

In Plainspeak

A digital magazine on sexuality in the Global South

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DISABILITY RIGHTS: CAN WE PLEASE TALK ABOUT SEXUALITY!

August 1, 2014 · Rupsa Mallik

The [Union Budget, 2014](#) presented by the newly elected government a few



Reshma, Free and Equal.

weeks ago includes various provisions for disabled persons that range from starting new Braille presses; schemes for the purchase of aids and appliances; setting up of a National Institute for Inclusive Design; focus on mental health rehabilitation and setting up of a Centre for Disability Sport. The Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability has since 2006 been holding broad-based consultations as part of a People's Budget Initiative with the aim of promoting people's voices in the budget-making process. The Charter of Demands presented by the Centre includes a separate section on disabled persons and many of its demands appear to have been addressed in the Budget. Not surprisingly, none of the demands for disabled persons, as presented in the Charter, is gender disaggregated nor seeks to promote measures that can address specific concerns of disabled women. Nor does any other section – including those on women and health – mention disabled people. Disabled women as a constituency remain completely invisible. This is the fundamental problem and from where any conversation on sexuality and disability needs to

begin.

The 'blinking out' of gender and sexuality related concerns and needs of disabled women is part of a prevalent narrative that prioritises their disability as the main 'problem' that needs to be addressed. The double or triple marginalisation a woman with disability faces because of her gender and sexuality is rarely given any importance. This is not unusual; after all in India addressing sexuality, in general, remains contested and controversial and for disabled women – seen to be asexual, burdens, victims – this issue like disabled women themselves remains completely marginalised. The disability rights movement too ignores this issue and wants to keep the disability rights discourse 'non-political' and non-controversial. Most disabled people's organisations are happy to trade off between greater access and other economic entitlements for the disabled at the cost of sexual and reproductive rights and related issues. This is justified as part of an incremental approach that some argue will eventually result in broad-based rights for disabled people, including disabled women.

But violations and violence against disabled women does not wait and requires an urgent and immediate response. [CREA's Count Me IN! Research report](#) on Violence against disabled, lesbian and sex working women provides evidence of the wide range of violence faced by disabled women both within their homes as well as in public spaces. More importantly, the study highlighted that due to the fact that disabled women are perceived as asexual, both positive aspects related to their sexuality as well as sexual violence that they experience remain invisible and therefore unaddressed. It is also important to highlight that privileging economic rights and entitlement over sexual and reproductive rights is an artificial divide. In the CMI research disabled women reported restricting their mobility due to the harassment they face in public transport and spaces. This needless to say affects their ability to attend educational institutions or seek other opportunities.

The valorisation of able-bodied-ness and medical intervention and rehabilitation to ameliorate the 'condition' of those that are not 'normal' is still prevalent today. There is little social recognition that being non-disabled is temporary. A host of circumstances – mostly commonly old age – can very quickly change our able-bodied status to one of disability. Yet, on the basis of our current, temporary non-disabled status we can claim rights and entitlements including to be a wife/partner, parent and to have reproductive and sexual freedoms that disabled women are habitually denied. Disabled women on the other hand are routinely sterilised and/or hysterectomy performed. Abortions, one of the most stigmatised and legally regulated medical procedures, becomes easily acceptable when it is for mentally challenged women because we judge them incapable of being 'good' mothers. This is the social and policy ecosystem that a disabled woman needs to navigate every day, day after day.

For all of us who want to change this ecosystem, the first important step is to create visibility and to disrupt the

'popular' images and portrayals of disabled women – [Free and Equal](#). Negative stereotypes are easy to create and the hardest to change. It requires a different narrative. The change in societal perceptions cannot emerge out of a discourse that like the Union Budget privileges welfare over rights. CREA and Point of View's online resource – www.sexualityanddisability.org – is one such alternative space. If one goes by website traffic and feedback from those who have viewed its pages the response is overwhelmingly positive. . Others too are seeking to create a different ecosystem through films and other media. A recent example is a film titled 'Accsex' by Shweta Ghosh that raises questions about beauty and sexuality through the lives and stories of four women who happen to be disabled. . The film received 61st National Film Award in 2013. The making of the film and its recognition serves to break the silence and helps create new narratives for the representation of disabled women. Placing desire, pleasure and sexual autonomy as part of the lexicon that is used when we talk about disability.

My colleague, was recently at the [first global conference on sexuality and disability](#), in Lisbon, Portugal. She shared the example of Australia where the government provides financial assistance in the form of payment for sex workers to cater to disabled people. Sex workers are seen to be part of disability service providers. The much-acclaimed film 'Scarlet Road' – that documents the story of an Australian sex worker who has as her specialised clientele people with disability – presents a profound example of all that is indeed possible. It demonstrates how those most stigmatised – sex workers and disabled people – can rally together and reclaim for themselves that which society continues to deny them. Unimaginable in the Indian context. Our narrative is still deeply lodged within victimhood and any emancipatory claims to sexual rights from within the disabled women's community are derided and trivialised.

The disability rights community has from time to time mobilised and become important influencers themselves. One such example is the role played by them to depose before the Justice Verma Committee that was constituted after the December, 2012 Delhi gang-rape to recommend amendments to criminal law to better respond to sexual assault against women. In doing so they were able to successfully highlight the violence and violations that disabled women continue to face. Changes in criminal law, however, cannot change societal perception it can only serve to redress wrongs once they have already been committed. The core agenda therefore needs to be to build a critical mass of supporters. Those who are willing to be influenced and become influencers themselves. We will know we have succeeded if next year the Charter of Demands submitted by the Centre for Budget and Governance Accountability does include separate provisions to guarantee the rights of disabled women not just in the section on disabled people but as a cross-cutting theme through the various sections.

Pic Source: [Free and Equal](#), CREA.



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