

Policy Brief

on Educational Resources for the Deaf in Pakistan

1. Executive Summary

Family Educational Services Foundation (FESF) is working to address literacy gaps in Deaf education via its Deaf Reach Program. Opening its first school in 1998, FESF now operates seven Deaf Reach Schools and Training Centers in Pakistan (Karachi, Hyderabad, Sukkur, Nawabshah, Tando Allahyar, Lahore), and is the only national deaf school network. FESF endeavors to empower deaf children and youth through education, literacy, training in marketable skills, and employment opportunities.

To enable scholastic achievement, FESF has created and documented a digital lexicon of 5,000 words in Pakistan Sign Language (PSL), the native language of the Deaf. FESF is reaching out to the concerned government and private bodies that have influence in this sphere to implement the distribution of the PSL Lexicon to the target audience, as well as to integrate it into the school syllabus. Similarly, FESF aims to provide PSL training to educators in the government and private sector.

2. Introduction

Providing adequate services for the Deaf is an international concern, and the needs of Pakistan's Deaf community remain far behind that of the world community. Of Pakistan's deaf school-aged children, estimated in 2010 as comprising over 1.25 million¹, less than 10,000 have access to schooling, and the percentage is much lower for deaf women.

The literacy rate of Pakistan's deaf children and adults lags far behind those of their hearing peers due to the scarcity of educational programs, general paucity of learning resources for their native language (Pakistan Sign Language – PSL), and the inability of parents to foster language development in their deaf children. Scant resources exist to assist deaf students in strengthening the language skills necessary for academic achievement, and none are available to the general public.

To address this, FESF has developed a digital PSL Lexicon of 5,000 commonly used words and academic vocabulary. This is the first resource of its kind in Pakistan.

The PSL Lexicon is provided in the following formats:

- **Website** - www.psl.org.pk: Contains 5,000 words in English, Urdu, and PSL. Also includes a picture to enhance language acquisition, as well as to assist illiterate persons to gain literacy
- **Mobile app**: Enables access to the PSL Lexicon via smart mobile phones. Contains 5,000 words in English, Urdu, and PSL

- **DVD**: Contains 5,000 words in English, Urdu, and PSL as well as interactive activities that are designed to test language retention, and enables self-learning
- **PSL Book**: Contains 1,000 essential signs, and is represented in seven languages: PSL, English, Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Pashto and Balochi
- **Training Programs**: Designed to improve the communication abilities of educators and families of the Deaf based on the PSL Lexicon
- **Additional PSL Resources**: FESF is in the process of developing PSL general knowledge tutorials and short stories to help improve literacy.

3. Outline

The aim of this policy brief is to represent PSL Resources as a dynamic educational tool that can be assimilated into the provincial and national education curriculum. A successful rollout will address the education deficit for the Deaf; improve education and services to the Deaf; and instigate policy discussions that can accelerate this process.

A five-month evaluation of the PSL Lexicon in schools for the Deaf, hearing (mainstream), and special education institutions revealed that the PSL Lexicon significantly improves upon the traditional methods of language instruction. These findings, aligned with the enthusiastic support expressed by the teachers and administrators who used the PSL Lexicon, indicate that **PSL Resources, with its visual and engaging features, represent a viable and cost effective boost to learning outcomes in schools, as well as self-learning.**

This is not only valid for Deaf institutions. PSL Resources have proven to be effective for mainstream Urdu speaking children in learning English rapidly, as well as for Special needs children with communication challenges (e.g. Down's syndrome, autism, cerebral palsy, mental challenges, etc.)

The native language of the Deaf community is its sign language, with each sign language being unique to its particular country. With the increasing number of nations that now endorse sign language as a language in its own right, it is important that Pakistan's Deaf community maintain pace.

The United Nations Convention of Rights of Persons with Disabilities, Article 30.4, of which Pakistan is a signatory, recognizes the crucial role of sign language, stating: *"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 languages and Deaf Culture."* The international community recognizes the Deaf as a cultural and linguistic minority with equal rights to educational access and quality of life.

"Sign language is a natural and complete language enabling perfect communication for its users. Sign language - if acquired fast - enables very young Deaf children to have early and full communication with their parents as opposed to spoken languages. It also plays an important role in the cognitive and social development of Deaf children."
Francois Grosjean (HASÉ, issue 2008/4)

The lack of literacy and communication skills amongst Pakistan's Deaf often has lifelong and devastating consequences in personal development and their ability to develop marketable skills and thereby become economically independent and contributors to the community and their households. Many are socially marginalized, bereft of sufficient social skills, or members of low income families lacking in the resources to improve their quality of life. The acquisition of literacy and communication skills is absolutely essential to their personal development and social and economic well-being.

FESF is collaborating with other organizations in the public and private sectors to facilitate the maximum exposure of PSL resources to institutions that cater to the Deaf. The active encouragement of sign language acquisition amongst parents, educators, and community members will improve literacy outcomes and accelerate the assimilation of the Deaf into society.

The PSL Resources effectively provide remote access of educational materials for marginalized, rural and female demographics where otherwise they would not receive an education. Access to a computer or TV/DVD component is all that is required, making these resources widely available to the deaf nation-wide. For those without access to these electronic tools, the PSL Book will meet that need.

"Sign language is recognized as the main means of communication between Deaf persons and others. There are Government measures for encouraging media and other forms of public information to make their services available to persons with disabilities." (Government Action on Disability Policy, UN document No. A/52/56)²

4. PSL Resources as a Policy Instrument

An analysis and review of policies in Pakistan depict that Pakistan's commitment to Deaf education has been inconsistent. PSL Resources provide the tools to improve the education, well-being, and provision of human rights for the Deaf.

The Pakistan National Policy for the Education and Rehabilitation of the Disabled³, which includes the Deaf community, states that *'life skills education ... shall be infused in curricula, and teachers' trainings and culturally apposite awareness materials be developed.'* These awareness materials are precisely what the PSL Lexicon provides, in the native language of the large and marginalized community.

Pakistan is a signatory to the UN's **Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006** that stresses a legal framework for providing equal opportunities in every sphere of life.

FESF is already working in areas that fulfill many of the objectives laid out in **Pakistan's National Plan for Persons with Disabilities, 2006⁴**, which outline measures to operationalize Pakistan's National Policy for the Persons with Disabilities, 2002. Specifically, FESF provides educational services to the Deaf population; promotion of inclusive education; provision of vocational training; providing employment for the Deaf; and providing awareness regarding the Deaf and their culture to the larger community.

5. Recommendations

FESF is engaging the government and private sectors to

"Instead of solely viewing deafness as a 'deficit' or medical condition in need of repair, more attention should be paid to improving access in all spheres of life: education, work, communication, etc. In this context, sign languages are a pivotal key to social integration. Hence the issue of sign languages recognition becomes a true question of human rights." (Stevens 2005:2)

provide training to teachers, parents and other community members using PSL Resources. Widespread distribution of PSL resources will promote cross platform language acquisition, and result in the inclusion of the Deaf in the community and workplace.

The government and the community should coordinate efforts to change present perceptions that view Pakistan's Deaf community as a *disabled group*, whereas it should rather be viewed as a *cultural minority that speaks another language* and simply requires empowerment through education and training – the same opportunity that is every citizen's right.

FESF believes that the wide distribution of PSL Resources and their inclusion in the primary and secondary school syllabi will help to fulfill Pakistan's objectives under the National Policy for Persons with Disabilities (2002), which maintains an overall vision of providing a conducive environment for realizing the full potential of persons with disabilities, leading to their empowerment.

Additionally, adaptation of the PSL Resources for use in schools will further assist Pakistan in achieving the Millennial Development Goals 2015.

On a sociological level, the PSL Resources will assist in negating the perception that Deaf individuals have limited capabilities and are cognitively deficient. Effective use of PSL Resources will remove barriers to communication and give the Deaf access to basic rights as a person and Pakistani citizen.

6. Conclusions

In short, perceptions of deaf individuals are changing in the international community, and Pakistan needs to also keep pace. This change leads to addressing the dire need for trained special education teachers; multi-professional teams and technological visual aids in the schools of deaf children; and basic resources that provide parents and relatives with the tools necessary to engage in meaningful communication with their children.

FESF considers the PSL Resources to be exactly the low cost, easy to use catalyst required for the significant improvement of learning outcomes amongst school-aged children, not only for the Deaf, but for mainstream school children who want to learn English, and for special needs children with communication challenges.

¹ National Taskforce Planning Meeting Feb. 2010, "Audio 2020 – Pakistan" - Islamabad, Pakistan

² <http://www.wvhearing.org/news/entry/audio-20-20-launched-in-pakistan>
³ <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1232&context=gladnetcollect>

⁴ <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/PAKISTANEXTN/Resources/pdf-Files-in-Events/Pak-Disabled-Policy.pdf>

⁵ http://www.bevysolutions.com/downloads/national_plan_of_action_2006.pdf

National Education Policy 2009, Government of Pakistan available at <http://unesco.org.pk/education/teachereducation/files/National%20Education%20Policy.pdf>