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Inclusion in international cooperation: commitment and reality

The experiences, gaps in provision and challenges faced by Deaf women in Zimbabwe

A beautiful silence in danger

By Ashely R Tome

This paper focuses on Deaf women and girls, their experiences, challenges and the gaps in provision which they encounter when trying to access gender-based violence (GBV) services. The reluctance of a number of institutions to adopt Sign Language to communicate with Deaf women increases this group's vulnerability to gender-based violence. Most Deaf women and girls cannot read written English and find the English language complex and difficult to understand. It is essential that institutions in Zimbabwe adopt Sign Language, especially since it has been ratified as an official language in the Zimbabwean constitution.



Women with disabilities are part of the population group who are victims and survivors of gender-based violence. A lot of these women are Deaf women who suffer at the hands of perpetrators because very little information on gender-based violence has been disseminated among persons with disabilities (PWDs) in Braille and Sign Language.

Women with disabilities are highly vulnerable and susceptible to abuse. This is often the case because certain cultural beliefs and practices portray such women as less human. Some families even believe that sending a child with a disability to school is a waste of resources, and this is especially the case for female children with disabilities. In some societies, people have been advised by traditional healers that having sexual intercourse with a person who has a disability may cure HIV/AIDS. Such beliefs intensify the danger persons with disabilities are already facing. Most women with disabilities are financially, emotionally, psychologically and physically dependent on other people such as their families or the community. This dependency intensifies their risk of being abused, exploited and oppressed. Some Deaf women become illegal street vendors to help sustain their livelihoods and end their dependency on others. However, illegal vending exposes them to harassment by the Zimbabwe Republic Police and city councils.



Photo: © Miss Deaf Pride Zimbabwe

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown has led to reports of many Deaf women suffering greatly at the hands of abusers. The lockdown has trapped them with the perpetrators and this has had a negative impact on the women's psychological, physical and emotional wellbeing.

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Deaf Culture

The term 'Deaf Culture' refers to the social beliefs, behaviours, art, literary traditions, history, values and shared institutions of communities that are affected by deafness and who communicate in sign languages. Members of the Deaf Culture and Deaf communities tend to view deafness as a unique human experience rather than a disability. It is important to note that Deaf Culture is also supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities which states that "Persons with disabilities shall be entitled on an equal basis with others to recognition and support of their specific cultural and linguistic identity, including Sign Language and Deaf Culture" (CRPD 2006). Rather than focusing on what Deaf people cannot do, Deaf Culture celebrates what they can.

Deaf Culture embraces the beauty of people's hands because they are the voice of Deaf people. Hands play a pivotal role in conveying important information to others and holding coherent conversations.

Gender-Based Violence in Zimbabwe

The Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women defines gender-based violence as "violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately". This violence is directed at individuals due to their gender role in society. The terms 'sexual violence' and 'violence against women' can be used interchangeably. The notion of gender-based violence also involves actions and threats undertaken by men or male-dominated institutions to physically, psychologically, emotionally and sexually harm a girl or woman merely because of her gender.

There are a number of cultural and traditional practices that violate the rights of women. These include child marriage, the pledging of women and girls to appease avenging spirits (termed *kuripa ngozi* in the Shona language), genital mutilation and using women and girls to clear debts.



Photo: © Miss Deaf Pride Zimbabwe

The Story of Mwenje (name changed for privacy purposes): a young Deaf woman who is a survivor of gender-based violence

Mwenje is a young Deaf woman who lives in Chitungwiza, Harare. She has two children and is married to a man who has abused her in the past. Although her husband is also Deaf, he was previously very possessive and jealous. He did not allow her to talk to other men and even barred her from visiting female friends. Mwenje's husband deprived her of her freedom and said he was afraid she would cheat on him and he would lose her to other men. She went through an extremely difficult time.

A Conversation with Mwenje:

My name is Mwenje Ndlovu. I'm a Deaf woman aged 34. I am married with two children, a boy and a girl. I live with my husband and children in Chitungwiza. I have been a victim of gender-based violence.

Q: What does it feel like to live as a Deaf woman in Zimbabwe?

A: Being a Deaf person is not at all easy in this country. It only becomes less difficult if your family loves you and you know they will always be there to support you. It also helps if you realise that being deaf is more of a beautiful and unique human experience than a disability. But it's still not easy to be a Deaf person in Zimbabwe

because very few people know how to communicate in Sign Language and very little is being done, especially in key institutions such as the police service and the hospitals, to ensure that staff are Sign Language literate.

Q: *What additional challenges and problems do you face? Have you encountered discrimination, violence (GBV) or other human rights violations?*

A: Yes, these certainly exist. To begin with, in our communities, persons with disabilities are viewed as people who are totally different from the rest of the community. We are viewed as lesser people and as objects of pity or people who require charity. When I was growing up, I even hated myself for being different and for being a recipient of strangers' pity and sympathy. I hated feeling helpless and not being able to use my mouth like others do to speak. But, over time, my view of myself changed. I grew to accept and acknowledge that I was Deaf and different. I began to love and embrace that difference and to appreciate the way I was created.

I was 25 years old when I met Timothy. He was a loveable person and I agreed to marry him because he, too, was Deaf. This comforted me. Because we were both Deaf, I thought we could really understand and appreciate each other.

But, soon after our marriage, Timothy began to change his attitude towards me. I had no say in our marriage, Tim was in charge. He did things that intimidated me. He would harass me and increasingly beat me. I was in emotional turmoil, life became very hard. There was a time when I was pregnant with our first child and I almost lost the baby. We were advised to go for counselling and Timothy received advice on anger management. He seemed to be serious about solving the problem so I decided to stay in the marriage. When I was being abused, I tried to access the Msasa Project and the Zimbabwe Women Lawyers association, but I had no idea how to contact them because I am Deaf. I realised that I would have to hire a Sign Language interpreter. But hiring an interpreter is very expensive and, since I wasn't working at the time, I couldn't afford one.

Q: *Did you try to access GBV services?*

A: Yes, I did. The challenge I faced was again one of communication. Most people do not know how to communicate in Sign Language. Even if you want to visit a counsellor or therapist, you are usually forced to hire a Sign Language interpreter. The lawyers who are supposed to represent us in the civil courts, together with the interpreters, can communicate in formal Sign Language but not in informal Sign Language. This means it is a great challenge for us to access GBV services. In addition, information on GBV issues is not available in Sign Language. This makes Deaf women and girls like us more vulnerable to GBV.

How Miss Deaf Zimbabwe Trust helps Deaf women

The Miss Deaf Pride Zimbabwe Trust is involved in supporting and advocating for the rights of young Deaf women and girls. It connects them to the organisations and people who are in a position to offer the survivors and victims of GBV a strong support system to help them deal with their predicament.

The Miss Deaf Pride Zimbabwe Trust is working on educating Deaf women about gender-based violence issues, sexual reproductive health, the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, constitutional rights and other issues related to the well-being of Deaf women and girls. It should be noted that information about such issues is rarely available in Sign Language and this means it is difficult for young Deaf women and girls to access GBV support services. Since lawyers and other non-governmental organisations advocating against GBV are not yet literate in Sign Language, the Miss Deaf Pride Zimbabwe Trust has for some time been holding Sign Language training sessions for groups including the police. However, the Trust is facing great challenges due to its limited resources.

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Say NO to Gender-Based Violence!

Gender-based violence is a phenomenon that can never and should never be tolerated. Women and girls, both those with disabilities and without, should be treated fairly. They deserve to be given respect. Good and equal treatment of women has positive results for the development of an entire nation.

References

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Tome has always had a passion for working with the Deaf Community. She is still learning a lot about Deaf Culture and its practices. Email

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