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The new disability law will be a game changer. Here's why

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The Cabinet has approved important changes to the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill, 2014, (RPWD) and it is hoped that it will be tabled and passed during the winter session of the Parliament. The new law, when enacted, will repeal the old Disability Act, 1995, and usher the Indian disability movement into a new age, where disability itself will be defined based on an evolving and dynamic concept.

The World Bank estimates that 15% of the world's population is affected by one disability or another. Exclusion of disabled persons from the labour market leads to an annual loss of approximately 3-7% of the GDP. According to Census 2011, India is home to 26.8 million people with disabilities and that is a huge underestimation.

Read: Persons with disabilities: An enabling force in India's growth story

(<http://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/persons-with-disabilities-an-enabling-force-in-india-s-growth-story/story-ye8t2nJxshZtzwr39PgX5I.html>)

The RPWD Bill increases the number of recognised disabilities from 7 to 21. With this, the official count will obviously also rise and as per conservative estimates, that figure could be as high as 70-100 million.

We must now leverage this vast human capital. It is hoped that the proposed new law, a robust rights-based legislation with a strong institutional mechanism, shall ensure enjoyment of rights by persons with disabilities on an equal basis with the non-disabled citizens of India.

Read: SC allows disability quota in promotions for government jobs (<http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/after-reservation-in-govt-jobs-sc-allows-disability-quota-in-promotions/story-ec1OWMNbtNl0XNAMwsWlfP.html>)

It is another matter that within the disabled community, there are haves and have-nots. Historically, the three big disability groups - orthopaedically disabled, blind, and deaf - have benefitted from various entitlements.

Other disability groups like people with intellectual disabilities, people with psychosocial disabilities, people affected by leprosy, and even those with cerebral palsy or autism by and large got nothing.

This law will dramatically change that. There is a lot in the new law for the have-nots. And not just for the thus far neglected disabilities, but 14 more altogether new disabilities. The world would change for people with Thalassaemia, Haemophilia, Muscular Dystrophy, Multiple Sclerosis, Learning Disabilities, etc.

Read: Universities do little to enable the disabled (<http://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/universities-do-little-to-enable-the-disabled/story-0ivq04mDi5onH7pHF1JjWP.html>)

Encouraging employers to promote employment opportunities for persons with disabilities is the focus of our NCPEDP-Mindtree Helen Keller Awards. Cegeo Thekkel is amongst our awardees this year. He is a Peer Director at AMBA in Bengaluru and leads a team of 25 data operators. Cegeo is a person with intellectual disability. He reflects the joy and feeling of accomplishment that economic empowerment has brought to the intellectually disabled community.

Thanks to the new law, people like Cegeo would not only get many more job opportunities, but also protection from any harassment or discrimination.

The new law will help break many more glass ceilings. It would be a game changer.

The disability sector has been waiting for this law patiently for the last several years. Just its making took over five years and seemed like a never ending saga. Finally, the Bill got ready and was tabled in Rajya Sabha in 2014. Since then, it has been closely examined by the Standing Committee, the Group of Ministers, and the PMO. Finally, it was passed by the Cabinet. I hope and pray that the Bill gets passed very soon, and most definitely within the current Parliament session.

Javed Abidi is a disability activist

The views expressed are personal.