



Vol. 3 No. 11 (November) (2025)

Disability Data and Magnitude in Pakistan and India

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ABSTRACT

Disability as a social and human right issue is relatively new field of interest in the world generally and in Pakistan and India particularly. This socio-economically-disadvantaged group of society and their right of full participation and equality needs positive action on the part of State as recognized by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), however, government has not paid due attention and publicity to the technical issue of disability. Non availability of relevant primary disability data and reliability on secondary data available in literature adds to the austerity of the situation of disables. Little available disability data from census and other sources is far unreliable and uncertain for further purpose.

This paper provides a comparative analysis of the statistical data and magnitude of disability in Pakistan and India and that how the situation in India varies from the situation in Pakistan after the ratification of UNCRPD by both States.

Key Words: Disability Data, Pakistan, India, Census, Education and Policy Regime

Data and Magnitude of Disability in Pakistan

Disability data regime in Pakistan over the years is not encouraging and satisfactory. From its first ever population census in 1951 to the one in 2017 and the very recent in 2023, country shows fluctuating data collection in respect of duration, enumeration, and sources.

“Sixth Population and Housing Census in March 15 to May 25, 2017” was the first national data collection effort since Pakistan has ratified UNCRPD on 5 July 2011 which requires member states to collect statistical and research data on disability.¹ Census 2017 was the result of the Supreme Court (SC) of Pakistan’s Suo moto notice in 2016 directing the government to take no further delays in this regard as it took place after a delay of 19 years.² According to the census of 2017, only 0.48 % of Pakistanis are persons with

¹ United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006, Article 31.

² Census 2017 and Disability, February 22, 2017, <http://www.datastories.pk/census-2017-and-disability/> November,12 2019. accessed March 9, 2020.



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disabilities (PWDs) out of the population of 210 million³ which is a gross underestimate. The total population of Pakistan is around 210 million and the population of PWDs, therefore, comes to 3,286,630 which includes 21,73,999 and 1,112,631 PWDs for the rural and urban areas, respectively.⁴ Data provided by Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) shows that total number of PWDs registered as voters is 165,972 (provides an estimate that 87% of the “Special Computerized National Identity Cards- CNIC-holder” PWDs are registered as voters).⁵ However, surprisingly only 136,928 PWDs have been registered with “National Database & Registration Authority” (NADRA) and are issued computerized national identity cards which is less than ECP number of PWDs as registered voters. It is worth mentioning that information published was requested under “Freedom of Information Ordinance 2002,” but NADRA had initially refused to share it.⁶ The information was provided by NADRA only after the intervention of federal ombudsman.

If compared with 1998 census report, the percentage of persons with disabilities in 1998 was 2.49 %, which ironically dropped to 0.48 % in 2017 census over the last 20 years. The disability data in 1961 census of Pakistan showed about 0.34 % of the total enumerated population as disabled. The collected data was in respect of persons who were totally “blind”, “deaf”, “dumb”, and “crippled”.⁷ A comparative look into the statistics of various census, one loses confidence in the credibility of census data. Population census adopts general approach because primary goal of the population census is to cover the whole population to collect data about all individuals and their basic demographic characteristics and not disables or any other protected character and their needs. According to global survey, it constitutes 10 to 15 % average of disables in an area whereas this prevalence is comparatively higher for developing countries.⁸ The report of the World Bank says that PWDs constitute at least 10 % (18 million) of the total population of Pakistan.⁹ Using a model disability survey method, WHO estimated that 30 million Pakistanis are living with disabilities.¹⁰ Model disability survey method can be a best tool to provide a better approximation of the true size and more understanding of the lived experience of persons with disabilities. This view is supported by sample based 1973 Housing, Economic and Demographic Survey (HED) in Pakistan showing enumerated disability percentage of 2.08 %¹¹ that is much higher than any estimates provided by all population censuses.

Accurate disability data helps in understanding the severity of the problem and making

³ Faisal Kamran, Sarah Bari, “No Data on Disability,” Dawn Oct 18, 2019,

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1511509>

⁴ Federal Bureau of Statistics, 2018.

⁵ Electoral and Political Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Pakistan; Situation Analysis & Way Forward, 2018.

⁶ Mehak Irfan, “**Lahore Businessmen Association for Rehabilitation of the Disabled (LABARD)**” Aug 8 , 2019 <https://medium.com/@mehak.irfan109/lahore-businessmen-association-for-rehabilitation-of-the-disabled-labard-8464cc33ff> accessed September 11, 2018.

⁷ Mohammad Afzal, “Disability Prevalence and Correlates in Pakistan: A Demographic Analysis,” *The Pakistan Development Review* 31(1992):217-19.

⁸ Disability Inclusion, The World Bank <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/disability> accessed March 22, 2020.

⁹ Pakistan’s first Model Disability Survey launched <https://www.islamabadscene.com/pakistans-first-model-disability-survey> accessed September 11, 2018.

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ The sample for the 1973 Housing, Economic and Demographic was about 255,000 households in the country, 122,000 in urban the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Malakand Province.



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informed decisions accordingly. Many hopes were attached to 2017 census in Pakistan as it took place after a gap of almost eight years because this second last in the series was supposed to be held in 2008. Further, it was the first to collect disability data after Pakistan made its commitment to UNCRPD. However, disability rights activists and organizations who claim 2.6 million PWDs in South Punjab only, has shown concerns that the government has not made enough efforts on a population count of the disabled persons in 2017 census. For instance, the main census form developed by the government did not consist a separate column on disability.¹² On 7 February 2017, parliamentary secretary for Finance and Statistics told the national assembly of two separately designed forms by the government- Form 2 and 2-A where form 2-A included a column for disable persons but added that the second form will be administered through sampling method after the end of main census.¹³ Pressure was built on government when a petition was filed by six PWDs under Article 184 (3) of the Constitution of Pakistan. All respondents (including federal/provincial governments and national/provincial councils) were directed by the apex court to exhibit their efforts in this regard making government responsible to hold headcount of disabled persons in the spirit of UNCRPD.¹⁴ The Supreme Court of Pakistan (SC) ordered “Pakistan Bureau of Statistics” (PBS) for the enforcement of decision of the Lahore High Court (LHC). The LHC Judgement required PWDs to be registered under separate categories of “male”, “female” and “transgender” in the ongoing census in separate and specific column by amending the forms being used in the population census.¹⁵ The SC sought an explanation from the PBS on the exclusion of questions on disability information. The reason to court for this was mentioned as lack of manpower and time.¹⁶

Pakistan's inaugural digital census, the seventh population census in 2023, tallied 241 million residents and transformed disability assessment by using the Washington Group Short Set, separating "disabilities" (severe impairments at 3.1%, or 7.45 million people) from "functional limitations" (daily activity difficulties at 9.64%, or 23.17 million) (Gallup Pakistan, n.d.; Hussain, 2024). Tablet-based collection improved accuracy, increasing visibility nearly sevenfold from 2017 by addressing invisible barriers like cognition.

Gender differences moderated: males at 3.30% prevalence for disabilities (about 4.09 million), females at 2.88% (3.36 million), with functional limitations similarly distributed (Gallup Pakistan, n.d.). Age showed a clear progression—0.39% disabilities in under-5s to 26.0% in those over 60 (3.19 million)—while rural areas held 63.6% of disabilities (4.7 million) versus urban 36.4% (2.7 million), linked to service disparities (Gallup Pakistan, n.d.).

Provincially, Punjab led with 56.7% (4.22 million), Sindh 17.2% (1.28 million), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 14.1% (1.05 million), Balochistan 8.7% (0.65 million), and Islamabad 0.5% (0.04 million) (Hussain, 2024). Functional limitations prioritized mobility (32.3%,

¹²“Centre, PBS told to include column for disabled in form,” Dawn, March 16, 2017

<https://www.dawn.com/news/1320804/centre-pbs-told-to-include-column-for-disabled-in-form> accessed March 5, 2020.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴“SC petition: Plea for collecting accurate disability data,” *The Express Tribune*, February 19, 2017 <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1331886/sc-petition-plea-collecting-accurate-disability-data/>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Haseeb Bhatti, “SC Orders Govt to Count Disabled People in Ongoing Census,” *Dawn*, March 16, 2017, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1320852> accessed March 12, 2020.



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7.49 million) and hearing (20.6%, 4.78 million), expanding beyond prior physical emphasis to include communication (11.1%) and self-care issues. Psychosocial data remained underrepresented, but overall, the approach marked a leap in granularity, with 17.34% functional limitations among adults over 18.

Education and Employment Policy Regime in Pakistan

Over a period of time, number of policies were formulated by the government of Pakistan on the subject of education including “report of the commission on national education 1959”, “education policy 1972-80”, “national education policy and implementation program 1979”, “national policy for special education (1986)”-revised in 1988, “national policy for rehabilitation of disables 1986”, “national policy for special education 1999”, “national policy for persons with disabilities 2002”, “national plan of action for persons with disabilities 2006” (NPA 2006), “special citizens act 2008”, “special citizens (right to concession in movement) act 2009” and “national education policy 2017”.

National policy on disability in 2002 was a major step by the government on the notion of equality and inclusion whereas NPA 2006 proposes steps and measures to place the National Policy of 2002 in practice with short- and long-term goals by 2009 and 2025, respectively. It proposed special schools for ‘severely handicapped’ students only. Education Policy 2017 takes both special and inclusive education side by side, although new facilities need to focus on inclusive education to meet international commitment. The policy has set a target of 50% of formal educational institutions at all levels to be converted to inclusive education friendly institutions. The policy further suggests allocation of at least 5% special education budget of general education budget and recommend 10% development budget of education departments for developing inclusive education facilities at general education institutions.¹⁷ However, both special and inclusive education have become devolved subject after 18th amendment to the Constitution in 2010. Devolution of powers to the provinces after 18th amendment altered the division of legislative powers and this policy is no longer binding on provinces. Center-based policy papers and pending disability-related legislation are no more federal issues but provincial which are making strides in various directions. For instance, Punjab and Sindh provinces have made special education departments while in KP and Baluchistan, it is still a part of social welfare departments. It is historically evident that too many policies and action plans contribute to the uncertainty of policies. Pakistan encountered same situation. In field of inclusive and special education, for example, the National Policy for Rehabilitation of the Disabled was framed in 1986 that recommended for integrated education of CWDs in regular schools.¹⁸ However, a new policy in 1988 replaced it that demanded separate and special education for PWDs.¹⁹ Again the idea of inclusive education was incorporated in national policy for special education in 2002.²⁰ Ironically, 2006 witness more changes when the NAP once again dropped the idea of inclusive education.²¹ In 1991, international pressure for inclusive education was built under UN “Convention on Rights of the Child” (CRC) as the policies of special education in Pakistan remained inconsistent and indeterminate with the UN policies and conventions particularly

¹⁷Pakistan National Education Policy, 2017.

¹⁸ Pakistan National Policy for Rehabilitation of the Disabled 1986.

¹⁹ Pakistan National Policy for Rehabilitation of the Disabled 1988.

²⁰ National Policy for Special Education Pakistan 2002.

²¹ National Action Plan 2006.



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UNCRPD. This uncertainty and inconsistency due to the apathy of policy makers have resulted in non and improper implementation of any one type of policy.

Like the case of education, provinces have extended exclusive policy and legislative powers on social welfare and labor. Changes in the constitutional structure of the State after 18th Constitutional amendment has added to the inconclusiveness of Pakistan's legislation about disability In Hafiz Junaid's case²², court referred to the absence of a comprehensive law protecting the rights of PWDs and that the existing plans and policies clearly endorse charitable approach towards disability in contrast to right-based approach of the UNCRPD. Court criticized the impugned recruitment policy and placed reliance on earlier cases.²³

The said amendment made the "federal ministry of social welfare and special education" defunct in 2013 shifting the administrative framework for drafting and implementing national policies on PWDs to provinces. Legislative and administrative steps taken in this regard are there but not up to the mark. Promulgation of "Punjab Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) (Amendment) Act 2012", "Sindh Differently Abled Persons (Employment, Rehabilitation and Welfare) Act 2015", and the "Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) (Amendment) Act 2012" brings no or little change on the issue. Among all, the Provincial Act of Punjab had little impact on making an inclusive society but lacks administrative and institutional framework for its implementation. The Act still talks about the quota policy and draw no distinction between different types of disabilities such as sensory, physical, or intellectual disabilities in quota allocation. The provision of the Act, that in case of failure to provide employment to PWD, the establishment has "to pay the sum of money it would have paid as salary or wages to a person with a disability/disabilities had been employed",²⁴ plays as a double-edged weapon. On one hand, the Act requires all establishments with one hundred or more employees to employ PWDs. In case of negation, it must pay money to be added to the fund established for inclusive services to PWDs encouraging employers to hire PWDs since they would pay the wage in any case. On the other hand, establishments can ignore to hire PWDs, since hiring a person with a disability may require investing in infrastructure and assistive technology to make the establishment inclusive. This act deters the inclusiveness of PWDs in the workplace, and yet, this action of the employers would be within the law. The recent SC court judgment in "Sui Southern Gas Company Ltd. v Federation of Pakistan 2018"²⁵ is remarkable on devolution issue of work and employment. The august Court held that despite the devolution of subjects of labor and trade union to provinces under 18th Constitutional amendment, the Industrial Relations Act 2012 is not unconstitutional.

Census Data on Disability in India: Historical Perspective

1Like Pakistan, disability in India was not on priority list of the administration before

²² Hafiz Junaid Mahmood vs. Govt. of Punjab, etc. W.P. No.2565/2014.

²³ *Kawas B. Aga and another vs. City District Government, Karachi (CDGK) through Nazim-e-Ala and others*, (PLD 2010 Karachi 182), *The Postmaster-General, Northern Punjab and (AJ&K), Rawalpindi vs. Muhammad Bashir and 2 others*, (1998 SCMR 2386), *Province of Sindh through Secretary, Home Department and others vs. Roshan Din and others*, (PLD 2008 S.C. 132), *Inayatullah vs. Sh. Muhammad Yousaf and 19 others*, (1997 SCMR 1020), *Mst. Afsana vs. District Police Officer, (Operation)*, and *M.D. Tahir, Advocate vs. Federal Government, and others*, (PLD 1999 Lahore 409).

²⁴ Punjab Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) (Amendment) Act 2012, Section 11.

²⁵ *Sui Southern Gas Company Ltd. vs. Federation of Pakistan*, 2018 SCMR 802.



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and even after the independence.²⁶ But later, regular population census and data enumeration led to an improved approach towards disability particularly its definition over the years. Census data based on definition, type and resulting measure of disability during both pre- independence and post- independence period is discussed and analyzed as under.

First systematic census was conducted in India in 1872.²⁷ Being a British colony, disability in India was explained and understood through medical perspective prevailed in UK and other western countries covering two categories of disability-physical and mental. The pre-independence terminology used for disables in census was 'infirm'. It was observed by the 1931 Census Commissioner of India that "the return of infirmities at the Indian census has probably never been satisfactory."²⁸ Practice of counting disability in the census had been discontinued after 1931 census. However, no administrative data or research is available on discontinuation practice. Disability found its place in national census again in 1981. The main element of including disability in Indian census 1981 after a gap of fifty years was the UN pronouncement of 1981 as an "international year of disabled persons." Another category of disability that is 'dumbness' was also included. Complicated nature of the disability definition in the census and the stigma attached to disability in Indian society resulted in under enumeration of the disabled. Despite raising global awareness about disability, it was once again not included in the census of 1991 due to doubts raised about the reliability of data, definitions and methodology adopted for this purpose.²⁹ However, lobbying of disability rights movements and international pressure resulted in the enactment of "Persons with Disabilities Act, 1995" (PWD) and inclusion of disability in census of 2001 with more liberal definition of five categories of disability. To re-define disabilities and to refine the process of enumeration of PWDs, efforts were made in 2011 census.³⁰ Suggestions were made for the changes in the types of disability, in the framing of questions under each category for enumeration and in the order of the questions on disability among other questions. Question No. 9 in the Household Schedule in 2011 census, for instance, relates to disability that requires the enumerator to ask it from every member of the household and the responses to be noted accordingly.³¹

According to the report of 2001 census, 2.13% of Indians were suffering from one or other kind of disability. New census 2011 shows only a small increase in number of persons with disability which is 2.21 %.³² It is surprising to note that disability data of 2011 census is much lower than 15 % percent of world's disabled population estimated by WHO. If WHO report is followed, 15% of Indian population would be much higher than the disability percentage of 2011 census. This clearly shows that how the large-scale studies like census and other national surveys mistakenly grasp the disability related concepts with adverse impact on the lives of PWDs.

²⁶ Renu Addlakha, "Introduction', in Disability Studies in India," in *Global Discourse, Local Realities*, ed. Renu Addlakha (New Delhi: Routledge, 2013),30-34.

²⁷Pooja Singh, "Persons with Disabilities and Economic Inequalities in India," *Indian Anthropologist* 44 (2014):47.

²⁸ C. Raghava Reddy and K. Pavani Sree, "Situating Census Data in Disability Discourse: An Analysis of Census 2011 and 2001," *Indian Anthropologist* 45(2015): 60

²⁹ Singh, "Persons with Disabilities," 67.

²⁹ Ibid, 68.

³⁰ Raghava, "Situating Census Data,"61.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Singh, "Persons with Disabilities," 69.



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Disability Definition, Types and Estimates: Census 2001 and National Sample Survey

Two key official sources of Indian disability statistics are “National Sample Survey”- (NSS) (administered every 11 years) and the census (administered every 10 years). The census includes listing and counting of the entire Indian population while the NSS uses nationwide sample surveys to represent whole population. The 58th round of the NSS reports that there were 18.5 million PWDs in India in 2002 whereas disability enumeration of 2001 census was reported as 21.9 million. Apparent difference of 20% exists between both recent estimates on disability.³³

When it comes to the definition of disability, there is no general definition in 2001 census. It does not define disability and rather a question on the type of disability in its population enumeration section (question 15) was included which says that “if a person is physically/mentally disabled, give appropriate code number from the list below: in seeing, in speech, in hearing, in movement, mental”.³⁴

Instruction Manual for census enumerators define each of the above-mentioned type of disability. The NSS, however, gives a general definition of disability and states that a person is deemed disabled “if the person has restrictions or lack of abilities to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being”.³⁵ NSS defines disability as an “activity limitation” than “impairment limitation” in census.

If the definitions of four out of five major impairments under 2001 census and 2002 NSS are compared, they are found radically different with no proper and matching estimates. The NSS definitions of impairments such as hearing, speech, and locomotion are deeper and more inclusive than census. However, in case of visual impairments, the census definition is broader than one given in NSS. Census definition of disables covers those who uses contact lenses and spectacles resulting into widely different estimates of census and NSS.³⁶ In case of youth with disability, census estimate of visual impairments among youth is 2.16 million, whereas the NSS finds only 0.18 million as visually impaired. In case of speech impairments, census data is twice higher than that of the NSS. The overall estimate of disability tends huge as 26.5 million if definition is taken in wider sense whereas it tends lower as 11.8 million if taken in stricter sense.³⁷ Estimates from 2001 census and NSS 2002 have been concluded that “prevalence estimates in the census and the NSS are clearly not comparable... and it is unsure what aspects of disability are captured by the census and NSS current disability definition.”³⁸ The substantial differences in rates of disability between these two sources contains diverse contextual ways to define and measure disability.

Apart from disability definition, disability types show clear inconsistencies in both the census and the NSS particularly in respect of use of assistive technology and aid. In 2001 census, for instance, locomotor disability refers to “a person's limitation without using aid while for hearing disability; it refers to a limitation experienced despite the use of hearing aid”. In the NSS, the visual definition of disability refers to “a person using

³³ Mitra, Sophie and Sambamoorthi, Usha. “Estimates in India: What the Census and NSS Tell U?” *Economic and Political Weekly* 41 (2006):4022.

³⁴ India Census 2001, Q 15 of population enumeration section, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2001_Census_of_India accessed October11, 2020.

³⁵ NSS 2002, Disabled Persons in India http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/485_final.pdf accessed May 12, 2019.

³⁶ Roger Jeffery and Nidhi Singal, “Measuring Disability in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 43(2008):22.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Mitra, “Estimates in India,” 4024.



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spectacles or contact lenses, while the definition of hearing disability considers a person's ability without using a hearing aid".³⁹ As a result of such huge discrepancies, field staff to collect data and researchers to interpret such data results fail to achieve desired outcomes. Such estimates and inconsistencies cannot be trusted when it comes to policy making and reports generation (such as of World Bank 2007) that rely heavily on the reanalysis of NSS data. Disability reviews and assessment need to be increasingly participative in nature.

Conclusion

The data collected about PWDs by government in Pakistan through various censuses is not correct enough for many reasons providing rough estimates about various disabilities as many are unreported disabilities. Across various censuses, prevalence fluctuated dramatically: 2.49% in 1998, 0.44% in 2017, and 3.1% in 2023 for disabilities (9.64% including limitations), reflecting methodological artifacts rather than true shifts. As a result, a comparative look into statistics of various census, one loses confidence in the credibility of census data.

Census and NSS as two key official sources to collect disability statistics in India have been analyzed. Disability estimates collected via census and NSS are hard enough to be compared as it is unsure what aspects of disability are absorbed by both the census and NSS while defining disability. However, the above detailed discussion and developments clarify that modern India has made attempts to accept disability as an evolving concept as specified in UNCRPD in comparison to past where PWDs were even kept out of the census population till 1980s.

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³⁹ Ibid, 4024.



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