



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. WFD was established in Rome in 1951.

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World Federation of the Deaf Charter on Sign Language Rights for All

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1. We, the signatories of the present Charter¹, reaffirm our strong commitment to take all necessary steps to safeguard the inclusion of deaf people in society, recognition of their needs, dignity and human rights as provided for in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the UN Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Developments Goals and all other international human rights treaties.
- 1.2. We emphasise the paradigm shift from the medical model of disability to the human rights model of disability in line with the CRPD. Deaf people are human rights holders entitled to equal opportunities to participate in society in the same way as other citizens.
- 1.3. We strive to ensure that deaf people have equal access in society, public and private life, through the use of sign languages, without discrimination, to ensure the full enjoyment of their human, civil, cultural and political rights. Through this Charter, we reaffirm our collective will to place deaf people as actors of their own destiny and inclusion in society.
- 1.4. For the purpose of this Charter, Sign Language Rights for All includes the rights of deaf people, deaf children, deaf youth, deaf women, deaf elders, deaf LGBTQIA+, deaf migrants, deafblind people, families of deaf children, children of deaf adults (CODA), and all other people using sign language to benefit from full and effective access to the community, including the Deaf Community and mainstream services through the use of sign language.

2. SIGN LANGUAGES

- 2.1. We wholeheartedly support and commit to ensuring the promotion of the United Nations General Assembly [Resolution A/C.3/72/L.36/Rev.1](#) recognising 23rd September as the International Day of Sign Languages as part of the International Week of the Deaf. This recognition promotes the legal recognition of national sign languages as official languages, equal to national spoken and written languages.
- 2.2. We recognise national sign languages as the key to the inclusion of deaf people in society. National sign languages are full, complex natural languages with the same linguistic properties as spoken languages,

¹ The signatories of the Charter include but are not limited to governments, national, regional and global institutions, national and international organisations as well as any other relevant stakeholders committed to enhance and improve the human rights of deaf people nationally, regionally and globally.

including phonetic, phonemic, syllabic, morphological, syntactic, discourse, and pragmatic levels of organisation. They are the mother tongue and the natural languages of deaf children. They are the vector of the inclusion of deaf children both in deaf communities and in society, fostering the building of their own identities and communities.

- 2.3. We acknowledge that deaf communities are part of a unique intersectionality of rights, belonging to both linguistic and cultural groups, and the disability movement. Deaf people have their own identity, mainly tied to national sign languages and social connections built on the shared experience of the use of these languages. Sign language and deaf culture strengthens multilingualism and are means of promoting, protecting and preserving the diversity of languages and cultures globally. Deaf people are found among all cultural, linguistic, and ethnic minorities and the deaf community is a diverse and intersectional community.
- 2.4. We deplore and profoundly regret the 2nd International Conference on Education of the Deaf in 1880, in Milan, Italy, which passed a resolution banning the use of sign languages in the education of deaf children, which had widespread and long-lasting repercussions for the language and linguistic rights of deaf communities worldwide. Consequently, deaf people were denied their most fundamental human right, their use of sign language.
- 2.5. We applaud the resolution from the 21st International Conference on Education of the Deaf in 2010 in Vancouver, Canada, rejecting Milan resolutions. History must not be forgotten in order to ensure that deaf people's right to use sign language is respected and promoted in all areas of life.
- 2.6. We commit to establishing sign language research centres and including deaf studies programs in universities and other institutions of learning.

3. INCLUSIVE SIGN LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENTS

- 3.1. We emphasise quality inclusive education for deaf children which can only be achieved through the provision of bilingual education in the national sign language and national written language. Bilingual schools must follow the official national educational curriculum and include the teaching of sign languages and deaf culture. Teachers must master sign language with native-level fluency and deaf children must be surrounded by their signing peers and deaf adult role models.
- 3.2. We reinforce the importance of providing government funded sign language training to families of deaf children. Sign languages are the only languages that deaf children can learn naturally and effortlessly for which reason families must be supported in the learning of these languages to communicate with their deaf children. The acquisition of a language from an early age is crucial to develop literacy and the cognitive capacities of children and in the case of deaf children, this is sign language.
- 3.3. We highlight the necessity of providing sign language training to the wide range of persons who may directly interact with deaf people. Those persons include but are not limited to health workers, social workers, employers, citizens, teachers and civil servants.
- 3.4. We encourage the development of Information, Communication and Technology as a means of accessibility and the availability of relay services that include video relay to facilitate the participation of deaf people in society. Signing avatars may be used in limited situations such as pre-recorded static customer information but must not replace professional and qualified sign languages interpreters and translators.

4. EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL DEAF PEOPLE

- 4.1. We commit to promoting the inclusion of deaf people in society through employment. Employment of deaf people is a cornerstone of implementing the social model highlighted in the Sustainable Development Goals and the CRPD. Deaf people must be given the opportunity to thrive in an accessible and inclusive working environment, which is possible through sign languages to reach their full

potential and maximise their participation in and contribution to society.

- 4.2. We commit to funding, promoting and encouraging the professionalisation and full access to qualified and accredited sign languages interpreters and sign language translators to guarantee the inclusion and participation of deaf people in society. Sign language interpreting training programs need to be established and developed with the leadership of these programs undertaken by deaf persons. Government funded professional sign language interpreting services must be made available for deaf people in all areas of life.
- 4.3. We note that deaf women are under-represented and face double discrimination due to their gender and disability intersectionality. Specific measures must be implemented to safeguard gender equality, diversity and equal participation in society and in decision-making processes for all deaf people.
- 4.4. We commit to making our health services and health information, including sexual and reproductive health care, health prevention programmes including psychiatric care and psychotherapy accessible in the national sign language. Equal access to health care is crucial for deaf people if they are to thrive as human beings and to ensure everyone's life is respected, protected and dignified.

5. DEAF LEADERSHIP

- 5.1. We stress the importance of providing sufficient funding, capacity building and empowerment to deaf organisations to ensure they are able to exercise leadership. It is only through sign languages that deaf people are able to stand firm and demand their human rights.
- 5.2. We note the urgent need to provide adequate funding to enable capacity building of deaf organisations especially in Global South countries. Knowledge empowers deaf people and allows them to be agents of change by collaborating with various stakeholders to build sustainable partnerships for the realisation of their human rights.
- 5.3. We stress the necessity of providing quality, harmonised and reliable data on deaf people disaggregated by gender, age, education, sign languages proficiency, disability, employment and sexual orientation. Such data would allow policy-makers to have an accurate overview of the situation faced by deaf people with enhancements made accordingly and adequately.
- 5.4. We reiterate our commitment to include deaf people as well as their representative organisations in the process of planning, realisation and monitoring the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and the CRPD to leave no one behind and ensure the principle "*Nothing about us without us*" becomes a reality.
- 5.5. We commit to aligning our strategy and policies related to the promotion of sign languages and the inclusion of deaf people according to the values and philosophy of the WFD and the present Charter.