



Invisible Yet Invincible: Experiences of Disabled Women at the Workplace in Kashmir

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Abstract

This research aims to explore the lived experiences of disabled women in workplaces across Kashmir, a region distinguished by its diverse cultural norms and socio-economic dynamics. The objective is to understand the unique challenges and barriers that these women face, which significantly impact their career opportunities and professional development. Employing a qualitative methodology, the study delves into the specific hurdles encountered by disabled women in their quest for meaningful employment. It further investigates their coping mechanisms and identifies potential strategies for creating an inclusive and supportive work environment. The findings reveal that disabled women in Kashmir experience a range of obstacles,

including physical accessibility issues, social stigmatization, and lack of appropriate workplace accommodations. Despite these challenges, many women demonstrate remarkable resilience and employ various coping strategies to navigate their professional lives. The study highlights the critical need for policy reforms and workplace adaptations to better support and empower disabled women. Recommendations include implementing inclusive policies, enhancing accessibility, providing disability awareness training for employers and colleagues, and offering targeted support services.

Keywords: *Disabled women, workplace, qualitative study, Kashmir.*

Introduction

Disability means physical, and mental or sensory impairment which may stop the interaction of a person and the person could not do use his full potential to do a task as he/she has the barriers of impairments and society see them as disable persons of the society.¹ Social model of disability has described disability as those people have impairments are disabled. According to research it was studied that disabled women were more affected by their disability than men in society.² Fifty percent of disabled women have higher risk of

¹ Fine, Michelle, and Adrienne Asch. "Disability beyond stigma: Social interaction, discrimination, and activism." *Journal of social issues* 44, no. 1 (1988): 3-21.

² Smith, Diane L., and Stephen J. Notaro. "Personal emergency preparedness for people with disabilities from the 2006-2007 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System." *Disability and health journal* 2, no. 2 (2009): 86-94

domestic abuse and domestic violence. This study also revealed that not only domestic violence, but women also faced difficulty to build social relation in society and faced many types of stigmatizations; they cannot get employments opportunities and had fewer opportunities to live independently, and it all affects they mental and physical health.³

In Azad Kashmir, disabled women face a myriad of challenges that intersect with both disability and gender biases. Often marginalized and overlooked, these women contend with limited access to healthcare, education, and employment opportunities, compounding their social and economic exclusion. Cultural stigmas and misconceptions further hinder their integration into society, perpetuating discrimination and isolation. Despite these obstacles, disabled women in Azad Kashmir demonstrate resilience and determination, striving to carve out spaces for themselves through advocacy and community support networks. Efforts towards inclusivity and empowerment are crucial to ensuring their rights are upheld, enabling them to contribute meaningfully to their communities and lead fulfilling lives free from discrimination.⁴ According to 2021 reports of Nadra there are 2259 disabled women

³ Dunn, Jennifer R., and Maurice E. Schweitzer. "Feeling and believing: the influence of emotion on trust." *Journal of personality and social psychology* 88, no. 5 (2005): 736.

⁴ Wani, Anusha, Vedika Pillai, and Yana Azaad. "Gendering of leisure forms and its impact on women in areas of conflict: A Case Study of Jammu & Kashmir." *The Macksey Journal* 1, no. 1 (2020).

are registered in Azad Kashmir. In Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), understanding the economic and social dynamics of women is crucial due to their heightened vulnerability. Women in AJK often encounter discrimination and distinct challenges, especially in safeguarding their economic, social, and cultural (ESC) rights. This disparity is particularly evident in remote and mountainous regions where women face obstacles in accessing fundamental human rights, such as clean and healthy environments. Moreover, opportunities for securing their rights to education, healthcare, and employment are limited, perpetuating their marginalization. Addressing these disparities requires concerted efforts to enhance access to resources and opportunities, promote gender equality, and empower women across all sectors of society in AJK.⁵

There is a degree of discrimination and stereotyping and several hindrances for the disabled women in achieving their life goals. Disabled women and girls live with two "minority" identities.⁶ Women had a long-life expectancy rate than men, therefore they spend a long life with disability and in the number of disabled persons women were more than men. Many women had limited their roles to domestic's activities therefore their disability was not visible in society and the women which were disabled and working outside the

⁵ Arif, Sardar MA Waqar Khan. "Legal Perspectives on Socio-Economic Status of Women in Azad Jammu And Kashmir." *Jurnal Dinamika Hukum* 18, no. 2 (2018): 215-221.

⁶ Fine, Michelle, and Adrienne Asch. "Disability beyond stigma: Social interaction, discrimination, and activism." *Journal of social issues* 44, no. 1 (1988): 3-21.

homes their disability was visible and it was estimated that women were less disabled than men, but the facts were on the contrary.⁷

Significance of the study

From a feminist perspective, disabled women face more challenges than their non-disabled counterparts, yet employment can aid in their societal integration. The study found that all employed disabled women share similar concerns in the workplace, encountering greater obstacles compared to non-disabled women. Additionally, disabled women have unique needs that are often overlooked in broader discussions within the women's community. This research underscores the importance of understanding and addressing these distinct challenges to foster inclusivity and support for disabled women in various societal and professional settings.⁸

Literature Review

The women perception about their work environment and its changes. In his investigation 38 ladies were interviewed evaluating insights of the work environment (self-confidence, self-authority, quality of life, perceived stress, self-rated health) and sensed proficient value. Data about reappearance to work were composed from discloses. Non-

⁷ Khan, Muhammad Junaid. "Discrimination against women in social and political fields in Azad Kashmir." PhD diss., 2014.

⁸ Gill, Thomas M., Julie T. Robison, and Mary E. Tinetti. "Difficulty and dependence: two components of the disability continuum among community-living older persons." *Annals of Internal Medicine* 128, no. 2 (1998): 96-101.

parametric numbers were used. The increase in the women evaluations of their work environment was not meaningful between unreal and accomplished renovation of people to a convenient place in society but was statistically significant between service line and the 12-month go through. No connotations were found between changes in discernments of the work environment and consequences after the restoration. At the go through, however, there were effects between apparent work environment fluctuations in a constructive direction and return to work; improved self-esteem, quality of life, perceived professional value and self-rated comfort; and decreased burden. It appears to be critical to consider the workplace in restoration for stress-related issues, and an experience shows up sure fire to distinguish changes and relations not obvious expeditiously after rehabilitation.⁹ Karolina explained the problems of disabled women working in the labour market. He was also observed that disabled women working in labour market suffered in social and professional community.¹⁰ They are diverse because of their sexual orientation and disability.

The Labor Force Participation Study investigated that the ratio of disabled women and men in labour market was 29.4 and 14.7 percent

⁹ Nur Hayati, Elli, Malin Eriksson, Mohammad Hakimi, Ulf Högberg, and Maria Emmelin. "‘Elastic band strategy’: women's lived experience of coping with domestic violence in rural Indonesia." *Global health action* 6, no. 1 (2013): 18894.

¹⁰ Schröttele, Monika, and Sandra Glammeier. "Intimate partner violence against disabled women as a part of widespread victimization and discrimination over the lifetime: evidence from a German representative study." *International Journal of Conflict and Violence (IJCIV)* 7, no. 2 (2013): 232-248.

respectively. It was also investigated that 16.1 percent of men and 17.2 percent of women were unemployed in Poland. It was Investigated that among working women diseases were common which worked as laborers. With major disabilities working women have a friendly environment at workplace. Previous studies showed that positive conclusions may be biased in watching social attractive quality and self-determination of employees and produced artificially positive conclusions.¹¹

A study was conducted to investigate the employment status of disabled women with those women who have no disability. "Only (32%) out of (100%) women with disability have full time or part time employment on the other hand (81%) out of (100%) women without disabilities were working full time or part time." "With major disability only (24.7%) women and (27.8%) men out of (100%) were working."¹²

This study compared the working women with disability and working men with disability. Regression analysis of data showed how disability and gender differences were related to joblessness. Data

11 Kim, Hansung, Juye Ji, and Dennis Kao. "Burnout and physical health among social workers: A three-year longitudinal study." *Social work* (2011): 258-268.

12 Pawłowska-Cypriasiak, Karolina, Maria Konarska, and Dorota Żołnierczyk-Zreda. "Self-perceived quality of life of people with physical disabilities and labour force participation." *International journal of occupational safety and ergonomics* 19, no. 2 (2013): 185-194.

revealed that gender and disability were the stronger associated variable with unemployment.

Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach to analyze the social actions of individuals in society. Positivists advocate for an unbiased and scientific approach to studying society.¹³

Research Site: Based on the literature review, it is evident that there is a substantial volume of research in international contexts, but a noticeable lack in the Pakistani context. Accordingly, the focus of this study is more on urban areas than on the rural population. This decision is driven by the concentration of job opportunities in urban areas, making it more compelling to explore the work experiences and challenges faced by women with disabilities. Thus, to meet the research objectives, interviews were conducted with disabled working women from various organizations in Kashmir.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique: In this study, a sample of 16 working disabled women was selected using non-probability sampling methods suitable for qualitative research. This approach allowed for a focused exploration of the participants' perspectives on their work experiences and challenges. Data was primarily collected

¹³ Neuman, W. Lawrence. Basics of social research. 2007.

through interviews, which enabled a detailed examination of their views, beliefs, and motivations.

Analysis/Findings

Perceptions of women about disability

The study found that disability encompasses any bodily syndrome or impairment that hinders a person's ability to interact with their surroundings. "People with disabilities" constitute a diverse group with varied needs, where individuals sharing the same disability may experience it differently, with some disabilities being invisible.

Several respondents in the study had acquired their disabilities through tragic or accidental circumstances. For women experiencing disability, the adjustment to their dual roles as both disabled individuals and working women proved particularly challenging. They faced expectations to perform tasks equivalent to those of non-disabled individuals, despite their limitations. Most respondents attributed their disability to polio, stemming from inadequate treatment, vaccination, or parental negligence. Many of these individuals came from broken or dysfunctional families, where they were often overlooked during family disputes and misunderstandings, exacerbating their disability.

I have been suffering from polio since the age of three. My father and mother lacked the bond and understanding that a couple should have for a perfect relationship, so there were daily arguments, fights, and drama in our home. Throughout these issues, no one paid attention to my vaccinations or noticed the changes I was experiencing. Eventually, my father divorced my mother, coinciding with my battle with polio.¹⁴

Many respondents in the study developed their conditions due to stress, financial pressures, and social strains they encountered. When individuals faced their own challenging circumstances and an unsupportive environment, they experienced mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety, which often manifested in physical symptoms like severe muscle contractions, a form of disability.

I was not born like this; I was once normal, even more active than most working women. However, we were not financially strong, and my father passed away when I was just 6 years old. My mother, hoping for a strong future pillar in me, worked hard to provide me with education and support. Consequently, I started working as a home tutor at a young age to contribute to my family's finances. Later, I joined a well-known international organization as a coordinator, where intense work pressure eventually took a toll on my health. The stress, restlessness, and heavy workload left me physically and mentally unstable. Despite this, I had no choice but to continue working to survive. This experience eventually categorized me as disabled.¹⁵

There are several respondents who have experienced accidents resulting in severe disabilities. For instance, one respondent shared,

¹⁴ Respondent Samreen Age.30

¹⁵ Respondent Rabia Age.45

When I was 2 years old, my father was taking me to visit relatives on his motorcycle. Suddenly, a truck collided with us, resulting in my father's death on the spot. I lost my right leg and suffered a broken hand as a result of the accident.¹⁶

The above narration elaborates that disability is not only a natural process but due to social, environmental and surroundings create such situations which pull the person to disability.

Integration of the Family

The integration of the family is crucial for supporting a woman's job outside the home. If a family does not value her role as a working woman and holds traditional views, it can negatively impact her. The extent of a woman's independence and autonomy in her affairs and decisions often reflects a liberal orientation.

A few respondents affirmed their freedom and independence in their lives when asked, indicating varying levels of autonomy among the participants.

I am considered a valued member of my family; my suggestions and opinions are gratefully accepted in most decisions and important matters. My disability has never limited my participation in family life or choices.¹⁷

On the other hand, the majority of respondents felt secondary within their families, particularly in matters concerning personal decisions.

¹⁶ Respondent Saba Age.32

¹⁷ Respondent Sofia Age.28

One participant shared, "I was the eldest daughter in my family and should have been seen as an integral part, but due to my disability, I was always treated as secondary. My parents never sought my opinion or considered what I wanted or what was best for me given my circumstances; instead, they imposed their decisions on me."¹⁸

Similarly, another respondent recounted their emotional experiences during the discussions.

*Although I desired to marry like other non-disabled girls, my parents never considered it due to my disability. They often disregarded my choices and opinions. Despite contributing suggestions in various important matters, they may believe that physical disability affects cognition or decision-making. Through my job, I've learned that many matters can be managed with financial support. For instance, I now prioritize providing gifts for my family and giving a monthly allowance to my father. This effort helps my family acknowledge and appreciate my contributions.*¹⁹

This discussion highlights that a liberal-oriented family is expected to value a woman's personal and social engagements. When families fail to appreciate these aspects and adhere to traditional views, it can negatively impact the woman's pursuits outside the home. While some families support their daughters and accept their disabilities as a natural part of life, many girls face significant challenges in asserting their identity to both their families and society at large.²⁰

¹⁸ Respondent Irum Age.44

¹⁹ Respondent Mahnoor age.25

²⁰ Arif, Sardar MA Waqar Khan, and Bushra Bannian. "Evaluating Economic Rights of Women in Azad Jammu & Kashmir: Challenges and Opportunities." *Advances in State Studies* 1, no. 1 (2022): 1-8.

Issues regarding job opportunities

Job opportunities are typically scarcer for disabled women compared to both non-disabled women and disabled men. Therefore, it was crucial to inquire about the experiences of working women regarding their job-seeking efforts. Many respondents reported enduring lengthy struggles in securing suitable employment.

After my mother passed away during childbirth, my father cared for me until I was three years old, after which he also left. I was raised by my grandparents, who loved me dearly but were too elderly to provide for me. My uncle and aunt, facing financial constraints, were unable to continue supporting me. Therefore, I had to find a source of income to sustain myself. After graduating, I diligently searched for a suitable job, but my disability proved to be a significant barrier. Despite successfully clearing interviews and meeting job criteria, I faced repeated rejections. After enduring numerous setbacks and a prolonged struggle, I eventually settled for a low-paying job simply to secure a means of livelihood.²¹

Marital Issues

Marriage is a fundamental instinct for all living beings, including plants, animals, and humans. However, disabled individuals often encounter discrimination and injustice in this aspect of life. Women with disabilities face challenges in finding suitable marriage partners. They may either marry late or feel compelled to compromise with someone who is ignorant, illiterate, and unemployed but non-disabled. In some cases, parents may discourage their daughters from

²¹ Respondent Rimsha Age.30

marrying at all, fearing potential reproductive complications in the future.²² As a result, many of the respondents in our study reported being divorced. One participant shared her experience:

I married at the age of 33 to a non-disabled man who showed interest in other women and never showed affection towards me. I felt like a maid in his home. He never cared for me, never appreciated me, but instead argued over everything, leading to our eventual separation.²³

While some respondents found themselves in compromising situations where they did not divorce, they expressed dissatisfaction with their marital lives. One respondent shared,

This is my second marriage; I divorced my first husband because of my disability. However, this new experience is not different from the first. It feels like history repeating itself, but this time, I feel trapped because my family would never accept me if I left this marriage after going through such tragedies.²⁴

Several unmarried respondents expressed their own insecurities and challenges. A few of them shared:

As I age, I find myself growing weaker and weaker. I lack someone I can rely on or confide in to share my thoughts. I requested my parents to arrange my marriage and even received a proposal, but my family opposes my marriage. Most often, I am rejected by potential suitors when they visit because of the misconception that women with disabilities face reproductive complications. This stereotype makes it

²² Jabeen, Nazish, and Sajid Malik. "Prevalence and pattern of traumatic limb amputations in female population of Bhimber District, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Pakistan." *Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences* 31, no. 1 (2015): 54.

²³ Respondent Huma Age.27

²⁴ Respondent Maham Age.31

*difficult for girls like me to find acceptance in marriage.*²⁵

Thus, this discussion reveals that many women with disabilities face challenges of disrespect and lack of acceptance from their husbands. Disabled women often marry later in life and may experience divorce if they do marry.

Mobility Problems

Mobility problems refer to a spectrum of impairments ranging from limitations in stamina to paralysis. Some mobility issues are congenital, while others result from illness or physical injury. These impairments can vary widely, from temporary conditions like a broken arm to permanent conditions such as paralysis or muscle degeneration. Additionally, conditions like respiratory illnesses can affect coordination and endurance, impacting an employee's performance within an organization.²⁶

Most of the informants indicated facing numerous obstacles in their workplaces, which significantly diminishes their performance and stamina.

I am a wheelchair user, yet my job as an event manager requires constant vigilance over every aspect of events both inside and outside the organization's premises. Despite my physical challenges, my office is located on the second floor, necessitating frequent trips up and down stairs for meetings and overseeing activities. Unfortunately, there are no ramps for disabled individuals in the

²⁵ Respondent Humaira Age.33

²⁶ Shah, Nazir Haider, and Sadaf Zamir Ahmed. "Inclusive Education in Azad Jammu and Kashmir: A Cross-Sectional Survey of Secondary Schools." *sjesr* 4, no. 2 (2021): 359-365.

*entire premises, leaving us to navigate stairs on our own. The repeated stair climbing throughout the day drains my energy and leaves me exhausted.*²⁷

Similarly, another respondent shared her experience to us in this manner, according to her

*People like to debate the rights and disabilities of disabled individuals, perhaps for self-projection, but it seems like no one really wants to help people like me. Maybe it's not their concern. Theoretically, providing ramps in public places for accessibility is a primary need. However, in practice, either there are no ramps available or the constructed ramps are not properly maintained. As a result, wheelchair users cannot use them independently; they require someone else's support. If someone tries to use these ramps alone, they might collapse or require excessive effort without yielding proper functionality.*²⁸

It's not surprising that women with mobility impairments are significantly affected by the physical environment. It is the responsibility of organizations to ensure that all necessary mobility measures are implemented to assist disabled individuals. These steps include specifying locations that are either in close proximity to each other within buildings equipped with lifts, or on the ground floor in buildings without lifts, and arranging furniture in a way that creates no accessibility barriers. Additionally, for women with disabilities who drive to work, the proximity of designated parking spaces to buildings needs to be considered

²⁷ Respondent Warda Age.29

²⁸ Respondent Hina Age.34

Dual Role Adjustment

Women with disabilities may find it challenging to balance their dual roles as both disabled individuals and working women. They often face difficulties in performing tasks at the same level as non-disabled women, yet they are expected to do so regardless. According to several respondents, managing both social and professional responsibilities alongside their impairments is particularly demanding.

I got divorced in the first year of my marriage while I was pregnant. I left everything and returned to my parents' home. Initially, I was unable to work due to my circumstances, and my father supported me financially. However, he later had to quit his job due to an accident. With no other options, I had to go out and earn a living to support my son and father. Now, I manage all household chores and work responsibilities myself. I cook, wash dishes, sweep, iron, and even manage events daily out of necessity, regardless of my physical or personal challenges. I do what I must because I have no other choice.²⁹

²⁹ Respondent Mariam Age.34

The findings of the study describe that many disabled women find it challenging to balance their dual roles as both disabled individuals and working women. Managing both their social lives and professional responsibilities alongside their impairments is not an easy task for them.

Dynamics of Workplace Experience

In the current scenario, job-related demands and pressures are constantly increasing. Managing both office and home responsibilities simultaneously is challenging even for non-disabled individuals. The perception of many respondents in this regard was quite compromising. Most felt that organizations and colleagues do not provide equitable treatment when assigning tasks to women with disabilities. They are expected to perform the same duties in the same work environment and for the same hours as their non-disabled counterparts. Physical and biological needs that significantly impact their health are often disregarded and not taken into consideration at all.

Due to polio affecting my legs, I started using a wheelchair. However, working for eight hours, constantly sitting in the same posture, and without any relaxation, has weakened my backbone to the point where it feels like it could break at any time. My doctors have advised me to have complete bed rest, but unfortunately, it's not possible for me at this time.³⁰

Similarly, another participant in the study shared their experience,

³⁰ Respondent Zareen.28

highlighting some common challenges.

I am an Assistant Professor at a Government College, required to deliver at least four lectures per day. Despite my health condition and physical challenges, I must navigate up and downstairs throughout the day. Unfortunately, there are no ramps or inclines provided in the college for people like me, so I have to manage my mobility using stairs. A few years ago, I could manage with a bit of effort, but this demanding routine has deteriorated to the point where I now rely on a wheelchair for mobility.³¹

Therefore, it can be analyzed that women with disabilities face significant challenges in the workplace, which can be detrimental to their well-being. In Kashmir, women are often perceived as weaker compared to men. When a woman also experiences a physical impairment, it is important that she receives care and support instead of facing stigma. She deserves to be valued and respected for her contributions, recognizing her efforts based on what she can contribute, considering her unique challenges, rather than expecting her to perform equally to non-disabled individuals.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides insights into the work experiences and dual role adjustments of women with disabilities. It reveals that disability is influenced not only by natural factors but also by socio-economic conditions such as poverty and parental awareness. Social isolation, misconceptions about disability, and challenges in

³¹ Respondent Sabahat.29

accessing job opportunities are significant issues faced by disabled women. Moreover, they encounter discrimination and lack of equity in the workplace, impacting their professional lives and social acceptance. The findings emphasize the urgent need for inclusive policies and supportive environments that recognize and accommodate the diverse needs and contributions of women with disabilities in society and the workplace.
