

Sign Language Recognition

From CRPD to today



WFD 75TH ANNIVERSARY
ROME



Impact of CRPD in sign language rights

Global state of sign language rights

Moving forward

A right that already existed, but needed to be named



Language Rights **before** CRPD was
adopted in 2006

- UDHR (Art. 2)
- ICESCR
- ICCPR (Arts. 2, 4, 24)
- Vienna Declaration
- UN Declaration on Minorities
- Convention on the Rights of the Child (Art. 30)
- UNESCO Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001)

What was missing?

A legal instrument that **named sign language explicitly** — **as a language** — instead of folding deaf people into a generic disability frame.

Sign language rights mean that deaf people have a right to live, learn and participate through sign language



Acquire

Early and sustained access to a national sign language from childhood

Use

Use national sign languages freely in family, school, work, culture and public life

Access

Information, justice, health, disaster response and services in sign language

Be recognised

As members of a linguistic and cultural community, with deaf-led participation

CRPD Adoption in 2006



**The CRPD
recognised
sign
languages in
guaranteeing
the rights of
deaf people
by addressing
it in 5 articles**

Article	What it supports
Article 2	Defines and recognises sign languages as languages
Article 9	Access to information and professional sign language interpreters
Article 21	Freedom of expression, access to information, and official recognition of sign languages.
Article 24	Inclusive education and learning of sign language.
Article 30	Recognition and support of deaf cultural and linguistic identity.

CPRD Committee and General Comments



Expanding sign language rights across the CPRD



2014

GC 1 & GC 2

**Legal capacity +
accessibility**

**Sign language
interpretation supports
autonomy, legal
transactions and equal
access.**

2016

GC 4

Education

**Sign language learning,
linguistic identity,
accessible materials and
qualified staff.**

2018

GC 6

**Equality and non-
discrimination**

**Sign-language learning
environments, deaf peers
and deaf adult role
models.**

2018

GC 7

Participation

**Sign language
interpretation enables
meaningful consultation
and public participation.**

CPRD Committee made national sign language recognition a repeated recommendation



2015
Turkmenistan

2016 Italy

2019 Kuwait

2021 France

2022 Laos

2025 Palau



Recognition is a pathway to equality, participation and deaf identity.



A total of **84/195** (193 member states and 2 observers) have achieved national level recognition
111 still do not

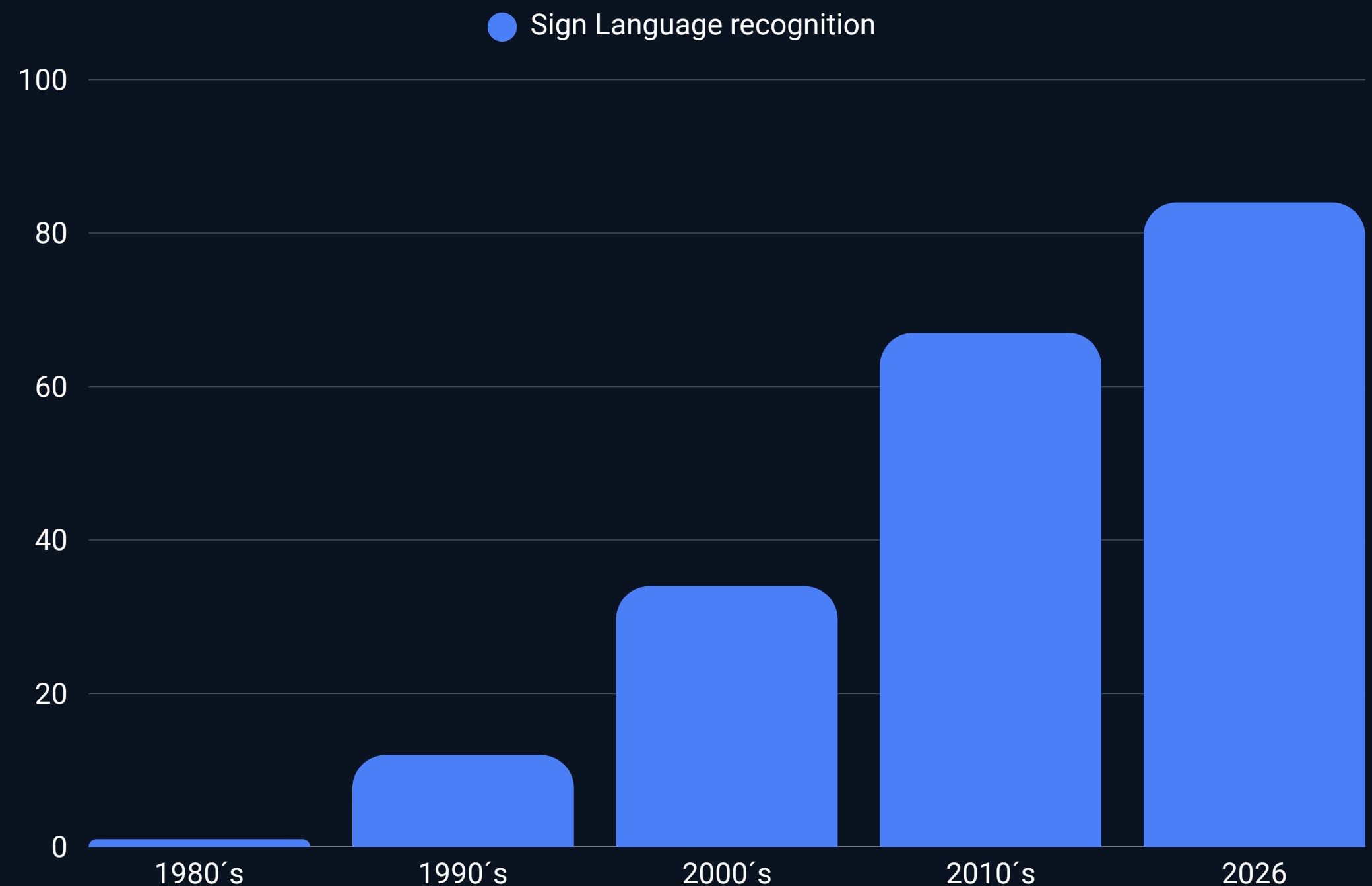


84 countries recognise a national sign language

Since the CRPD was adopted,
59 of the 84 recognitions have
followed —
about **seven in ten** of the total.



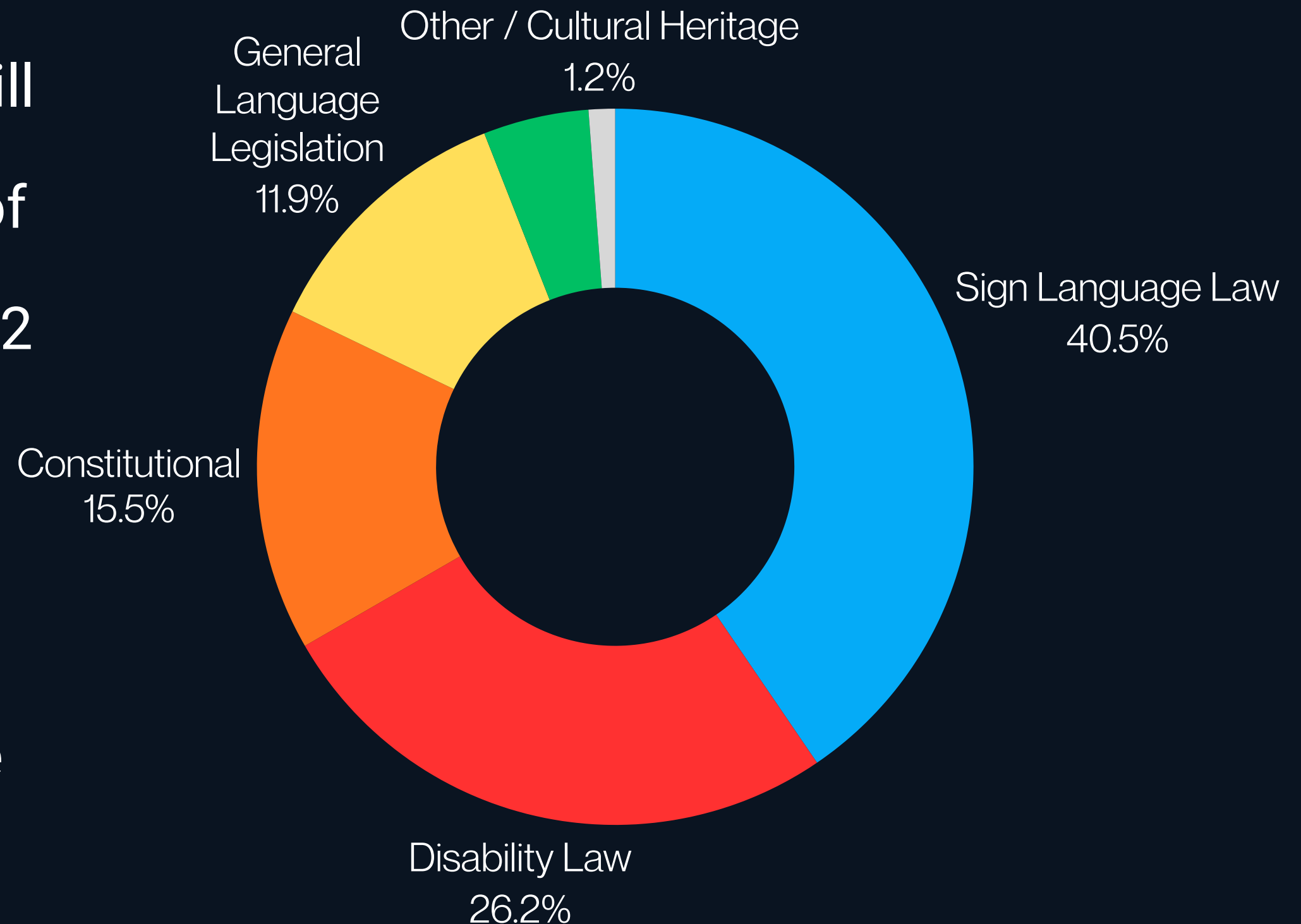
Cumulative growth by decade



Not all recognition is equal

The largest single pathway (27%) still frames sign language as a disability accommodation, not the language of a linguistic-cultural community — exactly the distinction CRPD Article 2 was written to resolve.

Recognition is often staged.
At least 15 (of 84) countries moved from a weaker law to a stronger one over time



Features vs. recurring gaps



Strong laws

- Full parity with other official languages
- Concrete, enforceable and comprehensive rights
- Guaranteed deaf majority for law oversight- sign language council
- Deaf-led consultation explicit in the law

Gaps

- Symbolic recognition
- Not comprehensive, have many gaps, several only focus on accessibility
- No clear guidelines on implementation
- Non- enforceable wording nor clear signs of deaf-led oversight

Recognition is necessary.
It isn't sufficient.

A law doesn't automatically deliver bilingual education or interpreter access for example.

Work on implementation and accountability is permanent, and must involve deaf communities throughout their representative national associations



Moving forward

The next generation of laws must go further.



- **Full parity with other official languages**, not a clause inside disability or accessibility issues.
- **Enforceable rights** — move from symbolic wording to enforceable rights: early language access, qualified interpreters, bilingual education
- **Clear guidelines for implementation**, not declarative
- **Deaf-led consultation and oversight written in the law** itself, from the start





Guidelines for Achieving Sign Language Rights

A WFD Advocacy Toolkit



Download the guide

WFD supports your
advocacy towards legal
recognition and posterior
implementation

