

## A Romantic Challenge: A Qualitative Study of the Lived Experiences of Challenges of Love among Girls with a Physical Disability

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### Original Article

#### Abstract

**Introduction:** The aim of this study was to identify the perceived challenges of girls with disabilities about love.

**Materials and Methods:** The study was a qualitative study and the target population included single girls with physical disabilities aged 18 years and older in Isfahan, Iran. Data were obtained through in-depth interviews with 16 girls with physical disabilities who were selected through purposive sampling from among the girls referring to two service centers for people with physical disabilities. Data analysis was performed using the Colaizzi's method.

**Results:** The challenges of girls with physical disabilities about love were generally divided into two categories of challenges related to the inside and outside world. Internal challenges included personal experiences, fears, beliefs, and psychological defenses, and external challenges included law, culture, suggestions, and advocacy.

**Conclusion:** People with physical disabilities face challenges related to themselves and society when dealing with love. Paying attention to these challenges can help empower these people to deal with them appropriately.

**Keywords:** People with disabilities; Physical disability; Single person; Love

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#### Introduction

Love is one of the most beautiful and meaningful concepts and is a familiar word in all cultures, nations, and societies (1). This abstract concept has different definitions and there is no single meaning for it. In other words, everyone knows a different meaning for it based on their experiences and inner state (2). The importance of love for human beings is to the extent that it is considered necessary for the entry and permanence of a relationship, and this point is more important for women (3). Love and belonging are basic needs in the Maslow's hierarchy pyramid, but the experience of falling in love and being loved does not necessarily happen to all human beings. A group of people in society whose needs may be neglected by society and the family are people with special needs (5).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), nearly one billion people in the world suffer from some form of disability, who account for about 15% of the world's population (6) and the rate of this

population in Iran is about 4% (7). Ignoring the emotional issues of this group means ignoring a significant population of humans (8). It seems that a view focused on a physical disorder is a common view in society towards people with disabilities, and this view can greatly affect the experience of love. The first glance often focuses on the person's defect, and sometimes the physical defect is the end of the experience of love (9).

There are many reasons why people with physical disabilities tend to get married and have emotional issues. The economic level of a disabled person (10) as well as the dominant social view towards a person with a physical disability (11) affect this issue. According to some researchers, people with disabilities in Iran, despite the desire to marry, are afraid of marriage because of the restrictions imposed by the family and society (12). Most women with physical disabilities are eager to experience love, marriage, and ultimately having children, but are afraid of the unknown future and its circumstances (13).

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Various factors affect the experience of love, one of which is the factor of physical attractiveness (14). Physical structure is considered as one of the factors influencing the attractiveness of individuals. Most people with physical disabilities have experienced a form of frustration due to not being able to attract the attention and love of the opposite sex during adolescence and youth, which indirectly sends a message of unattractiveness to them (15). The results of studies suggest that people with physical disabilities are considered as the ones who are not able to perform their personal work (16), and others may not see a person with disabilities as sexually active. However, despite some limitations, people with physical disabilities are emotionally like other people (17).

In Iran, studies on disability is mainly focused on physical or psychological needs of the disabled, and despite their significant population, the need for love and marriage and related issues have not received much attention in this group. In the present study, we sought an answer to the question that what challenges do girls with physical disabilities experience in the path of love, regardless of their marital status and marriage experience?

### Materials and Methods

In order to achieve direct experience of individuals, the qualitative research method and phenomenological type were used. Qualitative studies seek to gain the deepest experiences of eligible participants. In such studies, the researcher, after gathering the necessary information, interprets the data without personal bias (18). Since qualitative studies are not performed with the aim of generalizing the data to the community, the sample should well have the desired characteristics of the study. For this reason, the purposive and snowball method was adopted for the sampling (19). To do this, the sampling was performed from among the physically disabled girls aged 18 years and old living in Isfahan, Iran, in 2019, and by interviewing 16 people, the data reached the saturation level. The subjects were selected from individuals covered by institutions and charities supporting people with disabilities who were disabled at the discretion of the Welfare Commission. The inclusion criteria for the participants included age 18 years and above, female gender, and having some kind of physical disability in the body. The data collection method was a semi-structured interview that was conducted for 60 to 75 minutes at a time and place selected by the participants.

In each interview, after forming a good relationship, the participant was asked to tell her life story focusing on love, marriage, and emotional relationships and to

express the existing obstacles and challenges. For example, they were asked to express their views and those of the community on the issue of love and marriage for girls with physical disabilities. The questions posed in the study are presented in table 1.

**Table 1.** Interview guide

Row	Study main questions
1	In general, what is your opinion about love and marriage?
2	What are the barriers and challenges related to the issue of love for girls with physical disabilities?
3	How has the community and the family reacted to the issue of love of people with physical disabilities?
4	How efficient do you feel in terms of lovemaking and emotional communication?
5	What are the sources of support from the family and society regarding the love of girls with physical disabilities?

All interviews were recorded with the permission of the participants. The Colaizzi analysis method was employed to analyze the interviews. This method includes seven steps: "Familiarity with data, creating initial code, formulating meanings, drawing a network of themes, defining and naming themes, final report, and final validation". All audio files were implemented verbatim and studied several times by both researchers, then open-coding was performed on them. Then the themes and sub-themes were determined. The validity of the findings was confirmed by the participants in the interview; this means that each participant observed the final results of the study and confirmed the consistency of the findings with their experience. In the present study, all ethical considerations including informed consent, confidentiality of personal identity, and confidentiality and voluntary participation in the study were observed. All stages of the study were approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Isfahan with the number IR.UI.REC.1398.067.

### Results

The characteristics of the participants are given in table 2. The participants were all single and childless.

The average age of the participants was 36 years old, and their lowest and highest education levels were below diploma and master's degree, respectively. In terms of employment, 7 of the samples were employed and the rest were unemployed. According to self-reports, the participants were from all walks of life, including the poor (n = 4), the average economic level (n = 9) and the affluent people (n = 3).

**Table 2.** Characteristics of study participants

Number	Participant age (year)	Type of disability (based on the diagnosis of the Welfare Commission)	Type of employment	Severity of disability	Education level	Family's history of diseases
1	18	Meningocele, paralysis and shortness of one leg	Content production	Moderate	Undergraduate student	No
2	18	Leg muscle strain	Unemployed	Low	Diploma	No
3	24	Parkinson's disease, foot numbness	Unemployed	Severe	Associate's degree	Having a sister with mental retardation
4	27	Weakness of the right hand	Unemployed	Low	Diploma	No
5	227	Weak leg muscles	Unemployed	Severe	Master's	Having a brother with physical disability
6	35	Scleroderma, muscular weakness	Activity in the stock market	Moderate	Master's	No
7	36	Cerebellar poor working, voice and body tremor	Handicrafts	Severe	Diploma	No
8	37	MS, mobility problem	Unemployed	Moderate	Diploma	No
9	39	Ataxia, voice and body tremors	Unemployed	Severe	Diploma	Having a sister with physical disability
10	39	Pelvic dislocation and short leg	Vitreous enamelling	Low	Associate's degree	No
11	40	Short leg	Writer	Low	Diploma	No
12	45	Disability of both legs	Unemployed	Moderate	Below diploma	No
13	48	Epilepsy, numbness on one side of the body	Unemployed	Moderate	Below diploma	No
14	48	Polio, both legs	Hairdresser	Moderate	Diploma	No
15	49	Paraplegia	Retired	Low	Master's	No
16	54	Polio	Unemployed	Severe	Diploma	No

The main criteria for entering the study were age over 18 years, female gender, and having a disability; the above information was determined after sampling based on the individuals' self-reports of the income and economic level of the family.

In data analysis, two main themes were extracted regarding the participants' challenges and problems related to the concept of love. These two themes included "challenges of the inner world and the outer world." Table 3 lists the main themes and sub-themes.

**Table 3.** Main themes and sub-themes

	Main themes	Sub-themes
First theme	Inner world	Personal experiences
		Fears
		Misconceptions
		Psychological defenses
Second theme	Outer world	Rules
		Cultural issues
		Inappropriate suggestions
		Supports

### Inner world

When the participants were asked about the concept of love and its challenges, some of what they

said referred to their inner life experiences, which included personal life experiences, including personal and physical experiences (and mental experiences) such as fears, beliefs, and defenses.

**Personal experiences:** The personal and physical experiences of girls with physical disabilities were one of the most important areas in the area of love. From the participants' point of view, physical weakness and the progress of the disease and independence problems played a huge role in the attitude of a person with physical disabilities towards love. On the other hand, the older people got, the colder their desire for a relationship with the opposite sex and a romantic relationship became. Participant 1 said: "My illness is progressing and it is affecting my spinal cord. My condition may be such that I even lose control of my urine ... Who will accept me with such conditions?"

Some participants believed that failure to experience love as a basic but important need of life, led to regrets and annoyances for them. For example, participant number 16 expressed her feelings about love as follows: "I tell you honestly, we the disabled have a chip on our shoulder. We miss a lot of things, we miss walking with a man, going to a restaurant ...

You may not believe it, but many disabled girls are happy to marry anyone to show off ... even if they divorce after a while."

**Fears:** Another psychological experience that the participants repeatedly referred to was fear. The impact of their own bitter past experiences or the life stories of others had somehow raised the expectation of failure in these people and they considered failure inevitable. Participant No. 14 believed: "No healthy person comes to a disabled girl unless he intends to abuse her; Because even disabled boys want a healthy woman. Disabled girls who are rich, finally get married and its reason is quite clear. The boy has nothing. He comes and collects all of the girl's belongings for himself. Then he gets tired and betrays her."

**Misconceptions:** Some of the girls with physical disabilities believed that others did not find them sexually attractive and active, and thought that people with disabilities needed a 24-hour nurse to perform their daily chores. Another strange belief was that people with physical disabilities believed in the existence of transcendental forces that had never allowed them to be in a relationship. Participant No. 10 believed in the ability of people with disabilities: "Some people think that we cannot have sex. Well, of course there are some limitations, but in general, if there is not numbness, it is not a problem. A man proposed to me that he had no sexual feelings at all, and I said that I could not cope with such a thing at all ... as if you just wanted to have a nurse beside you." Participant No. 12 also referred to the transcendental forces: "We don't have fortune on our side. There was a man who had a lot of knowledge in this regard, telling me that: "you have been married to your partner and you cannot marry again." "The suitors came to behind the door many times, but they did not enter ... there is something wrong."

**Psychological defenses:** Another point that is frequently seen in the present study was the psychological defenses used by the interviewees. Expressing hatred of the opposite sex, the idealistic view that some young people had towards marriage, and the all-or-none thinking, seemed to be a kind of stubbornness towards the circumstances around them. Participant No. 14 stated: "I do not like to get married at all; I mean, I do not like boys, I am afraid of them... "They all lie a lot ... they all betray." Participant No.

disabilities would be higher." Participant No. 7 expressed dissatisfaction with the gender difference: "The disabled boys have much better conditions; after all they are boys, they can propose to healthy girls and can marry them."

**Inappropriate suggestions:** Reaching the age of marriage, physical problems on the one hand and the look of others and the feeling of not being liked by the opposite sex on the other hand, were considered a deep pain for the interviewees. The interviewees might either not have the conditions to fall in love and get married, or face things that might not be right for them. Participant No. 11 said: "An 80-year-old man proposed to my young friend ... She is perfect and educated, she only has a little problem in her feet, her mother has pressured her to marry him." Participant No. 6 also pointed out inappropriate offers: "I took a taxi (the driver proposed to me), of course, it has happened to me many times that the guy has proposed to me as a concubine or as a second wife ... most of them have sexual dissatisfaction with their first wife."

**Supports:** According to the participants, the family and community can be a source or barrier to support. Participant No. 9 pointed to the extreme support of some families: "There was a case the girl had tremors, who hid the disease with medicine ... After getting married, the boy found it out, well the family hid it to get their daughter married." In contrast, about the support of her family, participant No. 11 said: "Thank God I have a family who have always supported me." "They never wanted to force me to do something like getting married." "They give me advice and say the decision is up to me." Participant No. 4 stated: "My paternal family believes *what on earth a disabled person has to do with getting married ... live your own common life*. Why? Maybe God willing, we will be happy too."

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the challenges related to the subject of love from the perspective of girls with physical disabilities in Isfahan. The challenges related to the inner world were divided into "personal experiences, fears, psychological defenses, and beliefs." Among the challenges of the inner world, personal experiences seem to be more important and effective, and are sometimes the root of other internal challenges such as fears, psychological defenses, and misconceptions. The challenges to the outer world also included "law, cultural issues, inappropriate suggestions, and supports."

Individual experiences cover a very wide field, but one of the main issues in this regard seems to be the autonomy. A person with a physical disability, and especially a girl, does not have the desired level of independence and self-reliance as other people. Of course, independence does not mean exercising control and influence over others, but it does mean that one is

able to follow their own plans and rules and not be a passive being dependent on others or influenced by the environment (20). When such an important principle is easily eliminated from a person's life, they may grow with the concept of dependence, and in adolescence and youth may not only lack positive psychological characteristics such as self-esteem (which is a basic characteristic in the issue of familiarity), but may not also be able to decide who to contact and how (10). The individual's inner challenges, including fears, beliefs, and defenses, may arise from experiences of independence. When internal independence is not formed in a person, harmful internal and external manifestations are formed in them. Independence and lack of reliance on others are among the most important principles in the life of people with physical disabilities (21). The internal manifestation of harm is the decrease of self-esteem and the increase of negative beliefs, and its external manifestation is lack of autonomy and social isolation. Previous studies have examined the impact of fear and lack of self-esteem on marriage and reported that people with disabilities are generally afraid to enter into a relationship; because given their previous experiences, they think that this relationship would be accompanied by stigma. They are afraid that they would not be able to satisfy their partner and get stuck in an unjust relationship (22). Additionally, such people are always worried about their fitness and the expectations of an emotional life that are created in them are derived from other factors in their lives (23).

The second category of challenges is related to the outside world. According to the participants, the theme of all the challenges in the outside world goes back to the community and those around the individual. Supports, laws, cultural issues, and the type of offers may discriminate against individuals, willingly or unwillingly. According to Goffman, society does not have a normal view of people with disabilities, and such a view provides the basis for obstacles in the way of life of people with disabilities for many years (24). It is always instilled in the person with a disability that he/she is different from others, but this difference does not mean superiority and equal rights with others, but it means having less rights. Ignoring the person and his/her abilities means taking the opportunities from the person in which who has been able to participate in different areas of society and feel useful and ensure his/her mental health (5). It is as if society simply deprives people with disabilities of the opportunity to make love and feel belonging. Girls with physical disabilities find it out that under equal conditions have the right to love

someone and to be loved by others (25). Social support plays an important role in improving the psychological condition and facilitating the marriage process of people with disabilities; however, they often feel they receive less social support (26). Entering the community can help build emotional relationships and familiarity, but based on the results of the present study, most of the problems of people with physical disabilities have been due to some kind of learned helplessness. Feeling helpless about one's abilities in emotional and romantic matters causes them to easily lose the existing emotional situations with doubt and fear.

### Limitations

Although the results of the present study provided important insights into the experiences of girls with physical disabilities, the study was conducted in a qualitative method and the limitations of the qualitative method, including the lack of generalizability of the samples to the whole community should be considered. On the other hand, the level of cooperation of the subjects and their honesty in self-disclosure and expression of their experiences is something that is somewhat beyond the will and control of the researcher and can affect the study results. Due to time constraints, the study was not performed in a combined manner and if it was combined, more information might have been obtained.

### Recommendations

Given that the study subject was the challenges of love and marriage in girls with physical disabilities, it is suggested that future quantitative and qualitative studies address these challenges in other specific groups of society, including other disabilities, addicts, and people with certain diseases. A quantitative study of the factors that can be effective in reducing the challenges related to love and marriage of girls with physical disabilities will also provide useful information.

### Conclusion

The challenges and problems in the lives of people with physical disabilities and their needs, including love, indicate the need for appropriate measures to support this vulnerable group. Analyzing the challenges and problems of people with physical disabilities in the area of love can pave the way for further research and provide the basis for executive plans. It is worth noting that the issues raised in the present study were derived from the lived experiences of the interviewees, however there is a high number of people with physical disabilities who have

experienced love and marriage, and studying the experiences of that group can also provide useful information.

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### Authors' Contribution

Mahtab Esmaeilipour: Study design and ideation, study support, executive, and scientific services, providing study equipment and samples, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, manuscript preparation, specialized evaluation of manuscripts in terms of scientific concepts, final manuscript approval to be submitted to the journal office, responsibility for maintaining the integrity of the study process from the beginning to the publication, and responding to referees' comments; Azam Naghavi: Study design and ideation, study support, executive, and scientific services, analysis and interpretation of results, manuscript preparation, specialized evaluation of manuscripts in terms of scientific concepts, final manuscript approval to be

submitted to the journal office, responsibility for maintaining the integrity of the study process from the beginning to the publication, and responding to referees' comments; Maryam Fatehizadeh: Study design and ideation, study support, executive, and scientific services, analysis and interpretation of results, manuscript preparation, specialized evaluation of manuscripts in terms of scientific concepts, final manuscript approval to be submitted to the journal office, responsibility for maintaining the integrity of the study process from the beginning to the publication, and responding to referees' comments.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest. Dr. Azam Naghavi and Dr. Maryam Fatehizadeh are working at the Department of Counseling, School of Education and Psychology, University of Isfahan. Mahtab Esmaeilipour has been an MSc student in family counseling at Isfahan University since 2019.

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