

THE DISCOURSE ON DISABILITY IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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In the world, disabled people are the largest minority group. Historically, children and adults with disabilities have been neglected and their rights as citizens of a particular country are many times not taken into consideration. Due to the long history of neglect and marginalisation, participation of the disabled in community life has been minimal. Schools have not accepted them as children, employers have not hired them as adults and they have been subjected to a long history of isolation, segregation, deprivation, charity and even pity. In India, The plight of the disabled is not different. Since the disabled as yet, do not occupy their rightful position in our country, they tend to be mostly ignored by society.

This paper incorporates a vast study of the circumstances of the disabled people living in the West and Middle East countries, through surveys which were conducted with young students from these countries from Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia Millia Islamia University and Delhi University in 2018-2019. Different Disability forums across the world were also contacted and students and other people were contacted through e-mails, social media and telephone. Students across India were also connected via telephone who helped in giving an insight on the disabled population in India as well. With this chapter, an attempt is made to study sociological factors in relation to the religious culture or beliefs a society tends to follow when the discourse of disability comes up, and is based on the surveys conducted.

Disability is not a personal quality but something that is created in relation between the disabled individual and the community. Further, Indian mythological scriptures and religious beliefs play a key role in constructing perception about disability. It is a great waste of resources when disabled persons are discriminated against and excluded from society.

Disability, as understood from a sociological perspective, is all the things that impose restrictions on the disabled people. This will include individual prejudice, stereotypes, societal attitudes and myths, segregated education, exclusion in work arrangements, barriers like inaccessible public buildings and unusable transport systems. Thus, it has been argued that 'disability' is mainly the 'social condition' imposed upon the disabled individual. The role of society in labeling a person as disabled has serious repercussions. The disabled face many social disadvantages such as feeling of inferiority, fear of social ridicule, lack of self confidence, limited sphere of social participation and inability to compete with the so-called physically normal people (Oliver, 1996).

The perception of any society throughout the world about disability is more or less similar. As James H. Omvig in his work, *Freedom for the Blind: Secret is Empowerment* (2002) writes, "blindness is visible characteristic, and the blind as a group of people perceived as inferior. A simple fact of life is that society tends to lump those who are identifiably different in some physical way into minority groups and treat them differently." According to him, impaired people are viewed as a different class by the society, significantly, as a minority group. In his words, "this is simply a fact of life, and one with which we must cope".

Therefore, the disabled, generally are judged and considered not as individuals with individual talents and abilities, but by what the people with whom we are dealing think about disability and the disabled as a class. This circumstance changes disability into a social and attitudinal problem, not a physical one.

As it has been mentioned above, Indian mythology and religious beliefs play a key role in the construction of myths about disability. For instance, it is considered that blindness is a curse. It is believed that a person who did a bad deed in his/her previous birth(s) pays through disability in the present birth. Disabled people are projected by society either as angelic or demonic characters. In both cases they are excluded from the human face of society. Very few social workers are ready to recognize them as minority community and understand their problems. This is the first category.

The second category includes families which are very protective about their disabled children. They give them proper education and they fulfill all their needs. Generally, disabled people who fall under this category belong to the upper class. However, here too, significantly, their parents don't have trust in them and sometimes they don't want their children to be independent. Warnings like, 'wherever you go, take someone along with you otherwise you might be in trouble' are common. These families believe in doing charity for their children. They do not recognize them as normal human beings who have emotional feelings and who can grow like others. They believe in protecting their children and they always portray them as charitable figures who always need help and support, due to which these children never get confidence.

The third category belongs to those families where disabled are considered burden of sins. Their sight is considered ill-

omen. Due to which these children are sent to institutions where they are abandoned by their families who seldom come to meet them. These children are deprived of their parental love. This is another impact of constructed myths.

In the fourth category fall the few fortunate disabled individuals who belong to the upper and middle class families, generally from cities. Due to social awareness their parents are trained to understand the disability and enable them to be independent. Fortunately, such parents are supportive. They do not believe in the mythological constructs about disability like others.

They try to enhance their disabled children's capability and try to show their confidence in them. These educated parents always help their children in decision-making and with various difficulties at home. However, we have to keep in mind that such families are very few. We have to take some concrete action to ensure that the number of such families increases, which will be immensely beneficial for disabled groups and social progress at large.

Here, therefore, it would be very significant to elaborate the fact that being disabled is only a challenge and it does not affect a person in many ways. It is at times an inconvenience but does not disable them from leading a normal happy life. That is why it is necessary for society to change perception about disability. Hence, it is essential to de-construct mythologically and religiously constructed notions about disability and in spite of showing sympathy or charity, society should have empathy towards disabled individuals and should give them equal opportunities to participate in society. This will help in the integration of the minority of impaired people in our society.

Thus, misinterpretation of the disability should be eradicated. Those working for the cause of eye donation and organ donation and even the concerned doctors should not present the disabled people in a pathetic light, as if their lives are totally darkened by their physical disability, as it leaves a wrong impact on people's minds. Moreover, it is also the duty of the common man to convey a positive message to society that disabled people are also leading a happy life like others, especially to children, so that they develop a positive image about vulnerable people in their minds. It should be expected that no one shuns disabled people. It should be everyone's responsibility to give them place in the community, and a space of their own, realize that they, too, are the part of the same social and cultural surroundings.

It can be put forward from the above discussion that first and foremost, our society needs to come forward to integrate disabled people, as a whole, in the society and consider them an equal part of it rather than segregating them. Further, media being the most important pillar of democracy, it should bring to light such social issues so that the government is conscious about them, and ensures that enough research is done in this area. It is important to realize that without changing myth about disability, it is impossible to change their social condition.

In the Middle East, many people have this perception that it is unpatriotic if they criticise the social dynamics that do not support the rights of the disabled, and they feel that voicing out against it means criticizing the country. A genuine need to provide a forum to the disabled, where they are given opportunity to freely speak about their requirements which would help them to progress and become active members of the society, is being realised by many social institutions in the Middle East. The problem they see is that many organisations or charity forums in the Middle East are mostly not led by the government, and despite overcoming the challenges, they tend to encourage people with disabilities to adapt to the situations.

In the not unknown that in Arab culture, the subject of disability is seen as a taboo. As witnessed in the religious scriptures, when the topic of disability is discussed in Arab societies, the discussion often leads to either silence or ignorance, and able people tend to express their sympathy which does not help in reducing the prevailing stigma attached to disability. Moreover, it ends the entire debate that is important to culminate the rising discrimination against the disabled in the rest of the world. While it has been witnessed that things are gradually improving, but the stigma attached to disability or mental illness still prevails. It is not about how the topic of disability is not spoken of freely, but with the manner in which it is approached by a society that has stringent norms, it is difficult to bring a change soon. The inflexible institutional structures and the widespread social attitudes which marginalise and stereotype people with disabilities lead to these barriers.

According to the Arab Human Development Report, it is not that people with disability are invisible but they represent actually "the vulnerability of those lost from sight" and they are understood only in terms of their disability always. In the Middle East, disabled individuals often wish to express themselves, their creativity, and their own lives. The Middle East's disabled population tends to struggle in terms of receiving the status of being productive, self-expressive individuals and they are instead termed as caricatures. However, the government's ignorance towards the disabled seems intolerable, and the challenges originate from the roots. As per the World Bank, 30 million disabled people reside in the Middle Eastern countries, which is more than the disabled population living in the West. The poverty and disability there are inextricably connected.

Egypt alone has four million disabled people who require constant rehabilitations and many of them are not even mentioned in the official records. In the Arab neighbourhood, people who fall under this category are most likely to join the poverty-stricken community just like the poverty-stricken individuals are exposed to the possibility of becoming disabled.

Theoretically, Egypt's government legislation secures the disabled rights, but in the manner in which most of the citizens are treated in general, the regime does not match the rhetoric of concrete action. However, an improvement of at least 5%

in workforce of impaired people in large firms has been acknowledged. For example, the entire staff in a KFC outlet in Cairo has deaf workers, and a recent case was reported where a policeman assaulted a mentally ill man in Alexandria and was brought in front of the law that gave rise to a huge official concern for the disabled community. However, in spite of all the legal support, there is still an absence of organisational support for those who are unable to make it to education and health systems.

However, not all society's ills can term Egypt as a country which is insensitive towards the disabled community. The punishment of the attacker who molested a disabled man in Alexandria not only proves that there is pre-existing taboo in the society, but something which is also mentioned in the religious scriptures that the moment a disabled man's presence is acknowledged, he is either seen as malicious or as a wretched creature who deserves help and charity. An NGO in Egypt confirms that the ordinary Egyptians barely consider people with disabilities as part of their society or as productive members who also have their own weaknesses, strengths and rights.

'The Disability Horizons Arabic' is a popular magazine in Arabic that strongly supports the need to promote awareness about the disabled individuals' achievements, especially to generate ideal figures or role models for the disabled kids. However, the manner in which their achievements are shared in the media, it turns out to be counterproductive. Society also believes that it is not the job of a disabled person to encourage people, and fight every day in order to gain self worth, and nor do they require efforts to prove their worth to anybody.

However, the counter argument that supports the idea of focusing on the accomplishments of the disabled still holds huge supremacy in the Arabic media. In order to not sensationalise the conditions of the disabled any further, a platform like Disability Horizons Arabic, which is an apolitical platform, offers the disabled community to be opinionated while offering them a chance to put forwards their distress. This automatically ends up becoming a forum where able people get educated about the disabled condition and work towards a good change. The Disability Horizons Arabic offers an apolitical platform for every individual belonging to every age, race, religion or caste, and even today in the Arabic media, current affairs are discussed taking the disabled community into full consideration. However, this is not just about the Arab society which does or does not acknowledge the presence of the disabled, but rather, it is about acknowledging a place for disabled individuals within the whole gamut of a normal life. The idea that reflects how disabled people are alienated from a normal lifestyle that to be "ordinary humankind", and the experiences that we share which are so common like having fun or loving or learning something new or feeling the sorrow, such experiences can lead to formidable outcomes. The situations of the disabled are taken very sternly but they are also perceived with negative stereotypes.

The majority of the disabled organisations prevailing in Arab culture are not user-led. This claims that the disabled people rather than initiating it themselves, are on the verge of being at the receiving end of change. This scenario is problematic because it reinforces the idea that the disabled always require help to achieve something. Rather than feeling empowered by leading something in life, their hopes and aspirations tend to get diminished as they have no role models who can prove to the society what can be done. It has been seen that less than 10 organisations are actually led by disabled individuals. For example, in Egypt, a non-profit organisation states that it aims to promote vast incorporation of the disabled in society and specifically in the workforce, but it was founded and is led by able individuals and no disabled person appears to lead any of its projects.

In the UAE, there are various charities and organisations which challenge the status of the disabled people and tend to work on wider inclusion, but the vast majority in these organisations are not led by the people they wish to serve. This is why it becomes problematic because how can an organisation represent a community of people when it has never experienced their situation? In fact, the language used by these organisations is the kind one would never find a disabled person using while describing themselves.

In contrast, in the United Kingdom, one would find disability activists are people with disabilities themselves. Organisations for charity or advocacy are also often led by people with disability. This sends across an important message that it does not perpetuate an atmosphere where disabled people have to wait to be given their rights by non-disabled people and when that happens, a disabled individual is completely dependent on the idea of what others think he or she requires and not what you actually know you require.

Instead of putting immense pressure on disabled people to show determination and fight for what they deserve, pressure should be put on the society to provide them with accessible tools and spaces that could help in their inclusion. The problem, as Brian Whitaker pens down in his book, is that the whole concept of the society being accepting, pluralistic and vibrant, and maintaining a forum where people can present their personal thoughts in every manner, and can still be accepted by the society, is an idea which is stubbornly denied with the help of social norms which are inculcated by family, educational systems and religious scriptures.

The Arabic educational models encourage "submission, obedience, subordination and compliance, rather than free critical thinking"; in other words children are taught that to be successful, one should unquestionably accept and learn the vision of the world provided by their parents or teachers, which is why many individuals often learn to discriminate with disabled people as they have been taught to look at them in this manner.

There will be change in attitudes only when society starts seeing active disabled people leading organisations and engaging with others, offering more acceptance. For example, if children are taught from a very young age that being impaired does

not bring a person in a miserable state of being, and they are encouraged to mix and learn that disability is not something to be feared about, then only one can witness greater acceptance in society.

In the middle east countries, disability is associated with stigma. As mentioned in the religious scriptures, families experience shame because they think that a family member's action is to be blamed for the presence of disability. In Iran, families with disabled children have to face a great deal of stigma. Disabled students are admitted and taught in separate schools and classrooms that could give more intensive interventions. In fact, Iranian mothers of impaired children face poor mental health in contrast to the mothers of abled children.

In the Middle East, religion plays a significant role in shaping up parents' perception and good feelings about their children. However, religion propagates them to maintain a positive attitude and try to do everything that could help their child. In all cultures, families are impacted by the experience of various disabilities. However, some Arab parents hesitate to accept that their child is disabled and they consider themselves or other families like them as the causal agent of disability. For them, their child's disability is shameful and that is what makes a society ignorant, a carrier of unfavourable attitudes and stigma towards them. Arab people feel extremely ashamed and discouraged by their children's inefficiencies and failures as much as they feel honoured by their achievements and awards. In Arab culture, the society blames the mothers for their children's disability. People believe that the mother is the one who gives birth to a disabled child. Many Arab mothers fear that because of a disabled child, their husband might leave them and marry someone else.

Parents in the Middle East experience a similar kind of worry and concerns like parents from other regions, but studies from this region show the immense impact the lack of knowledge of parents and caregivers has on families and society. Iranian parents were surveyed about their knowledge on disability and how disability impacts their lives. It was noted that families faced extreme amount of health problems and stress which targeted them emotionally and brought difficulties in family functioning. The main setback lies when the families lack adequate information about disabilities and their causes, but they still manage to gather some information or support or advice for themselves as parents from either professional services or some informal platforms. (Dunst, Trivette & Hamby, 2007)

Lack of information for parents about their children's disabilities further contributes to their stress and anxiety. For example, it has been reported that Turkish mothers, due to lack of knowledge, have faced extreme stress and negative feelings about their child. (Bilgin & Kucuk, 2010). One important benefit of having accurate knowledge about disability is that families become more able to face the stigma they experience from society and professions (Farrugia, 2009) which is another source of stress for them. (Mak & Kwok, 2010).

In Arab countries, seeking mental health services is considered a sign of weakness. The same is viewed for students who seek special education. This is the reason which discourages people in the Arab world to seek assistance for their children's disability. Also, the common stigma associated with the idea of disability discourages Arab parents to evaluate their children and they end up searching for quick medical treatments for their children's disability, especially during the initial stages when they suspect or diagnose a disability. In contrast to this, in the United States of America, parents view their experiences with special education services to be extremely meaningful and important. These parents seemed to be satisfied with the services which were offered to their children and how their children demonstrated the improvement. They appreciated the individual attention and practical assistance which was offered to their children in school and how these services made a huge investment in their children's future.¹ It is a very daunting task to label a disability because it is difficult for health care professionals and educators to find out if a child has a disability which is based on lack of standardized assessment tools, diagnostic criteria due to absence of training and cultural differences towards disabilities in different countries. In the Middle East, due to lack of resources, knowledge and awareness about disablement, there are several countries where it has been suspected that disability is undiagnosed just like in other low and middle income countries.

In Iran, non-profit clinics or private doctors diagnose preschool kids with impairments. Before these children start school, they are sent to special screenings for special needs. In Lebanon, some British experts worked with the Middle Eastern teachers and policy makers and discussed issues such as disability and special teaching for disabilities like visual and hearing impairment, dyslexia and behavioural issues and found out that the country did lack facilities for disabled children. However, they mentioned that in Lebanon, 140 schools take part in National Awareness Day every year in order to raise the awareness of special needs education and highlight disabled children's progress and achievements which highlights the country's efforts for the neglected group. There is also a change in the status of higher education, they mentioned. A Lebanese university has a new course of Masters in Special Education which produces 22 graduates a year and teachers studying at the Bachelors level have to attend 42 hours of screening related to special needs as a part of their degree.

In several middle eastern countries, impaired children are seen to be rudimentary², and as a result it is the responsibility of the family to take up the initiative and provide efficient care to their disabled child.³ The educational services vary quite

significantly for children in both special education and in general. In Oman, the government invests good amount of money in the improvement of education and health care systems for disabled children. But in countries like Jordan, though children with disabilities have good options for educational schools and centres, however, the educational system is more focused to promote incorporation of students in general education settings.⁴ However, a study in Jordan which talks of perception of inclusion among teachers, states that teachers there had a favourable view of inclusion for children with disabilities because of the concept of inclusion taught in the pre-service education that demonstrates willingness to differentiate and support disabled children in a classroom setting.⁵ It has been noticed that due to the lack of standard education options or adequate settings for children with disabilities, children end up being in a diversity of settings which are based on parental input and resources.⁶ This often results in wandering and looking around for doctors by parents who have more means and more flexible employment criteria and they are the ones who are able to secure more services for their children.⁷

Providing special education services is one of the key societal roles towards children with disabilities. Oman leads the region in advocating the integration of children with special needs.⁸ Initially, the modern Omani education system had a huge focus on increasing the literacy rates and this effort turned out to be successful.⁹ However, education and services for disabled children is lagging behind in the country, and it is still unclear as to how it impacts the disabled children and their family members who try to seek and access relevant intervention, rehabilitation and special education services in the country.¹⁰

In Iran, many parents choose to enrol their disabled children in private educational systems or get them private therapists even when the state-funded special schools are a part of the Iranian public system. Children with multiple disabilities are welcomed to participate in the state-funded day treatment programmes. However, these services are only limited to the large cities and only affluent families can avail such privileges.¹¹ Families who can afford private settings or private therapists are opened to more formalized services, whereas there is hardly any evidence of the fact that disabled children who avail public systems are actually being provided specific services or not.

In Syria, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has mentioned that during the Syrian civil war, the country faced about 56,000 lives of people being displaced. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) states that due to this conflict, 1.5 million Syrians live with impairments including those who got impaired accidentally. It has been gauged that 3.3 million Syrian kids are vulnerable to getting disabled from an explosive menace. It has been stated that the disabled Syrian children were exposed to wars and the devastation it carried and there was acute negligence by the aid organisations in providing basic facilities or access to aid.

Disabled children are the most vulnerable in the lot. They often are in need of specialized treatment and services. The needs of a disabled child are different from those of disabled adults, and without any access to social services, education or assistive products they are often exposed to the threat of getting excluded, neglected and stigmatized as the implacable issues continue to prevail. Moreover, it has been noted that due to financial deficiency and lack of support, the initiative to build schools for disabled kids does not seem to fulfill.

All over the world, disabled women continue to experience discrimination on a daily basis. Equal access to education, social welfare, employment, and leadership roles, and growth are key factors for empowering the disabled women in the Middle East. However, various discriminatory issues faced by disabled women create a hindrance in their complete inclusion in society. Disabled women lack complete access to employment, adequate housing, education and healthcare. Not only this, they experience denial of social, political and economic rights which lead to further persistent legal, physical, cultural and institutional barriers. They are excluded from the policy or decision making processes too. For productive and complete participation of disabled people, having accessibility to all these privileges is a precondition.¹² Accessibility plays a key role for disabled women living in the middle east to seize the opportunity to get basic services including sanitation, food and water, education, information and transport. Communication technology and information serve to be essential tools for making enabling conditions for women with disabilities.

¹ Donovan, 2013, p. 162.

² Eapen et al., 2007; Profangter 2009

³ Read & Schofield, 2010

⁴ Al-Rossan, 2012

⁵ Abu-Hamour & Muhaidat, 2013

⁶ seif eldin et al., 2008

⁷ Al Farsi et al., 2013; Chakrabarti, 2009

⁸ al-lamki & ohlin, 1992

⁹ Al-Adawi, 2006

¹⁰ Al Farsi et al., 2013

¹¹ Samadi et al., 2013

¹² See General Assembly resolution 48/96 and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, art. 9.

Middle East countries are presumed to have poor rule of governance and law, prejudice and cultural and traditional practices, and all these factors lead to impediment of the successful fulfilment of disabled human rights in their societies. In 2006, the signing of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) by many Middle Eastern countries shows great prospects for advocacy, bridging the gap of inequality and making changes that would have a positive influence on the lives of disabled persons, particularly women. To challenge the change in society with a bottom-down approach, a way forward to implement the humanrights principles of this convention nationally and of other treaties such as the 1979 Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) should act more effectively, with more engagement of women with disabilities which would help in their empowerment to lead and carry forward the institutional and social changes which they require to have freedom and equal status in their countries.

Various studies have sought to fill the gap present in data and studies on impaired women from the middle east region. To assess the amount of marginalization and discrimination against disabled women in terms of laws and policies in the middle east, these studies help to collect analytical data for the same. These studies or plans have helped women with disabilities to have full engagement with the members of parliament, local authorities and the media in order to voice out their message widely, which included their right of involvement in various national movements. Gender and disability are the key factors of analysis for the laws being reviewed against the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Such movements aim to be useful in terms of the advancement of the disabled women's rights that prove to be helpful to the national and regional government organisations and parliament members of countries like Jordan, Egypt, Palestine, Yemen or Sudan.

In the middle east region, the workforce of women is more than the men in the informal sectors. Their work-related or occupational disabilities are often seen to be resulting in the misleading of the statistics. Women are more prone to home-based injuries than men. Women working in the informal sectors have a disadvantage of not getting any coverage by formal disability schemes. An NGO in Palestine supports the disabled women's rights and claims that a disabled woman in the Middle East is often viewed as dependent or childlike. They are considered to be incompetent and asexual, someone who cannot take up roles as workers, sexual partners or mothers. As a result, these women are left confused about their existence or identities and unsure about their future in society.

Male children in the families carry an economic significance while female children are viewed as a symbolic value. In fact, women in many cultures, especially in the Middle East, are viewed as symbols of worth and honour in a family. Their health and beauty are represented as the good standing and well-being of the family. Female members of the family in the Middle East are not expected to produce wealth independently. They are only seen as mothers, supporting their fathers, brothers, and their husbands ultimately. They are expected to be successfully arranged-married which is the family's enhancement and a privilege.

Because of societal norms of female beauty, and unchallenged gender roles, disabled women are often considered a failure on such grounds. While disabled sons can be tolerated and got married, on the other hand, disabled daughters barely get any access to basic resources, not being very hopeful about their future, marriage or social mobility. In the Middle East, it is very usual for a disabled woman to be kept hidden or inside a closet by her family. This can be in the form of imprisonment at home, which includes being locked inside a room so that no visitor apart from the immediate family members can see her.

For disabled people, the ethos surrounding the idea of marriage allows them more independence in those times when marriage is not ruled out entirely. However, it should be stressed that it is generally the case only with women having disabilities. For instance, in 1995, a woman with a learning disability was raped by a gang of young men. Later, the woman was murdered by her brother because her assault brought a shame on the family's name. Such issues are defined by the General Union of Disabled as "double discrimination" which is caused by gender and disability subjugation.

The status of women is an unresolved business in the Middle East society as a whole. For instance, in the General Union of Disabled Palestinians, the management consists of both disabled men and women but it is mostly men who are involved in the decision-making and other important acts. Disabled girls in the Middle East are not given access to primary education and are marginalised and denied access to education. According to a recent study, only 42 percent of disabled girls complete primary education in comparison to 50 percent of disabled boys and 53 percent of girls without disability. The educational disadvantage for women with disabilities is the foremost cause of building social exclusion and poverty which could further have long-term implications on their capacity and opportunity to participate in labour markets.

Most of these associations' activities mainly involve holding meetings and gatherings and various sports events and they expect good amount of participation by their members and such activities are seen as a morale booster especially for disabled people. However, women's participation is not witnessed and the participants happen to be all men.

International evidence suggests that the number of disabled women is higher than disabled men in the developed nations, but the number is lower in the developing nations. It has been studied that severe impairments are male-dominated, and

another possibility is that disabled females in the developing countries are under-reported and do not receive adequate care and tend to die sooner because they are never exposed to the outside world by their families and are forced to remain hidden. This is also the reason why disabled women in the Middle East region are exposed to higher risks of getting ill due to multiple pregnancies, improper health, and inadequate medical care. They often become victims of the law, and do not receive any legal protection and prophylactic care.¹³

Yemen is another country with a huge population that is afflicted with high poverty, showing low social measures. The nation fashionably follows a traditional practice of consanguineous marriages, and women giving birth to children when they are not ready, and their illiteracy rate is also very high. The Yemeni Association of the Physically Handicapped, aims to benefit the rights of the disabled community, its premises are entirely occupied by disabled men while impaired women are provided a separate space altogether. The Yemeni government provides subsidies to this association and it currently attracts more than 500 disabled members out of which fewer than 10 percent are women. Improving the general situation and well-being of the people with disabilities, providing them rehabilitation services, vocational training and mainly working towards their full social integration are few of its mandates and objectives.

While its activities include providing financial assistance and rehabilitation equipment, there is no accurate data regarding how many impaired women get the actual benefit of these programmes which state the fact that like this, many other associations that work for the disabled, have no specific targets for women with disabilities.

In the Middle East region, without involving disabled people in the societal programmes or ensuring their social inclusion, there is less possibility that any developmental goals will be met. People with disabilities come under the category of people who are represented as those living in chronic poverty. However, there is a clear growth of evidence on the association between poverty and disability. Conditions that are linked to poverty like poor nutrition, education, absence of health care services and unsafe working conditions tend to increase the possibility of disabilities which can occur anytime from birth to old age. Due to prejudices, absence of health and rehabilitation programmes, and lack of employment opportunities, all these factors make the disabled vulnerable and exposed to poverty.

In the Middle East, disability draws important inferences for economic and social growth. The social and economic crises are not only dealt with by disabled individuals, they also affect their family members and their community. The incorporation of the disabled present in the employment market helps in many significant ways like it would reduce both costs and public expenditures afforded by families, and it also ensures the participation of the disabled in more productive work. Formulation of policies that would integrate disabled individuals into every possible feature of society, like employment, education and vocation rehabilitation, will not only benefit a person but the whole society as well.

Despite the fact that disabled individuals in Saudi Arabia have access to education in government universities and the opportunity to work in both government and private sectors, disabled individuals are still not viewed as capable of marriage. A famous philosopher, Al-Bakri, writes that knowing how disabled people experience issues every day, still the society and government never give them adequate rights. He further adds that many disabled individuals get refused by the parents of healthy sons and daughters who don't want to marry their children off to disabled individuals. He suggests that if the Ministry of Social Affairs grants loans or offers that would help provide job opportunities to disabled people with high income, the society may witness a change towards disabled individuals and also see them as a good prospect for marriage. The philosopher reveals that earlier he had debated over the rights of the disabled with the Council of Shoura, but they were unresponsive about the matter, and neither did the government associations intervene. "We called several times for facilitating marriage of handicapped people by offering them special apartments, loans and job opportunities. We also called for equipment in the street to facilitate the movement of handicapped. In the Kingdom, we issued many decisions, but there is no executive plan to ensure implementation of the decisions", Al-Bakri writes.

In the middle east area, people not only face societal stigma or prejudice, but they face many physical or cultural prejudices as well. Therefore, the social exclusion which starts from the family itself brings an end to the coming opportunities for disabled people to participate and work as useful participants in the society. As discussed earlier, the inclusion of the disabled in the employment market would not only help them socially, but it would also be helpful to ease down the public expenditures that are borne by the families.

It is significant to notice the connection of disability and employment policies in society. In social policy, there is neither a single understanding of disability nor a single procedure that could draw disparity between the disabled and the non-disabled. To take an example, any work-related impairment can be understood as the lack of functioning at tasks or as a reduction in effectiveness of work in comparison to an abled individual. When disability is viewed in the social context, it is defined as per the lack of access to complete participation in the society. Any medical condition which gives rise to an impairment does not necessarily imply as a work disability. In programmes that are sponsored by the government, the disability insurance policies are defined for those cases which underlie subsequent impairments which prevent a disabled individual from performing a work that an individual would anyway be competent enough to perform.

¹³ Groce N, Trasi R 2004. Rape of individuals with disability: AIDS and the folk belief of virgin cleansing. *The LANCET*, Vol. 363:1663-1664, May 22.)

It is often noticed that disabled people are poorer or are more exposed to poverty than the able people. Also, people living under poverty are more vulnerable to disabilities than the ones who are not poor. In a society, well-being is linked with the ability to perform a task and fulfill the given roles.¹⁴ However, even in the developed countries, the association between disability and poverty has not been systematically examined.¹⁵

With the representation of disabled women, writers try to invoke a sentimental effect but one also would find glimpses of these women strongly defying the norms of gender and marriage and leading independent lives. Disabilities tend to put much greater load on women than on men, whether they are caretakers of having a disability themselves.

Although, disabled women are seen as misfit for marriage, there are women who do marry and others chose to remain at home or connect themselves with support networks such as residential schools or convents. An example which represents that the perception of society in the Middle East of disabled individuals' marriages is highly insensitive and negative is that of an Egyptian couple, where both the partners had Down's Syndrome. Their will to marry each other resulted in a number of discourses on the public forum. Many people branded the marriage as immoral, saying that it would lead to a continuation of the gene and their children will also be disabled. Such attitudes are expressed by typical conventional family members who would never accept marrying off their children to someone with a disability.

Consanguinity is known as a reason for genetic disorders which include diseases and syndromes which are present with developmental and intellectual disabilities. This can happen because of the autosomal disorder that are recessive in nature or those disorders that are inherited. However, the genetic association and the way it functions requires more investigations which is why researchers tend to acknowledge the role and functioning of the genetics. In Israel, researchers have found that several consanguineous Israeli Arabic families have serious autosomal diseases causing intellectual disability. Out of all the marriages, 30 percent were consanguineous and 17 percent of them was between the first cousins. This can be understood by its founder effect that owes to the general high rate of consanguineous marriages where two families with multiple off springs having intellectual disabilities are later not accepted for marriages.

Yemen, a nation with high population growth rate with low social indicators and extremely high poverty incidence, follows the customary practice of early and consanguineous marriages followed by early pregnancies. In Palestine, the status of disabled women is altering gradually. A physically disabled woman marrying an able man is till now an unheard situation there. However, people with disabilities are freer to marry out of their personal choices in comparison to able individuals who often have to submit themselves to arranged marriages. In Jordan, 30% marriages are based upon cousin mating and most of them are first cousins. Families where first cousins get married and have children, have a higher rate of genetic disorders like intellectual disabilities, dimorphism or congenital anomalies. In Qatar, in a study with thousands of women, it has been found that 54% marriages were consanguineous and the most common were between the first cousins. The study further suggests that these women have inbred children who are at higher risk to experience intellectual disabilities, epilepsy and other kinds of disabilities in comparison to children born from non-consanguineous couples. Despite the growing programmes and organisations it has been witnessed that a social change is needed. Firstly, for instance, people still tend to hide their disabled sons or daughters so that they do not become a hindrance in their siblings' marriages, and then aim the bigger issues regarding literacy, employment, infrastructure, medical health or equal participation in society.

Looking at the disability movements in the West, it tends to group together both physical and intellectual impairments under the definition of 'disability'. In the United States, disabled Americans constitute the largest minority group, and there are many acts that define disabilities along with different policies that can benefit people in the school or labour market. Disabled Americans have good options for receiving subsidized support from various sources which are at the zonal level as United States lack universal healthcare support systems. In the rural areas, significantly in the Great plains region, there is no medical infrastructure organised by the government for disabled people that affects them physically or mentally, but it also affects the nation's socioeconomic status. It is significant to mention that in the Middle East or in India situations are more or less similar, and disability in the context of religion remains similar in every religious scripture.

A person having any sort of disability does not necessarily experience any inefficiency in their functioning due to their impairments, but their status in the society, especially the manner in which they are perceived by people, is denigrating. Notably, in the twentieth century new policies or acts were brought in, but before this society strongly believed that individuals with disabilities were abnormal beings who were incapable to serve the world. The Americans with Disabilities Act helps in ensuring certain rights for disabled individuals, but it fails to prevent disabled individuals from facing poverty and providing them good education. Statistics reveal that people without disabilities are more employed in comparison to the individuals who have disabilities.

¹⁴ Consultations with the Poor (Brock, 1999), pp. 1, 29.

¹⁵ From the preface to the papers from the conference "Disability, Exclusion & Poverty: A Policy Conference", organized by the Combat Poverty Agency, the Forum of People with Disabilities and the National Rehabilitation Board, 1994.

Investigations done on the unemployment and impairment nexus constantly show that there is clear correlation between disability and poverty for every ethnic group in the West. The pressure on the governmental programmes would easily decrease when disabled people achieve financial stability. Studies show the data of the U.S. Census Bureau that examines high level of generality within the welfare recipients. However, thirteen percent of couples who have children under eighteen years of age get welfare benefits. It also suggests that 50 percent of families have low salaries and fall under the poverty line, and their children are more likely to be born with a disability in contrast to those couples who have good incomes.

In the case of the European Union, over seventy million people suffer with some kind of an impairment, whether it is mental or physical impairment that limits their movements, activities and senses. Disabled people often experience barriers that keep them away from participating in the employment market. The European Union through its policies, laws and actions tends to promote inclusion and active participation of disabled people. A key example is the European Disability Strategy 2010-2020, which aims to make services and products easily accessible (in order to remove every obstacle for disabled people in using them), ensuring that disabled people actively participate in public life, manage to combat discrimination because of disability, improve their employment conditions, inculcate more inclusive education and lifetime learning for young disabled people, and most importantly fight against the social exclusion and poverty among the disabled individuals. The policies did show tangible results where the Youth Guarantee strongly supported employment for all young people, including the ones with disabilities. In order to ensure income support as a key right of disabled people, the European Union is committed to various principles to bring fair labour markets and welfare systems.

The European Accessibility Act is also being widely discussed by legislators to make a range of services and products more accessible for the disabled people. The EU Disability Card, which is now successfully launched in eight countries, enabled disabled people to travel and they can access any sport, culture, leisure without any hindrance. In California, it is illegal to refuse car insurance to disabled people, if they are proper licensed drivers, just because they are disabled. It is also against the law if the insurers refuse to provide insurance to a family member just because the owner of the vehicle is blind; however, they can exclude the coverage for damage and injuries if the visually impaired and unlicensed individual was operating the vehicle. Apparently, the legalities are structured in a way to only allow the visually impaired to buy and get their vehicles insured, and their friends, caretakers or family can drive their vehicle. Based on a 1998 European Community Recommendation, the European Parking Card for people with disabilities provides them a significant notice of what can be done and achieved. Disabled people can apply for special parking cards in their Member State which is recognised by all Member States in order to give access of having "nationally defined parking related benefits". The European Youth Card Scheme also provides an alternative model of voluntary recognition.

To facilitate mutual recognition by the administrative authorities, the European Union has established an inventory of national disability eligibility criteria which suggests that disabled individuals can apply for benefits in another Member State before taking residence there. If they are eligible, those benefits are made immediately available on their arrival. In a similar manner, mobility can be improved by agreeing on the existing payments from the state during the time when the resettlement is in another Member State. However, across Europe, the importance of the issue on the denial of a disabled individual's mobility is highly stressed which leads to too many gaps in the provision in many countries. However, the European Disability Strategy aims to see more work on the implementation of the recent European regulations based on the transferability of benefits of disabled people.

In Europe, at the time of World War I, Disability Protection System only covered soldiers or veterans who fought in the war, it was solely based on this principle that they deserve this protection if they sacrificed their limbs for the country. The concept was termed as a 'Quid Pro Quo' duty that suggests that soldiers must be acknowledged with facilities in return for their services to the country. During World War II, millions of people were severely injured due to its aftermath, and attitudes towards disability were drastically changed. However, disabled individuals in Europe experienced high rate of unemployment. The time after 1945, European countries acted in the most positive manner to deal with this situation. They made it mandatory for employers to hire disabled soldiers, and this programme got further extended by including disabled civilians. In initial times of the European Community (EC), the laws were made within the realm of the union making it a concrete subject of the conventions of the United Nations. Before the transition into the European Union during the early 1990's, the European Community made laws by itself that included disabled people and their everyday needs. The timeline that established legislations about impaired individuals by the European Union can be divided into two eras, from 1945 to 1992 and from 1992 to the present. The period from 1945 to 1992 guaranteed broad and strong rights to disabled people just as they were provided to the non-disabled people. During the period from 1992 to the present, special policies and treaties are seen coming into the picture that only concentrated on the disabled rights.

In the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe, disabled people experience many common challenges. Apart from countries like Turkey, most other countries in the Balkans follow a legacy of social policies which has the Soviet influence and includes deep entrenched rehabilitative and medical approaches towards disability, followed with an emphasis on separate

and state funded institutionalised care. In order to have an access to the state services, disabled people are assessed by medical officers and pedagogical experts and given the status of disabled, which specifies a degree and a type of disability. Many disabled people also lose their legal autonomy, become dependent on their family members who ultimately take decisions and gain benefits on their behalf. Parents of disabled children are also encouraged to give up their children as orphans to the state. To administer disability assessment and placements in orphanages, its residential homes and various other institutions, extensive bureaucratic systems were established and these systems were extremely vulnerable to corruption, exploitation towards disabled people and reinforced exclusion. However, after the dissolution of Eastern bloc, it has led to the situation where many disabled people, including children, stay in the institutions throughout the region.

Educational and rehabilitative services in these institutions are found to be either non-existent or extremely poor. In Budapest, as per the Mental Disability Advocacy Centre, one million or above disabled people in the region continue to experience systematic violations of human rights in terms of residential facilities. The governments have considerable political pressure and legal obligations on them to change the criteria from institutionalising disabled persons with more rights-focused and inclusive approaches towards disability. However, many countries have managed to establish alternative institutions for care, specifically in the domains of political and economic instability which can be exacerbated in many forms like declining public health systems, civil unrest, conflict and environmental hazards. Disabled people across the region, continue to remain isolated, discriminated, marginalised, exploited and abused in many cases. Discrimination is deeply rooted in many legislatures of the countries which includes health care, education and pension systems and in employment sectors. Disabled people experience restrictions in their movements, they have very few opportunities to be a part of social events or live productive, full and independent lives.¹⁶

In the West, disparities among children in education has been witnessed continuously for generations. In a study of individuals who are 65 or above, 21 percent of them are those who have not completed high school and 40 percent of individuals with disabilities also failed to complete their higher education.¹⁷ In the attainment of higher education degrees, great disparities have been found to be existing in higher schooling. According to the 2015 Census, 15 percent of the population with disability of age 25 have attained a bachelor's degree while 33 percent of individuals belonging to the same age group category without any disability have obtained a similar educational position.¹⁸ In a study of 2005, 46 percent of disabled students were found enrolling in post-secondary education like college, technical schools or vocational schools compared to 63 percent of students without disabilities. However, higher education completion and post-secondary enrolment also vary in terms of the disability type.

At the time before the Individuals with Disabilities Act, disabled children never received free and adequate public education. However, different acts had different criteria which incorporated laws like different schools for differently abled students which were obliged to provide adequate services to them and this act is applicable to those students who are school-aged children and they must fall under the category of disabilities. Due to societal and religious stigma, disabled children were viewed with a negative eye, and were never made a part of any activity in which other able children participate. In order to bring some amount of inclusion in the society, the Americans with Disabilities Act tries to cover individuals with any kind of disablement such as physical or learning disabilities. The act ensures that no disabled individual should be discriminated outside their homes, which includes school, work or in any public areas. However, it does not include authorization of privatized areas for individuals like homes. It has been noted that educators often hold disabled students with lower expectations that ultimately affects their educational progress in future. Here, this act ensures that disabled students in the educational setting, unless these schools are not government funded, participate in every form, like be a part of the school sports team or attend on and off campus events. As per the Individuals with Disability Act, the school in a district is responsible to give an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to the disabled children. The IEP comprises of group of members who act as administrators, child advocates, guardians, occupational therapists and other specialists in the school. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act makes sure that the fee for schooling of disabled children gets discharged. However, for these children it is necessary to have an approval of Individuals with Disabilities Education Act criteria, and must fall under the category of disability. The act helps disabled children to be assessed appropriately and provided extra incentives which are helpful to their condition. The IEP also aims to evaluate the goals of children with special needs, and understands what can be done to fulfil those goals.

Disabled children who are parentless or do not have a guardian who could advocate them are not adequately enrolled in schools in comparison to children having parents or guardians.

¹⁶ USAID Report 2009

¹⁷ Steinmetz, 2006

¹⁸ U.S. Census Bureau, 2015

During the transition time, the law provides facilities to students of certain age. The students receive the transition procedure very early in their lives because the states or IEP believe that early age is more appropriate to start with the transition procedure. However, it has been noticed that many disabled students do not receive the transition procedure at all. The transition services are more result-oriented rather than outcome-oriented and they ensure that it only leads to a student's success. Students are supposed to attend the planning meetings for the transition but not every student is able to attend, and disabled students end up playing a passive role in their own life decisions or plans. A study in a higher education institute in the Midwestern United States found that less than one-third of disabled students lack transition preparation and many in the group were not aware of the laws that were meant for the disabled and their higher education. This ultimately leaves them without any knowledge about their learning requirements and they become unable to advocate for themselves.

It has been noted that European Schools, which is a network of thirteen inter-governmental schools, teaching children of the EU employees, fail to fulfil the requirements of the disabled kids. While schools are paying profound attention towards inclusion, Human Rights Watch has noticed that disabled children are being ignored, and their needs are neglected. They are also under pressure to change schools and are not provided adequate accommodation and valuable support which could allow them to learn and succeed in an inclusive environment. Disabled students who are ashamed of their impairment and identity, are unable to understand what they need for their growth, they look up to the faculty members for their accommodation needs. European institutions tend to provide funds to their employees for the enrolment of their children with disabilities in private schools where education fee is very high. According to interviews with European Commission officials, Human Rights Watch has found out that the European Commission, which incorporates the largest staff from all EU institutions, provides similar funding to around seventy children, which ends up making a good budget annually. Thus, the EU spends significant funds on private education for these disabled children instead of investing in the needs of disabled children in European schools.

In higher education, self-advocacy plays a very significant role in a student's achievements. Examination of self-advocacy skills limits the impact on academics to a large extent, whereas it also leaves an impact on the non-academic situations as well. A study shows that only 3 percent of disabled students in the west acquired self-advocacy training. Students who have received the self-advocacy training and are confident about their disability and their needs, interact well with the faculty and staff. Advocacy education is also provided to staff members from different programmes in order to help the instructors understand the requirements of the impaired students whom they teach so that if some students are unable to complete their course and require extra time, some arrangements can be provided to them. Education serves disabled students an opportunity to learn self-advocacy skills that make them aware about their health, insurance and various other needs. As learners in higher education environments, disabled students are responsible for the advocacy of their accommodation and needs.

Though many institutions have staff for disabled students to help them in their accommodation requirements, the faculty members can choose to act differently based upon the concerns of weakening of the academic integrity and receiving accommodation requests in large numbers. While working with the faculty for accommodation, many disabled students claimed that they had a negative experience during the allotment.

Schools for disabled students have been segregated or they would have segregated classrooms and it has been noticed that their education would be extremely inferior to the mainstream general education. Federal Initiatives work for the disabled children's betterment; it has led to a progress towards the integration of literacy for disabled students. The law guarantees students with disabilities free and adequate education without any restrictive environment. Despite the segregation and slow progress, disabled students are often still more educated than the non-disabled students.

However, studies indicated that boys are more preferred to receive special education than girls. There are 75 percent of disabled students studying in the special schools out of which 51 percent of boys are studying in elementary and secondary schools.¹⁹ Researches have tried to find out why boys are seen as more capable to get special education than girls. Some writers say that the issue behind this perception is that it reflects the discrimination against the disabled boys due to which they are deprived from the benefits of regular literacy. They state that disabled boys are more easily labelled as 'disabled' and are immediately channelled to special schooling on the basis of disruptive behaviours. Others say that due to the overrepresentation of disabled boys in special schools, it reflects the idea that educating disabled boys is a priority. In India too, similar challenges of discrimination are faced by girls with disabilities. In fact, special education schools were established in the colonies during the colonial rule and most of the special schools were meant for disabled boys and very few for girls. The necessity of educating disabled boys reflected the motive of society, which perceives education more important for disabled boys than for disabled girls, because boys are seen in need for the education services which could help them develop skills so that they become capable to look after themselves and their family members.²⁰

¹⁹ Russo & Jansen, 1988

²⁰ Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund, 1983; Russo & Jansen, 1988

Researches also state that boys labelled as mentally retarded tend to have greater IQ levels than girls with a similar label.²¹ The reason behind this has been noticed as the stereotype of a woman and any person with a mental disability are considered being same. They are considered to be dependent, emotional, illogical and in constant need of protection. Girls may not be termed as mentally disabled unless they show signs of low IQ that are very evident.

The overemphasis of the situation of boys in special education serves as the best example of gender influence on the special literacy placement where one study has reported that girls are overrepresented in a certain manner in the special literacy programmes. In a study with 8,000 disabled children, the Disability Rights Education and Defence Funds (1983) found that a high percentage of disabled girls were made to attend separate schools in comparison to disabled boys. The writers state that it is also believed in religious discourses that these disparities originate from the perception that males would have to support themselves and their families which is why they require better education. The impact of gender roles in special literacy placement and labelling gets further problematic due to the strong influence of class. It has been studied that disabled kids, especially boys from the minority class are overrepresented in a gross manner during special literacy programs, especially in those that happen for children with mild mental illness.²²

The European Union Disability Strategy tends to provide great significance to issues concerning both the genders. However, there are existing inequalities in certain spheres of life which result from gender and disabilities and disabled women tend to experience multiple forms of discrimination. In order to access their freedoms and human rights, women with disabilities face greater challenges than disabled men. They are often isolated, abused, marginalised and are situated at a risk of experiencing extreme poverty. Over the past few years, growth has been witnessed but still impaired women experience social discrimination and prejudice at extreme levels in the society. The participation of women is deeply affected due to their predominant role of being caregivers to their children, and to other dependent individuals including disabled children. Women tend to face massive difficulties in order to reconcile their private, professional and family lives which have been witness to having a strong effect of parenthood on the employment rates. Disabled women not only face discrimination in the area of employment but also in education, health services, training etc.

According to the effects of social attitudes that are built on the interaction of disability and gender, it is shown that disabled women often have less independence, less employment opportunities, less access to education in comparison to men, and women without disabilities. In addition, they also face huge threat of abuse or injury, including violence, negligent treatment, exploitation, maltreatment or sexual abuse both inside and outside homes.

In order to expose the existing inequalities and differences in men's and women's work experiences, the issues of social exclusion, poor labour market integration, poverty experiences by impaired women need to be referred to as important examples of gender mainstream perspective. In the light of the provisions by UN Convention on the Rights of Disabled People, it provides a concrete analysis and interpretation on the condition of the disabled women in the society. The Convention is an integral international convention which supports and protects the rights and dignity of disabled people, including disabled women and girls, working towards promoting their participation in the political, civil, economic, social and cultural spheres with equal opportunities. Article 6 of the UN Convention is the most crucial basis of the study which provides a specific article on women with disabilities, recognising the obligations laid down on the government in order to take measures which ensure complete and equal access of all kinds of freedom and human rights. The primary motive of the UN Convention is to ensure that disabled women, and also mothers of disabled children, exercise same rights as the others do.

Disabled women are not seen fit for the roles of mothers, wives, nurturers, homemakers and lovers. Examining the limitations of disabled women, their abilities to acquire the conventional roles is never acknowledged as their best action to get social success. This provides valuable insights on how impaired women go through difficulties in everyday life, and how they are not exposed to all the social options. Disabled women sense being trapped in abusive or unfulfilling relationships because for them it is hard to imagine to sustain on their own without economic support because they are not given all the social and financial means, and they also fear to spend their entire lives in disabled institutions.²³ In addition, it has been reported that disabled women might get back to abusive relationships because for them it is the only close intimate relation they ever have or had, and for them it is preferable to have a poor relationship with someone than having no relationship at all.²⁴

²¹ Gillespie-Silver and Heshusius (1981)

²² Jones, 1976; Mercer, 1973; Tomlinson, 1982

²³ Hannaford (1989)

²⁴ Asch and Fine (1988)

However, various movements are seen to intertwined, and one can notice the fact that how equality of women is seen to be attained with the idea of subverting their potentiality. The disabled feminists of the world challenge and criticize the potential assumptions around disabilities that underlie the practices related to the present scenario of prenatal screening or abortion of foetuses that are recognised as disabled.²⁵ They demonstrate how society's insensitive attitude towards the disabled influence the counselling given to the women who are pregnant, and it claims that it would be better if the disabled people are not born at all.²⁶ Critics argue that abortions underline a woman's oppression and it negates a woman's growth in general, especially for a woman with disabilities. This states that reproductive and disability rights are contradictory, and the concept of aborting a disabled child is extremely immoral and unjustified.

Studies were conducted which explained the inequality lying between disabled men and women in terms of employment. In a study of gender equity on the subject of accessibility to rehabilitation services, it was found that women have less than one-third representation in rehabilitation programmes.²⁷

It was also found that disabled women are just confined to part-time jobs or as homemakers, while disabled men enter into full-time jobs in the labour market. The authors suggest that the reason behind this is the gender biased perceptions about men, women and employment where disabled women face double difficulties due to gender role and disablement. It has been ascribed in society, and in the religious scriptures as well, that disabled women are attached to certain stereotypes where they are viewed with an eye of dependence, failure, helplessness and passivity.²⁸ Such attitudes are shared by general public and rehabilitation counsellors which result in disabled women being deprived of vocational training, rehabilitation programmes, quality training, and finally becoming rehabilitated into non-employment.

It is believed that the sudden increase of employed women in the labour force leads to women facing an unhealthy effect on mental growth, due to the added employment stress that affects their main role of bearing a child and meeting various demands in the family. However, in a study where the relationship between a woman's work and a woman's mental health was studied, it was found that women's participation, and especially of disabled women, in the labour force had positive results and very few negative results were there.²⁹ It is indicated that for them work is a medium of self-esteem and satisfaction and the employment participation maybe a health enhancement for them. It is also noticed that women who experienced mental disabilities were non-employed, non-white and led socially isolated lives with limited social roles. This further suggested that disabled women are at more danger than any other women's group because they are isolated in the society, they are not given access to social responsibilities or employment.

Although the image of a traditional mother as the nurturer of a child and as the caregiver is changing gradually, the society still uses its reference in many areas. Since disabled women are considered dependent and in constant need for care, many people wonder how a disabled mother can fulfil the role of a caring and nurturing mother.³⁰ The popular belief about disabled women that they cannot or should not give birth to children has brought difficulties to pregnant disabled women. It is difficult for them to find doctors to help and treat them.

They also find problems related to attaining information or services related to their special requirements.³¹ When disabled women become mothers, they face many difficulties and challenges, more than able mothers because the world assumes that their disabilities do not make them fit to be mothers. In this process, when they go through divorces, the custody of their children is taken away from them while many other disabled mothers' children are taken away from them and placed in social care institutions only because it is thought that their mothers are unfit to raise their children.³² Disabled mothers not only face issues while being pregnant or keeping the custody of their children, they also face extreme injustice if they are willing to adopt kids or choose to foster children for some time.³³

However, if they are successful in keeping their children with them, they encounter further challenges like finding children's programmes that traditionally ignore the requirements of the disabled mothers.

There are disparate accounts of womanhood that are experienced by disabled women. These accounts are either researched and written by disabled women³⁴ or they are based on personal interviews taken with some disabled mothers.³⁵ Often mothers with mental illness are not even mentioned in this discourse because they are invisible in comparison to mothers who have some other disability. There is very limited information from the doctors who talk about mentally disabled mothers, how they face different challenges in the society.³⁶

²⁵ Asch, 1986; Saxton, 1987

²⁶ Saxton, 1987

²⁷ Menz, et al., (1989)

²⁸ Menz, et al., 1989: 32

²⁹ Sales and Frieze (1984)

³⁰ Shaul, Dowling, & Laden, 1985

³¹ Finger, 1985; Women and Disability Awareness Project, 1989

³² Corbett, 1989

³³ Asch and Fine, 1988; Finger, 1985

³⁴ Anderson, 1985; Hyler, 1985; LeMaistre, 1985; Roth, 1981

³⁵ Shaul, Dowling, & Laden, 1985

³⁶ Budd & Greenspan, 1985; Shilling, et al., 1982; Whitman & Accardo, 1990

Moreover, very limited resources are available that present the viewpoint of mentally disabled mothers, and how they deal with the motherhood. The few resources which are available state that 25 percent of mentally disabled women had their children separated from them.³⁷ In addition, society follows the myth which is also mentioned in the religious scriptures that disabled women produce defective children, though this is groundless as most of the impairments are not genetic. Due to these myths and fears, disabled women experience severe discrimination in society.

Earlier, individuals with feeble minds were seen as a major risk to the society. It was believed that feeble mindedness was hereditary and no mother with a feeble mind will ever be able to have a normal child.³⁸ These women were believed to be devoid of moral restraints mainly concerning having sexual relations which was thought as a punishment or a consequence that they might give birth to deficient and illegitimate children.³⁹ Harsh preventive measures were followed against this risk that included unwilling sterilization or segregation from society and men.⁴⁰ In the 1960s, many western states followed the laws of sterilization, and in the 1980s, some states forbade the marriages of mentally disabled people.⁴¹ It has been noted that no section of disabled women has faced as much injustice about their reproductive rights as mentally disabled women have witnessed, just because of the myth that talks about their uncontrollable sexuality, and this is still prevalent at present as well.⁴²

Studies that state that disabled women are considered to be asexual are widely documented.⁴³ This is presumed to be true in general because society and most of the professionals with whom disabled women have interacted, share similar thoughts. Because disabled women are seen as sexually unfit, they are not provided adequate knowledge about contraception, sex life or having children. Disabled women have often criticised the movement of disability rights which does not include sexual rights as a social issue just like transportation and housing. Critics also state that not only disabled women but many other disabled people feel that sexual rights are often dealt with extreme oppression.⁴⁴ Authors have also speculated on the pervasive stereotype about disabled women being asexual. For instance, a stereotype continues to stem from looking at disabled people as eternal children,⁴⁵ and many abled people wonder how impaired people can have an active sexual life.⁴⁶

Sexual molestation of disabled women and children has received attention in recent years. It seems problematic how disabled women are viewed as asexual people, and at the same time they are exposed to the risk of getting sexually molested as well. According to a study, it has been found that sexual molestation is associated with use of power and not just sex. The abusers look for vulnerability as a chance to molest, and this vulnerability is witnessed in those individuals who are dependent, marginalised or desperately needing affection.

Therefore, the more powerless and vulnerable individuals appear to be, they are at higher risk of being sexually abused. Recent studies have proved that disabled women are more exposed to the risk of being sexually molested in comparison to any other group of women⁴⁷. It has also been found that disabled women are even sterilized to prevent the aftermath of rape.

Many women in society do not consider marriage as desirable. However, for a disabled woman it is difficult to have such options or possibilities between tradition and non-traditional lifestyles. Disabled women rarely have similar options as abled-women would have and how disabled women are restricted to traditional female roles is extremely problematic. For the disabled feminists, it is matter of tension about how the reproductive rights are not provided to the disabled women in society. They deeply criticize the movement for reproductive rights that neglect the forced procedure of sterilization of disabled women or the society pressurizing disabled women to not give birth to children and undergo abortions.⁴⁸ Disabled feminists are a group of women who tend to fight with the moral contradictions between reproductive and disability rights. Their main argument lies against the abortion of a defective foetus.⁴⁹ They believe that the reproductive and disability rights movements have a common aspect and must have a common commitment towards disabled women having full authority on their bodies and lives.

³⁷ Whitman & Accardo, 1990

³⁸ Johnson, as quoted in Wolfensberger, 1975: 38

³⁹ Simmons, 1982

⁴⁰ Scheerenberger, 1987

⁴¹ Scheerenberger, 1987

⁴² Sank & Lafleche, 1981

⁴³ Asch & Fine, 1988; Finger, 1985; Matthews, 1983; Shaul, Dowling, & Laden, 1985; Waxman, 1989

⁴⁴ Waxman 1989: 2

⁴⁵ Finger 1985

⁴⁷ Craine, et al., 1988; Musick, 1984; Senn, 1988

⁴⁸ Fine & Asch, 1982; Finger, 1985

⁴⁹ Asch, 1986; Saxton, 1987

It has been noticed that despite all such forms of assistance and programmes, disabled people are still mostly unemployed and living in poverty. The American Association of People with Disabilities found that at least more than two thirds of disabled people belong to the working age group and are willing to work. Poverty among disabled people fuels more doubts about the effectiveness of public assistance provided to them and the incentives given to them to be able to return to work. The Act ensures equal job and education opportunities for the disabled, and prevents any sort of injustice against them. The U.S. Department of Labour's Office of Disability Employment Policy (2017) states that the labour force participation rate for disabled people who have physical, intellectual, developmental or sensory disabilities in the age-group of sixteen or above is 20 percent in comparison to 70 percent of able people belonging to the similar age group. The American Community Survey shows results which indicate significant disparities in the incomes of those with and without disabilities. People without any disability earn over \$30,469 as compared to people with disability who have \$20,250 of earning per year.⁵⁰ For individuals who are visually impaired, unemployment rates exceed 70 percent⁵¹, whereas, unemployment rates of people with developmental or intellectual disabilities exceeds 80 percent.⁵²

In order to investigate the unemployment disparities, a study was done which surveyed the perception of project managers and human resources personnel on hiring candidates with disabilities. The results show that these professionals hold negative attitude and thoughts on the productivity, interpersonal skills, social maturity and psychological adjustments skills of disabled people⁵³ and how disabled individuals are treated with negative attitudes by their employers which further leads to discrimination and misunderstanding.

Disabilities among young children and adults might result in affecting the socioeconomic growth of families. The US federal government incorporates two important programmes to assist disabled persons. Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) is one insurance programme for employees who have become disabled and are not able to work after they have paid Social Security taxes for forty quarters. This programme leads to a higher income which yields higher earning through SSDI. Supplementary Security Income (SSI) is another programme which focuses on traditional welfare of disabled individuals with very low income, having few resources, or with no work history. The current benefit SSI provides for a single disabled person is \$735 per month. Moreover, SSI recipients automatically get qualified for Medicaid in many states as well.

The US Rehabilitation Act 1973 ensures that all organisations receive funds from the government to offer services and programs. Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 forbids private employers, local and state governments, labour unions or employment agencies from discrimination against capable disabled individuals in hiring, job training, advancement or bonuses. Organisations like retail business, restaurants and movie theatres are included in the criteria. They must ensure to provide reasonable accommodation to disabled people. The protection is expanded for people in three conditions: first, individuals who have physical or mental disability that limits them from doing everyday activities; second, their impairment should be medically recorded; and third they should be labelled as impaired. The second and third conditions help in providing protection from any unfair discrimination that disabled individuals experience on the basis of the risk of people's perception, because an impaired individual is often perceived to be sick. Job protection laws not only prevent discrimination against the eligible disabled individuals but they also ensure to provide them reasonable accommodations that include having modification in the physical atmosphere like creating facilities that are more easily accessible and also include more flexibilities in the job like restructuring the system, part-time or reassigning to vacant positions, or modifying work schedules. Since many people hold attitudes which are more informed and different than in the past, the term 'disability' now carries positive connotations in many places.

Government policies which are specifically directed to disability and reflect decades of advocacy for disabled people, are a source of both support and frustration. For instance, although these programmes are highly criticised for glorifying the welfare dependency only over civil rights and distorting work incentives, the Supplemental Security Income Programs and the Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) serve as significant social protection for individuals who have serious impairments or chronic health problems. By the end of 2004, more than eight million disabled workers had received income under the laws of Social Security Act, and this number has been witnessed to be increasing since then. However, still the features of SSDI, which include a strong link between SSDI benefits and Medicare services, tend to discourage people to return to work. The federal government attempts to conduct devised and test programmes which reduce these work disincentives by allowing disabled people who are qualified by SSDI and Medicare, if they become able to work, to retain all health care benefits in any circumstance.

⁵⁰ U.S. Census Bureau, 2015

⁵¹ American Psychological Association Task Force on Socioeconomic Status, 2007

⁵² Butterworth et al., 2015

⁵³ Chan, 2008

In the United States, disabled citizens get Medical assurance and social preventions to various degrees. The Fair Labour Standard Act of 1938 is appropriate for those disabled individuals who are looking for better economic and therapeutic purposes. It is an endeavour to promote larger number of disabled individuals to receive good opportunities of employment. Section 14(C) provides suggestive procedures to pay disabled employees lesser than the minimum federal wage. The Secretary of Labour then issues certificates that coordinate wages with the employees' productivity. However, currently there are disabled employees who are paid less than the given minimum wage that is eight dollars every hour. According to the administration, the wages of the disabled was set to be at 75 percent and those working at sheltered home centres barely have a minimum floor for their wages.

Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities incorporates the right of employment that requires to be enshrined. However, millions of disabled people getting to do a job is also something which is far from the reality. The Europe 2020 strategy aims to reach 75 percent employment growth in the European Union. In the European Union, 72 percent of abled people have jobs, while only 47 percent of impaired ones are working.

Moreover, disabled women, young disabled individuals, and people who require high level of support are more likely to face discrimination and being excluded from the work force. The European Disability Forum also strongly believes in access to occupation as the key issue because it is the crucial aspect for social and economic inclusion of more than eighty million disabled people in Europe. Unemployment may lead to extreme poverty and social exclusion. Barriers which prevent access to the occupation market are often based on the judgements and misconceptions about disabled people.

Disabled people are unable to marry without experiencing harsh penalties. While this does not affect every disabled person but it does affect a large group of the disabled majority in the United States. Disability not only affects marriage but it also affects an individual's ability to work. When a person has a disability, he or she gets reliant on services which could fulfil their needs, and they are expected to be poor if they want to have access to those facilities.

Most of the programmes incorporate very low limitations of receiving the said benefits. For instance, if a disabled individual earns over \$825 per week, they are asked to pay for their own health care services. In New York, a programme for disabled workers is followed as long as they have a job and they are making a certain amount of money, which is mostly higher than in most states. Not every state follows this programme or many states don't even have one and it is difficult to earn money without being penalized or kicked off from the programme. While these programmes help disabled people to work, getting married becomes a challenging task because their partners' income also gets included in the programme. If their partner has a decent job and earns well, then the disabled partners are expected to become dependent to them and all the services they get from the programmes go out of consideration. Therefore, in order to have access to such programmes, they need to make little money or find a wealthy partner so that they can afford to pay for their special needs.

Financially, in order to survive, many disabled people rely on SSI or disability benefits. When a disabled individual gets married, their benefits get eradicated. People stop receiving security disability benefits for adult children, the moment they get married because the provision believes that the disabled individual becomes a dependent of the spouse. And often, it gets difficult for the spouses to take care of their loved ones with disabilities, maintain their jobs and pay bills, which ultimately leads to poverty. When two disabled people on SSI get married, their benefits of services are taken away from them and they reach the point where they cannot afford to live. Moreover, Social Security determines the relationship status of whether an individual is married or not, even if he or she is not in a legal marriage, technically. By simply believing that a disabled individual is living in a marriage type situation, they tend to cut their healthcare services and other benefits. Many of them do not even acknowledge their relationships with their partners due to the fear of losing their benefits, which further adds to the complication in this discriminatory society.

The European Union Disability Strategy focuses to give great importance to issues which concern both men and women. Its actions concentrate specifically on people with disabilities, including disabled women, their independent lives and making equal opportunities open to them. In this respect, EU Disability Action Plan 2006 has set these priorities which reflect the citizen's notion of disability as per the Article 26 mentioned in the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. This concept is best understood in a way that both disabled people should have complete rights to make their life choices and have control over their bodies and sexuality, incorporating sexual rights and reproductive rights, motherhood, family planning or parenthood, and everything that a non-disabled individual has.

It should be noticed that because of Christian religious beliefs, the discrimination against the disabled people in the West, where there are more Christians, is far less than in the Middle East or Eastern countries, simply because the Christian prophet, Jesus Christ, believed in the healing of impairments and accepted disabled people as a part of the society. Likewise, it is very significant to note that we as civilians of society should not form our perspectives purely on the basis of our religious norms, which in some manner bring disparities in the society.

Therefore, there is a need for a change in people's perception in society which would affect people with special needs in a more positive manner. Dr. Mathew who has been working for physically disabled people for the last forty years, states

on the basis of his experience that religion is structurally fed into people's minds and it almost impossible to deconstruct or distort their beliefs. However, religion with its staunch power over society can counter the negative argument about disability and its implications, which will lead to more acceptability of disabled people in the society and it can serve as an important tool.

As witnessed at present, the world is suffering from the Covid 19 pandemic where social, political, economic and personal factors are experiencing a huge menace. From learning about the exodus of migrants to reading about the egregious economic conditions in the newspapers, people have turned empathetic, and understand each others' hardships in these dire times. However, the hardships of the disabled have gone unnoticed. Disabled people and their families experience severe issues due to the stringent policy of the government regarding 'Social Distancing'. Practicing Social Distancing has brought some negative connotations that has made people apathetic towards the disabled and their rights. As we notice, before the pandemic, disabled people like the visually impaired felt supported when able people helped them while crossing the roads or using a staircase, because people were not hesitant to offer help at that time. These days, people are avoiding to help the needy because they have a fear of catching the virus through human touch. However, on the contrary, Western societies reflect a positive behaviour towards the disabled even after being severely hit by the pandemic. As I am told, people there are still helpful and empathetic towards disabled individuals, and hardly any change in human behaviour has been noticed.

Because of their inclusive religious atmosphere, they are more willing to help the vulnerable and needy even during these difficult times.

Media as discussed above, in spite of being an important aspect of the society, neglects the problems of the disabled, and does not discuss about them at all. The media has failed to spread copious awareness about how to help the vulnerable, and support them to fight in these difficult times without ostracizing them or making them feel helpless.

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