

# Women with Disabilities: A Study of Contributions of Sexual and Reproductive Rights for Theology

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**Abstract**—People with disabilities are often neglected in the exercise of their sexuality, facing several prejudices and discrimination in this area. For women with disabilities, the negligence is even major. Studies that relate sexual and reproductive rights with the experience of women with disabilities are rare, and in the field of Theology, practically nonexistent in Brazil. The aim of this work is to reflect on the relationship between women with disabilities, sexual and reproductive rights and Theology, according to a feminist perspective. The work is a literature review and involves the areas of Gender Studies, Disability Studies, Feminist Studies and Theology. In the article it will be addressed the relations between disability, sexual and reproductive rights, feminism, as well as the relations with the area of Theology, reflecting on these themes toward a fairer and more inclusive understanding of feminism, sexuality and women with disabilities. To reflect on sexual and reproductive rights of women with disabilities, it is important to reflect on religious concepts about the body, sexuality, reproduction and gender roles, because they are all connected. So, a critical analysis of traditional theological values taking into consideration the dimensions of sexuality and women with disability is important for a more liberating and inclusive understand about sexual and reproductive rights of women with disabilities. Theology should help the other areas in the understanding that all people have the right to live their lives with completeness, dignity and respect, so women with disabilities must have the opportunity of making their own choices on the fields of sexuality and reproduction.

**Keywords**—Disability, gender, sexual and reproductive rights, Theology.

## I. INTRODUCTION

WOMEN with disabilities face discrimination by their gender and disability. Both of them are sources of vulnerability and disadvantages. Women face prejudices according to gender stereotypes, and people with disabilities face prejudices because of their bodies with disability. So, these two dimensions intersect on the production of vulnerability. There are many myths, prejudices, and discrimination around being a woman and having a disability in the area of sexuality and reproduction. In this way, women with disabilities are neglected in the area of sexual and reproductive rights. These prejudices limit or even impede women with disabilities from exercising their sexuality and making decisions about their sexual and reproductive lives.

Sexual and reproductive rights are fundamental human rights for all people and are guaranteed by the Brazilian Law of Inclusion of People with Disabilities [1] and other

conventions and declarations as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. So, women with disabilities as well as any person has the right to exercise its own sexuality, it is a human right. But they are neglected in this area and it is the area that women with disabilities suffer most oppression [2]. In Theology, it is difficult to find studies about women with disabilities.

The aim of this article is to reflect on the relationship between women with disabilities, sexual and reproductive rights and Theology through a feminist perspective. The methodology used in this article is a literature review and this study is on the areas of Gender Studies, Disability Studies, Feminist Studies and Theology. In this article, we are going to discuss sexual and reproductive rights of women with disabilities, and its connection with Theology

This subject criticizes theological understandings about sexuality, reproduction, disability and the body. It is necessary to put a more inclusive view that considers other experiences such as the experiences of women with disabilities, which are different from the traditional views. This discussion is important in order to include the experience of women with disabilities on the area of Theology, where they have been neglected, especially on the areas of sexuality and reproduction. The study is about justice and non-discrimination and human rights of women with disabilities in Theology.

## II. SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

Sexual and reproductive rights are fundamental human rights to the quality of life and must be guaranteed for women with disabilities. To this end, in addition to laws and policies it is necessary to question the cultural prejudices and consider the specificities of women with disabilities so that they can experience their sexuality freely and autonomously.

Women with disabilities suffer discrimination because they are women, by gender prejudices, and because of their disability. According to gender stereotypes, women are still expected to be submissive, dependent on a husband or relative, and people with disabilities face prejudices such as being dependent and being unable to govern their lives, especially in their sexual and reproductive lives. So, when these two dimensions are united, being a woman and having a disability, these prejudices become more complex.

So, they face sexism and disablism (a term that denounces the effects of the ideology of body normality) [3]-[5]. Among some prejudices and stereotypes around disability misconceptions about incapacity and dependence, where

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people with disabilities cannot make decisions and govern their lives alone, and these ideas are also associated with women, mistakenly, according to gender roles, where women are dependent, submissive, and cannot make decisions on their own either. Therefore, gender issues can intensify the images formed related to disability, reinforcing the little cultural expectation of women with disabilities, especially in their sexuality, where they have seen as asexual beings [6].

Women are, in general, taught to be submissive, and dependents, whereas men, are taught to be aggressive and autonomous. Power in general and power on decision-making has not been taught or encouraged for women, according to gender roles [7]. Gender roles are oppressive and they limit the liberty of women and men. Feminist studies use the category of gender as a category of analysis, that aims to deconstruct the gender stereotyped representations and other domination systems. Feminist Movements emerged to claim rights that women did not have back then and they are still fighting for them [8].

So, when the dimensions of gender and disability are connected, that generates many prejudices and discrimination. Disability influences on gender roles of women (to be in a relationship, have children, and take care of the house and of the children). It is not expected that women with disabilities exercise sexuality and have children. They are devalued by the belief that they cannot fulfill the expected gender roles and are not encouraged to do that, and if they want to leave prejudices aside and exercise sexuality or have children, they are discriminated. In general, there is no liberty to women with disabilities. There are just little expectations and, discrimination. They should be valued regardless of their choice of having or not having children and should be encouraged to have a healthy sexuality as everyone should [9, p.37-52].

Sexual and reproductive rights are considered human rights in accordance with the United Nations and the World Association for Sexual Health and are essential to freedom, equality and dignity of all people [10]-[11].

The sexuality of people with disabilities has been and is still made invisible. This is most often regarding issues of reproduction. Studies on sexuality have ignored the issues of sexuality and the rights of people with disabilities, just as disability studies, and mainly, do not consider women with disabilities. Although sexuality is the area of the most important difficulties that people with disabilities have to deal with, Disability Studies fail to address questions about sexuality and love relationships [12, p.4-6].

The greatest difficulties in the area of sexuality and reproduction of women with disabilities are in certain prejudices and discrimination. The prejudice that women with disabilities may not have a sexual life and children is common, and many women believe that they cannot have children even when they want to and have conditions to [13].

The violence suffered in this area is also frequent. Women with disabilities are prevented from accessing their rights, especially sexual and reproductive rights. Their bodies are controlled, they are often being forced to sterilization,

abortion, denial of custody or suffer sexual abuse [9, p.42-48], [14], [15]. "It is estimated that women with disabilities are at three times more risk of being raped than women without disabilities" [16, p.39].

It is expected of women higher standards regarding the aesthetics of the body. In the 21st century, the dictatorship of beauty established a slim, healthy and well-toned body, and media plays a vital role in the construction of this process [17]. To meet social expectations of gender, men seek strong bodies, and women, beauty within the standards set by society, becoming hostages of these models. Thus, having a disability has an impact on what is expected of the bodies of women in relation to the corporonormativity (hegemonic patterns of body functioning).

Feminist Studies criticize ideals related to the image of the body (established patterns of overvaluation of the body as an object - fashion, makeup, ...) in order to promote a more realistic and positive image of the body, and reduce its alienation, it focus on the body experience and competence rather than appearance. These principles are important both for women with and without disabilities. In order to reduce the high standards of a female aesthetics and what understood as more acceptable bodies. Women have to feel good about their own body in spite of the impairments [18].

There are, according to what has been presented thus far, many barriers to the development of the sexuality of women with disabilities. Physical barriers (architectural ones which interfere on mobility), programmatic (lack of public policies and legislation on women's sexual and reproductive rights, especially in the area of health), but especially attitudinal barriers such as prejudices, discriminations and stereotypes, that cause negative feelings about sexuality in people with disabilities, making difficult the developing of their sexual identity and sexual life. Especially for women, they are discouraged to exercise sexuality and reproduction if they want it. This discouragement comes from doctors, family, and in a considerable way from a lack of information about sexuality, which results in low self-esteem and confidence on one's sexuality [12, p.22-46].

In the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities is explicit the right of marriage and the right to form a family through free consent of the persons that are involved and the right to decide about having children, the number and spacing between them, and the right to access information and education on this area, besides the means necessary for these rights be achieved [19].

However, sexual and reproductive rights, despite being recognized as human rights, are not guaranteed, so the discussion about sexual and reproductive rights is fundamental to its consolidation. Prejudices, discrimination and violence are still frequent and maintained by conservative cultural and religious understandings, rooted in moralistic and patriarchal views, depriving the rights, especially of women and people with disabilities.

Thus, sexual and reproductive rights are neglected for women with disabilities, including rights relating to equality, non-discrimination, freedom and nonviolence. The right to

education and accessible information is also essential for women with disabilities so that they could benefit from their rights, assisting in decision making, and in the prevention of coercion or violence and increasing self-confidence [20]. About rights regarding sexual and reproductive health, women with disabilities represent one of the most marginalized populations [21].

The relationship between gender, sexuality, reproduction and disability are issues that generate great debate and there is little academic production, just as it is absent from discussions in health services or legislation. Sexual and reproductive rights of women with disabilities is a fundamental issue for the quality of life, citizenship and equality for women with disabilities. The accomplishment of these rights is a matter of respect for human dignity. Theology is an influential area on issues of sexual and reproductive rights that can assist on thinking about these issues and about the prejudices related to the sexuality of women with disabilities.

### III. THEOLOGY AND SEXUAL RIGHTS AND REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

Disability challenges many conceptions of embodiment, sexuality, reproduction on Theology and presents contributions to the area. But, in the area of Theology it is difficult to find studies about disability and sexuality, and, moreover, women with disabilities are hardly made visible. The discussion of sexual and reproductive rights of women with disabilities should instigate theologies to affirm the dignity and humanity of women with disabilities as people who have the right to live their lives with completeness, including the area of sexuality, without discrimination or violence by gender or disability.

Apart from all myths and prejudices about women and disability, theology also has ideas that often suppress the body and sexuality. Feminist theologies and disability theologies have questioned these strict standards in the context of gender and sexuality and reductionist understandings of the body and sexuality. They affirmed the importance of sexuality, noting that all bodies are worthy.

One of the Church's most notable advances in the twentieth century has been the acceptance sexuality as an important part of human personality. Feminist and other theologies that work on the theme of sexuality claim that sexuality is one of the most important and precious elements of maturity. Therefore, thinking of people with disabilities as infantile and asexual, and not encouraging them to exercise their sexuality is a serious issue [22, p.323;333]. Like all people, people with disabilities are blessed as sexual people who desire intimacy and completeness, and expect the Churches to support their sexual experiences [23, p.283;287].

The right of having children is an important choice, as well. Feminist Theology affirms that having children is a choice for any women that must be respected. However, women with disabilities fight for the right to have children whenever they want to and unfortunately, they face a lot of violence in this area.

Religious moral concepts should help demystify negative

ideas about sexuality, approach sexuality more positively and broadly, so that each person feels encouraged to find sexual pleasure in the most diverse ways of experiencing their sexuality. Thus, it is fundamental that the churches accept other ways of exercising sexuality other than penetration. If some practices are seen as sinful or improper, then some people with physical disabilities will be deprived of having sexual experiences [24, p.212-214].

Regarding women with disabilities, Feminist Theologies and Theologies on Disability themselves make invisible women with disabilities and in the issues related to sexuality and reproduction, they do not consider bodies with disabilities. According to Elizabeth Stuart, Church has not striven to accommodate issues related to the sexuality of women with disabilities [22, p.330].

Feminist theologies and theologies that deal with corporeality and disability reflect on the body experiences as a revelation from God, but rarely mention diversity and tend to assume that the healthy body is normative, not mentioning women with disabilities. Thus, women with disabilities are not represented in theology [25], [26, p.53-57].

Deborah Freeman argues that the neglect of disabled women in the movements of people with disabilities and the theologies about disability is not coincidental. When the Feminist movement struggles for the celebration and appreciation of the female body as a divine place, in the midst of so much dispute with patriarchy and the supremacy of the male bodies, the bodies of women with disabilities may not be seen (erroneously) as a good advertisement for the divine. As such, it is easier to exclude the realities of the bodies of women with disabilities, as the image of a strong and non-disabled body is closer to the ideal of the "normative body", i.e. male body, and can be mobilized in the struggle. [27].

This idea goes along with notion that humanity is made in the image of God and all people have to be "perfect", which generated a misunderstanding that only non-disabled bodies are created in the image of God, and created a sense of the ideal of the "perfect body, normative body" [28, p.15].

In Genesis account on God's creation, there is not the word "perfect", but "good" (Gn 1.10). Iára Müller stresses the importance of a theology that speaks of the bodies as they are, without trying to let them "be perfect" to fit the image of God [29]. Thus, every person is worthy and whole and each body, regardless of their condition and their differences is created in the image and likeness of God [28, p.16-20].

So, to confirm the dignity of people, sexual and reproductive rights of women with disabilities should be recognized. Depriving women with disabilities of their sexuality is to deprive them of giving and receiving love, touch, affection, companionship. It is depriving them of living their life with completeness, strongly affecting their self-esteem. It dehumanizes women with disabilities, which is an affront to the justice of God. Churches can serve as models of inclusion and access for women with disabilities and take the lead in the discussion of these issues [22], [23], [26, p.68].

Nancy Eisland proposes an image of God with disabilities, contrary to the image of God as omnipotent and self-sufficient

[30]. To think about a God with disabilities is to approach the body with disabilities with God [22, p.322]. The appreciation, recognition and inclusion of bodies of women with disabilities as bearers of God's image in its entirety helps to remember the flow of all bodies, different bodies, bodies that must be respected as humans, including all their rights. This is what is consistent with the righteousness of God [22, p.329]. Thinking of God as a disabled God allows to reaffirm the sexuality of women with disabilities.

James Nelson presents a key concept for us to understand incarnation and our relationship with God, not only because God became incarnated in Jesus, but because God continues to incarnate in every person. We find God in and through every aspect of human nature, including our sexuality and other aspects of the body [10]; [31]. Thinking of the incarnation of God with disabilities reinforces the idea that women with disabilities, as well as anyone, are created in the image of God and have the right to exercise their sexuality.

The authors Elizabeth Stuart [22] and Deborah Creamer [32] offer six important issues to think about theology, sexuality and disability, as 1. to think of the body as something good while it can be a source of limitations, suffering, and even pain, in some cases. 2. the fact that people with disabilities are seen as asexual. 3. there are ethical issues to think about the sexuality of people with disabilities that present disagreement as surrogacy, pornography and to include personal assistants or carers in the fulfilment of sexual needs. 4. the fact that all people could have a disability, so, it is a relevant category for all people. 5. the person with disability is a person with its limitations and possibilities. 6. disability is a significant issue of identity, so, in order to be included, their specificities must be considered.

The bodies of women with disabilities are beyond the standard of "normative bodies" and should be seen as integral bodies, questioning the body's aesthetic standards. The theme of incarnation is fundamental to think about disability and sexuality in a positive way, as a way of revelation of God. However, to reflect on the goodness of the body and the importance of sexuality for women with disabilities it is necessary to consider their different experiences with their bodies, their limitations, and possibilities.

Therefore, discussing about sexual and reproductive rights of women with disabilities is a challenge for theology. It is necessary to reflect on traditional views on the body, understand the body and sexuality in a more positive and broader form, pay attention to the prejudices that women with disabilities face in these areas. By doing so, we will be truly inclusive in the discussions on sexual and reproductive rights and theology, so that their dignity is respected and their rights guaranteed.

It is necessary to consider the specificities of women with disabilities in the areas of sexual and reproductive rights. To think about women with disabilities as asexual is dehumanize them, is a disrespect to their rights. Therefore, it is essential to include the perspectives of women with disabilities in Theology about sexuality.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The sexual and reproductive rights of women with disabilities are often overlooked by the lack of cultural expectations regarding sexuality and reproduction of women with disabilities and by the stereotypes and discrimination that hinder the guarantee of their rights. These rights are denied for women with disabilities.

Religions and theology hardly make visible women with disabilities and hardly mention issues related to sexuality and reproduction. Therefore, Theology is challenged to reflect on these issues and question to what extent the human rights are guaranteed and to promote a new way of thinking about the body, sexuality, reproduction, gender, and disability. There are important issues that can be rethought through a critical view including women with disabilities, sexual and reproductive rights and Theology, as: incarnation, sexual pleasure, sexuality of women and having children as a right, the relation between sex and procreation, the value of the body, dignity of the body of women with disabilities, diversity of the bodies, expansion of ways to exercise sexuality and reproduction, the body as image of God and, violence to women with disabilities.

Thus, from a feminist and disability analysis of sexual and reproductive rights of women with disabilities, many traditional theological values are questioned, and reflections and contributions are offered.

Feminism and disability in Theology are ways of trying to expand Theology and include all people. Theology should be an example and show that all people have the right to live their lives with completeness, dignity, and respect. The insights of sexual and reproductive rights in religion should be deepened by making it possible that women with disabilities can live their sexuality and make reproductive decisions without guilt, fear, shame or discrimination.

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