

Take a Look at This Heart:
Disability, Sexuality and Representation

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PREFACE

The sexuality of individuals with disabilities is a complex and often marginalized aspect of human identity. Historically, societal paradigms have pathologized or desexualized disabled bodies, perpetuating erroneous assumptions of asexuality or diminished erotic agency. However, disability does not negate desire, intimacy, or sexual autonomy. Rather, it necessitates a reconceptualization of normative frameworks, emphasizing bodily diversity, inclusivity and the dismantling of ableist ideologies that constrain authentic sexual expression. Ben Duffy's *Take a Look at This Heart* is a powerful documentary that gives people with disabilities a voice in talking about love and sexuality. It breaks common stereotypes that ignore or downplay their romantic and sexual lives, offering instead raw, emotional, and honest narratives of connection and desire.

This project offers a compassionate and critical engagement with the representation of disability through the lens of *Take a Look at This Heart* (2018). It is structured into four chapters. The first chapter, "Introduction", reflects on how history and culture have shaped and often limited the way society views disabled sexuality. The second chapter, "Disabled Sexuality: An Overview", provides a basic look into different theories and ideas that have tried to explain or define the sexual experiences of people with disabilities. The third chapter, "Breaking Barriers: Films, Disability, and Shaping Social Change", investigates how cinematic narratives, particularly documentaries like *Take a Look at This Heart*, challenge normative assumptions and advocate for social awareness. Finally, the "Conclusion" synthesizes the key insights from the study, underscoring the importance of centering disabled voices in redefining sexuality, agency, and inclusion.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

For a long time, sexual education simply was not seen as necessary—or even relevant—for people with disabilities. Harmful stereotypes and a lot of misinformation played a big role in keeping this crucial information out of reach. While there has been important progress thanks to passionate advocates and educators, many people with disabilities still don't have the same access to sexual education and support that other often take for granted. Talking about disability and sexuality can be complex. For too long, it has been a subject surrounded by stigma, silence, and misunderstanding. Despite the wide range of human experiences, people with disabilities have often been left out of conversations about sex, intimacy, and relationships. That exclusion has made it harder for them to find the understanding, guidance, and support they deserve. Much of this comes down to ableism—deeply ingrained beliefs that disabled bodies are somehow less worthy or capable. These attitudes can erase the desires and needs of disabled people entirely. One of the most damaging assumptions is that disabled people are asexual or do not have sexual agency. Thankfully, many in the disability community have been speaking out, challenging these outdated ideas, and demanding space in conversations about sexuality and relationships.

Disabled people, like anyone else, have a wide range of experiences when it comes to sexuality. Their identities, desires, and ways of expressing intimacy are just as diverse as those of non-disabled people. Some may identify as heterosexual, LGBTQ+, or somewhere in between. They can experience pleasure, connection, and love in many ways—and they may also face unique challenges in navigating their

sexual lives. Unfortunately, many of the systems meant to support people—like sex education, healthcare, and accessible social spaces often fall short for disabled individuals. This lack of access can leave people feeling isolated or unsupported. But the disability community has been pushing back, breaking down barriers and advocating for more inclusive, informed, and respectful conversations around sexuality. When we take the time to understand the real, lived experiences of disabled people and their relationships with identity, intimacy, and self-expression, we begin to see how interconnected all these things are. That understanding is key to creating a world where everyone regardless of ability feels seen, valued, and empowered to lead a full and authentic life. Respecting the full range of human experiences is not just important it is essential for building a more inclusive and compassionate society.

Disabled people experience sexuality in beautifully diverse ways, with a wide spectrum of desires, identities, and forms of self-expression. Just like anyone else, they might identify as straight, LGBTQ+, or anywhere along that fluid spectrum. They can feel joy, pleasure, love, and deep emotional connection in many unique and meaningful ways and at times, they may also face distinct challenges as they explore and express their sexuality. One of the biggest hurdles is the lack of inclusive sex education, accessible healthcare, and welcoming social spaces. These gaps often leave disabled individuals without the tools, support, or safe environments they deserve. Still, the disability community has been bold and resilient, actively pushing back against these barriers and paving the way for more understanding, visibility, and acceptance. By opening our minds to the rich, layered experiences of disabled people when it comes to sex, identity, and intimacy, we gain a deeper appreciation for how deeply connected these aspects are to overall well-being. Embracing this diversity helps us move toward

a world that celebrates all bodies, all identities, and all ways of loving. True empowerment comes when everyone is seen, heard, and valued no exceptions.

This project explores the diverse sexual identities and expectations of people with disabilities through the lens of the documentary *‘Take a Look at This Heart’*, directed by Ben Duffy. Ben, a 28-year-old filmmaker from New York, has already created eight documentaries, each shaped by his passion for storytelling and human connection. His journey began early at just 13 years old, Ben discovered a camera, an editing program, and a skateboard, all in the same year. That combination sparked a creative spark that never faded. He later enrolled at the School of Visual Arts in NYC but left after his freshman year to chase a bigger dream: making his first full-length documentary, *Behind the Story: We Are Skateboarders*. This film went on to become the second most-watched feature-length skateboarding documentary on YouTube, setting the stage for his future in filmmaking.

Ben Duffy is an accomplished filmmaker known for creating award-winning films and television content for both Canadian and American audiences. His body of work highlights a deep commitment to telling powerful, human-centred stories particularly those that give voice to underrepresented communities. Some of Duffy’s most notable works include *Tin Soldiers* (2015), a compelling documentary that showcases adaptive sports and the resilience of athletes with disabilities. In *Heart Child* (2013), he captures the emotional journey of a mother raising her autistic son, and how skateboarding becomes a powerful tool for connection and healing. His earlier film, *Behind the Story: We Are Skateboarders* (2012), explores the spirit and controversy surrounding the skateboarding culture, offering an intimate look into its raw, unfiltered essence. In 2019, Duffy released what is considered one of his most acclaimed works, *MEGALODEMOCRAT: The Public Art of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer*. This documentary

dives into the large-scale interactive public art installations of Lozano-Hemmer, a celebrated artist whose work challenges political and social boundaries. The film earned the award for Best Canadian Film at the Montreal International Festival on Art, further cementing Duffy's reputation as a thoughtful and impactful storyteller. In addition to directing documentaries, Ben Duffy has also made his mark in the mainstream film industry as a film editor and visual effects supervisor. He has contributed to several high-profile Hollywood productions, including *The Marvels* (2023), *The Crow* (2024), *Fast & Furious: Hobbs and Shaw* (2019), *47 Meters Down* (2019), *Summerland* (2020), and *Greed* (2019). His behind-the-scenes work on these major films reflects both his technical expertise and his ability to bring creative visions to life on screen.

Take a Look at This Heart is a powerful 2018 documentary directed by Ben Duffy that dives into a topic often left in the shadows: love and romantic relationships within the disabled community. Through the voices of 17 individuals—some living with disabilities and others who love and support them—the film explores what it really means to connect, to be vulnerable, and to be seen. Some share stories of deep, unconditional love, while others open up about the loneliness and challenges they face in a world that too often overlooks them. With honesty and warmth, the documentary challenges deeply rooted stereotypes about disability and intimacy. It highlights not just romantic love, but also self-love, confidence, and the human need for connection. These personal stories remind us that everyone deserves to experience love, desire, and belonging—regardless of ability. The film premiered on September 10, 2018, at the SVA Theatre in New York during the School of Visual Arts Alumni Film & Animation Festival, followed by an engaging Q&A with Ben Duffy and some of the individuals featured in the film. Since then, it has been screened at select venues across the U.S. and is available for purchase on iTunes. Featuring a diverse and inspiring cast including

quadriplegic rock climber Stephen Wampler, a one-legged skateboarder, and couple Angela Rockwood and Steven Profeta—the documentary invites viewers into real, intimate conversations about love, sexuality, and identity. *Take a Look at This Heart* is not just a film—it's an invitation to rethink what we believe about love, and to see the beauty and strength in all kinds of relationships.

The film challenges common societal misconceptions about disability and intimacy by shining a light on the emotional and physical dimensions of relationships involving people with disabilities. It captures the rich diversity of human experience and emphasizes that love, connection, and meaningful relationships are essential parts of life for everyone regardless of ability. By sharing deeply personal stories, the documentary invites viewers to reflect on their own beliefs about love, vulnerability, and what it truly means to connect with others. At its core, *Take a Look at This Heart* is a moving and insightful exploration of love, relationships, and disability. It gives a voice to people who are often overlooked or misrepresented in conversations about intimacy and self-worth. The film also highlights how women with disabilities often face deeper social judgment experiencing what is known as double discrimination, both as women and as people with disabilities. Other studies support this, showing that women with disabilities are sometimes denied the right to be seen as partners, mothers, or caregivers because of harmful assumptions that label them as dependent or incapable. The documentary also underscores the importance of emotional connection for people with disabilities. Forming strong bonds and having the freedom to express love, experience intimacy, and be seen as whole individuals are crucial to their sense of value and personal agency. Ultimately, the film advocates for a world where everyone regardless of ability can love, be loved, and live their truth with dignity and joy.

Conversations about sexuality can be incredibly challenging—especially when someone hasn't first had the opportunity to build meaningful, trusting relationships. These interpersonal bonds often begin in shared social spaces, which are essential for personal growth and emotional connection. That's why it's so important for health and wellness programs to create inclusive environments where people with disabilities can develop these social and relational skills. Such spaces not only support emotional well-being but also help individuals feel more connected and empowered within their communities. This perspective aligns with broader research that emphasizes the need to cultivate values like acceptance, empathy, and mutual respect. When society embraces these principles, it helps dismantle harmful stereotypes and reduces the social isolation that people with disabilities often face. Ultimately, fostering connection and inclusion aren't just beneficial—it's essential for creating a society where everyone is seen, heard, and valued for who they are.

When it comes to eroticism and intimacy, the desire for a satisfying and fulfilling sex life is just as real for people with disabilities as it is for anyone else. Yet, as many experts have pointed out, individuals with disabilities are often unfairly labelled as “asexual” or assumed to lack the same emotional and physical needs as those without disabilities. This misconception is not only inaccurate—it is deeply harmful. For example, research has shown that women with spinal cord injuries—despite changes in physical sensation—do not necessarily experience sexual dysfunction. Many are fully capable of enjoying active and fulfilling sexual lives, especially when they have access to proper information, education, and early rehabilitation support. These findings highlight the importance of recognizing sexual well-being as a basic human right and ensuring that everyone, regardless of ability, is empowered to explore and enjoy their sexuality with confidence and dignity.

When it comes to sexual experiences, there are some interesting differences between men and women with disabilities. Many men tend to focus mainly on intercourse as the core of sexual activity, often overlooking other ways to express intimacy and pleasure. This narrow view can lead to feelings of frustration or loss, especially for those who have reduced or no sensitivity in their genital areas. On the other hand, women often have a broader, more holistic approach to sexuality, which can bring them greater satisfaction and well-being. These patterns align with what many researchers have found: sexuality is often reduced to just physical acts, ignoring the fact that lovemaking is a unique, creative experience that couples shape together, according to their own desires and boundaries. Pleasure is something every person can experience, regardless of physical limitations, and it goes far beyond just genital sensations. Masturbation is an important part of exploring one's sexuality, promoting self-awareness and independence.

In this study, however, opinions varied—while some people viewed it as natural and healthy, others saw it as harmful or sinful. Similar divides appeared around pornography: some found it stimulating or even helpful for their sexual expression, while others rejected it as uncomfortable or inappropriate. These differences often reflect the strong influence of religion and cultural beliefs, which can place negative pressure on how sexuality is experienced. Comprehensive sex education has the power to challenge these restrictive views and open the door to healthier attitudes. The study also highlighted gaps in scientific sex education delivered by professionals trained to address the unique needs of people with disabilities. There's a clear need to support reproductive rights, including the right to choose parenthood freely. This choice involves serious responsibility and commitment between partners, but societal prejudices often create barriers. For example, women with disabilities are frequently

viewed as unsuitable for motherhood because of assumptions about their need for care and a lack of support from family or community.

These findings echo reports from many authors who emphasize the need for social, economic, and healthcare support programs to uphold the rights of people with disabilities to become parents—a responsibility that existing systems in countries like Peru often fail to meet. When it comes to sexuality, people with disabilities have diverse experiences. Some approach their sexuality openly and without fear, while others withdraw from intimate encounters due to not just physical challenges but also psychological and social barriers such as pain, depression, low self-esteem, discrimination, stigma, and exclusion. These challenges make sexuality for people with disabilities a complex and often misunderstood area of life. This situation is not unique to one country. In places like India, people with disabilities face deep-rooted cultural biases that devalue their abilities and participation in society. Historically, disabled individuals have been stigmatized and marginalized worldwide, often seen as medical anomalies or burdens rather than fully capable human beings deserving of respect and inclusion.

In India, disability is often seen as either a “lack” or simply something different from the norm. Few people recognize that disability, much like gender or race, is shaped just as much by society as by individual circumstances. Because Indian culture—and really, cultures worldwide—tends to fear and misunderstand any kind of difference, whether it’s caste, class, gender, race, or disability, people with impairments often find themselves labelled with terms like “disabled,” “handicapped,” “crippled,” “differently-abled,” or “special” (Ghai 84). These labels can isolate them, pushing them to the margins of society and making disability feel like a personal struggle or tragedy that must be faced alone. Even those who have studied in inclusive environments can’t

escape the harsh, often intolerant attitudes toward disability—and especially toward the sexuality of people with disabilities—that still exist in Indian society.

At the same time, people with disabilities are often viewed through a spiritual lens, seen as children of God, but this perspective can unfortunately lead to their rights being overlooked—especially when it comes to sexuality and access to opportunities. The good news is that this is beginning to change. More voices in the disability rights movement—and in conversations about sexuality—are speaking up about the unique challenges faced by people with disabilities. This is a relatively new but very important shift, because for many years, the topic of sexuality and disability was simply not discussed. For example, in 2011, Malini Chib, a disability rights activist and author with cerebral palsy, wrote about this silence. She pointed out how the words “sex” and “disability” rarely come together in conversation, and how people often avoid the topic out of fear of causing offense. Despite being raised in a progressive, Westernized family, Malini said she rarely talked about sex openly. She questioned why sexuality is so frightening to discuss when it comes to disabled people—and her words continue to challenge us to break that silence.

Over the past 50 years, there has been significant progress worldwide in disability rights, visibility, and access to opportunities. Disabled activists and their allies have done incredible work advocating for equality and inclusion. Yet, even in Western countries—where access and facilities tend to be more advanced—sexuality remains a difficult and often taboo topic for people with disabilities. In India, the barriers around sexual relationships for disabled individuals are even greater. Many find it easier to suppress or deny their desires rather than face judgment. For disabled women especially, expressing their sexuality or seeking a partner can lead to harsh labels like “crude” or “sex-obsessed.” Society often reacts with shock or disapproval at the very

idea, making it risky for them to be open about their feelings. Disabled men, on the other hand, face less discrimination in this area and often have more opportunities to form relationships with able-bodied partners. This may be partly because, in many heterosexual relationships, women are expected to take on caregiving roles—often praised as “nurturers” or “mothers”—which shapes societal expectations differently for men and women. These experiences echo what disability rights activist Malini Chib has shared from her own life (Chib 114) and they were also reflected in a 2007 study by Renu Addlakha. Her research, based on case studies of college students in Delhi, explored how young people with disabilities think about their bodies, sexuality, and marriage. The study highlighted the challenges disabled individuals face in finding partners, revealing that women with disabilities were generally more open to marrying men with disabilities, while many men with disabilities preferred partners without disabilities.

Even many organizations that work with people with disabilities have often overlooked the important topic of sexuality. For example, the Women’s Health Training Research and Advocacy Cell (WOHTRAC) in Vadodara, Gujarat, has been advocating since 1992 for a broader, more holistic approach to women’s health. Through their years of work, especially in reproductive health, they realized that disabled women were largely absent from mainstream conversations about women’s health. To address this gap, WOHTRAC made disability and gender a key focus in their programs and capacity-building efforts. In 2004, they organized a one-day consultative meeting, moderated by Janet Price, to develop a workshop on Gender and Disability. During this event, a needs assessment was carried out among disability-focused organizations in Vadodara. The results were telling: sexuality ranked lowest among the twelve major concerns identified by people with disabilities. Other pressing issues

included treating people with disabilities as a “special group,” rehabilitation strategies, and understanding the causes and needs related to different disabilities. Sexuality, however, was still not a priority. In her research, Anita Ghai (2018) shares a story that closely mirrors some of the documentary’s characters. Kiran, a female-to-male transgender person and wheelchair user from the Lambani tribal community in Warangal, South India, reveals how overlapping challenges shaped his life. Childhood polio caused paralysis in his lower limbs, isolating him from school and social life for many years. On top of that, his tribal background added another layer of complexity. Kiran recalls the strong cultural bias against girls in his community and how his parents, fearing for his safety as a girl with a disability, raised him as a boy dressing him in short pants and cutting his hair short. It was only after a teacher intervened and convinced his parents that he was able to attend school for nine years. When reflecting on his struggles with gender identity and sexuality, Kiran remembers feeling isolated, without friends or independence, and facing criticism for his choice of clothing. He completed his schooling at 18 and moved to a hostel 40 kilometres away for further education—an all-girls hostel where he still felt like a boy and struggled to connect. There, he met another young person with a disability, and together they began advocating for the rights of disabled students. Around this time, Kiran fell in love and had a temple marriage, despite facing harsh opposition. The support of a crisis team from an NGO focused on sexuality and rights became a turning point, helping him understand and embrace his own gender and sexuality. Kiran’s journey highlights that people with disabilities have sexual desires and identities just like anyone else. They have the right to explore their sexuality, feel comfortable with their bodies, and seek pleasure on their own terms. But to do this, they need access to information, education, and support that empower them to make informed decisions about their sexual lives with confidence and

safety. At the same time, many people with disabilities face unique challenges. Privacy can be scarce, especially when care providers do not acknowledge their sexual needs or allow space for private moments like masturbation. Visible disabilities can affect body image and self-esteem, making it harder to feel attractive or connect intimately with a partner. Physical issues such as muscle weakness, spasms, or chronic pain might also limit sexual activity, but many find creative ways to experience closeness and pleasure through touch, caressing, and other forms of physical intimacy. Sadly, opportunities to explore sexuality with partners are often limited, and lack of privacy remains a constant barrier. Recognizing and addressing these challenges is crucial to supporting the full, joyful sexual lives of people with disabilities.

Social media often plays a role in reinforcing harmful stereotypes about the sexuality of disabled people, sometimes excluding, or ignoring their experiences altogether. Disabled individuals are frequently marginalized or erased from conversations about sex, relationships, and intimacy online, which wrongly suggests that they are asexual or undesirable. This kind of ableism and misinformation can deepen the stigma they face and impact their self-esteem, mental health, and access to supportive resources. However, by uplifting disabled voices and increasing their visibility on these platforms, we can help build a more inclusive online space—one that respects and celebrates the full diversity of human experiences. The core message of the documentary is clear: disabled people absolutely have sexuality. They experience a wide spectrum of desires, needs, and expressions, just like anyone else. Their sexuality isn't defined by their disability, and they deserve the same rights to intimacy, relationships, and sexual fulfilment as non-disabled people. Recognizing and honouring their sexuality is key to supporting their autonomy, dignity, and overall well-being. It is essential to challenge the common misconceptions and stereotypes around disability

and sexuality, and to ensure that accessible, inclusive resources are available to meet their unique needs. By doing this, we can create a more accepting and understanding society that truly values every individual's experience.

CHAPTER TWO

SEXUALITY OF THE DISABLED: AN OVERVIEW

Disability is experienced differently depending on where a person lives and the culture, they're part of. While scientific definitions often frame disability as a physical or mental limitation, it's much more than that. Traditionally, disability has been seen as something purely physical—something visible. But in reality, its true impact is often felt in how it affects a person's mental and social well-being. As Tobin Siebers puts it, "Disability has been a medical matter for as long as human beings have sought to escape the stigma of death, disease, and injury" 2008 (1) The documentary *Take a Look at This Heart* challenges the common misconception that people with disabilities are asexual or unproductive. It offers an honest and intimate look into the lives of people with disabilities, highlighting not just their challenges, but also their desires—especially around love and sexuality—and how society's expectations can limit their ability to express themselves fully.

On September 10, 2018, the documentary *Take a Look at This Heart* premiered at the SVA Theatre in New York City. Since then, it has been shown at select screenings across the U.S., sparking important conversations wherever it goes. Directed by Ben Duffy, the film boldly confronts a long-standing and harmful myth: that people with disabilities don't have sexual desires or relationships. Through deeply personal and heartfelt stories, the documentary explores this often-ignored subject, offering both emotional insight and educational value. At its core, the film delivers a powerful message—that sexual fulfillment is a human right, and every relationship should define intimacy on its own terms. *Take a Look at This Heart* invites viewers into the lives of

people with disabilities as they speak openly about love, sex, connection, vulnerability, and self-image. It challenges audiences to rethink how they view disability and sexuality, and it encourages reflection on how people with disabilities perceive their own bodies, desires, and how society views them as sexual beings.

Take a Look at This Heart features 17 individuals with various disabilities, including cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, and muscular dystrophy. Others in the film are living with permanent paralysis caused by car accidents or gun violence. The documentary follows these individuals as they navigate the often-overlooked challenges of pursuing a fulfilling sex life. While the film's broad scope and inclusion of many voices is commendable, it can sometimes feel a bit scattered—giving glimpses into powerful stories without always spending enough time to form a deep connection with each person. What adds depth and authenticity to the film is that its director, Ben Duffy, is himself disabled. His perspective brings a layer of empathy and understanding that helps the stories feel more genuine and grounded.

The film reminds us that human sexuality is complex and deeply personal. It includes not just physical aspects like anatomy and biology, but also psychological and emotional dimensions—identity, orientation, values, and beliefs. How we express our sexuality is shaped by many factors, including culture, spirituality, and personal experiences. *Take a Look at This Heart* shines a light on how all of these elements play out in the lives of people with disabilities, challenging societal assumptions and encouraging more inclusive conversations about intimacy and love. People who do not fit society's narrow standards of beauty are often treated differently—and not in a good way. The further someone is from what is considered "normal," the more likely they are to face discrimination. For people with disabilities, this often shows up in subtle and not-so-subtle ways: being pitied, treated as less capable, or excluded entirely due

to physical barriers that make everyday life—like entering buildings, using public services, or enjoying social spaces—more difficult. These limitations, created by society, not the individual, lead to unnecessary dependence on others. But it does not stop there. Family members of people with disabilities can also feel the weight of society's judgment. They are often seen as burdened or even ashamed, not because they feel that way themselves, but because that's how the world around them frames the relationship. Sadly, over time, even family members may begin to internalize these views, shaped by long-standing social attitudes toward disability. It is a reminder of just how powerful—and harmful—these perceptions can be when left unchallenged.

Popular media from glossy magazines to ancient myths often paints incomplete and sometimes insensitive pictures of people with disabilities. These portrayals tend to ignore the full humanity of disabled individuals, reducing them to stereotypes or leaving them out altogether. While representation in news media is slowly improving, people with disabilities are still rarely seen or heard. In a world that prizes physical perfection and intellectual achievement, those who don't fit these narrow ideals often face deeper isolation. By highlighting what's considered “normal” and “ideal,” society not only limits access to public spaces and opportunities but also chips away at the self-esteem of people with disabilities, making them feel less seen, less valued, and more dependent on others.

Director and producer Ben Duffy takes a radically different approach in *Take a Look at This Heart*. His film goes straight to the core of what it means to love and be loved whether you are disabled or not. With honesty and heart, the documentary shares the stories of 17 people from across the U.S., exploring their real experiences with dating, intimacy, identity, and even parenthood. Among the cast are a quadriplegic rock climber, a paraplegic dancer, and a one-legged skateboarder each of them challenging

the assumptions we have been taught to hold. Scene after scene, the film gently dismantles society's biases and invites viewers to reflect on their own. As I watched, I found myself confronting some of my own hidden assumptions and questions I did not even realize I had. And that's part of the power of this film: it makes space for curiosity without shame. It reminds us that wondering, "Can someone with a disability have a sex life?" is a very human question—but one that deserves a better, more informed answer.

Ultimately, the documentary does not just take us into another world; it reveals the reality of more than a billion people living with disability around the globe—and it asks us to see love, connection, and dignity through a much more inclusive lens. More than 15% of the world's population lives with some form of disability—whether physical, sensory, intellectual, developmental, or psychosocial. And yet, when it comes to sexuality and reproductive rights, people with disabilities are often ignored, misunderstood, or outright dismissed. While it should be obvious that everyone—disabled or not—has the same rights to love, desire, and parenthood, society has long failed to honour those rights for people with disabilities.

Too often, they're treated as either asexual or, in some cases, hypersexual. They're seen as incapable of being romantic partners, unfit to have children, or undeserving of sexual agency. This is especially true for women with disabilities, who are frequently excluded from ideas of femininity, partnership, motherhood, and sexual fulfilment. These harmful assumptions strip away dignity and reinforce the false idea that disability somehow erases humanity. Even in major global efforts to promote equality, sexual and reproductive rights for people with disabilities have often been side-lined. For example, when the United Nations negotiated the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the early 2000s, sexual rights were largely left

out of the final language. The focus shifted to traditional ideas of family life, leaving no mention of sexual identity, agency, or inclusion beyond heteronormative structures. Thankfully, advocacy is changing that. Activists have pushed for stronger recognition of these rights—regionally, through frameworks like the ASEAN Incheon Protocol, and globally, through ongoing work around the Sustainable Development Goals. Still, much remains to be done. Despite growing awareness, sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) have long been overlooked—not just by society at large, but even within the disability rights movement itself. For decades, SRHR was treated as a private issue, kept out of policy, planning, and public conversation. But that silence is finally being broken. Today, conversations and campaigns about the SRHR of people with disabilities are gaining visibility and momentum. These efforts share a common thread: a call for the world to recognize what should have been obvious all along—that people with disabilities are sexual beings, with desires, dreams, and the right to live full, self-determined lives

Historically, societies around the world have harboured deep-seated prejudice toward people with disabilities. For centuries, they were often treated as less than human—looked at with pity, fear, or even disdain. Disability was framed as a medical problem, and disabled individuals were cast as helpless victims or lifelong burdens to their families and communities. Although we’ve made progress—especially in recognizing the importance of education and employment for people with disabilities—their sexual and emotional lives remain largely ignored. Sexual and reproductive rights are still seen as irrelevant or unimportant for people with disabilities in many parts of the world. Their desires, dreams, and need for intimacy are too often pushed into the background, overlooked in both policy and everyday conversation.

This paper draws on qualitative data to explore how young people with disabilities, living in urban settings, think about and experience sexuality—using the documentary *Take a Look at This Heart* as a key reference. Gender plays a central role in shaping these experiences, revealing different challenges and expectations for young men and women with visual or locomotor disabilities. Ultimately, this project seeks to better understand and portray the complex, real-world experiences of disabled sexuality—an area long neglected, yet deeply human and deserving of attention.

Around 10% of the world's population lives with some form of disability, and a significant number of them are adolescents and young adults. Yet, people with disabilities remain among the most marginalized and overlooked groups in society. They are often met not with understanding, but with discrimination, neglect, and pity. Structural barriers—economic, educational, legal, architectural, and healthcare-related—further prevent them from living fulfilling lives and reaching their full potential. For many, especially in low-resource settings, life with a disability can mean isolation, poverty, and deep emotional hardship. And for women with disabilities, the struggle is even more complex, as they often face both gender-based and disability-based discrimination—a double burden that amplifies their invisibility in society.

At its core, sexuality is about self-acceptance and being accepted by others. But when it comes to disability and sexuality, powerful cultural myths continue to shape public perception. From fairy tales to film and media, we're constantly fed narrow ideals: the beautiful, slim heroine and the tall, charming hero. Rarely do we see people with disabilities in empowering or romantic roles. Instead, they're often portrayed as broken, undesirable, or simply invisible.

People with disabilities are frequently expected to reject their bodies and their sexual identities, as if love, desire, and intimacy are luxuries they're not entitled to. While able-bodied people are encouraged to aspire to romantic love, physical beauty, and a fulfilling sex life, disabled individuals are often excluded from this narrative entirely. They're cast as the "ugly" or the "other"—not protagonists in their own love stories, but background characters without emotional or physical needs. As a result, their longing for affection, closeness, and human connection is often ignored. Society continues to view disability and sexuality as uncomfortable topics—if not outright taboo. Many disabled people, and even their families, have internalized the belief that love, sex, and intimate relationships are simply not part of their future. This erasure is both painful and profoundly unjust.

Even under ordinary circumstances, sexuality is seen as something to be regulated, not embraced. When disability enters the picture, that discomfort only grows. But if we want a truly inclusive world, it's time to challenge these outdated myths—and to affirm, loudly and clearly, that people with disabilities have the same right to love, intimacy, and self-expression as anyone else.

Young people with disabilities are sexual beings, just like anyone else. They deserve the same rights, respect, and opportunities to explore their sexuality, express themselves, and build meaningful, fulfilling relationships. Having control over their bodies and choices is not only a matter of personal freedom—it's essential for their physical, emotional, and social well-being. Unfortunately, society often views disabled bodies as "different" or "abnormal," shaping a distorted perception of disability and sexuality. The harmful myth that people with disabilities are asexual—or somehow "less than" when it comes to desire—has created real barriers. It keeps disabled young people from receiving comprehensive sex education and contributes to a lack of sexual

knowledge compared to their non-disabled peers. As a result, they may be more vulnerable to unhealthy, disempowering, or even exploitative relationships—what we might call "bad sex. That's why access to accurate, inclusive sex and relationships education is so important. Disabled young people need to understand not just their rights, identities, and ways to express themselves—but also how to protect their safety, set boundaries, and recognize unhealthy dynamics. This kind of education empowers them and helps shift public attitudes, affirming that disabled people are sexual beings with desires, agency, and the right to be treated with dignity. Parents, educators, and healthcare professionals play a critical role in this process. They need to be equipped with the right tools, knowledge, and sensitivity to support disabled youth—offering them the same level of guidance and respect as any other young person

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) affirms in Article 12 that disabled people have the right to enjoy legal capacity on an equal basis with others in all areas of life—including, though not explicitly stated, sex and relationships. As the World Health Organization emphasized in 2012, sexuality is a fundamental part of being human. Everyone deserves the chance to experience love, intimacy, and pleasure in a way that is safe, consensual, and free from discrimination or violence. When disabled people are educated about their sexual rights and given the tools to make informed, healthy choices, they are also better prepared to recognize and resist sexual violence and abuse—whether in personal relationships or broader social settings. Ensuring that they have access to this knowledge isn't just a matter of education; it's a matter of justice, inclusion, and human dignity.

According to Article 8 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (European Human Rights Convention, 1953), every person

has the fundamental right to a private life, a family life, and the freedom to build personal relationships and develop as an individual. This includes the right to a sexual life and the freedom to engage in relationships of one's choosing as long as those relationships are consensual and do not cause harm to others. While sexuality is often considered a deeply personal or "private" matter, it's also shaped—and often restricted—by social norms, laws, and cultural expectations. Our understanding of who is allowed to express their sexuality openly is influenced by these rules, both formal and unspoken. This is where the idea of sexual citizenship becomes important. It means recognizing that everyone, regardless of ability, deserves equal legal and social rights when it comes to expressing their sexual identity. But for people with disabilities, this right is frequently denied. Because disabled bodies are often seen as "different" or "abnormal," their sexuality is misunderstood, ignored, or even viewed as inappropriate by society. As one scholar puts it (Sibers 4) both sex and disability tend to challenge rigid ideas about how bodies should look and behave—and that makes people uncomfortable. These deeply rooted anxieties can lead to exclusion, stigma, and a denial of the basic human right to love, intimacy, and sexual expression for disabled individuals

For a long time, young people with disabilities have been left out of the usual social experiences and education that help prepare most people for love, sex, and relationships. Parents, teachers, and healthcare providers often feel unsure or uncomfortable talking about sexuality with disabled youth. This hesitation isn't surprising when you consider how society tends to exclude disabled people from typical ideas of sexuality. Cultural messages often paint disabled individuals as asexual or uninterested in romantic or sexual relationships. Take, for example, D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, where a woman's affair outside her marriage to a disabled

man is not condemned, reinforcing the stereotype that disabled people are somehow incapable of sexual intimacy. Even today, media and popular culture usually focus on non-disabled bodies when showing sexuality, leaving disabled people's experiences largely invisible. That's why the documentary *Take a Look at This Heart* is so important—it gives voice to the real feelings, desires, and expectations of disabled people when it comes to love and sexuality, breaking through the stereotypes and showing a much richer, more honest picture.

The reality is that the sexual lives of disabled people are often invisible and ignored in public discussions, and this contributes to disabled young people having less sexual knowledge and receiving poorer sex education compared to their non-disabled peers. Because of this lack of information and support, they are more vulnerable to harmful experiences what some call “bad sex.” This can include anything from being exploited through prostitution or pornography, to facing sexual violence, unplanned pregnancies, or sexually transmitted infections. While these issues may seem different, they all share a common thread: they involve relationships where disabled people can be taken advantage of or disempowered in various ways. It is important to understand just how widespread sexual exploitation is for disabled people. A growing number of large studies show that individuals with disabilities face a significantly higher risk of sexual victimization compared to those without disabilities. That said, some findings vary, and researchers are still exploring why. A recent meta-analysis looked at 68 studies from 1970 to 2018, including over 12,000 participants, to better understand the risks. It found that people with disabilities were more than twice as likely to experience sexual victimization as those without disabilities. The risk was especially high among adults compared to minors, and among those with sensory impairments. Geographically, the risk was higher in African countries, lower in Western Europe, and

somewhere in between in the United States. Interestingly, the rates did not change much over time, showing this is an ongoing and serious issue. This data highlights just how urgent it is to improve education, support, and protections for disabled people—because everyone deserves to live free from fear, harm, and exploitation. Sexual violence is a serious public health issue and a violation of basic human rights, with effects that can last a lifetime. It includes any sexual act done without the full, free consent of the person involved—or against someone who can't consent, like children, people with certain disabilities, or those who are unconscious or intoxicated. Sexual violence can take many forms: forced sex (rape), situations where someone is pressured into sexual acts through lies, threats, or manipulation, unwanted touching or fondling, and even non-contact abuse like exposure or harassment that makes a person feel unsafe. People who cannot give clear consent—whether due to age, illness, disability, or being under the influence—are especially vulnerable. This makes protecting disabled individuals from sexual exploitation critically important. So, how can we help prevent sexual abuse against people with disabilities? Here are some key steps:

- 1) Understand Their Needs: It's vital to learn about the specific challenges and needs faced by disabled people. This can be done through training and working closely with disability rights experts.
- 2) Make Reporting Accessible: Reporting abuse must be easy for everyone. Provide different ways to report—whether verbally, in writing, or digitally—and make sure these options are available in accessible formats like braille or simple language.
- 3) Protect Privacy: Keeping complaints confidential and respecting the privacy of those who come forward helps them feel safe and supported.
- 4) Offer Support: Counselling, legal help, and other tailored support should be available to those who report abuse, recognizing their unique needs.
- 5) Work With Experts: Including disability advocates in committees or as consultants ensures that cases involving disabled individuals are handled with care and

understanding.⁶)Keep Policies Up-to-Date: Regularly review and improve policies to make sure they truly protect disabled people. Listening to feedback from the disabled community is key. By taking these steps, organizations can build a safer, more supportive environment where everyone's rights are respected, and disabled people receive the protection and justice they deserve.

Director Ben Duffy and Ajani “AJ” Murray first connected while working on a project for Yoocan, an online community for people with disabilities. AJ, who lives with cerebral palsy, opened up to Duffy about the challenges he faced with dating and how little information there was about love and sexuality within the disability community. That conversation inspired Duffy to explore this important but often overlooked topic in his next film. Having already been introduced to the disability community through his 2016 documentary *Tin Soldiers*, Duffy shared the idea with friends, and it quickly became clear that this subject was not just interesting—it desperately needed more attention. From that moment on, *Take a Look at This Heart* became his main focus. In the documentary, people with a wide range of disabilities openly share their stories about love and relationships. Some are in happy, healthy partnerships, while others are still searching for the connection, we all naturally desire. While films like *The Sessions* and *The Theory of Everything* has touched on love and disability before, as one cast member, Spike Kane, points out, “The Hollywood approach is very much sugar-coated.” By choosing the documentary format, Duffy gives real people with disabilities a chance to tell their own stories and challenge the stereotypes and myths that many able-bodied people still believe.

Rockwood, a seasoned veteran of the entertainment industry, believes that educating writers and decision-makers in Hollywood—and encouraging them to move beyond traditional casting choices to include more actors with disabilities—is a crucial

step forward. After all, film and TV have a powerful way of changing how society thinks about important issues. For example, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* helped normalize the idea of a single woman focused on her career instead of starting a family, and *Will & Grace* played a big role in pushing forward marriage equality for the LGBTQ+ community. Margarita Elizondo, CEO and founder of Rolling with Me and a participant in the documentary, is hopeful that *Take a Look at This Heart* will reshape how future generations see people with disabilities. Through her work with a Disability in Society class at San Diego State University, she is managed to get the documentary included in the curriculum this semester, with two on-campus screenings reaching nearly 1,000 students. She's also working to bring the film to other colleges, hoping to spark important conversations among young millennials—an audience she believes is passionate about philanthropy and ready to advocate for changes that previous generations have failed to adequately address. Society has long held narrow and misguided beliefs about the sexuality of disabled people, often viewing them as incapable of intimacy or emotionally immature. These assumptions strip them of their sexual identity and overlook the diversity of their experiences.

CHAPTER THREE

Breaking Barriers: Films, Disability and Shaping Social Change

In this chapter, I want to explore how the idea of “sexuality in disabled people” is brought to life through film—especially through the powerful documentary *Scarlet Road*, along with a few other films and short films that touch on this often-overlooked subject. These stories don’t just present disability—they give it a human face, one that includes desire, intimacy, vulnerability, and agency. *Scarlet Road*, directed by Catherine Scott, follows the deeply moving and groundbreaking work of Rachel Wotton, a sex worker in Australia who specializes in working with clients who have disabilities. Rachel is more than just her profession—she is bold, compassionate, intelligent, beautiful, and fiercely committed to fighting for sexual rights for people who are so often denied them. In the film, we are introduced to two of her clients: John Blades, a 51-year-old man who has lived with multiple sclerosis for nearly three decades and uses a wheelchair, with no movement below the neck; and Mark Manitta, 49, who was diagnosed with cerebral palsy at the age of ten. What is so powerful is not just what Rachel does, but how she does it—with dignity, sensitivity, and deep respect for her clients' humanity. As we watch the relationships unfold between Rachel and the men she works with, we see not just the physical side of intimacy, but the emotional healing, joy, and sense of connection it brings. These stories challenge the common assumptions around disabled sexuality and open up space for a much-needed, more compassionate conversation about desire, touch, and the right to feel loved and seen.

For John, his sessions with Rachel were about so much more than physical intimacy—they helped him reconnect with his body in ways he had not thought

possible. Over time, he even began to regain some movement, but more importantly, he rediscovered a sense of confidence and self-worth that had been buried under years of isolation. For Mark, one of his deepest wishes was simple yet profoundly human: to fall asleep next to a woman and wake up beside her the next morning. Rachel gave him that experience—not just the physical closeness, but the emotional presence. She listened, laughed with him, and made space for his story. Rachel is not just a sex worker; she is a companion, a listener, an advocate, and someone who treats her clients with deep respect and care. As Mark movingly says in the film, “People don’t understand the difference sex makes. Part of having cerebral palsy is spasticity and muscle spasms. I need sex to make my muscles relax... and I like sex.” That honest, unapologetic statement breaks through so many social taboos and misunderstandings. Watching the film opened my eyes in ways I did not expect. It made me more aware of how often the sexual needs and emotional lives of disabled people are ignored or brushed aside. But more than that, it showed me how powerful it is when people from different communities—disabled individuals, sex workers, advocates—stand together to fight for dignity, for rights, and for the freedom to express love and desire. As Rachel has said, *Scarlet Road* was created to show the diversity within the sex industry, but it also ends up showing the diversity—and the deep humanity—of those who seek connection through it. What’s usually considered private and hidden becomes something worth talking about, worth noticing, and worth fighting for.

Another powerful work, *Yes, We Fuck!* is more than just a documentary—it’s a bold, collaborative project that dives deep into the lives and sexual experiences of people with functional diversity. What makes this film so unique is that it’s not just telling stories about people; it’s made with them. Participants aren’t just subjects—they’re co-creators, using the space to share their personal truths, challenge

assumptions, and ask difficult, necessary questions about sexuality, desire, and autonomy. Social media plays a big role too, helping the project grow beyond the screen and become a wider conversation, connecting individuals and communities across different movements. Through the making of the film, meaningful relationships have formed between groups working on body politics—whether it’s around disability, feminism, transfeminism, LGBTQ+ rights, fat activism, or queer and intersex experiences. It’s a beautiful example of how art and activism can come together—not only to raise awareness, but to build solidarity and open up new, more inclusive ways of thinking about sex, identity, and the right to pleasure.

Yes, We Fuck is a bold and emotionally charged documentary that brings together six real-life stories, exploring how intimacy and physical connection can become powerful tools for personal empowerment and social change among people with functional diversity. These stories go beyond surface-level narratives—they dive into the deep human need for connection, touch, and self-expression. The first story follows the Post Op collective, a group that blends art, activism, and alternative expressions of sexuality to explore how people with functional differences experience desire and identity. In the second story, we meet Miriam and Palma, two individuals born in India, who share their journey of exploring emotional and physical closeness in a world that often overlooks their needs. The third story is about Oriol, a man with cerebral palsy who has a deep curiosity about life. He connects online with Linda, a professional who offers alternative companionship experiences, and together they explore a meaningful and respectful encounter that marks an important step for Oriol. In the fourth story, a group of young adults with intellectual disabilities openly talk about their feelings, preferences, and worries related to romantic and physical relationships, while their parents reflect on how their own views have influenced their

children's understanding of intimacy. Throughout the film, intimacy is presented not just as a private act, but as a form of resistance—a way to reclaim the body, seek joy, and challenge a society that often silences or overlooks these voices.

This led us to realize that much of the problem isn't written down anywhere—it lives in the collective mindset, stuck in outdated ideas from the past. Many people still imagine that isolating those with functional diversity in institutions is the answer. There's a lingering belief that biology makes them “naturally dependent” and somehow more childlike, stripping away their dignity and autonomy. In this kind of thinking, a person's worth is only seen in extremes—either through death, miraculous recovery, or becoming a hero like Stephen Hawking. The documentary's title cleverly references Obama's famous campaign slogan, signaling that this film isn't just about showing a slice of reality. Instead, it aims to shatter those old, limiting images that erase the sexuality of people with functional diversity. Our goal is to share honest, real stories with bold visuals that reveal these individuals as sexual beings—people who desire and are desired. By capturing everyday moments, we invite viewers to rethink what “normal” really means and challenge their assumptions about desire, pleasure, and beauty. Ultimately, it's about understanding freedom, identity, and the right to live fully as oneself.

The “we” in the title represents a coming together—a meeting of different groups who share a common political commitment to understanding and owning our bodies. This includes feminists, trans feminists, queer communities, people with functional diversity, and fat activists. The word “fuck” isn't just meant to shock or fit into any norm; instead, it's about breaking down old barriers and pushing for a meaningful change in how we represent and experience human sexuality.

In my research, I explored these documentaries to better understand how filmmakers approach telling the stories of disabled communities. What became clear to me is that these films don't just show someone's life on the surface—they invite us to witness the real struggles, fears, and hopes that shape their experiences. One important point I want to share is that recognizing disabled people as sexual beings—and supporting them in finding suitable partners—can bring about powerful changes. It's not just about physical intimacy; it can transform their mental well-being and how they see themselves, sometimes making a profound difference in their whole sense of identity and confidence.

I want to take a moment to share a glimpse of a Turkish film called *Mucize*, or *The Miracle*, directed by Mahsun Kırmızıgül. The story is set in 1961 and follows Mahir Yılmaz, a schoolteacher who is sent to a remote Kurdish village in Eastern Turkey—far from his family and the life he knows. When he finally arrives after a long, exhausting journey, the villagers initially greet him with suspicion and even guns, but soon they explain that there is no school in the village at all. Determined to make a difference, Mahir comes up with a clever plan—he calls home pretending he's been kidnapped to raise money for building a school. With the help of the local outlaws, who are just villagers, he manages to get the school up and running. One of his students, Aziz, is the intellectually disabled son of the village chief. Despite being teased because of his muscular dystrophy, Aziz is encouraged by Mahir to believe in himself and work hard. Their relationship becomes a powerful example of hope, determination, and the impact one caring person can have in a community.

After Aziz's father saves a man from a murder attempt, that man offers his daughter Mizgin's hand in marriage to Aziz as a way of saying thank you—even though

many warn that Aziz's disabilities might make the marriage difficult. At first, Mizgin struggles to accept her new husband and feels overwhelmed by the situation. But over time, she begins to see Aziz for who he truly is and starts to accept him. Sadly, their happiness is clouded by the harsh judgment and ridicule from the villagers, which takes a heavy toll on both of them. When Mizgin reaches a breaking point, Aziz decides to leave the village with her. Before they go, he leaves a heartfelt note explaining why he's leaving and promising that he will return one day. Later, Mahir receives news that he must move on to another assignment. As he leaves, the villagers express their gratitude, touched by the positive changes he helped bring to their lives.

Seven years later, Mahir returns to the village—now accessible by a newly built road—and brings his family with him. There, he introduces them to Aziz, who has made an incredible recovery, standing strong alongside his wife Mizgin and their children. When Aziz's father asks how he was cured, Aziz simply says it was because he fell in love with Mizgin. This moment beautifully shows how having the right partner can truly transform the life of a person with a disability—offering not just emotional comfort, but practical help, social connection, and physical support. Of course, these relationships can come with their own challenges, and it's important to recognize and navigate them thoughtfully. With open communication, mutual care, and a focus on accessibility, people with disabilities and their partners can create deep, meaningful, and fulfilling bonds.

In the documentary *Take a Look at This Heart*, this idea comes through clearly: the happiness and well-being of individuals with disabilities greatly improve when they have a partner who supports them—not just emotionally, but also socially and physically. It gives them a whole new outlook on life and helps them realize something

really important—that they are sexual beings too. Before watching the film, I had the same questions and misconceptions many people do, wondering, “How can disabled people lead a normal sexual life?” But the documentary was eye-opening and helped me to understand—yes, they can. I also realized how we sometimes lump very different people into one category of “disabled.” For example, I used to think of conjoined twins as disabled without really questioning it. Then I heard about Abby Hensel, one of the conjoined twins who got married. Abby and her sister first came into the spotlight on The Oprah Winfrey Show back in 1996, and now Abby has reached a huge milestone in her life—she is married. What struck me was that Abby and her sister don’t even see themselves as disabled, so why do we automatically put certain people into that box? What is the point of separating them like that? This question really hit me because of *Take a Look at This Heart*—the film challenged me to rethink how I see sexuality and identity among people with disabilities. Along with many other films and documentaries I have mentioned before, it has played a big role in me to rethink about these issues.

One of the powerful things about films, documentaries, and series is their ability to deeply influence how we see the world—and sometimes, that influence can lead to misunderstandings or confusing ideas. I picked up some wrong ideas about sexuality and disability from certain movies in the past. But watching *Take a Look at This Heart* completely changed my perspective. What makes this documentary so impactful is that it shows the real lives of real people. Unlike fictional movies, documentaries feel more genuine and closer to actual experiences. This film really drives home the message that everyone has the same sexual rights, no matter their abilities. It also shows that intimacy with new partners is not just about sex—it’s about discovering each other in meaningful ways.

In a podcast, the director, Ben Duffy, shared why he made this film. He said, “I don’t care about Steven Spielberg, I don’t care about being a famous writer or director—I want to make documentaries.” He dropped out of college after his first year because he felt inspired and unstoppable. He moved to L.A., made a documentary called *Behind the Story: We Are Skateboarders*, and since then, he’s wanted to truly connect with humanitarian stories. Hearing him talk about his journey moved me to tears and gave me a whole new understanding of the disabled community. Before, I hadn’t thought much about their lives, but now I’m eager to learn more and explore their stories with an open heart.

Ben Duffy explores how society’s stereotypes and stigmas around disability and sexuality intersect, shaping the everyday lives of disabled people. He looks closely at how individuals with disabilities navigate their sexual identities and how their experiences are influenced by both their disabilities and the world around them. In recent years, the idea of “identity” has become a hot topic in research and theory, with many assumptions being challenged—like the idea that identity is fixed or only shaped by disability, or that people with disabilities share one uniform identity. What really matters, though, is understanding the difference between the words we use and the real-life experiences people face, so we can break free from the limiting labels society has placed on disabled individuals over time. The core message here is that a person with a disability can build an identity that isn’t defined by their impairment but exists beyond it. They learn to accept their disability as part of their reality without losing their sense of who they are. In society, disability is often seen as a barrier—not because of the impairment itself, but because of the attitudes, cultural norms, policies, and institutions that discriminate and exclude. Identity, on the other hand, is about how we become ourselves, how we are recognized as full human beings’ challenges the traditional way

disability is viewed, which tends to focus only on what a person can't do or what's "wrong" with them. This narrow view creates real obstacles, making it harder for people to live independently and participate fully in society. By shifting the focus away from limitations and toward the whole person, Ben encourages us to rethink how we understand disability and identity—and to create a world where everyone has the chance to live with dignity and autonomy.

Society often overlooks the fact that impairment is simply a part of being human. Instead, it tends to see the challenges that come with impairment as problems or obstacles. This way of thinking comes from the way society interacts with people who have disabilities—expecting them to fit into existing social structures, rather than changing those structures to meet their needs. But if society were willing to make changes, like removing physical barriers and creating laws that protect human rights, life would be much easier for people with disabilities. Solutions like special education, inclusive laws, and accessible architecture could help bridge the gap between what society expects and what people actually need. Ben Duffy argues that people with disabilities can build a strong sense of self—not by ignoring their impairments, but by redefining what "normal" really means. Instead of trying to fit into society's narrow idea of a "normal" body, they embrace their differences as their own version of normal. Developing a true self-identity means actively questioning the labels and expectations society places on them. By pushing back against social systems that don't reflect their own sense of self, people with disabilities can create identities that move beyond outdated medical views of disability as something tragic or limiting. This kind of identity isn't about showing off differences or simply celebrating diversity—it's about defining disability on their own terms and living authentically as themselves.

Research on identity, self, and disability shows that people with impairments or chronic conditions often experience a loss of self. They find themselves trying to live as “normal” a life as possible, negotiating their daily realities to stay connected with the world they want to be part of. This often means they feel pressured to conform to certain rules and expectations to be seen as acceptable—basically trying to fit into the mold of a non-disabled person. While this is often called “normalization,” it is more accurately described as assimilation, because it asks people with disabilities to change themselves to fit into society, rather than society changing to include them. When it comes to building identity, the idea of “self-concept” needs to be understood through the lens of the social challenges and oppression these individuals face. Instead of asking people with disabilities to adjust to society’s limits, the focus should be on changing society itself—breaking down barriers and empowering people with disabilities to be their true selves.

Even though many people with disabilities face daily challenges and discrimination from those without disabilities, some don’t see their disability as a defining part of who they are. They choose to identify themselves simply as “normal” people, focusing less on their physical condition and more on their ability to live full, active lives—sometimes even achieving more than those without disabilities. It can be surprising to hear someone with a disability say something like, “I know this might sound strange, but I don’t see myself as disabled. “These individuals are able to set aside their impairments when defining who they are, basing their identity on what they can do rather than how they do it. When obstacles arise, they tend to see the real problem as the barriers society and the environment create—not their own bodies. In this way, they accept living with impairments as normal, as long as unnecessary restrictions and limitations are removed.

When someone with a disability sees themselves first and foremost as a person—and views their disability as just one part of who they are—they start to understand that everyone has traits that might be seen as less than perfect. That is just part of being human. So, impairment becomes just one difference among many in a person's unique makeup. This is what real normalization looks like. However, this way of thinking brings up a tricky question: who gets to decide who is considered a person with a disability? And how does that connect to their sense of sexuality? For example, the Kenyan draft committee, when trying to define disability within the framework of the National Convention of Human Rights (2004), pointed out that the label of disability really only applies if a person sees themselves that way. People might respond to this in two ways—either by accepting disability as just one characteristic that doesn't define their whole identity, or by denying it in a way that can actually be harmful, stripping away an important part of who they are. It's a delicate balance between recognizing disability as part of a person's life while also respecting their full sense of self and identity.

Rights exist to protect the dignity of every human being. In times of struggle, it's our rights that help us hold on to our sense of worth and humanity. But even though rights are meant to serve such a noble purpose, they are often violated—especially when it comes to people with disabilities. Too often, their basic rights are treated as if they are special favors or privileges, rather than the fundamental entitlements they truly are. Disability is not just a medical or personal issue—it is a human rights issue, and a deeply social one too. Recognizing disability in a meaningful way means acknowledging both a person's strengths and limitations without stripping away their worth. This is also where self-identity becomes really important. If someone is not sure of who they are or doesn't have a strong sense of self, it becomes hard to know what

they are truly capable of—or where their rights begin and end. That confusion can lead to misunderstanding rights as privileges, or vice versa. A healthy, positive identity gives a person the clarity to tell the difference and use that understanding to stand up for what they deserve. Watching *Take a Look at This Heart* helped me rethink how we view the sexuality and identity of people with disabilities. It reminds us that these conversations aren't just about inclusion—they're about justice, recognition, and dignity for every person. The American public's approach to the sexuality of disabled individuals has been historically shaped by a mixture of cultural discomfort, misunderstanding, and evolving awareness. For much of modern history, people with disabilities were often perceived as either asexual or sexually deviant, leading to the widespread neglect of their sexual rights and needs. Institutional policies, media portrayals, and even family attitudes frequently excluded or infantilized disabled individuals, denying them autonomy over their bodies and desires. However, in recent decades, there has been a growing recognition of the fact that disabled people, like anyone else, experience sexual feelings and deserve the right to healthy, consensual sexual relationships. Activists, scholars, and disability advocates have increasingly challenged stereotypes by promoting inclusive sex education, fighting for reproductive rights, and emphasizing the importance of consent and agency. Despite this progress, barriers still remain, including inaccessible healthcare, social stigma, and inadequate support from caregivers or institutions. Nonetheless, the ongoing conversations around body autonomy, intersectionality, and human rights are helping to reframe disability and sexuality in more affirming and empowering ways across American society.

The presentation of disabled sexuality in popular media has historically been limited, often distorted, and rooted in deeply entrenched stereotypes, though recent years have seen a gradual but meaningful shift. For much of the 20th century, media

largely ignored the sexual lives of disabled individuals or portrayed them through a lens of pity, tragedy, or abnormality. Characters with disabilities were frequently desexualized, seen as incapable of romantic or sexual relationships, or conversely, portrayed as dangerously hypersexual or manipulative. This lack of authentic representation reinforced societal myths that disabled people are either childlike and asexual or unfit for love and intimacy. However, more contemporary media—spurred by greater activism and demand for inclusive storytelling—has begun to challenge these harmful tropes. Shows like *Sex Education* and films such as *The Sessions* or *Crip Camp* offer more nuanced, respectful, and empowering portrayals of disabled individuals as complex beings with real desires, relationships, and agency. These stories highlight not only the physical aspects of disabled sexuality but also the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions often left unexplored. Still, despite this progress, representation remains sporadic and often lacks the input of disabled creators themselves. Authentic storytelling that includes disabled voices, particularly in writing, directing, and acting, is crucial for reshaping public perceptions and fostering a more inclusive media landscape that fully embraces the diversity of human sexuality.

Social workers and filmmakers have played crucial roles in advocating for the recognition and normalization of disabled sexuality, using both practice and art to challenge deeply rooted social stigmas. Social workers, often on the front lines of care and advocacy, have long fought to affirm the sexual rights of people with disabilities, pushing for comprehensive sex education, consent-focused conversations, and access to reproductive healthcare tailored to diverse needs. Pioneers like Dr. Mitchell Tepper, a sexologist and disability advocate, have worked tirelessly to educate professionals and the public on the intersection of disability and sexuality, arguing for it as a basic human right rather than a taboo topic. Similarly, filmmakers have leveraged the power

of visual storytelling to give voice to disabled individuals' lived experiences. Directors such as Ben Lewin, himself a polio survivor, brought a sensitive and personal perspective to his film *The Sessions*, which depicted a man with disabilities seeking a sexual surrogate. Documentaries like *Crip Camp*—produced by Barack and Michelle Obama—shine a light on the broader disability rights movement, including the fight for sexual autonomy. These professionals and creatives often collaborate, ensuring that the stories being told are not only accurate but also empowering, grounded in dignity, and informed by real-life experiences. Their collective work continues to break down stereotypes, advocate for systemic change, and foster a cultural environment in which disabled sexuality is no longer ignored or misrepresented, but accepted and celebrated as a natural part of human diversity.

What makes the film even more powerful is that it doesn't try to fit disabled people into mainstream ideas of "normalcy." Instead, it redefines what normal means by showing love and sexuality in many different forms. It gently challenges viewers to rethink the systems and mindsets that have labeled people with disabilities as "less than" or "not enough." Through real voices and real stories, the film helps us see that sexuality is a human right—not a luxury—and that everyone deserves the chance to connect, express, and be desired. At its heart, the documentary reminds us that identity is not something society should assign, but something each person has the right to define for themselves. At its heart, *Take a Look at This Heart* serves as a powerful reminder that identity is not something that should be dictated by societal expectations, but something deeply personal—shaped by lived experience, self-awareness, and emotional truth. The film challenges the rigid labels often imposed on people with disabilities by showing that they, too, are complex, emotional beings who long for connection, intimacy, and love. It argues that sexuality is not reserved for the able-

bodied—it is a basic human right, essential to self-expression and emotional well-being. By sharing deeply honest and vulnerable stories, the documentary dismantles the idea that disabled individuals are somehow “other” or outside of what society views as sexually desirable or emotionally capable. Instead, it portrays them as fully human, with desires, struggles, and joys just like anyone else. It also highlights how outdated systems, cultural norms, and social attitudes create unnecessary limitations—not the disabilities themselves. By doing so, the film doesn’t just raise awareness; it calls for empathy, inclusion, and a reimagining of how we define both identity and normalcy. It asks us to stop seeing disability as a barrier to love or intimacy and start recognizing it as part of the rich and varied human experience.

The documentary *Take a Look at This Heart* can be understood through a range of intersecting theoretical lenses that enrich its emotional and social depth. Critical Disability Theory is central, as the film critiques the ableist norms that restrict disabled individuals from being seen as fully autonomous and sexual beings. Rather than focusing on what disabled people lack, the documentary highlights systemic barriers that deny them dignity, voice, and intimacy. Queer Theory also plays a key role by challenging rigid norms around sexuality and bodies, showing that desire and affection exist outside the bounds of able-bodied heteronormativity. Through its focus on personal storytelling, the film aligns with Narrative Identity Theory, allowing disabled individuals to reclaim their identities by telling their own stories in ways that resist stigma. Feminist Theory and Embodiment Theory further enrich the analysis, especially in how the film explores bodily autonomy and the lived, sensory experience of love and pleasure. The stories shared reflect a deep awareness of intersectionality, as each participant navigates layered experiences shaped by ability, gender, and societal perception. Finally, through the lens of the Human Rights Framework, the film

demands recognition of sexual and emotional expression as basic rights—not privileges—thus reinforcing the idea that intimacy, connection, and self-definition are fundamental to all human lives, including those of people with disabilities. Together, these theories help unpack how the documentary not only gives voice to a marginalized community but also critiques the broader social structures that continue to limit their freedom.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

Around the world, there are many persistent stereotypes about the sexuality of people with disabilities, and unfortunately, most of these ideas are negative. Often, these stereotypes either deny that disabled people have a sexual life or create fear and misunderstanding about it. One common misconception is that people with disabilities are childlike, without sexual feelings, and need to be shielded from adult experiences. Another harmful belief is that if they do express their sexuality, they will not be able to control themselves and might behave inappropriately or even pose a danger to others. There's also a widespread assumption that people with disabilities can't learn about sexuality, have meaningful relationships, be sexual partners, or become good parents. Research from places like the University of Bristol and Malmo University has shown that these ideas are simply not true. Sadly, these stereotypes lead to discrimination and stigma, making life harder for people with disabilities. The topic of sexuality among disabled people is a highly socially relevant one because that people are separated into a category of asexual. In the documentary.

Take A Look At This Heart, directed by Ben Duffy, dives into the desires and experiences of people with disabilities, challenging the many myths and misunderstandings society holds about their sexuality. Sexuality is much more than just physical sex it is a rich, multi-layered part of who we are. It includes our feelings, thoughts, and expressions like intimacy, affection, love, touch, hugging, and yes, sexual contact itself. This means that sexuality touches many parts of a person's life and identity. Having a disability does not have to limit someone's ability to experience and

enjoy their sexuality. Being sexually healthy is a vital part of life. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines sexual health as “a state of physical, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality,” which means it is about feeling positive, respected, and safe in sexual relationships — free from coercion, discrimination, or violence. This broad definition shows that sexual health goes beyond just the physical act and includes emotional and social connection too. People with disabilities deserve to experience this full sense of connection, just like anyone else. But unfortunately, societal attitudes and assumptions often get in the way. These biases are even found within healthcare, where people without disabilities who experience sexual difficulties can get diagnosed and treated — while people with disabilities are often expected to just accept their situation without support or conversation about possible help. This difference in treatment can seriously affect their quality of life.

Sexuality and disability are a deeply important and often overlooked topic in today’s global conversation. For many people with disabilities, breaking down the long-standing myths surrounding their sexuality represents one of the final frontiers in the fight for equality and dignity. These misconceptions do not just shape how society views them — they have real impacts on mental, emotional, and physical well-being. At the heart of challenging these myths is the recognition that sexuality is a vital part of life for everyone. It contributes significantly to our sense of identity, fulfillment, and overall quality of life regardless of ability. This chapter aims to encourage a healthier, more inclusive understanding of sexuality and disability by sharing relevant historical context, as well as the psychological and social factors that shape public attitudes. By confronting these issues head-on, we can help create a world where people with disabilities are free to explore and express their sexuality with the same respect, support, and dignity as anyone else. The relevance of considering disabled people as not asexual

lies primarily in challenging harmful stigmas and ensuring their sexual rights, health, and well-being are respected and addressed. The widespread but false assumption that disabled individuals are asexual leads to significant negative consequences, including exclusion from sexual health education and services, denial of their sexual agency, increased vulnerability to sexual abuse, and diminished self-esteem.

Moreover, *Take A Look at This Heart* powerfully highlights the importance of human connection within the disabled community — not just as a theme, but as a lifeline. These bonds are profoundly significant because they provide emotional support, a sense of belonging, and contribute directly to the overall well-being of individuals with disabilities. For many, forming close relationships helps to counteract the isolation and loneliness that can come with being excluded or misunderstood by society. Strong social connections offer more than just companionship — they nurture self-esteem, resilience, and a sense of identity within a shared community. Through these relationships, individuals can exchange experiences, provide mutual encouragement, and advocate for their rights with greater strength and solidarity. Emotional closeness also supports mental and cognitive health, while practically offering help with everyday tasks and navigating physical or societal barriers. These connections go beyond surface-level interaction — they are rooted in trust, empathy, and mutual respect. When disabled people have access to deep, meaningful relationships, they are more empowered to live independently and take part fully in their communities. Importantly, these relationships foster a sense of collective strength, where individuals not only receive support but also give it, creating a cycle of care that benefits families and society. Ultimately, the film reminds us that for people with disabilities, the value of human connection is not just about being seen — it's about being

understood, supported, and included. In a world that often overlooks them, these bonds create spaces of dignity, empowerment, and love.

Ben Duffy's direction of *Take a Look at This Heart* is a powerful reflection of his deep compassion, storytelling sensitivity, and unwavering commitment to honest representation of the disabled community. Working with just a fraction of the typical budget around 5% of what most feature documentaries receive Duffy managed to craft a moving, intimate, and thought-provoking film that brings long-overdue attention to the realities of love, sexuality, and emotional connection among people with disabilities and their partners. What makes Duffy's work so impactful is his ability to foster trust and openness, encouraging a diverse group of individuals spanning different races, backgrounds, abilities, and sexual orientations to share their deeply personal stories. These conversations unfold with honesty and vulnerability, shining a light on topics that are too often silenced or ignored. Through his patient and empathetic approach, Duffy dismantles the stereotypes that desexualize or diminish people with disabilities, and invites audiences to rethink outdated ideas about intimacy and human connection. Behind the scenes, Duffy's determination was tested in real ways—most notably when the film lost its original distributor to fraud. But he continued, driven by a belief in the importance of the message. His perseverance paid off. The documentary has been met with critical praise and shown at festivals, universities, and advocacy spaces across the country, sparking meaningful conversations about relationships, identity, and representation. In conclusion *Take a Look at This Heart* is more than just a film—it's a heartfelt and powerful statement about the dignity, complexity, and beauty of disabled lives and relationships. Through his work, Duffy shows how documentary filmmaking, when done with care and intention, can not only tell stories but shift culture, break taboos, and foster real empathy.

Beyond its powerful stories, the film serves as an inspiration for society to recognize the strength and bravery it takes to seek love, connection, and acceptance in the face of adversity. Just as the individuals in the documentary navigate emotional and physical barriers, the film itself pushed through major challenges during its creation and release—reminding us that perseverance can lead to meaningful impact. At its core, *Take a Look at This Heart* is a call for greater empathy and inclusion. It reminds us that love does not have limits—and that having a disability doesn’t diminish a person’s ability to form deep, loving, and intimate relationships.

By highlighting shared human experiences, the film urges us all to embrace the truth that everyone deserves to love and be loved. For example, actress Angela Rockwood, who lives with quadriplegia, shares in the film, “I’m sexual and sensual... I’m still going to want to make love... I am not going to wake up paralyzed and not want affection.” (Lubo) Her words beautifully underscore a fundamental truth: the desire for closeness, tenderness, and connection doesn’t disappear with disability. It’s a deeply human longing—one that lives in all of us, regardless of physical ability.

As of 2025, attitudes toward the sexuality of disabled people remain mixed, with many societal stereotypes still lingering. A significant portion of the general public—especially older generations and certain cultural communities—continue to view disabled individuals as asexual or less capable of having romantic relationships. For example, many young people express reluctance to date or marry someone with a disability, often due to fears about social judgment or misconceptions about parenting and attractiveness. At the same time, studies show that disabled LGBTQ+ individuals report lower satisfaction with their sex lives, often because of physical challenges and social isolation. Despite progress, sexual education for disabled people frequently remains limited, focusing mostly on biology rather than intimacy, consent, or pleasure.

However, there are hopeful signs: younger generations, healthcare professionals, and disability advocates are increasingly pushing for more inclusive, respectful views of disabled sexuality. They emphasize that desire, love, and intimacy are universal human experiences that do not disappear because of a disability. Moving forward, expanding access to comprehensive sex education and representation will be key to breaking down harmful myths and fostering a society that truly values disabled people's rights to love and connection.

Since the release of *Take a Look at This Heart*, numerous documentaries and films have drawn inspiration from its honest and groundbreaking exploration of love, sexuality, and identity within the disabled community. These works continue to challenge stereotypes and amplify stories often overlooked by mainstream media. Filmmakers have embraced its compassionate approach to craft narratives that highlight the emotional depth, desires, and relationships of people with disabilities, showcasing their humanity beyond physical limitations. Common themes include intimacy, self-discovery, and resilience, all contributing to a growing collection of films that promote inclusion and dismantle social taboos. Building on the foundation established by *Take a Look at This Heart*, these projects broaden public understanding, foster empathy, and encourage ongoing conversations about sexuality and disability in diverse communities worldwide.

As a viewer, I truly wish there were more documentaries that shine a light on the sexuality and intimate lives of people with disabilities. Stories like those in *Take a Look at This Heart* are so important because they break down harmful myths and show the real, human experiences behind the labels. More films like these would help raise awareness, foster understanding, and give disabled individuals the visibility and respect they deserve in conversations about love, desire, and relationships. It's crucial for media

to include these voices more often, so society can grow more inclusive and supportive, recognizing that sexuality is a natural, vital part of everyone's life no matter their abilities. Compared to earlier times, visual mediums like documentaries have a much stronger impact on people today. With the rise of digital platforms and social media, documentaries reach wider audiences faster and create deeper emotional connections by showing real stories in vivid, relatable ways. Unlike traditional print or radio, visual storytelling combines images, sound, and personal narratives to engage viewers on multiple levels, making complex issues more accessible and compelling. This has made documentaries powerful tools for education and social change, especially on topics like disability and sexuality, where personal experiences can challenge stereotypes and inspire empathy. Today's viewers not only watch but often share and discuss these films, helping important messages spread far beyond what was possible in the past.

Marriage and support for disabled people in today's society have come a long way, but challenges still remain. More awareness and legal protections now exist to support disabled individuals who want to marry and build families. Society is gradually recognizing that people with disabilities have the same desires for love, companionship, and partnership as anyone else. Support systems—ranging from family encouragement to accessible healthcare and counseling—are increasingly available, helping disabled couples navigate the unique obstacles they might face, such as physical accessibility, communication barriers, or social stigma. However, biases and misconceptions about disability and relationships still persist, sometimes making it harder for disabled people to find acceptance or equal treatment. Overall, there is growing momentum toward greater inclusion and respect, with many organizations and communities advocating for the rights and dignity of disabled individuals in marriage and beyond.

In 2025, several organizations are actively championing the sexual and reproductive rights of people with disabilities, aiming to dismantle barriers and promote inclusivity. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has been at the forefront, particularly through its “We Decide” initiative. This program focuses on empowering women and youth with disabilities by advocating for their sexual and reproductive health and rights. UNFPA's commitment was highlighted at the Global Disability Summit in Berlin, where they showcased an art exhibition titled “Wanted: A World for One Billion,” emphasizing the importance of access, dignity, and empowerment for persons with disabilities. In the United States, the National Health Law Program has been instrumental in addressing systemic inequities. Their advocacy has led to the affirmation that healthcare providers cannot deny services like abortions or pain management based on disability, race, or gender stereotypes. This marks a significant step toward ensuring that disabled individuals receive equitable healthcare services.

In addition, organizations such as Cross the Hurdles, led by Abha Khetarpal in India, are providing counseling and resources focused on the sexual health and rights of people with disabilities. Khetarpal has been a vocal advocate, challenging societal stereotypes and highlighting the need for comprehensive sexuality education tailored to disabled individuals. These efforts collectively contribute to a global movement striving for the recognition and realization of the sexual and reproductive rights of people with disabilities, fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

In short, even in 2025, it's clear that supporting the sexuality and desires of disabled people is still essential. Many societal attitudes, structural obstacles, and ongoing barriers continue to limit their rights to sexual and reproductive health, personal freedom, and full inclusion. While laws against discrimination and global efforts—like those showcased at the 2025 Global Disability Summit—have made

progress, disabled individuals often still face challenges such as inaccessible healthcare, lack of sex education tailored to their needs, and harmful stereotypes that either erase or infantilize their sexuality. Truly supporting their sexual freedom means more than just providing accessible services; it requires creating respectful spaces where their right to pleasure, choice, and intimacy is fully honored as part of their humanity. This support also involves addressing overlapping forms of discrimination—like ableism mixed with gender or racial bias—that unfairly limit access to compassionate care and meaningful relationships. Through education, policy change, and inclusive health programs, we can begin to break down these barriers and recognize disabled people as complete sexual beings with equal rights to love, intimacy, and self-expression. Ultimately, ongoing efforts like this help affirm their dignity, enhance well-being, and challenge the exclusion that still shadows many disabled people's sexual lives today.

By Supporting documentaries like *Take a Look at This Heart* is incredibly important because they shine a light on stories that often go unheard—those of disabled people's love, sexuality, and relationships. These films challenge harmful stereotypes that paint disabled individuals as asexual or incapable of intimacy, helping to humanize and normalize their experiences. By amplifying authentic voices, they educate audiences, break down societal taboos, and promote empathy and understanding. Such documentaries also provide representation that disabled people rarely see in mainstream media, validating their feelings and desires. Supporting these projects encourages more inclusive storytelling, sparks important conversations, and helps push for greater rights, accessibility, and acceptance. In short, backing films like *Take a Look at This Heart* contributes to building a more compassionate and inclusive society where everyone's sexuality and humanity are respected.

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