

Sense



Mumbai girl Nidhi Goyal was 15 when her parents received an unexpected suggestion, that of hiding her disability for 3 years and getting her married as soon as she turned 18. It had got something to do with a condition Nidhi was diagnosed with, retinitis pigmentosa (RP), a disorder that affects the retina's ability to respond to light, rendering one blind. Today, as one of the foremost trainers, advocates and activists in disability, she is thankful to her parents for not only politely refusing the bizarre offer, but also shielding her from such goings-on.

She lost all her functional vision in three years after this, and it would be wrong to say that Nidhi wasn't shattered. "It wasn't a happy moment surely! I didn't know initially how to cope with it, but I was fortunate to have only an example of how to live with RP in my home, and a truly successful example at that!" Nidhi admits, mentioning elder brother Ashish who didn't let the same impairment affect his goals of study at Wharton Business School and become the world's first blind trader. "The knee-jerk reaction of 'my life is over' that others have with an acquired disability, was never for me. My parents were caring and enabling rather than protective, so we, my disabled and nondisabled sibling and I, got a kick on our hinds and were sent out (in the world) to do what needed to be done," she explains.

What Nidhi did not get a kick in was, writing for magazines and portals, for it did not create direct impact about issues she was passionate about – disability issues. Thankfully, her paths merged with

When Nidhi Goyal began working on disability and gender issues, she was labelled a pseudo activist and faced resistance from many other disability rights groups. It has not deterred her from moving the gears of change



Sensuality

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Point of View, a Mumbai-based non-profit which focused on amplifying women's voices with regard to sexuality and gender issues. "I'm a programme director at POV," she says, adding, "much of what we do involves reaching out to women with disabilities in need of awareness – online and offline!"

Nidhi's role at POV is perhaps just one-third of what she does these days, claiming no weekdays are alike. Her keenness to discuss sexual issues in the public domain and her tryst with disability herself made her choose the rarely focused intersection – gender, sexuality and disability.

'How could a woman who's visually challenged be bothered about others' sexual lives?' 'Why focus on these awkward subjects when PWDs (persons with disabilities) in India seek basic needs such as access and employment?' – These were the stumbling blocks Nidhi faced while starting off, and still does. Society's age-old myth that 'disabled persons are de-sexualized beings, having little or no sex drive' had to be broken, hammer by hammer to a mountain. "Ironically, however, much resistance came from other PWDs, who'd be irked particularly seeing a woman take up these issues. Many did not and still do not understand that we are only trying to empower women who have been victims of ignorance, stigma and misinformation," Nidhi feels.

Looking inward, she is thankful for her parents' ways but at the same time, fears for all those thousands in India whose parents treat PWDs with undue sympathy, discrimination and ignorance. Labelled as a pseudo activist initially, Nidhi has gone on to create small and big impacts in

many fields, and she duly credits her siblings Dr Neha and Ashish. "I got motivated by them at the right moments, not only due to their ability or disability, but as inspiring successful and extremely positive older siblings!" she says.

Now knee-deep in the areas of training, advocacy and activism, Nidhi works on disability and gender rights issues for organisations across the world. She designs workshops, makes training modules that helps disability rights activists abroad function better and, of course, tweets about this all. "Social media helps us create a lot of awareness among non-disabled people. It cuts boundaries too – we've had our online resource www.sexualityanddisability.org sought by trainers from Africa to Australia," she informs. After all, gender and disability is such an intersection, it finds resonance across the world and people like Nidhi who're committed to the causes are very few.

So on one day, Nidhi would be on a conference call to Brazil, strategising inclusion of disabled women in the mainstream women's movement, and on the other, she would hold a workshop in a Nagpur college, talking menstruation and hygiene but 'slipping in' talking points on sexuality. The next, she would be busy lobbying with the government on the pending Rights of Persons with Disabilities Bill. No time to stand and stare!

Nidhi is positive that year-by-year, the organisations she's with are bringing one big change that impacts many Indians. When we do see a society which doesn't suggest 'marrying off' a girl with disability, we'd have her to thank.

THIS-ABILITY IS AN ADVOCACY INITIATIVE OF TRINAYANI, AN NGO WORKING WITH A MISSION TO RESPECT, EMPOWER AND INCLUDE PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES. FOUNDED BY RITIKA SAHNI, TRINAYANI WORKS TOWARDS CREATING MASS AWARENESS ABOUT DISABILITY ISSUES, HOPING TO ALTER PERSPECTIVES OF NON DISABLED PERSONS ON THE STRENGTHS, PROBLEMS AND DISCRIMINATION FACED BY PERSONS WITH DISABILITY. WWW.TRINAYANI.ORG