

## Editorial

In 1981, after the International Year of Disability was celebrated, slowly but steadily Disability Rights Groups began to emerge in India. There were relentless efforts by the disabled people to gain rights and respect. This movement led to an equal opportunities legislation in 1995. But like most fights for the rights of the disabled in other developing countries as well as the developed world, the movement in India was largely male-centric and patriarchal in nature. For women with disabilities, social experiences were limited as it was difficult for the personal to be seen as political. In the Indian context, this bias was reflected in the primary questions raised by the disability movement in the 1980s and 90s. These concerns were primarily related to education, employment, accessibility - built and in the form of communication and assistive devices. Women with disabilities were largely ignored. It is only in the last decade that some visibility of the vulnerability of women and girls with disabilities can be discerned.

This Special Volume of *Peace Prints*, a South Asian Journal of Peacebuilding, focuses on Gender and Disability. The papers in this special issue illustrate that there are several converging themes between Disability Studies and Gender Studies.

This volume, seeks to understand disability through a gender lens. It sees disability not just as a physical or mental condition but a social condition which is heavily stigmatized. The papers in the volume draw from the Academy as well as practitioners in the field. The authors engage with a range of concerns; human rights, mad studies, mental illness, queer discourse, desire and sexuality, rights of indigenous women, domestic violence, motherhood, cinema and technology vis-à-vis disability.

The care for disabled women comes primarily from the mothers who cannot give up on their children and young adults. As I have stated elsewhere “*although the stress of impairment impacts upon both the parents, it is usually the mother who bears the brunt of the child’s disability*” While there is research on the mothering of disabled children, there is paucity of work on the experiences of mothers who are disabled. Rachana Johri in *Disability and Mothering: Embodied Knowledge* underscores the intersections of feminism, mothering and disability. She begins the paper with a short discussion of the problematic place of the mother in feminist theory, and connects this to her research on mothering of daughters and the question of the selective abortion of a foetus that is projected to be disabled. The author here departs from the conventional focus on mothers of disabled children, and traces the trajectory of the right of a woman with disability to be a mother. She argues that focusing attention on mothers with disability might be a productive space from which to negotiate a relationship between disability theory, feminism and mothering. Mothering with disability makes this relationship less antagonistic than appears to be the case through the prism of debates on selective foeticide of the disabled.

In *Missing Disabled Women: Gendered Information and Communication Technology Development Projects in India* Sushil K. Oswal and Keshreeyaji R. Oswal highlight the information and communication technology development (ICTD) that caters to the needs of the disabled. On one hand, this establishment claims to target low-resource and low-income regions in India in the name of poor people and on the other hand quite regularly excludes poor disabled women even in targeted disability population projects. The paper underscore the literal and figurative exclusions wrought while pointing to the potential such projects might acquire with the participation of disabled women. There is an attempt to re-frame the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (RPD) of 2016 from the perspective of rural disabled women. The authors make a case for the law to be serviceable for the entire Indian disabled community. They ask the ICTD community to wear a less “benevolent” mantle and include disabled women as key stakeholders and active participants in defining, designing, and operationalizing disability and technology projects.

In understanding the specific nature of violence against women with disabilities, this volume underscores the heterogeneity of disability as Seema Baquer shares a gendered response to leprosy in *Disabling Women Further: A Gendered Lens on the Leprosy Affected*. Though included in the legislation, there is limited research on the experiences of people who have leprosy, as the society associates leprosy with stigma, defect and imperfection. The author gives a brief introduction to the condition and current situation with regard to leprosy in India. She summarizes the gender-based issues in the life of women affected by leprosy. She reminds us that the real challenge in the reach of the RPD Act, 2016 lies in taking its benefit to the invisible millions of leprosy-cured people who hide their condition, build other narratives about their deformities and live silently in the general communities under the constant fear of identification, discrimination and ostracization. The answer would lie in challenging the attitudinal barriers to leprosy, beginning with the removal of the 119 legal provisions in Indian laws that directly discriminate against an individual on grounds of leprosy. As a welcome first step, on the last day of the sixteenth Lok Sabha during its monsoon session in 2018, the government introduced, The Personal Law (Amendment) Bill, 2018 to remove leprosy as a ground for divorce from various Acts governing marriage and divorce. However, we have to contest the able-bodied mind set of the society. As the movement reworked on the heterogeneity of disability, RPD 2016 bill therefore conceived of 21 disabilities. Though we cannot discuss the nature of different lived realities, we do acknowledge the fact that inequality and deprivation do not exist in isolation, as disability and gender intersect to impact the lives of disabled women daily. Therefore disabled women struggle for survival, as they face multitude of oppressions with minimal and shrinking support.

The article *Disability and Domestic Violence: A Woman's Perspective* by Shampa SenGupta traces the trajectory of violence in the lives of women with disabilities. Both non-disabled and women with disabilities share experiences of everyday violence. Violence against disabled women and girls emanates from gender-based and disability-based discrimination. The experiential reality of disabled women includes a wider range of emotional, physical and sexual abuse: by personal attendants, health care providers, strangers as well as emotional abuse by family members.

The author gives us a legal perspective as well as a vivid picture of lived realities of women with disabilities. Indian laws to prevent domestic violence do not take into account specific needs of disabled women. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016 that addresses issue of violence/discrimination faced by women with disabilities does not spell out domestic violence. In fact, RPD Act talks more about Right to Marriage & Family Life, which may be a reflection of disability movement's preoccupation with defying "institutionalization" and glorifying community living. This ignores the fact that "family" is also an "institution" and can be a site of violence/discrimination. Shampa shares her experiences from the field of dealing with cases of women with disabilities facing domestic violence. These poignant cases locate gaps in both feminist and disability movements to deal with domestic violence.

Recognizing that familial experiences are reflected in popular culture, Neha Sen in *Gendering the Disability Discourse: Disabled and Independence in Indian Cinema* attempts to raise several questions. For instance, how far has cinema been able to articulate the struggles of women? Has the medium, which is male-dominated and controlled, used the female body to document struggles for equality and modes of resistance? Or does it further push the women's cause into a corner? How has disability been used in popular cinema in the context of resistance? Does cinema perpetuate and reinforce stereotypes, or is disability used as a technique to question and defy ablebodiedness? The author documents the changing trend in Indian Cinema especially with regard to exploration of sexuality and sexual desires of women with disabilities through new age films like *Margarita With A Straw*. The film is a bold attempt to articulate sexual desires, sexuality and queer relationships.

The concepts of care, support and assistance are of vital importance to disabled and non-disabled alike. The article also discusses the links and tensions between these concepts, and interrogates its depiction on screen. One redeeming factor that is gleaned from Sen's work is that there are a number of women-centric films in the last decade. However, popular cinema is still embedded in patriarchal constructions. Largely women are depicted relationally as mothers, wives and lovers. Cinema has failed to offer stories with single unattached disabled woman. Popular cinema in India has to reconstruct the narratives of both hope and despair, so that a more creative dialogue and depiction of disability emerges. Sadly, in this area so far not only patriarchy but normativity is the dominant troupe.

In her paper *Forgotten Voices: Claiming Spaces by Indigenous Women with Disabilities*, Pratima Gurung, looks at the disabled women, who, make up one of the minority groups occupying invisible and isolated status in Nepali society. While every disabled woman faces multiple and intersectional forms of discrimination, the indigenous women are invisible in the disability discourse. They are among the poorest, most marginalized, stigmatized, excluded groups and most likely to face violence. The author attempts to understand the experience of indigenous women with disabilities, their negotiations of multiple axes of identity. There are striking similarities between experiences of women in Nepal and those from India and other countries of South Asia.

One cannot ignore the reel as we move to understand the real in the paper, *Revisiting Gender Norms Across Intersections of Disability, Sexuality and Class in Bangladesh* by Saad Adnan Khan and Farhana Alam. Khan and Alam explore what happens to both disabled women

and men who are already stigmatized with respect to desire and romance. So the significant question is how do disabled women tell their stories of desire and how do others re-tell these stories, both to themselves and others? The article attempts to answer the above question by studying the sexuality of disabled people through photo narratives. The article explores how the disabled negate/hold up norms around masculinity and femininity, and experience vulnerabilities and agency. The authors find that sense of agency varies across class positions and that individuals feel both empowered and disempowered in matters of romance and marriage. Views about dating and marriage among the disabled also reinforce several patriarchal values, privileging male members of the society. The authors conclude by emphasizing the need to creatively and critically talk about disability in relation to gender, sex and sexuality and revise the able-bodied discourse of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights in Bangladesh.

Bindhulakshmi Pattadath in her article *Mad Studies and Feminist Disability Studies: Interconnections, Gaps, and Points of Contestation* uses research with women diagnosed as mentally ill by bio-medical psychiatry to explore the interconnections between Disability Studies and Mad Studies. As an emerging critical discipline in India, Mad Studies offers new ways of articulating disability. Using feminist material-discursive analysis as a theoretical framework, Pattadath examines embodied practices, relationships and negotiations of survivors. She provides a framework for denaturalizing impairment and offers an alternate epistemology of mental health care.

The final paper in this volume by Suchaita Tennati *Reclaiming “Illness” and “Disability” in Online Visual Queer and Mental Health Activism* attempts to understand the evolution of Queer Disability Studies (DS) in India. Queer DS has received considerable attention in the West. In India, however Queer DS remains at an extremely nascent stage.

The author offers a discourse analysis of online campaigns using Memes. She reveals that disability and queerness in India have similarities as both categories are pathologised and subjected to coercive medical treatment, violence and exclusion. While queer people labour significantly to escape the labels of “mentally ill” and “disabled”, they evidently resist identifying any similarities with the disabled. Disabled people are unlikely to find any immediate organic similarity with sexual minorities although de-sexualisation and vulnerability to sexual exploitation common areas of concern for the two groups. Yet, there is emerging hope for mutual understanding and coalitions. Two such promising instances are the #QueersAgainstQuacks campaign by the Humsafar Trust that was a “name and shame” campaign of psychiatrists and religious figures who considered homosexuality to be an illness using memes and people holding up placards with slogans of self-acceptance and #NothingToCure. The second campaign run by the White Swan Foundation to spread awareness about women and mental health titled #NotJustHormones, focused on the psychosocial aspects of “mental health issues” among women, which are often dismissed as physiological conditions. Both of these campaigns are notable in their attempt to spread awareness of the limits of biomedicine with its somatic reductionist approach. The author uses tools from visual anthropology to analyze the memes, photos and posters used by these campaigns and their sensitive representation of disability, mental health and homosexuality. What is critical is the understanding of the distinctions between “illness” and “disease”, “disability” and “disorder” and the false promise of “cure”. However, the selective use of anonymity in these images raise enduring concerns about the

meaning of being queer or mentally ill in the public sphere and the future for queer, disabled subjectivity that the field aspires.

Shilpa Anand reviews Shahd Alshammari's first book, *Notes on the Flesh* (2017) that brings together stories of the author's youth in post-Gulf War Kuwait.

The second review of *Disability and Mothering: Liminal Spaces of Embodied Knowledge* by Santosh Kumar highlights the similarities between disability and motherhood. The book reflects a rich understanding of both disabled and non-disabled vantage points with reference to mothering. As our knowledge of disability shifts, so do the cultural meanings attached to mothering, and vice versa. The review offers a constructive interpretation of the intersection of disability and mothering.

The articles in this Special Issue provide a stimulating, thought-provoking context to initiate new conversations. Disability is imperative to an understanding of human predicament both for academics and activists. The fact remains that Disabled Women have to fight the battle of normality as unified subjects in their own right.

As an editor, I have embarked on an exploration of some but not all areas that link gender and disability. That disability can happen to anyone at any stage of life, the day-to-day experience of living in inaccessible structures, women as care-givers of disabled family members, the impact of war and conflict on disability, issues of active passive euthanasia, disabilities caused by disasters, and the lives of queer disabled people are some of the silences that can be readily listed. This issue of *Peace Prints* will I hope still provide new perspectives that can inform both disabled and non-disabled lives. However, to truly empower all disabled people, it is vital to engage with these exclusions and silences. And journals such as *Peace Prints* have a critical role to play in addressing these in the future. To me, this is truly a work in progress.

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