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Educational opportunities for Girls with Disabilities: Challenges and Prospects

Dr. Kabita Kumari
Assistant Professor
Department of Education
Mizoram University, Aizawl

Abstract

Education is the fundamental right of every person and all the children belonging to the age group of 6-14 years are entitled to free and compulsory education under the Right to Education Act, 2009. However, education for females with disabilities is still a far away dream due to the physical, social and attitudinal barriers when compared to their disabled male or non-disabled female counterparts. While different policies and programmes are run by the central government and the state governments for the education and empowerment of women in general, no specific consideration is given on the education of these women and girls. Though the National policy for persons with disabilities, 2006, gives special focus on women and recognises their special needs, hardly any specific programmes are being implemented at the grassroots level to empower these women who are multimarginalised and have to fight battle at many fronts for their own empowerment like, physical, social, economical, cultural and attitudinal level.

The present article is concerned with the prospects and challenges related to the educational opportunities for the girls with disabilities and their role in empowering women at large. The study attempts to explore if the various Government Acts, Policies and Programmes framed for women and disabled people offer specific provisions for girls and women with disabilities considering their unique needs and requirements. Further, it also explores the kind of barriers the girls with disabilities have to face to access the educational opportunities available. Finally, the study attempts to offer some suggestions for the empowerment of girls with disabilities.

Key words

Disability, policy, women, education, marginalisation

1. Introduction

Progress of any nation depends upon the empowerment and holistic development of her citizens. This is ensured by providing opportunities for their social, educational and economical development without discriminating on the basis of gender, class, caste and ethnicity. But in a country like India, holistic development of the country is still a distant dream as the women in the country who constitute 49% of the entire population are still far away from having equal representation and opportunities in any field. The situation is more dismal for those women who are living with any kind of disability.

While the disabled are discriminated on the ground of their disabilities, women and girls with disabilities who constitute 44%¹ of the entire population of disabled in India have to face multiple discrimination on account of their disabilities, their gender and as most of the disabled are from rural areas and low economic background, on socio-economic status. As a result, they are deprived of even the basic human rights. They have lived experiences distinct from those of non-disabled women and boys and men with disability. However, such experiences have remained largely invisible in law and policy making, consequently, the policies and programmes for the disabled women and girls are not even countable on fingers. One of such areas where the discrimination and special needs of these women are given least consideration is 'Education'. Education is the key to the empowerment and advancement of women and girls with disabilities as it provides access to information, enables them to communicate their needs, interests and experiences, brings them into contact with other students, increases their confidence and encourages them to assert their rights and also paves their way to financial and economic security and independence. Without a basic education, their chances for employment are almost nil and the dream of empowerment unfulfilled. As per the UNESCO report 2018, persons with disabilities are the most excluded group in education and girls being the multiple marginalised on account of their disability, gender, age are the most pushed out group. Hence, there is an urgent need to formulate policies and programmes that places greater emphasis on the participation of girls with disabilities in the mainstream education system.

2.1. Educational Opportunities for girls with Disabilities:

Education is the fundamental right of every child for their all round development and rightful inclusion in the global society. In India, with the implementation of Right to Education Act, 2009, every children belonging to the age group of 6-14 years are entitled to free and compulsory education. However, the reality is that only 59% of the disabled children aged 5-19 years are not attending educational institution and out of this group, only 47 % of disabled girls are enrolled in schools.²

Education for women and its role in empowering women has been recognised in the constitution of India which directs that every person, irrespective of their gender, caste and class will be provided education and from the very first five-year plan, the programmes were run for the education and subsequently for their empowerment. Different

¹ (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2016).

² (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2016).

commissions and departments were also found for the overall development of women, specific programmes for the empowerment of the women were also run and the national policy for the empowerment of the women was also introduced in 2001. While these policies and programmes are concerned with the welfare and development and empowerment of the women from scheduled and backward classes and mentions specifically them as their target group, hardly any programme or policy mentions women with disabilities as their target group and hence no specific programme.

The problems of these girls are associated with females in general and no special consideration is given on the nature of their special needs and rights. Same negligence is shown in the programmes run for the disabled persons. Here also, women with disabilities are taken together with their male counterparts without realising the differences in their needs and care. While the available data focused on literacy indicate that women and girls with disabilities fare less well in the educational arena than either their disabled male or non-disabled female counterparts. For example, UNESCO, estimate the literacy rate for disabled women as one percent, compared to an estimate of about three percent for people with disabilities as a whole.³

Educational Provision in Policies and Acts:

In India, different policies and programmes are run for the empowerment of women and disabled. However, hardly any policy or programme is concerned with the education of women and girls with disabilities. The different policies and acts do not cater to the specific needs of these girls and women- safe environment at schools and educational institutions, basic infrastructure such as disabled friendly toilets with sanitary facilities to help the disabled girls, especially adolescent girls to maintain hygiene, auditory and Braille instruction in lifts, toilets, and classrooms, especially trained female teachers, trained escorts in schools and in vehicles; and self-defence courses and skills development programmes along with vocational training. All the policies and programmes whether for the disabled or for women are general in nature and hence, excludes disabled girls and women from the empowerment programmes.

Persons with Disability (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act, 1995:

The PWD Act, the most significant act for the welfare and empowerment of persons with disabilities also while giving directions for the education of disabled, nowhere mentions the special needs and thus special programmes for girls and women with disabilities. It concentrates mainly on the disabled in general. This act directs for every child with disability get access to free education in an appropriate environment till s/he attains the age of eighteen years, their integration in normal schools, transport facilities to the children with disabilities or in the alternative financial incentives to parents or guardians to enable their children with disabilities to attend schools.

National Policy for Persons with Disabilities, 2006

This national policy, although recognises the specific nature of these girls and women's needs, yet does not mentions what sort of programmes and rehabilitation should be given in educational field. While it mentions the need of supervising the retention of girl child at primary, secondary and senior secondary level, it is highly deplorable that even after the eight years of implementation of this policy, no specific research has been done to

³ Enable, U. N. (2008).

determine the exact number of girls with disabilities enrolled in schools and educational institutions and how many are out of schools. Where it talks about the building of safe environment at work places for these women, it nowhere envisions the need of doing the same at educational institutions at the time when females in general are becoming the victim of various types of abuse and atrocities.

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016.

The latest Act that has been put in the parliament, though mentions the specific nature of disabled women's needs, but when it comes to education, it nowhere mentions special provision for these women and girls. It directs that

1. The appropriate Government and the local authorities shall take measures to ensure that the women and children with disabilities enjoy their rights equally with others.
2. The appropriate Government and local authorities shall ensure that all children with disabilities shall have right on an equal basis to freely express their views on all matters affecting them and provide them appropriate support keeping in view their age and disability.”.

But, while directing for the educational provision for the disabled, this bill also does not consider the specific needs, such as safe environment along with sanitation and hygiene, basic infrastructure and trained escorts and self defence training courses for girls.

Right to Education Act, 2009

Right to Education Act, 2009, a major breakthrough for the education of children, also excludes disabled girls from its ambit which does not consider the special nature of educational needs of girls with disabilities and end up with general directions.

The National Policy of Empowerment of Women of 2001

This national policy which is specifically formulated for the empowerment and development of all women also shows its indifference to the educational empowerment of disabled girls and women, nevertheless it endorses the provisions of NPE 1986, i.e. the provision of education for all and inclusive education. The policy prescribes: equal access to education for women and girls, special measures to eliminate discrimination on the basis of caste and class, universalisation of education, creation of a gender-sensitive educational system, increase of enrolment and retention rates of girls, development of occupation/vocation/technical skills among women and reducing the gender gap in secondary and higher education.

3. Challenges to Education for girls with disabilities

Apart from the negligence from the policies and programmes for the educational empowerment of the females with disabilities, there are various other factors which pose hurdles in front of these girls and women. The reasons behind their out of schooling are various- social, cultural, economical, physical and most importantly, attitudinal. Thus, the major challenges to the educational opportunities are more from the socio-economic background of the disabled girls and women than from the negligence in policies.

Barriers to Education

Getting proper and quality education is fraught with many challenges for females with disabilities. They face multiple barriers in gaining access to primary and secondary school and in obtaining an equitable education once they are enrolled in school. In many cases, social, cultural, attitudinal barriers, along with physical barriers, pose serious threat to their dream of getting not only higher education but even the basic and elementary education of girls and women with disabilities. And—gender bias compounded by disability bias—are key, although transportation, architectural and other types of barriers are also significant.

Social and Cultural Challenges:

The most frequently mentioned barrier to education for girls with disabilities are the social and cultural challenges which include poverty, family responsibilities, the locality, beliefs and practices. Poverty and family responsibilities in most of the cases snatch the opportunities from these girls to continue with education. Physically disabled girls are most often kept back in homes for taking care of their younger siblings. Not only that, even if the parents want to send their girls to school, the distance of schools and special schools, especially in rural areas, from homes obstruct them from sending them. Moreover, sending the girls to school is an addition to their expenditure- buying disability-related equipment and assistive devices or special transportation- which most of the families cannot bear. Adding to that, the cultural bias and preferential practices leading to gender discrimination also adds to the hurdles for girls with disabilities in getting education. Most of the time, they are kept hidden from society as disability, especially for girls, is held to be stigma for the entire family. As a result, the available resources and educational opportunities are provided to male children, at the expense of their sisters. Education is considered less important for girls, who are expected to become housewives and mothers, and in some cases just a burden, whereas boys, destined to become breadwinners, are given priority in schooling. While some view gender bias as the major barrier, many others believe disability bias limits disabled girls' opportunities still further. Families often assume that a disabled daughter have lesser prospect of marriage, which may add to her devaluation, since in some cultures, the prospect of a good marriage is the primary value given to girls. In contrast, it is assumed that boys, even those with disabilities, will become breadwinners, as well as marry. Hence, the girls with disabilities remain largely out of school and leading to their negligible presence in higher education.

Physical Challenges:

Physical barriers are of two types- environmental and one's own physical impairment. While the type and level of disability certainly affects the type of schooling these girls get: severely and moderate disabled girls get lesser chances in getting mainstream education compared to the mild disabled girls and also girls with mental disabilities find fewest opportunities to even get enrolled even in special schools compared to the loco-motors, hearing and visually disabled girls and women; environmental and infrastructural barriers takes away even the slightest opportunities of continuing with their education. Out of these two, the disabled girls are more denied of their access to education due to the environmental barriers. The unsuitable infrastructure of the school, distance and lack of transportation facilities, non availability of disabled friendly toilets, escorts and the trained and intimate helpers adds to the hurdles all the more.

Attitudinal Challenges

The biggest challenge to educational empowerment of women and girls with disabilities is attitude- attitude of the family members and the society. In most of the cases, where the girls are given the opportunity to pursue education, they become victim of either the sympathetic attitude or negative attitude and in long run, turn out either the girls dropping out of schools and studies or pulled out. In most of the cases the disabled girls are shown sympathy by the family members and the society. This sympathetic attitude in reality makes them weak in taking risks and taking steps for some challenging areas of study and areas of their choice like studying maths and learning languages apart from their own mother tongue. On the other hand, the negative attitude of the people about the capability of these girls adds to these challenges: that these persons cannot do well in their studies without the help of others or they are not capable of doing anything, affects the confidence of the these girls and subsequently leading to a negative attitude in them about their own capabilities.

Recommendations

These social, cultural, physical and attitudinal challenges are fatal to the educational aspirations of women with disabilities and are lethal not only to the educational empowerment of these women but even to the entire vision of the empowerment of woman in general. While at one hand, the dearth of educational programmes especially for girls and women with disabilities and the high indifference of government to the specific needs of these women is snatching the opportunities and right of education from them, on the other hand, these barriers pose serious challenge not only to the education of these women but also to the vision of quality education for all that the government is aiming to achieve. Thus, there is a need that these barriers should be removed and the government bring specific programmes and awareness programmes specifically for these women. So there is need to:

- bring changes in the mindset of the people and bring awareness among them.
- set up schools within the locality
- provide disabled friendly transportation facilities
- recruit specially trained female staffs and helpers in the schools and also in the institutions vehicle.
- provide incentives to those parents who send their disabled girls to the schools.
- Increase the numbers of Merit scholarships for disabled girls and women.
- give 50% reservation to the girls and women with disabilities in all the educational institutions
- to exempt them from tuition fees for their higher education

Conclusion

The vision of empowerment of woman is unachievable until every woman is given opportunities for their overall advancement and development. Women with disabilities constitute 2.01 percent of the entire women population and without empowering them the vision of women empowerment is unfulfilled. Educational empowerment is the base of the overall empowerment of any person and only by providing them with fair opportunity to get proper and quality education this vision can be realised in reality.

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