Legal Awareness, Educational Access, and Empowerment of Women with Disabilities in India: Challenges and Policy Implications

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines legal awareness, educational access, and empowerment of women with disabilities in India, with a focus on the challenges and policy implications arising from the gap between formal rights and lived realities. Women with disabilities experience multiple forms of disadvantage shaped by gender, disability, poverty, social stigma, and limited institutional support. The study adopts a socio-legal and descriptive research design, using questionnaire-based data supported by secondary sources such as Census disability tables, NSS Report No. 583,

and the Annual Report of the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities. The findings show that legal awareness among respondents remains limited, particularly regarding the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, reservations, scholarships, free legal aid, and grievance redressal mechanisms. Educational access is also restricted by inaccessible institutions, weak teacher support, limited scholarship reach, digital barriers, discrimination, and family-related constraints. The results further indicate a positive relationship between legal awareness and empowerment, showing that women who are more aware of their rights are better positioned to claim support, participate in decision-making, and develop confidence. The study concludes that legal recognition alone is insufficient unless supported by awareness programmes, accessible education, effective implementation, and gender-sensitive policy measures.

Keywords: Women with disabilities; Legal awareness; Educational access; Empowerment; Disability rights

1. Introduction

In India, women with disabilities are at a socially vulnerable position due to the interplay of gender inequalities, disability-based exclusion, poverty, lack of educational opportunities and low awareness of law. Disability is not just a medical condition, it's a social and institutional reality created by disability barriers in education, transportation, communication, employment, family life and public participation. This problem is complicated in India as people with disabilities are also women who are discriminated against as women without considering their disability. Hence an investigation of their empowerment must consider the issues of legal awareness, access to education and social participation.

Education is at the heart of inclusive education's importance in the discourse on disability, as it ensures access to knowledge, confidence, access to work, autonomy and citizenship. Equality of access to education for people with disabilities is not experienced by all learners in all settings and regions, however. Inclusive education provision in a metropolitan city and a rural district in Telangana revealed that a child's location, institutional capacity and provision of support services are key determinants of access to education for children with disabilities (Rose et al., 2021). This has important implications for the present study as women with disabilities are affected by similar inequalities around accessing schools, colleges, transport, assistive devices and digital learning.

The long-term impacts of learning withdrawal on safety, dignity and empowerment are also significant. Women's lack of literacy and educational attainment may restrict their knowledge of their rights, access to services, reporting of violence and involvement in decision-making. In fact, research based on INFS data revealed that there are links between disability, education level, literacy and IPV, and it also showed that women with disabilities are more vulnerable than women without disabilities if they have a low level of education (Maher & Hayes, 2023). Thus, access to education is a developmental concern and a gender justice and legal protection concern.

Knowledge of the law is also critical to empowerment. Women with disabilities may not be able to claim rights even if they exist in laws and policies because of lack of awareness of disability certificates, reservations, scholarships, free legal aid etc. and in the event of grievance redressal, may not know how to approach. Studies and research on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Implementation in India point to a lack of strong institutional responsiveness to civil society concerns and experiences of persons with disabilities, which may result in limited disability rights (Chaney, 2020). This means that there is a need for legal awareness and the accountability of institutions to be linked together.

Development is also the lens to understand disability and education in India. In practices, educational systems tend to replicate exclusion, either by not identifying learning needs, offering reasonable accommodation, or by not recognising disability as a part of diversity. Learning disability and education in India comes with larger issues of development, social inequality, and institutional preparedness, says Kalyanpur (2022). This is because there is a need for not only formal acceptance for women with disabilities, but formal support for them in educational environments.

Higher education is especially significant for empowerment because it affords greater opportunity for employment, leadership and self-advocacy, and independent decision making. But inclusive higher education is still far from being achieved, because access to the campuses is difficult, disability-inclusive support services are not available, and the implementation is lacking in terms of disability sensitivity. In his analysis of India's National Education Policy 2020, Raj has suggested some avenues for pursuing inclusive higher education and emphasized the requirement for institutional reform to ensure that inclusion is meaningful (Raj, 2025). Therefore, in this context, women with disabilities need a spotlight since higher

education can directly affect the economic and social mobility of women with disabilities.

International studies related to inclusive education also indicate that it is not only the policies that make inclusive education a reality. A systematic review of inclusive education interventions in LLMICs revealed that teacher training, available infrastructure, community engagement, and ongoing institutional support are all factors that contribute to the implementation of inclusive education interventions (Mendoza & Heymann, 2024). The findings are significant for India because, on one hand, many of the challenges confronted by women with disabilities may be practical and institutional in nature and, on the other, the findings provide an understanding of the state's legislative framework and its development in the context of women with disabilities.

Every disability study must ensure that it has at the centre gender issues. The issue of bodily autonomy, health, sexuality, violence and reproductive rights are often silent when it comes to women with disabilities. However, sexual and reproductive health issues of PWDs are still widely absent in the Indian context, indicating the overall discomfort towards PWDs and the lack of institutional sensitivity (Sharma & Sivakami, 2019). The lack of dignity, autonomy, and health rights are inextricably linked to the lack of legal and educational rights, and thus the lack of empowerment.

The slow progress of women persons with disabilities also reveals the disparity between the legal recognition and the practical inclusion of them. Despite the implementation of various policies and programmes, Addlakha (2022) suggests that the marginalisation of women with disabilities in India is continuing because of the social invisibility, insufficient institutional support, and low priority given to policies that focus on these women. This reflects the importance of looking at the role of legal awareness and education in combination in the context of empowerment.

Accessibility has taken a new form with digital education. While online learning has the potential to increase opportunities, it can also present barriers for learners with disabilities if platforms are not accessible, or if there is no access to assistive technologies. Reyes et al. (2022) conducted a systematic review of academic interventions for students with disabilities in online higher education and identified that for the successful participation of learners, support systems, accessibility design, and learner-centred interventions are needed. This is especially applicable for women with disabilities who are experiencing digital and gender barriers.

Empowerment also is influenced by violence and social vulnerability. A systematic review of violence-prevention programmes conducted by Chirwa et al. (2020) revealed that women with disabilities are at a higher risk of experiencing intimate partner violence than women without disabilities. This means that empowerment needs to encompass the issues of safety, legal knowledge, and access to support services.

Sexual and reproductive rights, access to services and public attitudes are also part of the global human rights aspect of disability. Hunt et al., 2017 demonstrate that non-disabled individuals' beliefs and attitudes can impact individuals with disabilities' capacity to exercise reproductive and health related rights. This is important because social attitudes can be a factor in encouraging or discouraging women with a disability from taking advantage of education and independence.

There is a strong need for policy design to be the key element to inclusion. The successful implementation of disability inclusive education systems has several key requirements: clarity of guidelines, professional capacity building of teachers, accessibility of infrastructure, and coordination between law and practice. Hayes and Bulat (2017) affirm that it is essential that policies for inclusive education are backed up by a system-level planning and implementation mechanism. Thus, the responsibility for providing access to education should be considered a systemic responsibility with regard to women with disabilities.

In addition to a change in thinking is necessary in inclusive education. Twenty first century

inclusive education must include disruptive interventions that confront conventional patterns of exclusion (Artiles, 2020). This translates to institutional change from the Indian perspective, from token enrolment to actual change.

Last, but not least, inclusive education must be recognised as a process of school and institutional change rather than as a mere goal. Slee (2018) says that the degree of inclusion is determined by the way policies are implemented in everyday education. Therefore, the present study is on the intersection of legal awareness and accessibility and empowerment in the day-to-day lives of women with disabilities in India.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study maintains a socio-legal and descriptive research design approach to research legal awareness, access to education and empowerment for women with disabilities in India. The study is an integrative approach of legal-policy analysis and the empirical study using questionnaires to grasp the legal norms and the real-world problems of women with disabilities.

2.2 Nature of the Study

The study is analytical, descriptive and interdisciplinary. It is based on the principles of law, disability studies, gender studies and education policy. The study reviews the issues related to education, empowerment and legal awareness, and explores the issues related to the barriers associated with it such as social stigma, lack of infrastructure, poor implementation of schemes and lack of institutional support.

2.3 Sources of Data

This paper is based on primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data is collected using a structured questionnaire that includes questions regarding the demographic profile, legal awareness, access to education, empowerment, challenges and recommendations for policy. The secondary data is taken from the Census, C-22, C-29, C-30 tables, Persons with Disabilities in India done by NSS on various number 583 and various Annual Report of department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities.

2.4 Study Area

The study is exclusively on women with disability in India both in rural and urban context. Disability, education and empowerment also differ across regions, and this study takes a regional approach to India as a whole study area, and uses the official national data, together with the responses on the questionnaires to come to an understanding of the patterns of legal awareness, educational access and social empowerment.

2.5 Sample Size and Sampling Technique

With the questionnaire part, we consider 150 women with disabilities as suitable sample size for descriptive and basic statistics. Purposive sampling would be suitable, as the study is specifically aiming for women with disabilities who can give relevant responses for the legal awareness, educational access and empowerment.

2.6 Tools of Data Collection

The main tool of data collection is a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire covers various areas such as demographic profile, awareness of disability laws, awareness of reservations and scholarships, access to educational institutions, infrastructural facilities, teacher support, discrimination, confidence, decision-making, financial independence, community participation, and suggestions for policies. Secondary data is gathered by analysing documents such as government reports, census tables and policy documents.

2.7 Method of Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistical methods are applied to analyse the data. The respondents' profile and response patterns are described in terms of frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations. Cronbach's Alpha could be used for testing reliability of scales within the questionnaire for the constructs of legal awareness, educational access, and empowerment. To explore the relationship

between legal awareness, educational access and empowerment, a cross-tabulation and correlation analysis can be performed. Secondary analysis is used thematically and comparatively as a device for interpreting primary results.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The study is based on basic ethical principles of social research. The participants are free to join and told the educational goals of the study. Response is gathered with consent. Participants' privacy and/or confidentiality is respected, and no personal identifying information is shared. Extra attention is given to making sure that the questionnaire is respectful, accessible and sensitive to women with disabilities.

3. Results

The findings are presented under the broad sections identified by the study: legal awareness, access to education, empowerment, social barriers and implementation of policies. The survey questionnaire includes questions about the legal awareness, policy recommendations, educational access, empowerment indicators, challenges and demographic profile. This interpretation is further informed by evidence from the NSS Report No. 583, and the DEPwD Annual Report for national level evidence relating to prevalence, education, certification, aid/help, employment, and government schemes.

3.1 Level of Legal Awareness among Women with Disabilities

The results reveal the presence of legal awareness among women with disabilities, which is not widely enough spread. As seen in Table 1, only 42.0% of the respondents reported to know the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, but 40.0% were not aware, and 18.0% had heard of the Act but not had enough information. This means that the presence of legal rights does not automatically mean that the intended beneficiaries are aware of the rights. The distribution of respondents' legal awareness is shown in figure 1.

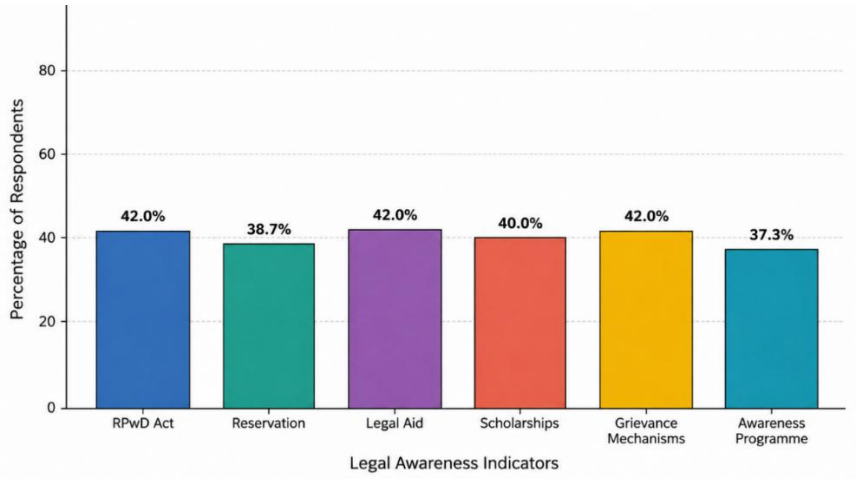

Figure 1. Legal awareness among women with disabilities

Table 1 presents the distribution of respondent's awareness of disability-related rights, schemes, and legal mechanisms.

Table 1: Level of legal awareness among respondents

Indicator	Yes	No	Other
Awareness of RPwD Act, 2016	42.0%	40.0%	18.0% heard but not aware
Awareness of reservation	38.7%	61.3%	—
Awareness of free legal aid	42.0%	58.0%	—

Awareness of scholarships	40.0%	60.0%	—
Awareness of grievance mechanisms	42.0%	58.0%	—
Attended legal awareness programme	37.3%	62.7%	—

3.2 Awareness of Constitutional Rights and Disability Laws

This finding suggests there is a low level of knowledge about disability legislation and rights-based protection. While equality and non-discrimination, accessibility, education, employment, and social security are enshrined in the RPwD Act, 2016, most respondents had limited understanding of the mechanisms for legal assistance and remedy. This is important, since the DEPwD Annual Report includes the following as components of the Department's work on disability empowerment: awareness generation, research, evaluation, and training.

3.3 Awareness of Educational Rights, Scholarships, and Reservations

There is also low awareness on entitlements related to education. In terms of awareness, as presented in Table 1, only 40.0% of the respondents were aware of the scholarship and 38.7% of them were aware of reservation in education and employment. This implies that if information is not accessible, then educational schemes may not be of benefit to women with disabilities in the long run. Educational support is institutionalized but needs to be better promoted, as is demonstrated by the inclusion of scholarships for students with disabilities under the Department's schemes in the DEPwD Annual Report.

3.4 Barriers to Educational Access

The results indicate that there are still some barriers for women with disabilities in accessing education. Table 2 indicates that 35.3% of those who responded said their institution was physically accessible and 43.3% said it was not accessible. Likewise, only 38% indicated that there were ramps available, toilets, lifts, or assistive facilities. These statistics indicate that education access isn't only about getting students enrolled, but also about making them feel welcome in school and having the access they need to computers. Respondent's perceptions about access to education and institutional support are presented in Figure 2.

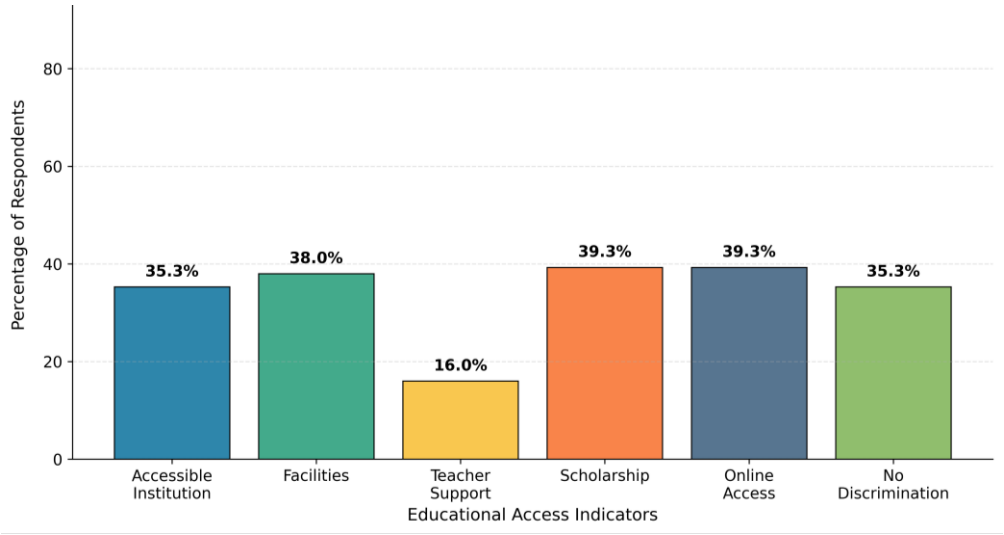

Figure 2. Educational access and institutional support among women with disabilities

Table 2 summarises major barriers relating to physical access, institutional facilities, teacher support, scholarships, digital access, and discrimination.

Table 2: Educational access and institutional support

Indicator	Positive Response	Partial/Sometimes	Negative Response
Institution physically accessible	35.3%	21.3%	43.3%
Facilities available	38.0%	26.7%	35.3%
Teacher support always available	16.0%	38.7% sometimes	45.3% rarely/never
Scholarship received	39.3%	21.3% applied but not received	39.3% not received
Difficulty in online education	37.3% yes	23.3% sometimes	39.3% no
Experienced discrimination	44.0% yes	20.7% sometimes	35.3% no

3.5 Institutional and Infrastructural Challenges

Barriers included institutional and infrastructural barriers. Many respondents mentioned that there was not full accessibility, limited facilities and teacher support. Teacher support was particularly low, with 16.0% saying it was always available, and 45.3% saying it was rarely or never available. Accessibility to public buildings and public transport is also a structural issue in the disability context as shown in the NSS Report No. 583 where difficulty accessing public buildings and public transport is listed as important.

3.6 Social Stigma and Family-Related Barriers

The results also highlight the barriers to empowerment stemming from social stigma and discrimination. Discrimination (19.3%), social stigma (16.7%) and transport barriers (14.7%) were the most common challenges reported (Table 3). 10.7% of the respondents reported family restriction. These findings demonstrate that there is social, cultural as well as institutional exclusion. Major challenges that respondents faced are shown in Figure 3.

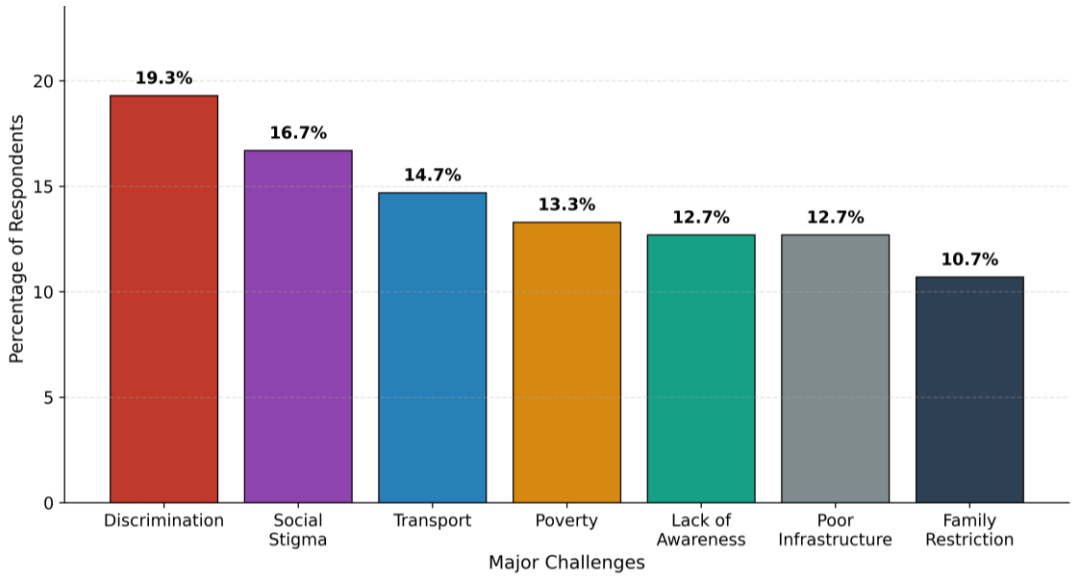

Figure 3. Major challenges faced by women with disabilities

Table 3 identifies the major social, economic, and institutional challenges reported by respondents.

Table 3: Major challenges faced by respondents

Challenge	Percentage
Discrimination	19.3%
Social stigma	16.7%
Transport	14.7%
Poverty	13.3%
Lack of awareness	12.7%
Poor infrastructure	12.7%
Family restriction	10.7%

3.7 Digital Divide and Accessibility Issues

Another issue to consider is access to the digital version. 37.3% said that it was difficult to access online education, and 23.3% sometimes. This indicates that, in the absence of such platforms, devices, Internet access and assistive technologies, online education could present new barriers to women with disabilities. So, the digital divide must be regarded as a type of educational exclusion particularly for women with disabilities of sight, hearing, movement and/or more than one disability.

3.8 Role of Education in Self-Confidence and Independence

The results suggest that education is associated with empowerment in a positive way. Table 4 indicates that 46.0% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that education boosted their confidence. Also, 42.7% reported being financially independent and 24.0% reported being financially independent to some degree. The findings indicate that access to education can enhance self-confident, independence and involvement in the family and community. Table 4 illustrates the association between education, confidence and financial independence with the capacity to claim rights.

Table 4. Empowerment indicators among respondents

Indicator	Strong/Positive	Moderate/Partial	Low/Negative
Education increased confidence	46.0%	19.3%	34.7%
Financial independence	42.7%	24.0%	33.3%
Confidence in claiming rights	38.0%	23.3%	38.7%
Legal awareness helped access support	46.0%	22.0%	32.0%

3.9 Relationship between Legal Awareness and Empowerment

The analysis reveals that there is a positive correlation between legal awareness and empowerment. Table 5 revealed that the

correlation between the legal awareness and empowerment was r = 0.627, showing that those with high legal awareness were more likely to report a high level of confidence, decision making ability and rights-claiming capacity. Reliability values were also high with Cronbach's alpha values exceeding 0.90 in all the key constructs. The reliability statistics and the relationships between the major study constructs are presented in Figure 4.

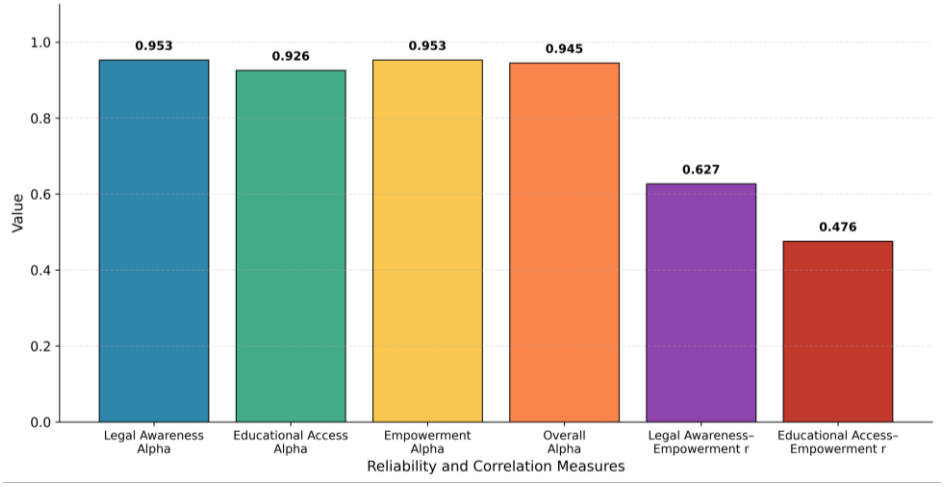

Figure 4. Reliability and construct relationships among the major study variables

Table 5 presents reliability values and correlations among legal awareness, educational access, and empowerment.

Table 5: Reliability and relationship between major constructs

Construct / Relationship	Value
Cronbach's Alpha: Legal Awareness	0.953
Cronbach's Alpha: Educational Access	0.926
Cronbach's Alpha: Empowerment	0.953
Overall Scale Reliability	0.945
Legal Awareness and Empowerment Correlation	0.627
Educational Access and Empowerment Correlation	0.476

3.10 Gaps in Implementation of Laws and Policies

The results show that there are differences between the law and access. According to NSS only 28.8% of population having disability had a disabled certificate and only 21.8% got assistance/helping from the government. The DEPwD Annual Report also estimates that there were 2.68 crore persons with disabilities in India with 1.18 crore females and that only 23% of females with disability were in the workforce. The numbers above show that recognition without

awareness, certification, accessible education, financial assistance and effective implementation cannot be enough.

Overall, findings indicate that there is strong relationship between legal awareness and education access with empowerment. But limited awareness about rights, poor institutional accessibility, lack of support, discrimination, digital barriers, and low policy outreach continues to limit women with disabilities in India.

4. Discussion

This is the present research which indicated that Legal awareness, educational access and empowerment are deeply connected in the life of women with disability in India. The results showed that the individuals who were aware about the disability laws, scholarships, reservations and grievance redressal mechanism also had greater confidence and decision-making capacity and they also had greater rights claiming abilities. It reinforces the perspective of inclusive education as an approach to education which is based on the principle of rights and involves a greater level of participation, dignity and social citizenship (Taneja-Johansson & Singal, 2025).

The results also show that empowerment cannot be achieved without legal measures. India has established a better disability rights paradigm, but there is still a lack of awareness among women with disabilities regarding their legal rights and remedies. The results of this study demonstrate that there is a need for enhanced outreach and awareness generation at grassroots level, training, research, rehabilitation, scholarships and implementation of the RPwD Act as areas of state responsibility identified by the Department of Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (2026).

Access to education was one of the major determinants of empowerment. The results indicated that those who had greater support from institutions, ease of access to facilities and assistance from teachers, were more likely to feel confident and more likely to participate. But it is greatly hampered by factors like inaccessible infrastructure, less teacher support, lack of assistive facilities, and discrimination. This is in line with the research on inclusive education in government schools in rural India that inclusive education is yet an ongoing journey that involves structural, pedagogical and administrative changes (Taneja-Johansson et al., 2023).

Accessibility for digital media also came across as an issue. The lack of devices, inaccessible platforms, weak Internet, or lack of assistive technology were among several challenges cited by many respondents for being able to access online education. Here, it is important to note that digital education can be a driver of inequality if not designed and delivered for inclusion. Also, a systematic review of educational technology for learners with disabilities in low and middle-income countries also emphasizes the need for accessibility, teacher readiness and support for individual learners (Lynch et al., 2024).

Results also indicate that the intersectional disadvantage for women with disabilities exists as the exclusion of women with disabilities is exacerbated by the gender disadvantage. They are hindered from getting an education and participating in society by social stigma, family constraints, poverty, discrimination and transport barriers. This provides a rationale for the need for having a separate policy for women with disabilities in India, instead of relying solely on disability and women's welfare policies (Jogdand & Narke, 2022).

The results make it evident that education plays a crucial role in empowerment. There was a relationship between education and confidence, independence, and involvement in decision making and access to opportunities. Education is empowering, however, if it brings about an expansion of real capabilities, and not just formal enrolment. The capabilities approach to inclusive education emphasizes the need to address the real freedoms, choices and opportunities provided to learners with disabilities (Nath & Batra, 2026).

The findings on educational disadvantage of the study are supported by the national-level evidence. The NSS Report No. 583 reveals that only 52.2% of the persons with disability in the age group of 7 years and above were literate,

while in the age group of 15 years and above, 19.3% of the persons with disability were educated up to secondary or above. This means that there are significant issues of structural barriers to education and empowerment that need to be addressed for people with disabilities (National Statistical Office, 2019).

Census C-22 is relevant since it provides information on persons with disabilities (aged 01-13) attending educational institutions or not by type of disability and sex. This corroborates the conclusion that the study of access to education should not be conducted based on overall enrolment figures, but rather based on gender, age and type of disability. It also helps in understanding why the participation of girls/youth with disability in school might be affected differently from boys (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011a).

This is further supported by Census C-29 data which gives figures on the education level of the disabled population, by type of disability and by sex. This is significant because education is well known to be related to empowerment and the results indicate that lesser educational attainment leads to lower awareness, confidence and employment or social participation. Thus, educational level is not just a demographic factor but also serves as an indicator of empowerment potential (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011b).

Another advantage of using Census C-30 is that it allows the disabled population to be broken down by type of household, type of disability and sex. Household conditions are important because women with disabilities frequently rely on their families to help them move, provide education, pay the bills, and make decisions. The study results on restriction in the family and social support indicate that the family context directly impacts on empowerment outcomes (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India 2011c).

The overall level and nature of disability in India also validates the need for focussed policy intervention. The findings from NFHS-5 reveal that the demographic and socio-economic determinants influence the occurrence of disability, which highlights the need for disability policy to be integrated with health, education, gender, poverty and social protection policies (Pattnaik et al., 2023).

The study also validates that women with disabilities are still socially invisible and excluded. The fact that respondents report discrimination and stigma in areas where there is a legal right, demonstrates that social attitudes remain a barrier to exercising rights. This signifies the idea that women with disability are marginalised in the disability discourse and in gender justice discourse in India (Chahal, 2021).

Finally, the results highlight the need for an educational reform that is aware of the different disabilities and learning needs. Inclusive education needs classrooms that are accessible, trained teachers, assistive technologies, flexible pedagogy, scholarships and accountability of the institutions. The scholarship of the last few decades also emphasizes policy reform, early identification and inclusive teaching (Singh, 2025) in the context of learning disabilities and educational reforms in India.

It is overall clear from the discussion that the three are mutually reinforcing; legal awareness, access to education and empowerment. It is when women with disabilities are granted legal rights, capacity is built and empowerment is put into practice, that they will be able to participate in family, community and public life. The number of people who are already active is still quite low, though. Hence, the disability framework needs to be shifted from the legal recognition to its effective implementation, outreach to the disability, accessible education, digital inclusion and community-level disability legal literacy in India.

5. Conclusion

The study attributes the close relationship between the legal awareness and empowerment of women with disabilities in India to their educational access. India has a progressive disability rights framework, but there is a lack of

awareness about the legal provisions on disability for many women with disabilities, including reservations, scholarships, free legal aid, and grievance redress. This diminishes their rights to rights and institutional support. The results also reveal that physical barriers, poor infrastructure, insufficient teacher support, digital exclusion, discrimination, poverty, transport problems and family restrictions all continue to hinder access to education. Education is one of the most important tools that can help to boost confidence, independence, financial participation and decision-making, but it is only empowering when educational institutions are truly inclusive and accessible. The study also points out that empowerment is not a process which can be accomplished by legislation. It demands the effective implementation of disability policies, law literacy at the community level, the availability of accessible infrastructure, assistive technologies, inclusive pedagogy, the awareness of scholarships and better grievance redressal systems. Women disabled must be considered as a specific policy group as they suffer multiple marginalisations, gender and disability, because of their disability. The study advocates for an education-based, gender-sensitive and rights-based strategy to empower persons with disability in India in general. Legal awareness and access to education can greatly enhance the social inclusion, autonomy and dignity of women with disabilities.

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