

Marriage and Persons with Disabilities - Current Trends and Reflections

| Anju Adhikari |

Department of Social Work,
University of Delhi.

adhikari.anju@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Indian society attaches a lot of importance to marriage. Marriage is regarded as one of the most significant life cycle rituals. In traditional Hindu society marriage is considered a sacrament and therefore expected to be for life. It is the most formally recognized institution under which the progeny is accepted. In India marriage is an important institution since it is advised by “dharma” and also gives you a sense of attachment and belonging towards each other. However, marriage seems to be an unattainable goal to many persons with disabilities. The persons with all kinds of physical disabilities have a hard time finding partner for the marriage because many people in the society cannot look beyond the appearance of a disability. Persons with disabilities have abridged marriage prospects, less choice of a partner, higher dowries and greater risk of desertion. There is a paucity of research studies, especially in Indian context to understand the need for marriage and marital concerns of persons with physical disabilities. This empirical research highlights the need and importance of marriage for the persons with physical disabilities. It also suggests the suitable social work intervention model for marriage needs of persons with physical disabilities keeping their specific needs and requirements in mind.

KEYWORDS

Disability; marriage; locomotor disability; visual disability; hearing disability

INTRODUCTION

In India, marriage is the only socially recognized institution which legitimizes the two individuals to enter into a sexual relationship. Alternatively, Marriage and disability are two terms considered anti-thesis of each other. Marriage seems to be an unattainable goal to the persons across disabilities. Persons with all kinds of physical disabilities have a hard time finding a partner for marriage. There is a considerable evidence to point out the difficulties faced by the persons with disabilities in getting married in general and women with disabilities in particular (Bhambani, 2005).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities specifies that the persons with disabilities have the right to marry, find a family, retain their fertility (Article 23) and have an access to the sexual and reproductive health care (Article 25)., yet the reality is that marriage is a wild goose chase for Persons with disabilities.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There is a paucity of information related to the persons with disabilities. One can still find the information on demographic features, employment details, rehabilitation and socio-economic aspect of the PWDs, but not much research work is available on marriage and

persons with disabilities. This is especially correct in Indian context. One can count the number of researchers (Addlakha, 2007; Bhambani, 2005) who have worked in this area.

The overall analysis of the research studies reflect that the persons with disabilities face difficulties in finding partner for marriages (Addlakhs, 2007; Bhambani, 2005). Moreover, the PWDs especially the men preferred marrying 'non-disabled' partner over 'disabled' partner who could actually compensate for and complement their disability (Jalal & Gabel, 2014; Phillips & McNeff, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

The objective of the study was to know various sexuality concerns of young physically disabled people with special reference to marriage. The nature of the study was descriptive and its universe comprised all the young persons with physical disabilities in the age group of 18-35 years residing in the National Capital Territory of Delhi. The study is based on the primary data collected from one hundred and fifty respondents. The Quota sampling method was used to draw the required sample. In order to accomplish the objective of the research study, mixed-method approach triangulating both qualitative and quantitative research methods was adopted. Interviews of persons with disabilities were conducted with the help of semi-structured interview schedule comprising both multiple choice and open-ended descriptive questions. Quantitative analysis was done with the help of statistical package SPSS 16.0. Qualitative data was analyzed by categorizing the data under certain themes and sub-headings. These themes emerged from the discussion with key informants and analysis of transcripts. Field notes were also used for the purpose of analysis. They helped the researcher in providing context to the interviews, and gauging nonverbal reactions of the respondents.

Profile of the Respondents

The respondents were drawn from the three different types of physical disabilities viz. persons with locomotor disabilities, persons with visual disabilities and persons with hearing disabilities. The sample consisted of 150 PWDs. Equal representation was taken from each kind of disability and both gender i.e. 50 respondent from each set of disability and an equal number of male and female (25 each). All the respondents were in the age bracket of 18-35 years. The maximum number of respondents (35.3%) was from the age group of 30 years & above. Fifty percent of the respondents were single at the time of the research study followed by 35.3 percent respondents who were married. Majority of the respondents (80.7%) belonged to Hindu religion. The respondents came from diverse educational backgrounds. None of the respondent was illiterate; the maximum being graduates (35.3%).

Marital Status of the Respondents

Persons with disabilities (PWDs) have a harder time finding a mate and getting married. Table 1 presents the marital status of the respondents. Fifty percent of the respondents were single at the time of the research study. This either means they were never in a relationship so far or were in a relationship in the past but at the time of the study their status was single. 35.3 percent of the respondents were married followed by 11.3 percent respondents being in a relationship. A negligible number of respondents were Divorcee (2.7%) and Widow/Widower (0.7%) respectively.

Table 1. Respondents' Distribution by Marital Status

Marital Status	Type of Disability			Total
	Locomotor Disability	Visual Disability	Hearing Disability	
Single	24	21	30	75 (50.0%)
Married	20	18	15	53 (35.3%)
In a relationship	4	10	3	17 (11.3%)
Divorcee	1	1	2	4 (2.7%)
Widow/ Widower	1	0	0	1 (0.7%)
Total	50 (33.3%)	50 (33.3%)	50 (33.3%)	150 (100%)

Out of four respondents who were divorcee, two respondents divorced recently (less than 5 yrs) and two were divorced for the last 5-10 yrs. Misunderstanding (30%), Emotional violence (20%), Sexual Incompatibility (10%), Adjustment problems (10%), Sexual Violence (10%), Physical Violence (10%) and Problems due to disability (10%) were cited as the reasons for the divorce. One respondent was a widow whose husband died a natural death.

Findings of the Study

The findings of the study are based on the interaction with married as well as unmarried respondents. The Findings of the study are categorised into two sub-sections. The First sub-section deals with the 58 married respondents (including 4 Divorcee and one Widow) and their perception on various components of marriage where as the second sub-section deals with unmarried respondents who were single (75) and in a relationship (17) at the time of the interview (N=92).

Part – I

Married Respondents and Marriage

Age at the Time of Marriage

Persons with disabilities face a lot of hardships in finding a suitable partner for marriage. A considerable literature has shown that in comparison to the persons without disabilities, the persons with disabilities tend to marry at a later age due to the problems encountered in finding a suitable alliance. The respondents' age at the time of marriage was examined with the type of disability and further cross tabulated with their gender.

Table 2. Age at Time of Marriage

Age at the Time of Marriage (in yrs.)	Type of Disability						Total		Total
	Locomotor Disability		Visual Disability		Hearing Disability		M	F	
	M	F	M	F	M	F			
16-20	0	2	0	1	0	1	0	4	4 (6.8%)
20-24	3	2	1	1	0	1	4	4	8 (13.7%)
24-28	4	2	3	2	1	6	8	10	18 (31.1%)
28-32	4	3	5	6	2	3	11	12	23 (39.6%)
32-36	1	1	0	0	2	1	3	2	5 (8.8%)
Total	12	10	9	10	5	12	26	32	58 (100%)
Grand Total	22 (37.9%)		19 (32.8%)		17 (29.3%)		58 (100%)		

Out of the total 58 respondents the maximum number of respondents (39.6%) got married at the age of 28-32 years followed by 31.1 percent respondents who got married at 24-28 yrs. 13.7 percent respondents married in the age category of 20-24 yrs. A small percentage

of the respondents got married at 32-36 yrs. (8.8%), and 16-20 yrs. (6.8%) respectively. The mean age of the marriage was calculated to be 27.31 yrs.

The findings reflected that approximately three-fourth of the respondents married in their late twenties or early thirties. Some of the late marriages were out of choice but most of them were because of the inability to find a suitable marriage alliance.

Gender-wise variations could be observed in the age of marriage. Most of the early marriages took place among the female respondents. They were married off at an early age by the parents who no longer wanted to take their responsibility and were concerned about their ineligibility as wives.

Disability Status of Spouse

It is often presumed that the persons with disabilities will only find the persons with disabilities as their spouses. Table 3 presents the disability status of the married respondents' spouses.

Table 3. Respondents' Distribution by Spouse' Disability Status

Disability Status of Spouse	Type of Disability			Total
	Locomotor Disability	Visual Disability	Hearing Disability	
Disabled	13	17	17	47 (81.0%)
Non-disabled	9	2	0	11 (19.0%)
Total	22 (37.9%)	19 (32.8%)	17 (29.3%)	58 (100%)

Out of the 58 respondents who were married (including 4 divorcees and 1 widow), 47 respondents had a person with a disability as their spouse. The remaining 11 respondents married the persons without disabilities.

Findings reflected that none of the hearing disabled respondent married a non-disabled person. This kind of marriage happened maximum among the persons with the locomotor disabilities followed by the visual disabilities. Marriage with non-disabled partner was more prominent among the males (7) than females (4). The in-depth interaction with the respondents revealed that in most of the cases, where partner's disability status was "non-disabled", the marriage was an outcome of the poor economic status of the partner.

Type of Spouse Disability

Except one case (2.1%), where a respondent (locomotor) married a hard of hearing person, all the other respondents (97.9%) married the persons with the same kind of disability though there were variations in the intensity of the disability.

Table 4. Type of Spouse Disability

Type of Disability	Type of Disability			Total
	Locomotor Disability	Visual Disability	Hearing Disability	
Same disability	12	17	17	46 (97.9%)
Different disability	1	0	0	1 (2.1%)
Total	13 (27.7%)	17 (36.2%)	17 (36.2%)	47 (100%)

The interaction with respondents also revealed that they were averse to the idea of marrying the person from other type of disability. They never considered this form of symbiotic relationship but instead thought that it will lead to more misunderstanding.

Degree of Spouse Disability

Sixty-six percent (66%) of the respondents married persons with the same intensity of the disability followed by 25.5 percent respondents marrying persons less disabled than them.

Remaining 8.5 percent respondents married persons who were more disabled than them in the intensity. Marriage with partner with less intensity of disability was more prominent among the males (9) than the females (3).

Table 5. Respondents Distribution by Spouse Degree of Disability

Degree of Disability of Spouse	Type of Disability			Total
	Locomotor Disability	Visual Disability	Hearing Disability	
Less Disabled	5	6	1	12 (25.5%)
More Disabled	4	0	0	4 (8.5%)
Same	4	11	16	31 (66.0%)
Total	13 (27.7%)	17 (36.2%)	17 (36.2%)	47 (100%)

Apprehensions before Getting Married

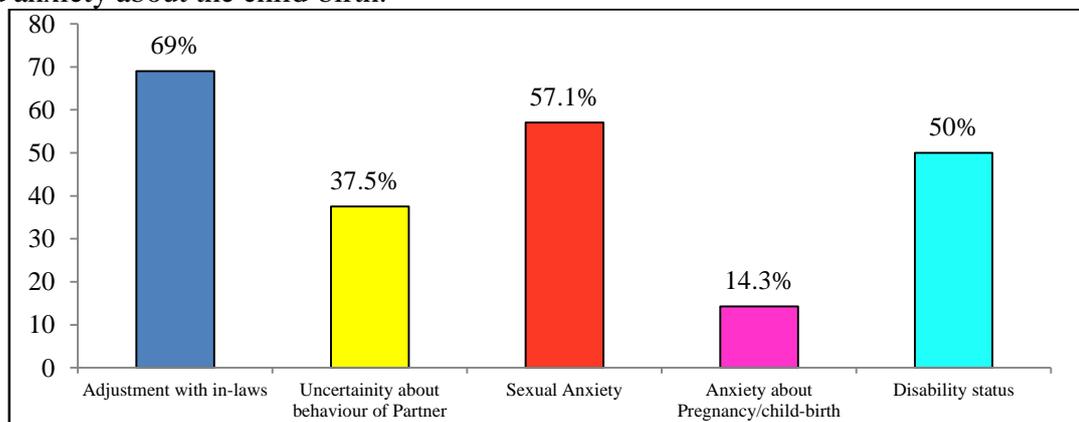
Every individual undergoes a certain level of apprehensions prior to the marriage. These apprehensions are on account of living a life together with another person who is sometimes known and at other times unknown. These apprehensions get aggravated when the person is having a disability because of the stereotypes associated with the marriage and the disability. Respondents' apprehensions before marriage were assessed and cross tabulated with the type of disability.

Table 6. Respondents' Distribution by Apprehensions before Marriage

Apprehensions before Getting Married	Type of Disability			Total
	Locomotor Disability	Visual Disability	Hearing Disability	
Yes	20	11	11	42 (72.4%)
No	2	8	6	16 (27.6%)
Total	22 (37.9%)	19 (32.8%)	17 (29.3%)	58 (100%)

Seventy-two percent (72%) of the respondents were apprehensive before getting married as against 27.6 percent respondents who did not have any kind of nervousness prior to the marriage. Disabled women expressed more apprehensions because of the fear of inability to cope up with the responsibilities and pressures of a marriage.

On being probed a little further, the respondents highlighted the reasons for the apprehensions as well. In 69 percent of the cases, the respondents were apprehensive about the adjustment with the in-laws and the family. The pressure of living up to the expectations of the in-laws (in terms of the household chores, comparison with other ladies of the house) made female respondents very uneasy. 57.1 percent had sexual anxiety, 50 percent respondents were apprehensive about how will their disability be treated in the family of the in-laws. 35.7 percent were apprehensive about the behavior of the partner while 14.3 percent had anxiety about the child-birth.



The percent of responses is greater than 100 because of multiple responses by the respondents.

Figure 1. Apprehensions fore Marriage

The analysis reflected gender-wise variation in apprehensions before the marriage. Female respondents were much more apprehensive about adjustment with the in-laws, behavior of the partner, sexual anxiety, child-birth and disability status than the male respondents.

Degree of Satisfaction with Spouse

The level of satisfaction with the spouse was assessed on a four point scale i.e. highly satisfied, satisfied, partially satisfied and dissatisfied. Respondents' responses on the degree of satisfaction were cross tabulated with the type of disability

Majority of the respondents were satisfied (41.4% highly satisfied, 37.9% satisfied) with their respective spouses in the marriage. 13.8 percent respondents reported partial satisfaction whereas 6.9 percent were totally dissatisfied with their partners.

Table 7. Respondents' Distribution by Degree of Satisfaction with Spouse

Degree of Satisfaction with Spouse	Type of Disability			Total
	Locomotor Disability	Visual Disability	Hearing Disability	
Highly Satisfied	12	7	5	24 (41.4%)
Satisfied	8	6	8	22 (37.9%)
Partially Satisfied	2	5	1	8 (13.8%)
Dissatisfied	0	1	3	4 (6.9%)
Total	22 (37.9%)	19 (32.8%)	17 (29.3%)	58 (100%)

Out of those who were either partially satisfied or dissatisfied with their respective partners, the most prevalent reason for dissatisfaction was insensitivity from the partner's side (7) followed by sexual incompatibility (5) between the partners. Two respondents each quoted financial instability, misunderstandings, infidelity by the partner, lack of trust and irresponsible behavior as the reason for the dissatisfaction. Disability status (1) was the least common reason for the dissatisfaction. The findings suggest that unlike the popular belief that the persons with disabilities cannot have satisfying and fruitful marital relationships; the persons with disabilities are capable of enjoying their married life.

Sexual Challenges in the Married Life

Fifty percent (50%) of the married respondents faced sexual challenges in their initial married life. The remaining half had a smooth sailing in the sexual life within the purview of marriage.

Table 8. Sexual Challenges in the Married Life

Did you Face Sexual Challenges	Type of Disability			Total
	Locomotor Disability	Visual Disability	Hearing Disability	
Yes	14	9	6	29 (50%)
No	8	10	11	29 (50%)
Total	22 (37.9%)	19 (32.8%)	17 (29.3%)	58 (100%)

Analysis of the data revealed that 51.7 percent of the respondents found sexual intercourse as a very painful experience for them initially followed by 44.8 percent respondents who were totally unaware about the sex and the sexuality. Probably this was one of the reasons which created anxiety among the respondents and made it a painful experience. The above two challenges were mostly quoted by the female respondents than the male respondents.

On the contrary, difficulty to persuade the partner for the sexual relationships (27.6%) and anxiety about the sexual performance on account of the disability (17.2%) were quoted as the sexual challenges more by the male respondents than the female respondents.

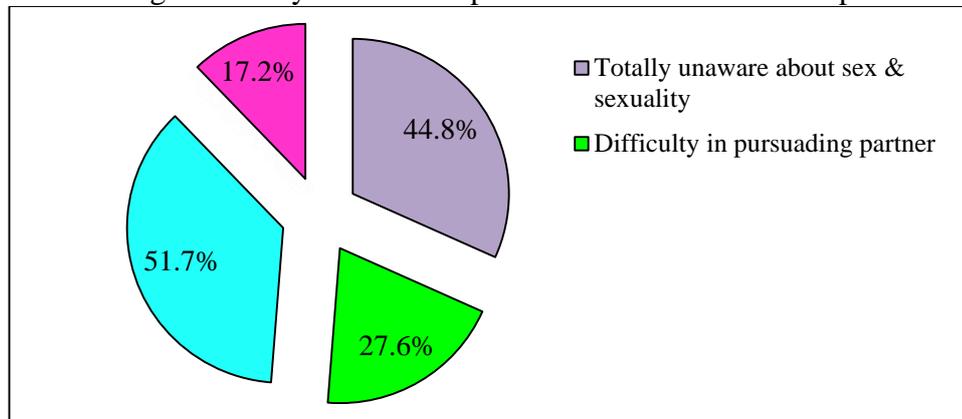


Figure 2. Challenges in Sexual Life after Marriage

Marriage Experience of Persons with Disabilities

Sixty-nine percent (69%) of the respondents agreed that there are differences in the marriage experience of the persons with disabilities and the persons without disabilities. The differences were quoted along the lines of their own personal marriage experiences and observing the non-disabled couples around them. 31 percent of the respondents did not find any significant difference in the marriage experiences.

Table 9. Respondents’ Distribution by Marriage Experience

Difference in Marriage Experience of PWDs & Non-disabled	Type of Disability			Total
	Locomotor Disability	Visual Disability	Hearing Disability	
Yes	16	14	10	40 (69%)
No	6	5	7	18 (31%)
Total	22 (37.9%)	19 (32.8%)	17 (29.3%)	58 (100%)

It was interesting to note the differences in the marriage experiences of the persons with disabilities. Majority of the respondents agreed (80% each) that the social life and the social circle of a married person is restricted due to the disability. They avoid doing things which are not necessary or related to outdoor activities. Barring close relationships (parents, siblings) the social circle of respondents is restricted to the persons with disabilities only. 45 percent of the respondents stated that they had to seek assistance from other people for the day to day activities whereas 40 percent respondents said that their married life is not as smooth as the persons without disabilities.

The verbatim account of some of the respondents is as follows:

“My wife wants to go to restaurant with me to have food on the weekends. I prefer not to and order at home. Who will bear the discomfort of hundreds of people staring at you in the restaurant?”

A respondent with visual disability

“We avoid going to the marriage parties we are invited to. It is very embarrassing for us to stand in a queue for getting food using a wheelchair in-front of so many non-disabled.”

A respondent with locomotor disability

“When people see us (me and my wife) talking to each other using the sign language, they stare at us as if we are from some other planet. They make fun of us. It gives me a feeling of discomfort and I consciously avoid their company.”

A respondent with hearing disability

“I have to wait for my mother-in-law to bring back dry clothes from the terrace. Once it was raining and my mother-in-law was not at home. Despite knowing that clothes will get wet, I could not get the clothes from terrace. It was disheartening.”

A respondent with locomotor disability

Part – II

Unmarried Respondents and Marriage

The sub-section below deals with the response of the interviewees who were in a relationship (17) and single (75) at the time of the interview (N=92).

Need for Getting Married

A large majority of the respondents (92.4%) felt the need for getting married unlike 7.6 percent respondents who did not want to get married. These respondents quoted fear of adjustment (4), personal choice (3), sexual anxiety (2) and not a priority (1) as a reason for not wanting to get married.

Table 10. Respondents’ Distribution by Need for Getting Married

Need for Getting Married	Type of Disability			Total
	Locomotor Disability	Visual Disability	Hearing Disability	
Yes	27	26	32	85 (92.4%)
No	1	5	1	7 (7.5%)
Total	28 (30.4%)	31 (33.7%)	33 (35.9%)	92 (100%)

Reasons for Getting Married

The respondents who choose to marry cited variety of reasons for getting married. This was a multiple response question and respondents had the liberty to give multiple responses. Only affirmative responses were considered for the purpose of the analysis.

More than 80 percent of the respondents cited Emotional support (85.9%), Companionship (85.9%), Settled and stable life (83.5%) and Fulfillment of the Sexual needs (81.2%) as reasons for getting married.

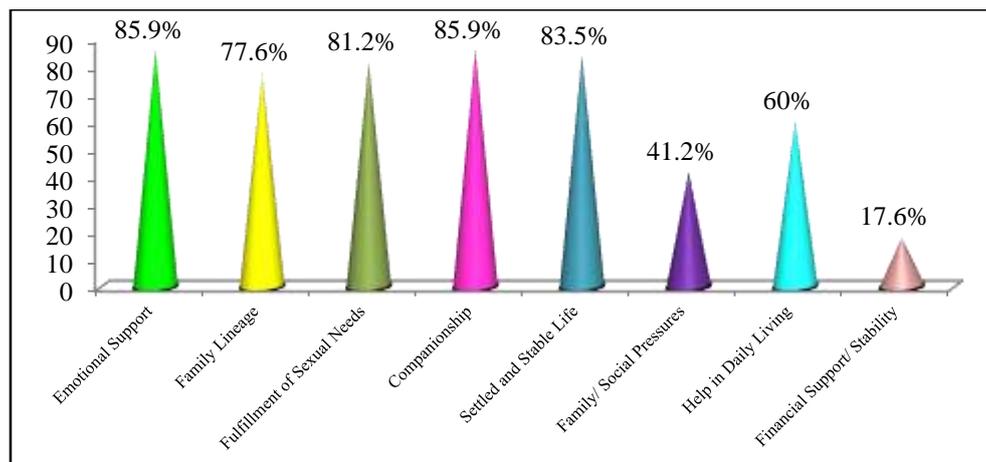


Figure 3. Reasons for Getting Married

Seventy-seven.six percent (77.6%) respondents considered marriage important for the purpose of family lineage. 60 percent respondents felt that getting married will help them in daily living assuming that they will get married to a less disabled or non-disabled person followed by getting married due to family and social pressures (41.2%) and for financial stability (17.6%).

It is important to mention here that the female respondents said that one of the reasons for them to get married was family and social pressure as well. The female respondents especially feared about what will happen to them after their parents are not alive. In the absence of education and lack of earning capacity they will not be looked after by the siblings or the other relatives and hence considered it a good idea to get married during the time-period when their parents are alive. This will at-least ensure them food, clothing and shelter.

Choice of Partner

None of the respondents wanted to marry a person from other kind of a disability. They either wanted a non-disabled spouse or persons from the same kind of disability with varying or same degree of disability.

Table 11. Respondents' Distribution by the Choice of Partner

Choice of Partner	Type of Disability						Total		Total
	Locomotor Disability		Visual Disability		Hearing Disability		M	F	
	M	F	M	F	M	F			
Disabled like them	0	1	3	3	9	12	12 (14.1%)	16 (18.8%)	28 (32.9%)
Non-disabled	6	8	3	1	5	0	14 (16.5%)	9 (10.6%)	23 (27.1%)
Less disabled than me	5	5	3	4	6	0	14 (16.5%)	9 (10.6%)	23 (27.1%)
Disability does not matter	1	1	5	4	0	0	6 (7.1%)	5 (5.9%)	11 (12.9%)
Total	12	15	14	12	20	12	46	39	85
Grand Total	27 (31.8%)		26 (30.6%)		32 (37.6%)		85 (100%)		

A majority of the respondents either wanted to marry a non disabled person (27.1%) or person less disabled than them in intensity (27.1%). The reason for marrying a non-disabled person or less disabled person was to complement the disability of the respondent. For e.g. a person with locomotor disability shared that if his/her partner was non-disabled or less disabled, he/she will be able to do a lot of things like going to the market, accompanying children to the park/ school. Female respondents with visual disabilities were less interested in marrying a non-disabled person because of their inability to trust a non-disabled partner. A number of the female respondents with visual disabilities shared that they do not trust a non-disabled person and fear that they will desert them once they find a better partner. 32.9 percent of respondents wanted to marry disabled person like them in intensity. These respondents were of the view that a disabled partner will better understand the problems associated with disability. Only 10.9 percent respondents stated that disability does not matter. The person has to match the qualities they are looking for.

Overall analysis of the findings revealed that persons with disabilities strongly feel the desire of getting married. While comparing the kind of person (in terms of disability status) persons with disabilities want to marry and the kind of person, persons with disabilities actually end up marrying, one can observe the sharp difference. Though only 32.9 percent respondents wanted to marry a person with a disability but in actuality 81 percent respondents ended up marrying a person with disability.

CONCLUSION

The present study is an honest attempt to bring out the sexuality concerns of the persons with disabilities with respect to marriage in the forefront. We, the people, talk about the inclusion of persons with disabilities in the mainstream world but this inclusion of the PWDs in totality remains incomplete till we provide them with their right to marriage which is an essential part of creating positive sexuality. The concept of family life including marriage is a mirage for the persons with disabilities. The distant desire to marry often remains a dream for many

PWDs on account of the misconceptions like inability to fulfill the responsibilities associated with the married life including copulation. This is particularly true for the females than the males with disabilities who are often considered “misfit” and much below the standards of the marriage market. In addition, the persons with disabilities lack the skills and training to attain financial sufficiency which is another hurdle in finding a suitable match. Persons with disabilities also face big question mark with respect to their child-bearing and child-rearing abilities. It is believed that the persons with disabilities have limited parenting abilities and children of such parents are forced to attend to their disabled parents i.e. instead of parenting their children, they are being parentified. In such a scenario, there is an urgent need to sensitize people about PWDs and their need for marriage.

There is no denying the fact that some changes have been observed in the recent times with respect to marital need of PWDs. A welcome change that has come in terms of reducing the difficulties of the persons with disabilities in finding partner for themselves is the inclusion of the column “Physically Disabled” in the popular Indian matrimonial websites like www.shaadi.com, www.jeevansathi.com. Similarly Bharat matrimony has launched a social initiative called www.abilitymatrimony.com for the people with disabilities who want to find suitable partners for marriage. There have been few NGOs who provide matrimonial assistance to the PWDs. All India Foundation of Deaf Women in collaboration with Delhi Foundation for Deaf Women organises events like “Pranay Milan Sammelan” to facilitate the marriages of the disabled people. Another organization like Narayan Seva Sansthan organise events like “Viklang Vivah” for social rehabilitation of the disabled people. There are certain states which have launched a scheme (for example the state of Maharashtra) of providing financial assistance to people getting married to the persons with disabilities.

On the other hand, there are certain areas where efforts on this front need to be strengthened. The Family, especially the parents should recognize the rights of the disabled child to marry and have a family life. Most often than not, parents are in a denial mode and do not want their children to get married because of either overprotective nature or their belief that marriage does not lie in the destiny of their disabled child. Parents should talk about these issues with their disabled young children to know their views and act accordingly. The organizations working in the field of the sexuality and/or disabilities should make efforts to organize many more such social events (at district, state or national level) and provide the PWDs with the opportunities to meet people and help them in finding partner which according to the PWDs is a herculean task. It is only when the efforts at individual, family, society and state level are made that we will be able to remove the stigma attached with the marriage of PWDs and help them lead a healthy married life.

REFERENCES

- Addlakha, R. (2007). *Gender, Subjectivity and Sexual Identity: How Young People with Disabilities Conceptualize the Body, Sex and Marriage in Urban India*. New Delhi: Centre for Women’s Development Studies.
- Bhambani, M. (2005). *The Politics of Disability Rights Movement in India*. *International Journal of Disability Studies*, 1 (1), 3-28.
- Jalal, S. & Gabel, S. (2014) *Physical Disability, Gender, and Marriage in Jordanian Society*. *Review of Disability Studies*, 10 (1 & 2).
- Phillips, D.H., & McNeff, E. (2005). *I Thought I was Less Worthy: Low Sexual and Body Esteem and Increased Vulnerability to Intimate Partner Abuse in Women with Physical Disabilities*. *Sexuality and Disability*, 23 (4) 227-240.
- UNCRPD. (2006). *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, Retrieved on March 10, 2013 from <http://www.uncrpdindia.org>