



**DEPUTY MINISTER IN THE PRESIDENCY FOR WOMEN, YOUTH
AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY

MS MMAPASEKA STEVE LETSIKE, MP

AT THE

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF SIGN LANGUAGES

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**women, youth &
persons with disabilities**
Department:
Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



Thank you, Programme Director, Mr Julius Dantile

Our Hosts, the Board and EXCO Team of the Pan South Africa Language Board under the leadership of the Board Chair, Prof Lolie Makhubu-Badenhorst

Leaders and members of the Deaf community,

Representatives of government, civil society, academia and the private sector,

Fellow South Africans,

We gather here today at a moment of profound importance.

The calendar reminds us that September is **Deaf Awareness Month**, and this very week, the global Deaf community marks the **International Week of the Deaf**.

Today we also mark the **International Day of Sign Languages (IDSL)**, observed globally on 23 September each year. This day was proclaimed by the United Nations to recognise the importance of sign languages in the full realisation of the human rights of Deaf people everywhere. It reminds us that sign languages are not secondary, not optional, but central to the dignity, equality, and participation of Deaf communities.

The IDSL is celebrated to bring the global Deaf community together in solidarity and advocacy. This year's theme, "**No human rights without sign language rights**", is not just a statement, it is a call to action. It challenges all South Africans to ensure that the recognition of South African Sign Language (SASL) as our 12th official language is matched by

implementation in every classroom, every clinic, every court, every workplace, and every community space.

By placing IDSL at the heart of today's programme, we affirm that Deaf South Africans are not invisible, not marginalised, and not an afterthought. They are citizens of this Republic, with equal rights and equal claims to justice and opportunity.

We affirm that these observances are not merely symbolic, they are reminders of our obligations, our duties, and our commitments as a democratic society.

They compel us to listen, even when the voices come to us not in sound but in the rich expressiveness of South African Sign Language.

This year's theme is not a slogan to be applauded and then forgotten. It is a profound truth, a declaration of what democracy means in practice.

For what is democracy without communication? What is citizenship without participation? What is dignity without recognition?

If Deaf South Africans cannot access education, seek justice, access healthcare, or participate in the economy in their own language, then our Constitution's promise of equality remains an unfulfilled dream.

Language is not simply a tool of communication. It is the very vessel of belonging. It is the bridge into education, the pathway into employment, the medium through which one takes part in democracy, the foundation upon which identity and dignity are built.

Denying South African Sign Language is not simply denying a form of expression, it is denying access to the fullness of citizenship itself. It is denying democracy. It is denying humanity.

Let us first reflect on the scope of this reality in our own land.

South Africa is home to nearly 600,000 Deaf persons, and studies suggest that as many as 4 million South Africans live with significant hearing loss. Of these, over 600,000 are active users of South African Sign Language, a number that places the Deaf community not as a marginal fragment of our population, but as a significant portion whose lives and futures matter to the destiny of our country. Yet, despite this scale, exclusion remains the daily reality.

In our schools, the situation is dire. Studies show that 9 out of 10 teachers of Deaf learners have no knowledge of SASL. Teacher training programmes are not structured to require proficiency in the very language their learners depend upon for education.

Imagine the injustice of expecting children to flourish in classrooms where their teachers cannot communicate with them. This is not simply a barrier to learning, it is a denial of equality itself.

The implementation of SASL as a language of learning and teaching has been undermined by shortages of trained teachers, insufficient curriculum support, inadequate resources, and vast disparities between well-resourced and under-resourced schools.

The majority of Deaf children, between 90% and 95%, are born to hearing parents who do not use SASL at home. Many of these children arrive at school already facing delayed language development, not because they lack potential, but because their earliest years were deprived of accessible communication.

This delay follows them for life. It shapes their educational trajectory, limits their opportunities, and too often undermines their confidence and sense of self. And we must ask: what does it say about our collective humanity when we knowingly allow such deprivation to continue?

The story continues into adulthood.

In the economy, the statistics reveal structural exclusion of the most painful kind. South Africa's unemployment rate remains stubbornly high at 32.9%. Yet for Deaf South Africans, the situation is even more devastating.

Studies indicate that nearly 7 in 10 Deaf persons are unemployed. They sit at home, not for lack of talent or ambition, but because employers refuse to adapt, because workplaces lack interpreters, because society does not see them as full participants in the economy.

Among persons with disabilities who are employed, those with hearing impairments are disproportionately absent from leadership positions. Only 1.3% of employed disabled persons hold senior or professional roles. This is not a reflection of ability, it is a reflection of exclusionary systems.

Programme Director, as we speak about the scale of exclusion, we must also recognise that these realities are unevenly distributed across our provinces.

In the **Eastern Cape**, where poverty and rurality intersect most acutely, the majority of schools for Deaf learners lack trained SASL teachers. Reports show that Deaf children in the province are often forced to travel long distances, sometimes across district boundaries, simply to access one of the few schools where SASL is taught. This compounds inequality, because a Deaf child in Lusikisiki does not begin life with the same opportunities as a Deaf child in Pretoria.

In **Limpopo**, community organisations have raised concerns that the provincial Department of Education is not equipping teachers with SASL training at the scale needed. Parents of Deaf children report that interpreters are scarce, leaving learners to navigate classrooms without full understanding. The rural nature of many Limpopo communities means that Deaf persons are doubly excluded: once by lack of language access, and again by poor infrastructure that limits mobility and access to services.

In **KwaZulu-Natal**, where the Deaf population is one of the largest in the country, unemployment among Deaf youth mirrors the national crisis but is often aggravated by stigma. Many Deaf school graduates in Durban and Pietermaritzburg cannot transition into employment because employers remain unwilling to provide interpreters or accessible workplaces.

In **Gauteng**, which is better resourced than most provinces, the disparities are starkly visible. Some schools in Johannesburg and Pretoria have access to trained SASL teachers and teaching resources, while schools

in poorer townships and peri-urban areas continue to struggle. This reproduces inequality even within the same province, where the Deaf child of a middle-class family may access SASL education, while the Deaf child of a poor family is left behind.

The **Western Cape**, with its history of activism around Deaf rights, has made progress in integrating SASL into schooling and public life. Yet even here, Deaf learners from poorer families face barriers, especially in rural districts like the Karoo, where services remain limited and opportunities scarce.

Gender disaggregation deepens our understanding of inequality.

Across provinces, Deaf women face disproportionately higher risks of unemployment compared to Deaf men, largely because of intersecting gender discrimination. Deaf women are also more vulnerable to gender-based violence, where communication barriers with police and justice officials make reporting difficult and pursuing justice almost impossible. Black Deaf women, in particular, face compounded disadvantages: in healthcare facilities they are often dismissed, in workplaces they are often excluded, and in education they are often overlooked.

In contrast, Deaf men, while also facing exclusion, are somewhat more likely to access technical training or find employment in informal trades. But even here, the statistics show devastating exclusion: over 70% of Deaf South Africans remain unemployed nationally, with women bearing the heaviest burden.

For children, the situation is no better.

In rural provinces such as Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and Eastern Cape, Deaf children are more likely to be kept at home by families who feel unequipped to support their education, or who succumb to cultural pressures of hiding disabled children from the community.

This practice remains widespread and must be condemned. Our Constitution is clear: no child should be denied access to education, no child should be hidden away, no child should be silenced.

In urban areas, even where resources are better, Deaf children face linguistic exclusion in families.

Over 90% of Deaf children are born into hearing households where no SASL is used. For a child in Soweto, Khayelitsha, or Umlazi, this often means that their first years, the critical years of language acquisition, pass without access to a full language. When these children enter school, they are already disadvantaged compared to peers who had access to SASL from birth.

These disparities matter, because they illustrate that exclusion is not only about being Deaf. It is about where you are born, whether you are a girl or boy, whether you live in a rural or urban community, whether your family can afford transport, and whether your teachers are trained in your language.

That is the essence of intersectionality: exclusion is layered, and unless we address each layer, we will continue to produce unequal outcomes.

Programme Director, this is why government must not only legislate, but also implement. The White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Disability Rights Bill, the recognition of SASL as the 12th official language, and our ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities are all milestones.

But these frameworks must travel from paper into practice. They must reach the Deaf girl child in Lusikisiki, the Deaf young man in rural Limpopo, the Deaf woman in Johannesburg township who faces barriers in clinics and courts. We must ensure that Deaf South Africans across provinces and across gender have equal access to society.

Equality is indivisible. Justice is indivisible. Human rights are indivisible.

As we reflect nationally, we must also recognise our global responsibilities. South Africa holds the **G20 Presidency** for the first time in history.

This is not only a diplomatic honour; it is a moral responsibility. On that platform, we carry the voices of Africa, of the Global South, and of marginalised communities into global decision-making.

As we advocate for inclusive growth, for gender equality, for youth empowerment, we must also insist that Deaf persons, and indeed all persons with disabilities, are not bystanders but participants in shaping the future of the world.

We must also look to international best practice. **Finland** and **New Zealand** have enshrined sign languages in law as equal to spoken languages, ensuring that education, justice, and healthcare are fully accessible.

Kenya, closer to home, has recognised Kenyan Sign Language in its Constitution and has begun integrating it into schools and public broadcasting. These examples show us that mainstreaming sign language across sectors is not only possible, but transformative.

South Africa, too, has taken an important step in recognising South African Sign Language as the 12th official language, but recognition must translate into practice. Recognition without implementation is betrayal.

Colleagues, I must therefore affirm the tireless work of the Pan South African Language Board (PanSALB), which has championed the recognition and promotion of SASL. Since the adoption of SASL in 2023 as the Republic's 12th official language, government has made deliberate strides to ensure that this recognition translates into real change for Deaf persons.

Together with PanSALB, government departments, and Deaf-led organisations, we have advanced key initiatives that speak to justice in practice.

We have initiated the development of a national SASL terminology bank and dictionary, ensuring that Deaf South Africans can access language resources standardised across provinces and sectors.

Through interpreter training programmes, we are growing the cadre of professionals needed in schools, courts, clinics, and workplaces. Workshops on the **SASL Charter** are being rolled out to government departments and institutions, embedding awareness of rights and compliance obligations across the state.

Recognising that inclusion begins in the family, we have supported initiatives that provide basic SASL training to parents and families of Deaf children, equipping them to communicate at home and strengthen bonds of belonging.

Importantly, we are seeing SASL gain ground across multiple fronts: in schools, where SASL is increasingly integrated as a language of learning and teaching; in universities, where Deaf students are supported with interpretation services; in courts, where SASL interpreters are more visible; and in public service platforms, where Deaf South Africans can increasingly access government information in their own language.

These steps are not the end of the journey, but the beginning of a transformation. They mark a shift from symbolic recognition to tangible implementation, from aspiration to lived change. They affirm that the promise of equality, dignity, and participation for Deaf South Africans is within our grasp if we remain committed to carrying this momentum forward.

Programme Director, as we move further into the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), we also inherit an unprecedented opportunity to harness technology for justice and inclusion.

The 4IR is not only about robotics, artificial intelligence, and big data – it is about the possibility of breaking barriers that have excluded Deaf South Africans for generations. Already, innovations in real-time captioning, speech-to-text services, and AI-powered translation are opening new frontiers of accessibility. With deliberate investment, these tools can be localised into South African Sign Language, ensuring that SASL is not left behind in the digital age.

Digital platforms must be accessible by design. Online education must integrate SASL interpretation and captioning so that Deaf learners are not shut out of e-learning. Virtual healthcare must include simultaneous SASL interpretation to ensure access to telemedicine. Workplaces embracing hybrid models must guarantee that online meetings and training platforms are SASL-accessible.

But inclusion in the 4IR will not happen by accident. It requires deliberate policy and investment. South Africa's innovation ecosystem — from NEMISA to the Smart Africa Youth Chapter, from our universities to our start-ups — must embed accessibility at the heart of digital design.

No application, no programme, no digital economy initiative must ever launch without accessibility built in.

The 4IR also offers opportunities for empowerment. Deaf youth, who are often locked out of traditional labour markets, can thrive in the digital and creative economy. With training in coding, design, and content creation, Deaf South Africans can shape their own enterprises, tell their own stories, and contribute to the knowledge economy of our country. The

digital revolution can therefore become not a threat, but a catalyst for inclusion if we are bold enough to claim it.

Friends, we must listen also to the wisdom of Deaf scholars and leaders. The scholar **Paddy Ladd** reminds us that “**Sign language is not just a means of communication, but a way of being in the world.**” Dr. **Joseph Murray**, President of the World Federation of the Deaf, has declared with clarity: “**Without sign language, there are no human rights for Deaf people.**” And **Hilde Hauland** has affirmed that “**The right to language is the right to belong.**” These words remind us that what is at stake here is not technicalities of policy, but the humanity of our fellow citizens.

The recognition of SASL as our 12th official language was a landmark moment. But recognition without implementation is betrayal. It is not enough to place SASL on paper; we must place it in classrooms, in clinics, in courts, in workplaces, in community gatherings, in places of worship, and in the halls of Parliament.

Every school must treat SASL as central, not optional. Every public service must guarantee access through interpreters. Every employer must understand that reasonable accommodation is not charity; it is justice. And every community institution must open its doors, its pulpits, and its platforms to Deaf South Africans.

I want to affirm the tireless work of the **Pan South African Language Board**, which has championed the recognition and promotion of SASL. But PanSALB cannot do this work alone.

This is the task of a whole-of-society effort. Churches, schools, traditional leaders, broadcasters, employers, families, and communities all have a role to play in mainstreaming SASL. There must be no space in South Africa where Deaf South Africans feel alienated.

Programme Director, fellow compatriots, the late Nelson Mandela reminded us that ***“to deny people their human rights is to challenge their very humanity.”*** Let us take these words to heart.

Let us ensure that Deaf South Africans are not hidden, not marginalised, not silenced, but affirmed as equal citizens. Let us build a society where Deaf learners are taught by teachers fluent in SASL, where Deaf women can access healthcare with dignity, where Deaf youth can find employment, where Deaf South Africans are visible leaders in politics, business, and culture.

For indeed, as this year’s theme reminds us, and as justice demands of us, ***“there are no human rights without sign language rights.”***

I thank you.