



## THE EQUAL OPPORTUNITY CELL, JMC

# NEWSLETTER

## DISABILITY AND DIVERSITY: EXAMINING INTERSECTIONALITY AND INTERWOVEN IDENTITIES

### WHEN IDENTITIES COLLIDE: THE COMPLEX REALITY OF DISABILITY AT THE CROSSROADS OF CULTURE, GENDER, AND RACE

*Disability is often viewed as a singular identity, but this perspective fails to capture the rich, layered experiences of individuals who navigate life at the intersection of multiple identities. This month, we delve into the theme of “Disability and Diversity: Examining Intersectionality and Interwoven Identities” to shed light on the complex realities faced by people with disabilities in a world where culture, gender, race, and socio-economic status intertwine with their experiences.*

**Intersectionality**, a term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides a framework for understanding how overlapping identities shape individual and collective experiences of marginalization and privilege. In the context of disability, it emphasizes that no two experiences of disability are identical, as they are deeply influenced by other aspects of identity. For instance, a woman with a disability in a patriarchal society faces unique challenges compared to a man with a similar disability. Likewise, the lived realities of a person with a disability in a rural economically disadvantaged community differ significantly from those of someone in an urban, affluent setting. Recognizing these differences is vital to fostering genuine inclusivity.



Through this edition, we will delve into how gender intersects with disability to create unique challenges for women, girls, and men, shaping their access to opportunities and societal perceptions. We'll also examine the pervasive link between disability and economic disparities, highlighting how poverty deepens the marginalization of individuals with disabilities and what can be done to break this cycle.

Race and ethnicity further add layers of complexity, as individuals with disabilities from minority backgrounds often experience dual discrimination. We aim to shed light on how cultural and systemic biases impact their access to resources and opportunities. Similarly, we'll discuss the role of technology in empowering individuals with disabilities while addressing the gaps in access and design that leave many behind.

Representation in art and media will be another focus, as we consider how authentic portrayals of disability can challenge stereotypes and celebrate diversity. Additionally, we'll explore the intersection of mental health and disability, recognizing the compounded challenges faced by individuals navigating these experiences. Finally, we'll touch upon the unique struggles of aging with a disability, a topic that often goes unnoticed but deserves attention. Each of these topics invites us to reflect on the diverse and interwoven identities that shape the disability experience. Through this issue, we hope to spark conversations and deepen understanding of these layered realities. By doing so, we aim to move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to disability discourse and advocacy, ensuring that every voice is heard and every experience acknowledged.

As we embark on this journey, we hope these messages resonate and inspire meaningful change and dedication towards a more inclusive world—one that values diversity, embraces intersectionality, and ensures everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

# INVISIBLE STRUGGLES: THE OVERLOOKED REALITIES OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

The intersectionality of gender and disability unfolds a complex landscape of discrimination and social challenges that deeply impact an individual. Both gender and disability have historically been grounds for marginalisation and oppression. Unfortunately, when these identities overlap, they create a distinct form of discrimination. For instance, women with disability face a “double disadvantage”– the burden of both sexism and ableism. They experience deeply entrenched stereotypes that portray them as inherently vulnerable, passive, emotionally unstable and incapable of independence. This manifests uniquely across various cultural, social, and economic contexts.

The World Health Organization highlights a humbling reality: women with disabilities are twice as likely to experience gender-based violence compared to others. These challenges are not just numbers—they reflect real lives burdened by systems that fail to protect and empower. The intersection of gender and disability creates layers of vulnerability, leaving many women silenced, overlooked, and underserved. They are also more vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion, have limited access to basic services and are at an increased risk of forced marriage.

Societal norms further exacerbate these issues. Society views and treats people according to gender roles and expectations, which frequently exclude people with disabilities. Traditionally, women have been linked to roles that society believes are incompatible with physical or cognitive impairments, such as caring for others, being beautiful, and performing emotional labor. Women with disabilities are therefore often desexualized and seen as unable to perform traditional gender roles. Men with disabilities, on the other hand, experience a distinct form of stigma. Conventional ideas of masculinity place a strong emphasis on dominance, independence, and physical strength. Because they are perceived as “less masculine,” men with disabilities may experience social exclusion and internalized shame.

Gender minorities with disabilities, such as transgender or non-binary individuals, encounter even more complex layers of discrimination due to the intersection of ableism, sexism, and transphobia. Their experiences often go unacknowledged in broader conversations about disability and gender, leaving them even more vulnerable to marginalization.



Economic inequality is a glaring issue at the intersection of gender and disability. Women with disabilities face significant barriers to employment, often stemming from discriminatory hiring practices, lack of workplace accommodations, and societal biases that undervalue their skills and potential. Even when employed, they are often underpaid and overworked compared to others. In developing countries, the situation is even more dire. Limited access to education and vocational training exacerbates unemployment and poverty among women with disabilities. For example, in India, only 25% of women with disabilities are literate, compared to 75% of men with disabilities. This literacy gap highlights the urgent need for targeted interventions that address the intersectional challenges of gender and disability.

The healthcare system also poses challenges for women with disabilities who face barriers in accessing reproductive health services, including inaccessible facilities, lack of trained medical professionals, and discriminatory attitudes.

These barriers can lead to adverse health outcomes, including higher maternal mortality rates and unmet contraceptive needs. Moreover, societal biases often strip women with disabilities of their reproductive autonomy. In some cases, they are subjected to forced sterilizations or denied the right to marry and have children.

Cultural perceptions play a significant role in shaping the experiences of people at the intersection of gender and disability. In many societies, negative stereotypes perpetuate the idea that women with disabilities are objects of pity or charity rather than individuals with agency. Even media representations reinforce these stereotypes by portraying disabled women as either tragic figures or inspirational overachievers.

Addressing the intersectionality of gender and disability requires a multi-pronged approach that combines policy reforms, grassroots activism, and societal change. Key steps include legal Protections such as anti-discrimination laws and ensure that policies address the specific needs of women and gender minorities with disabilities. Laws should encompass education, employment, healthcare, and violence prevention. Secondly, inclusive education is a must to close the literacy gap and provide accessible education for girls with disabilities. Healthcare services must be made accessible and inclusive, with an emphasis on reproductive rights and autonomy. Training healthcare providers to address the unique needs of women with disabilities is crucial. Public awareness campaigns and increased representation of disabled women in media and leadership roles can challenge stereotypes and foster a culture of inclusion. Grassroots organizations and self-advocacy groups led by women with disabilities should be supported to amplify their voices and create a sense of solidarity.

The intersectionality of gender and disability reveals the multifaceted nature of discrimination and the urgent need for systemic change. By recognizing and addressing the unique challenges faced by women and gender minorities with disabilities, we can move toward a more inclusive society where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.



## BRIDGING THE GAP: TACKLING INCOME INEQUALITY FOR DISABLED PEOPLE IN A CHANGING ECONOMY



THE TIMES OF INDIA

*Economic inequality affects many marginalized groups, but its impact on people with disabilities is particularly profound and long-lasting. Across the globe, disabled individuals disproportionately experience poverty due to systemic barriers in employment, education, and healthcare. As the global economy shifts towards gig work and informal labor, these challenges have only become more pronounced, exposing the urgent need for systemic solutions.*

*Despite these difficulties, the issue is not insurmountable. By addressing the intersection of disability and economic inequality with focused and structural interventions, we can foster greater inclusion and reduce disparities.*

Disability and economic inequality are deeply intertwined. Inaccessible infrastructure, inadequate support networks, and persistent social stigma prevent many disabled individuals from accessing quality education, steady employment, and essential healthcare. These barriers trap many in cycles of poverty, creating long-term economic disadvantages. Access to education, a cornerstone of economic empowerment, is a significant hurdle for disabled individuals. From the lack of inclusive schools to the prohibitive cost of assistive technology, these challenges hinder skill development and upward mobility. Without adequate education or training opportunities, employment prospects remain limited, perpetuating financial insecurity.

Healthcare adds another layer of economic burden. Disabled individuals often require specialized treatments, assistive devices, or caregiving services, all of which carry significant costs. These expenses place disproportionate strain on households with disabled members, making financial stability even more elusive.

For many excluded from traditional employment, the gig and informal economies—praised for their flexibility—have become vital sources of income. Yet, these sectors often exacerbate the challenges faced by disabled workers. While the gig economy offers flexibility, it often lacks accessibility. Mobile applications and platforms are rarely designed with disabled individuals in mind, excluding those with hearing, vision, or mobility impairments. Even when disabled individuals can participate, they frequently do so without social protections, health benefits, or job security, leaving them vulnerable to income instability.



The gig economy's emphasis on speed and productivity further marginalizes workers with disabilities. Environments that prioritize efficiency over inclusivity may exclude those who require accommodations or adapted tools to perform their roles. Client-facing gig jobs are also subject to societal biases, with disabled workers often facing discrimination or skepticism about their capabilities.

Tackling the relationship between disability and economic inequality requires systemic change that prioritizes accessibility, equity, and opportunity. Accessible education is key to breaking the cycle of poverty for disabled individuals. Schools must prioritize inclusive infrastructure, accessible digital tools, and adequate resources. Governments and organizations can provide grants, scholarships, and financial aid to ensure disabled students have access to higher education and skill development opportunities.

Employers must adopt inclusive hiring practices and make accommodations for disabled employees. Governments can support these efforts by strengthening anti-discrimination laws and offering tax incentives to businesses that prioritize accessibility. In the gig economy, platforms must incorporate accessibility features, such as voice tools and screen readers, to ensure disabled individuals can participate fully. Additionally, providing gig workers with essential benefits—healthcare, retirement plans, and paid leave—would offer much-needed security.

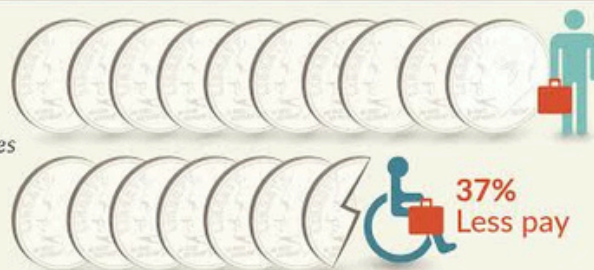
Expanding unemployment insurance, healthcare coverage, and disability benefits is crucial, particularly for disabled workers in the informal sector. Policymakers should also focus on funding programs that support disabled entrepreneurs with grants, loans, mentorship, and tailored initiatives to overcome workplace barriers. Countries like Sweden and Canada offer valuable examples of how inclusive policies and social protections can reduce economic inequality for disabled individuals. For instance, these nations have robust disability benefits, inclusive workplace policies, and accessible public services. Adapting these models locally can drive meaningful progress.

Addressing the intersection of economic inequality and disability is a complex but necessary challenge. By rethinking education systems, transforming labor markets, and enacting inclusive policies, we can create a more equitable society. However, the ultimate goal is not just to reduce disparities but to build a world where disability is no longer a barrier to opportunity. Achieving this vision requires collaboration among governments, businesses, and individuals. It involves reshaping societal attitudes, strengthening policy implementation, and fostering an economy that values diversity.

Inclusive efforts benefit everyone. A more equitable society leads to stronger communities, increased innovation, and a workforce that reflects the full spectrum of human potential. By breaking down barriers and addressing systemic inequalities, we can create an economy where everyone—regardless of ability—has the chance to thrive. Together, we can bridge the gap and build a future that prioritizes dignity, opportunity, and inclusion.

### Workers with disabilities earn less than their peers

For every dollar paid to workers without disabilities, those with disabilities receive only 63¢, on average



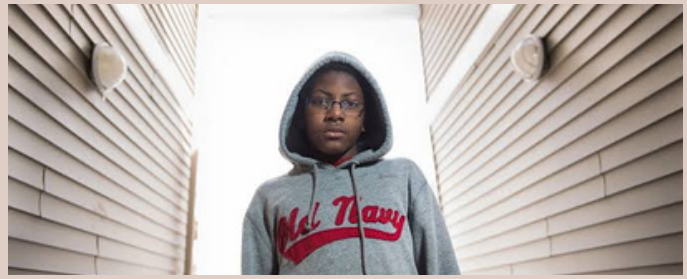
# CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES: UNDERSTANDING RACE AND DISABILITY TOGETHER

People with disabilities face significant societal stigma, but when they also belong to a racial minority, their struggles often intensify. These individuals encounter barriers not only due to their disabilities but also as a result of racial discrimination. To build a fairer and more inclusive society, it is essential to address these issues together.

History reveals how race and disability have been intertwined in ways that harm marginalized groups. During colonial times, disabled individuals were often dehumanized and viewed as weak or inferior. For those who also belonged to racial minorities, this marginalization was even harsher. Colonial powers exploited these prejudices to justify excluding disabled individuals from society and denying them basic rights. Unfortunately, these harmful ideas did not disappear after colonization. They continue to shape how society treats disabled people from minority communities today.

Racial inequalities in essential services such as healthcare and education exacerbate these challenges. Minority communities often face limited access to these services due to systemic inequities. For individuals who are both disabled and part of a marginalized racial group, these barriers are compounded by factors such as language differences, cultural misunderstandings, and underfunded community resources.

A notable example of this intersection is the case of Kayleb Moon-Robinson, a young Black boy with autism who gained attention in the United States in 2016. Kayleb was criminalized for behaviors linked to his autism after experiencing a meltdown at school. Instead of receiving care and understanding, he was charged with disorderly conduct, highlighting how systemic racism and ableism can intersect to harm individuals.



His story served as a stark reminder of how biases within institutions, such as schools, can disproportionately impact disabled individuals from racial minorities.

Unfortunately, Kayleb's story is not unique. Many disabled individuals from minority backgrounds face similar systemic inequalities. Disability support programs often fail to consider the additional struggles faced by people of color. Services in minority communities are frequently underfunded, leaving many without adequate support.

To address these challenges, we must rethink how disability support is designed and implemented. Programs should be inclusive of all racial and cultural backgrounds to ensure no one is left behind. This could include offering services in multiple languages, improving accessibility in underserved areas, and hiring staff who are trained to navigate the intersections of race and disability.

Education is a crucial tool for changing societal attitudes. Raising awareness about the intersection of race and disability can challenge harmful stereotypes and foster empathy. Schools and workplaces can implement training programs to create more inclusive environments, while communities can host workshops and events to promote understanding and unity.

Ultimately, addressing the intersection of race and disability is about fairness and dignity. Everyone, regardless of their background or ability, deserves to live with respect and equal opportunities. Tackling systemic inequalities and raising awareness will help ensure that no one feels overlooked or excluded.

By listening to the voices of those directly affected by these struggles, we can learn what changes are needed and take meaningful steps forward; break down stereotypes, address inequities, and build a more inclusive and equitable future for all.

# THE DIGITAL LENS: VIEWING DISABILITY THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

In recent years, technology has proven to be a transformative force for various aspects of society, including the lives of individuals with disabilities. The introduction of assistive technologies has provided new opportunities for accessibility, inclusion, and independence for people with disabilities, revolutionizing how they interact with the world. However, while these innovations have created new possibilities, they have also brought forward challenges and biases that must be addressed, especially regarding the digital divide and the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) biases on disabled communities.

Technology acts as an enabler of accessibility; these technologies range from simple tools like hearing aids and wheelchairs to more sophisticated solutions like speech recognition software, eye-tracking devices, and AI-powered applications for the visually impaired.

For instance, screen readers, such as JAWS and NVDA, have enabled blind or visually impaired individuals to access websites and digital content by converting text into speech. Similarly, voice-activated technologies, like Apple's Siri or Amazon's Alexa, have empowered individuals with mobility impairments to perform tasks that would traditionally require physical interaction, such as adjusting home temperature or sending messages. These technologies not only foster independence but also enhance quality of life by increasing access to education, employment, and social interaction.



Another groundbreaking advancement is the development of prosthetics and exoskeletons. While prosthetics have been around for centuries, modern versions—often embedded with advanced sensors and powered by AI—are becoming more functional, adaptable, and even responsive to the wearer's needs. For example, companies like Open Bionics are producing affordable prosthetic arms that are controlled by muscle movements, allowing amputees to regain finer motor control and functionality.



While these innovations represent significant progress, there are still numerous challenges in ensuring that digital technologies are accessible to all disabled individuals. One of the most pressing issues is the digital divide—the gap between those who have access to technology and those who do not. This divide is exacerbated for people with disabilities, particularly those in underprivileged communities who may lack access to essential devices, internet services, or digital literacy training.

In many parts of the world, especially in low-income regions, individuals with disabilities face significant barriers to accessing both basic and assistive technologies. The high cost of advanced prosthetics, hearing aids, or specialized software remains an obstacle, and in some cases, financial support is inadequate or unavailable. Furthermore, the lack of internet infrastructure in remote areas can severely limit access to educational resources, online employment opportunities, and telemedicine—services that could help bridge the gap for disabled individuals.



Beyond the accessibility of physical devices, the growing reliance on AI-powered tools raises concerns about algorithmic bias and its impact on underprivileged disabled communities. Many AI systems are trained on large datasets that may not be inclusive of diverse disabilities or individuals from marginalized groups, leading to inaccurate or discriminatory outcomes.

Despite these challenges, there have been numerous success stories where assistive technologies have significantly improved the lives of disabled individuals, demonstrating the immense potential for tech to drive positive change.

One such success story is the development of "Seeing AI," an app by Microsoft that uses computer vision to describe the world for visually impaired users. The app can identify people, read text, recognize products through barcodes, and even interpret emotions from facial expressions. It has received praise for its accuracy and ease of use, providing a simple yet effective tool for individuals to navigate daily challenges and interact with their environment.

Another powerful example is the exoskeleton suit developed by Ekso Bionics. The suit is designed for individuals with spinal cord injuries, allowing them to stand, walk, and even climb stairs with the assistance of powered movements. For individuals who had been confined to wheelchairs, this technology has been life-changing, offering a new sense of autonomy and independence.



As we look into the future, there are several opportunities to ensure that technology continues to serve the needs of people with disabilities in an inclusive and equitable manner.

First, it is essential to tackle the digital divide by increasing investment in accessible infrastructure, particularly in low-income and rural areas. Governments and private companies should work together to make assistive technologies more affordable and widely available, offering subsidies or insurance coverage for individuals who may not otherwise have access. Furthermore, digital literacy programs should be implemented to ensure that people with disabilities, especially those in underprivileged communities, are equipped with the skills necessary to utilize these technologies effectively. It is also crucial to address the issue of AI biases by ensuring that developers use inclusive, diverse datasets when training AI systems.

The digital lens has the potential to transform how disability is viewed, providing unprecedented opportunities for inclusion and accessibility. However, as with any technological advancement, there are challenges to overcome, particularly in ensuring equal access and addressing biases in digital systems. By working to bridge the digital divide, removing biases from AI systems, and fostering collaboration between stakeholders, society can create a future where technology truly empowers all individuals, including those with disabilities. Through these efforts, we can ensure that the digital world is not just a tool of convenience, but a platform for equal opportunity and social equity.



# REDEFINING THE CANVAS: DISABILITY AND ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

*Art has always been a reflection of society, a powerful medium to challenge stereotypes, evoke empathy, and inspire change. But when it comes to disability, the canvas often remainse incomplete—defined by underrepresentation or misrepresentation. In recent years, disabled artists and storytellers have stepped into the spotlight, weaving intersectionality into their work to reshape societal attitudes and celebrate the power of inclusion.*

## Amplifying Voices: Disabled Artists and Intersectionality

Disabled artists bring unique perspectives to the creative space, informed by their lived experiences at the crossroads of disability, race, gender, and culture. For instance, British artist Yinka Shonibare uses his work to explore the complexities of identity and colonialism, incorporating his experience with physical disability into his striking installations. Similarly, American writer Alice Wong, founder of the Disability Visibility Project, amplifies voices within the disabled community through essays and storytelling.

Intersectionality allows these artists to highlight the multifaceted nature of disability, challenging the singular, monolithic narrative that often dominates public discourse. Their art and advocacy illuminate how disability intersects with other aspects of identity, creating richer, more nuanced representations.

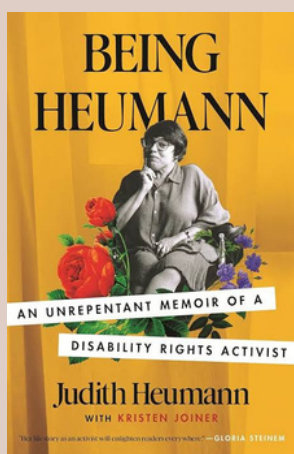
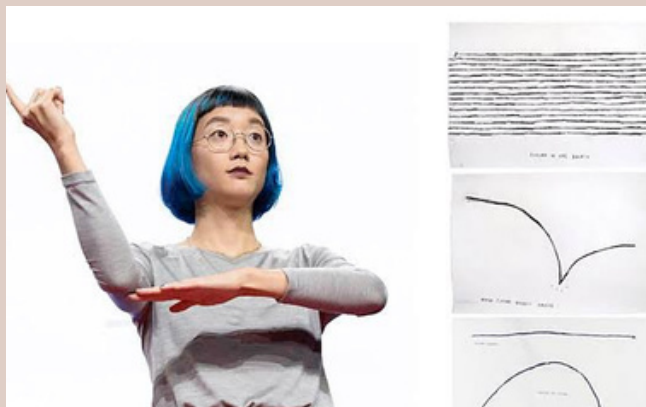
## Representation in Media and Literature: A Changing Narrative

Historically, media and literature have been rife with reductive portrayals of disability—from the pitiable "tragic figure" to the "inspirational hero." These tropes not only dehumanize but also limit societal understanding of the disabled experience. However, there has been a gradual shift toward authentic representation.

Films like *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution* showcase the power of collective action in the disability rights movement, while television shows like *Speechless* bring humor and authenticity to the portrayal of disabled characters. Similarly, novels like Riva Lehrer's *Golem Girl* and Sigrid Nunez's *The Friend* offer deeply personal insights into living with disability, fostering empathy and breaking down barriers.

These inclusive narratives are not just reflective but transformative. By representing disability as an integral part of the human experience, they challenge audiences to reconsider ingrained biases and embrace diversity.





### Storytelling as Empowerment

Storytelling is more than an artistic expression; it is a means of empowerment. For disabled individuals, sharing their stories becomes a way to reclaim agency, dismantle stigma, and build community. Platforms like the Disability Visibility Project and We Are Visible provide spaces for disabled voices to be heard, fostering connections and sparking dialogue.

Take, for example, the work of Deaf artist and filmmaker Christine Sun Kim. Through her innovative sound-based art, Kim challenges conventional notions of sound and language, opening up new ways of thinking about communication. Similarly, Judith Heumann, a pioneering disability rights activist, uses storytelling in her memoir *Being Heumann* to highlight the systemic barriers faced by disabled individuals and the resilience required to overcome them.

By sharing their stories, disabled artists not only empower themselves but also pave the way for a more inclusive society—one that values diverse perspectives and experiences.

### Toward an Inclusive Future:

The celebration of disabled artists and inclusive storytelling is not just about representation; it is about redefining the cultural narrative. It is a call to recognize the richness of human diversity and the transformative power of art. Whether through films, books, or paintings, these artists remind us that disability is not a limitation but a lens through which to view the world differently—and more fully.

As society moves toward greater inclusivity, it is imperative to support and amplify the voices of disabled artists. This means creating accessible spaces, funding initiatives that prioritize diversity, and actively seeking out and engaging with stories that challenge our perceptions.

By redefining the canvas, disabled artists are not only reshaping art but also reshaping society—one brushstroke, one story, and one audience at a time.



# THE HIDDEN EPIDEMIC: WHEN MENTAL HEALTH AND DISABILITY INTERSECT

The intersection of mental health and disability is a pressing issue that demands our urgent attention. Far too often, individuals grappling with both physical disabilities and mental health challenges find themselves caught in a web of dual stigma, misrepresentation, and formidable barriers to care. These individuals face unique hurdles that can perpetuate a vicious cycle, especially when society fails to recognize and address their complex realities.

For many individuals, the experience of living with a physical disability is frequently compounded by mental health struggles. The challenges of daily life, from coping with chronic pain to navigating social isolation, can fuel anxiety and depression. At the same time, those with mental health issues may experience difficulties in effectively managing their physical conditions.



## The Stigma Factor

Stigma remains one of the most significant barriers for individuals at this intersection. Society often simplifies the narratives around disabilities, leading to harmful stereotypes and misconceptions. For instance, mental health issues might be dismissed as mere figments of imagination, and individuals with physical disabilities may face pressure to seem "grateful" for their situation. Such perspectives not only dehumanize those individuals but also discourage them from seeking critical help and support.



## Overcoming Barriers to Care

Access to mental healthcare is notoriously difficult for those with disabilities, with several key barriers impeding their journey, such as

**Physical Access:** Many healthcare facilities aren't designed to accommodate mobility aids, wheelchairs, or other accessibility needs. This can discourage or even prevent individuals from seeking help. Solutions like universally accessible buildings, telehealth options, and mobile services can make a real difference.

**Financial Strain:** The cost of living with a disability often includes added healthcare expenses, making mental health services less accessible. Many insurance plans may not cover specialized mental health care or may impose high out-of-pocket costs. Expanding coverage for mental health and disability services could ease the financial burden.

**Specialized Knowledge Gaps:** Mental health professionals need more training on the specific challenges faced by individuals with physical disabilities. This could include how to navigate the emotional impact of living with a disability or the effects of chronic pain on mental health. This could be addressed through better training programs and partnerships with disability advocacy groups.

**Lack of Awareness:** Too often, health policy overlooks the intersection of physical disabilities and mental health. Advocacy for policy change, increased research, and a more integrated approach to care could help bridge this gap and ensure that people with disabilities receive comprehensive care.



### **Addressing the Trauma Link**

Trauma adds another layer of complexity for those navigating both physical and psychosocial disabilities. Many individuals have experienced significant life events—such as accidents, abuse, or systemic inequality—that contribute to the challenges they face. The psychological impact of such trauma can manifest as PTSD, anxiety disorders, or debilitating depression.

To foster healing, it's vital to adopt trauma-informed care approaches emphasizing safety, trust, and empowerment. Services that validate and understand the lived experiences of those with dual disabilities can create an environment where recovery and resilience flourish.

### **Advocating for Change**

We must advocate for systemic changes that address these significant barriers. It is essential to promote healthcare services that address both physical and mental health needs seamlessly. This would ensure that individuals with disabilities receive holistic care, with both their physical and mental health being treated in tandem, reducing the silos that often exist between different types of care. Establish strong community networks where individuals can share their experiences and build resilience together. Peer support not only helps individuals feel less isolated but also provides a safe space for exchanging strategies for coping with both the physical and emotional challenges of living with a disability.

Another important step is to equip mental health providers with essential knowledge about the needs and rights of individuals with disabilities, fostering empathetic care. This training should focus on both the mental and physical aspects of disability, helping professionals deliver more tailored, effective, and compassionate treatment. Actively push for legislation that expands access to mental healthcare, ensuring everyone—especially those with dual disabilities—receives the care they require. Advocating for inclusive policies that prioritize the intersection of mental health and physical disabilities can drive systemic change, ensuring greater equity in healthcare access.

By throwing light on the critical intersection of mental health and disability, we can create an inclusive and empathetic society. One where individuals are recognized not only for their challenges but as complete individuals deserving of respect, support, and comprehensive care. The hidden epidemic of mental health among people with disabilities cannot be ignored; it is time for awareness, empathy, and decisive action.



### **Let's Talk About Disability and Mental Health**



Mental health is a leading cause of disability worldwide



For young people, depression, anxiety and behavioural disorders are major causes of illness and disability



Persons with disabilities often face stigma and discrimination and are more likely to report mental distress



Invisible disabilities are often overlooked and misunderstood

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# AGEING WITH DISABILITY: THE UNTOLD STORIES OF GROWING OLDER WITH UNIQUE CHALLENGES IN INDIA



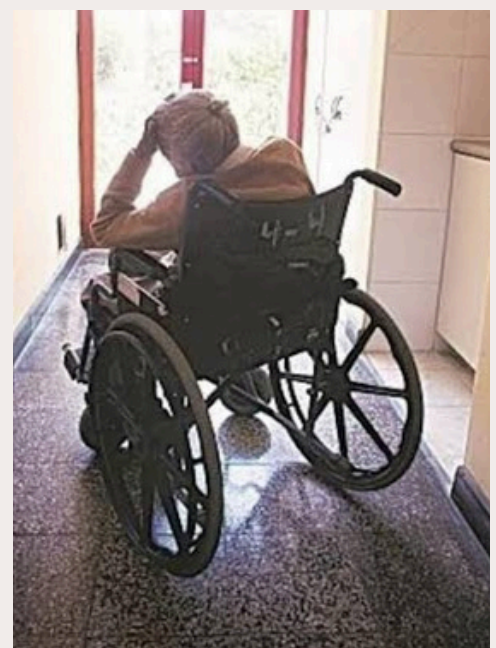
India's growing older population is causing a rise in ageing difficulties, but the intersection of ageing and disability is often overlooked. Those with disabilities face unique challenges and are often misunderstood. Navigating ageing for these individuals involves managing physical tolls and the deteriorating impact of their disabilities. The system is often inadequate and unable to adequately prepare or sympathize with their needs, leaving them and their caregivers in the shadows of public debate.

## **The Unspoken Struggles of Ageing with Disability**

Over 104 million people in India have disabilities, with a significant portion of this group being the aging population. These individuals face challenges in daily life, such as accessing public spaces and healthcare. However, rural areas in India, where a significant portion of the population lives, can exacerbate these issues due to inadequate infrastructure, resources, and societal awareness.

Consider the story of Asha Paswan, a 68-year-old woman with rheumatoid arthritis. While her disability has limited her mobility for years, as she ages, it has become increasingly difficult for her to perform basic tasks like cooking, bathing, or cleaning. Asha lives in a small village in Uttar Pradesh, where access to healthcare and disability support is minimal. "I have to wait months for my physiotherapy session, and when I do get it, the facilities are subpar," she says. "I feel like I'm becoming invisible—no one seems to understand how much harder it is to live with a disability as I grow older."

Asha's situation highlights the underrepresentation of older disabled people in India's policy and society, resulting in limited healthcare access, poorly constructed public spaces, and a severe shortage of long-term care services. This issue is exacerbated by a healthcare system that solely treats age-related disorders without considering disability.





### **The Burden of Caregiving**

In India, the concept of caregiving is frequently viewed as a household role, particularly for seniors. While this may promote close-knit family relationships, it also entails a significant emotional, physical, and financial load on family members, many of whom are elderly themselves. Carers, mostly women, are frequently left without appropriate support or credit for the critical role they serve.

Take the case of Manoj Apte, a 74-year-old man with polio who lives in a suburban area of Mumbai. His wife, Sunita, has been his primary caregiver for decades. However, as Sunita gets older, managing Manoj's care has become increasingly difficult. "I have arthritis in my knees, and helping Manoj move around is physically taxing for me," Sunita shares. "There is no one else to help, and I can't afford professional care. We struggle in silence."

Manoj's story highlights a hidden reality for many older disabled people and caregivers in India. While the concept of family caregiving is strongly embedded in the culture, the absence of institutional support and the growing health issues that caregivers face create an untenable situation. As the number of elderly people with disabilities increases, the informal caregiving structure becomes more fragile, emphasising the critical need for professional caregiving services and assistance

### **Ageism and Ableism: A Double Burden**

Ageism and ableism often lead to a double burden of prejudice for older persons with disabilities. Ageism, which is a prejudice against senior citizens, can manifest in daily interactions and the healthcare system. It is worsened by ableism, which sees disability as a personal tragedy or constraint, devaluing their quality of life and disdaining their medical needs. Older people with disabilities often claim their issues are less serious, with medical professionals dismissing them as a result of ageing instead of considering the challenges of living with a handicap. This disrespectful attitude perpetuates the notion that older disabled people are not as valuable as younger, able-bodied people. These prejudices are deeply ingrained in the healthcare system, and elderly disabled persons often feel marginalized.

### **Policy Gaps and Areas for Improvement**

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, is a significant initiative in India aimed at ensuring access to social security, work, and education for people with disabilities. However, these regulations often overlook the unique needs of elderly people with disabilities, denying them the necessary protections and services. The National Social Assistance Program (NSAP) and other government programs are often dispersed and underfunded, lacking accessible healthcare, long-term care options, and physical infrastructure. While innovative measures like public transportation, community-based rehabilitation programs, and home care services have been implemented in states like Tamil Nadu and Kerala, rural residents often receive little or no assistance. The gap between urban and rural areas and the lack of integration of ageing and disability policies at the national level highlight the need for more inclusive solutions.

### **The Call for Systemic Change**

India's aging population is a significant issue, requiring systemic changes. Personal stories of Asha and Manoj highlight the need for integrated policies, long-term care, accessible healthcare, and public infrastructure. Societal attitudes must shift to value the lives of older disabled people, addressing ageism and ableism. By addressing these challenges, India can create a more inclusive society where aging with disability is seen as a part of human experience, rather than a burden





# Intersectionality: A Call to Action for Disability Inclusion

Understanding the lived experiences of disabled individuals requires a deeper comprehension of their disabilities and the intersecting aspects of their identities. Disability does not exist in isolation; it intersects with factors such as race, gender, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. These overlapping identities profoundly shape how individuals experience the world and determine their access to opportunities, resources, and support systems.

The challenges faced by disabled individuals are not merely tied to their impairments but are often amplified by social and structural inequalities. Intersectionality helps us unravel these complex relationships, highlighting how disability and societal factors are intertwined. For example, a woman with a disability from a marginalized racial background faces unique layers of discrimination, which affect her access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities.

Viewing disability through the lens of intersectionality enables the development of more inclusive and holistic policies that prioritize social equity and the empowerment of every individual. While progress has been made in disability rights, systemic challenges such as ableism and intersectional invisibility persist. People with disabilities who belong to marginalized communities face compounded struggles that are often overlooked. Addressing these disparities requires targeted efforts and a nuanced understanding of their lived experiences.

Ableism remains one of the most pervasive barriers disabled individuals face, manifesting in social stigma, discrimination, and systemic exclusion. Despite legal frameworks aimed at inclusivity, significant obstacles remain in physical spaces, digital platforms, and workplaces, limiting full participation. Many disabled individuals continue to experience disparities in employment, healthcare, and representation in media and politics, further perpetuating stereotypes and marginalization. Weak implementation of disability rights policies often leaves individuals without necessary accommodations and support. To combat ableism, society must undergo a cultural shift, strengthen policy enforcement, and foster truly inclusive environments where everyone can thrive.



# ABLEISM

Intersectional invisibility highlights the compounded marginalization of individuals at the intersection of multiple disadvantaged identities, such as disabled women of color, LGBTQ+ individuals with disabilities, or low-income individuals from racial minorities. These individuals often face discrimination that mainstream policies fail to address, as they primarily focus on singular aspects of identity. This lack of recognition perpetuates disparities in healthcare, education, economic opportunities, and protection from violence, leaving these individuals further marginalized.

An inclusive approach that acknowledges the complexities of intersecting identities is vital for empowering disabled individuals. Advocacy and allyship play a pivotal role in fostering equity and inclusion. Efforts such as Microsoft's Disability Hiring Initiative, which offers mentorship and training for individuals with disabilities, demonstrate how inclusive practices can create equitable work environments. Similarly, representation in media—such as Millicent Simmonds' portrayal of a deaf character in *A Quiet Place*—highlights the importance of authenticity and visibility in reshaping societal narratives.

Nevertheless, significant gaps remain in healthcare accessibility, education, and employment opportunities. To bridge these gaps, society must remain committed to fostering awareness, advocating for change, and practicing allyship. By embracing intersectionality and prioritizing accessibility, representation, and equity, we can collectively create a world where everyone, regardless of their identities, has the opportunity to thrive.

Together, we can ensure a future of hope, inclusion, and opportunity for all—a world that truly values and respects the diverse experiences of every individual.



# IN THE NEXT EDITION

## Redefining Accessibility: The Role of AI, Innovation, and Inclusive Design in Shaping the Future of Disability Empowerment



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