The higher education is imperative for job creation, political empowerment, and nationwide growth (Jameel, 2011). It produces talented manpower for national development. Moreover, it provides marginalized communities with opportunities by equipping them with access to quality education (Azad, 2008). The policies at the higher education level must aim to focus on protecting the rights of persons with disabilities (Hardman & Dawson, 2008), with a special attention woman with disabilities. Higher education is essential for women with disabilities. Higher education equips women with disabilities with knowledge, skills, and qualifications that enable them to become independent and self-reliant. It provides them with the tools necessary to pursue their goals, make informed decisions, and actively participate in society (Mudzingwa, 2017). Higher education opens up a wide range of career opportunities for women with disabilities. It enhances their employability and increases their chances of securing meaningful and well-paying

jobs. Higher education equips them with the necessary skills and knowledge to contribute to the workforce and achieve financial independence. It fosters personal growth and development. It helps women with disabilities build confidence, critical thinking abilities, and problem-solving skills (Komabu-Pomeyie, 2019; Al-Zboon & Smadi, 2015). It provides them with opportunities for self-expression, creativity, and personal exploration. It empowers women with disabilities to become advocates and leaders in their communities (Taddei, 2019). It equips them with the knowledge and skills to challenge stereotypes, advocate for their rights, and promote inclusivity and accessibility (Komabu-Pomeyie, 2019; Al-Zboon & Smadi, 2015). Higher education can provide them with a platform to raise awareness about disability issues and effect positive change (Mudzingwa, 2017).

Additionally, higher education promotes social inclusion and participation for women with disabilities. It provides them with opportunities to interact with diverse groups of individuals, fostering understanding, empathy, and appreciation for different perspectives. Higher education also prepares them to engage in civic and community activities, contributing to the overall development and well-being of society. Further, the institute of higher education often provide support services and accommodations for students with disabilities. These services can include assistive technologies, accessible learning materials, academic support, counseling, and disability-specific resources. Access to such services can significantly enhance the educational experience and success of women with disabilities. Higher education challenges stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes towards women with disabilities (Komabu-Pomeyie, 2019; Taddei, 2019). By pursuing higher education, women with disabilities defy societal expectations and demonstrate their capabilities and potential. Their presence in higher education institutions challenges negative perceptions and promotes the inclusion and acceptance of individuals with disabilities. In summary, higher education is crucial for women with disabilities as it promotes empowerment (Taddei, 2019), independence, career opportunities, personal development (Al-Zboon & Smadi, 2015), advocacy, social inclusion, and access to support services. By investing in higher education for women with disabilities, we can create a more inclusive and equitable society that values and supports the rights and aspirations of all individuals (Hammad & Singal, 2015).

RIGHTS OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

In India, women with disabilities have certain rights and protections when it comes to accessing higher education. These rights are outlined in various laws and policies that aim to ensure equal opportunities and inclusivity for all individuals, including those with disabilities. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 which is very comprehensive legislation in this regard. It safeguards the rights of persons with disabilities in various domains, including education. It mandates that higher education institutions provide reasonable accommodations and support services to ensure equal access for students with disabilities. It also prohibits discrimination based on disability. According to the RPwD Act (2016), women with disabilities have the same rights as their non-disabled counterparts when it comes to accessing higher education in India. Some key rights included in the RPwD Act (2016) are as follows:

- a) **Right to Non-Discrimination:** Women with disabilities have the right to be free from discrimination based on their

disability in all aspects of education, including admission, enrollment, participation, and completion of higher education programs. This right is protected under various laws, including the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, and the Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation Act, 1995.

- b) **Right to Reasonable Accommodation:** Women with disabilities have the right to reasonable accommodations and support services that enable them to access and participate in higher education on an equal basis with their peers. Reasonable accommodations can include accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, accessible teaching materials, sign language interpreters, note-takers, extended time for exams, and any other necessary adjustments to ensure equal opportunities.
- c) **Right to Accessibility:** Women with disabilities have the right to accessible higher education environments. This includes physical accessibility of buildings, classrooms, libraries, and other facilities, as well as accessible information and communication technologies, websites, and digital resources. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, mandates accessibility provisions and requires educational institutions to make reasonable modifications to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities.
- d) **Right to Inclusive Education:** Women with disabilities have the right to inclusive education, which means they should have access to mainstream educational institutions and programs. Inclusive education promotes the integration of students with disabilities into regular classrooms and ensures that appropriate support services and accommodations are provided to facilitate their learning and participation.
- e) **Right to Support Services:** Women with disabilities have the right to support services that enable their full participation in higher education. This can include academic support, counseling, disability-specific resources, assistive devices, personal care attendants, and any other necessary services to ensure equal access and success in educational pursuits.
- f) **Right to Privacy and Confidentiality:** Women with disabilities have the right to privacy and confidentiality regarding their disability status and any accommodations or support services they require. Educational institutions should respect and protect the privacy of students with disabilities and ensure that information regarding their disability is disclosed only on a need-to-know basis.

The RPwD (2016) Act has also increased the reservation for PwDs in Higher Educational Institutes (HEIs) from 4% to 5%. It also stated that the relevant Government and the local authorities shall work to ensure that all educational institutions they fund or recognize offer inclusive education to the children with disabilities. Hence, it is important for educational institutions, policymakers, and society as a whole to be aware of these rights and actively work towards their implementation. By upholding and promoting the rights of women with disabilities in accessing higher education, we can create a more inclusive and equitable educational system that values diversity and ensures equal opportunities for all (Taddei, 2019).

CHALLENGES OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES IN ACCESSING HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education presents unique difficulties for disabled female students, not just in terms of acquiring physical access to facilities but also with regard to far broader access

concerns regarding the modification and accommodations of the curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment (Taddei, 2019). These factors serve as the qualifying requirements for examining higher education's capacity to accept a wide variety of students. This has caused attempts to provide access for people with impairments to higher education to get more attention (Konur, 2000; Szymanski & Bilius, 2011). The most crucial elements in determining a student with a disability's success in higher education were seen to be a positive outlook and self-advocacy abilities (Komabu-Pomeyie, 2019). There are 300 million women with physical and mental impairments worldwide. In low- and middle-income nations, 75% of the disabled population is made up of women. Ten percent of all women globally are disabled women (Mehortra, 2004). The barriers that students with disability experiences were divided into various sections such as:

- **Accessibility of Facilities:** Many higher education institutions do not have adequate facilities and resources to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities. This includes physical accessibility, such as ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms, as well as digital accessibility for online learning platforms and materials (Hammad & Singal, 2015).
- **Lack of Accommodations:** Despite legal requirements for accommodations, some institutions might struggle to provide necessary support, such as sign language interpreters, note-takers, accessible course materials, or flexible scheduling for exams (Hamad, 2001).
- **Lack of Awareness and Information:** Women with disabilities are not aware of the available educational opportunities, financial aid, accommodations, and support services. A lack of information can deter them from pursuing higher education (Hussain et al., 2020). Additionally, there is often a lack of awareness among educators, staff, and students about the specific needs and rights of women with disabilities (Mahmoud et al., 2011). This can result in a lack of appropriate support, understanding, and accommodations. Inadequate support systems and resources further compound the challenges faced by these women, making it difficult for them to access necessary assistance and navigate the academic environment effectively (Hammad & Singal, 2015).
- **Limited Social Inclusion:** Inequity, based on gender discrimination, is observed in societies, where boys are given more preference than girls. As a result, investment in education for girls is much less than boys. Additionally, women with disabilities find it challenging to participate in extracurricular activities, clubs, and social events due to physical barriers or exclusionary practices. This can contribute to feelings of isolation and affect their overall college experience.
- **Inaccessible Curriculum:** Course materials, textbooks, and online content might not be designed with accessibility in mind. This can impede a student's ability to fully engage with the curriculum and perform well academically.
- **Communication Barriers:** Some women with disabilities do face communication challenges that make interactions with professors, peers, and administrators more difficult (Rimmerman and Araten-Bergman, 2005). This can impact their ability to ask questions, seek help, and fully participate in classroom discussions.
- **Financial Constraints:** Women with disabilities often face financial constraints that limit their access to higher

education. The costs associated with disability-related expenses, such as assistive devices, personal care attendants, and transportation, can be significant. Scholarships, grants, and financial aid opportunities specifically targeting women with disabilities are limited, making it challenging for them to afford higher education. Accommodations, assistive technologies, and medical expenses related to disabilities can add financial burdens on top of regular educational costs, making higher education less accessible.

- **Mental Health Struggles:** The stress of navigating an inaccessible environment, managing accommodations, and dealing with social isolation can contribute to mental health issues. The stigma around mental health might also deter them from seeking support (Maxwell et al., 2007).
- **Unawareness of Rights:** Some women with disabilities are not fully aware of their rights and entitlements under disability laws and regulations. This lack of awareness can prevent them from advocating for the accommodations they need (Rimmerman & Araten-Bergman, 2005).
- **Limited Representation and Role Models:** The representation of women with disabilities in higher education, both as students and faculty, is low. This lack of representation can result in a lack of role models and mentors who can guide and inspire women with disabilities in their educational and career journeys. It is crucial to promote inclusive representation and visibility to encourage more women with disabilities to pursue higher education.
- **Inadequate Support Services:** Higher education institutions do not have specialized support services, counseling, or mentorship programs tailored to the unique needs of women with disabilities (Idrees & Ilyas, 2012).
- **Transition to Employment:** Transitioning from higher education to the workforce can be challenging due to potential workplace accessibility issues, biases, and discriminatory practices in hiring.
- **Isolation and Social Stigma:** Women with disabilities might experience isolation and social stigma, making them feel disconnected from the mainstream educational experience. This can affect their motivation to pursue higher education (Santovec, 2011). According to Groce (2004), it is admitted worldwide that the greatest hurdle to learners with disabilities is the prejudices, stigma, and bias (Despouy, 1991).
- **Intersectional Discrimination:** Women with disabilities face discrimination at the intersection of gender and disability. This intersectionality can lead to compounding challenges, as they experience unique forms of bias and exclusion. Women with disabilities often face societal stereotypes and discrimination that intersect with gender biases (Santovec, 2011). They may be subject to double discrimination based on their gender and disability, leading to limited opportunities, lower expectations, and reduced support. Stereotypes can also affect their self-confidence and sense of belonging in academic settings.
- **Unsupportive Attitudes:** The attitude of faculty members towards the students with disabilities, including women with disabilities, is also vital for the success of inclusive education in universities (Rao, 2004). Idrees and Ilyas (2012) found that these students with disabilities face extreme conditions due to the negative attitude of faculty members and public at large and they also added that the social stigma is negatively attached to disability and the degree of rejection of PwDs

depends on the type of disability and gender. Besides, the attitude of teachers and normal classmates is often negative towards students with disabilities at university (Mittler, 2012; Zakarya, 1995). Additionally, familial and cultural attitudes discourage women with disabilities from pursuing higher education, emphasizing traditional gender roles or downplaying the importance of education for individuals with disabilities.

- **Physical Accessibility Challenges:** Accessibility to educational institutions is very important for learners with disabilities (Rimmerman and Araten-Bergman, 2005). Low enrolment and high dropout rates in HEIs are due to the lack of accessibility to institutions of higher education (Johnson, 2006). Without accessible buildings, students with disabilities cannot achieve the goals of education (UNESCO, 2015). Inadequate physical accessibility, such as lack of ramps, elevators, or accessible transportation, can make it difficult for women with disabilities to physically access campuses. Many higher education institutions in India lack adequate physical accessibility for women with disabilities. Buildings, classrooms, libraries, and other facilities may not be designed to accommodate individuals with mobility impairments or sensory disabilities, making it difficult for them to navigate and participate fully in academic activities.
- **Lack of Inclusive Policies:** Institutions often lack inclusive policies and practices that address the specific needs of women with disabilities. This includes measures such as reasonable accommodations, accessible teaching materials, assistive technologies, and support services. Without these provisions, women with disabilities may face barriers in accessing and participating in education on an equal basis with their peers.
- **Lack of Policy Implementation:** According to Idrees and Ilyas (2012), due to defective policies; learners with disabilities do experience huge problems. Furthermore, despite legal frameworks and regulations, some institutions do not effectively implement policies that ensure equal access and accommodation for individuals with disabilities.

To address these challenges, higher education institutions must prioritize accessibility, inclusivity, and awareness. This includes implementing and enforcing policies for accommodations, providing training for faculty and staff, offering mentoring programs, creating accessible digital content, and fostering an environment that embraces diversity and empowers women with disabilities to thrive academically and personally.

STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGES OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES IN ACCESSING HIGHER EDUCATION

Addressing the challenges faced by women with disabilities in higher education requires a comprehensive and inclusive approach. Here are some strategies and considerations to create a more accessible and supportive environment:

- **Accessibility on Campus:** Ensure that the campus infrastructure, classrooms, libraries, and other facilities are fully accessible to individuals with disabilities. This includes providing ramps, elevators, accessible restrooms, and designated parking spaces. Vickerman and Blundell (2010) have rightly opined that students with disabilities require equal opportunities for expressing themselves

through education. Besides, Ruijs, Veen, and Peetsma (2010) argued that if amenities and help are provided at universities, learners with disabilities including women with disabilities, will acquire all the necessary skills and education to lead a successful life.

- **Inclusive Curriculum:** Review and update the curriculum to be more inclusive and accommodating of different learning needs. Use diverse teaching methods, materials, and technologies that cater to various learning styles and abilities. Additionally, society has to offer equal opportunities for learning in inclusive and enabling environments (Naz & Aurangzeb, 2002).
- **Disability Services Office:** According to research, it is common for students with disabilities at higher education level to be unaware of the accommodations that are available to them or how to make sure that they are receiving them in compliance with their rights as ensured by laws (Barnard-Brak et al., 2009). They frequently lack the social abilities necessary to ask for or bargain with their teachers about accommodations. Therefore, it is suggested to establish a dedicated disability services office on campus to provide support, accommodations, and resources for students with disabilities. This office can help with arranging reasonable accommodations, assistive technologies, note-taking support, and exam modifications.
- **Faculty Training:** According to Fleming et al. (2017), the factors related to the success of students with disabilities in institutes of higher education can include relationships with and perceptions of peers and faculty and knowledge of accommodations. Supports for students with disabilities that negate negative attitudes from faculty and increase the awareness of disability law can provide better outcomes for students with disabilities who attend institutes of higher education (Fleming et al., 2017). Therefore, it is suggested that workshops and training sessions for faculty and staff are to be conducted to raise awareness about the rights of persons with disabilities and challenges faced by women with disabilities and to provide guidance on creating an inclusive learning environment.
- **Sensitivity Training for Peers:** All students face a number of difficulties as they adjust to college life, but it seems that these difficulties are exacerbated for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities in college report experiencing greater degrees of social isolation and loneliness (Herts et al., 2014). Through peer networks, it is possible to ease the transition for disabled students to college life (Herts et al., 2014). Like many other facets of life, connections are crucial to a disabled student's success in college. According to research, college students who have strong peer support networks are more likely to succeed and adjust to college life more successfully both socially and academically. Peer support is available to students in a range of contexts, including social gatherings, tutoring, study groups, and peer mentoring. Students with disabilities can feel at ease, relaxed, and inspired when they get social support. Additionally, they can learn how to behave properly around their college roommates, friends, and peers (Fleming et al., 2017). Academic achievement for college students with disabilities can be facilitated by social supports (Fleming et al., 2017; Lombardi et al., 2016). Therefore, it is suggested to organize workshops and

awareness campaigns to educate the general student population about disability etiquette and foster a more inclusive, friendly, cooperating and understanding campus culture.

- **Mentorship and Counseling:** Mentorship programs and counseling services that are sensitive to the unique challenges faced by women with disabilities are to be made available. Such programs can help students build self-confidence, set academic and career goals, and navigate any obstacles they encounter.
- **Flexible Learning Options:** Flexible learning options, such as online courses or recorded lectures are to be ensured for students who have difficulties attending classes physically due to their disabilities.
- **Inclusive Housing:** The campus housing should be accessible and can accommodate the needs of women with disabilities. Housing options that are designed to meet specific accessibility requirements are to be ensured in the campus of institutes of higher education.
- **Student Organizations:** The formation of student-led disability support and advocacy groups is to be encouraged. These organizations can provide a sense of community and address issues that are specific to women with disabilities on campus.
- **Financial Support:** Financial challenges by offering scholarships and grants specifically for women with disabilities are to be addressed, as they may face additional expenses related to their disability.
- **Career Services:** It is suggested to work with career services to ensure that job fairs, interviews, and internship opportunities are accessible and accommodating to students with disabilities.
- **Regular Assessments:** The effectiveness of the support services and accommodations provided to women with disabilities at institutes of higher education should be regularly assessed and upgraded. Feedback from the students themselves should be taken to identify areas that need improvement.
- **Collaboration with External Organizations:** Collaboration with external disability organizations should be made to share best practices, resources, and expertise in supporting women with disabilities in higher education.

To put in record, the key to addressing the challenges of women with disabilities in higher education is to create an inclusive and supportive environment that allows them to fully participate in academic and extracurricular activities. By implementing these strategies, educational institutions can help these students achieve their full potential and contribute their unique perspectives to the campus community (Hammad and Singal, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Women with disabilities are one of the most marginalized and vilified groups in society today. Education ought to support teachers who work with pupils who have special needs and promote societal acceptance of them (Komabu-Pomeyie, 2019). Disabled people themselves and their families cannot and should not wait on government institutions and agencies to take action in order to improve the situation. Change must start with individuals acting independently. People with disabilities should have equal access to employment, education, and social activities

in the family (Komabu-Pomeyie, 2019). We should take all necessary measures to enable the full growth, advancement, and empowerment of women with disabilities in order to ensure the enjoyment and fulfillment of the human rights and fundamental freedoms indicated in the existing situation. Women have also shown a range of strategies for overcoming challenges and the odds in order to accomplish their goals. They include Florence Ndagire, the first visually impaired lawyer in Uganda, Safak Pavey, the first disabled woman to serve in the Turkish Parliament, and Safak Ndagire, who founded Pakistan's National Forum of Women with Disabilities and chairs UNICEF's Youth Council. We must learn more about their way of life in order to remove the barriers that still prevent them from obtaining a higher education and social equality.

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