



Inclusion of Women with Disabilities in Local Government Development Plans

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ABSTRACT

One excellent step the government has taken to encourage widespread and maximum public engagement in politics is local government in the form of self-governance. It seeks to involve every citizen in decision-making and program execution in order to promote social and economic progress. Nonetheless, women with disabilities continue to face challenges and difficulties while accessing local government services. Due to gender inequality, marginalization, and discrimination, they are unable to participate in the decision-making process.

This paper examines how barriers and hindrances can be mitigated to empower women with disabilities. It discusses the necessary steps that will enable women with disabilities to be included in the local government development plans. The study reveals that women with disabilities lack representation in politics and face various challenges when accessing services in the local government. Consequently, women with disabilities become a vulnerable section of our society that needs human rights and social work intervention.

Keywords: *Inequalities, Marginalization, Women, Disabilities, Inclusion, Accessibility*

INTRODUCTION

Women with disabilities face challenges similar to those encountered by men with disabilities; however, they also experience unique barriers that demand additional protection, care, and attention to ensure their safety, equal rights, and opportunities. According to the World Bank, “women with disabilities face additional barriers in their socio-economic participation compared to men with disabilities and to non-disabled women and men.” This means they are at a greater risk of sexual abuse, educational exclusion, and marginalization from decision-making and social participation.

This paper, therefore, focuses on the empowerment of women with disabilities by addressing their specific challenges and advocating for their inclusion in local government development plans and initiatives. It explores the barriers faced by women with disabilities in accessing government services and facilities, and highlights the persistent lack of awareness among local

bodies regarding their needs. These obstacles include discrimination, complicated procedures for obtaining the Unique Disability ID (UDID), transportation difficulties, limited educational access, and insecurity.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Participation in local governance and development planning is a fundamental right for all individuals, regardless of physical or socio-economic status. However, people with disabilities—particularly women with disabilities—have long faced exclusion, stigma, and discrimination within local governance structures (Lwiindi, 2020).

According to UN Women (2025), one in every five women lives with a disability. Yet, more than a decade after the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), there remains a significant gap between international commitments and the actual implementation of policies promoting gender equality and empowerment of women and girls with disabilities.

Women with disabilities continue to face marginalization and underrepresentation in political, social, and decision-making spaces. Data on their political participation is either limited or completely absent, reflecting their invisibility in the public sphere.

The role of family, friends, and society is also crucial in shaping the lives of persons with disabilities. As noted

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by Lalrinhlui (2023), the attitudes, behavior, and moral support provided by close relations greatly influence the disabled person's ability to participate and thrive in social life. A supportive family environment has a positive impact not only on the person with a disability but also on the family as a whole, including parents, siblings, and extended relatives.

Despite growing awareness, leadership roles among persons with disabilities, especially women, remain limited in both political and social spheres. Price (2018) points out a significant gap in research on leadership qualities, participation, and inclusive strategies for persons with disabilities, which hinders the development of effective solutions for their empowerment.

To address systemic inequality, Ansari and Fatima (2024) recommend that reserved seats should also be allocated for women with disabilities in political and administrative bodies, similar to the reservations provided for other women. Increased representation in parliament and local governance is essential to ensure their voices are heard and their rights upheld.

For achieving equality and sustainable development, local governments must operate with transparency, ensuring equal representation for all sections of society, including women with disabilities.

As outlined in the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (2014), the key functions of local government for citizen development include:

- Administration of various laws and regulations;
- Equitable management of public accounts to provide essential urban services;
- Effective delivery of welfare schemes to targeted beneficiaries at the grassroots level;
- Development and maintenance of infrastructure to improve the quality of life;
- Planning and implementation of schemes for economic development and social justice;
- Authority to collect taxes as authorized by state legislatures (Article 243 of the Constitution);
- Provision of grants-in-aid from the consolidated fund of the state.

These roles underline that local government acts as an essential agent of social welfare and inclusion. Therefore, as a democratic nation that upholds human rights, gender equality, and minority protection, India must emphasize social audits alongside economic development to ensure equitable growth. Women with disabilities, often overlooked or unheard in the political process, deserve focused attention and active inclusion in all local development initiatives.

OBJECTIVE

This paper aims to promote the inclusion and participation of women with disabilities in local government development plans and programs. By adopting a comprehensive approach, it seeks to highlight the importance of recognizing and addressing the specific challenges faced by persons with disabilities—particularly women—to ensure genuine equality, empowerment, and representation in public life.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

A study was conducted at the Manipur Press Club, Imphal, Manipur, India, using a focus group discussion (FGD) approach involving 40 women participants. The participants represented a diverse range of disabilities, including low vision and blindness, hearing and speech impairments, locomotor disability, Down Syndrome, intellectual disabilities, dwarfism, and cerebral palsy. They represented different municipal councils, Gram Panchayats, and Autonomous District Council areas.

Data collection and analysis: Primary data were collected through the focus group discussion and analyzed using a deductive thematic analysis approach. Predetermined themes were established to ensure that relevant data could be organized systematically for discussion and analysis.

To maintain a comprehensive and inclusive strategy, the analysis focused on identifying all types of barriers encountered by women with disabilities and persons with disabilities in accessing local government development plans and services. This approach ensured that all significant issues and recommendations emerging from the discussions were adequately captured and addressed.

RESULTS

The structure of local government in Manipur consists of the Municipalities, Panchayats, and Autonomous District Councils (ADCs). While the Municipalities and Panchayats function in the valley regions, the ADCs operate in the hill districts that are predominantly inhabited by tribal communities. The basic responsibilities of these local bodies include the construction and maintenance of roads and infrastructure, and the provision of essential livelihood facilities such as poultry, fishery, agricultural seeds, health, and education services.

During the focus group discussion, participants emphasized the need for greater support in accessing government schemes and services. They recommended

that the issuance of the Unique Disability Identity (UDID) certificate should be made available at the local level to reduce delays and travel burdens. They also expressed the need for inclusion under welfare programmes such as the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) for housing, Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY) for fisheries, PM-Kisan and the Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana (RKVY) for agriculture and allied sectors, as well as horticultural schemes for seeds and saplings. Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of awareness and training programmes to enhance skills, knowledge, and access to accurate and accessible information for persons with disabilities.

Access to service at the panchayat office/councillor's office

The group members concluded that most of the women with disabilities cannot easily approach the councillors/panchayat office, i.e. the local government, due to several reasons, barriers and hindrances.

Barrier, hindrance and issue: Lack of a support structure, communication difficulties, and language limitations are the obstacles or issues encountered while attempting to obtain services from the panchayat, Municipality and Autonomous district council office. Moreover, Insufficient education, knowledge, and self-assurance, discrimination, stigmatization, lack of acceptability, and Inaccessible office building infrastructures, improper and inaccessible roads, less accessible information, poverty or low economic standing, absence of identification such as a Unique Disability Identity (UDID) certificate, bank account, or Aadhaar are basic and common issue that hinders them.

Actions that could be taken to mitigate such barriers and hindrances: Educating the local government and the community at large, setting up programs for individual consultations and micro groups, data collection and door-to-door surveys to gather more data. In addition, it is necessary to establish disability grievance cells in each block-level office and to ensure that they are closely monitored.

Pamphlet distribution and poster campaigns via social media and other print and digital media broadcasting, organizing or performing Nukkad Natak, or short plays, about inclusion and the rights of women and women with disabilities could also have a great impact in raising awareness to the local government and able man/woman.

Access to the decision-making process:

- a. Although some participants mentioned that public meetings are held annually and occasionally twice or three times a year, depending on the matter required by the panchayat office/Municipal office,

none of the participants were aware of the number of public meetings held, whether monthly, every three months, every six months, or annually. Public meetings were held at the village level, ward level, by the village authority in the ADCs, the panchayat, and the municipality councillors' office as well.

- b. People participated generally through political connections and invitation, mostly, and some as community members, like teachers, health workers, and club leaders. Only a small number of persons with disabilities participated.
- c. When it comes to the Autonomous District Council in Hill areas, persons with disabilities do not have access to any information, beginning from the village level to the district level, about the public meeting and were often excluded (left out) till today.
- d. Out of the total 60 women with disabilities interviewed, only three (3) of them from the panchayat area attended the public meeting once in a year. Other women with disabilities or persons with disabilities do not attend the meeting.
- e. No discussion was made on the problem being faced by women with disabilities, nor were any suggestions from the person with disabilities heard. However, the meeting mainly focused on the development plans for the local areas, schemes and facilities for the communities.
- f. Maximum numbers of participants want to attend public meeting, while some others do not want to participate due to lack of understanding, self-confidence, lack of information about the meeting, inaccessibility of roadways, infrastructure facilities of the place where the meeting was held, lack of support and encouragement from the family near and dear ones for taking them to the meeting spot. No sign language interpreter or captioning for the hearing and speech impairment etc.

Suggestions to overcome issues and challenges

Suggestions on how to get beyond the obstacles and issues that women with disabilities and other people with disabilities confront. Individual autonomy, including the freedom to make one's own decisions and live independently, should be respected by friends, family, and society at large. Disability, gender equality and opportunity parity should be guaranteed by local governments. Information should be accessible. Inclusive education. All types of impairments should be able to easily enter the meeting place and all other platforms with the help of accessible devices.

Moreover, the local government must adopt disability policies and standards that adhere closely to the 2016 Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act and

provide sufficient funding for campaigns to increase awareness, capacity building, skill development, and other training initiatives.

Both the person with disabilities commission office and the person with disabilities empowerment department should be established and run effectively. The State Commissioner for persons with disabilities should be selected from among eligible persons with disabilities in order to look into the grievances of the persons with disabilities and provide the community the opportunity to make decisions by themselves.

CONCLUSION

Women with disabilities are facing double marginalization i.e. being a person with disabilities as well as being a woman. In some cases, they are even denied inheritance rights by their family. In this kind of situation and scenario, as we have understood, achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is still far. A lot of community-based work at the grassroots level has to be done. Accessing information and awareness still remains an issue in the North Eastern states of India, like Manipur and others.

The present local governance system and services do not include persons with disabilities fully till date, for which the persons with disabilities were often left behind. Therefore, we urge immediate and urgent action for inclusive development change for an equitable society, not only in Manipur but also in our nation.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Broader research could be conducted on women and girls with disabilities, addressing issues such as skill development, employment, administrative and political participation etc., in the northeastern states where development is behind due to several reasons like geographical distances, unrest, political issues and identity crisis.

DECLARATIONS

The participants attended the focus group discussion voluntarily. They were being mobilized before the discussion with the help of organizational partners, All Tribal Disabilities' Union Manipur (ATDUM). There is no conflict of ideas and interest between the author and the participants, and full consent was given for research publication.

The author followed all norms and guidelines of research ethics. Confidentiality of participants is maintained. There is no influence or subjective view by the author towards the participants.

Availability of data and materials: Most of the data is being used in the manuscript itself. However, if

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