IT for Change

National Gender Fellowship 2024

Navigating the Ableist Digital Divide: Challenges and Aspirations of Working Women with Disabilities

Srishti Gulati

About IT for Change

Founded in 2000, IT for Change is a Southern, women-led NGO rooted in feminist principles and driven by a commitment to social justice. Recognized with Special Consultative Status by the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. IT for Change is dedicated to democratizing digital technologies, enabling individuals and communities to harness their power for empowerment.

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About the National Gender Fellowship

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About the Author

Srisht Gulati is a changemaker dedicated to fostering an inclusive society by educating marginalised groups in STEM fields. Her research investigations are concentrated on disability representation and inclusive education. She had been recently awarded a seed grant from The Pollination Project Foundation, a U.S. organisation, for her project enhancing STEM access. Currently, a postgraduate student of sociology at Ambedkar University Delhi and a Youth Program Leader at Pravah, Srishti has formerly worked as an elementary school teacher for more than four years in organisations such as Billabong High School, G.D. Goenka School, Teach For India, and Net Impact.

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Contents

Abstract

This article focuses on the lived experiences of women with disabilities, particularly visual impairment, from Delhi, India. Using the lens of critical disability studies and critical technology studies, it highlights how technology and gender intersect in intricate ways in a rapidly developing economy like India, where deep-seated structural disparities exist along the axes of other socio-economic determinants such as caste, class, or language. Insights derived from qualitative data reveal that although cultural attitudes towards disability are largely exclusionary and patriarchal, they govern the negotiations with workplace bias and digital ableism for the most part; community-based movements often challenge technoableist norms, wherein positive gender inclusion becomes possible through mutual care and sharing of technical knowledge among the community members. The problem of ableist digital public infrastructure remains overshadowed by the dominant narrative of the digitalizing nation. As a solution, the development of a robust framework of inclusive digital policy architecture is recommended, involving local grassroots organizations, followed by strong regulatory mechanisms and enforcement.

Introduction

In the neoliberal economy, inclusion is mostly an afterthought, especially when it comes to digital infrastructure (Davies et al., 2023). When an able-bodied individual designs an app or an organization chooses to go digital, their first thought is about scalability, feasibility, or usage for the masses. It is hardly taken into consideration that within the masses, people might have different needs and user functions. The lived experiences of Delhi-based women with visual impairments served as the basis for this study. It primarily employs the lens of critical disability studies and critical technology studies to highlight the complex intersections of gender, technology, and disability. The research is framed by in-depth interviews with twenty working women who have vision impairment or blindness and are employed in various professional sectors throughout Delhi NCR. In India, the perception of the disabled population largely falls under three lenses. First is the sympathetic gaze, where the person is seen as an object of pity, and the efforts of inclusion are based on 'feel-good' feelings attained from charity. The other is the religious model, where a person's disability is associated with their past life karma. Last one is the social model, where ableist power structures perpetuate into systematic barriers, negative attitudes, and inaccessible institutions, making an individual 'disabled'. All the lenses are negative and do not help in creating inclusive attitudes towards persons with disabilities. The discrimination and violence created due to inaccessible institutions are replicated in the digital environment. Lived experiences show how technocratic digital systems are unfair to the disabled population, much like the sociocultural environment that is still adapted to religious and sympathetic models of disability. These lived realities underscore the need to reimagine digital architectures and call for design justice. Da Silva et al. (2025) argue that the ableist discrimination goes unchallenged because the necropolitics of the state determine which bodies are deemed valuable or productive for neoliberalism.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), people with disabilities form the largest minority in the world, with a population of a billion people, of which 80% live in developing countries. Disabled women are disadvantaged and particularly vulnerable to abuse (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Disability). In India, women with disabilities experience the compounded burden of patriarchy and disability, along with the intersection of other social identities such as caste, class, region, religion, or language. As per Ghai (2002; 2021), the prevailing culture–based on religious, social, and charity models–accords women with disabilities the status of 'devalued others'.

In India, legislation such as the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 mandates equal opportunities for disabled individuals. Bhattacharya (2016) finds that Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) in workplaces are reduced to being 'spectacles of diversity' and 'token' employees in reality. Kumar and Kothiyal (2018) find that such enforced demands might force a disabled individual to become 'able' by overexertion to prove their capabilities, 'supercrip' (Crittenden, 2018; Schalk, 2016) or 'disabled hero' (Wendell,1996) who has some 'special' ability which can supposedly be gathered from their high level of productivity.

Through a systematic review of media representations of disability in the workforce in India, Kumar and Kothiyal (2018) observe uneven distribution as there is over-representation in low-skilled employment and under-representation in managerial/professional positions. When it comes to work, disabled women have few opportunities as attaining education is more difficult for them, and thus, there are fewer chances of acquiring a dignified job (Dawn, 2013; Palan, 2020). Also, the knowledge of disability-based discrimination in the job market is severely lacking compared to other minority groups (Boehm and Jammaers, 2024). The dearth of literature concerning gender and disability in the workplace from the Global South poses a challenge in understanding the full implications of these identities when performed in workplace settings (Wickenden et al., 2022). In a world that is increasingly digitalized, their social and economic exclusion is concerning, particularly in the context of the digital divide and rising inequalities.

Walkowiak (2024) discusses how physical access barriers are reproduced in the digital environment. Individuals with disabilities often face barriers while accessing information online due to poorly formatted digital content (Beyene, 2019). Perez (2019) highlights how data bias, rooted in the presumption of male universality, further marginalizes non-male experiences across various domains, including virtual spaces. This bias distorts scientific research and everyday digital interactions, such as the gendering of emojis and default male assumptions in gaming and design. While women face notable underrepresentation, the situation is further exacerbated for disabled women, whose intersecting identities remain largely invisible (Addlakha, 2016). The virtual world's pervasive white male-dominated narratives deepen systemic inequalities restricting accessibility and representation for disabled women, especially from the Global South, ultimately impeding their participation in digital spaces and reinforcing societal exclusion (Gurumurthy et al., 2016).

Taylor (2017) highlights how digital inequalities are a result of invisibility, disengagement with technology, and discrimination. Studies in the past have identified issues such as the inaccessibility of digital payment systems (Kameswaran and Muralidhar, 2019; Goundar and Sathye, 2019), design challenges in e-commerce platforms (Sosa and Mateos, 2021; Thadikaran and Singh, 2024), and usability concerns in popular social media applications (Sajid et al., 2022; Gkatzola and Papadopoulos, 2024). Palan (2020) explored how students with visual impairment faced restrictions with educational access due to systemic exclusion, lack of information, internalized oppression, pedagogy, and lack of employment opportunities. These findings align with global research trends on critical disability studies in the Global South (WHO Disability and Health; Ghai 2015; UNICEF 2025).

Studies highlight that only 30% of the disability research done in recent years came from the Global South, despite having a large population of disabled individuals (Boehm and Jammaers, 2024). Moreover, oversimplification and generalizations of different types of disability have negative implications for accessibility research (Hofmann et al., 2020). The experiences of men and women with disabilities are significantly different (Jammaers and Williams, 2024), yet these identities are hardly studied separately from a gendered perspective in South Asia (Ghai, 2024). The voices of women with disabilities are hardly reflected in research (Gomes et al., 2019; Ghai, 2018b)

There is also the problem of alienated understanding and power imbalances when non-disabled experts take data from vulnerable groups, whilst giving little in return or treating participants as mere 'subjects' (Boehm and Jammaers, 2024). In most of the literature reviewed, future research is suggested to be focused on these critical issues. This study aims to contribute to the discourse by providing insights into these very areas, which are underrepresented.

Research Design and Methodology

Research Objectives and Research Questions

The research primarily focused on the current digital divide that is posing a challenge for women with visual impairments, exploring the linkages between social and digital exclusion, and examining how these factors impact the participation of disabled women in the digital economy. It will have the following objectives:

1. Explore what factors determine the accessibility, acquisition, and application of digital skills among women with visual impairments.
2. Study the role of digital skills and platforms in building professional identities, expanding networks, and accessing new opportunities for women with disabilities.

The major questions that would be addressed in this research are:

1. How are the personal lives and career trajectories of women with disabilities impacted by technocratic digital architectures?
2. How does digitalization impact the inclusion of women with visual impairments, particularly in professional work arrangements?

Methodology: Co-Creation and Collaboration

McMillan and Schumacher (1993) define qualitative research as primarily an inductive process of organizing data into categories and identifying patterns among categories. This research primarily uses qualitative research methods. Disability scholars have argued that the complexities of lived experiences of disabilities can be best understood by centering the subjective experiences of disabled people (Baglieri et al., 2011; Ferguson & Nusbaum, 2012; Hughes, 2023). To bring out the subjectivities of women with visual impairments and how they define their work and life experiences in the digital economy, data was collected through in-depth interviews that captured the narratives and lived experiences of participants.

The language used in this study alternates between person-first ('women with disabilities') and identity-first ('disabled women'). Identity-first usage represents the critical disability studies perspective that disability is socially and politically constructed, whereas person-first usage is kept when engaging with global policy frameworks (e.g., UNCRPD) that adopt this terminology. The also provides more reflexivity in situating the narratives from a sociopolitical standpoint while also making them coherent for policy debates and discourses.

Research Ethics

For this study, purposive and snowballing sampling techniques were deployed. Twenty participants aged between 25-50 were interviewed in-person in their home settings, with interviews lasting for about 45 minutes to one hour. The interviews were conducted in both Hindi and English. These interviews were recorded with the informed consent of the participants and were later transcribed and utilized to analyze the data along with field notes. To maintain the privacy of the participants, all interviewees have been anonymized using numerical codes (Participant 1, 2, and so on).

Author Positionality and Reflexivity in Research

The author identifies herself as a primary carer and has been long-term associated with the community they are studying. While the personal connection helps in understanding nuanced systemic barriers and leads to ease of collaboration and co-creation of knowledge, it is acknowledged that an interpretive bias can arise from being a non-disabled female researcher. The experiences and interpretations may or may not differ from those of individuals with disabilities themselves. To make the research more reflexive, regular member checks have been done by the participants to ensure the analysis reflects their voices.

Limitations of the Research

This study does not examine other social determinants such as caste, religion, or ethnicity. The main focus is on the lived realities of women with disabilities in Delhi NCR. Though it is acknowledged that these are important social markers that need to be explored further in detail in order to acquire a more nuanced understanding. These areas can be taken up for further in-depth research.

Key Findings and Discussion

Demographics

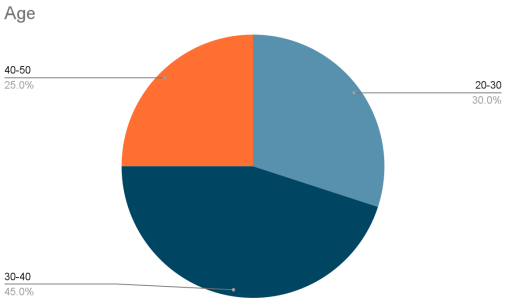
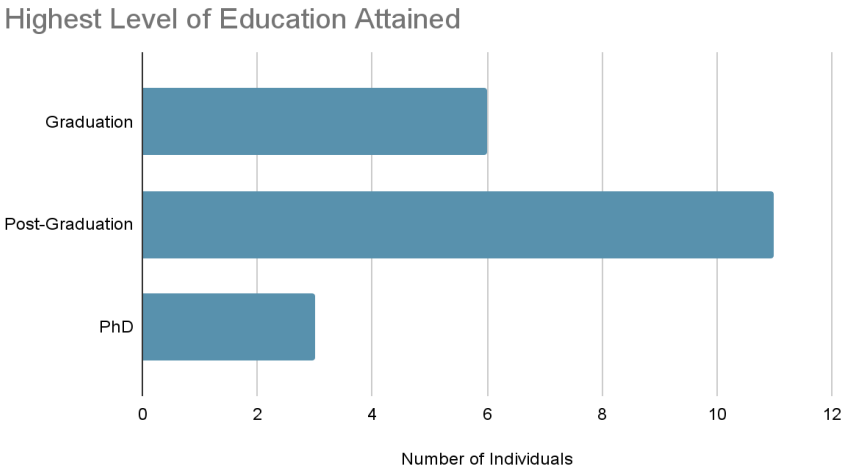


Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 1

This study represents 20 participants aged between 20-50 who are currently employed in various occupational domains, such as Schools, Universities, Educational NGOs, Research Institutions, Public and Private Banks, Government Public Sector Undertakings and Private Sector enterprises such as Multinational Companies (MNCs). Out of which, about 80% participants have identified as having complete blindness and 20% as having low vision.



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With regards to educational qualifications, all the participants are graduates with a Bachelor's degree, 55% (n = 11) of the participants possess a postgraduate degree, and 15% hold a PhD degree (n = 3). The women are working as teachers, professors, bank managers and officers, receptionists, trainees, and managers at MNCs.

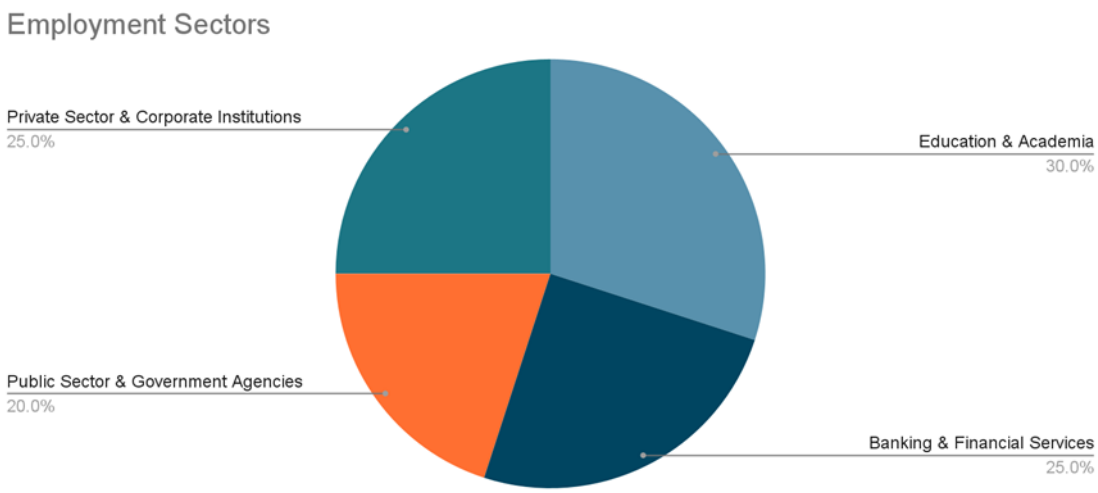

Figure 3

Participants are also varied in marital status, with 80% identified as married and 20% as single. This demographic ensures a detailed study of key research areas that are taken up in this study.

Reviewing Inclusion: Barriers and Enablers

The International Labour Organization (ILO)'s report (2019) recommends that reasonable accommodation is essential for inclusivity in workforce participation, but on-ground realities depict how a clear lack of guidance and training becomes a barrier to achieving independence for people with disabilities. UNICEF's Global Disability Inclusion Report 2025 calls for a whole-of-society approach where governments ensure the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) is strictly followed by involving multiple stakeholders with cross-sectoral coordination to ensure inclusion. At the organizational level, studies show that qualities like agreeableness and openness in colleagues and employers lead to positive outcomes and inclusion (Kershner & Marakas, 2024). But, this is hardly being followed at the organizational level.

Most of the participants in this study confirm that they have acquired digital skills alongside their mainstream education through government-backed initiatives in order to 'cope' with texts and books in print used largely. Converting school textbooks to braille and recordings is also a task; therefore, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives in place (providing free-of-cost devices to students from disadvantaged backgrounds in central universities; computer training centres for persons with disabilities) helped participants complete their education. But herein lies the problem of accessibility to quality education. In tier-2 cities of India (as Participant 1 and 7 highlighted), it becomes difficult to acquire quality education, and therefore, families have to make special arrangements to make sure individual needs are met. As previous research studies have shown, this is not possible for all households. Lack of resources in tier-2 cities limits access to quality education, as families may prioritize basic needs over educational expenses (Das & Shah, 2014; Ringu & Ranjan, 2024). Therefore, the successful operationalization of the government schemes, along with NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) and CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) work, helps in supporting their education.

The participants reiterated the importance of the proper implementation of these initiatives as they provide adequate training and independent living. Participant 2, who is a Vice Principal in a school, says, “It’s very important to be techno-friendly these days…especially for visually impaired (VI) persons…Otherwise, you are completely dependent on sighted people, and they might try to evade you.”

She shared that those individuals who do not have technical skills are more likely to be dependent on carers or on their peers to navigate day-to-day life. “Often, a file has to be sent or an email needs to be acknowledged. When you ask somebody else to do it, they would evade and lie… normal logon ko lagta hai ma’am ko pata nhi chalta toh misguide kar skte hain” (Translation: ‘Normal people’ think that since I can’t see so I won’t know, thus they can misguide me’). One of the biggest problems disabled individuals encounter is stigmatization and discrimination at the workplace. As per the 2019 report of the International Labour Organization (ILO), violence and harassment against PWDs is under-researched and underreported. Negative attitudes at the workplace are one of the major contributing factors. A lot of coworkers have preconceived ideas about what people with disabilities are capable of, which can lead to low expectations and exclusion from team activities (Mensah, 2022). These everyday acts of objective violence (Žižek, 2008) remain hidden but significantly exacerbate violence against disabled individuals.
Participant 3, who works as a teacher, shares that despite having knowledge and a skillset, there is a prevalent bias in the organization that whenever work has to be allotted, she is thought of last, when no other alternative is there. Participant 3 shares

> “They don’t know how to use a person as a resource. Despite having digital skills, I am hardly involved in any other work apart from teaching, whereas other [able-bodied] teachers are approached freely for the same. When it comes to inclusion in education, somehow the narrative only includes inclusive practices for learners; how employees also need to be included, that is not given much thought.”

The irony of teaching students about inclusion while surviving an exclusionary workplace shows the on-ground failure of the legal policy apparatus. Prejudicial behaviors, including segregation and discrimination, are frequently displayed by coworkers, and they can negatively affect the psychological health of people with disabilities (Bongwong & Fangnwi, 2019). Numerous able-bodied individuals possess preconceptions that foster negative opinions of colleagues with disabilities, perceiving them as incompetent or unable to execute jobs properly (Murtiasih et al., 2024). Additionally, according to some research, disabilities that are visible could elicit greater negative reactions than those that are unseen (Santilli et al., 2023).

Participant 8 shared that since she is paid well, she is able to buy a smart cane and laptop herself, as most of the organizations do not provide rehabilitation expenses. When it comes to upskilling training at workplaces, they are held with a one-size-fits-all approach, disregarding inclusion completely.

Participant 13 shares, “Many times videos are played for the trainings with only background music and visuals, then you have to ask your colleagues to share what was in the video. In case some form of link is shared in such trainings, it’s easier for a sighted person to open it quickly; as a Visually Impaired (VI) person, I need more time to open the document with Talkback, as I have to leave the WhatsApp platform first and then look for the app where the link is opened. No extra time is provided to accommodate such needs, and things move on quickly, making us (disabled individuals) depend more on others for help than doing it ourselves.”

Exclusion by Design: The Neoliberal Logic of Capitalist Elitism

In order to characterize the disparity between those who have access to digital technology, particularly the internet, and those who do not, the term “digital divide” first appeared in the late 1990s (Van Dijk, 2020). But what started out as a dichotomy—of having access versus not having access—has since developed into a more complex conversation. These days, researchers employ intersectional frameworks to comprehend how overlapping oppressive structures, such as caste, gender, ethnicity, class, and disability, influence internet access. The field of intersectional disability studies posits the view that accessibility is not a one-size-fits-all solution.

While assistive and sensing technologies contribute to the access of digital platforms and ease the activities of daily living, the inherent ableist normativities (Campbell, 2009) manifest themselves in design and ease of use. Two of the participants shared that it is very difficult for them to use screen reader technologies such as JAWS or VoiceOver in the phone as the accented English is difficult to comprehend, and when they set the default language to Hindi, many of the words used are outdated and not of common parlance, so it becomes easier to ask a sighted person to help them out than using the talkback. This correlates with key findings of accessibility research that highlight how language acts as a barrier in digital access (Botelho 2021; Nectoux et al., 2023)

Gangadharan’s research concerning “digital exclusion by design” highlights the systematic marginalization of disadvantaged populations by policies and institutions. As an illustration of how state infrastructure can impose techno-ableist rules, government e-services in India frequently need Aadhaar-based authentication, which may be unavailable to those who are visually impaired or multi-disabled (Gangadharan, 2021).

This type of ableist bias is replicated over many digital platforms, which are often inaccessible and again require some vision assistance, as the captcha is in the form of an image and no voice version is available. The Directorate of Education website was earlier inaccessible due to the same reason, but after a lot of complaints were made, its architecture was changed, which now includes a readable captcha along with audio.

Participant 1 shared

> "Similar protests happened for almost all the websites and applications, like DIKSHA or SBI net banking; both are accessible now, but were not in the recent past. The problem lies within the way they are conceptualized; half of the time, an app or a website is launched first and made accessible later, often after a series of complaints and grievances have been made against it. I recently tried filing property returns, but the SPARROW (a central government website) is inaccessible (due to image captcha); now the work is disrupted, and you have to first write an email requesting that this be looked into."

To empirically test the narrative of 'ease of use' and 'universal accessibility' commonly propagated by digital platforms, a checklist of 50 popular apps in India was prepared and their accessibility was discussed during the interview. The apps belong to different categories such as e-commerce (Amazon, Flipkart, Meesho), quick commerce (Blinkit, Zepto, Swiggy Instamart, etc.); social media (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, LinkedIn); e-payment systems (Google Pay, PhonePe, Paytm); food delivery (Zomato, Swiggy); transportation and ride-sharing apps (Uber, Ola, Rapido, DMRC App), trading apps (Zerodha, Upstocks); online banking apps (YONO SBI, HDFC, Canara, etc.), education and parenting apps (Coursera, FirstCry, etc.); and entertainment apps (YouTube, Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar, etc). Participants shared that most of the popular apps are accessible, barring a few, such as Blinkit and Zepto, where images are dominant, and no image description is provided and nor are the images labelled.

Applications having a global reach showed more accessibility features and ease of use (like Amazon, Google Pay, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, WhatsApp) compared to those based in India, where the accessible version of an application is launched later. The major accessibility issue came with online banking apps of private banks such as Axis Bank, Canara Bank, HDFC Bank, etc., where the apps were either not accessible at all or, if accessible through Talkback or VoiceOver, they are extremely difficult to navigate. Their importance is explained by another participant, who shows why their inaccessibility becomes a major concern.

These digital payment apps help in ensuring fair monetary transactions are taking place, participant 20 recalls,

> "Earlier, when I used to take autos, one of them tried to trick me...I would ask them if this is a 100 rupee note, and they would say yes when in actuality, the note was of Rs. 500. Now, because of digital payment systems and RBI MANI, I feel safer while paying."

However, online banking apps like YONO (State Bank of India's online banking app) or the Canara Bank app were found to be inaccessible. The experiences of participants with online banking apps of private banks were vastly different, but from the data it was gathered that there is a need to examine them further as they are inaccessible in one form or another.

Disembodied Accessibility: Disability, Interface, and Infrastructural Neglect

The problem of universal objectivity in digital infrastructure is that it fails to acknowledge its own deep entanglement with structures of power, especially those of gender, race, and ability (Mejias & Couldry, 2024). Scholars of feminist technoscience advocate for epistemic justice in the tech space, demanding recognition for the lived realities of vulnerable communities in the design and architecture of digital frameworks rather than ignoring their voices as subjective noise. It invites a rethinking of what counts as innovation, who gets to design, and whose knowledge is made legible (Amrute et al., 2022). It challenges us to reconsider who gets to create, what constitutes innovation, and whose knowledge is rendered readable. Because the problem of inaccessibility of apps is not a simple problem of design, it is about how these conceptualizations simultaneously benefit from disabled consumers while offering discomfort in return. And their hegemony in the market makes it difficult for the masses to avoid their usage.

Apart from digital banking systems, the lack of proper technological support in transportation also becomes a hindrance to full inclusion. Participant 4 and Participant 8 had similar experiences while trying to opt for bus services via an app:

> “There is still no proper app that makes recognizing bus numbers or boarding them easier...Still, we have to depend on sighted persons to help us catch the bus, as most of the apps only make ticketing possible, not the boarding part.” Another shares, “I keep on standing at the stand, saying ‘Excuse me, Excuse me’ again and again. If someone is there, they listen and tell me which bus is approaching; if there’s no one, I have no way of knowing which bus it is. It also feels quite dangerous.

These embodied experiences show the dissonance between the materiality of bodies and the ableist and elitist design abstraction. This erasure of embodiment in technology signifies a larger structural problem of inequality of power embedded in digital infrastructures, where only dominant narratives defining ‘normate’—an ideal they construct based on social and statistical construction of normalcy, disregarding bodily difference—make disabled individuals hypervisible and invisible at once (Davis, 2006).

Garland-Thomson (2011) calls this concept of being ‘misfits’ where the built and social environment fails to take into account diverse bodies and suggests that it is not the body of a person that is deficient, but rather the environment. Another example of technology making ‘misfits’ is of ride-sharing applications, which are now widely common across the world. All participants have pointed out that the design of the app is such that if the location is not correctly picked up, a person has to manually drag and drop to pinpoint the pickup location, and in case no sighted person helps out with this issue, it becomes a hassle to use Uber. This shows that, contrary to marketing by these massively profit-generating apps, their failure to accommodate is coming from the design, where disabled individuals are just passive recipients of innovation rather than active contributors to its evolution (Fritsch et al., 2019).

Crucially, Shew (2020) advocates for a paradigm change rather than a categorical rejection of technology, one in which disabled people play a key role in the conception, evaluation, and direction of technological advancement. In this way, technoableism becomes more than just a criticism; it is a demand for design justice, co-creation, and critical technoscience.

The Gendered Violence of Patriarchal Capitalism

In the Indian context, it has been noted how disabled women are denied autonomy yet expected to perform an 'ideal woman' or 'supercrip' narrative by fulfilling the role of care receivers as well as unpaid caregivers of the household (Ghosh and Banerjee, 2017). 18 out of 20 participants reported that the primary responsibility of domestic work and care lies on them. They have to look after their children and also cook on a day-to-day basis. Those with decent pay hired a paid carer who assisted them in domestic chores, but still, the major task of care work at home is taken up by the participants compared to their spouses. With the rise of women's movements, rise in literacy, and popular discourses in media, the status of women, including those who have disabilities, is evolving. Many participants have also expressed positive support from their partners (n=7), and they feel their partners help them with household chores equally. However, the majority of day-to-day tasks, such as keeping track of groceries, making lunch, dropping children off at school, dusting the house, etc., fall on the woman's shoulders.

Another way patriarchy manifests itself is in the way autonomy is provided to women with impairments by their environment in their developing years. Erevelles (2011) notes that in the Global South context, disabled women's lives are shaped by poverty, structural neglect, and developmental violence. Ghai (2002, 2013, 2015) argues that women face triple marginalization of gender, disability, and caste/class. Four participants shared that they grew up in environments that made studying very difficult, due to family situations or the violence they faced due to the stigma attached to being a disabled female. Participant 7 hails from Lucknow and had initially lived in a hostel in the city for blind women. She recalls, "students were regularly beaten there, so it was very difficult to survive...What I have endured there, I doubt others can handle it." This traumatic experience has left deep scars that make interactions or upskilling less desirable for her and her family.

The problem of familialism and infantilization of women (or disabled individuals in particular) inherent in Indian society presents a complex picture in disabled women's quest to acquire autonomy. Participants 5, 14, and 19 shared that they have lived with their families for most of their lives, so in case they need to get something done, they ask their family members rather than doing it themselves. Their families also have apprehensions about the safety of the women, so they are more eager to make arrangements and extend support to the participants than to support independent living. Such beliefs of being incompetent independently are internalized and lead to anxiety over occupying external space outside the constraints of families, be it digital or physical. Addlakha's critique of familialism manifests here, showing how the spaces of care transform into sites of control as the family's role in managing disability becomes more about containment and protection than empowerment, leading to individuals in cycles of dependence and obligation (Addlakha, 2007).

Schalk (2018) also posited a similar view with regard to systemic devaluation of black and brown disabled women's bodyminds in the Global South context. Society expects them to care for others without a care infrastructure for themselves. Such patriarchal narratives shape the experiences women have with technology and heighten the barriers to inclusion. When the tech studies focus on disability and gender as categories, these belief systems also need to be considered while understanding and analyzing the digital divide.

Challenging the Technocratic norms through Community Resistance and Togetherness

Hamraie and Fritsch's "Crip Technoscience Manifesto" (2019) argues that disabled people are not just users of assistive technology but also creators of new technologies and information. Crip technoscience questions conventional notions of invention, design, and competence by drawing on the critical connotations of the term "crip," which reclaims and politicizes the term "cripple." They acknowledge that disabled persons are experts and designers of everyday life. The result encompasses everything from repurposing wheelchairs for navigating around cities to ingeniously utilizing text-to-speech technologies or transforming inaccessible online spaces into protest and visibility platforms. The participants talk about similar quests that are taken up collectively by men and women for accessible digital infrastructures. Participants 1 and 3 were involved in raising grievances regarding the inaccessibility of the employment website of the government. "It does not matter whether you are a man or a woman; we collectively raise issues of inaccessibility. Both men and women are involved in such protests. To make the DIKSHA platform and the Directorate of Education app accessible, many persons with disabilities came together and raised this point." Another participant shared, "While we have an accessibility lead in the department who oversees such issues half of the time, the helpline number is not picked up by anyone, so we have to write emails". Initially, for many applications and websites, they had to do a similar process. These movements become an empowering medium to connect the community at the macro level, with people forming active online networks, like over WhatsApp, to seek support.

But these issues are not solved at an effective speed. This is what Crip technoscience scholars call "access friction" (Hamraie, 2017), which refers to the difficulty and inventiveness necessary in navigating inaccessible situations. However, not all movements end up becoming successful, nor is it every time that a disabled individual encounters a barrier that they can rely on community support. Most of the time, these issues are not properly addressed by concerned authorities, leading to structural silencing.

Systemic Failures—The Problem of Institutional Apathy towards Reasonable Accommodation

Digital inclusion is not limited to access to platforms but also in how it is materialized in the workplace dynamics. As per UNDP (2024), in India, the workplace participation rate for people with disabilities is only about 36 percent of the workforce, while the same is around 60% for people without disabilities.

When looking at gender, the difference is even more pronounced: only 23% of women with impairments are working, compared to 47% of men with disabilities. These numbers highlight structural obstacles, which include everything from educational disparities and a lack of inclusive employment procedures to attitudinal biases and inaccessible infrastructure.

Since there is a lack of sensitization and awareness about disability amongst able-bodied persons, most participants interviewed have faced some form of exclusion at the workplace due to the attitudes of their bosses and peers. All of the participants have reported that they have encountered some form of discrimination and differences in attitude due to their disabilities.

Two of the participants shared that despite being upskilled in advanced programming in the workplace, they are allotted simplistic tasks as they are not seen as capable of doing anything. Participant 18, an officer in a private bank, shares:

> "I have asked them to provide me a system to work; they [superiors at work] refused, saying that it will be a long process, besides it will be difficult for me to do more work, so I have been generally given calling, for which only a phone is required. So even though I am supposed to be an officer, I am doing clerical work."

The 'token employee' narrative of Bhattacharya (2016) is distinctly visible in these experiences, where unfair treatment is not only a result of ignorance but also a sheer act of ableist entitlement. In most bureaucratic organizations, negligence is a result of capitalism-driven disinterest in inclusion. While on paper, these organizations follow Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion policies, but in everyday reality, it is the power dynamics that determine the nature of inclusion (UNICEF 2025).

According to Ghai (2015), accessibility turns into a place of exclusion rather than empowerment when it is provided solely within normative frameworks. Every day resistance is also tiring in the ways that finally the idea of full inclusion is given up due to the inability of the system to listen. Most participants say that they have accepted that not everyone is going to treat them fairly at the workplace. This attitude also influences the way reactions are made towards digital platforms as well; while many resist the technoableist interfaces, others have accepted that there cannot be full inclusion, so they have to rely on what is available. This research highlights the psychological toll of persistently addressing structural inaccessibility.

Institutions that present inclusiveness as a goal rather than a requirement are at fault, not the individual (Kafer, 2013). Therefore, avoiding requests for complete access is a survival tactic. The task of navigating technoableist infrastructures that frequently deny their presence falls on disabled users, especially in the Global South (Garland-Thomson, 2002). Refusing to resist is a sign of structural surrender rather than apathy.

Resignation thus turns into a silent protest against the weariness of being overlooked and a political reaction to institutional violence.

Conclusion

The micro processes of exclusion shape the way in which women with visual disabilities navigate everyday life, access opportunities, and construct their identities. Five out of twenty women were completely dependent on their families for work and did not know how to use technology for assistance; they were also single. Twenty out of twenty participants in the research shared that they had faced some form of exclusion or discrimination at the workplace, which also means that all of them 'felt' the effect of exclusionary violence. Be it in their journey of acquiring basic education, technical education, a job, or a match, everything is determined by what is the dominant affective state within the environment—care, empathy, sympathy, or abjection.

The same dynamics repeat in the way the digital world is conceptualized, leading to a male-dominant upper-class, ableist virtual reality where disabled women cross the barriers in order to enter.

While the problem lies with the neoliberal system that demands bodies function perfectly and generate maximum profit, the notion of viewing disabled bodies, particularly that of women as devalued others not only makes complete inclusion in the digital economy impossible but also places the onus of devaluation on the women, even when she is performing all the roles prescribed to her, living up to 'supercrip' expectations at behest of their interests. People who are part of the disabled community understand this and also support each other, but till sensitization regarding the same is done effectively, especially with non-disabled peers, their digital inclusion is not possible completely. UNICEF's Disability Summit 2025 report prescribes that governments should ensure CPRD is enacted properly, with a special focus on core programs and a whole-of-society approach.

Though this study is in no way nationally representative, it substantiates many of the previous research studies, which highlight that limitations of technology due to ableism and Western-dominated automation become a barrier to digital inclusion. Future research could explore this further by looking at other social determinants alongside gender and disability to understand how they shape digital encounters.

The findings of the current study have important implications for future practice. A key policy priority should be to make sensitization workshops mandatory and ensure platforms and websites pass the basic disability audit check. There should be a robust mechanism in place to ensure compliance and facilitate grievance redressal. Communities should be strengthened by amplifying their voices, encouraging participatory decision-making. To empower women with disabilities, it is crucial that their voices are heard and meaningful changes are implemented to enhance their digital inclusion. For access and inclusion do not only mean entering a system, but rather stand for meaningful participation, control, and authorship.

Policy Recommendations

1. This section describes specific policy solutions that can help address the challenges found, based on insights gathered from the in-depth conversations and participant interviews:

2. Introducing mandatory sensitization workshops for developers, designers, and legislators involved in digital ecosystems is an important policy move. In order to ensure that the lived experiences of people with disabilities inform our understanding of accessibility, these seminars ought to be regular and co-developed with disability rights organizations.

3. In addition, all government websites, private apps, and digital platforms that interact with the public must pass a baseline disability accessibility audit and, at the very least, follow internationally accepted standards like Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). Crucially, these audits must be a regular necessity linked to license renewal or app store listing eligibility rather than a one-time event.

4. It's crucial to set up strong regulatory and grievance resolution procedures. To guarantee relevance and responsiveness, these should be co-designed with Organizations of Persons with Disabilities (OPDs). In order to guarantee transparency and inclusiveness, the UNICEF report highlights the function of OPDs in monitoring and implementation frameworks (UNICEF, 2025, p. 60).

5. A key component of disability inclusion programs must be community engagement. Participatory decision-making methods that empower local disabled communities guarantee contextual relevance and sustainability (UNICEF, 2025, p. 168).

6. Both ableism and patriarchal neglect contribute to the intersectional difficulties that women with disabilities have to face. By guaranteeing gender-sensitive accessibility guidelines, funding assistive technology, and the establishment of secure online environments, policy must place a high priority on digital inclusion. Their situated knowledge and unique use cases need to be explored further to make technologies inclusive.

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