



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Social Science

PERCEPTION OF GENERAL PUBLIC TOWARDS SEXUALITY OF PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

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ABSTRACT

The issue of Sexuality of Persons with Disabilities is still an unheard topic among the general public. In India, sexuality is a taboo subject to be confined within four walls of bedroom and not to be discussed candidly in public. Disability is also seen as something to be embarrassed about and to be kept under the wraps. The two taboos come together to form a harsh reality which is neither acknowledged nor addressed. There is an absolute deadlock and no discourse. The current article explores the perception of general public towards the sexuality concerns of persons with disabilities. The article is based on the primary data collected from one hundred respondents. The findings of the study reflect poorly on the knowledge base of the persons without disabilities with respect to the sexual needs of the persons with disabilities and a complete apathy towards them.

Introduction

Perception is defined as the way one thinks about someone or something. Oxford dictionary defines perception as “a way of regarding, understanding, or interpreting something”. The perception an individual carries, influences his/her behaviour towards another person in a positive or a negative way. Perception plays a vital role in achieving equality as it may translate into behavior towards other individuals and groups in society which may have negative consequences. Disabled people continue to face challenges in several spheres of their lives and many of these challenges involve people’s perception. Negative perceptions result in discrimination such as social rejection and maintaining social distance towards the persons with disabilities (PWDs). For example, non-disabled people may avoid the persons with disabilities because they think that the persons with disabilities cannot do anything and will become a burden on them. The disabled people often do not know how they will be treated when they enter a social situation, whether they will be treated as an object of sympathy, pity or curiosity. They also do not know whether they will be avoided, rejected, praised or patronized. The attitude and perception of society towards them becomes a decisive factor in developing their personality and integrating them in the mainstream society.

Review of Literature

There is considerable literature to indicate that the persons with disabilities are more likely to experience negative attitude than the persons without disabilities. Overall analysis of the research studies with respect to perception of general public towards sexuality concerns of the persons with disabilities reveals the poor knowledge base among general public on sexuality of the PWDs and the negative perception towards sexual needs of the PWDs (Deepak, S.; 2002, Milligan & Neufeldt; 2001 & McCabe, Cummins, & Deeks; 2000).

Objectives and Research Methodology

The objective of the study was to know the perception of general public towards sexuality and sexual needs of young persons with physical disabilities. Here the term physical disabilities included three forms of disabilities viz. locomotor, visual and hearing disability. Through the study, the researcher has tried to gauge the opinion of the general public on the three core components of the sexuality viz. Sexual Needs, Marriage and Reproduction with respect to the PWDs. This is besides gathering information on the exposure of the general public towards the PWDs.

Quota sampling technique was used to select the sample of persons without disabilities. The sampling was done in two stages. In the first stage, the population was divided into two strata based on the Gender i.e. Male and Female. In the second stage, equal number of respondents i.e. 50 was selected from each stratum. An interview schedule was used to collect in-depth information from the respondents. Quantitative analysis has been done with the help of statistical package SPSS. Qualitative data was analyzed by categorizing the data under certain themes and sub-headings.

Profile of the Respondents

The respondents were taken from the age group of 18-35 years residing in the National Capital Territory of Delhi at the time of the research study. Equal representation was given to respondents according to their gender (50 males and 50 females). Maximum number (47%) of respondents was in the age group of 30 yrs. & above followed by 24 percent respondents in the age category of 26-30 years. The sample comprised mix of people from all religion, though a majority of them (81%) were Hindus and Muslims (12%). The distribution of the respondents according to their educational qualification revealed that the maximum number of the respondents were Post Graduates (40).

Findings of the Study

1. Attitude towards the PWDs in General

Perceptions are product of life experiences, including the relationship we build with the people around us. An individual’s attitude towards a disabled person is shaped by his/her personal experience of knowing a disabled person. This perception often affects the way people behave in a particular situation towards that person. Therefore, it was considered important to assess the exposure level of the general public towards the persons with disabilities. The findings of the study revealed that sixty two percent of the respondents knew persons with disabilities in their day to day life ranging from immediate family member to friends, colleagues, neighbor, acquaintance and relative. More than quarter (38%) of the respondent was not exposed to the persons with disabilities in their everyday surroundings. This in way speaks volumes about the less integration of the disabled people in the society. It was noteworthy to observe that a large chunk of the respondents still opted for sympathetic view (69%) towards the persons with disabilities followed by 17 percent respondents feeling indifferent towards them and their disability. The appropriate feeling of empathy was only felt by 8 percent respondents. Five percent respondents had feelings of respect and appreciation for the persons with disabilities because of the way they were handling/dealing their disability whereas one respondent felt feeling of anger towards the PWDs.

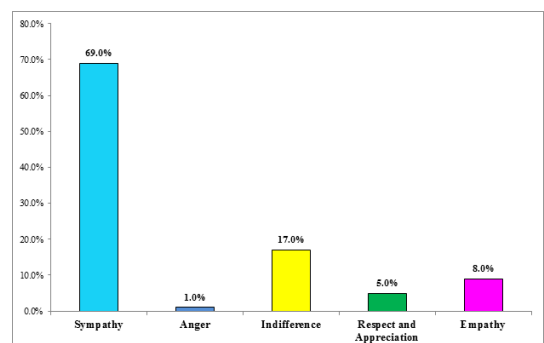


Figure 1: Feelings about Persons with Disabilities

60 percent of the respondents still believed that disability is an

outcome of either bad karma (49%) or wrong deeds of past life (11%). The remaining 40 percent were of the opinion that disability can happen to anybody at any time. The above findings reveal that there is still a considerable population who believes in theory of karma and disability and considers disability as penance for wrong past deeds.

2. Perception towards Sexual Needs of the Persons with Disabilities

The findings reflected poorly on the knowledge base of the persons without disabilities with respect to the sexual needs of the persons with disabilities. More than fifty 50 percent of the respondents were either carrying wrong notions or were clueless about the sexuality of the PWDs. Among those respondents, who considered the PWDs as sexual, sexual intercourse with the spouse/partner emerged as the most popular source of the sexual satisfaction for the PWDs. Disability-specific variations were observed in the responses. Most of the respondents believed that the persons with locomotor disabilities did not engage in practice of masturbation or so called real sex would be hard for the persons with locomotor disabilities than visually and hearing disabled. Empirical studies conducted by several researchers (Oliver et al., 2002; Scotti et al., 1996; Wolfe, 1997; Yool et al., 2003) also revealed that the Persons without disabilities consider many sexual behaviors less acceptable or inappropriate when involved in by the PWDs.

3. Perception towards Marriage of Persons with Disabilities

Marriage is fundamental to human life. The right to marry and found a family willfully is a right enshrined in various Human Right laws and United Nations treaties to which India is a signatory. The findings reflected the existence of stereotypical notions and negative attitude towards the marriage of the persons with disabilities. It was only handful of the respondents (less than fifty 50 percent) who felt that the persons with disabilities should get married. A little above half of the respondents were of the opinion that the persons with disabilities should either get married to non-disabled person or somebody who is less disabled than them. This verdict was governed by the element of sympathy towards the persons with disabilities. The respondents felt that the persons with disabilities cannot take care of themselves and therefore, need a non-disabled or less disabled partner for them. Becoming burden on another person(s) and inability to look after the partner emerged as the strong reasons quoted by the persons without disabilities for not allowing the PWDs to get married.

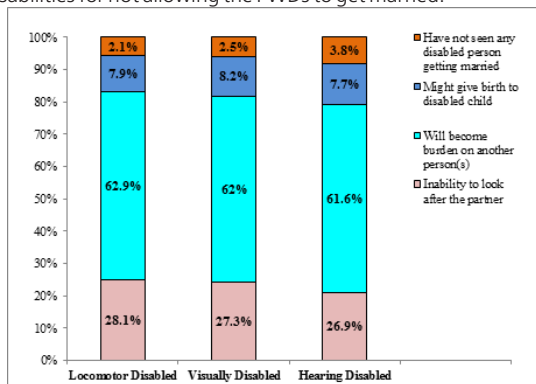


Figure 2: Reasons why disabled people should not marry

Moreover, the resistance for marriage was found to be more prominent with respect to the persons with locomotor disabilities than the visual and hearing disabilities. This also signifies that the visibility of the disability has a greater impact on the perception of the people.

4. Perception towards Reproduction of Persons with Disabilities

Right to reproduce is a right bestowed to all individuals. There are variety of reasons why human beings reproduce; the most prominent one being to carry forward the name of the family and love for children. However, it is seen that the persons with

disabilities face barriers when it comes to reproduction. There exist social biases that portray the persons with disabilities as infertile and incompetent of being parents. Over all analysis of the findings revealed that a considerable section (75%) of the persons without disabilities were not in favor of the persons with disabilities exercising their reproduction rights. More than 70 percent of the respondents in the researchers’ findings feared that it will add on to the population of disabled people in the society. “Disability breeds disability” is the common notion among society. This notion gets more prominent if the disability is visible. Moreover, they were of the opinion that children born from disabled people will not be properly taken care of. The knowledge level of respondents with respect to the reproduction abilities of the PWDs also reflected dismal state. Approximately a quarter of the respondents still had wrong or no knowledge about the reproduction abilities of the PWDs. Only a handful of the respondents believed that the persons with disabilities are capable of reproducing a normal child.

Conclusion

The perception of society towards the persons with disabilities impacts their self-worth and esteem especially when the perception is negative in nature. Over the last two decades, with the introduction of legislations pertaining to the persons with disabilities, there has been a general improvement in opportunities and visibility for the person with disabilities. The findings show that there is a considerable section of people among the general public who hold negative attitude towards the sexuality concerns of the persons with disabilities and these perceptions are underpinned by the common lack of understanding about disability and disabled peoples’ needs in general and sexuality in particular. Moreover, attitudes towards person with less visible disabilities tend to be less negative than visible disabilities. The findings echo a lack of exposure towards the persons with disabilities which is reflected in their opinion and attitude which needs to be checked and changed.

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