

INDIAN ASSOCIATION FOR WOMEN'S STUDIES

XV National Conference on Women's Studies

Sub-theme:8

Women with Disabilities

Persons with Disabilities have been defined in the UN Convention for Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD) to include those who have long term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairment which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others. This “social model” of disability has been accepted by people with disabilities across the world as it reflects the paradigm changes in thinking from a charity and a medical perspective to one of disability being a development issue. This approach allows us to examine the intersectionality's as well, like gender, and the barriers that they present. Article 6 of the CRPD specifically speaks of the double discrimination faced by women with disabilities and recent efforts by civil society to strengthen the State obligations under this Article have highlighted the socio-economic and cultural barriers that doubly marginalise women with disabilities.

As we move forward, with the new way of thinking, the following shifts in the disability sector are slowly happening, they certainly need more robust action.

- a) Over the years, the main concerns have been of education for children six to eighteen years, most services, schemes and programmes and training of manpower have concentrated in this age group. It has led to people with disabilities always being treated as children, with limited capacities.

There is now a move to look at the evolution of barriers, and consequently, the evolution of support across the life span, from birth to old age.

- b) The segregation of services has led to segregation of persons with disabilities. Budgetary emphasis has always been on general services, and hence specialized services are of poor quality and are not allocated enough resources to take place at the grassroots levels. This in turn leads to women with disabilities being unable to access them. We need to move beyond special schools and institutions to all the requirements for living in the community as equal members.
- c) Even within such segregation, there is further isolation of different groups of persons with disabilities from others. It is essential for us to move from a ‘specialized’ single

disability approach to one that is cross disability. Such inclusion is important to prevent a hierarchy of 'good' and 'bad' disabilities. It is the disability sector which needs to introspect on the traditional thinking that each disability is highly technical and needs to struggle and advocate only for itself.

- d) From service delivery to inclusion. 'Mainstreaming' the inclusion of persons with disabilities in all services is extremely crucial by making them accessible and relevant to persons with disabilities.
- e) We need to push for moving from the 'solution' of institutions to encouraging living in the community according to the choice of the individual. Promoting citizenship and active participation rather than living segregated and isolated lives.
- f) We must emerge from the present dismissal of persons with certain impairments as lacking capacity and towards capability development to facilitate the exercise of legal capacity.

Of course, in all of the above endeavours, the specific inclusion of women with disabilities is crucial. Neo-liberal economic reforms and globalisation, coupled with the stigma surrounding disability have further disenfranchised women with disabilities. Studies show that there are failures even in the most elementary entitlements like a birth certificate, being counted in a survey or census, obtaining a disability certificate etc. which leads to gender gaps in literacy, schooling, and access to skills and avenues to self-employment through loans, employment or any chances to convert skills into income. Women with disabilities face the irony of being denied sexual agency and being deemed asexual, while simultaneously facing extreme vulnerability to violence and sexual abuse. In many cases, they are dependent on family and sibling support and are at risk of abandonment, institutionalisation or being rendered homeless.

At the Conference we would like to encourage submission of papers on women with disabilities in all the Sub- Themes, this will ensure that disability becomes part of the general discourse. In fact all studies should include the disability dimension.

For the sub-theme on women with disabilities, the discussions will be around three areas for which papers/presentations are invited.

1. Financial Inclusion: Livelihood and Employment.
2. From institutions to living in the community: services, entitlements and delivery
3. Cultivating relationships: of support, family, friendship and love

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