

## The Attitude of Society and Family towards People with Disabilities

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*The purpose of this study is to analyze the subjective perception and attitude of family and society towards Persons with disabilities. In developing countries, disability is compared with sin and virtue which was attempt in past life. In this context, disability in the past was taken as the punishment by God for some sin committed in the past life. I found these types of belief in society. Most of Nepalese people believes that 'having disabled children is the result of a past fault or punishment of previous life'. They try to hide the disability from the community due to social stigma. Unlike other citizens of the society disabled people live in most terrible conditions, isolated and excluded from their communities by barriers of policy, environment, and attitude. Due to ignorance, illiteracy, faith in supernatural power etc. the common attitude of the people towards the disability has been to by-pass it as the curse of gods for the wrong done in the past life very few persons thought it to be the result of some disease or accident. Maximum of the respondent were the victims of feeling discrimination in the society. The study found negative social attitudes with misconceptions about disability based on*

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*negative stereotype and a biased social environment. Person with disabilities faced challenges from family and society due to her/his disability.*

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## **1. Introduction**

The term of disability has many different meanings in different society. In developing countries, disability is compared with sin and virtue which was attempted in past life. In this context, disability in the past was taken as the punishment by God for some sin committed in the past life. We can find these types of belief in everywhere in society and we also find it in Hindu mythology. In the past, medical science was not sufficiently developed, and people were not literal in the perspective of disability, so they felt the disability is sin or fate. Most of Nepalese believes that 'having disabled children is the result of a past fault or punishment of previous life'. Due to the lack of awareness, parents feel severely burdened by having disabled children and prefer to send their children to an orphanage center rather than keep them with them. They try to hide the disability from the community due to social stigma (Weiss et al., 2006). Unlike other citizens of the society disabled people live in most terrible conditions, isolated and excluded from their communities by barriers of policy, environment, and attitude. Due to ignorance, illiteracy, faith in supernatural power etc. the common attitude of the people towards the disability has been to by-pass it as the curse of gods for the wrong done in the past life very few persons thought it to be the result of some disease or accident. A disabled person was thought to be a stigma to the family.

Due to ignorance, illiteracy, faith in supernatural power etc. the common attitude of the people towards the disability has been to by-pass it as the curse of gods for the wrong done in the past life very few persons thought it to be the result of some disease or accident. A disabled person was thought to be a stigma to the family. Society degrades and despises persons with disabilities and their families. As a result, families felt humiliated and tried to hide the disabled persons from the society as long as they could (IYDP, 1981).

During the United Nations decade of disabled persons (1983-1992), it was recognized that people with disabilities particularly in developing countries were not considered as potentially contributing to social and economic development. Disability had a

devastating effect on the quality of life of the disabled people with a particularly negative effect on their marriage educational attainment, employment, and emotional state. Disability also jeopardized their personal, family, and social life. More than halves of the disabled people were looked at negatively by society.

Internationally there has been an increasing focus on non-discrimination protection in the workplace and human rights for disabled people (Halvorsen & Hvinden, 2011). Article 27 in the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities [CRPD] further states that disabled people have a right to work on equal basis with others, and its main purpose is to ensure individuals with disabilities equal opportunities, to realize their human rights and to reduce obstacles that hinder this (CRPD, 2008). Also the constitution in Nepal ensured fundamental rights to people that no one should be discriminated against in everyday life and in any opportunities. But in our society, the condition of the disabled is critical. Lack of physical mobility and mentally retarded is the major cause of social exclusion and isolation. There is also lack of skill transfer to the care takers. After the great change in country being republic, there are some green signals to have more rights in legislation. One problem is that present legislation is not implemented fully or effectively, and the government officials lack awareness about disabled people. In this background, I have raised questions on the issue of disabilities. Is a disabled person considered a family burden? How is the attitude of the family and society towards persons with disabilities? I am trying to find answers to these questions through this study.

## **2. Attitude of Family and Society towards Persons with Disabilities**

The disabled are helpless and burden in the Nepalese society (Mishra, 2014). Disability has many meanings to others. The disabled person often does not know when he enters a social situation whether he will be an object of curiosity, pity, sympathized with, helped, patronized, exhibited, praised for his abilities, avoided, or actively rejected. The attitude of person with disability towards his own disability, towards other disabled persons and towards the members of his society as well as the attitude of society towards him are determining factors for the development of his personality and for his integration in society (Albrecht, Sheelman, 2001).

According to Mishra (2014), the person with disability who considers himself stigmatized due to his disability condition may be more vulnerable to anxiety than a non-disabled person. Because so many disabled persons' lives tend to revolve around their disabilities rather than abilities, their self-concepts are unrealistically low. Consequently, their self-expectations, levels of aspirations and general motivational levels are unnecessarily diminished. Therefore, those who give up easily owing to their disability condition may not significantly contribute, on the other hand those who refuse to accept disability as a disabled condition and constantly struggle for higher goals, outshine others including those without disability. There are several such examples. Disabled individuals often tend to be isolated with regard to their social contacts. Status in the family, neighborhood and at workplace is important, however, for many the possibility of achieving or maintaining such status is impaired (Gokhale, 1995).

The non-disabled majority tends to maintain a certain social distance, often treating the disabled as outsiders. Many non-disabled people feel uncomfortable in the presence of a disabled individual. They find it very difficult to accept and combine with the disabled as they do with other people, and since they have greater prestige and power, they can restrict the opportunities of the disabled. The PWDs are often forced either to associate with each other or become socially isolated. They are frequently segregated - physically, psychologically, and socially. The disabled person, sensing social discrimination gravitates to his own kind who can accept him without reservations (Telford & Sawrey, 1995). Non-disabled treat persons with disabilities as different. They are not included in the competitive group that form among active adolescents. In a sense, they are treated as an outsider whom people may like but exclude from their inner circle for sports and leisure activities. They live with their disabilities in the community, but they are never fully accepted by the teen age peers. Attitude is a condition of readiness, a tendency to respond in a certain manner when confronted with certain stimuli (Oppenheim, 1992). Attitude towards disabled people have been predominantly negative in direction and the intensity of beliefs and behavior appears (Ingstad & Whyte, 1995; Stone, 2001).

A disabled person, like every other person, is a 'social being' and is, therefore, no different from other able-bodied persons. It is an irony, however, that he is not accepted by the society as he is, for it invariably focuses its attention on his disabilities rather than on his

abilities, victims of disease, accident, or negligence, they have been further victimized by their peculiar and irrational discrimination of the society. Social Scientists have known for decades that able-bodied people tend to avoid interacting with people with disabilities, because they are uncertain about how to behave in their presence (Thompson, 1982; Yamamoto, 1971).

Goffman's (1963) sociological analysis of stigma and its consequences in socially marginalized groups is frequently cited as foundational in disability literature reviews. Goffman's (1963) and Davis's (1961) thesis that relations between disabled persons and non-disabled persons are marked by strain, misunderstanding and disconnection is supported by a wide range of data sources. Murphy (1990) described disability as a 'disease of social relations', adding "Social relations between the disabled and the able bodied are tense, awkward, and problematic. This is something that every disabled person knows". Disabled people of every condition complain that non-disabled act as if we were contagious (Murphy et al 1988) and wheelchair users know that in public places, they are commonly "noticed by everyone and acknowledged by nobody". In my opinion, the society and their families do not have a good attitude towards disabled people. The society does not even accept him/her as a good citizen. Based on this literature I have studied the attitude of society and its family towards disability in Nepalese society.

### **3. Coverage of Disability in Cinema, Media, and Literature**

Negative portrayals of disabled persons in movies such as beggars, comic, wicked and villainous characters. In fictions, a villain is invariably featured by the wicked or deformed. Shakespeare's Richard III, a spastic by birth is one of the most terrible, corrupt, and villainous characters ever created by the author. Several novelists have depicted disabled individuals in bad character (Banik, 2016). With regard to mentally ill, newspaper headlines in England in twenty first century have included 'Nuts to be caged for life by the doctors' (*The Sun*, December 2000) and "psychos to be locked up for life' (*The Sun*, June 2002). The animalistic terms 'caged' and 'locked up' suggest those concerned are less than human." Examples of the "life not worth living" narrative include media coverage of the case of Sarah Lawson who was diagnosed as a patient of manic depressive. Her father killed her at the age of 22 by administering an

overdose of drug and then suffocating her with a pillow. He was given a suspended sentence and, when he walked free from court, media comment included 'she would be better off dead'.

Disabled women face a double dose of discrimination and prejudice - both as persons with disabilities and as women with disabilities are triply disadvantaged. Disabled women therefore face multiple barriers to achieving their life goals. As a consequence of the bias, discrimination and stereotyping that disabled women face, they experience low employment rates and wages, low educational levels, high rates of poverty and segregation, limited access to community services and high rates of sexual and physical violence (Fiduccia & Wolfe, 1999). It may be concluded that common reactions of non-disabled towards disabled can be curiosity, pity, over-solicitousness, rejection, repugnance, indifference, fear, and sympathy.

#### **4. Attitudes towards Disability and Discrimination**

Discrimination implies denial of opportunity, unequal treatment, and exclusion from the main channels of economic and social life (Jernigan, 1968). It is in the economic sphere that discrimination against the persons with disability is found to be more overt and serious. Their economic security is often threatened by the frequent refusals of work opportunities in many areas of employment. It is a common observation that economically independent persons with disabilities are more accepted in the society than the dependent ones. While it is true that the vocational outlets for the disabled may be realistically circumscribed, the restrictions are often extended to areas where the limitations are not inherently confining. Unrealistic requirements close the doors of employment to many of the disabled.

The social effects of disability tend to create social distance between the disabled and their families on the one side and the community on the other. The distance is often expressed by the non-acceptance of the handicapped in social functions, religious services, educational programs, workplaces, marital relationships leading to social and economic isolation. This may often result in un-social, and even anti-social attitude on the part of the disabled (Gokhale, 1995).

Biklen (1987) and Taylor et al (1993) identified social construction of disability as a barrier to social inclusion. At

community level negative attitudes can become structured into social patterns of segregation and discrimination. The theory of social construction attempts to explain the process by which knowledge is created and assumed as reality (Douglas, 1970).

Particular social constructions of disability portray people with disabilities as “other” and not as an integral part of the ‘normal’ world. Negative attitudes and behaviors develop from this ‘worldview’. In the last two decades disability rights activists and academics have highlighted cultural and environmental factors that marginalized people with disabilities, denying them basic values and the accompanying basic rights/conditions. This social model of disability places a person’s impairment in the context of social and environmental factors, which create disabling barriers to participation (Oliver, 1990). This social model of disability approach suggests that the root of disability lies in a failure of the environment to allow someone to function to his/her full capacity as much as in any functional impairment that the person may have.

The social construction of disability represents a basis from which barriers to inclusion of people with disabilities are created (Devine, 1997 citing Olkin et al, 1994). As a result of the social construction of disability, people with disabilities experience decreased expectations by people without disabilities and limited inclusion in society (Devine, 1997 citing Bogdan et al, 1992; Safilios Rothschild, 1976). Understanding social constructions can help to explain why people with disabilities have been sidelined and discriminated against and can draw attention to what needs to be done to eliminate negative attitudes. New interpretations of impairment and disability can be informed by the experience of impairment of people with disabilities; by facilitating their rightful participation in mainstream activities and by the recognition and defense of the common values of autonomy/self-determination, equality, dignity, social justice, and diversity that are rooted in every person and of the rights that flow from them.

Mishra (2014) cites Funk (1987) who said that the social construction of disability is responsible for creating images of people with disabilities as “pathetic figures in need of pity, charity and caretaking”. Society prescribes a set of standards for functional independence, capabilities, and social reciprocity. When people’s functioning or biological composition does not fall within these

standards, they are assumed to be inferior and are subject to a decrease in inclusion in society (Devine, 1997 citing Allen et al, 1995; Bogdan et al, 1987 and Hahn, 1988).

All human beings are born free both in dignity and in rights but there is a difference between people. There is discrimination within human beings. Discrimination is the act of making unjustified distinctions between human beings based on the groups, classes, or other categories to which they are perceived to belong (Amnesty, 2020). People may be discriminated on the basis of race, gender, age or sexual orientation, as well as other categories (American Psychological Association, 2019). According to Cambridge dictionary, discrimination especially occurs when individuals or groups are unfairly treated in a way which is worse than other people are treated, because of their actual or perceived membership in certain groups or social categories. It involves restricting members of one group from opportunities or privileges that are available to members of another group (W. W. Norton, 2009).

Discriminatory traditions, policies, ideas, practices and laws exist in many countries and institutions in all parts of the world, including territories where discrimination is generally looked down upon. Discrimination against people with disabilities in favor of people who are not is called ableism or disableism. Disability discrimination, which treats non-disabled individuals as the standard of 'normal living', results in public and private places and services, educational settings, and social services that are built to serve 'standard' people, thereby excluding those with various disabilities. Studies have shown that disabled people not only need employment in order to be provided with the opportunity to earn a living but they also need employment in order to sustain their mental health and well-being. Work fulfils a number of basic needs for an individual such as collective purpose, social contact, status, and activity (Vornholt, Katharina, 2013). A person with a disability is often found to be socially isolated or excluded even from family.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities clearly outlines that people with disabilities have the same economic rights as those without impairments and should be able to live a life free from discrimination. Further, the National Disability Strategy prioritizes the jobs and economic security for people with disability. However, in practice Australia is failing dismally to live up to these expectations. Discrimination against People with Disability (PWD)

with respect to employment is against the law and it is mandatory that 5 per cent of the jobs be retained for PWDs. However, the Employment Policy does not spell out how to get rid of the discriminatory barriers and provide reasonable accommodation to the employees. In the absence of policy arrangements to support the employees in creating and maintaining an enabling working environment and reasonable accommodation, PWDs are unable to work anyway.

## **5. Persons with Disabilities consider Family Burden**

### **A Case Story of Sima Thapa, (Pseudonym) Physical Disable**

Sima Thapa is a physical disabled women of 39 years old. She has 2 kids. When Sima was two and a half years old, she developed high fever. A registered medical practitioner treated her locally for fever. As she grew older, she failed to stand up properly.

Initially, her family believed that she was possessed by witchcraft. After that, the family started to go with doctor and treated by him. But her condition did not improve, and her left leg was getting thin and small. But they later learnt that she had had an attack of polio. Till date, Sima experiences weakness in her legs and needs assistant to support herself while walking specially climb stairs.

She can perform most of her household chores but has problems in outdoor work. She tries to live her life like the normal people, but faces many problems when she is attaining school, public places, playing games. Sima attended school till class 8 but feeling hesitate she dropout. Her friends did not call by name, they called by Langadi (physically weak). So, she didn't make friend. Even her friends did not care for her. Instead, she was given various nicknames like Luli, Langadi and even her friends acted like her by making her body movement.

When she was 19, she got married to an inter-caste boy who is identified as a lower caste in the society. But her family was recognized as upper caste in the society as Kshetriya. When she got married and came to her husband's house, she was not accepted by her husband's family. Her mother-in-law did not even allow her to enter the house. Later, at the request of the villagers, she accepted her socially but continued to insult her inside the house. Her mother-in-law was very rude to her. They started calling her by the nickname of her disability. they started giving work that she could

not do. Gradually, they were discriminated against in terms of food and clothing. She felt she was a burden to her family.

However, she took a room in Nepalgunj with her husband and started living there. There was no dearth of those who discriminated against her. Some said that it was due to ancestral sin, while some said misfortune, helplessness etc. But the degree of discrimination was less as compared to the village.

She had a love marriage with a lower caste boy, her parents did not care. She was unknowingly accepted, because she was disabled, the insult and humiliation were justified. She did not know that the society, family, friends had any positive thoughts towards her. As everyone discriminated against her, she also fell victim to a mental illness. However, she continued her study with the idea that advocacy for people with disabilities should protect their human rights.

According to her, the attitude of our society towards women with disabilities is very bad. They are not even treated as human beings. Society has negative attitudes toward disabled people. Negative attitudes may result in low acceptance by peers, few friendships, loneliness and even being rejected or bullied. This can have dramatic effects on the lives of young students with disabilities, resulting in difficulties in joining group activities, declining academic performance, dropping out of school and/or problem behavior (Jackson & Bracken, 1998; Ollendick, Weist, Borden, & Greene, 1992). In worst-case scenarios, rejection and bullying may lead to negative long-term outcomes.

#### **Case Story of Junu Thapa (Pseudonym), Intellectual Disable**

Junu Thapa is an intellectual disabled age of 25 years. She can't speak, hear, and have difficulty walking. Growing up for Junu was also difficult. Because she didn't have loving family and relatives to take care of her. She lost her mother at the age of 12. Now she lives with her father and stepmother and their financial condition is also poor, so they are unable to give time to Beli. She never went to school due to her disability, but there is an intellectual special school located in Nepalgunj which is near her home.

According to her elder sister (she is already married), when she lost her mother, she became orphan, and she started living in neighbors' home. After sometimes later her father took her in her house. According to her neighbor Shusila Chhetri, she is too tired to even eat a single meal. Taking advantage of the situation, roguish

boys raped her, when there was no one in her house. Then she was raped repeatedly. Her guardian and neighbor knew it but no one cared. Her neighbors and guardian ignored her as she was useless in their eyes. However, her father told me that he is too tired to care her, he does not have time to care her. Because he is a daily wage laborer. Her stepmother does not take care of her, she despises her a lot. She feels that Junu is a burden to her family.

After repeatedly raping her, she usually becomes pregnant. It is also a burden to her family and now they give Sangeeni Sui (contraceptive injection) every 3 months. A Sangeeni Sui is a three-monthly injection that is a temporary contraceptive method which is most widely used as a family planning method. However, as a person with a disability, Junu has experienced many barriers. But she doesn't speak, though she runs away seeing the boys.

Disability activist DeepaThapa says that the government has provided disability card (Red Card-A) based on Beli's condition. After Junu started receiving social security allowance from the government, now her father has started taking care of her a little bit. Junu has had some improvement over the past few years, but she is continues compelled to take contraceptive injections. Although social workers have repeatedly advocated on the issue, despite that she has been raped repeatedly while her father was away from home for work. Sima said that she seen many of the barriers and negative attitudes towards people with disabilities persist. For the economic burden group such as Beli's father, who have severe intellectual disable child were found to be high family burden and they did not receive special education.

Her family and neighbors thought it would be better if she died. Her neighbors and family believe that she would have been emancipation if she had died. Another thing is that the boys in the society can be spoiled because of her. They worry about spoiling their son, husband but don't think about her. So, the social burden for the girl of intellectual disability is very high and the negative attitude is also high.

## **6. Attitude of Family and Society towards PWDs**

Puspa Raj Upreti, physical disable said that due to ignorance, illiteracy, faith in supernatural poses, etc, the common attitude of people towards the disability has been to bypass it as the curse of gods

for the wrong done in the past life. Very few people thought it to be the result of some disease or accident (Interview 2021). Pushpa is a physically disabled person who uses crutches and sometimes a wheelchair. He also faced much ignorance by family and society. Similarly, Ghanshyam Malla said a disabled person was thought to be a stigma to the family and society. Society looks down upon the disabled persons and their families and hated them if even when accept by the family. Ghanshyam is the army of Nepal, he lost his two legs and one arm during the Maoist insurgency. When he lost his limbs. Many say that it is better to die than to survive. Her family agreed. But he was rescued by the Nepal Army. When they came home, everyone was crying. Now he had to take care of him a lot. He cannot do anything by himself, even cannot eat because he doesn't even have fingers. But he accepted the reason for his regular salary from Nepal Government. But later, it became possible because of the same responsibility towards her family and the support of the government. He now lives with his family, but society still believes it is better to die than to survive. According to his wife, her family and society have put a lot of pressure on her to remarry. As a result, his wife felt humiliated and tried to hide him from the society as long as she could (Interview 2021).

According to Harikala Devi, teacher of Lagdahawa higher secondary school said that some families attempt to hide the existence of their child's disability and they do not want to send school with normal children. She again said that people who are literate and have attended school are developing more positive attitudes towards disability than the rest.

Gangajali Khatik, parent of disabled child said that I feel humiliated having a blind daughter because everyone thinks she was born for the reason that we sinned in the past. She is now 13 years old, and in her community, she should get a gauna (pre-marriage rituals) for marriage at this age, but for the reason of her disability no one came to ask her to marry. She again said, she should be nurtured for the rest of his life. As a parent, there is a lot of concern about who will take care of them after we die. Society also hates being a blind daughter. Relatives also despise it.

Every time a mother of cerebral palsy (Nitu Dahal, Pseudonym) prays to God that her son expires soon and gets salvation. Sometimes she keeps her child in CP Center Caretaker Home which is

established for orphan disabled child and sometimes leaves her relatives/natal home.

During my studies as a researcher, I found that families and societies in general do not accept people with disabilities easily. Society hates and despises being disabled. The family feels more burden. In some cases, I have found that parents wish to see their children die as soon as possible. Most of respondent believes that 'having disabled children is the result of a past fault or punishment of previous life'.

The respondents are facing the difficulties in joining the community activities too. They faced difficulties for fear of being of mocked, some of them just feel uncomfortable among the members of the community, sometimes they felt guilty for not having helpers for walking, not having assistive device etc.

## **7. Major Findings of the Study**

The major findings of the study can be summarized in the following points :

- » Maximum of the respondents were the victims of feeling discrimination in the society and only few did not feel about it. They were faced mockery, suffering from abuse by peers in the name of discrimination, family burden, negative attitude of society etc.
- » Respondent feel that disability is a problem for marriage.
- » Most respondents usually do not go to the neighbour's house.
- » Most of the parents reported that they did not know about rights of disabled people. Were unaware about the laws/policies for them.
- » Parent (respondent parents) think that they are unlucky to having disable child.
- » Almost all the respondents had no participation in political activities. They had no participation in domestic/community level decision making.

## **8. Conclusion**

The study found negative social attitudes with misconceptions about disability based on negative stereotype and a biased social environment. Myths and misconceptions have been found to deeply

rooted in society. Traditions and religions related to disability refer to the basis of personal beliefs and attitudes. Person with disabilities faced challenges from family and society due to her/his disability. Even now, disability is compared with sin and virtue which was attempt in past life. I found these types of belief in society. Most of respondent believes that 'having disabled children is the result of a past fault or punishment of previous life'. They try to hide the disability from the community due to social stigma. At last, there is a need for raise public awareness and advocacy to mitigate misconception about disability and promote disabled rights.

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