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**SOCIAL WORK PRACTICES IN THE MATRIMONIAL PROSPECT OF  
WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES IN TIRUCHIRAPPALLI DISTRICT**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Marriage, from time immemorial has been one of the most enduring, profound relationships which restrain self-centeredness and self-indulgence. Marriage is the only relationship that conditions us for a lasting community and brings about social order. Though a section of people do not get married willfully for a cause, the women with disabilities are not able to get married due the negative attitude the society have towards the success of the marital life of the women with disabilities. The possibility of getting married for the women with disabilities is much less in comparing with the non-disabled women due to social stigma and discrimination leading to the experience of extreme isolation and social exclusion.*

*The disabled women are seen as incapable of intimate relationship and so the divorce rate among them are on the increase. They are forced to choose a disabled man as her life partner. But in some cases women with learning disabilities are encouraged to marry with the hope that the taking up of the role a wife or mother would cure her learning disabilities.*

*This research identifies that social work practice can remove the barriers and social stigma and may enable the women with disabilities to have access to sexual and reproductive health information, help them to navigate the physical, emotional and social issues involved in the marital relationships of the women with disabilities.*

**keywords:** *Disability, Marriage, Social work Practice, Social inclusion*

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## INTRODUCTION

We hope to live in a society where all are respected with due human rights and responsibilities. But it is crystal clear from the daily happenings that the women with disabilities experience numerous hurdles in their effort to make decent living. They are not given the possibility to actualize their potentialities and are treated as objects of our pity, persons in need of others support and service constantly. This sort of treatment has led them to have a low self-esteem and becomes the major encumbrance to overcome and improve their state.

Women with disabilities long to have a family that supports them in all the ways possible as they realize the important factor that families are the center of life on earth. Besides, the families also serve as the social security organizations for the women with disabilities. The families provide the dependents with the economical protection from the proceeds of the earning members. The women with disabilities long to form a family and to have children through the holy union called marriage. But the problem arises when the question of marriage for the women with disabilities is raised by the person concerned. Marriage for the women with disabilities becomes not only a problem but also a challenge which they have to face in their life. In poor countries, women with disabilities are simply marginalized and left aside. They are regarded as not capable of being a good wife and a dedicated mother. The nondisabled community often regards them as incapable of fulfilling the adult social roles (Asch & Fine, 1997).

Even if they attempt to marry, they are not able to identify the right partner and even if they succeed in identifying their partner the family life does not always become a bed of roses. They have to come across innumerable obstacles from the husband, society and their relatives. This leaves a deep scar in them.

So the researcher wanted to identify the matrimonial prospects of women with disabilities and the barriers encountered by them in this social institution. The study has brought to light the various obstacles that are to be conquered by the women with disabilities and majority of them felt that the care givers, helpers and their own family members do not advocate the marriage of the disabled women.

## UNITED NATIONS ON THE MARRIAGE OF THE DISABLED WOMEN

The United Nations has emphasized the importance of marital life and sexual relations of women with disabilities in Regulation No.9 of the Evidentiary Regulations of 1994 concerning Generalization of Opportunities for the Disabled under the heading of Family Life and Individual

Fulfillment. Thus the women with disabilities are entitled for a happy married life and reproductive state and need to be allowed to bring up their offspring and lead a decent living and in fact they long to.

## **METHODS AND MATERIALS**

### **Objectives**

The objectives of this research study are:

- To identify the possibilities of marriage for the women with disabilities
- To analyze the various difficulties the women with disabilities encounter in the process of getting married
- To find out the ways and means to establish the marital life of the women with disabilities

### **Methodology of data collection**

- ✓ Primary method of data collection was made use of by the researcher.
- ✓ For the data collection, interview schedule was adopted by the researcher through semi-structured and open ended individual questionnaire.

### **Universe**

- ❖ The district of Tiruchirappalli which is located at the centre of Tamil Nadu had been chosen for this research study.
- ❖ All the sixteen blocks of the district were taken into consideration. Only the 1249 women with disabilities registered in these 16 blocks constitute the universe of this research.

### **Sample Frame**

- ❖ Through the stratified disproportionate random sampling method from each block 20 women with disabilities were selected as a sample ( $16 \times 20 = 320$ ).

## **RESULTS**

The researcher has come out with the following results on the family's involvement in the marriage of the women with disabilities, the perception of the women with disabilities on their own marriage and the prospect of making choices on the marriages of the women with disabilities.

Figure 1

Distribution of the respondents according to the family's involvement in the Marriage of WWDs

S. No.	Family's involvement in the Marriage of WWDs	No. of Respondents (n = 320)	Percentage
1	<b>Question of marriage raised by family members</b>		
	Yes	146	45.7
	No	174	54.3
2	<b>Reasons for question not being raised</b>	(n=174)	
	Family cannot take decision due to my disability	50	28.8
	Studying at present	21	12.0
	Financial problems	39	22.4
	Family members think nobody will agree to marry me due to my disability	24	13.8
	Family members have not yet tried for my marriage	09	5.1
	Not of marriageable age	11	6.3
	I want to be self-dependent	20	11.6

The above research shows that 54.3 percent of the family member did not raise the question of marriage for the women with disabilities. The reason for not taking the decision is due to the fact that 28.8 percent could not take a decision due to the person's disability. 12 percent of the disabled were studying at present and so the question was not raised. For 22.4 percent of the disabled women the question could not be raised due to financial constraints in the family. 13.8 percent of the people's family thinks that due to the disability nobody will, come forward to marry her so better not to raise the question of marriage at all. 5.1 percent felt that the family not yet started thinking about the marriage of the disabled. 6.3 percent were below the age for the

marriage and so the question did not arise. 11.6 percent felt to be self-reliant and so the question did not arise at all.

**Figure 2**

**Distribution of the respondents according to the WWDs' perception  
On their Marriage**

S. No.	Perception of the WWDs on their Marriage	No. of Respondents (n = 320)	Percentage
1	<b>Perception: whether WWD should get married</b>		
	Yes	201	62.9
	No	119	37.1

The research has clearly pictures that 62.9 percent of the disabled women feel that they have to get married. 37.9 percent feel of the family members of the disabled women feel that they should not get married.

**Figure 3**

**Distribution of the respondents according to the prospect of making choices on the  
Marriage of WWDs**

S. No.	Choices on the Marriage of WWDs	No. of Respondents (n = 320)	Percentage
1	<b>Treated as infants</b>	<b>206</b>	64.5
	Allowed to make a choice	85	26.4
	Do not know to decide	29	9.1
2	Family force us to think as if	207	64.7

	we are asexual		
	Have desire to exercise my sexuality	103	32.3
	I am frustrated	10	3.0
3	Made to feel that no roles to play	223	69.6
	I have a definitive role in the family	97	30.4
4	Made to feel that better not to become a mother	191	59.5
	Want to have children	116	36.4
	I am confused	13	4.1

The findings of the research is that the majority of the population, 64.5 percent feels that they are treated as infants by their family members. 26.4 percent feel that they are given the freedom to make choices. 9.1 percent were not able to decide by themselves. 64.7 percent of the family forces the women with disabilities to think that they are asexual. But 32.3 percent feel that they have the sexual desire. 3 percent are frustrated for being caught in this situation. 69.6 percent feel that they have no roles to play in the family. 30.4 percent feel that they have a definitive role in the family. 59.5 are made to feel that it is better not to become a mother. But 36.4 percent long to have children. 4.1 percent are in a confused stage.

## DISCUSSION

From the above findings we can have certain discussions in order to verify them as well as the to see the possibilities on the whole left open for the women with disabilities.

## MARRIAGE – ONLY A DREAM

Marriage is a social institution which can be celebrated only by humans. But it remains a dream for most of the disabled women. Figure 1 states that 54.3 percent of the family did not raise the question of marriage at all. It is awful to know that women with disabilities are more likely to

never marry and be divorced if they get married (Asch & Fine, 1988; Hannaford, 1989; Simon, 1988). Indian society still exercises the form of arranged marriage and women with disabilities are mostly neglected in this arranged marriage. In case the woman is disabled after the marriage, the possibility of divorcing her is much higher whereas the women accept and nurture the man if he is disabled after the marriage. The two major marital experiences of many of the women with disabilities are, first, the long duration and the complicatedness they come across in getting familiar with the husbands and the second is that they have to face ill-treatment in the homes of their partners after their marriage. This situation leads them to have negative attitude towards marriage and don't aspire to marry leaving marriage only as a dream.

### **ATTRIBUTION OF ASEXUALITY**

Sexuality, in many societies, is a forbidden subject matter that cannot be discussed and when it comes to women with disabilities, it is still worse a topic. The prospect of women with disabilities establishing romantic relationship also limited to the maximum level. Figure 3 explains that 64.7 percent of the disabled are made to feel that they are asexual. There is an erroneous belief in the society that women with disabilities are asexual (Asch & Fine, 1988; Finger, 1985; Matthews, 1983; Shaul, Dowling & Laden, 1985; Waxman, 1989). Such a fallacy has no support among the scientists. The society fails to understand that the women with disabilities have as much as sexual desire as he able-bodied women. Disability does not suppress the sexuality an individual in any way, unless and otherwise the disability is related to the reproductive organs.

### **LIMITED MATRIMONIAL CHOICES**

Women with disabilities are usually discouraged from aspiring to marry. Figure 2 states that 37.9 percent of the family's impression is that the disabled women should not get married. Even if she makes the step ahead, she is not left with ample choices of partners spread before her. It is the fact that the women with disabilities agree to marry the disabled man. But the disabled man does not look for a disabled woman as his life partner and on the contrary he would like to choose a nondisabled woman. The patriarchal society accepts this deviation. As a consequence the disabled woman is left with little possibility to make choices on the partner. Figure 3 says that only 18.4 percent were allowed to make decisions. She has to accept the one who is left before her and it is assurance not an assurance for a happy married life as she is looked down by her partner and the society. If she marries a nondisabled man then she is treated as a weaker partner.

In situations where she marries a disabled partner, she is looked down as no one else would marry her.

### **MISSING MOTHERHOOD**

Figure 3 brings it out that 59.5 percent are made to feel that not to become mother. It is a shocking factor. As the women with disabilities are exposed as dependent persons and seek the service and support of the care givers for carrying out their personal activities, they are forced to forgo the caring and nurturing mothering role (Shaul, Dowling & Laden, 1985). So much so that they do not receive general and reproductive health care. In India, states Menu Sikand, women with even simple disabilities do not get to learn about reproductive health because reproduction is linked to marriage and disabled women are not considered to have marriage prospects. The society's ungrounded campaign and baseless fear that women with disabilities will give birth to disabled children has successfully kept away the disabled women from motherhood. Even if by chance the disabled women might have become pregnant the society sees to that the pregnancy is aborted and sterilized. But contrary to this universally held stigma, thanks to the scientific advancements the women with disabilities of the modern world are proving today that they can break all the barriers related to sexuality, reproduction, motherhood and nurturance. The scientific world does not stop proving to the humanity that disability is not a hereditary factor.

### **INFANTILE TREATMENT**

Most of the women with disabilities are treated as infants by both the family and the institutions. They are considered as not being productive in any level but only at the receiving end. They are treated as infants, not being able to take responsibility for their relationships and are in need of the service and support of the family and the society. Figure 3 states that 64.5 percent are treated as treated as infants. This infantile treatment is not welcomed by the women with disabilities. But the women with disabilities argue that though they experience some sort of disabilities, not all forms of disabilities lead them to be like infants, not capable of exercising their physical and cognitive functions.

### **SYSTEMATIC ROLELESSNESS**

There are certain roles assigned to women traditionally. They are nurturers, mothers, home makers and the like. But the society is of the impression that the disabled women cannot execute the roles. Figure 3 states clearly that 69.6 percent were made to think that they do not have any role to play in the society due to their disabilities. It is stated that the disabled women are denied

access to the area of reproduction (Asch & Fine, 1997; Nosek et al., 1995; Thomson, 1997). For any women marriage and reproduction are important roles as they enable them to leave behind their progeny. But women with disabilities are discouraged by the society from taking up these roles due to the negative impression of the society that they cannot give birth to a child and bring the child up. The women with disabilities are most often branded by a few that they cannot play any vital role in the society. This systematic “rolelessness” places the women with disabilities at a disadvantaged position psychologically, socially and economically, and allows limited avenues for self-affirmation (Lonsdale, 1990). As a consequence, the women with disabilities do have no major role to play but to be a passive receiver of the service and support from the society.

### **‘SUYAVARAM’ / ‘SWAYAMVAR’ – A NEW THRESHOLD**

The sprouting of numerous matrimonial registration centers and websites are the indications that finding partners for marriage has become a herculean task in our days. The barriers like, caste, creed, colour, wealth and traditions play a vital role in determining the partners. If it is the case for the nondisabled people, the situation of the disabled women is worse to the extreme. Thanks to the many Non Governmental Organizations like Delhi Foundation of Deaf Women (DFDW) and Tamil Nadu Differently Aabled Welfare Association (TNDAWA) the conducting of ‘suyavaram’ / ‘swayamvar’ has become a regular feature and the number of people disabled women getting married through these occasions are on the increase.

### **SUGGESTIONS**

The researcher is of the opinion that the prospects of marriage for the disabled women does not seem to be very positive and not much opportunities are left open to the women with disabilities. So the following suggestions are presented:

- The field of social work can make an effort to pay much concentration on the matrimonial life of the women with disabilities than just providing the necessary economical benefits.
- ‘Suyavaram’ / ‘swayamvar’ meet has brought together many disabled people. So this meet need to be organized frequently and in many place.
- The social workers need to bring awareness to the families of the disabled women that disabled women can become a mother and bring up a child depending upon the level and nature of her disabilities.
- The socialization opportunities need to be expanded and encouraged by the family and

the society.

- Social workers must lobby for the enactment of laws that makes compulsory care for the disabled women and obligatory arranging of their marriage if they are medically capable.
- Child care centers / day care centers, especially for the children of the disabled mothers need to be set up so that their children can be taken care of when they go for work or get sick.
- Removing the barriers in the medical fields and training the medical practitioners will create confidence in the disabled women for marriage and pregnancy.

## CONCLUSION

Life on earth is lived only once but it has to be lived meaningfully. The women with disabilities are longing to find meaning in their disabled life. Marital union is the best form of providing meaning to these disabled women. So we are, in encouraging the disabled women to have a happy married life and supporting them in their bringing up of their children, adding meaning to our own existence.

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