

Awareness level of RPwD Act, 2016 among Mizoram University Students and Teachers: An Analytical Study

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Abstract

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPwD Act 2016) represents a landmark legislation in India's commitment to protecting the rights and dignity of persons with disabilities. This study assesses and compares the awareness level of the RPwD Act, 2016 among students (N=250) and teachers (N=110) at Mizoram University, a central university in Northeast India. Using a descriptive survey design with stratified random sampling, data were collected through self-administered questionnaires. Findings reveal that 60% of students and 73.6% of teachers are aware of the RPwD Act, 2016. However, deeper understanding of specific provisions remains limited: only 38.7% of aware students could name three or more key provisions, compared to 55.6% of aware teachers. Critical gaps exist in knowledge about university-specific policies (known by only 18% of students and 31% of teachers), assistive technologies (used by 32% of students, 38% of teachers), and exam accommodations (understood by 45% of students, 62% of teachers). The study concludes that while basic awareness is moderate, targeted interventions are urgently needed to deepen understanding and translate awareness into inclusive practices on campus.

Keywords: Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Mizoram University, infrastructure, curriculum adaptation, support services

Introduction:

The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 (RPwD Act, 2016), passed by the Indian Parliament, is a significant step forward in the country's efforts to protect the rights and dignity of people with disabilities. This legislation connects India with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), fostering an inclusive society where people with disabilities have equal opportunity. Among its several provisions, the RPwD Act, 2016 heavily focuses on inclusive education, recognizing it as a basic right of those with disabilities.

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The RPwD Act of, 2016 places a great focus on inclusive education, which is one of its main concerns. The Act requires inclusive education for children with disabilities in all government-funded or recognised educational institutions, acknowledging education as a basic right for people with disabilities. This clause is based on the idea that inclusive education improves learning for all children by creating a varied and welcoming atmosphere, in addition to promoting equality.

According to the Act, educational institutions have to make sure that students with disabilities are admitted without facing any prejudice and that they receive the support they need to participate fully and effectively in the classroom. This covers providing suitable instructional strategies, accessible learning resources, and reasonable accommodations. The Act seeks to accomplish this by removing the obstacles that have traditionally kept children with disabilities out of regular education.

The RPwD Act, 2016 also addresses higher education, requiring universities and colleges to reserve a set percentage of places for students with disabilities. This reservation is designed to increase the representation of people with disabilities in higher education institutions and give them equal chances to pursue further degrees and professions. Furthermore, the Act establishes scholarships, financial aid, and other support services to help students with disabilities pursue their educational goals. In addition to its emphasis on education, the RPwD Act, 2016 has several other measures to improve the general well-being of people with disabilities. It broadens the concept of disability to include a larger variety of impairments, such as intellectual disabilities, mental illnesses, and multiple disabilities. This wide definition guarantees that more individuals are protected under the law and can access the rights and services guaranteed by the Act.

Overall, the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act of 2016 takes a comprehensive and progressive approach to disability rights in India. By conforming with UNCRPD principles, the Act seeks to build a more inclusive and fair society in which people with disabilities may exercise their rights and fully participate in all parts of life. Its emphasis on inclusive education, accessibility, employment, and social security demonstrates the varied character of disability rights and the necessity for a comprehensive approach to addressing the obstacles that people with disabilities confront. With the implementation of the RPwD Act, 2016, India is making tremendous progress towards realising the goal of an inclusive society in which people with disabilities' rights, and dignity are safeguarded and promoted.

Significance of Promoting Inclusive Education:

Inclusive education is a crucial component of the RPwD Act 2016, which seeks to integrate students with disabilities into mainstream educational institutions. The Act requires educational institutions to provide reasonable accommodations, barrier-free access, and supportive learning environments that meet the different needs of all students. By doing so, it hopes to break down the obstacles that have historically kept students with disabilities from accessing equal educational opportunities. The RPwD Act, 2016 emphasizes the need for both public and private institutions to create an inclusive educational environment that supports fairness, non-discrimination, and accessibility.

Definition and Importance of Inclusive Education:

Inclusive education is an educational system in which students with disabilities study alongside their non-disabled peers in normal classes. This paradigm encourages full engagement of all students, regardless of ability, in the general education curriculum and school community. Inclusive education is based on the premise that every student has the right to a decent education and that diversity enhances the learning experience for everyone.

Specific focus on Mizoram University:

Mizoram, a state in north-eastern India, provides inclusive education through initiatives like elevators, ramps, and assistive devices to support students with disabilities. However, many students are unaware of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 and its resources. Inclusive education benefits all students, including those with temporary injuries or parents with strollers. To ensure full inclusivity, Mizoram University should raise awareness among students through orientation programs, workshops, informational campaigns, and curriculum incorporation. By educating the entire student body, the university can create a more informed, empathetic, and supportive campus culture, enhancing the educational experience for everyone.

Review of related literature:

Rani, (2018) *'The rights of persons with disabilities act, 2016 promoting inclusive education'* found that despite numerous shortcomings, the RPwD Act of 2016 remains the most effective legislation for advancing and elevating those with disabilities. It enables inclusive education to achieve its goals more effectively and quickly. Further research is needed to assess the impact of the RPwD Act, 2016 on social and national contexts.

Dheesha, (2020) *'Awareness on Disability and Inclusive Education among the Prospective Teachers'* Inclusive education aims to bring all students together in one classroom, ensuring appropriate educational needs and participation without discrimination. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 lists 21 types of disabilities, including blindness, low vision, leprosy, cerebral palsy, specific learning disabilities, speech, and language disabilities, hearing impairments, and more. However, 66% of prospective teachers were not aware of the Act, and 34% were only aware of certain types of disabilities.

Lalmuankimi, (2023) *'Perceptions of Students on Implementation of Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016 in Secondary School Students of Mizoram'* This study found that most students with disabilities had average perceptions of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016. Only a small percentage had above-average perceptions, and no students had poor perceptions. Additionally, both genders are expected to have similar attitudes of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016. There were no significant differences between the two groups. A comparison of mean scores revealed a substantial disparity between rural and urban students with disabilities.

Lalnunpuia, Shree, (2024) *'Rights of persons with disabilities Act 2016: A case study of secondary schools in Aizawl, Mizoram, India'* The study found that to assess the implementation status of the RPwD Act, 2016 in secondary schools of Aizawl using an observational checklist and field notes. Principals provided their viewpoints on infrastructural and instructional facilities for children with disabilities through face-to-face interviews. The research found that no study has been conducted related to the RPwD Act, 2016 in their schools, but all teachers were aware of the Act.

Research questions:

1. What is the level of awareness of the RPwD Act, 2016 among students at Mizoram University?
2. What is the level of awareness of the RPwD Act, 2016 among teachers at Mizoram University?
3. How does awareness of the RPwD Act, 2016 compare between students and teachers?

Objectives of the study:

1. To assess the awareness level of the RPwD Act, 2016 among the students at Mizoram University.
2. To assess the awareness level of RPwD Act, 2016 among teachers at Mizoram University.
3. To compare the awareness levels and understanding of key provisions between students and teachers.

Methodology of the study:

Method of the study:

Two self-administered questionnaires were developed specifically for this study to assess awareness and understanding of the RPwD Act, 2016.

Source of data:

The findings and analysis presented in the study are based on primary data, specifically sourced for this research. The researcher personally engaged with students to gather the necessary information for this paper.

Sample design:

The study employed a descriptive survey design to assess the awareness level and understanding of the RPwD Act, 2016 among students and teachers of Mizoram University.

Sample Size:

A total of 250 students and 110 teachers were randomly selected from various departments of Mizoram University. The sample size was determined based on feasibility and the need for adequate representation across different academic disciplines.

Sampling Technique:

A stratified random sampling technique was used. The strata were formed based on:

1. Academic departments
2. Year of study
3. Gender

For teachers, strata were formed based on department.

From each stratum, participants were selected randomly to ensure proportional representation.

Distribution of sample:

1. Undergraduate students: 150 (60%)
2. Postgraduate students: 100 (40%)
3. Male students: 110 (44%)
4. Female students: 140 (56%)
5. Students with reported disabilities who answered the questionnaire: 18 (7.2%)
6. Student without disabilities: 232 (92.8%)

Tools for Data Collection:

Two questionnaires were developed:

1. Student questionnaire: 15 items measuring awareness and understanding of RPwD Act, 2016 provisions.
2. Teachers' questionnaire: 15 items.

Ethical Considerations:

Prior to data collection, permission was obtained from the students and teachers. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and their consent was obtained.

Findings related to objective one:

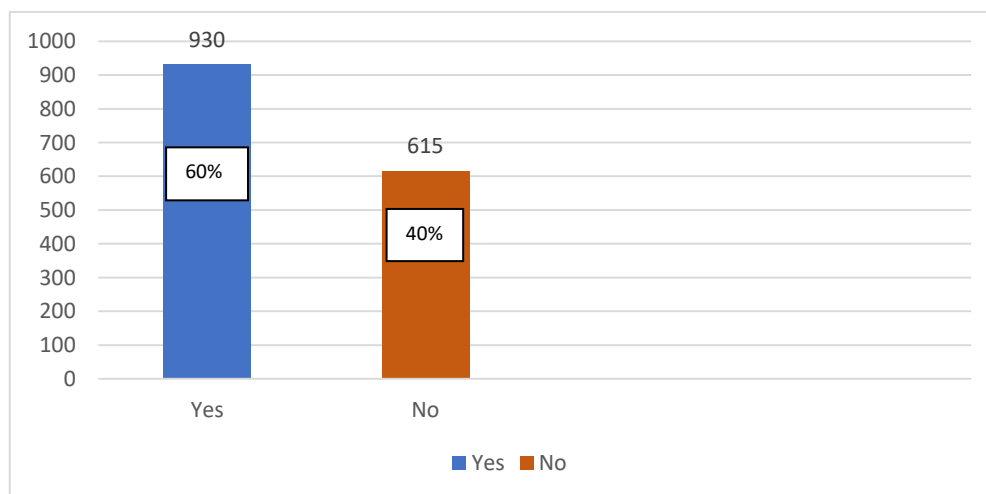
The outcomes for Objective 1 reveal the average degree of awareness of the RPwD Act, 2016 among Mizoram University students. According to the study, 60% of students are aware of the RPwD Act, 2016, while 40% are unaware. This large number of unaware students demonstrates a deficit in spreading knowledge about the RPwD Act, 2016 and its requirements. The RPwD Act is a critical law that protects the rights and dignity of people with disabilities and encourages their full participation in educational and societal settings. However, 40% of students are unaware of this vital deed shows that the institution should employ more effective measures to educate its students.

There are several ways to raise awareness, including adding the RPwD Act, 2016 to orientation programs, holding workshops and seminars, and adding important information to the curriculum. Increased exposure can also be achieved through informative campaigns that make use of both physical and digital media.

Mizoram University can create a more welcoming atmosphere where all students, including those with disabilities, are aware of their rights and the resources accessible to them by raising awareness. Consequently, this will improve the university's general accessibility and inclusion.

Graph showing the average level of awareness of the RPwD Act, 2016 among the students of Mizoram University.

Graph:1. Level of awareness of the RPwD Act, 2016 among the students of Mizoram University



From the graph we can see that only 60% of students who answered the questionnaire were aware of the RPwD Act, 2016, emphasizing the need for increasing awareness. This can be accomplished by

including information on the Act in orientation programs, organizing workshops and seminars, and adding relevant topics to the curriculum. Additionally, informative promotion of the Act via online platforms and physical materials can considerably increase its exposure and comprehension. Raising awareness is crucial and these strategies can ensure that more students are informed and knowledgeable about the RPwD Act, 2016, resulting in improved implementation and adherence to its guidelines.

Findings related to objective two:

Objective 2 of this study aims to determine the proportion of teachers at Mizoram University who are aware of the RPwD Act, 2016, thereby establishing a baseline against which future interventions can be measured.

Table No. 1: Level of awareness of RPwD Act, 2016 among teachers of Mizoram University

Awareness level	Frequency (N=110)	Percentage
Aware	81	73.6%
Unaware	29	26.4%
Total	110	100%

The data reveal that 73.6% of teachers (81 out of 110) at Mizoram University are aware of the existence of the RPwD Act, 2016. Conversely, 26.4% of teachers (29 out of 110) reported being unaware of the Act.

This finding indicates that approximately three out of every four teachers at the university have at least basic awareness that such legislation exists. While this majority is encouraging, the presence of more than one-quarter of teachers (over 26%) who remain completely unaware is a matter of serious concern. In practical terms, this means that in any given classroom of 30 students, there is a high probability that the teacher has no knowledge of the legal framework that guarantees rights to students with disabilities.

Conclusion:

The results for Objective 2 reveal that 73.6% of teachers at Mizoram University are aware of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016. Despite this majority, significant concerns arise: 26.4% of teachers are completely unaware of the Act, indicating a crucial shortfall in professional knowledge that may adversely affect students with disabilities. Furthermore, while awareness among teachers is higher than among students, the difference is minimal at only 13.6 percentage points, highlighting inadequate emphasis on disability rights training for faculty.

Findings related to objective three:

The RPwD (Rights of Persons with Disabilities) Act, 2016 is a crucial piece of legislation that ensures the protection and promotion of the rights and dignity of individuals with disabilities. Evaluating the understanding of its key provisions among students and teachers who are aware of its existence is essential for effective implementation within the university setting. This section compares

the awareness levels and understanding of key provisions between students and teachers at Mizoram University.

Current Awareness and Understanding: A Comparison

The findings from Objective 1 indicate that only 60% of Mizoram University students are aware of the RPwD Act, 2016, leaving a significant 40% who are not. In comparison, findings from Objective 2 reveal that 73.6% of teachers are aware of the Act, while 26.4% remain unaware. This means that teachers are approximately 13.6 percentage points more aware of the Act than students. While this difference indicates that teachers have slightly better awareness, the gap is surprisingly small; one would expect teachers, as professional educators, to be far more knowledgeable about disability rights legislation than students.

When examining the depth of understanding among those who are aware, the differences become more pronounced but still concerning. Among the 150 aware students, their grasp of the Act's essential elements varies greatly. Some students demonstrate thorough comprehension, others show moderate understanding, and many have only basic awareness. Similarly, among the 81 aware teachers, understanding ranges from deep to superficial. However, teachers consistently show deeper understanding than students across almost every provision.

Specifically, teachers demonstrate stronger knowledge of critical provisions such as the right to non-discrimination, accessibility requirements in buildings, education and employment reservations, reasonable accommodations, exam accommodations, assistive devices provision, social security schemes, grievance redressal mechanisms, and penalties for non-compliance. In every single provision measured, teachers outperformed students, with the largest differences observed in exam accommodations, grievance redressal mechanisms, and assistive devices provision.

Despite this better performance by teachers, significant gaps remain for both groups. The least understood provision among both students and teachers is the penalty for non-compliance, followed by grievance redressal mechanisms. This is deeply concerning because without knowledge of penalties, there is no deterrent against violations, and without understanding grievance mechanisms, students with disabilities cannot effectively seek justice when their rights are denied.

Importance of Understanding the RPwD Act, 2016

The RPwD Act, 2016 includes several requirements designed to ensure that people with disabilities can fully participate in educational, social, and professional contexts. The key components include the right to equality and non-discrimination, accessibility requirements, educational and employment rights, and the development of institutional mechanisms to defend these rights.

For students, understanding these regulations enables those with disabilities to fight for their rights and request reasonable accommodations, fostering a more inclusive atmosphere at the university. For teachers, understanding these regulations is not optional but a professional and legal obligation. Teachers who lack understanding may unknowingly violate the law, deny students their legally mandated rights, or fail to provide necessary support.

Need for Enhanced Awareness Campaigns for Both Groups

Given that 40% of students are completely unaware of the RPwD Act, 2016, and among aware students, deep understanding is limited, urgent action is required. Similarly, while 73.6% of teachers are aware, more than one-quarter of teachers (26.4%) remain completely unaware, and even among aware teachers, critical provisions such as penalties and grievance mechanisms are poorly understood. This gap, lack of basic awareness in a substantial minority of both groups, and shallow understanding in the majority demands comprehensive, targeted interventions.

Recommendations for Raising Awareness and Understanding

For Students:

1. **Workshops and Seminars:** Plan frequent events with an emphasis on the RPwD Act, 2016. The details of the Act's requirements should be thoroughly covered, along with helpful advice on how to implement them in a university setting.
2. **Incorporation into Students' Orientation Programmes:** Ensure that new student orientation programs include in-depth discussions of the RPwD Act, 2016. This guarantees awareness from the outset of their academic experience.
3. **Curriculum Integration:** Include important RPwD Act, 2016 related subjects in pertinent courses offered by various academic departments. This will ensure that all students receive education on the Act, irrespective of their subject of study.
4. **Informative Campaigns:** Use both physical and digital media. Information about the RPwD Act, 2016 can be shared through university bulletin boards, websites, and social media platforms.
5. **Interactive Approaches to Education:** Use interactive teaching strategies such as group discussions and quizzes to engage students and improve their comprehension.

For Teachers:

1. **Mandatory Faculty Development Programs:** Require all teachers to complete certified training modules on the RPwD Act, 2016, with periodic refresher courses.
2. **Departmental Workshops:** Conduct targeted workshops for departments with particularly low awareness, such as Commerce and Engineering.
3. **Integration into B.Ed. and M.Ed. Curricula:** Ensure that all teacher education programs include mandatory, credit-bearing courses on the RPwD Act, 2016 and inclusive classroom practices.
4. **Resource Materials:** Provide all teachers with accessible handbooks, guides, and quick-reference cards summarizing key provisions, penalties, and grievance mechanisms.
5. **Accountability Measures:** Include knowledge of the RPwD Act, 2016 as a criterion in teacher performance evaluations.

Conclusion:

Evaluating the awareness of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, 2016 among students and teachers at Mizoram University is crucial for its effective implementation. The analysis reveals that while teachers have a moderate advantage in awareness compared to students, both groups exhibit significant knowledge deficiencies that hinder the Act's application. Specifically, 40% of students are entirely unaware of the Act, and of the 60% who are aware, there is a pronounced lack of understanding regarding critical elements like penalties and grievance mechanisms. Among teachers, 26.4% lack awareness, and even among the 73.6% who are knowledgeable, only a minority grasp vital provisions thoroughly. Alarming, the penalty for non-compliance is the least understood by both groups, indicating a disconnect regarding the consequences of violating disability rights.

To bridge these gaps, Mizoram University must undertake comprehensive awareness initiatives for both students and teachers. Recommended strategies include workshops, seminars, curriculum integration, orientation programs, and interactive teaching methods. Furthermore, teachers should receive mandatory training, participate in departmental workshops, and have access to accountability measures and resource materials. These interventions are essential for ensuring that the university community understands the RPwD Act, 2016 and is equipped to advocate for the rights of persons with disabilities, thereby fostering an inclusive academic environment.

Limitations of the study:

The following limitations should be considered while interpreting the findings:

1. **Self-reported data:** The study relied on participants' self-reports, which may be subject to social desirability bias or inaccurate recall. Both students and teachers may have over-reported their awareness to appear socially conscious or professionally competent.
2. **Single university context:** The study was conducted only at Mizoram University. Findings may not be generalizable to other universities in India or Northeast India, particularly private universities or those with different demographic profiles.
3. **Cross-sectional design:** Data were collected at one point in time. The study does not capture changes in awareness over time or the long-term impact of awareness campaigns.
4. **Possible social desirability bias:** Some participants, particularly teachers who may feel professional pressure to demonstrate knowledge of disability laws, may have over-reported their awareness or understanding.
5. **Modest teacher sample size:** While the student sample (N=250) is robust, the teacher sample (N=110) is relatively modest. Department-wise subsamples for teachers were very small for some departments (e.g., Commerce had only 6 teachers, Engineering had 9), limiting the reliability of department-level comparisons.
6. **Uneven departmental representation:** Teacher respondents were not equally distributed across all departments. Some departments (e.g., Education) had higher representation, while others (e.g., Commerce, Engineering) had fewer respondents, which may affect the generalizability of department-specific findings.
7. **Awareness versus application:** The study measured awareness and understanding, not actual behaviour or implementation of the Act's provisions on campus. A teacher may be aware of the Act but still fail to provide reasonable accommodations in practice.
8. **Disability status verification:** Student disability status was self-reported and not verified through university records or medical documentation. The actual number of students with disabilities at Mizoram University may differ from the 18 reported in this study.

Implications of the study:

The findings of this study have several practical implications for different stakeholders:

For University Administration:

1. **Mandatory sensitization programs:** Mizoram University should introduce compulsory orientation sessions on the RPwD Act, 2016 for all incoming students.
2. **Accessible infrastructure:** Ensure that ramps, elevators, assistive devices, and accessible washrooms are not only present but also well-maintained and publicized.
3. **Establish a Disability Support Cell:** A dedicated cell can coordinate awareness campaigns, provide accommodations, and address grievances of students with disabilities.
4. **Mandatory training programs for teachers:** Given that 26.4% of teachers were completely unaware, the university must require all faculty to complete certified training modules on the RPwD Act.

For Policymakers:

1. **Allocate resources for awareness:** Government and UGC should provide funding specifically for disability rights awareness campaigns in higher education institutions.
2. **Monitor implementation:** Regular audits and assessments should be conducted to ensure universities comply with the awareness and accessibility mandates of the RPwD Act, 2016.
3. **Integrate into policy frameworks:** Awareness of disability rights should be made a criterion for accreditation bodies like NAAC and NIRF.

For Teachers and Educators:

1. **Curriculum inclusion:** Disability rights, inclusive education, and the RPwD Act, 2016 should be integrated into relevant courses (e.g., Education, Sociology, Law, Social Work, Teacher Training).
2. **Teacher training programs:** B.Ed. and M.Ed. curricula must include mandatory modules on the RPwD Act, 2016 and inclusive classroom practices.
3. **Classroom sensitivity:** Teachers should be trained to create inclusive learning environments that accommodate diverse needs without stigmatization.

For Students:

1. **Peer-led awareness:** Student groups and clubs can organize debates, quizzes, and street plays to spread awareness among peers.
2. **Self-advocacy:** Students with disabilities, when aware of their rights, can better advocate for reasonable accommodations and barrier-free access.

Suggestions for Future Research:

Based on the findings and limitations of this study, the following directions are recommended for future research:

1. **Comparative studies across universities in Northeast India:** A multi-university study (e.g., including Assam University, NEHU, Tripura University) would help compare awareness levels and identify region-specific gaps.
2. **Implementation of RPwD Act, 2016 infrastructure at Mizoram University:** A mixed-methods study examining physical infrastructure (ramps, elevators, assistive technology), library accessibility, and hostel facilities for students with disabilities.
3. **Awareness among faculty and non-teaching staff:** Since teachers and administrative staff play a key role in implementation, their awareness and attitudes toward the RPwD Act, 2016 should be studied.
4. **Impact of awareness campaigns on inclusive behaviour:** An experimental or pre-post intervention study to measure whether workshops, seminars, or digital campaigns actually improve awareness and foster inclusive behaviour on campus.

5. **Awareness among non-teaching staff:** This study included teachers, but future research should examine awareness among administrative staff, library staff, hostel wardens, and other non-teaching personnel who also play a role in implementing the RPwD Act.
6. **Barriers to implementation:** Qualitative studies using interviews or focus groups to understand why awareness remains low despite the existence of the Act, and what practical barriers exist at the university level.
7. **Longitudinal study:** Tracking the same cohort of students from first year to final year to see if awareness increases naturally over time or requires structured intervention.

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