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Hilde Haualand
hilde.haualand@fafo.no

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Sign Language Interpreting: A Human Rights Issue

Hilde Haualand¹

Fafo of Labor and Social Research, Norway

World Federation of Institute the Deaf and the Swedish National Association of the Deaf

Abstract

Viewed as isolated cases, sign language interpreters facilitate communication between 1 or more people. Viewed broadly, sign language interpreting may be seen as a tool to secure the human rights of sign language using deaf people. To fulfill this goal, interpreters must be provided with proper training and work according to a code of ethics. A recent international survey of 93 countries, mostly in the developing world (H. Haualand & C. Allen, 2009), found that very few respondents had an established sign language interpreter service, formal education and training opportunities for interpreters, or an endorsed code of ethics to regulate the practice of interpreters in their country. As a consequence of these limitations in the interpreting field around the world, there is potential for deaf people's human rights to be violated. In this article, the accessibility and training of sign language interpreters are discussed from a human rights point of view within the context of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities, and a snapshot of the previously unexplored interpreting scene in various countries around the world is given.

Keywords: human rights; Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities; accessibility; interpreter education; code of ethics; developing countries

¹ Correspondence to: hilde.haualand@fafo.no.

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Sign Language Interpreting: A Human Rights Issue

1. The Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities: A paradigm shift

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD)² indicates a paradigm shift from a medical focus to a political and social focus in the work to secure the freedom and dignity of people with disabilities. Attitudinal and environmental barriers, not the physical impairment, prevent people with disabilities from enjoying full human rights. For sign language using deaf people, major barriers include a lack of recognition, acceptance, and use of a sign³ language in all areas of life, as well as a lack of respect for deaf people's cultural and linguistic identity.

1.1. *A World Federation of the Deaf report: Deaf people and human rights*

The information provided in this commentary article is based on the report titled *Deaf People and Human Rights*⁴ (Haualand & Allen, 2009) and data collected from the survey conducted as a part of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) Global Education Pre-Planning Project on the Human Rights of Deaf People. Topics discussed include the legal status of national sign languages; access to sign language interpreters, including the existence of a sign language interpreting service; training for sign language interpreters; and whether there is a code of ethics for sign language interpreters in the various countries surveyed.

1.2. *Deaf people and sign language in the CRPD*

In the CRPD, sign language interpreting is highlighted as a core tool for ensuring the human rights of deaf people. The CRPD mentions sign language in the following five articles:

- Article 2 _ Definitions;
- Article 9 _ Accessibility;
- Article 21 _ Freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information;

²The full text of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities can be found at <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?id=259>

³ Editorial note: The author has requested the use of the term 'sign language' rather than 'signed language' be used throughout the article in reference to languages that are signed in general, in order to adhere to World Federation of the Deaf policy.

⁴The reports from the Global Education Pre-Planning Project and the Deaf People and Human Rights Report can be downloaded from <http://www.wfdeaf.org/projects.html>

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- Article 24 _ Education; and
- Article 30 _ Participation in cultural life, recreation, leisure and sports.

The definition of language in the CRPD includes “spoken and signed languages and other forms of non-spoken languages” (Article 2)⁵. Thus, sign languages are implicitly included in all articles that mention “communication” or “language.” The CRPD provides a powerful tool for enhancing the human rights of people with disabilities, and the afore-mentioned articles highlight the basic factors for protecting the human rights of deaf people.

However, simply having access to qualified sign language interpreters is not sufficient to ensure that deaf people can enjoy their human rights. The implementation of four basic, and closely intertwined, factors is tantamount to the protection of the human rights of 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.
- Signed language interpretation.

Full enjoyment of human rights for deaf people can be found in the core of this model, in which sign language (including recognition of and respect for deaf culture and identity) is the central factor. The sign language interpretation and accessibility circles share more space than the other circle because accessibility often rests upon the availability of sign language interpreters. Sign language is at the core of deaf people’s lives and makes accessibility for deaf people possible; without accessibility, deaf people are isolated.

A key factor for access to government services (and any other service run by institutions and businesses in which the personnel do not use sign language) for deaf people is provision of, and access to, sign language interpreters, as is highlighted in Article 9 (accessibility) of the CRPD which states that in order to

enable persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life, States Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas. (p. XX)

The article further declares that States Parties, among others, shall take appropriate measures to “provide forms of live assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers and *professional sign language interpreters*, to facilitate accessibility to buildings and other facilities open to the public” (CRPD, YEAR, Article 9.2 (e), p. XX; [author’s emphasis]). In WFD’s view, sufficient availability and qualification of sign language interpreters is a human rights issue, and education and training of interpreters is also regarded in this light. To safeguard a deaf person’s independence and autonomy (CRPD Preamble [n]), the provision of trained sign language interpreters, with a true commitment to provide their services according to the code of ethics for sign language interpreters, is a prerequisite.

The survey revealed that of the 93 respondent countries, only 18 have a service for providing sign language interpreters, training for sign language interpreters, a code of ethics that they are obliged to follow, and a government that is prepared to pay for the interpreters’ salaries. However, in most of those countries in which the formal requisites are established, the number of qualified interpreters is too low to meet the actual demand. The lack of qualified interpreters, service providers, and training curricula and institutions, as well as the absence of a code of practice to encourage the professionalization of the interpreting field in many countries in the world reflect the potential for deaf people to experience a violation of their human rights on a daily basis.

⁵ See <http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?id=262>

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2. The deaf people and human rights report: Data collection

As part of the WFD Global Education Pre-Planning Project, a questionnaire was sent to organizations and/or associations in 123 countries, and 93 responded. The goal was to collect deaf people's experiences and views on the above mentioned topics, and as far as possible, the questionnaire was sent to the WFD Ordinary Members in the seven WFD regions.⁶ WFD membership was used as an indicator of the nature of the respondents because only national associations of deaf people with (a) a clear majority of deaf voting members, (b) a governing board with a majority of deaf persons, and (c) goals similar to WFD can become Ordinary Members. In countries that did not have any registered Ordinary Members of WFD, the questionnaire was sent to other organizations or associations that were assumed to represent, or have extensive knowledge about, the lives of deaf people. Sixty-eight of the respondents were Ordinary Members of the WFD, which indicate that they were run and led by deaf people, whereas 25 respondents were organizations, institutions, or associations mainly led by hearing people, working *for* deaf people, and not ordinary members of WFD.

The questionnaire was available in English, Russian, Spanish, French, Arabic, and International Sign. In each of the seven regions, a deaf regional co-coordinator was appointed and a regional working group was established. The regional co-coordinators were responsible for establishing a communication network with the regional members as well as co-coordinating the meeting for the regional working group. The deaf members of the regional working groups were also responsible for acknowledging the survey results as they were received from the country respondents. In the cases in which it was suspected that not all respondents truly understood the questions, the regional working groups were also sometimes able to correct the received answers. It is still likely that some of the responses do not really reflect the situation, so the numbers given in the report and in this article may not be entirely accurate. However, the overall tendency in the responses is clear: deaf people experience violation of their human rights on a daily basis.

3. Status of sign languages

If a sign language is not even recognized as a language in its own right in a particular country, it will be a challenge to present a persuasive argument to the government that the training of interpreters is a necessity. Therefore, the legal status of sign languages is relevant to the question of access to, and training of, sign language interpreters.

3.1. Recognition of sign languages: An aspect of freedom of expression and opinion

The CRPD notes that full citizenship includes "freedom of expression and opinion, including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas on an equal basis with others and through all forms of communication of their choice" (Article 21). Deaf people cannot access enough information to make informed choices, form independent opinions, and express themselves adequately without sign language. Spoken languages are

⁶ The seven WFD regions include the following:

WFD Eastern Europe and Middle Asia Regional Secretariat (WFD EEMARS)

WFD Regional Secretariat for Asia and the Pacific (WFD RSA/P)

WFD Regional Secretariat for South America (WFD RSSA)

WFD Regional Secretariat for Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean (WFD MCAC)

WFD Regional Secretariat for Eastern and Southern Africa (WFD RSESA)

WFD Interim Regional Secretariat for Western and Central Africa Region (WFD WCAR)

WFD Interim Regional Secretariat for the Arab Region (WFD RSAR)

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inaccessible to people with no hearing or limited hearing, and the written form of a spoken language in a particular country will only be accessible to people who are literate. Acquiring literacy is largely dependent on formal educational experience, and many deaf people in various countries around the world experience a sub-standard education or no formal education at all. It is not possible for people to express their opinions and thoughts without a language that they have the predisposition to learn and master effectively and naturally_ and to deaf people, the naturally accessible language is sign language. The measures that ensure the right to freedom of expression for deaf people are not only accepting and facilitating, but also recognizing and promoting, the use of sign languages (Article 21[b and e]). Accepting sign language is indicating acceptance of deaf people; whereas denying sign language is equivalent to denying deaf people their opportunity to enjoy equal citizenship in society. Recognition of sign languages also implies acceptance of the linguistic and cultural identity of deaf communities, as culture and language are inextricably related.

3.2. Sign language dictionaries

A sign language dictionary is a fundamental tool to promote the status of and enhance the use of sign language, and it is a necessity in the education of sign language interpreters. Deaf people, teachers of the deaf, sign language interpreters, hearing parents of deaf children, and other people with a need to communicate with deaf people benefit from sign language dictionaries. A dictionary makes many of the signs of a particular sign language accessible to more people than those who already know it and also serves as documentation of the existence of a sign language. Legal recognition is not necessary for sign language dictionaries to be developed, but the dictionaries can then be used as a tool to show the existence of a (sign) language that needs legal recognition and protection.

3.3. Recognition of sign language in legislation

Whereas 74 respondent countries say that the government recognizes deaf people as citizens on an equal basis, only 44 countries have any kind of formal recognition of the country's sign language(s), as shown in Table 1. The level of legislation varies from sign language being mentioned in official guidelines to having constitutional status. In some countries, the national sign language is recognized at more than one level.

Region	Constitution	Legislation	Policy	Guideline	Other
Eastern Europe and Middle Asia		5			
Asia and the Pacific	1	3	5		
South America	3	2	1		
Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean		2	4		
Southern and Eastern Africa	3	3	9	2	
Western and Central Africa		1			
Arab Region	3	3		5	1
Total	10	19	19	7	1

Table 1: Recognition of sign languages in different legislations

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In 10 countries, sign language is mentioned in the constitution; in 19 countries, it is mentioned in one or more laws. Nineteen countries mention sign language in policy, and seven countries mention sign language in guidelines. Among those who have given detailed information on where and how sign language is formally recognized, most refer to educational laws/policies or laws/policies regulating social and/or welfare services. The survey revealed that in only 30 of the 93 respondent countries (a) are deaf people recognized as equal citizens, (b) is sign language mentioned in legislation, and (c) has a sign language dictionary been developed.

In 15 countries, deaf people are recognized as being equal citizens and have a dictionary, but sign language is not mentioned in legislation. In 10 countries, respondents say deaf people are not recognized as equal citizens, sign language is not mentioned in any legislation, and they have no sign language dictionary; or they simply did not answer the questions. It appears from the data that only in very few countries around the world are sign languages formally recognized in such a way that users of the language have the right to use it for communication in all activities of society and in all aspects of life. Although many countries have some kind of formal recognition, many deaf organizations reported dissatisfaction with the level or scope of this recognition and continue to lobby their government to enhance and improve the status of their sign language(s).

3.4. *Sign languages: Part of the human heritage*

Some respondents, especially in Western and Central Africa and in the Arab region, said that sign languages other than those used by the indigenous deaf populations in their countries were taught in schools and were used by sign language interpreters. This situation, in which national sign languages are threatened by other sign systems (e.g., the Unified Arab Sign Language) or by the importation of foreign sign languages (most often, American Sign Language), is a reminder of the low status of national sign languages as used by deaf people.⁷ Although the natural sign languages of indigenous deaf communities in various countries remain unrecognized and invalidated, others' attempts to change or mold them into artificial and less effective variants of the indigenous sign language are likely to continue. Each natural sign language used by the deaf people of a region or in a country represents the cultural, social, historical, and religious ideas of that region or country. Signed languages are carriers of regional and national cultures and heritages—in the same way spoken languages are; they carry, as well, the culture and heritage of deaf people. Deaf people are not the only individuals who benefit from formal recognition of sign languages. Recognition of sign language is a way to enhance and give respect to the overall linguistic and cultural heritage and sociocultural human capital of each country. It also enriches the linguistic and cultural diversity of humankind. It is important that sign language interpreters and those who plan and provide training for interpreters respect and support the local or national sign language that deaf people use, in order to provide adequate sign language interpretation services.⁸

3.5. *Access to services*

Article 21 (on freedom of expression and opinion, and access to information) in the CRPD says State Parties shall take appropriate measures to (a) provide "... information intended for the general public to persons with disabilities in accessible formats and technologies appropriate to different kinds of disabilities in a timely manner and without additional cost" (21a) and (b) accept and facilitate the "... use of sign languages (author's emphasis), braille, augmentative and alternative communication, and all other accessible means, modes and formats of communication of their choice by persons with disabilities in official interactions" (21b).

⁷ See Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) and other resources provided at www.terralingua.org for discussions on the relationship between language use and status.

⁸ See also the WFD Policy "WFD Statement on the Unification of Sign Languages" at http://www.wfdeaf.org/pdf/policy_statement_signlanguages.pdf.

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Eleven countries reported that deaf people did not have access to government services, such as education, health care, employment, and social welfare. Of the countries that indicated that deaf people did have access to such services, when asked how these services were accessed, about half of the respondents said that deaf people use services in the same way as do hearing people. The regional overviews (Figures 2_8) show, however, that there are severe limits on deaf people's opportunities to benefit from, or fully access, government services in all the countries that responded. Although very few countries deny deaf people formal rights to government services outright, and the number of countries who provide sign language interpreters has grown since 1992 (Joutsalainen, 1992), the responses to the 2008 survey indicate that few, if any, deaf people have access to government services that equals that of hearing people. The reported existence of one or more sign language interpreters in a particular country cannot be taken as a sign that deaf people have equal access to various services, for several reasons, as outlined below.

4. Sign language interpreting services, training and codes of ethics

First, there must be a system for provision of, and equal access to, sign language interpreters for all situations when they are requested, and the deaf person or associations of deaf people should not be solely responsible for paying the interpreters' salaries. Sixty-one country respondents indicated that their government takes no responsibility for paying for sign language interpreters' salaries. Second, sign language interpreting is a profession that serves both deaf and hearing people, and the profession requires training. A professional sign language interpreter is fluent in both the sign and spoken languages of the country and has specialized knowledge in interpreting between two (or more) languages. Knowing some sign language, and having a commitment to "help" deaf and hearing people to communicate are not qualifications to serve as a sign language interpreter. The survey showed that the length and quality of training varies greatly among the respondents, from courses lasting for a few days to education at university level over several years. Third, professional confidentiality and awareness of a signed language interpreter's duties and roles are fundamental to (a) ensure equal status between the parties in a communication situation that involves interpreting, and (b) safeguard a deaf person's right to independence and autonomy. Signed language interpreters must be trained in the languages that they are to translate between (most often, one or more of the spoken languages in the country where he/she is working and one or more of the sign languages that are used by deaf people in the same country). Signed language interpreters also must learn about, understand, and follow the code of ethics for sign language interpreters in that country. A code of ethics (also known as an ethical code or code of professional conduct) for sign language interpreters gives direction on how sign language interpreters shall conduct themselves during the course of their work.

4.1. *A global overview*

In the questionnaire, respondents were asked if their country has a sign language interpreting service, if there is any training for sign language interpreters, if there is a national code of ethics for sign language interpreters, how many sign language interpreters are recognized, and their general opinion of the sign language interpreting provision.

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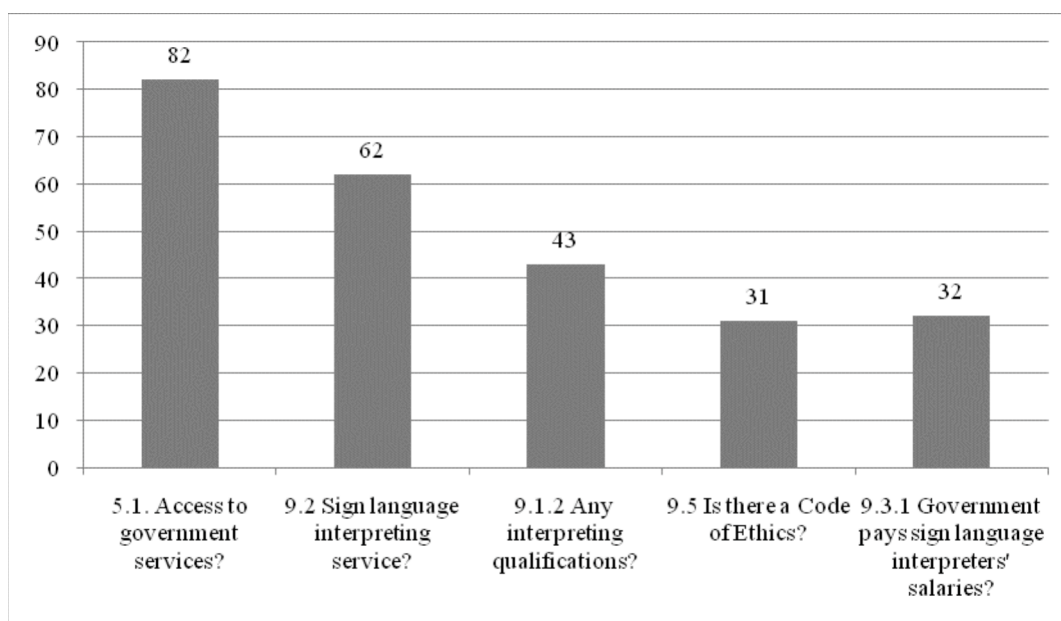


Figure 1. Total overview: Services, training, code of ethics and payment

Figure 1 shows that of the 93 country respondents, 62 reported that there is a sign language interpreting service in their country. Forty-three indicated that there was some kind of training for people who want to become qualified sign language interpreters. However, the question on training may have been interpreted differently by different countries, as some may have included general sign language classes or courses, whereas others may have understood the question to be focused on training in interpreting skills required after gaining fluency in sign language. Thirty-one countries said that there was some kind of national code of ethics for sign language interpreters. Thirty-two countries say that their government takes some responsibility in paying for the sign language interpreters' salaries. Only 18 reported that they had a sign language interpreter service, training provisions for sign language interpreters, a code of ethics *and* a government that is prepared to pay for the interpreters' salaries. These countries include Australia, Belarus, Brazil, Bulgaria, Colombia, Costa Rica, Honduras, Japan, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Mexico, Namibia, Nicaragua, Qatar, Russia, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda. In all other countries, one or more of these factors were missing. Of those respondents reporting that they have a sign language interpreting service, training and code of ethics, only three (Australia, Bulgaria, and Japan) reported that the government paid for all sign language interpreter services. In all other countries, the government paid salaries to sign language interpreters in some or no cases and/or the deaf people themselves, an organization/association of or for deaf people, or other parties paid for interpreters' salaries if the interpreters received any salary at all. Access to higher education illustrates the importance of paying attention to the issue of responsibility for covering the cost of interpreters. Among the 93 respondents, 50 said that there are no formal obstacles against deaf people entering a university, but only 18 countries actually provide interpreting services at the university level. Several of the countries' respondents reporting that deaf people do not have access to a university indicate the reason for this is no, or limited, access to interpreting services. The number of countries in which deaf people are not formally denied access to a university might thus be higher than reported, but the number of countries in which deaf people experience genuine access is much lower; the main reasons for this are a lack of qualified interpreters and a lack of commitment on behalf of the educational institution, government, or other party, to cover the interpreters' salaries.

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4.2. Increase in availability of sign language interpreters

Since 1992 and the WFD survey titled *Deaf People in the Developing World* (Joutsalainen, 1992), there has been considerable growth in the number of countries that say they have sign language interpreters available. In 1992, of the 65 respondents to the WFD survey, 29 indicated that they have sign language interpreters in their country. Of the 93 respondents to the 2008 survey, 80 countries reported that they have one or more sign language interpreters; however, the qualifications and the quality of sign language interpreting services varies greatly. The 13 countries that do not have any sign language interpreters at all include Benin, Bhutan, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mauritania, Myanmar, Seychelles, and Togo. In all other countries, the quality and the scope of the sign language interpreting varies greatly, and the variation is related to the availability of training, professional conduct, and how sign language interpreters are accessed by those who request their services.

5. Regional Overviews

Figures 2_8 show the overall access to government and interpreting services in the respondent countries, sorted by region. Each “yes” to the relevant questions has been given one point. All other answers (“no” and information that deaf people themselves and/or associations have to pay salaries, or no information was provided at all) have been given zero points. The higher the score, the better one can assume access to sign language interpreters is_ and thus access to government services. The countries receiving one point offer only formal access to government services but have none of the basic requirements for a sign language interpreting service; therefore, in these countries deaf people have only partial, if any, access to services. The maximum score for any country is five. However, a maximum score does not mean that one can conclude that deaf people have full access to various services and a well-functioning sign language interpreting service. The highest score indicates only that a sign language interpreting system exists with minimum basic elements (an organized service, some training, a code of ethics, and government recognition that sign language interpreters are entitled to a salary for the service they provide). Also, the number of available sign language interpreters in each country, although a critical factor, is not included in the figures. Those countries receiving fewer than five points cannot be said to have even a basic, functional sign language interpreting system. The regional survey reports that were provided detailed information about the situation in each country. The numbers before the questions at the right side of each figure refer to the question number in the questionnaire, which is available in the full report.⁹

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5.1. Eastern Europe and Middle Asia

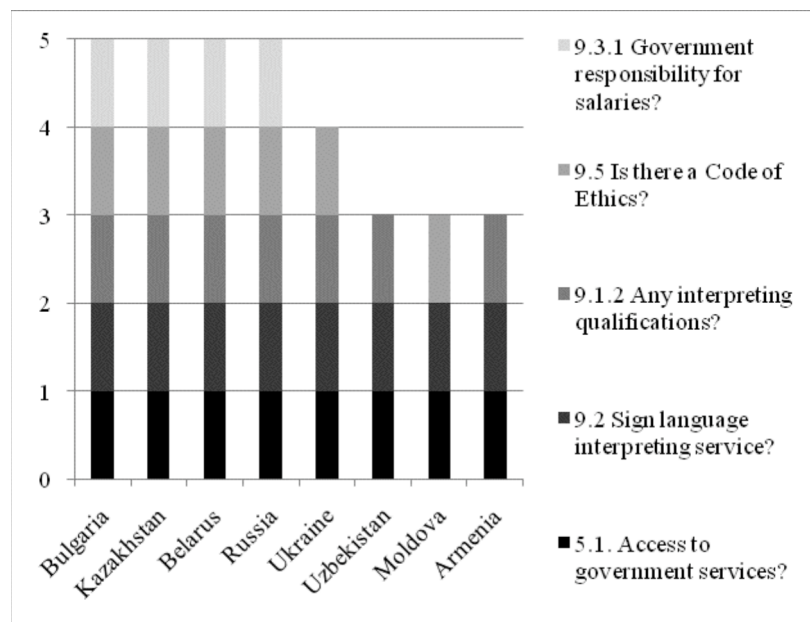


Figure 2: Eastern Europe and Middle Asia

Figure 2 reveals that Moldova has no training for sign language interpreters, and Uzbekistan and Armenia lack a code of ethics for sign language interpreters. The Bulgarian government pays only up to 10 hours of interpreting service per year for each deaf person, so access to services is severely limited in this country, too. In four countries, the government does not pay or contribute to the payment of interpreters' salaries at all. The message from the other countries is that there are few sign language interpreters available. The numbers ranged from five sign language interpreters in Armenia to 800 interpreters in Russia.

5.2. Asia and the Pacific

Figure 3 shows the situation in 14 countries in the Asia-Pacific region. Only Nepal revealed that deaf people do not have access to government services, but they do have a sign language interpreting service. Bhutan, Laos and Myanmar offer formal access but have no sign language interpreting service, training, or code of ethics for sign language interpreters. The government pays for some of the interpreting costs in only four countries. Australia, Japan, and Malaysia received the maximum score in the Asia-Pacific region. Those countries, however, reported that there are large differences in the qualifications of sign language interpreters and that the services are still inconsistent. The broad opinion regarding sign language interpreting services in the region is that there is a lack of quality in formal training or qualifications; interpreting services themselves are weak; the number of sign language interpreters is not enough, and supply cannot meet demand; and the general community has limited awareness about available services. The number of sign language interpreters ranges from three in Laos and Sri Lanka to 20,000 in Japan. However, fewer than 1,800 of the interpreters in Japan are qualified, and their status and salaries are low.

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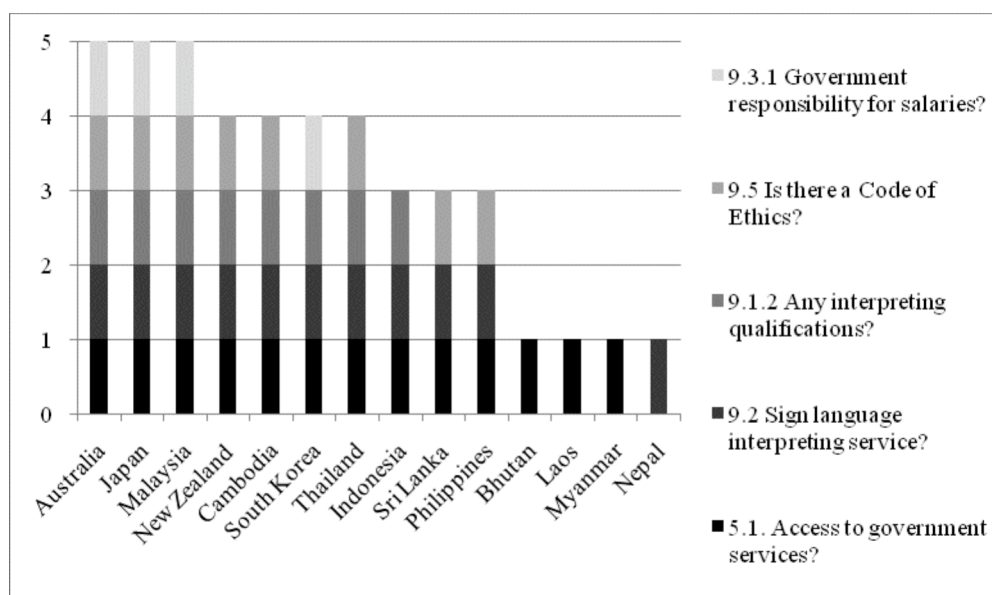


Figure 3: Asia and the Pacific

5.3. South America

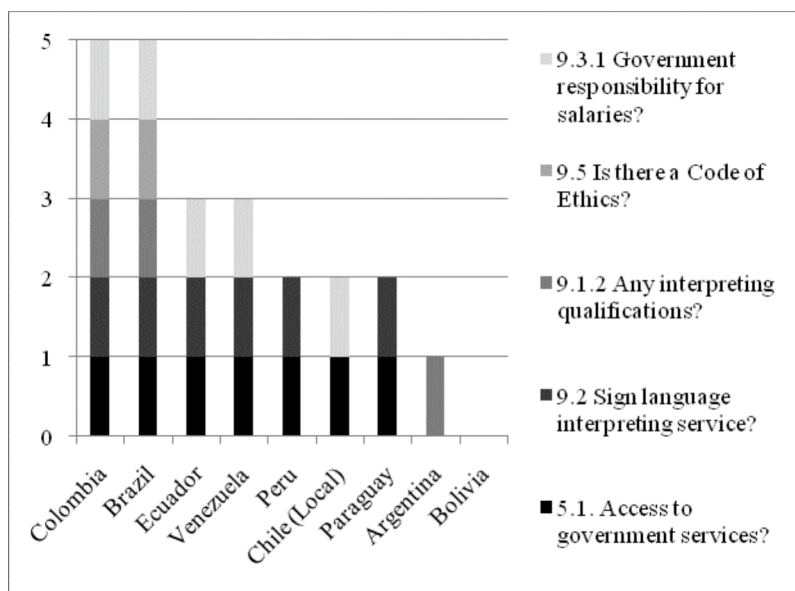


Figure 4: South America

Argentina and Bolivia reported that deaf people do not have access to government services, as can be seen in Figure 4, which illustrates the situation in nine countries in South America. Only three countries have any training for sign language interpreters and only two countries have a national code of ethics. Most respondents in the South American region stated that sign language interpreting services are accessed through a national or local deaf

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association, religious groups, or through hearing family members or acquaintances. The regional working group in South America also expressed the concern that deaf people had to register as members of particular groups (e.g., religious organizations) in order to receive sign language interpreting services at no charge. The number of sign language interpreters ranges from approximately 10 in Bolivia to 1,500 in Brazil. Peru and Argentina did not provide the number of interpreters in their countries.

5.4. Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean

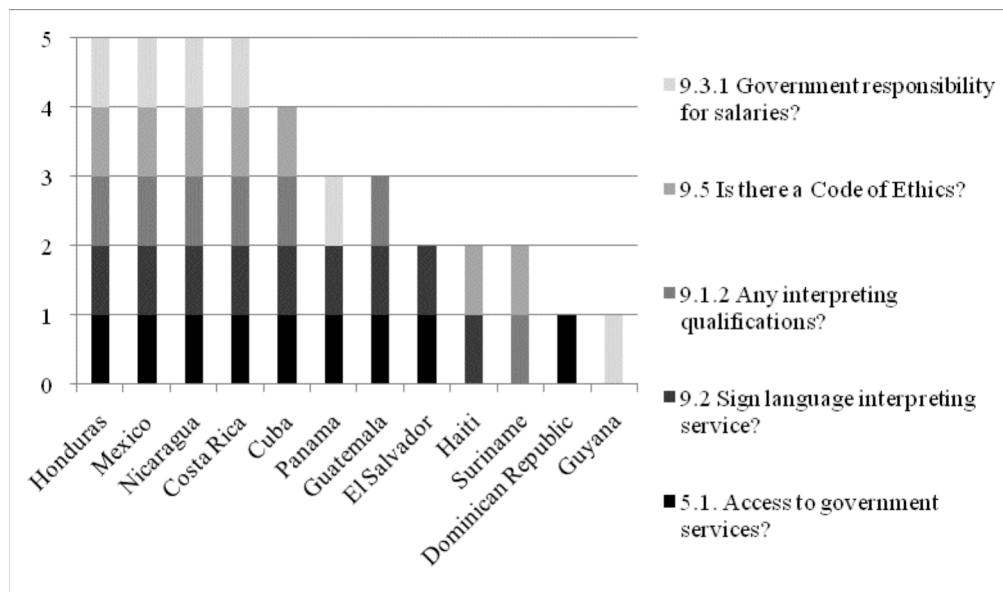


Figure 5: Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean

Figure 5 shows that three countries indicated deaf people do not have formal access to government services; however one of these (Guyana) reported the government sometimes pays for sign language interpreters. Three countries lack a sign language interpreting service; there is training for sign language interpreters in seven countries, and seven countries have a national code of ethics. The major complaint in the Middle and Central American region is the lack of, and the low quality of, training for sign language interpreters. Also, the low number of sign language interpreters is a constant concern. Suriname reported that they have two sign language interpreters, whereas there are 434 in Cuba.

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5.5. Eastern and Southern Africa

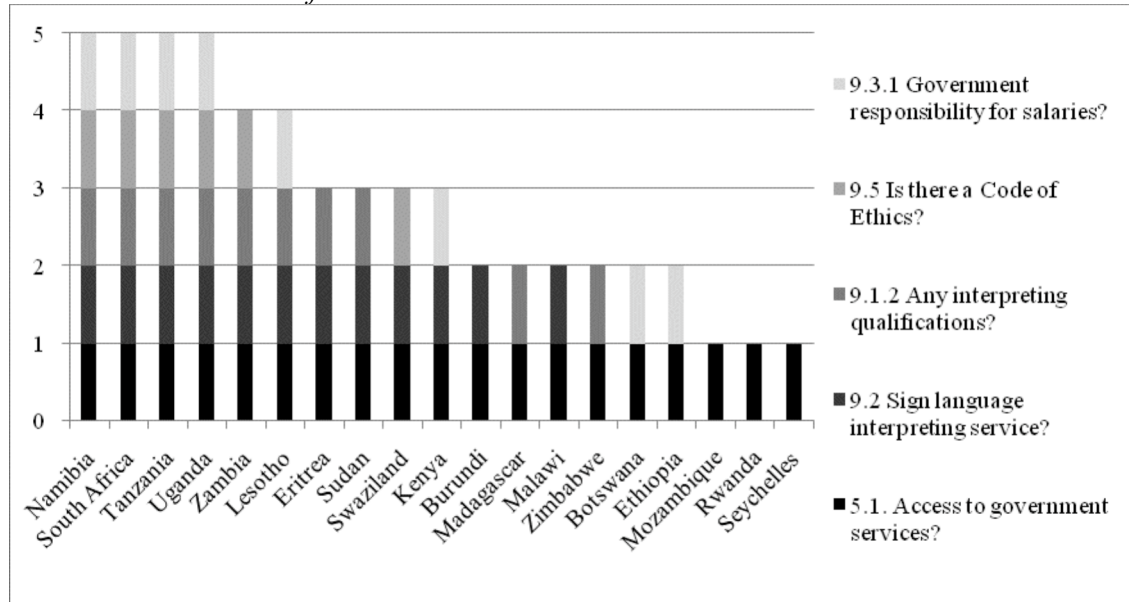


Figure 6: Eastern and Southern Africa

According to 12 of the 19 respondents in the Southern and Eastern African region, national or local deaf associations provide sign language interpreters. Figure 6 further shows that eight of the governments in this region pay for some sign language interpreting. There is a code of ethics in six of the countries. Seven countries have no sign language interpreting service. The broad opinion is that there is a lack of quality in formal training and qualifications; sign language interpreting services are not available all of the time; there are not enough sign language interpreters, so supply cannot meet demand; and there is a lack of funding for these services. In this region, the number of sign language interpreters ranged from three in Rwanda and three in Swaziland to 102 in Uganda. Seychelles respondents did not provide any information about sign language interpreting services but stated that they use hearing people who have signing skills to act as interpreters for deaf people.

5.6. Western and Central Africa

Figure 7 shows the replies from 16 countries in the Western and Central African region. Only in Cameroon does the government pay for sign language interpreters. Four countries have a sign language interpreting service, but governments run none of these. Only Ghana has recently started a sign language interpreter training program at the university level, and the Gambia is the only country with a code of ethics for sign language interpreters. The demand is far greater than the supply in most countries, so people who know sign language (often teachers and people with deaf parents) are asked to interpret without qualifications or payment. In Benin and Togo, staff members at the deaf schools function as interpreters. The number of sign language interpreters ranges from two in Cameroon and Senegal to 150 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

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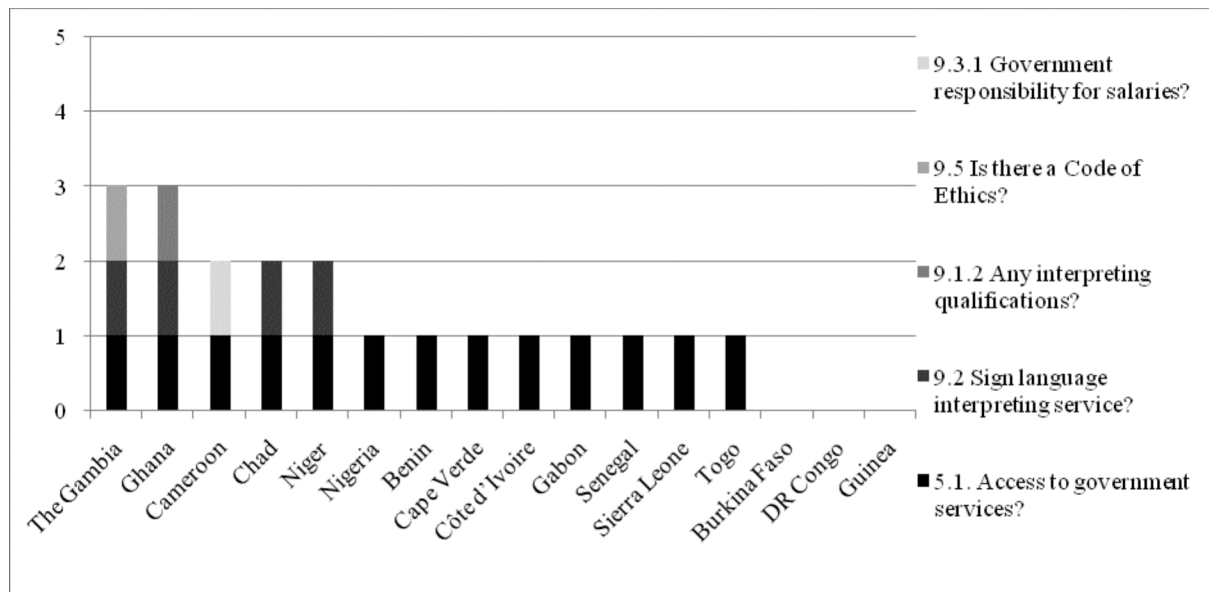


Figure 7: Western and Central Africa

5.7. The Middle East and North Africa Region

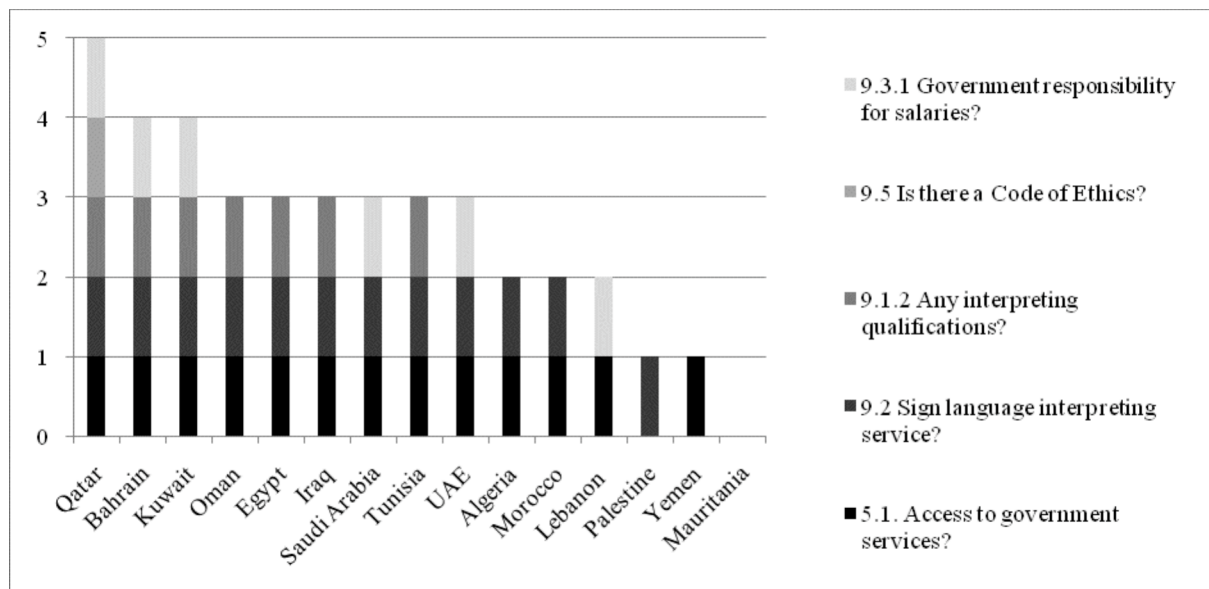


Figure 8: The Middle East and North Africa Region

In the Middle East and North Africa region (Figure 8), Mauritania and Palestine reported that deaf people do not have access to government services, but Palestine still has a sign language interpreting service. Lebanon and Yemen offer formal access but have no service, training or code of ethics for sign language interpreters. Qatar is the only country in the region that has a code of ethics. The regional working group for the Middle East and North

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Africa region commented that, in spite of some of the responses, there are no people who have received full training to become professional or qualified sign language interpreters. There is a training program on the Unification of Arabic Sign Languages¹⁰ that both deaf and hearing people can attend for five or ten days. Hearing people who complete this training receive a sign language interpreter certificate. Deaf people generally do not understand or use the signs of the Unified Arabic Sign Language, and because the course gives no instruction on the process of interpreting, it must be questioned whether the sign language interpreting qualifications provided are of much worth. The number of interpreters ranges from five each in Bahrain, Morocco and Palestine to 300 in Algeria.

6. Low quality of training and low number of sign language interpreters

The situation regarding the training of sign language interpreters in the Middle East and North Africa region is also illustrative of the situation as a whole. Although 40 of the respondent countries have some kind of interpreter training in place, the length, scope, and quality of this training varies greatly, from a 5-10 day course in learning some signs to a university diploma with courses running over several years. Thus, it is not possible to assume that the mere existence of training guarantees that the people who work as sign language interpreters have the necessary qualifications. Only 34 countries have both training for sign language interpreters *and* a code of ethics. If no formal guidelines or standards exist for sign language interpreters, the goal of a training or qualification program is bound to be imprecise; hence, it will be difficult to evaluate the qualifications that the training supposedly provides.

Of those countries answering the question about how many sign language interpreters in the country are qualified, 30 countries said they had 20 or fewer qualified sign language interpreters; seven countries had 21-100 qualified interpreters, whereas 12 had more than 100 qualified interpreters. Some of the countries that reported that they had 20 or fewer qualified/trained interpreters are populous countries such as Mexico (20 trained interpreters/approximately 108 million inhabitants), Thailand (20/65 million), Madagascar (4/20 million), Sudan (5/40 million), Tanzania (6/40 million) and Iraq (1/28 million). It is not clear whether these numbers are from official registries of sign language interpreters or if the person or group responsible for giving the answer based them on his or her assumptions and/or personal knowledge. There are no recommended ratios on the number of sign language interpreters required in a given population, as the demands/demographics of a local/national community drive the real need. But the low number of qualified sign language interpreters in most countries is alone a strong indicator that deaf people do not have de facto access to government services. Limited availability of qualified interpreters and widespread lack of awareness and knowledge about deaf people, as well as the role and expectations of a sign language interpreter, deprive most deaf people of access to large sections of society. If the education of sign language interpreters fails to recognize and respect the indigenous sign language(s) used by deaf people and/or lacks a goal to teach the professional ethics that will secure the independence, autonomy, and equality of all parties involved in the communication, interpreters may involuntarily contribute to the continued violation of deaf people's human rights. To avoid this, it is crucial that the training of interpreters includes a human rights perspective—from the planning of education programs, throughout the training period(s), to the final examination of sign language interpreters.

7. References

¹⁰See paragraph 5.4. in the Equality and Sign Language chapter in the *Deaf People and Human Rights Report* (Hualand & Allen, 2009).

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