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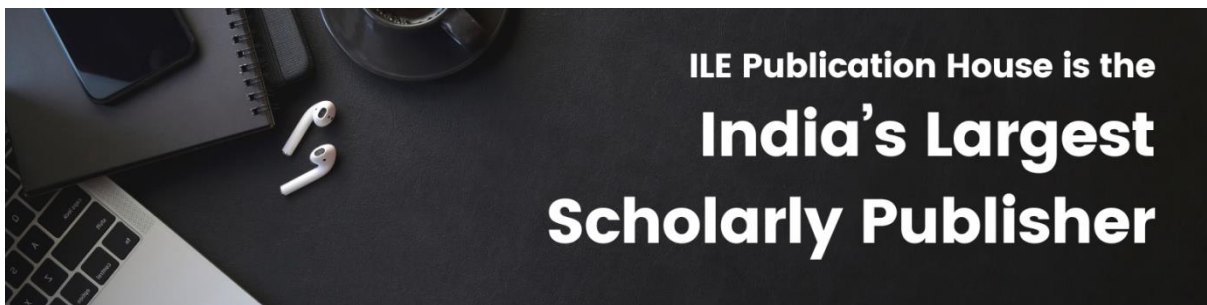
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A Study on Disability and Covid-19: Moving Toward the New Normal

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ABSTRACT

Whilst COVID-19 pandemic affects all parts of society, those with disabilities are adversely affected owing to attitudinal, environmental, and institutional barriers that are replicated in the COVID-19 response. Numerous people with disabilities possess pre-existing health issues that make them more prone to getting the virus, resulting in more severe symptoms and an increased risk of death. During the COVID-19 crisis, people with disabilities (PWDs) who rely on support for their everyday living could find themselves secluded and unable to survive during the lockdown period. Those living in institutions, on the other hand, are extremely susceptible, as seen by the high frequency of deaths in residential care homes and mental asylums. Access to health care and information for people with impairments is becoming more difficult. Specific categories of disabled people, such as convicts and people who are homeless or lack proper shelter, face much greater risks. The availability of health care and information for people with disability is becoming more difficult. Persons with disabilities continue to encounter discrimination and other difficulties in gaining access to livelihood and income support, engaging in online education, and seeking safety from violence.

This study investigates the impact of COVID-19 on disabled people in a broader context, as well as the critical role that numerous disability organisations performed in assisting disabled people throughout the pandemic. As a result, it was thought that there was a need to comprehend the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of people with disabilities,

their care and support systems, nutrition, livelihoods, social engagement, mental health, and access to health and education services.

Keywords: Disability, COVID-19, Attitudinal Barriers, PWDs, Environmental Barriers

INTRODUCTION-

As we begin the decade of implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to halt progress, particularly for the most marginalised groups, such as individuals with disabilities. COVID-19 spread aggressively over the globe in the year 2020, killing millions of people, taxing health-care resources, wreaking havoc on economies, and causing enormous disruption in people's lives. The outbreak also emphasised societal differences, strengthening pre-existing inequalities and having a significant impact on some of the most vulnerable populations, particularly the elderly. An increasing amount of research suggests that persons with disability have been among the most severely impacted by COVID-19. They are amongst the most vulnerable to the virus and also one of the most severely affected in terms of deaths. *"Persons with disabilities include those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others."*⁹⁰ Many persons with disabilities have pre-existing health concerns that make them

⁹⁰ Sixty-first session of the General Assembly by resolution, Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Human Rights Instrument, (Dec. 13, 2006), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-persons-disabilities#:~:text=Persons%20with%20disabilities%20include%20those,an%20equal%20basis%20with%20others>



more susceptible to contracting the virus, leading in more severe symptoms and a higher chance of death. People with disabilities who rely on help for daily life may find themselves alone and unable to survive during the COVID-19 crisis, while those living in institutions are especially susceptible, as seen by the high number of fatalities in residential care homes and psychiatric facilities. Specific categories of disabled people, such as convicts and people who are homeless or lack proper shelter, face much greater risks. The availability of health care and information for people with disability is becoming more difficult. The various attitudinal, environmental, and institutional barriers that are replicated in the COVID-19 response adversely affected those individuals with disability. Prior to the outbreak, although, the number of disabled people in the labour force was expanding faster than the proportion of those without disabilities, indicating success in closing the disability unemployment gap. People with disabilities, on the other hand, have suffered disproportionately as a result of pandemic-related unemployment. Individuals who have disabilities have many barriers even if they remain employed. If people with disabilities continue to work, the consequences of COVID-19 may make it challenging. Adults with these kind of disabilities, for example, are much more likely to have an underpinning medical issue that puts them at a relatively high risk of severe illness from COVID-19, and analysts believe that adults with intellectual developmental disabilities are three times more susceptible to death if exposed to the virus of COVID-19. *"The most daunting problem, however, is the fact that door will stay shut even after the pandemic has been contained in light of the fact that the pandemic's approaching danger will have caused social orders previously staggering from the uncertainty of war and struggle to disregard focusing on the consideration of individuals with disabilities and incorporating into their way of life."*⁹¹

⁹¹ Jess Markt, *COVID-19 and its Impact on Persons with Disabilities*, GLOBAL/HEALTH & SAFETY (Aug. 26,2020),

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY-

The research is carried out using a doctrinal research approach, using data gathered from diverse sources such as case laws, online journal articles, books, research papers as well as online websites.

CHALLENGES FACED BY PWDs DURING COVID-19-

Individuals with disabilities have unique challenges in situations such as the spread of a novel covid-19. Individuals with disabilities are a heterogeneous audience that face a variety of problems in obtaining information about infection prevention and risk, including such as:

Person with Visual Impairment:

Individuals who are visually impaired or blind rely on touch for the majority of their everyday tasks. They need someone for their smooth escort; they are unable to interpret the signs that the majority of people can perceive; and they are unable to practise social distancing unless unique methods are used, such as keeping a safe distance with a white cane.

Person with Hearing Impairment: The hearing impaired individuals, particularly those who are illiterate, or those who cannot hear or read the message rely on lip-reading. Since the person delivering the information has to cover their mouth by wearing a mask, the PWDs are jeopardized. This is one the greatest challenge which they face.

Sign language interpreters are not used in any of the media communications. The physically challenged may be unable to reach a wash basin or wash their hands vigorously. Dietary assistance is required for kids and teenagers with disorders such as cerebral palsy or down syndrome. People suffering from mental illnesses are unable to grasp the messages. At

<https://blogs.icrc.org/new-delhi/2020/08/26/covid-19-and-its-impact-on-persons-with-disabilities/>



the same time, persons with impairments are more likely to develop diseases like diabetes and hypertension, which are risk factors for COVID-19 mortality. As a result, persons with disabilities require far more assistance than the general population in the event of a pandemic.⁹²

Persons with Disability might not have a proper diet and may be stressed out because they are unable to comprehend what is going on around them over which they have no control. Women with disabilities face unique challenges. They are more likely to be mistreated during a pandemic. A large number of them have youngsters who are not disabled and are worried about how they will really focus on their kids and relatives since they are not upheld to do as such. People with speech impairments are unable to convey their concerns. Their routine health requirements are also not met since health centres and transportation are inaccessible as the vehicles are not designed universally keeping the PWDs in mind.

In the leading case of *Suresh Kumar v. Department of Personnel & Training*⁹³, the plaintiff is suffering from omicron virus where he gets delayed treatment despite the authorities knowing his condition. This is a key example showing the struggles of a person with disability where Mr. Suresh Kumar despite letting hospital know about his condition refused to give him proper administration during the pandemic.

PUBLIC AND THE GOVERNMENT- HELPING HAND

- India has committed to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, the cornerstones of which are universal access to health, education, and equity. The government and organisations that engage with individuals with disabilities

must make an effort to adapt COVID preventive and care messaging into an accessible manner.

- People with disabilities should be prioritised in health care institutions above the general population. Instead of travelling to hospitals, mobile health teams may offer people with services in their homes.
- A special helpline can be established for this purpose so that the medical team can contact them and they must be guaranteed of enough supply of soap, sanitizers, and tissues.
- Reducing their hospital wait time will decrease their interaction with other infected individuals of the new covid cases.
- Involve individuals with disabilities and their representatives in the design of the COVID-19 response to meet the needs of all people, especially those in outlying and rural locations.
- Use all available communication channels to reach out to persons with disabilities, and make all public health information accessible to people with all types of impairments. Do not rely only on verbal or written communication.

These are some of the essential practices which should be followed and should be taken into account by the Government as well as the citizens ensure that persons with disabilities have equitable access to information, health care services, and the assistance they require to keep them healthy, fit and safe.

PRECAUTIONS TO BE FOLLOWED-

With the emergence of COVID-19, it is crucial that everyone, especially individuals with disabilities, take basic precautions to keep themselves and others safe from the virus. Social detachment and self-isolation, which can be challenging for some persons with disabilities, are equally vital. Even PWDs

⁹² Bindu Shajan Perappadan, Coronavirus | People with disabilities have special issues during virus outbreak, says Indian Indian Institute of Public Health chief G.V.S. Murthy (Apr. 13, 2020, 12:18 pm), <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/health/coronavirus-people-with-disabilities-have-special-issues-during-virus-outbreak-says-indian-indian-institute-of-public-health-chief-gvs-murthy/article31324294.ece>

⁹³ Suresh Kumar v. Department of Personnel & Training, (2022), (India)



should follow some of the vital steps in order to be safe from the novel coronavirus:

- Prevent crowded locations and transportation as much as possible, and decrease your desire to visit public places as well as your personal interaction with people.
- Make sure that any assistive or other goods you use inside or outside your house, including as wheelchairs, white canes, sterilize and clean orthoses and hearing aids on a routine basis.

Have enough foodstuffs, medications, and essential health and hygiene items on hand to last at a minimum two weeks.

- Purchase products wherever possible, with the help of family, friends.
- Identify appropriate community organisations, hotlines, or persons in your family, friends, peers, or carers who you may call for help if necessary.
- Create a plan to guarantee the continuity of care and support.

STATISTICS-

The COVID-19 epidemic has left no one unaffected, but persons with disabilities have had their lives disturbed more than others. According to government figures, around 2.2 percent of India's population comprises of persons with disability. However, this figure is likely to be underestimated considering that the World Health Organization estimates that roughly 15% of the world's population is disabled, with the majority of them living in medium and low-income nations. People with disabilities, like everyone else, have basic healthcare requirements.

The National Social Assistance Programme in India provides a monthly stipend to those living below the poverty level who have severe and numerous disabilities. Considering the Coronavirus issue, the public authority expressed that three months of pension will be

paid ahead of time. Nonetheless, there are differences in pension amounts among states, and annuity installments have been deferred in various states.

Through the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojna, the Central Government has granted an ex-gratia reimbursement of INR 1,000 to below-poverty-line people who are disabled over three months in two equal installments. This support is only provided to those with 80 percent or more disabilities and also possess a disability certificate.

- According to the 76th round of the National Sample Survey 2019, 76.4 percent of disabled persons do not get government aid, and just 28.8 percent have a disability certificate from a competent organization.⁹⁴

CURRENT SCENARIO:

▪ **INDIA:**

One in every five women worldwide has a handicap. Women with disabilities are more prevalent in poorer nations. They experience a variety of discrimination, marginalisation, and denial of rights. Women with disabilities have reduced access to school as a result of intersecting prejudice based on their gender and disability in both the education system and within their households. Many women with disabilities confront difficulties to employment and labour in less formal settings.

There are 11.8 million disabled women in India who face significant problems, prejudice, seclusion, and marginalisation. Women with disabilities are deemed a burden, negatively stereotyped on a regular basis, deprived of decision-making rights, not regarded "**woman enough**," and constantly mistreated against, assaulted, and ridiculed in a patriarchal and classist culture. They encounter hurdles to healthcare, education, work, social security, and safety. The COVID-19 issue intensifies these

⁹⁴ Divya Goyal, People with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic in India (Nov. 28, 2020), <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/people-disabilities-covid19-pandemic-india/>



difficulties. Their access to knowledge is limited, and their involvement at home suffers much more. Discrimination and isolation, which existed previously, have reached epidemic proportions, negatively hurting the mental health of women with disabilities. Domestic abuse, which was difficult to document and report for handicapped women even previously, but was quite common, has increased, but no formal data are available. Access to helplines has also been a significant barrier for women with disabilities. Access to and affordability of digital gadgets are already a challenge for people with impairments. According to research, women's possession of technology/communication devices such as cell phones is significantly lower. This gap is caused by a lack of finances, a restriction of women's access to technology, patriarchal control, and a lack of privacy.

Given these cultural settings, it is reasonable to conclude that women with disabilities face even greater hurdles to owning and using technology, as less investment is made in their development or goals. They are frequently regarded as a burden inside families and are not treated as adults with needs and expectations.⁹⁵

Throughout March and April of 2021, rural Indian women in informal occupations accounted for 80% of job losses. Indian women also spend a greater amount of time doing family duties than males. Females spend 9.8 times quite so much time as men on unpaid housework and 4.5 hours a day taking care of kids, the aged, as well as the sick. During the outbreak, their share of unpaid family duties increased to over 30%. The socio - economic and cultural toll on women and girls has long-term consequences unless initiatives and behaviors purposefully target and invest in women.

▪ **UNITED STATES OF AMERICA:**

As the economy continues to rebound from the COVID-19 pandemic's hardships, persons with disabilities gradually re-entered the work field in bigger numbers, surpassing pre-pandemic levels. This optimistic development narrows the traditionally widening gap amongst individuals with and without impairments.⁹⁶

While these disadvantages are still evident in females with disabilities having a lower employment share than males with disabilities, women's employment participation has grown over the last few months. In July 2021, the employment-to-population ratio for males aged 16 to 64 with impairments reached 33.2%. In April 2021, the employment-population ratio for persons with impairments was 29.7% among women aged 16 to 64. This proportion for females with disabilities has been around one-fifth more noteworthy as of late than it was past to the outbreak of COVID-19. While improvements in the work to-populace proportion of people with disabilities are positive, significant disparities in workforce cooperation and work between individuals with and without impairments still exist.

MODES FOR SPREADING AWARENESS:

➤ **ADVOCACY**

Broadly advocacy is efforts made by individual persons or organizations to promote the rights and interests of public at large, for example people have equal access to health care, education and employment or fighting discrimination and promoting the inclusion of marginalized groups in all the aspects of society. Advocacy is something that can be done from the grass root level by each individual and can create a big impact in the society. There are various modes of advocacy such as-

- Media and Public Education

⁹⁵ Rising flames and Sightsavers, Neglected and Forgotten, (July 14,2020), https://risingflame.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/NeglectedAndForgotten_RFandSS.pdf

⁹⁶ Joell Gamble and Megan Dunn-Paul, COVID-19 and Employment Trends for People with Disabilities (Jan. 3, 2023), <https://blog.dol.gov/2023/01/03/covid-19-and-employment-trends-for-people-with-disabilities>



- Grassroots Organizing
- Direct support
- Self-Advocacy
- Lobbying and Policy Advocacy
- Legal Action

➤ **PASSAGE FROM INVISIBILITY TO MAINSTREAM:**

Do we notice people with disabilities at malls, marketplaces, movie theatres, or other public areas nowadays? The answer is clearly no, simply because these locations are unreachable to them, rendering them invisible to the general public. The only way to go from invisibility to mainstreaming is for governments, civil society organizations, and people to work together.

CONCLUSION AND OPINIONS-

“The aim of universal healthcare cannot be attained until accessible health facilities for individuals with impairments are established.”

In order to establish a successful and equitable recovery from the consequences of COVID-19, governors must guarantee that the needs of persons with disabilities are explicitly incorporated in their economic and workforce recovery initiatives. Because people with disabilities face disproportionate consequences as a result of COVID-19, effective protections and supports must be in place to increase opportunities for safe and sustainable work. There are several provisions and initiatives take up by the government for the persons with disabilities but in order to establish peace in the society where every person feels safe and secure there must be proper implementation of laws. It is essential to change the mindset of the world where PWD kept on the same footing as others with reasonable accommodation, accessibility and universal design in order to overcome the barriers they face. Awareness can play a major role in the upliftment, which can begin right from educational institutions like schools and colleges having capsule courses.