

**Socio-cultural Challenges Faced by People with Physical Disabilities**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/skmj.v2i2.62504>Anjana Sharma<sup>1</sup>**Abstract**

*This qualitative study explores the challenges and the problems faced by people with physical disabilities in Nepal's cultural and social systems. In-depth interviews were conducted with eighteen participants living with physical disabilities in Kathmandu. Findings reveal significant challenges arising from exclusive social traditions, discrimination based on physical impairments, inaccessible infrastructure, and prejudiced social practices. These challenges hinder educational and employment opportunities, exacerbating vulnerability and exclusion from the mainstream socio-cultural system. The study also highlights limitations in government policies and programs, with poor implementation and cumbersome procedures leading to inadequate benefits for people with disabilities. Prejudiced social practices, discrimination, and inaccessible infrastructure further impede day-to-day activities, education, and employment, deepening vulnerability and marginalization. Institutional barriers within Nepali socio-cultural practices perpetuate the labeling of individuals with disabilities as incompetent and deficient, marginalizing their inclusion in social and cultural systems. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive interventions promoting inclusivity and accessibility.*

**Keywords:** physical disabilities, challenges, Nepal, social systems, inclusivity, accessibility

**Introduction**

The terms impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions are used to describe different aspects of disability. Disability can occur at three levels. If the problem lies in structure or body function; it is an impairment; If an individual encounters difficulty in carrying out a task or action, it can be classified as an activity limitation; likewise, when an individual experiences problem in engaging in life situations, it is a participation restriction. (WHO, 2000) Disability is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. It is influenced by various factors, including personal characteristics, environmental characteristics, and societal structures. The environment in which a person lives can significantly influence their experience and the extent of their disability. Lack of access to environments can create barriers to involvement and inclusion for individuals with disabilities. The shift from an individual, medical viewpoint to a structural, social viewpoint is often referred to as the transition from a

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"medical model" to a "social model" of disability. This transition recognizes that society plays a role in disabling individuals, rather than attributing disability solely to their physical bodies. While the medical model and social model are often seen as opposing perspectives, it is important to understand that disability should not be regarded as purely medical or purely social. People with disabilities often face challenges that stem from both their health conditions and societal factors. (World Health Organisation & World Bank, 2011)

### **Physical Disability**

Physical disability refers to the problem that arises in operation physical parts, movement, and motor function. Some instances of physical disabilities include conditions such as cerebral palsy and injuries to the spinal cord. (Khanal, 2014). Physical disability is defined as any type of physical impairment, weakness, deformity, or disfigurement that originates from injuries, illnesses, or congenital factors including a wide range of conditions, including but not limited to paralysis, diabetes mellitus, epilepsy, amputation, lack of physical coordination, visual impairments such as blindness, hearing impairments or deafness, speech impediments or muteness, as well as the need for assistive devices like guide dogs, wheelchairs, canes, crutches, or other corrective devices. (New Brunswick Human Rights Commission, 2011)

Similarly, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2007) recognizes disability as an evolving phenomenon resulting from the interaction between people with impairments and environmental obstacles. The convention aims to promote and protect the civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights of persons with disabilities, ensuring their full and equal participation in society. People with disabilities often bear the burden of societal stigma within their families, viewed as a source of shame due to widespread misunderstandings. Misconceptions persist, linking disability to past sins, portraying it as a form of penance. This belief system further stigmatizes people with disabilities, marking them as ominous for their families. Within familial circles, they face concealment, stigmatization, and the silencing of their voices amid social obstacles. Living in disgraceful circumstances, excluded from their families by environmental, policy, and attitudinal barriers, individuals with disabilities constitute the world's most discriminated minority group, witnessing the violation of their human rights.

Social exclusion leads people with disabilities to isolate themselves from various activities, be it entertainment, social, educational, or cultural events. Even during special occasions, family gatherings, and festivities, they experience neglect and isolation, contributing to feelings of loneliness and shame. Societal reluctance to engage with them in social and cultural activities perpetuates their isolation and economic backwardness.

The study was conducted to identify the socio-cultural challenges faced by people with disabilities, aims to focus on their social status, societal behavior towards them, and the

hurdles in their livelihood opportunities. Despite constitutional guarantees of equal and special rights, the harsh reality reveals discrimination, poverty, and a lack of societal respect. Understanding these challenges is crucial to addressing the persistent discrimination faced by people with disabilities.

The study has explored various theories that provide lenses to define variables, establish research designs, and offer an outline for the analysis and has guided the research. The theories examined include the Social Model of Disability, Critical Disability Theory, Labeling Theory, and Pravdha Karma.

The Social Model of Disability considers disability as a product of societal influences that emerge from the experiences of people with disabilities (PWD) and society's response within the health and welfare system. This model recognizes that disability is not solely an individual's impairment but also encompasses the barriers and exclusion imposed by society. It emphasizes the unequal relationship between disabled individuals and society, where their needs are often ignored. The study aimed to find the difficulties experienced by individuals who have physical disabilities, focusing on the impact of social norms, systems, and attitudes on accessibility (Carson, 2009; Retief & Letšosa, 2018).

Critical Disability Theory considers disability as a socio-cultural and political phenomenon that extends beyond individual medical conditions. It emphasizes that the problems faced by PWD are products of an unjust society and highlights the importance of social action and change. This theory recognizes that social oppression, including prejudice and discrimination, poses greater challenges for disabled individuals than impairments alone. It challenges societal norms and stigmatization, framing disability as a cultural, political, and social issue (Minich, 2016; Sutherland, 1981; Campbell & Oliver, 1996).

Labeling theory of disability has been used to comprehend how labels affect individuals with disabilities. This theory suggests that the labels assigned to individuals can influence how they are perceived and treated by others, which can have significant consequences for their experiences and opportunities. Research has shown that labeling theory partially attributes poorer outcomes for individuals with disabilities to the stigma associated with their labels (Shifrer, 2013). The labeling of individuals with disabilities can lead to negative attitudes, stereotypes, and discriminatory behavior towards them. This stigma can affect various aspects of their lives, including education, employment, and social interactions.

Pravdha Theory, rooted in Hindu beliefs, interprets the life of an individual as the outcome of actions delivered in previous lives. It is based on the moral principle of karma, which governs the universe through the eternal cycle of life, deaths, and reincarnation. This theory suggests that an individual's present life is influenced by their past actions, with good or bad actions leading to corresponding outcomes. Pravdha Theory provides a framework for

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understanding the concept of destiny and personal responsibility in relation to disability (Das, 2010).

Globally, there are more than one billion people worldwide, which accounts for approximately 15% of the global population who are reported to have disabilities. This number is expected to rise due to various factors like age, conflict, natural disasters, and forced migration. People with disabilities face challenges in education and employment, with lower completion rates and job opportunities, particularly impacting females and girls. (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development; The World Bank, 2018)

Similarly, in India, approximately 2.21% of the population had disabilities in 2011, with 75% residing in rural areas. Challenges faced by individual with disabilities in India include limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities. Additionally, societal attitudes and stigma often contribute to the marginalization and exclusion of individuals with disabilities (Mohan VT, 2021). Though, the fact of Bangladesh is a variation in the prevalence of disabilities between rural and urban areas, with approximately 5.6% of the population experiencing some form of disability (Sultana & Gulshan, 2014).

In Nepal, disability-related issues often go unnoticed, with challenges in policy implementation. Traditional beliefs associating disability with past sins persist, contributing to societal stigma. The lack of comprehensive data hinders understanding the situation, and women with disabilities face higher rates of violence. Both national policies and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities share the common goal of promoting the rights of persons with disabilities (Lord, Sijapati, Baniya, Chand, & Ghale, 2016; Human Rights Watch, 2011; United Nations, 2018).

Nepal ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) in 2010 and incorporated disability rights in its 2015 Constitution. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2074, defines disability, categorizes it based on severity, and outlines various policies for protection and empowerment. Other policies cover education, employment, social security, and health for people with disabilities (Constituent Assembly Secretariat, 2015; Thapaliya, 2016; Prasai & Pant, 2018).

The above literatures explore the Disability Social Model, Critical Disability Theory, Labeling Theory, and Pravidha Karma. These theoretical perspectives offer valuable insights into the understanding of disability as a socially constructed, shaped by socio-cultural factors and political phenomenon, influenced by societal labels and personal action. Research shows countries like Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh have varying rates of disability prevalence and encounter obstacles in providing equal opportunities for people with disabilities. Nepal, in particular, struggles with societal stigma and the implementation of disability-related policies. However, there is a growing acknowledgment of the rights of individuals with disabilities, and

there are concerted efforts being made at both national and international levels to address these issues.

The research employed a qualitative research method to the socio-cultural challenges faced by individuals with physical disabilities in Kathmandu, Bagmati Pradesh. The study focused on youth aged 18 to 40 years who have physical disabilities. A case study approach and a narrative research approach were utilized to analyze the collected information. In-depth interviews were conducted using an interview checklist to gather wide and in-depth perspectives on the life challenges, social, and cultural difficulties faced by people with physical disabilities in Nepal. The study utilized both primary and secondary data, with primary data collection involving the use of checklists and case studies, and secondary data obtained from books, journal articles, and websites. Multiple case studies were conducted using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method, to collect information from the participants. Several data collection tools and techniques were employed, including checklists, in-depth interviews, and observational analysis. In-depth case studies, in-depth interviews with 18 individuals, and observational analysis were conducted to gather detailed information. The collected data, including interview transcripts, observation notes, and non-textual materials, were systematically processed and analyzed using narrative analysis to explore the experiences and perceptions of the participants. The study included 18 youth participants aged 18 to 40, and purposive sampling was employed to collect information from them. However, it is important to note that the findings of the study cannot be generalized to all people with disabilities, as the focus was on socio-cultural challenges faced by people with physical disabilities aged 18 to 40 in Kathmandu. The study also acknowledged theoretical and methodological limitations. Ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the research process, with prior consent obtained from the interviewees and a high level of respect for the rights of people with disabilities during the information gathering process.

### **Socio- Cultural Challenges and People with Physical Disability**

The research article explores the experiences of people with disabilities and highlights several major findings. The study emphasizes the pivotal role of family support in enabling individuals with disabilities to adapt and thrive in society. It also sheds light on the challenges of social isolation, the risk of abuse, accessibility barriers, discrimination, and negative perceptions. Additionally, the study explores the diverse perceptions of individuals with disabilities regarding their own lives and identifies limitations in the current disability card system.

### **Social Challenges**

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**Family Support and Access to Education:** The research underscored the significant role of family support in empowering individuals with disabilities, encompassing emotional aid, access to medical care, and formal education. Participants shared instances where parental support played a transformative role, such as modifying home structures to accommodate people with disabilities and make the infrastructures accessible. However, the study also sheds instances of abandonment, revealing the profound impact on individuals, hindering their access to support and employment opportunities.

**Social Isolation and Depression:** The study highlights on the pervasive issue of social isolation and negative attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. Participants expressed feelings of being ignored, disrespected, and unworthy, contributing to a sense of discouragement and depression. A participant's poignant reflection, "I felt humiliated to appear in front of others," underscores the urgent need for societal acceptance and inclusion to address these challenges.

**Risk of Abuse:** The research uncovers the heightened vulnerability of women with disabilities to exploitation and abuse. Participants shared experiences where people took advantage of their perceived helplessness. One participant stated, "People approach us, thinking we won't complain," highlighting the urgent need for awareness programs and measures to protect individuals with disabilities, particularly women, from abuse and exploitation.

### **Practical Challenges**

**Accessibility Barriers:** Participants highlighted significant challenges posed by inaccessible infrastructure, leading to mobility issues and embarrassment in public spaces. The lack of disabled-friendly facilities, including inadequate public transportation accommodations, compounds the difficulties faced by individuals with disabilities. One participant's candid admission, "I have been embarrassed because I could not hold my urine," underscores the urgent need for improved accessibility measures to improve the quality of life for people with disabilities.

**Dislike, Discrimination, and Embarrassment:** The study revealed the prevalence of labeling, discrimination, and negative perceptions towards individuals with disabilities. Participants shared experiences of feeling disrespected and marginalized, emphasizing the importance of focusing on a person's abilities rather than their disability. A participant's plea, "We need acceptance, not pity or special treatment," highlights the significance of promoting a more inclusive society.

Perception of Living a Life with Disability: The study explored diverse perceptions among individuals with disabilities regarding their own lives. While some express feelings of burden and shame, others embrace their disability as a normal part of life. A participant's powerful statement, "Disability is only a body condition, not a matter of shame," emphasizes the need for greater understanding and acceptance of the varied experiences and viewpoints of people with disabilities.

### **Policy Considerations: Problem in Disability Card**

The study identifies limitations in the current disability card system, particularly in reflecting the severity of disabilities and the inadequacy of social security allowances. Participants expressed the need for a revised disability card system that accurately represents the degree of disability. One participant's straightforward suggestion, "The disability card should be revised based on the actual degree of disability," underscores the importance of equitable support and fair representation for individuals with disabilities.

The findings from the study reveal a wide range of obstacles and difficulties faced by people with disabilities, encompassing familial support, societal attitudes, accessibility, and the limitations of existing support systems. The experiences shared by the participants underscore the critical need for comprehensive support mechanisms, societal inclusivity, and policy reforms to address the identified challenges.

The study highlights the essential role of family support in enabling individuals with disabilities to navigate societal barriers. However, instances of abandonment and lack of familial support emphasize the need for greater awareness and support for families of individuals with disabilities. This underscores the complex dynamics within families and the significant impact of familial support on the well-being and opportunities of individuals with disabilities.

Furthermore, the study highlights on the significant influence of social isolation, discrimination, and adverse attitudes impacting the mental well-being of people with disabilities. The findings underscore the urgent need for greater societal acceptance and inclusion to address these challenges and promote the mental well-being of people with disabilities.

The increased vulnerability of women with disabilities to exploitation and abuse is another major finding. The study emphasizes the need for awareness programs and protective measures to safeguard individuals with disabilities, particularly women, from abuse and exploitation.

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In addition, the challenges posed by inaccessible infrastructure and the inadequacies of the disability card system further emphasize the need for improved accessibility measures and equitable support systems. The findings of the study offer valuable insights into the varied experiences of individuals with disabilities, emphasizing the significance of addressing systemic obstacles and promoting a society that is more inclusive and supportive.

These findings provide a compelling basis for advocating for policy reforms, awareness programs, and societal changes to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for individuals with disabilities. These insights highlight the need for proactive efforts to address the diverse barriers faced by people with disabilities and create an environment that promotes equal opportunities and inclusivity for all.

### **Conclusion**

This research has provided valuable insights into the obstacles experienced by individuals with physical disabilities within the social and cultural systems of Nepalese society. Through in-depth interviews with eighteen participants, the study revealed that an individual's perception of disability is heavily influenced by their family, society, and community.

The research highlighted the pervasive bias and discrimination that individuals with disabilities face in Nepalese society. Acceptance within the family was found to be a key factor in facilitating societal acceptance. Moreover, access to education and employment emerged as crucial for social inclusion and the enjoyment of rights and resources. Individuals with physical disabilities also struggle with personal feelings about their impairments, as well as various forms of discrimination, prejudice, an unfavorable physical and social environment, and suppression. The performance of cultural duties within the family and society further compounds their challenges.

The study identified challenges at the personal, family, social, and policy levels, emphasizing the need to address functional barriers and provide proper medical treatment and infrastructure suitable for individuals with physical disabilities. Additionally, inclusive education and employment opportunities must be made available to support their integration into society.

Negative attitudes towards individuals with physical disabilities have a profound impact on their social inclusion, leading to exclusion from social and cultural events and denying them identity and recognition. The lack of inaccessible infrastructure established by the government worsens the challenges individuals with physical disabilities have to face when trying to access public places and transportation.

In conclusion, people with physical disabilities in Nepal continue to confront significant challenges in meeting their fundamental rights and accessing opportunities.

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Collaboration among society, government, and stakeholders is imperative to address these challenges, promote inclusivity, and uphold the rights, respect and human dignity of people with physical disabilities.

### Recommendations:

- Enhance awareness programs to promote acceptance, reduce social stigma, and prevent abuse and exploitation of people with disabilities.
- Improve accessibility by implementing disabled-friendly infrastructures and ensuring compliance with regulations.
- Provide support and resources to families of people with disabilities to enhance their understanding and ability to provide adequate care and support.
- Revise the disability card system to accurately reflect the severity of a person's disability and ensure fair access to social security allowances.
- Advocate and promote inclusive education and job prospects for individual with disabilities to strengthen their social integration and empower their economic independence.
- Develop and implement policies and initiatives to address social isolation, depression, and mental health issues experienced by people with disabilities.

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