

## **Double Vulnerability: Understanding Disability through Everyday Experiences of Women with Disabilities - a Brief Treatise**

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### **Abstract**

*The structure of Indian society is complex and heterogeneous, and it is pluralistic by nature due to its cultural and religious diversity. This aspect of pluralism has a massive impact on India's social order. In this social structure of diversity, though women are fighting for their basic rights, disabled women are more vulnerable to people's notions of othering, which have muffled their voices. In Indian society, the position of a disabled woman is always inferior to that of a disabled man in comparison. Regarding women with disabilities, Fine and Asch write, "Disabled women are not only more likely to internalize society's rejection, but they are more likely than disabled men to identify themselves as 'disabled' The disabled male possesses a relatively positive self-image and is more likely to identify as 'male' rather than as 'disabled.'" (Fine and Asch, 1981, p. 34). The idea of social acceptability dominates the minds of disabled women. In Indian society, women with disabilities have been subjugated through the dialogue and discourse of 'deviant' women because they do not fit into the society-made norms and cultures that determine and guide human behavior. This article delves into the theme of women with disabilities and their everyday lives. Following the lived experiences of disabled women, this essay supports and advocates their standpoints. What are some ways that women with disabilities face unique challenges? Is it possible to rethink the binary between disabled men and women? What could be the best way to address such burning issues? Based on the above questions, the researcher embarks on exploring the truth of the situations and positions of disabled women in society.*

**Keywords:** *Women with Disabilities, Crises and Everyday Lives, Distress within Distress, Gender and Disability, Indian Context*

**Introduction:**

“While Indiancultural reality has never been favourable to the birth of daughters, the onset of disability in a daughter is fate worse than death.” (Ghai, 2018,p. 243)

“Being a person with disability is challenging. Being a woman with disability adds extra challenges.” (Iyer, 2017, para.1)

Women with disabilities experience double discrimination due to their status as part of a marginalized group. Indian disability thinkers such as Anita Ghai, Nasa Begum and Nandini Ghosh, have pointed out how difficult it is to live if you are a woman and disabled at the same time. The structure of Indian society is complex and heterogeneous, and it is pluralistic by nature due to its cultural and religious diversity. This aspect of pluralism has a massive impact on the social order of India. In this social structure of diversity, though women are fighting for their basic rights, disabled women are more vulnerable to people’s notions of othering which has muffled their voices. Anita Ghai has asserted that “while women are fighting hard for equal rights in a particular order, disabled women are rarely recognized as persons. The society that accepts the able-bodied norm subjects disabled girls and women to the most inhuman treatment possible” (Ghai, 2018, p. 245). Disabled people, and more importantly, women, are always encouraged to be submissive and apologetic towards the able-bodied society. The role of women in general has shrunk within the boundaries of daughter, wife, and mother. In recent times, some necessary changes and reformations have taken place to empower women in our country. In different sectors, such as education, entrepreneurship, and politics, the participation of women has been promoted to break the barriers of patriarchal discourse. But the position of a disabled woman remains vulnerable and occupies a multifarious and marginalized position in Indian society. Besides, In Indian society, the position of a disabled woman is always inferior to that of a disabled man in comparison. Regarding women with disabilities, Fine and Asch write, “Disabled women are not only more likely to internalize society’s rejection, but they are more likely than disabled men to identify themselves as ‘disabled’. The disabled male possesses a relatively positive self-image and is more likely to identify as ‘male’ rather than as

'disabled.' The disabled woman appears to be more likely to introject society's rejection and to identify as disabled" (Fine and Asch, 1981, p. 34). We witness some gruelling pictures when a girl child takes birth with an amputee or some other disabilities, parents of that girl child forsake them in a hospital or throw them in a river. On the contrary, a boy child with a disability is better accepted. The scene is more pathetic in Indian rural areas. A large number of disabled people in India live in abject poverty along with illiteracy. Illiteracy has become a barrier to awareness regarding disability. Thus, superstitions related to disability still exist in rural India. Due to illiteracy, people often associate disability with false concepts like ill-omened, sin of previous birth, etc. Disabled women have been treated just like objects of negligence. Anita Ghai added in this connection, "While Indian cultural reality has never been favorable to the birth of daughter... the onset of disability in a daughter is fate worse than death" (Ghai, 2018, p. 245). Feminist theory, the women's movement, and academic discussions in our country address issues of gender discrimination, stereotypical practices, and women's empowerment. Through generations, it has overlooked issues related to women with disabilities. As a consequence, the disabled woman and the construction behind it always remained outside of hegemonic discourses of patriarchy and normalcy. The problem is not to resist connotations, but connotations such as abnormal, deviant, vulnerable, and incompetent are applied to disabled women. It can be said that the concept of normalcy is a social construction. Women with disabilities mediate their lives through various socio-cultural construction ideologies of 'normalcy.' The idea of social acceptability dominates the minds of disabled women. In Indian society, women with disabilities have been subjugated through the dialogue and discourse of 'deviant' women because they do not fit into the society-made norms and cultures that determine and guide human behavior. Thus, under obligations or fear of societal rejection, disabled girls become aware of their disability or impairment to fit into the culturally prescribed appearance norms. In this regard, Nandini Ghosh, a disability and women's rights activist, has expressed her concern, "disabled women strive to adhere to the socially acceptable ideas about *bhalo meye* (good girl) through different strategies of presenting a feminine self in gait and bearing, in dress and comportment" (Ghosh, 2010, p. 58). Shivani Gupta in her autobiography writes, "...there was concern about looking presentable in a crowd

of young woman. Dressing up seemed sacrilegious somehow as a disabled person who could no longer connect with her femininity..." (Gupta, 2014, p.59).

Disability does not only suggest the issue of physical impairment but also includes the idea of social negligence. In forming an identity and recognition of the disabled person, the so-called hegemonic societal perceptions about disability often deprive and treat them as marginalized. The traditional or literal definition of disability connotes "a physical and mental condition that means you cannot use a part of your body completely or easily, or that you cannot learn easily (Hornby 2010, 428). Many disability scholars believe that disability is a political category. Apart from physical and mental aspects of disability, it has some deep-rooted social and political discourses. Women with disabilities in our society face multiple challenges in their everyday lives. Different layers of marginalization shape their experiences in the field of education, employment, healthcare issues, along with the social and cultural life that is dominated by the notion of ableism.

The researcher finds the subject of women with disabilities to be particularly significant for exploration. At the beginning of the research journey, the researcher faced some challenges related to understanding the experiences of women with disabilities. During fieldwork, the researcher observed a tendency among both people with disabilities and able-bodied individuals to overlook the unique struggles and suffering of women with disabilities. Many believe that there are no significant differences between women with disabilities and men with disabilities, assuming their experiences and challenges are the same. This lack of awareness regarding the intersection of gender and disability raises important questions. This incident sparked further interest and curiosity in me to explore my research in a more comprehensive, grounded, and expanded manner. What unique challenges do women with disabilities face? Is it possible to rethink the binary distinction between disabled men and women? What are the most effective ways to address these pressing issues? Based on these questions, the researcher aims to uncover the truth about the situations and positions of women with disabilities in society.

During a conversation with a scholar and writer, Debolina Biswas, the idea and perception about the disparity and discrimination of disabled women became more explicit. The researcher, wanted to know from her in what ways the

experience of a disabled woman differs from that of a disabled man. She rightly observed, “most of the times a disabled man will hesitate to marry a disabled woman. Disabled male tends to consider themselves superior to disabled females.” (D. Biswas, personal communication, December, 2023). In the context of the above statement, the researcher notes one incident that was reported in a popular newspaper in North Bengal, India. The news appeared with the headline, “the newly married disabled couple was harassed in Siliguri at midnight.” The victims also felt problems while reporting to the police about the incident as they had deaf and dumb disabilities. The groom’s family did not accept them, and as a result, they had to leave the house at night. It is said, that the bride was deaf and had mute disabilities. This could be the main issue of the rejection of their marriage. Ironically, the groom himself a disabled person used a wheelchair, yet his disabilities did not seem to matter to his family. During their return, they faced further hardships as the local vehicle’s driver took advantage of their vulnerability (“*Dersho Meter Chutlen Mukh O Bodhir*”, 2025). This shocking news has stirred emotions among the people of Siliguri. The incident shows the bitter reality that many disabled lives continue to face in society and women in particular.

Disabled women are often considered burdens even within their families. The researcher shares some of the observations and incidents that he encountered while studying and developing his knowledge on the situation of women with disabilities. The researcher refers to one incident involving an abandoned child in the nearby Ganga River. One morning, when he woke up from sleep, he found the villagers running to the river Fulahar to witness an incident. They saw that a child in a container had been floating across the river. The local people spotted the incident, and they put their efforts into saving the child. With the help of local police, they took the child to the Malda Medical College for the necessary treatment. The researcher tried to communicate with one of the representatives of the hospital to get an update about the lost child. The researcher came to know from Koyel Sengupta, who works at Malda Medical College, that the abandoned baby was a girl child, and it was more important to note that she had an amputee in her leg (K. Sengupta, personal communication, October 9, 2022). Perhaps that could be the reason that the unknown parents of the child had thrown her into the

river. The news was also published in the popular newspaper in North Bengal. (“Fulahare Vasman Shishukonnya”, 2022).

For disabled women, navigating marriage and relationships can be particularly challenging. Many families do not show support for their independence. This point has some similarities to the Bengali novel of Nirupama Devi. In her novel *Shyamali*, the female character Shyamali is portrayed as a deaf and mute girl. Although Shyamali has disabilities, she has many dreams. Nobody wants to give her attention. The novel shows the social and familial situation of a disabled girl, focusing on the theme of their pre-marriage and post-marriage circumstances. A disabled girl's life always goes through some difficult ordeals in terms of their personal, familial, and social lives. The researcher refers to another incident that he had witnessed since his childhood. His neighbor's (Shree Narayan Haldar) daughter, Kalidashi Haldar, has had a leg amputated since her birth. From her childhood, she received negative treatment from society.

Everyone used to call her '*Nengri*' (disability in legs) instead of her real name. For a disabled person, social discrimination and negligence very often prove to be more vulnerable than his/ her bodily problems. Even villagers used to mock her parents, citing their daughter's disability. It used to be said, “Who will marry her? Is there any prospect for the disabled daughter?”

As a consequence, they felt depressed. The problem became more unfortunate when Kalidashi became an adult. During her marriage proposal, the groom's side demanded a heavy dowry. People used to pass comments like “a disabled female is equal to a burden.” Although Kalidashi's parents did everything to make their daughter happy, their efforts were in vain after getting married and Kalidashi's life became unhappy. She became the victim of domestic violence. Her husband demanded more money from them. She realized the pain of becoming a disabled girl. The researcher mentions the lived experiences of another disabled woman. She is our neighbor and is blind in one eye. People often call her “*kani*” (blind) in a very derogatory way and insult her. The local villagers always have an attitude of overlooking her because she is blind. She faces multiple forms of discrimination. First, she is disabled, poor, and a female.

As per the 2011 Census of India, there are 26.8 million persons with disabilities in India (*Disabled Person...7*). As per the record from the office of the Chief Commissioner for Persons with Disabilities, 56% (1.5 cr) of men and 44% (1.18 cr) are women. In terms of safety and security, disabled women in India face terrible challenges. A disabled male is at least free to roam outside. Disabled males are safe in terms of security. Disabled females, on the contrary, become the victims of sexual violence. In the article “Invisible Victims of Sexual Violence” by Human Rights Watch, these cases of violence against women with disabilities have been pointed out. The researcher refers to it in below:

Women and girls with different disabilities face high risk of sexual violence. Those with physical disabilities may find it more difficult to escape from violent situations due to limited mobility. Those who are deaf or hard of hearing may not be able to call for help or easily communicate abuse, or may be more vulnerable to attacks simply due to the lack of ability to hear their surroundings. Women and girls with disabilities, particularly intellectual or psychosocial disabilities, may not know that non-consensual sexual acts are a crime and should be reported because of the lack of accessible information (“Human Rights Watch”, 2018).

The researcher discusses cases of sexual violence encountered by various disabled women in India. One case involves Chandra, a 12-year-old girl with cerebral palsy, was abducted and raped by some miscreants. She could not speak due to speech impairment issues, and as a result, she could not call for assistance. Later, some local villagers found her in the nearby field in a very poor condition. She lost her life due to some health issues. (“Human Rights Watch”, 2018).

There are plenty of cases where disabled women become the victim of sexual exploitation. In rural as well as in urban areas, the mentally disabled or women with psychological disabilities face sexual harassment. In this connection, the researcher refers to one very significant incident that happened with a disabled girl. A girl with intellectual disability was raped multiple times by a man in her neighbourhood. She belongs to a village in the Hooghly district of West Bengal. She became five months pregnant. The girl was facing challenges in sharing what

had happened with her to the police (“Invisible Victims of Sexual Violence”, 2018).

The former Chief Justice of India (Learned, DY Chandrachud) expressed concern for women with disabilities. His statements focus on the issue of sexual violence faced by disabled women in society, particularly those who belong to marginalized sections. While speaking on the subject and theme of “Protection Services for Children with disabilities,” he emphasized their security and protection by reflecting on the idea of the “dual vulnerability of women with disabilities” he rightly observed: “The challenges faced by the women with disabilities extend beyond issues of physical accessibility and they also involve entrenched societal biases, stereotypes and misconceptions” (“Women with disabilities seen as ‘easy targets’”, 2024). Although some Acts are there in the Indian Legislations that includes the Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992, The National Trust for the Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities Act, 1999, and The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 1992 to empower the person with disabilities and women in particular (“Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities”, 2025), but their effective implementation to create awareness in the grass root level still lacks proper measurements to reduce the barriers.

Women with disabilities in our society posit a lower rank and status and are considered as ‘other’ (*parai*). People’s gaze towards them is filled with pity and negligence. Apart from physical or mental issues, they face societal and attitudinal barriers while expecting an equal status in their everyday lives. They are considered ‘cancelled’ in terms of social accessibility in all spheres of life. They are first women, then disabled, which gives rise to the notion of their distress within distress circumstances and relegates them as marginal. We live in a culture that promotes the males in all forms of representation. People never try to give a second thought to their ablest minds and easily pass comments like “although disabled, he is still a son”. A disabled son is also like a diamond to them, which is positive in terms of disability identity, care, and acceptance. However, they express their regressive thought in the case of a disabled female. Although the former perception of a disabled male as equal to a jewel is quite praiseworthy, the latter case that a disabled female is equal to a burden is quite

discriminatory and lacks appreciation. As Ghai in her article entitled “Disability, Exclusions, and Resistance”, has asserted:

The construction of daughter as a burden is rooted in the cultural milieu that looks at daughters as *parai* (Other). The prospective son-in-law, when offered a disabled girl, has to be compensated accordingly. If compensation is not possible, then compromises like being married to a widower have to be made. Disability in a son, on the other hand, though traumatic, will still be more acceptable as he does not have to be given away. Consequently, in a culture in which arranged marriages are the rule, disabled women are put in a difficult position (Ghai, 2018, p. 246).

**Note:**

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