

“Who Will Marry Me?”: The Marital Status of Disabled Women in India

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Abstract : The stigma attached to disability is very high in India and given its patriarchal society women and their interests have always been pushed to the background. The identity of disabled women is compromised under the social construction of disability which lowers their self-esteem and hampers their development. Disability policies in India have focused on provision of educational and employment opportunities to make them economically productive members of the society. This preoccupation with the materialistic spheres of lives of the disabled has led to a neglect of the private sphere concerning intimate social relationships and motherhood. This paper seeks to bring to forefront the private lives of disabled women. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with twenty seven women with physical disability (congenital/acquired) from Odisha, a state in India. Sampling was done in a manner to include women from various strata of the society to allow meaningful analysis. In a society where paramount importance is attached to wifehood and motherhood, the chances of marriage for disabled women were very low compared to disabled men. Majority believed that marriage and having a family was meant for non disabled women and had decided against getting married. Socialization process was found to be a major factor in determining the ideas and aspirations of disabled women. They were clearly sidelined by their families on the issue of marriage. Education and employment levels did not seem to increase the appeal of disabled women to prospective suitors. But not all the women interviewed were closed to the idea of intimate relationships and marriage. Disabled women who were married or hoped to get married in future were found to have a better body image and greater self motivation. It is interesting to understand the means by which these women, who have been brought up to internalize ideas of their unattractiveness, undesirability, asexuality and inability to care, established identities which have so long been denied to them. With these stories of personal triumphs an attempt is made for reclamation of private spheres which have been abandoned by disability policies and make them gender sensitive.

Keywords : disability, gender, marriage, relationships

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