

BREAKING STEREOTYPES AND STIGMA THROUGH ASSISTIVE DEVICES: A STUDY AMONG WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES IN MIZORAM

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INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial, disability has been linked with various hardships and problems. According to World Health Organization (2001), disability arises due to the combination of a person's health related issues with both the personal, as well as environmental factors in society, which gave birth to a series of social barriers. These barriers arise due to lower socio-economic conditions, races, disability and gender which further denied meaningful and active participation of persons with disabilities in society (Noel et al., 2021). Social barriers, in this regard, include the barriers faced in the areas of families, education and employment sections. The exclusion and barriers faced in these areas further increased the stigma towards them as they are constantly perceived as "incapable and unfit" for all spheres of life. The stigma directed towards persons with disabilities leads to their discrimination and inequality and thus, take away their value. This vicious process strips them of their human values which gave them the status of "second class citizens."

Amongst persons with disabilities, women with disabilities are further marginalized and they dealt with double discrimination, which is firstly exerted by their disability followed by their gender. The barrier they faced is doubled and they are mostly expected to be confined in the four walls of their home. This act of segregation led them to be expelled from social activities which denied their chances for equality and social justice. Universal human values maintain that all sections of society including women with disabilities be empowered and be given value and this is possible through the introduction of assistive devices to aid their disabilities. Assistive device usage can alter their lives in a positive way. The aid and assistance provided by these devices can help the women to perform tasks better and give them meaningful life and purposes. Through the

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use of these devices, they can excel in their academic journeys; they can perform better in their occupational tasks, provide better quality in their health and also give them better chances to relieve their family members in the care giving processes. Thus, the improvement and advancement brought about by the introduction of assistive devices can shatter the social barriers faced by women with disabilities and give more room for assimilation of human values. It also plays an effective role towards dissolving discrimination faced by these women and will contribute in increasing their inclusion and empowerment in society.

Literature Review

World Health Organization & World Bank (2018) has estimated that globally, the population of persons with disabilities forms the largest minority population and their number only moves towards the higher side in recent years. Their study has further elaborated that as many as 1 billion people are affected by disability when glance at a global picture among whom, 80 per cent of them have resided in developing countries. Due to the issues associated with their disability, persons with disabilities have find it difficult to attend educational institutions and faced additional problem in seeking jobs due to the low level of their education and vocational skills. These factors in turn, led them to be marginalized from society which made them feel "left out" in society. These factors brought upon financial burden and injustice in their daily lives and when combined with their health-related issues, it increases their disability considerably (Rohwerder, 2015).

On the other hand, women with disabilities have faced double the consequences of the marginalization directed towards persons with disabilities as they felt victim not only to gender disparity, but also due to their impairment, which further worsened their sufferings. Ghosh et al., (2022) have said that the marginalization increased their discrimination which led them to be vacated away from the rest of society. This led them to be in a state of voicelessness and provide lower status to them as compared to their male counterparts. In this manner, equality is absent in all manner and human value has no meaning in their lives.

The study by Peters-Scheffer et al., (2010) have shown the harsh conditions faced by women with disabilities and has even said that they have to fight a lengthy battle to even be recognized due to the violation of their fundamental rights. Despite the focus on disability, the academic study and paradigm have given a minute focus on the research centered on the women with disabilities in all spheres of life (Rao, 2004). They are perceived as weak and are stereotyped as not being able to learn and work which led to their low enrollment rate in special schools and vocational training centers. It is at this stage when the awareness and uses of assistive devices can come in handy for the women with disabilities.

Assistive devices are those devices which provide help and assist the disabilities in performing their daily activities with better ease. Among the 15 per cent of the world's disabled population, around 2 to 4 per cent of them are in extreme need of assistive devices without which, they have extended difficulty in functioning (WHO & World Bank, 2018). The absence of these devices led to their exclusion in all sectors of life like education, skill training centers and social activities, because they find it difficult to cope with the demands required by these institutions and service centers. These factors further led the women with disabilities to encounter poverty and low quality of life, as is observed in the study conducted by Karki et al., (2021). Assistive devices include wheelchairs, crutches, spectacles, prosthesis and all other devices which serve as the basis of offering relieve and assistance for the users. Their study has further shown that these devices offer a wider chance of social participation for persons with disabilities, specifically the women, due to their potential in reducing the problems associated with their disability.

Arpacik et al., (2018) have indicated that the use of assistive devices by students with disabilities increased the focus and attention in schools and this further leaves much room for further advancement in higher education for them. The use of these devices is also proven to increase the motivation of the users towards achieving their purpose in life and has increased their chances of acquiring more social skills (Fernandez-Batanero et al., 2022). The assistance provided by the devices increased the likelihood of attending higher education, training centers and provide better ease at their workplace as well. At this point,

the devices can function as a "saving grace" for women with disabilities as they can be equipped with better skills and knowledge through entering the aforementioned institutions which can in turn, yields a successful insurance of their inclusion in society; thus, breaking various social barriers standing in the way of their advancement in life.

Methods :Research Design:

This study follows a descriptive research design, utilizing mixed methods of both qualitative and quantitative methods, to provide a clear insight as to know the awareness level on the importance of using assistive devices among women with disabilities in Mizoram. It investigates an extension on the knowledge of the efficiency brought about by their usage by the women and hence, this design was specifically chosen. The total number of samples comprised of 163 women from two districts in Mizoram which are Aizawl and Lunglei, who were randomly selected.

Results

Use of assistive devices among women with disabilities:

Women with disabilities are limited from performing various tasks which further prevents them from their effective participation in society. The responses displayed in the Table are the frequencies and percentages were written in the brackets.

Table 1: Indication of the respondents' use of assistive devices

District	Use of assistive devices for disability		
	Yes	No	Total
Lunglei	4 (20%)	16 (80%)	20 (100%)
Aizawl	38 (26.6%)	105 (73.4%)	143 (100%)
Total	42 (25.8%)	121 (74.2%)	163 (100%)

Source: Field Survey

Table 1 highlights whether the women respondents use assistive devices

or not, to assist them. In terms of using assistive devices to aid their disability, table 1 has indicated that in Lunglei district, only 4 (20%) women have used assistive devices as against 16 (80%) women who did not use any assistive devices to assist their disabilities.

In Aizawl, 38 (26.6%) women have used assistive devices, and as many as 105 (73.4%) women did not use any assistive devices. So, in total, only 42 (25.8%) women have used assistive devices, and the devices that they used range from cochlear implants, hearing aids, walking sticks, wheelchairs, and spectacles. Surprisingly, even though most of the women have said that their disabilities brought certain limitations and restrictions, as many as 121 (74.2%) women live their daily lives without the use of any assistive devices to assist their disabilities.

Non-users' experiences:

121 (74.2%) women did not use assistive devices. The main reason for not using assistive devices among these women are mainly due to the lack of awareness on the availability of the devices (65%) and due to financial constraints (35%), which prevent them from acquiring devices to assist their disabilities. Most of the non-users are restricted from social participation due to lack of educational qualifications and social skills as they are mostly confined in their houses. As compared with the assistive device users, the overall chances of progress for women without assistive devices is generally unfavorable.

Benefits associated with using assistive devices:

Among the 42 users of assistive devices, the level of how they actually benefit from using the devices are highlighted as under.

Table 2: The level of benefits of using assistive devices by women with disabilities

District	The respondents' benefits of using assistive devices					
	Very high	High	Medium	Low	Very low	Total
Lunglei	3 (75%)	1 (25%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (100%)
Aizawl	28 (73.7%)	10 (26.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	38 (100%)
Total	31 (73.8%)	11 (26.2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	42 (100%)

Source: Field Survey

As observed in the table 2, as many as 3 (75%) women in Lunglei have said that the level of benefits associated with using assistive devices is very high for them while 1 (25%) woman has also expressed that the level of benefits she received is high.

In Aizawl, 28 (73.7%) women have indicated that the benefits associated with using assistive devices is very high and another 10 (26.3%) women have claimed that the benefits of using assistive devices is high.

Discussion

The study on women with disabilities in Mizoram has shown the importance of using assistive devices in their everyday life. Most of the women respondents did not use any assistive devices and there are only a handful of them who used the devices. The users have expressed positive remarks in using the devices as they help them in achieving their goals.

"By using hearing aids, I am capable of listening to class lectures without much issues. It helps me to excel in my academic journey without which, I would have never been able to attend higher education." (P1 respondent, who has hearing impairment).

However, the increased number of non-users of assistive devices is mainly attributed to the lack of awareness and knowledge on the importance and also due to the financial hardships faced by the women respondents. One of the respondents without access to assistive devices has said,

"I have been told by the doctors that only cochlear implant can restore my hearing and coming from a poor economic background, it is close to impossible to afford cochlear implant due to the expensive price. Since I am not capable of hearing properly and with low economic condition, I dropped out of school and instead help my families in household chores." (P2 respondent, who has hearing impairment).

So, the comparison between the users and non-users shows a significant outcome about the benefits associated with using the devices. The users have said that using assistive devices helped them acquire higher educational qualifications and also help them to participate in various social activities which

are further important to break certain stigma and stereotypes directed towards them.

Knowledge of the existence and importance of assistive devices is the first and foremost step to making the most use of them. If women with disabilities are not aware of the importance and have limited knowledge about its usage, there can be less scope for them to even be aware of the devices freely distributed by the government. Overall, women from both districts have very low knowledge on the importance of using assistive devices. One of the women respondents has said,

In overcoming the social barriers by using assistive devices, most of the users have claimed that they highly benefitted from using the devices and helped them achieved higher education. They provided increased motivation and capabilities to pursue their academic interests and in turn, taught them certain social skills to help them progress further in life. Higher education level and vocational trainings made them more aware about their rights and needs which give them better employment opportunities. In fact, they are in a better position to relieve their families of financial burden by earning an income and also, the uses of the devices relieve their caregivers from burden associated with constant care provided to them as they are now able to care for themselves to a considerable extent. Through using assistive devices, they also participate in community and social activities which break the societal stereotypes of labelling them as "incapable and unfit."

"I am who I am today mainly because of using wheelchair which enabled me to complete my bachelors' degree in science. Otherwise, it would be rather difficult for my caregivers to constantly carry me around campus which would also be embarrassing for me as well. It also enables me to attend social activities as well." (P3 respondent, who has muscular dystrophy).

The statements of the respondents have also clarified that positive cycle exists in using assistive devices, as the uses ease their attendance in various educational and vocational training institutions which helped them acquire higher educational backgrounds and vocational skills. This leaves them in a better position to help other women with disabilities progress in life and also offer

wider chances to participate in policy making for the holistic and inclusive development of women with disabilities in Mizoram. The increased awareness needed to be accompanied by the introduction of more accessible educational institutions and vocational training centers which will in turn leads to increased enrollment. These factors will therefore, serve as an important gateway for shattering stigma and also give the women wider chances of equality with other non-disabled populations.

Conclusion

Women with disabilities are highly benefitted from using assistive devices like wheelchairs, crutches and hearing aids as they are more capable of pursuing their careers and academic interests. The use of assistive devices empowered them to attend educational institutions. These factors in turn, placed them in a better position to amend the laws and promotes their inclusion in society, thereby breaking stereotypes and stigma directed towards them by society. It is recommended that government agencies dealing with handicapped or differentially abled should not only provide financial assistance but also educate the poor tribal women about the utility of devices to improve their wellbeing and productivity for the society at large.

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