



*Legal Seat – Helsinki, Finland*

## **WORLD FEDERATION OF THE DEAF**

An International Non-Governmental Organisation in official liaison with ECOSOC, UNESCO, ILO, WHO and the Council of Europe, established in Rome in 1951

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### **Deaf women and girls not able to enjoy basic human rights**

**A submission by the World Federation of the Deaf on the half day of general discussion on women and girls with disabilities, Geneva 17 April 2013**

**Presented at the session by:** Jenny Nilsson, President, World Federation of the Deaf Youth Section (WFDYS)

**Submission authored by:** Dr. Joseph Murray, Chair, World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) Human Rights Work Group and Jenny Nilsson, President, WFDYS.

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The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is an international non-governmental organisation representing approximately 72 million deaf people worldwide. It is estimated that more than 80 percent of these 72 million live in developing countries, where authorities are rarely familiar with their needs or desires. WFD is recognised by the United Nations (UN) as the representative organisation for deaf people worldwide. The WFD works closely with the UN and its various agencies in promoting the human rights of deaf people in accordance with the principles and objectives of the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other general acts and recommendations of the UN and its specialised agencies.

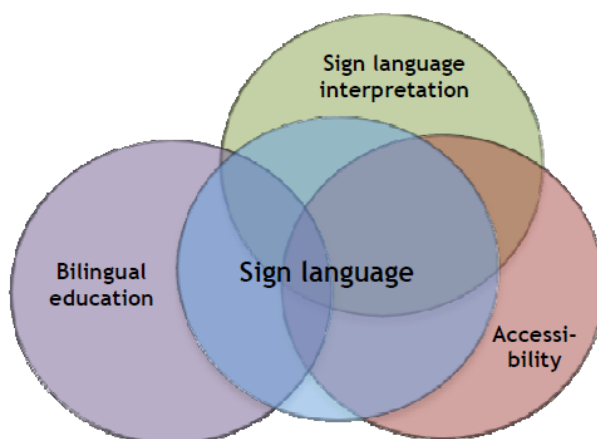
WFD has a policy of closely collaborating with its member organisations. This close interaction ensures that WFD's work truly reflects the best interests of deaf people, by having member input from planning through implementation and follow-up. WFD has an Expert Group on Deaf Women and Children. Members of Expert Groups provide technical aid and expert advice, either directly or indirectly, to the WFD Secretariat and WFD Ordinary Members. The WFDYS is a section of the WFD which works to promote the interests of Deaf youth worldwide.

This submission on strengthening the human rights of deaf women and girls is based in part on the WFD Report *Deaf People and Human Rights* (henceforth “Report”).<sup>1</sup> This Report is based on a survey which explores the lives of Deaf people in 93 countries, most of which are developing countries. The report concludes “relatively few countries deny Deaf people access to education, government services or equal citizenship on the basis of deafness alone. But lack of recognition of sign language, lack of bilingual education, limited availability of sign language interpreting services and widespread lack of awareness and knowledge about the situation of Deaf people deprive most Deaf people of access to large sections of society. Thus they are not able to truly enjoy even basic human rights.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Basic Factors for Human Rights of Deaf People**

For deaf people, sign language is a fundamental human right from which it is possible to achieve all other human rights. The Report outlines four basic factors for the achievement of human rights for deaf people:

- “Recognition and use of sign language(s), including recognition of and respect for Deaf culture and identity
- Bilingual education in sign language(s) and the national language(s)
- Accessibility to all areas of society and life, including legislation to secure equal citizenship for all and prevent discrimination
- Sign language interpretation”<sup>3</sup>



The emphasis on sign language is apparent in the image above, taken from the Report, with sign language occupying a central and determining role for all other basic human rights.<sup>4</sup> The Report notes, “It has frequently been observed that sign language is repressed in many countries and its use is not permitted in education. The consequence is that Deaf people are not aware of the rights they have, and live as a highly marginalised group especially in most

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<sup>1</sup> Hilde Haualand and Colin Allen, *Deaf People and Human Rights*, World Federation of the Deaf, 2009.

Available at <http://www.wfdeaf.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Deaf-People-and-Human-Rights-Report.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> *Deaf People and Human Rights* (2009), 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Deaf People and Human Rights* (2009), 9. Figure from same page.

<sup>4</sup> *Deaf People and Human Rights* (2009), 9.

developing countries. There is usually no or only very little access to information for Deaf people.”<sup>5</sup> The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities recognises the importance of sign language and access to a deaf community in five of its Articles. Full implementation of these Articles entails, among other items, recognition of national signed languages.

### **Lack of data on the situation of Deaf women and girls**

This submission wishes to highlight a significant barrier with regard to fully understanding the human rights situation of deaf people in gender-specific ways. There is simply very little data on the lives of deaf people, especially deaf people in developing countries. As noted in the Report, “The lack of data hinders efficient planning and targeting of development co-operation projects; as well, lack of knowledge about the situation of Deaf people in each country and region makes education and improved awareness more problematic.”<sup>6</sup> The Report goes on to note the paucity of data on “the quality and quantity of the various services and institutions serving Deaf people” and of gender-specific data in particular.<sup>7</sup>

Research on deafness has largely focused on a medical model which looks at hearing loss. With this submission, the WFD and WFDYS wishes to bring attention to the need for more research focused on the human rights situation of deaf people, and of specific populations of deaf people, including deaf women and girls.

### **International, Regional, and National meetings of Deaf Women**

One way in which to understand the needs of deaf women and girls is through the principle of “nothing about us without us”. Deaf women and girls should have the opportunity to comment on their own life situations. The WFD’s quadrennial World’s Congresses of the World Federation of the Deaf has special interest group (SIG) meetings for particular groups. SIGs on Deaf Women have been a regular feature of the WFD’s Congresses. An overview of SIG reports from past Congresses show these SIGS emphasized the importance of:

- Deaf female role models and deaf women leaders
- Gender equality
- Deaf bilingual education
- Employment opportunities for deaf women
- Promotion of women to leadership or management positions
- Recognize the history of deaf women by developing books in this area

Key conclusions from several Congresses were that information, training programmes, and support for deaf women, especially those from developing countries should be a priority.

The WFD has eight Regional Secretariats which conduct activities in different world regions. There have been regional meetings of Deaf women in Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, and the Arab Region. The WFD and WFDYS both attended the “First Forum of Deaf Training for

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<sup>5</sup> *Deaf People and Human Rights* (2009), 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Deaf People and Human Rights* (2009), 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Deaf People and Human Rights* (2009), 52.

Deaf Women” in Doha, Qatar in 2012, with representatives from 13 Arab nations present.<sup>8</sup> The WFD Asia/Pacific Region (WFD RSAP) November 2012 meeting highlighted issues of discrimination for deaf women. Among other items, the meeting stressed that there is not a lot of access to information about women’s rights on Sign Language. They conclude that deaf women suffer serious discrimination part of two causes: being deaf and being women, this double discrimination impacting all areas of their life.<sup>9</sup>

These meetings are important in highlighting gender-specific issues for deaf women in different nations and regions of the world. There are also associations or groups in several countries, such as Colombia, Uganda, and the United States, which serve to highlight human rights issues concerning deaf women and girls.

## **Conclusion**

The WFD and WFDYS urge the United Nations and its affiliated agencies, national governments, non-governmental associations, aid organisations, and other entities working with deaf people to cooperate to remedy the lack of gender-specific data on deaf women and girls, with attention being paid to national, regional, and other variations in the lived experiences of this population. These entities should work with the WFD, the WFDYS and representative organisations of deaf people worldwide to promote and utilize associations and networks of deaf women. In this way, we can work to achieve human rights objectives for deaf women and girls.

In conclusion, the WFD and WFDYS would like to remind the Committee of the continuing need for fulfillment of the WFD’s Vision, affirmed by the WFD General Assembly in 2011:

*“Deaf people have full human rights in an equal world where they and their sign languages are recognised and included as part of human diversity.”*

We recommend the Committee, and other actors in the human rights field, use this Vision as a guiding principle in the further promotion of the needs of deaf women and girls.

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<sup>8</sup> Colin Allen, ”President’s Column, *WFD Newsletter* June 2012, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ichiro Miyamoto, Director WFD Regional Secretariat, Asia. “Report on Deaf Women’s Meeting: The Deaf women’s meeting is a new session held in WFD Regional Secretariat in Asia/Pacific Representatives Meeting.” E-mail communication with WFD Office, February 5, 2013.