

Human Rights of Students With Disabilities in Higher Education: A Socio-Legal Study of Selected Institutions in Chennai, Tamil Nadu

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ABSTRACT

Higher education is a fundamental component of equality, dignity, participation and social inclusion. For students with disabilities, however, formal admission to higher education does not necessarily ensure equal participation or substantive enjoyment of educational rights. This study examines the human rights situation of students with disabilities in selected higher education institutions in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, from a socio legal perspective. Particular attention is given to awareness of disability rights, accessibility, reasonable accommodation, equality, non discrimination, participation and institutional implementation. A convergent parallel mixed methods design was adopted. The quantitative component comprised 200 students with disabilities from five purposively selected higher education institutions, while the qualitative component included 50 participants consisting of 30 students with disabilities and 20 institutional stakeholders. Documentary analysis was used to examine the relevant legal, policy and institutional framework. Quantitative data were analysed through frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations, exploratory correlations and selected group comparisons. Qualitative data were analysed thematically and subsequently integrated with the quantitative and socio legal evidence.

The findings indicate that awareness of disability rights remains limited, with a mean awareness score of 3.59 out of 8 and 44.0% of respondents falling within the low awareness category. Perceptions of accessibility, reasonable accommodation and institutional support, equality and participation, and institutional implementation were moderate, with mean scores of 2.98, 2.97, 2.93 and 2.95 respectively. The strongest association among the major constructs was between reasonable accommodation and perceived institutional implementation ($r = .420$). Qualitative findings further indicate that accessibility extends beyond physical infrastructure to learning materials, digital resources, examinations and institutional procedures. Students also identified uncertainty regarding accommodation procedures, grievance mechanisms and institutional responsibilities. The study argues that the central challenge is not the complete absence of legal recognition or institutional mechanisms, but the incomplete transition from formal legal entitlement to effective and substantive rights realisation. The article concludes that disability inclusive higher education requires a whole institution approach based on accessible procedures, reasonable accommodation, trained personnel, effective grievance redressal, student participation and measurable institutional accountability.

Keywords: *Human Rights; Students with Disabilities; Higher Education; RPwD Act 2016; Accessibility; Reasonable Accommodation; Equality; Socio Legal Research; Chennai; Tamil Nadu*

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is a fundamental human right closely associated with equality, dignity, participation and social inclusion. For students with disabilities, access to higher education is important for academic development, employment, independence and social participation. However, formal admission does not necessarily ensure equal participation.

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Students may continue to face barriers related to physical infrastructure, learning materials, digital accessibility, examinations, reasonable accommodation, institutional support and discriminatory practices.

Internationally, the rights of persons with disabilities are grounded in equality, non discrimination, participation and inclusion. Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognises the right to education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity.² In India, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 provides a rights based framework addressing equality, non discrimination, accessibility, inclusive education and higher education.³ However, the existence of legal and institutional provisions does not necessarily ensure their effective implementation in students' everyday educational experiences.⁴

This gap between **rights on paper and rights in practice** provides the central socio legal concern of the present study. Existing Indian research has identified continuing barriers relating to accessibility, institutional support, academic participation, teacher attitudes and implementation of disability rights. Recent scholarship also demonstrates that accessibility extends beyond physical infrastructure to digital learning environments, educational materials and institutional services.

Against this background, the present study examines the human rights situation of students with disabilities in five selected higher education institutions in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. It focuses on six interconnected dimensions: **rights awareness, accessibility, barriers to access and participation, institutional implementation, equality and non discrimination, and reasonable accommodation**. Using a mixed methods socio legal approach, the study combines quantitative evidence from students with disabilities, qualitative perspectives of students and institutional stakeholders, and analysis of the relevant legal and policy framework. The study argues that effective disability inclusion requires movement beyond formal legal recognition towards meaningful and substantive rights realisation in higher education.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Disability, Higher Education and the Human Rights Perspective

Recent scholarship increasingly approaches disability in higher education through a rights-based rather than solely welfare-based perspective. This shift is important because it changes the central question from whether institutions assist or whether students with disabilities are able to exercise legally recognized rights on an equal basis.

Pandey examined barriers affecting students with disabilities in higher education within the context of India's legal and policy framework. The study highlighted continuing concerns relating to infrastructure, accessibility and implementation despite legislative and policy developments. The significance of this work lies in its recognition that formal policy commitments do not automatically remove barriers.⁵

Mir and Waheed examined the experiences of students with disabilities in Indian higher education using an interpretative phenomenological approach. Based on interviews with students, their study highlighted physical accessibility, institutional support, inclusive education and teacher attitudes as significant concerns. The study demonstrates the importance of examining students' lived experiences rather than relying exclusively on institutional policy statements.⁶

² United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, art. 24 (2006). Article 24 recognises the right of persons with disabilities to inclusive education at all levels and requires States Parties to ensure reasonable accommodation and equal access to tertiary education.

³ The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, Act No. 49 of 2016, particularly ss. 3, 16, 17 and 32. The Act provides statutory protections relating to equality and non discrimination, duties of educational institutions, inclusive education and reservation in higher educational institutions

⁴ The distinction between formal legal recognition and effective enjoyment of rights is central to the socio legal approach adopted in this study. The existence of statutory entitlements does not, by itself, establish that such entitlements are accessible, known or effectively implemented in institutional practice.

⁵ A. Pandey, "Roadblock on the Way of Disabled Students in the Higher Education," *Issues and Ideas in Education*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2021, pp. 97–102, doi:10.15415/ije.2021.92009.

⁶ A. A. Mir and A. Waheed, "Experiences of Students with Disabilities in Indian Higher Education: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study," *Higher Education for the Future*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2022, pp. 186–202, doi:10.1177/23476311221111442.

Arora examined access to higher education among students with disabilities with special reference to Panjab University. The study identified physical, academic and financial barriers and emphasised stronger implementation of disability rights provisions.⁷

Mistry and Panigrahi examined inclusion of students with disabilities in Indian higher education and identified continuing issues despite government initiatives and the existence of a legal framework. Their work reinforces the argument that institutional provisions must be accompanied by effective implementation.⁸

Together, these studies demonstrate that disability inclusion cannot be reduced to enrolment. Entry into higher education is only the beginning of rights realisation.

2.2 Accessibility and Institutional Barriers

Accessibility is one of the most frequently discussed dimensions of disability inclusion. Traditional understandings of accessibility have often focused on physical infrastructure such as ramps, entrances, toilets and classrooms. Contemporary disability research, however, increasingly recognises that accessibility must include digital, academic, communication and institutional environments.

Lomellini et al. reviewed literature on accessible and inclusive online learning in higher education and demonstrated that digital accessibility has become an important component of inclusive education. The expansion of digital platforms means that inaccessible websites, learning management systems, electronic documents and online learning materials may create barriers even where physical infrastructure is accessible.⁹

Li et al. examined academic learning experiences and challenges among students with disabilities and emphasised the importance of institutional support in enabling students to overcome academic barriers. Their findings suggest that support must be responsive and timely rather than placing the burden entirely on students.¹⁰

The literature consequently supports a multidimensional conception of accessibility involving:

- i. Physical accessibility;
- ii. Digital accessibility;
- iii. Academic accessibility;
- iv. Accessibility of learning materials;
- v. Examination accessibility;
- vi. Communication accessibility; and
- vii. Accessibility of institutional services.

The present study adopts this broader understanding.

2.3 Reasonable Accommodation and Institutional Support

Reasonable accommodation represents an important dimension of substantive equality. Merely treating students identically may reproduce disadvantage where disability related barriers remain. Appropriate academic, examination, technological or communication adjustments may therefore be necessary to enable equal participation.

⁷ R. Arora, "Access of Students with Disabilities (SWDs) to Higher Education in India with Special Reference to Panjab University, Chandigarh, India," *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 69, No. 2, 2023, pp. 360–371, doi:10.1177/00195561231154387.

⁸ H. S. Mistry and S. C. Panigrahi, "Inclusion of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education in India: Some Issues and Suggestions," *Asian Journal of Inclusive Education*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2023, pp. 31–52, doi:10.59595/ajie.11.1.2.

⁹ A. Lomellini, P. R. Lowenthal, C. Snelson and J. H. Trespalacios, "Accessible and Inclusive Online Learning in Higher Education: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Computing in Higher Education*, Vol. 37, 2025, pp. 1306–1329, doi:10.1007/s12528-024-09424-2.

¹⁰ Y. F. Li, D. Zhang, H. M. Dulas and M. L. Whirley, "Academic Learning Experiences and Challenges of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education," *Journal of Postsecondary Student Success*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 2024, doi:10.33009/fsop_jpss134617.

Existing literature indicates that students may experience delays or uncertainty in obtaining institutional support. **Mir and Waheed** identified concerns relating to institutional support and teacher attitudes, while **Li et al.** highlighted academic challenges and the importance of appropriate institutional responses.

An important issue emerging from the literature is whether accommodation is treated as a rights based institutional obligation or as discretionary assistance. If a student receives support only because an individual teacher is willing to help, the system remains dependent on personal discretion. A rights based approach instead requires clear procedures, responsible personnel, predictable timelines and accessible communication.¹¹

2.4 Equality, Non Discrimination and Participation

Human rights based disability inclusion requires more than physical access. Students must be able to participate in classrooms, examinations, academic activities, cultural activities, sports and institutional decision making without discrimination.

Arora identified concerns relating not only to physical infrastructure but also to the behaviour of teachers and fellow students. **Mir and Waheed** similarly highlighted attitudes and institutional support as important aspects of student experience.¹²

This literature supports a distinction between formal inclusion and substantive inclusion. Formal inclusion may exist when students are admitted to an institution. Substantive inclusion requires that they can participate meaningfully and equally after admission.

2.5 Awareness of Disability Rights

Awareness represents an important but relatively less examined dimension of disability rights in higher education. A student may have a legal entitlement to reasonable accommodation or protection from discrimination but may not be able to exercise that entitlement without knowing that the right exists or how to claim it.

The present study therefore treats awareness as an independent empirical dimension. This approach is important because legal recognition cannot automatically be equated with rights awareness.

2.6 Research Gap

The literature reviewed in the thesis reveals three principal gaps.

First, there is an institutional gap. Although Indian research has examined access, barriers and student experiences, comparatively limited evidence is available concerning the practical implementation of disability rights within selected higher education institutions in Chennai.¹³

Second, there is an integration gap. Accessibility, institutional support, student experiences and disability policy are frequently examined separately. There is less research integrating awareness, accessibility, reasonable accommodation, equality, participation and institutional implementation within a single empirical framework.

¹¹ A. A. Mir and A. Waheed, "Experiences of Students with Disabilities in Indian Higher Education: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study," *Higher Education for the Future*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2022, pp. 186–202; Y. F. Li, D. Zhang, H. M. Dulas and M. L. Whirley, "Academic Learning Experiences and Challenges of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education," *Journal of Postsecondary Student Success*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 2024.

¹² R. Arora, "Access of Students with Disabilities (SWDs) to Higher Education in India with Special Reference to Panjab University, Chandigarh, India," *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 69, No. 2, 2023, pp. 360–371; A. A. Mir and A. Waheed, "Experiences of Students with Disabilities in Indian Higher Education: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study," *Higher Education for the Future*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2022, pp. 186–202.

¹³ See generally A. Pandey, "Roadblock on the Way of Disabled Students in the Higher Education," *Issues and Ideas in Education*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2021, pp. 97–102; A. A. Mir and A. Waheed, "Experiences of Students with Disabilities in Indian Higher Education: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study," *Higher Education for the Future*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2022, pp. 186–202; R. Arora, "Access of Students with Disabilities (SWDs) to Higher Education in India with Special Reference to Panjab University, Chandigarh, India," *Indian Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 69, No. 2, 2023, pp. 360–371.

Third, there is a socio-legal implementation gap. The existence of statutory protections does not establish substantive rights realisation. There is a need to examine the relationship between legal entitlement, institutional mechanisms and students' lived experiences.

The present study addresses these gaps through a convergent parallel mixed methods socio-legal design.

3. LEGAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The study is grounded in the principle that students with disabilities are rights holders, rather than merely recipients of welfare or institutional assistance.

The international human rights framework establishes equality, non-discrimination, and inclusive education as central principles. Article 24 of the CRPD is particularly relevant because it recognises the right of persons with disabilities to education without discrimination and on the basis of equal opportunity.¹⁴

Within India, the RPwD Act, 2016 provides the principal statutory framework for disability rights. The Act recognises equality and non-discrimination and establishes provisions relating to inclusive education, accessibility and educational opportunities. Section 32 specifically addresses reservation in higher education. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Rules, 2017 and relevant higher education guidelines further contribute to the regulatory framework.¹⁵

For the purposes of this study, the legal framework is conceptualised through four interconnected stages:

Legal recognition → Rights awareness → Institutional implementation → Substantive rights realisation¹⁶

Legal recognition refers to the formal recognition of disability rights in legislation, regulations and policies.

Rights awareness refers to whether students understand the rights and entitlements available to them.

Institutional implementation concerns whether legal and policy requirements are translated into accessible facilities, reasonable accommodation, support mechanisms, grievance procedures and institutional practices.

Substantive rights realisation concerns whether students can actually participate in higher education equally, with dignity and without disability related discrimination.

This framework provides the central socio-legal lens for interpreting the empirical evidence.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study was guided by six objectives:

- i. To examine the awareness of human rights among students with disabilities in selected higher education institutions in Chennai.
- ii. To assess the accessibility of higher education facilities and services for students with disabilities.
- iii. To examine perceived barriers to access and participation through students' experiences of accessibility, reasonable accommodation, institutional support and participation.
- iv. To examine the implementation of disability rights provisions in selected higher education institutions.

¹⁴ United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, art. 24. Article 24 further requires reasonable accommodation and support measures within the general education system and specifically addresses access to tertiary education without discrimination.

¹⁵ The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 is supplemented by the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Rules, 2017 and higher education accessibility guidance issued by the University Grants Commission. The UGC's *Accessibility Guidelines and Standards for Higher Education Institutions and Universities* emphasise accessible environments and barrier free participation throughout the higher education process.

¹⁶ This four stage framework is an analytical framework developed for the present study. It is not presented as a statutory sequence under the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016; rather, it is used to examine how formal legal rights may be translated into institutional practice and substantive educational participation.

- v. To understand the experiences of students with disabilities regarding equality, non-discrimination, reasonable accommodation and participation in higher education.
- vi. To suggest measures for strengthening the protection and implementation of human rights of students with disabilities in higher education.

5. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- i. The study addressed the following research questions:
- ii. What is the level of awareness of human rights among students with disabilities in selected higher education institutions in Chennai?
- iii. To what extent are higher education facilities and services accessible to students with disabilities?
- iv. What barriers to access and participation are reflected in students' experiences of accessibility, accommodation, institutional support and participation?
- v. To what extent are disability rights provisions implemented in selected higher education institutions?
- vi. What are the experiences of students with disabilities regarding equality, non-discrimination, reasonable accommodation and participation in higher education?
- vii. What measures can strengthen the protection and implementation of human rights of students with disabilities in higher education?

6. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods socio-legal design and was conducted in five purposively selected higher education institutions in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. The quantitative component included 200 students with disabilities, while the qualitative component involved 50 participants comprising 30 students, 10 teachers/faculty members, 5 administrators and 5 disability support personnel, resulting in 250 unique participants. Data were collected through a researcher-developed 34-item questionnaire, two semi-structured interview schedules and documentary review of relevant disability rights laws, policies and institutional provisions. The questionnaire assessed rights awareness, accessibility, reasonable accommodation and institutional support, equality, non-discrimination and participation, and institutional implementation; awareness items used Yes/No/Not Sure responses, while the remaining items used a five-point Likert scale. Quantitative and qualitative data were analysed separately and integrated during interpretation to examine the relationship between legal provisions, institutional implementation and students' lived experiences.

7. RESULTS

7.1 Socio-Demographic Profile

The quantitative sample consisted of 200 students with disabilities.

The largest age group was 21–23 years, comprising 75 respondents (37.5%). This was followed by 18–20 years (22.0%), 27 years and above (21.0%), and 24–26 years (19.5%).

Females constituted 51.5% of the sample, males 47.5%, while 1.0% preferred not to disclose gender.

Visual disability represented the largest disability category (21.5%), followed by specific learning disability (20.5%) and locomotor disability (20.0%). Hearing disability accounted for 14.0%, multiple disability 13.0%, speech and language disability 5.0%, and intellectual and other disabilities 3.0% each.

Undergraduate students constituted 58.0% of respondents, postgraduate students 30.0%, and M.Phil./Ph.D. students 12.0%.

The largest group by year of study was second year (37.5%), followed by first year (33.0%), third year (16.0%) and fourth year (13.5%).

Universities represented 48.5% of respondents, private colleges/institutions 20.0%, government colleges 18.0%, and government aided colleges 13.5%.

Most respondents (66.5%) resided in Chennai, while 19.0% were from other urban areas and 14.5% from rural areas.

These characteristics demonstrate considerable heterogeneity in the sample and provide useful context for understanding the varied experiences of students with disabilities. However, because purposive sampling was used, these distributions cannot be treated as estimates of the wider population.

7.2 Awareness of Disability Rights

The mean awareness score was 3.59 out of 8 (SD = 2.90).

This indicates that respondents, on average, demonstrated awareness of fewer than half of the assessed disability rights.

Table 1. Awareness of Individual Disability Rights

Awareness Dimension	Aware n	Aware %
Equal right to access higher education	89	44.5
Protection against discrimination	88	44.0
Awareness of RPwD Act, 2016	90	45.0
Awareness of reasonable accommodation	83	41.5
Institutional accessibility responsibilities	94	47.0
Equal participation in academic/institutional activities	88	44.0
Right to seek institutional assistance	91	45.5
Equal opportunity, dignity, participation and education	94	47.0

Awareness ranged from 41.5% to 47.0%. The lowest level of awareness concerned reasonable accommodation (41.5%).

The overall awareness distribution was:

Awareness Score	Category	n	%
0–2	Low	88	44.0
3–5	Moderate	53	26.5
6–8	High	59	29.5

The findings indicate a substantial awareness deficit. Nearly half of the respondents were in the low awareness category.

From a socio legal perspective, this finding is important because legal rights are less likely to be effectively exercised when rights holders do not know their entitlements or the institutional procedures through which those entitlements can be claimed.

7.3 Accessibility of Higher Education Facilities and Services

The overall accessibility mean was 2.98 (SD = 1.12).

Table 2. Accessibility of Facilities and Services

Accessibility Item	Mean
Accessible main entrances	2.98
Accessible classrooms and teaching spaces	3.04
Accessible toilets and essential facilities	3.06
Accessible library facilities and resources	3.01
Accessible digital learning platforms/resources	3.00
Learning materials in appropriate formats	2.87
Accessible examination and assessment facilities	2.97
Institutional services without disability related barriers	2.95
Overall	2.98

The highest mean was recorded for accessible toilets and essential facilities (3.06), followed by classrooms and teaching spaces (3.04).

The lowest mean was recorded for learning materials in appropriate formats (2.87).

The results demonstrate that accessibility extends beyond physical infrastructure. Learning materials, digital resources and examination arrangements are also important components of educational accessibility.

7.4 Barriers to Access and Participation

The evidence indicates that barriers were multidimensional.

Three broad categories emerged:

Physical and Environmental Barriers

These include difficulties involving entrances, toilets, classrooms, campus movement and other physical spaces.

Academic and Digital Barriers

These include inaccessible learning materials, digital resources and examination arrangements.

Institutional and Participation Barriers

These include difficulties in classroom participation, academic activities, cultural and institutional activities, and accessing support mechanisms.

The findings demonstrate that physical entry into an institution does not necessarily mean that the educational environment is fully accessible.

7.5 Institutional Implementation of Disability Rights

The overall implementation mean was 2.95 (SD = 1.27).

Table 3. Perceived Implementation of Disability Rights

Item	Mean
Institutional policies/practices protect disability rights	2.98
Disability related policies are effectively implemented	3.00
Institution takes appropriate accessibility measures	2.90
Institution responds appropriately to reported barriers/discrimination	2.98
Teachers and staff are aware of their responsibilities	2.97
Overall disability rights implementation	2.90
Overall mean	2.95

The means ranged narrowly between 2.90 and 3.00.

The findings therefore do not indicate complete absence of implementation. Rather, they suggest that students did not perceive implementation as consistently strong.

This distinction is important. The central issue is not simply whether institutions possess policies but whether those policies are visible, accessible, coordinated and effective in everyday practice.

7.6 Reasonable Accommodation and Institutional Support

The overall mean for reasonable accommodation and institutional support was 2.97 (SD = 1.16).

Table 4. Reasonable Accommodation and Institutional Support

Item	Mean
Institution provides reasonable accommodation	2.98
Students can request accommodation	2.90
Accommodation requests are considered promptly	2.98
Appropriate examination support is provided	3.00
Teachers/staff provide appropriate assistance	3.04
Adequate disability support services/personnel	2.94
Overall	2.97

Teacher and staff assistance received the highest mean (3.04).

The ability to request accommodation received the lowest mean (2.90).

This difference suggests that interpersonal assistance may sometimes be more accessible than formal institutional accommodation procedures.

A rights based system should not depend primarily on individual goodwill. Students require a clear procedure, designated personnel, predictable timelines and accessible communication channels.

7.7 Equality, Non Discrimination and Participation

Equality, non discrimination and participation produced the lowest mean among the four major experiential dimensions: 2.93 (SD = 1.20).

Table 5. Equality, Non Discrimination and Participation

Item	Mean
Equal treatment by teachers and institutional staff	2.95
Freedom from disability based discrimination	2.87
Equal opportunity in classroom activities	2.85
Equal participation in examinations and academic activities	2.91
Participation in cultural, sports and institutional activities	2.97
Institutional respect for students' views and needs	3.01
Overall	2.93

The lowest mean was observed for equal opportunity in classroom activities (2.85), followed by freedom from disability based discrimination (2.87).

The highest mean was recorded for institutional respect for students' views and needs (3.01).

The results suggest that formal admission does not automatically produce substantive equality.

7.8 Comparative Analysis of Major Constructs

Table 6. Major Study Dimensions

Construct	Mean	SD
Accessibility	2.98	1.12
Reasonable accommodation and support	2.97	1.16
Equality, non discrimination and participation	2.93	1.20
Implementation of disability rights	2.95	1.27

The four constructs produced closely clustered means between 2.93 and 2.98.

Accessibility had the highest mean (2.98), followed by reasonable accommodation and support (2.97), implementation (2.95), and equality/participation (2.93).

The closeness of the scores indicates that the challenges are interconnected rather than isolated. Inaccessible learning materials may increase the need for accommodation, while inadequate accommodation may restrict equal participation.

7.9 Correlation Analysis

Table 7. Correlation Matrix

Variable	Awareness	Accessibility	Accommodation/Support	Equality/Participation	Implementation
Awareness	1.00	.260	.236	.274	.295
Accessibility	.260	1.00	—	—	.331

Variable	Awareness	Accessibility	Accommodation/Support	Equality/Participation	Implementation
Accommodation/Support	.236	—	1.00	—	.420
Equality/Participation	.274	—	—	1.00	.376
Implementation	.295	.331	.420	.376	1.00

Awareness was positively associated with accessibility ($r = .260$), accommodation/support ($r = .236$), equality/participation ($r = .274$), and perceived implementation ($r = .295$).

The strongest relationship was between reasonable accommodation/support and perceived institutional implementation ($r = .420$).

The relationship between equality/participation and implementation was also comparatively stronger ($r = .376$).

These findings suggest that greater awareness tends to coexist with more positive institutional perceptions. However, the correlations are modest, indicating that awareness alone does not determine students' experiences.

Because the study is cross-sectional and purposively sampled, these relationships must be interpreted as associations rather than causal effects.

7.10 Exploratory Group Differences

Most demographic comparisons did not demonstrate statistically significant differences.

Age, gender and disability category did not show statistically significant differences in the major study dimensions.

Educational level showed a statistically significant difference in reasonable accommodation and institutional support:

$F(2,197) = 3.50$, $p = .032$, $\eta^2 = .034$.

Year of study showed statistically significant differences in:

- Accommodation/support: $F(3,196) = 3.52$, $p = .016$, $\eta^2 = .051$
- Equality/participation: $F(3,196) = 3.10$, $p = .028$, $\eta^2 = .045$

The effect sizes were small.

Therefore, these differences should not be overstated. The broader pattern suggests that disability rights challenges are primarily institutional rather than confined to a particular demographic group.

8. QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Thematic analysis identified five broad themes.

Theme 1: Limited Awareness of Disability Rights

The qualitative evidence indicates that students often possessed a general awareness that disability related support existed but lacked detailed knowledge of specific entitlements and institutional procedures.

Knowledge concerning reasonable accommodation, examination support and grievance mechanisms appeared less consistent.

The qualitative evidence therefore complements the quantitative awareness score of 3.59.

The issue should not be interpreted simply as a failure of students to acquire knowledge. Institutions also have a responsibility to communicate rights in accessible and understandable forms.

Theme 2: Accessibility Beyond Physical Infrastructure

Participants described accessibility in relation to physical spaces, learning materials, digital resources, examinations and institutional communication.

This theme strongly complements the quantitative result in which accessible learning materials received the lowest accessibility score.

The evidence suggests that physical accessibility may exist while educational accessibility remains incomplete.

Theme 3: Reasonable Accommodation and Institutional Support

Participants reported that teachers and staff could assist when students communicated their needs. However, uncertainty existed regarding formal procedures for requesting accommodation.

This corresponds with the quantitative difference between:

- Teacher/staff assistance: $M = 3.04$
- Ability to request accommodation: $M = 2.90$

The qualitative findings therefore suggest a distinction between informal support and institutionalised reasonable accommodation.

Theme 4: Equality, Non-Discrimination and Participation

Participants described participation barriers in classroom activities, examinations, cultural activities and institutional programmes.

Importantly, exclusion was not always described as direct or explicit discrimination. It could take less visible forms, such as receiving information later, being left out of activities or repeatedly having to explain accessibility requirements.

This supports the study's distinction between formal inclusion and substantive inclusion.

Theme 5: Institutional Implementation and Accountability

The qualitative evidence suggests that institutional mechanisms may exist while their visibility, coordination and practical application remain uneven.

Students and institutional actors may therefore perceive the same mechanism differently.

An administrator or support officer may regard a support mechanism as available, while a student may experience difficulty locating the responsible person or understanding how the mechanism works.

This divergence is particularly important from a socio legal perspective because the effectiveness of a right depends upon whether the rights holder can actually use the mechanism intended to protect that right.

9. INTEGRATED SOCIO LEGAL ANALYSIS

The quantitative, qualitative and socio-legal evidence converges around a central finding: disability rights are partially realised but not consistently translated into substantive equality.

The evidence does not support the extreme conclusion that disability rights are absent from the selected institutions. Instead, there appears to be a gap between formal recognition, institutional mechanisms and lived experience.

The socio legal process can be represented as:

Legal Recognition → Rights Awareness → Institutional Implementation → Substantive Rights Realisation

The first stage concerns legal recognition. India has established a substantial statutory and policy foundation for disability rights.¹⁷

The second stage is awareness. The mean awareness score of 3.59 out of 8 indicates that a significant proportion of students lack sufficient knowledge of their rights.

The third stage is implementation. The institutional implementation mean of 2.95 indicates moderate rather than strong perceptions of implementation.

The fourth stage is substantive rights realisation. Equality and participation produced the lowest major construct mean of 2.93, suggesting that formal admission does not necessarily translate into equal educational participation.

The study therefore identifies an implementation gap, rather than an absence of legal protection.

This distinction is important for socio-legal research. The findings cannot independently establish whether an individual institution is legally compliant or non-compliant. Such a determination would require systematic examination of institutional documents, procedures and actual practices against the applicable legal standards.

The more defensible conclusion is that the evidence identifies areas where institutional and legal implementation requires closer scrutiny.

10. DISCUSSION

The present study demonstrates that disability inclusion in higher education is multidimensional and cannot be adequately understood through physical accessibility or admission figures alone.

The first major finding concerns awareness. The mean awareness score of 3.59 out of 8 and the fact that 44.0% of respondents fell within the low awareness category indicate that many students may not possess sufficient knowledge of their legal and institutional entitlements. This has significant socio legal implications. Rights cannot be effectively exercised if rights holders do not know what they are entitled to or how to claim those entitlements.

The second major finding concerns accessibility. The overall mean of 2.98 suggests a moderate and uneven accessibility environment. Particularly significant is the lower score for learning materials in appropriate formats. This indicates that accessibility should be conceptualised as a continuum extending from physical infrastructure to digital, academic and institutional environments.

This finding corresponds with recent scholarship emphasising digital accessibility and inclusive online learning. The increasing use of digital educational systems means that inaccessible digital content can reproduce exclusion even when physical infrastructure has improved.

The third major finding concerns reasonable accommodation. The overall mean of 2.97 indicates moderate support. However, the comparatively higher score for teacher and staff assistance and the lower score for the ability to request accommodation reveal an important institutional distinction.

¹⁷ The principal statutory foundation includes the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, particularly its provisions concerning equality and non discrimination, duties of educational institutions, inclusive education and reservation in higher educational institutions.

A student may receive assistance because an individual teacher is responsive, while still lacking a predictable formal procedure for requesting accommodation. From a rights-based perspective, this is insufficient. Reasonable accommodation should be institutionalised rather than dependent on individual discretion.¹⁸

The fourth major finding concerns equality and participation. This construct had the lowest mean among the major experiential dimensions. The scores for equal classroom participation and freedom from disability based discrimination were particularly low.

This reinforces the distinction between formal and substantive inclusion. A student can be admitted to an institution, attend classes and complete examinations while still experiencing barriers to meaningful participation.

The fifth major finding concerns institutional implementation. The implementation mean of 2.95 suggests that students recognise the existence of some institutional mechanisms but do not perceive their implementation as consistently strong.

The strongest correlation in the study was between accommodation/support and implementation ($r = .420$). This suggests that students' perceptions of institutional implementation are particularly connected with concrete experiences of support.

The mixed methods evidence explains this relationship. Students tend to judge institutional implementation through practical outcomes: whether they can obtain accessible learning materials, receive examination accommodation, access support, and participate without barriers.

The findings therefore suggest that institutional implementation is experienced through practice rather than policy statements.

The study's qualitative findings further demonstrate the importance of institutional communication. A mechanism can technically exist but remain ineffective if students do not know whom to contact, what documents are required, when to apply or what support can be requested.

This is a particularly important socio-legal insight. The practical effectiveness of a right depends on the accessibility of the mechanism through which that right is exercised.

The study therefore supports a movement from formal compliance towards substantive rights realisation.

11. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

11.1 Implications for Higher Education Institutions

Disability inclusion should be treated as a whole-institution responsibility.

Responsibility should not be concentrated exclusively within a disability support cell. Academic departments, examination authorities, administrative units, teachers, infrastructure personnel and support staff all have responsibilities.

11.2 Implications for Disability Rights Policy

Implementation should be evaluated through measurable outcomes rather than merely through the existence of policies.

Relevant indicators could include:

¹⁸ Article 24 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities expressly requires reasonable accommodation in education, including tertiary education. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 further provides the domestic statutory framework for inclusive education and the duties of educational institutions.

- accommodation response time;
- availability of accessible learning materials;
- staff training coverage;
- functioning of disability support mechanisms;
- grievance resolution time;
- accessibility audit completion; and
- student-reported experiences of discrimination and participation.

11.3 Implications for Institutional Accountability

Periodic accessibility audits and student feedback mechanisms should be institutionalised.

Accountability should include not only infrastructure compliance but also digital accessibility, examination accommodation, communication and grievance redressal.

11.4 Implications for Student Participation

Students with disabilities should be directly involved in institutional accessibility planning.

Their lived experiences can reveal barriers that may not be identified through technical audits alone.

11.5 Implications for Substantive Equality

Equality should not be interpreted as identical treatment in every circumstance. Meaningful equality requires reasonable accommodation and removal of barriers that prevent equal participation.

12. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following measures are recommended.

12.1 Strengthen Rights Awareness

Institutions should provide disability rights information during admission and orientation and should make information continuously available in accessible formats.

12.2 Conduct Comprehensive Accessibility Audits

Audits should cover:

- buildings;
- classrooms;
- libraries;
- toilets;
- campus transport;
- digital platforms;
- learning management systems;
- educational materials; and
- examination facilities.

12.3 Establish a Clear Accommodation Procedure

Students should have a simple mechanism for requesting reasonable accommodation.

The procedure should identify:

- the responsible authority;
- the application process;
- required documentation;
- expected response time; and
- appeal or grievance mechanisms.

12.4 Improve Accessible Learning Resources

Institutions should ensure that educational materials are available in formats appropriate to different disabilities.

Digital resources should be compatible with relevant assistive technologies.

12.5 Strengthen Grievance Redressal

Institutions should establish accessible and confidential mechanisms for reporting discrimination, inaccessible facilities and denial or delay of reasonable accommodation.

12.6 Train Faculty and Staff

Faculty members, administrators and support personnel should receive regular disability rights and sensitisation training.

Training should include reasonable accommodation, accessible communication and inclusive teaching practices.

12.7 Strengthen Disability Support Cells

Support cells should have:

- trained personnel;
- clearly displayed contact details;
- defined responsibilities; and
- effective coordination with academic, administrative and examination units.

12.8 Involve Students in Institutional Planning

Students with disabilities should participate in decisions concerning accessibility, accommodation, support services and institutional policies.

12.9 Develop Measurable Accountability Indicators

Institutions should monitor measurable indicators such as accommodation response time, accessibility audit completion, staff training, grievance resolution and student experiences.

12.10 Adopt a Whole Institution Approach

Disability inclusion should be embedded throughout institutional governance rather than being treated as the responsibility of one office or support unit.

13. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The findings must be interpreted in light of several limitations.

First, the study used purposive sampling and was restricted to five selected institutions in Chennai. Consequently, the findings cannot be statistically generalised to all higher education institutions or students with disabilities in Tamil Nadu.

Second, the quantitative component was cross sectional. The observed relationships among awareness, accessibility, accommodation, equality and implementation therefore represent associations rather than causal relationships.

Third, the quantitative findings are substantially based on self reported perceptions and experiences. Such evidence is valuable for understanding lived experience but may be influenced by individual expectations and perceptions.

Fourth, demographic comparisons should be treated as exploratory because the sample was purposively selected.

Fifth, the empirical findings alone cannot establish the legal compliance or non-compliance of individual institutions. Such conclusions require systematic documentary verification and institutional audit evidence.

Finally, the qualitative findings are context-specific and reflect the experiences of selected participants.

These limitations do not eliminate the value of the study. Rather, they establish the appropriate boundaries within which the findings should be interpreted.

14. CONCLUSION

The present study examined the human rights situation of students with disabilities in selected higher education institutions in Chennai through a socio-legal and mixed methods framework.

The findings demonstrate that disability rights are formally recognised and that institutional support mechanisms exist to some extent. However, their practical realisation remains partial and uneven.

The most important empirical concern is the limited awareness of disability rights. The mean awareness score of 3.59 out of 8 and the relatively high proportion of respondents in the low awareness category demonstrate that formal legal recognition does not automatically produce rights awareness.

Accessibility was moderate, with an overall mean of 2.98. Importantly, the findings demonstrate that accessibility extends beyond physical infrastructure to learning materials, digital resources, examinations and institutional services.

Reasonable accommodation and institutional support produced a mean of 2.97. The higher score for teacher and staff assistance compared with the ability to request accommodation suggests that informal interpersonal support may sometimes be more accessible than formal institutional procedures.

Equality, non-discrimination and participation produced the lowest mean among the major dimensions at 2.93. This indicates that formal admission and presence in higher education do not necessarily guarantee substantive participation.

Perceived institutional implementation recorded a mean of 2.95. The result does not demonstrate that institutions lack disability rights mechanisms. Rather, it suggests that students do not consistently experience institutional implementation as strong, visible, coordinated and effective.

The strongest correlation was between reasonable accommodation/support and institutional implementation ($r = .420$). This suggests that students' assessment of institutional implementation is closely connected with whether they experience concrete and responsive support.

The socio-legal contribution of the study lies in identifying a gap between legal entitlement, institutional processes and lived experience.

The study therefore proposes a shift from formal recognition towards substantive rights realisation. Disability inclusive higher education requires more than legislation, admission policies or physical infrastructure. It requires students to know their rights, institutions to provide accessible procedures, reasonable accommodation to be predictable and responsive, and students with disabilities to participate meaningfully and without discrimination.

A whole-institution approach, supported by accessible communication, trained personnel, effective grievance mechanisms, student participation and measurable accountability, is therefore essential.

The findings are limited to the five selected institutions in Chennai and should not be generalised to all higher education institutions in Tamil Nadu. Nevertheless, they provide useful evidence for strengthening disability rights implementation and for developing future empirical and socio-legal research on inclusive higher education in India.

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