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New report highlights major gaps in access experienced by people with deafblindness

Deafblind individuals are clubbed with persons with multiple disabilities, which leads to the lacuna, the report highlighted



By: **Lifestyle Desk** | New Delhi | Published: August 19, 2020 8:50:04 pm



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People with deafblindness continue to face issues, a new report highlights. (Source: Getty Images/Thinkstock)

A recently-released report based on a survey among adult deafblinds, highlights the lack of access to various opportunities for the deafblinds in the country. As per report, **access to education**, employment, assistive devices and equipment, financial inclusion, healthcare and awareness of rights are some of the prominent issues faced by the community.

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According to the reports, all the respondents said they needed support to travel to and from new places, with 37.5 per cent of respondents expressing the need for a lot of support and 56 per cent requiring some support. Six per cent of the respondents expressed the need for a lot of support even in familiar places, while 62.5 per cent needed at least little support to travel to and from work and to familiar places. 25 per cent said they could manage independently if the places were familiar to them.

Despite section 42 of **Rights of Persons with Disability Act** (RPWD) Act, 2016 which mandated all appropriate government agencies to ensure accessibility of Information and Communication including sign language interpretation, the report highlighted how the Act is not specific on the specific support services for persons with deafblindness, such as tactile interpretation and communication technology/devices.

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Deafblindness persons face lack of access to education, employment and communication. (Source: Getty/Thinkstock)

Conducted by the Society for the Empowerment of the Deafblind (SEDB) at a national conference for deafblind people held in January, 2020, in Indian state of Kerala, the sample size was small with 17 deafblinds but significant, as per the SEDB chief Zamir Dhale.

When it came to mobility and communication, 87 per cent of the respondents expressed that they have knowledge about the various assistive devices. However, many reported not owning many basic devices. Of the respondents, 12.5 per cent reported to have canes while 50 per cent said they do not have smart canes.

Although respondents had exposure to and training from various civil society organisations in the areas of communication devices, 25 per cent reported lack of stylus and slate, 43.75 per cent said they do not have Braille (Braille typewriter) 37.5 per cent stated that do not have a Braille reader.

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Many participants expressed that they find the costs of devices are very high and management and maintenance a constant barrier.

In terms of employment, the survey reported that 78.57 per cent were employed in the informal sector. It also noted that 43.75 per cent of those working reported that they were not paid at par with others; 25 per cent said there is no pay and 50 per cent of the respondents stated that their **disability** hindered their access to work and employment. However, those working felt that their impairment did not impact their work.

Deafblind individuals are clubbed with persons with multiple disabilities, which leads to the lacuna, the report highlighted. 'Already a diverse group within themselves, this further dilutes the understanding of their situation and specific needs. This is reflected in lack of specific policies that addresses the specific issues confronting deafblind people. Also, the existing policies and programs related to **persons with disabilities** do not take into account the specific support requirements and the specific marginalisation experienced by deafblind people. For example, though there is a discussion on Indian Sign Language Institute, there is a lack of commitment to ensure human resources that provides tactile interpretation services and a complete absence of attention to the need for additional knowledge on how to guide and orient a person who is deafblind in different situations.'

Some of the recommendations of the report include

*Amend the RPDA 2016 to include persons with deafblindness as a separate category of disability.

*Orientation and training of government officials, particularly the ministries and departments dealing with information and communication, to strictly adhere to the web accessibility standards. It is crucial at a time when the world is moving to

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digital-centric functioning, and far more so now, given the [pandemic](#) that has led to severe restrictions on movement and personal (face-to-face) communication.

*All service portals should be audited by experiential experts with knowledge of technology for their accessibility, with immediate effect. This is important since many of the service portals use CAPTCHA (automated systems for detecting non-human tools) that are not accessible for people with print disabilities.

*To arrive at a policy to ensure support service such as interpreter – guides and personal assistance services.

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