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“The participation and leadership of persons with disabilities in building a disability-inclusive, accessible and sustainable post-COVID-19 world”

*United Nations Virtual Expert General Meeting
in collaboration with UN Women and the UN Inter-Agency Support Group on CRPD*

25 – 27 May 2021

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Summary of the Paper in International Sign: https://youtu.be/4-H5RX2V_mk

Introduction

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Federation of the Deaf Youth Section (WFDYS) has issued several joint statements with several other disability organizations. We recognise that the pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on marginalised groups including disabled, women and youths. This paper will adopt parts from the three joint statements, which were made in collaboration with the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), Deaf Kidz International, International Federation of Hard of Hearing People (IFHOH) and International Federation of Hard of Hearing Young People (IFHOHYP). The paper highlights the important findings from the joint statements.

[Statement and Guidelines on Best Practice for Access to Higher Education for Deaf Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) *(in collaboration with World Federation of the Deaf)*

The World Health Organisation (WHO) provided their public health measures recommendations for the national governments to adopt, which are intended to prevent spreading of the virus and to keep citizens safe. These recommendations have impacted higher education institutions such as universities and colleges. They have physically closed and shifted to online learning for the students. Online learning requires a variety of technologies to continue delivering higher education.

Key Points:

- Deaf students must be considered in all planning and implementation efforts during the shift to remote and online education during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Educational institutions should foresee the provision of national sign language

interpretation for online and remote classes.

- All course materials must be accessible to all students at the time of release.

The rights of persons with disabilities, including deaf and deaf youths, are affirmed and recognised under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). They have the right to have professional sign language interpreters to participate fully in all aspects of life and receive equal access to information. The UN CRPD also recognises the persons with disabilities' right to the freedom of expression and opinion. In this case, the deaf and deaf young people have the right to receive and express information in their national sign language(s). Additionally, the UN CRPD also recognised the right of deaf students to request receiving reasonable accommodation in higher education. Education is crucial for any individual to have a full participation in society. When transitioning from in-person to online instruction, deaf students' rights and their accommodation needs should not be left behind.

Key Recommendations:

- Consult with the deaf student on their preferred accommodation requirements which can include certified professional national sign language interpreters, and notetakers. The deaf student should also have an input in which national sign language interpreters are hired and to request alternative interpreters if the ones chosen are not suitable.
- Ensure that all of the class lectures and discussions are accessible to the deaf student which should be professionally interpreted by certified national sign language interpreters and auditory or filmed class materials should be professionally subtitled or the information to be provided in alternative formats at the same time as they are made available.
- Deaf students should not be burdened with coordinating reasonable accommodations provisions as they should be the responsibility of the educational institutions. Deaf students also should not be asked to cover additional fees for quality national sign language interpretation or other accommodation provisions.
- Educational institutions should ensure that the national sign language interpreters are qualified and accredited by their national interpreting organisation. Certified deaf interpreters can also be used.
- In events where it is not possible to ensure a deaf student's full access, such as lack of available national sign language interpreters, to higher education, the classes should be postponed until a time the educational institution is able to provide a full and equal access. Alternatively, the institution can also find other solutions, such as recording classes for translation as immediately as possible and without penalty to the deaf student.

Responding to the Safeguarding and Protection Needs of Deaf Children and Youth During the COVID-19 Pandemic *(in collaboration with World Federation of the Deaf and Deaf Kidz International)*

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries around the world have had or continue to have partial or full lockdowns which meant many deaf children and their families had to remain home. The closure of schools has also forced deaf children to lose out on learning due to lack of educational alternatives or accessibility. The safety of deaf children and youth is compromised due to the lack of resources and accessibility in many countries too.

Key Points:

- The Committee on the Rights of the Child recognises the importance of learning national sign language(s) for the parents and family members of deaf children, but many countries have not implemented this recommendation. The families of deaf children who are under-resourced and struggling are now exacerbated by the pandemic.
- The uncertainties of the global economy and the pressures of poverty and marginalisation are disproportionately impacting the world's vulnerable children, including deaf children and youths. They are easy targets for child labour, domestic servitude, prostitution, forced begging and other exploitative situations.
- Deaf children and youths are at risk of being victims of physical, psychological and/or sexual abuse and violence, especially if they are forced to isolate with a perpetrator or an abusive individual.
- The shift to online settings and longer periods of isolating at home also increases the risk and vulnerability of children. Deaf children and youths are at risk of connecting with adults who actively seek them out and sexually groom them.

Key Recommendations:

- National governments, public health institutions and other stakeholders should ensure that deaf people, including children and youths to receive accessible information in a language and format of their choice. This includes the use of national sign language(s), which also encompasses tactile sign languages. Any crucial information and public health recommendations should be immediately made accessible and available.
- National governments should work with deaf people through their representative organisation(s), national associations of the deaf, to ensure that adequate information and safeguarding access to health and education are provided.
- National governments, working with the national associations of the deaf, should implement accessible emergency services for deaf children and youths who are victims of physical, psychological and/or sexual abuse in accessible formats, such as direct communication, SMS texting and via remote interpreting through Video Relay Services.

- Governments should work with the associations of the deaf and organisations working with deaf people, children and youths, to ensure that they are adequately protected from physical, psychological and sexual abuse and violence.
- Deaf children and youths should cautiously use the Internet to maintain social connections with each other and the parents of deaf children and youths should be given support in educating them in safe Internet and social media use.

Statement on Accessible Communication for Deaf and Hard of Hearing People during COVID-19 Pandemic *(in collaboration with World Federation of the Deaf, International Federation of Hard of Hearing People and International Federation of Hard of Hearing Young People)*

The public health recommendations have included the use of facial coverings and social distancing, which can pose barriers for deaf and hard of hearing people. Deaf and hard of hearing people rely heavily on facial expressions, speechreading and other visual inputs in addition to linguistic inputs to understand conversations. The use of visual cues are important for both deaf and hard of hearing people and the face coverings impedes their communication. This has shown the need for accessible communication for everyone.

Key Points:

- Hard of hearing persons define accessibility as a practice that will ensure equal access for all hard of hearing persons in all forms of communication. The accessibility can be achieved through the use of technology (e.g. assistive listening devices, hearing loops, speech-to-text services or apps) or without (e.g. pen and paper, clear view of speaker's face for speechreading). The personal protective equipment can be adapted to create accessible environments to allow clear communication.
- Full accessibility for deaf people is reached when all aurally transmitted information and communications are provided in national sign language(s). The use of national sign language(s) is complementary with social distancing measures as they do not require physical proximity. The information shared with the public should be also made available and accessible through national sign language(s). Other visual means of communication can be used too.

Key Recommendations:

- Mandate the use of clear, transparent face masks and shields for people who communicate frequently with the public. Transparent masks should be made available at all health institutions and be used when deaf and hard of hearing people come in.
- Deaf people must be given access to national sign language interpreters upon request in advance. Alternatively, some hard of hearing people may request access to a captionist.

- Essential information should be provided in text format in public spaces, especially in medical settings. To ensure maximum access, the information should be supplemented with visual aids. Additionally, the printed information should contain a QR code to access the same information in national sign language(s) or via the provision of remote sign language interpretation services.
- The use of speech-to-text apps can facilitate communication for one-on-one conversations. The background noise (e.g. music) should be reduced so deaf and hard of hearing people can accurately follow conversations through automated speech apps.
- A positive individual and societal attitude should be adopted when communicating with deaf and hard of hearing people with visual communication preferences. These can include the use of national sign language(s), gesture-based communication, writing with pen and paper, using speech-to-text apps and making sure the face is clear and visible.

Conclusion

The public health crisis has shown the flaws and cracks within our society where many of marginalised people are forgotten or left behind. The WFDYS has recognised the impact of the global upheaval that has affected deaf children and youths in many aspects in our society including access, education and safety. The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the greater need for accessible, inclusive and sustainable systems that will not only benefit the marginalised communities but other members of our communities as well. These recommendations should be taken into consideration for the United Nations, the national governments, policymakers, private sector, academic institutions and other stakeholders to ensure that the post-COVID-19 world is fair and equitable.

