

## **Educating Women with Disabilities in Mizoram: Prospects and Challenges**

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**Abstract:** *Women with disabilities form a small portion of population in Mizoram. They are often neglected and excluded from certain societal activities which led them to experience inadequacy in many aspects of life. In the field of education, the situation is also similar as they faced high proportion of discrimination in this area. This paper attempts to study the educational status of women with disabilities in Mizoram and also studies some of the challenges faced by them in the field of special education. The various challenges and problems faced in implementation of special education is highlighted and offers suggestive measures for the concerning authorities to follow.*

**Keywords:** *Special education, women with disabilities, Mizoram, challenges, prospects*

### **Introduction**

The concept of 'disability' has shifted from an individual level to a social phenomenon in the last three decades. The complex nature of disability includes a person's impairment intertwined with impairment at societal level. They are restricted from performing daily activities due to the limitations brought about by their physical and mental impairment and at the same time, the restrictions by society prohibit them to perform several activities. As per the notion of social concept of disability, it is society, rather than the individual's impairment who is responsible for holding back the potential and capabilities of persons with disabilities (Chandrashekhara et al., 2010).

Mizoram is a close-knit society where individuals are closely related to each other and had profound affection towards each other. The concepts of 'altruism' and respect towards elders are among the highlights of Mizo culture. However, persons with disabilities are often side-lined and excluded from certain narratives in the state. This may be quite contradictory for a state which builds its foundation on respect towards others

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and helping everyone in need without showing signs of discrimination. This paper highlights the possibilities of exclusion and neglect faced by women with disabilities in Mizoram in the field of education.

## **Literature Review**

Disability is often defined as an umbrella term and it is used to describe a person's impairments that stem from serious injuries, diseases or conjugal. It is also used to describe a situation where individuals are restricted from social activities when their surrounding environments are not supportive or inclusive. Thus, disability has been used by scholars to represent the ability continuum of a person along with the conducive restrictions exerted upon the persons with disabilities which, in turn, has a long-lasting impact in their lives (Altman, 2014).

Persons with disabilities face considerable number of societal exclusions which ranges from limited accessibility, inadequate educational structures to denied employment opportunities, leading to poverty. Building an inclusive environment in workplaces and educational institutions can foster change to accommodate persons with disabilities and anticipate their daily challenges (Calvert, 2021).

Education is one of the key aspects to empower persons with disabilities, particularly the women with disabilities as it can acquire them the right skills to earn livelihood and also receive education and learnings to help them gain insights into their rights and duties. The intersection between various hurdles like stigma, neglect, exclusion and discrimination led them to be uneducated and lack skills for breaking the shackles of poverty. Hence, providing special education to women with disabilities can provide inclusive development for them (Nhan & Singhe, 2024).

Though scholars and academicians stressed about the importance of educating women with disabilities, various hurdles stand in the way of accomplishing this feat. Poverty is one of the reasons for the low educational status of women with status, which is added by neglect by their caregivers and attitudinal barriers exerted upon them by their surrounding environment. Lack of trained educators and inadequate special schools are another reason for the low enrolment of women with disabilities in educational institutions (Thomas, 2019). Besides, the attitudes of the families and caregivers go a long way for the low educational status of women with disabilities as they are mostly confined in the four walls of their homes without caring to educate them. Further, special schools and mainstream schools do not have enough educational facilities to cater them. The lack of resources and lack of special trained teachers also led to the increased drop-out rates among them (Cushen, 2024).



The improper implementation of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016, is the main reason for low educational status of women with disabilities in India. This Act has mandated the concerning authorities and local government to provide educational and developmental opportunities for women with disabilities on an equal basis with others and also mandated support to pursue their goals. However, due to poor implementation of this Act in many places, women with disabilities have not received their rights and are in fact denied basic education (Kumari, 2020). This paper analysed the educational status of women with disabilities in Mizoram state and the main challenges faced in the field of special education.

### **Methodology**

This paper uses mixed methodology of both qualitative and quantitative method. 163 women with disabilities are selected through simple random sampling and consents are taken before conducting interviews. Pseudonyms are provided to maintain anonymity and the resulting data are analysed through Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The results are displayed through tables and quotations of the respondents are also highlighted under the results. The study aims to answer two research questions which are:

1. To study the educational status of women with disabilities in Mizoram
2. To find out the key challenges faced in special education

### **Educational status of women with disabilities**

The act of learning something new or transferring knowledge is known as education. Education involves getting children ready for adulthood. The process of education begins right when a child is born. At first, it started as an informal process as the child watches and imitates others around them. Then, the process becomes more formal as the child gets older in which the education becomes more formal through pre-school and play dates.

This education process then becomes academic lessons and is much more than learning simple facts. Education is a means to socialize humans into society and is an important socialization method. All cultural expectations and norms are taught through education by teachers through textbooks and classmates. The respondents in this study are asked about their educational status and the education level of the respondents is divided into primary, upper primary, high school, pre-degree, graduate, post-graduate, Ph.D., technical, and no education.

Table 1: Educational status

District	Educational background of women respondents								Total
	Primary	Upper Primary	High School	Pre-Degree	Graduate	Post-Graduate	Ph. D	No Education	
Lunglei	15 (9.2%)	0 (0%)	3 (1.8%)	1 (0.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.6%)	20 (12.3%)
Aizawl	55 (33.7%)	17 (10.4%)	19 (11.7%)	10 (6.1%)	13 (8%)	6 (3.7%)	1 (0.6%)	22 (13.5%)	143 (87.7%)
Total	70 (42.9%)	17 (10.4%)	22 (13.5%)	11 (6.7%)	13 (8%)	6 (3.7%)	1 (0.6%)	23 (14.1%)	163 (100%)

Source: Field Survey

The educational level of the respondents is depicted in the above table. It is evident that in Lunglei, most of the women, i.e., 15 (9.2%) have reached only the primary level of education, while there are 3 (1.8%) women who have reached the high school level of education. There is only 1 (0.6%) woman who has reached the pre-degree level of education and there is 1 (0.6%) woman who did not receive any education at all.

The situation is somewhat similar in Aizawl as there are 55 (33.7%) women who have reached only the primary level of education and there are 17 (10.4%) women who have reached the upper primary level of education. 19 (11.7%) women have achieved a high school level of education and 10 (6.1%) women have reached pre-degree level of education. In terms of graduate women, there are 13 (8%) women who have graduated at their bachelor's level, and 6 (3.7%) women are post-graduate. There is 1 (0.6%) woman who currently pursuing her Ph. D from Assam and as many as 22 (13.5%) women did not receive any formal education at all. These women did not go to any conventional schools and educational institutions but they had received informal education in the form of reading and writing from their caregivers.

Among the women, 70 respondents have attained only a primary level of education which accounts for as many as 42.9% of the entire respondents. In Lunglei, as many as 75% of these women have achieved only a primary level of education while in Aizawl, the number is a bit lower at 38.47% but the category still forms the highest number in the district as compared to other categories of education. 17 (10.4%) of the women have an upper primary level of education and 22 (13.5%) of the respondents have reached high school level. 11 (6.7%) of the women have a pre-degree which is equivalent to a higher secondary level of education in modern days. In terms of graduates, there are 13 (8.0%) women who are graduates in this study and 6 (3.7%) women who have post-graduate degrees. There are no graduate and post-graduate women from Lunglei district. Among the women, there is only one woman who is currently pursuing a Ph. D which accounts for 0.6% of the entire women respondents. As many as 23 women or 14.1% of the respondents did not receive any type of education in their lifetime because their disability prohibits them from receiving

formal school education. It is noted that these women are not illiterate despite receiving no education but have received basic alphabet and number of lessons taught to them by their caregivers.

*'...what is the use of education for a disabled girl like me? All my life I have lived off the emotional, financial, and physical care of my family and I don't have many opportunities in life anyway. Besides, my analytical thinking and memories did not permit much education as I could not learn many things academically. One of my family members had to accompany me to school every day which is time-consuming for them as they all must work as well. So, I had to drop out from school after reaching primary level as I felt that I only disturbed my families.'* – P1, autism spectrum disorder.

The data revealed that access to formal education tends to be quite formidable for women with disabilities due to multiple reasons as most of the respondents have attained only a primary level of education followed by women who had not received any kind of formal education at all. Disability has formed a major obstacle to the promotion of the educational career of the respondents. The majority of them have either dropped out after primary level or have not gained entry into formal education. So, it is crucial to provide special education with a syllabus that is customized based on their respective ability.

### **Challenges in special education**

Education is the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction at schools, colleges, or universities. There are two types of education such as formal and informal type of education. Formal education is the type of education that one receives through traditional means in schools, colleges, and universities. An informal type of education is the education that is provided by the parents and caretakers inside one's own home. Education is an important factor to achieve inclusive development, without which, holistic development cannot occur. In this study, the issues about education are thoroughly investigated and the women are asked about their opportunities in terms of education, educational facilities, the inclusivity of education, the syllabus as well as the issues in shortage of specially trained teachers.

Table 2: Educational Opportunities

District	Education opportunities for women with disabilities					
	Very high	High	Medium	Low	Very low	Total
Lunglei	1 (0.6%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (1.2%)	17 (10.4%)	20 (12.3%)
Aizawl	8 (4.9%)	15 (9.2%)	10 (6.1%)	14 (8.6%)	96 (58.9%)	143 (87.7%)
Total	9 (5.5%)	15 (9.2%)	10 (6.1%)	16 (9.8%)	113 (69.3%)	163 (100%)

Source: Field Survey

From the above data, the educational opportunities of women with disabilities in two districts of Mizoram are highlighted. In Lunglei, there is only 1 (0.6%) woman who stated that education opportunities are high while 2 (1.2%) women have stated that the opportunities are low. At the same time, as many as 17 (10.4%) women have stated that the educational opportunities for them are very low. One of the respondents said, ‘...try as I may, I will never have educational opportunities like other girls without disabilities because my capabilities do not permit me.’

In Aizawl, the situation does not vary much as only 8 (4.9%) women have said that educational opportunities are very high. 15 (9.2%) women have said that the opportunities are high and 10 (6.1%) women have said that the opportunities are neither high nor low. 14 (8.6%) of the women have expressed that the opportunities for them for education are low while the remaining 143 (87.7%) women have stated that the opportunities for education in Mizoram are very low for them. This finding is in favour of low educational opportunities for women with disabilities in Mizoram as 113 (69.3%) of the women from the total respondents have stated the low chance for them to achieve education in the state. The main reasons as to what restricts their educational opportunities are studied further and shown in the following table.

Table 3: Lack of inclusivity in education

District	Lack of inclusivity in education					Total
	Strongly agree	Agree	Medium	Disagree	Strongly disagree	
Lunglei	20 (12.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	20 (12.3%)
Aizawl	114 (69.9%)	22 (13.5%)	6 (3.7%)	1 (0.6%)	0 (0%)	143 (87.7%)
Total	134 (82.2%)	22 (13.5%)	6 (3.7%)	1 (0.6%)	0 (0%)	163 (100%)

Source: Field Survey

When enquired about the lack of inclusivity of education in Mizoram, all 20 (12.3%) women from Lunglei have said strongly agreed that education is not inclusive in Mizoram, as observed from the above table. In Aizawl, as many as 114 (69.9%) women have strongly agreed that education is not inclusive in the state and an additional 22 (13.5%) women have also agreed on the lack of inclusion in education. Only 6 (3.7%) women have neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement and there is only 1 (0.6%) woman who disagrees that education is not inclusive. The situation also does not fare well in Aizawl.

*P2, a student from Aizawl who has cerebral palsy has given a strong statement about the lack of inclusivity in education who said, ‘Education is neglected in Mizoram for women with disabilities in the sense that it is still not inclusive. Mainstream schools hesitate to enroll as they claim that they do not have specially trained teachers to look after their disabled students. We need to make*

*education more inclusive and to make that happen, mainstream schools should not hesitate to enroll disabled students in their respective schools and adjust their curriculum accordingly. Besides, there is a constant lack of educational facilities even in the special schools in Mizoram like braille, audio aid, and visual aids.'*

The overall data has pointed out that a total of 134 (82.2%) women from both districts strongly agree on the lack of inclusivity in education. In Lunglei, it appears that education is more exclusive all the women from the district have expressed their concerns over the exclusivity.

Table 4: Opinion on the lack of educational facilities

District	Lack of educational facilities					
	Very high	High	Medium	Low	Very low	Total
Lunglei	20 (12.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	20 (12.3%)
Aizawl	115 (70.6%)	21 (12.9%)	7 (4.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	143 (87.7%)
Total	135 (82.8%)	21 (12.9%)	7 (4.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	163 (100%)

Source: Field Survey

In terms of lack of educational facilities, the above data highlights the opinion of the women in two districts, and in Lunglei, all 20 (12.3%) women have said that the lack of educational facilities is very high in Lunglei. In Aizawl, 115 (70.6%) women have raised their opinion about the very high lack of educational facilities in Aizawl, whereas 21 (12.9%) women have also said that the lack of educational facilities is high. There are only 7 (4.3%) women who have said that the lack is neither high nor low and is in a range of medium. Hence, it is obvious that there is an extreme lack of educational facilities in both districts and this is the early step that blocks the overall inclusive development of women in Mizoram. There is a dire need to elevate the presence of educational facilities such as visual and hearing aids in classrooms, ramps for entry into educational institutions, and other educational books and instruments which are specifically designed for disabled communities.

*P3, is an intellectually disabled woman whose age range falls between 21 – 30 years old and who lives in Lunglei town. She is not capable of achieving mainstream education so, she attended the only special school in Lunglei, which is Onyx Special School. In terms of the educational facilities, her father has said, 'Society should broaden their mindset and include women with disabilities in various activities and gatherings. They may not be as capable as other able persons, but they have their strengths and capabilities, and we should not look*

*beyond that. The special school that she attended is the only special school in Lunglei and facilities are rather lacking. Visual aids and other disability-friendly devices are not much in their school and so, that makes them lag in terms of attaining educational knowledge. Women like my daughter are in serious need of educational facilities in their day-to-day learning and without those facilities, learning becomes difficult for them.'*

There are as many as 135 (82.8%) women from both districts who have stated that the lack of educational facilities is very high in the state while another 21 (12.9%) women have also stated that the lack is high. There are 7 (4.3%) women who have stated that the lack is neither high nor low. Besides the lack of educational facilities, another problem that they can face in terms of education is the lack of special-trained teachers in the state.

Table 5: Lack of special-trained teachers

District	Lack of special-trained teachers					Total
	Very high	High	Medium	Low	Very low	
Lunglei	20 (12.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	20 (12.3%)
Aizawl	118 (72.4%)	23 (14.1%)	2 (1.2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	143 (87.7%)
Total	138 (84.7%)	23 (14.1%)	2 (1.2%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	163 (100%)

Source: Field Survey

The previous heading has highlighted the problems faced by women in terms of lack of educational facilities but in this section, the lack of specially trained teachers is analyzed through the data displayed in the above table. In Lunglei, all 20 (12.3%) women have said that there is a very high lack of special-trained teachers in Lunglei. The district fared rather low in terms of having qualified special-trained teachers. In Aizawl, 118 (72.4%) women have also said that there is a very high lack of special-trained teachers and an additional 23 (14.1%) women have also said that there is a high lack of special-trained teachers. The remaining 2 (1.2%) women have said that there is neither a high nor low lack of special trained teachers and there are no women in both the districts who have expressed the abundance of special teachers in Mizoram. 138 (84.7%) women have said that there is a very high need for special-trained teachers in the state while another 23 (14.1%) women have also stressed the high need for special-trained teachers. Only 2 (1.2%) women have expressed that there is neither a high nor low need for specially trained teachers for women with disabilities. Another problem that can arise in the field of education is the lack of an inclusive curriculum which limits the chances of attaining education among women.

## Conclusion

In Mizoram, the educational status of women with disabilities are rather low. Educational opportunities for them are low and this limit their chances to receive inclusive development in society. There is still a high lack of inclusivity in the field of education due to the exclusive nature of the syllabus, lack of special trained teachers in mainstream as well as in special schools and also due to the inaccessible nature of schools in Mizoram. The lack of educational facilities like study aids and playground and therapy sessions in schools for students with disabilities also prohibit women with disabilities to attend schools and have decent educational status. This shows the need to change the attitudinal barriers of society to provide safer and inclusive environment for persons with disabilities. Besides, the government needs to maintain strict and rigorous implementation measures for the proper functioning of RPwD Act, 2016, which, in turn, will led the women with disabilities to achieve higher educational degree and have further scope for finding employment to shackle the poverty and hardships faced by them.

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