



## SOCIETAL PERCEPTION OF DISABLED INDIVIDUALS IN CURRENT TIMES

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### Abstract

Disability is a term which describes a condition wherein an individual's physical or mental health limits their movements, senses or activities. An individual with disability is restricted in certain activities which makes them seem different from others which can sometimes be overwhelming for a person to bear. CDC defines disability as "Any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions)." The paper sheds light on perception of people towards individuals who suffer from disability. Disability unwillingly attracts a lot of unwanted attention, specifically from people who are unaware about the disability, hence forming prejudices and stereotypes against the individuals who have disability. The paper will highlight the portrayal of disabled individuals in media, societal factors and inclusivity in recent times. The paper will also focus on instruments through which raising awareness.

### Keywords

*Disability Studies, Stigma, Inclusivity, Stigma, Mental Health, etc.*

### Full Article

#### **Introduction:**

Disability refers to the impairment of an individual in either one or more than one aspects, it could be physical or mental disability which hinder the regular functioning of any individual. Discrimination towards disabled communities, hatred, unequal opportunities, unemployment, lack of adequate education, and social exclusion among many other issues are commonly faced by disabled individuals on a regular basis. In our modern society, disability isn't something which is normalized or spoken at length; usually it is peripheral among other occurrences which grabs all the importance. Society sure has come a long way to accept the disabled individuals but we are not where we are supposed to be yet.

#### **Perception of Disabled Individuals in Modern Society:**

There are many types of disabilities that affect a person such as: vision, memory, learning, thinking etc. Disability covers impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions. Individuals who have been identified with one or more disabilities find it rather challenging to sustain themselves in this fast-paced society and its unending demands. People with disabilities often find themselves in a position where their appearance is perceived as uncommon, surprising and abnormal. Some people have readily accepted the change and the others still find it hard to consider the disabled individuals as perfectly sane or normal. Many times, even disabled



individuals find it quite difficult to “fit-in”, because they’re viewed as somebody who is different from others in a wrong/negative way. Sometimes, they’re made fun of, teased publicly, bullied in schools/colleges and in workplaces. Their impairment is perceived as a large part of their personality and behavior and often becomes the main target of harsh criticism in society. The government laws or science might have given them some due recognition in their lengthy ledgers yet the common people observe it as inflexible at initial stages, sometimes, there can be resistance at later juncture as well. Especially in our Indian community, men or women who are disabled discover that it is quite a strenuous task to get married in society within their choice of age limit, status, education, etc. Many disabled individuals do not marry by choice, a small fraction of people actually get to marry with their desired partners and the rest leave it to their fate or mostly to their families to find them an ‘appropriate match’. Many of them still face discrimination and great contempt for something that ‘they lack’ from someone who is sufficient (physically/mentally) to be included in society. There is division among people who are normal (with their appearances) and those who are not (differently abled). Often in our society, we form perceptions towards people we hardly know anything about, which ultimately leads to prejudices and discrimination. It is important to address it from the very beginning and develop empathy in order to make the especially abled feel inclusive and accepted.

### Review of Literature:

In the research paper titled *Factors Affecting the Perception of Disability: A Developmental Perspective* by Iryana Babik & Elena S Gardner (2021) enunciates about the importance of understanding factors which may affect the well-being of the individuals with disabilities. They also highlight that negative attitudes drive disabled people into isolation and not being able to reach out to others in society.

In a policy report titled *The Disability Perception Gap* by Simon Dixon et al (2018), the report suggests that there is a significant perception gap between disabled and non-disabled people, negative attitudes and perception play a key role in shaping the image towards disabled. The report indicates that there is indeed a lot of prejudice against disabled people, and they are mostly discriminatory.

In a research article titled *Perceptions of Disability among University Students* (2023) by Saadijah Julian et. al, expresses that exposure and awareness contribute greatly towards reducing negative attitudes towards the disabled and helps in shaping positive perceptions. Creating a positive and welcoming environment helps in social inclusion as well.

Fiona Rillotta & Ted Nettlebeck in their research article *Effects of an awareness program on attitudes of students without an intellectual disability towards persons with an intellectual disability* (2009) stressed upon awareness programs and their effectiveness in generating positive outcomes. Their research focused on APD programs and conducting awareness for intellectually disabled.

Prashant Srivastava and Pradeep Kumar in their research paper titled *Disability, Its Issues and Challenges: Psychosocial and Legal Aspects in Indian Scenario* (2015) focuses on the problems faced by disabled individuals in India, they also emphasize on having a collaborative effort from general public and the stakeholders in government. The key aspect is to change the age old mental attitude of people and need to remove the social stigma attached with disability.

### Objectives of the Study:

The paper aims to study how individuals with disabilities are perceived in society. The study explores how disability is treated in society, and how various stereotypes and stigmas came to



form. It also makes us understand how little we know about disability. The paper also aims to highlight the struggles faced by disabled individuals.

### **Methodology:**

The paper is qualitative in nature and is studied by referring to various literature reviews to understand the societal perception, behaviour and stigma attached to disability. Media portrayals were also taken into consideration to examine the perception towards disability in recent times. The paper analyses the

### **Challenges faced by Disabled Individuals:**

The most common challenge that they face is to make others understand about their disability. Lack of education and awareness often lead to poor perception and social exclusion of disabled individuals. Many people who grow up with a disability find it difficult to adjust in their environment because their friends at school, or peers at the workplace, view and treat them differently and in worst cases, they are often bullied or mistreated. On the other hand, people who became disabled due to an injury or accident are treated with more sympathy, care and so not face the same stereotypes as the ones who had disability since their birth. Also people with intellectual disability are neglected more than people with physical disability. Many of the individuals grow up with low self-esteem, lack of self-confidence and achievement motivation.

### **Acceptance in the Society:**

The situation is not as bad as it was decades or centuries ago, but it isn't as good as we think it is. We surely have dodged many stigmas related to disability, but has it been accepted by society completely? Not sure if we have found the answer yet. The awareness about disabled individuals and disability has surely seen some good reception in modern days. Studies have shown that children who have a positive attitude towards people with disabilities are inclusive and are more willing to accept and understand them than people with negative attitudes (Diamond, 1993).

### **Changing Perception in Modern Times:**

People have become more aware about disability than ever before. Educational institutes for specially-abled have played a significant role in changing attitudes and perception. Awareness programs at college and school levels, even at workplaces have significantly improved the understanding of the struggles and challenges faced by disabled in society. To some extent, it can be said that it might have educated them, if not made them an expert. It can also be observed that the media now handles the portrayal sensitively, keeping their audience in mind.

### **Conclusion:**

We, as society, can change the scenario to create an environment where disabled individuals need not fear societal rejection and can be self-reliant and lead their lives on their own terms. It is important to understand that disabled individuals are part of the society and their societal treatment has to be more empathetic and inclusive rather than the age-old perception of keeping them at home, locked up and without seeking any professional help. The stigma attached to disability is gradually changing however, we are still lagging behind. Government, Medical practitioners, counselors, educators can play a key role in eradicating age old perceptions regarding disabilities and create awareness amongst the less educated ones. Schools and Colleges can conduct awareness programs to make students aware about the prevailing sensitive issues in society. Positive attitudes and perceptions can be developed through training and awareness at various levels to reduce existing prejudices against disabled individuals.



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