[**Breaking down the walls**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1694062/breaking-down-the-walls)

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June 10, 2022

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ONE estimate suggests there are around a million deaf children of school going age in Pakistan, yet only about 50,000 are enrolled in educational institutions. It is an estimate, as census data on disability is generally very poor. Most such estimates are based on projections from smaller level sample surveys.

However, even if one allows for a significant margin for error, the situation is quite poor. Only about five per cent of deaf children have access to education when the promise to Pakistani children, as enshrined in the Constitution, is that all 5- to 16-year-olds must have access to education.

Deaf children and their parents face significant barriers to accessing education. Children with hearing impairments require early exposure to sign language, yet Pakistan does not have enough teachers trained in sign language. Typically, when a child is diagnosed as deaf, doctors and medical professionals by and large try to persuade parents to try hearing aids and other medical and other interventions. They often learn about sign language and the possibilities it unlocks much later.

Secondly, there are not enough mainstream schools that are inclusive or employ trained teachers to facilitate children with hearing disabilities. There are not enough special schools either. Finally, there are also almost no opportunities for deaf people to continue their education beyond the undergraduate level, and even bachelor’s level education is being offered by very few universities.

The state needs to do a lot more and a lot better for hearing impaired children.

Like any other language, early exposure and deep immersion in sign language are better for learning development. However, many deaf children never get exposed to sign language, and many too late. This delays their development. It is usually when a family has another member who is deaf that they may have some prior knowledge of sign language and the learning possibilities it offers. Children of deaf adults, for example, usually have early exposure to appropriate learning environments. Other parents, however, typically stumble a lot along the way as there are few places where they can get proper advice and guidance.

If a child is deaf and has not been exposed to sign language and to a community of people who can communicate with them in sign language, the child can grow very isolated. The child is going to, very likely, be very angry, frustrated and possibly depressed too. Consider their predicament: you cannot communicate with your parents, siblings and/or family members. You do not speak. When you try to communicate by signs and gestures, people around you do not understand as there is no ‘common language’, and they, eventually, give up and ignore you. What is such a child to do?

A child we interviewed, now in school and one who knows how to sign, said that his family mostly does not understand sign language and “they usually ignore me”. He further stated: “My father knows sign language to some extent, but my mother has no idea about it. I have no bond with my mother and never have a conversation with her. I usually don’t visit her.”

Another child said: “At family gatherings, I don’t talk much to relatives. They are all hearing [do not suffer from an impairment] and do not know sign language. I have no strong connections with them, so I stay quiet in those settings.”

Child after child we interviewed, and their parents as well, told us they only have friends and conversations at school, where they are around people who know sign language. At home, they are isolated: their activities are restricted to reading or keeping themselves busy, and even if they try to interact and/or go out and play with others, they are usually shunned.

Parents said when they make an effort to get access to education for their deaf children, they do not get support from their larger family and their communities. On the contrary, they are often discouraged. Some parents even mentioned that their relatives keep asking them why they are investing in their children. “Even if she gets educated, she is never going to be able to be independent. You are wasting money.” The constraints get much more binding for parents with lower income levels.

The discouragement from society and community is not restricted to the above. The larger issue is how deafness is looked at. Some of the parents mentioned that people tell them that the deafness of their child is ‘God’s punishment’ for some errors of omission or commission — a curse or a trial from God. This association with religion causes a lot of distress to parents and can even lead to depression. It also makes it difficult for parents to create a more nurturing environment for the deaf child and deepens their sense of isolation as well.

The state has definitely not done enough to address the needs of deaf children from an education and health perspective. Children need early diagnostics and access to schools that have teachers trained in sign language, but, as mentioned earlier, we have too few of those. There is no other support for deaf children and/or their parents. Some cases have gone to the courts, and the courts have, in general, been supportive of demands for ensuring the rights of differently-abled individuals. However, implementation from state and other sectors has been lethargic at best.

Too many deaf children are out of school and do not have access to inclusive or special needs schools that are equipped to offer them the services they need and/or teachers who are trained in sign language. Parents are not getting the needed support either. The state needs to do a lot more and a lot better. They may not be enough to change the perceptions of society entirely, but bold, forward-looking and progressive steps by the state can not only help parents and children directly, but they will also definitely impact social attitudes too. We need to do much better for our children.

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*Published in Dawn, June 10th, 2022*