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**Joint submission on cyberbullying against persons with disabilities**

1. **Introduction**

1. The World Federation of the Deaf[[1]](#footnote-1), DeafKidz International[[2]](#footnote-2), and the European Union of the Deaf Youth[[3]](#footnote-3) are honoured to submit their joint contribution to the report of the OHCHR to the Human Rights Council on cyberbullying against persons with disabilities.
2. The present submission aims to highlight the specific issues faced by deaf people, especially deaf children and youth, in the prevention and fight against cyberbullying, to share case studies and disaggregated data on the impact of cyberbullying on deaf persons, to present good practices from some deaf-led organisations in the world, and to provide recommendations to Member States to the United Nations on how to meaningfully address cyberbullying against deaf people.

1. **Specific issues faced by deaf people, especially deaf children and youth, in the prevention and fight against cyberbullying:**

1. As a general comment, the World Federation of the Deaf, DeafKidz International, and the European Union of the Deaf Youth would like to emphasise that deaf people face a unique situation compared to other persons with disabilities due to their specific cultural and linguistic identities and the use of their own languages, their national sign languages. As highlighted in the [WFD Position Paper “Complementary or diametrically opposed: Situating Deaf Communities within ‘disability’ vs ‘cultural and linguistic minority’ constructs](https://wfdeafnew.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/LM-and-D-Discussion-Paper-FINAL-11-May-2018.pdf),” deaf people and their communities belong to both the disability movement and the minority cultural and linguistic movements.
2. Deaf people face huge barriers in participating the society on an equal step with others since most information and communication is not provided in their sign languages. National sign languages are minority languages used by Deaf communities within a given country, whereas written/spoken languages constitute the dominant language of the country. To this day only 77 countries out of 195 countries in the world have legally recognised their national sign languages, as enshrined in Article 2.2 and Article 21(e) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
3. National sign languages have a critical role in ensuring deaf people’s participation in society and access to essential services, including health services as identified in the [WFD Position Paper on Access to National Sign Languages as a Health Need](https://wfdeaf.org/news/position-paper-on-access-to-national-sign-languages-as-a-health-need/). Deaf children are at high risk of language deprivation, which is caused by a lack of access to national sign languages during the critical period for language acquisition and development, preventing them to be proficient in written languages and to access information produced in the national written languages. This has been exacerbated since the COVID-19 pandemic with the exponential use of online information which is not accessible in sign language.
4. During the pandemic, the World Federation of the Deaf, its Youth Section (WFDYS), and DeafKidz International identified in their [Joint Statement responding to the Safeguarding and Protection Needs of Deaf Children and Youth During the COVID-19 Pandemic](http://wfdeaf.org/news/resources/joint-statement-responding-to-the-safeguarding-and-protection-needs-of-deaf-children-and-youth-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-2/) that deaf children and youth are exposed to potential forms of physical, psychological and/or sexual abuse and violence, especially when they are online. Indeed, as long as they are not provided accessible sign language information and education about the safe and respectful use of online platforms and how to recognize a situation of cyberbullying, they are at high risk of becoming victims of cyberbullying.
5. Based on the project of the European Union of the Deaf Youth "Deaf Youth against Cyberbullying: Action Kit and Manifesto" surveyed 211 respondents across Europe aged 15 to 35 to understand cyberbullying prevalence. A concerning trend emerges from the data: a significant 36.76% of cyberbullying victims choose not to report the abuse, while 33.82% seek solace in friends and 32.35% in family. Even more alarming, nearly 40% of victims bullied via sign language refrain from reporting due to potential communication barriers. These figures underscore the critical need to address accessibility issues and enhance support mechanisms for sign language users. Moreover, over 70% of deaf youths find it daunting to seek help after cyberbullying incidents, with a staggering 80% perceiving platforms as ineffective in addressing reported cases. This pervasive sense of helplessness and disillusionment with official channels highlights a pressing need for platforms to step up their responsiveness and accessibility for the deaf community. Despite these obstacles and struggles, over half have witnessed online cyberbullying, with 80% believing that seeking help in sign language would be more beneficial. This speaks to the importance of tailored support services and the power of building a supportive network within the community. However, efforts must be intensified to bridge the gap between perceived support and effective action, ensuring that all individuals feel empowered to seek help and support when faced with cyberbullying.
6. It is important to recognize that deaf children and youth, deaf older persons, and deaf persons with diverse identities such as deaf persons of African descent, deaf Indigenous Peoples, deaf people coming from ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities, are at higher risk of being victims of cyberbullying and that their rights must be protected, promoted and fulfilled by the Member States to the United Nations.
7. **Impact of cyberbullying on deaf persons: case studies and data**
8. Cyberbullying is a form of violence that deaf people, especially deaf children, and youth as well as deaf older persons, experience in high prevalence worldwide. This is revealed through three case studies, among which two data collection projects conducted by respectively DeafKidz International and the European Union of the Deaf Youth.
9. First, **DeafKidz International** (DKI)’s work has evidenced that deaf children are three times as likely to be victims of abuse than hearing children. It is therefore vital to equip the 34 million deaf children around the world with the knowledge and knowhow to stay safe. There are few safeguarding resources available for deaf children and what does exist, is not accessible to deaf children in their national sign language. DKI’s original research in South Africa and Pakistan, a cohort of 620 deaf children, aged 7/11, 46% of which were girls, 42% of which were boys, across ten schools has evidenced:
* That few deaf children understand the concept of cyberbullying and that information about cyberbullying is rarely taught at home or in schools if at all, before the age of 12/13 years
* Lack of education and awareness means that many deaf children do not realize they are being bullied to view harmful material online; that they are being groomed or live streamed.
* Few parents, if any, discuss the cyberbullying or any other forms of abuse and exploitation with their children, thus awareness of what constitutes cyberbullying is low and the susceptibility to such, is high.
* The stigma and taboo that surrounds deafness makes deaf children susceptible to cyberbullying. However, this stigma also makes it difficult for deaf children to disclose instances of abuse and exploitation.
* In some instances, loneliness and disenfranchisement pushes deaf children online where they spend an inordinate amount of time. Unsupervised, a deaf child will roam online – either on a mobile device, tablet, laptop, or PC – and be prey to those who wish to bully or seek access to children for their own gratification.
* At schools for the deaf in Pakistan and South Africa, almost half (49%) of the teachers said they have never had any training or professional development on safeguarding and in some schools, policies were not documented. Forty percent (40%) of teachers surveyed were not able to identify a clear school safeguarding policy they were familiar with. This presents a clear barrier to deaf children who may wish to disclose cyberbullying.
1. Second, the **European Union of the Deaf Youth** (EUDY) conducted a survey between June 2023 and July 2024, funded by Erasmus+, aiming to grasp the prevalence and impact of cyberbullying among Deaf individuals in Europe. With 211 respondents aged 15-35, the survey explored various demographic factors, cyberbullying experiences, and institutional responses. Analysis revealed disparities across demographic categories. Females were overrepresented (57.7%) compared to males (34.5%) and non-binary individuals (4.8%). LGTBIQA+ individuals (27.98%) were fewer compared to heterosexuals (54.76%). Religious affiliations varied, with Christianity (33.33%) and atheism (27.38%) being prominent. Racially, white/Caucasian respondents dominated (79.76%), while other groups were significantly underrepresented, highlighting systemic barriers. Verbal harassment (72.1%), social exclusion (45.6%), and cyberstalking (39.7%) were common forms of cyberbullying reported, with 39.3% experiencing it. Revenge, anonymity, and spreading rumors were primary motives, with disparities observed among BIPOC respondents (3.6%). This underscores the need for inclusive interventions and addressing systemic biases.
2. The emotional toll of cyberbullying was evident, affecting over half of affected individuals significantly. Cyberbullying mostly occurred before the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting its persistent nature. Deaf women and girls faced unique challenges, emphasising the importance of tailored support systems. Communication barriers with platform administrators (39.9%) hindered reporting, despite the perceived effectiveness of sign language (71.88%). Over 80% expressed difficulty in seeking help after cyberbullying, stressing the need for accessible support systems. Educational institutions and workplaces were deemed crucial in offering cyberbullying training, followed by deaf associations, law enforcement, and online platforms. However, perceptions varied, indicating the necessity of tailored training across entities. The survey provides vital insights into cyberbullying among Deaf youth in Europe, highlighting demographic disparities, cyberbullying understanding, emotional impact, and institutional responses. Addressing these findings necessitates inclusive interventions, tailored support systems, and comprehensive training to combat cyberbullying effectively and ensure the well-being of Deaf youth.

For more information on the research results, please consult this webpage: <https://eudy.info/project/deaf-youth-against-cyberbullying/>

1. Third, the **Newfoundland and Labrador Association of the Deaf**, one of the provincial associations of the deaf of the Canadian Association of the Deaf, has faced an exponential surge of cyberbullying and online hate speech post-Covid against the members of the deaf community in the province. Due to limited access to information on what cyberbullying is, how to prevent it and how to report it, many deaf individuals, mostly youth, older persons, and those from Indigenous communities, were victims of cyberbullying regarding deaf community-related topics that became part of a public debate. While research on this age group is sparse, observations and reports from this community indicate an increase in deaf seniors and older adults as victims of online hate and bullying, and Inuit deaf adults have also reported concerns. The consequences of bullying on older deaf individuals are profound and multifaceted, affecting physical and mental well-being. Victims may experience health decline, anxiety, depression, and a diminished quality of life.
2. The identified factors contributing to the huge barriers faced by deaf persons, which are exacerbated when they are part of minorities within the deaf communities, in the prevention and fight against cyberbullying are numerous and include, among others:

1. The lack of education and awareness raising among deaf people, especially deaf children and youth, in their national sign language regarding their rights to protection against cyberbullying and how to use social media and online platforms with tolerance and respect for each other.

2. The lack of accessible information and services in the national sign languages on cyberbullying causing a lack of knowledge among deaf people on how to recognize cyberbullying and whom to report to as a victim or witness of a case of cyberbullying.

3. The lack of provision of professional sign language interpretation and accessibility by the (emergency) services provided to deaf victims of cyberbullying.

4. The failure of the global child protection community to include the needs of deaf children and young people in their strategic and operational programming. There is a need for child protection practitioners and decision makers to be deaf aware so that the specific cultural, language and communication needs of deaf children are included in protection programming design, implementation and evaluation. Without such, deaf children and youth will continue to be at risk from cyberbullying and other forms of abuse and exploitation.

1. **Good practices examples of safeguarding and education of deaf children on the safe online use**

1. DeafKidz International has worked to address the vulnerability of deaf children to online abuse and exploitation by developing its DeafKidz Defenders programming. Funded by the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children and the Oak Foundation, it is a games-based intervention that is designed to teach deaf and hard-of-hearing children aged between seven and eleven years old how to recognise abuse – including online abuse and cyberbullying – to say ‘no’ to abuse and to seek help. The main element of the programme is a package of online animations that explain – with no written or oral language – seven key safety messages which are followed by seven games designed to reinforce the concepts of each theme. The online materials are intended to be used by schools, who receive written teacher guidance containing suggested lesson plans to accompany the online materials. The resource also includes a teachers’ guide and lesson plans with some additional classroom activities, based on delivery over three one-hour sessions. The games, which are 2D so suitable for use in countries with low bandwidth, are currently available in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese, and will soon be available in Urdu, Hindi and Arabic. The impact of this programming has been significant with initial evaluation reports noting that 91% of deaf children that completed the DeafKidz Defenders gaming programme increased their knowledge about online abuse and professed to now feel safer. Children repeated the messages learnt during the sessions quickly and confidently. This was because the use of online gaming materials generated understanding, built confidence, created belonging and engaged through entertainment. For more information on DeafKidz Defenders visit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7e8qiqlIUU>
2. Similarly, the European Union of the Deaf Youth (EUDY) is actively engaged in developing a Manifesto and an Action Toolkit aimed at creating a safer online environment for deaf young people. Drawing on survey results and existing policies and guidelines, these resources will provide recommendations for addressing cyberbullying on social media platforms and websites. Expected to be published by June 2024, the Manifesto and Action Toolkit represent a proactive effort to empower deaf youth and enhance their online safety.
3. The National Deaf Confederation of Spain (CNSE) published a bullying prevention guide for deaf youth with a campaign in 2022, and thanks to a collaboration with the ANAR Foundation, a Spanish entity dedicated to the protection of children and their families, the CNSE implemented SVISUAL, a video interpreting platform, on their [website](https://www.anar.org/ninos-ninas-y-adolescentes-sordos-podran-acceder-sin-barreras-a-las-lineas-de-ayuda-anar/) ensuring the accessibility of the helplines in sign language for any deaf victim of (cyber)bullying. Based on this good practice, the CNSE will collaborate in 2024 with the Spanish National Cybersecurity Institute (INCIBE) to develop a guide on cyberbullying with tools and resources for deaf youth, their family members, and professionals, to help them identify and prevent cyberbullying among deaf youth, as well as foster a safe online and social media environment, and to render their helpline accessible through SVisual.
4. The Ireland’s Child and Family State Agency, Tusla, provides resources and a [Child Safeguarding Statement](https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Child_Safeguarding_Additional_Guidance-Final.pdf) detailing policy on cyberbullying. Since Tusla is a public body, deaf people can require access to or support from Tusla in Irish Sign Language under the scope of the Irish Sign Language Act 2017. Thanks to this Act, deaf people have been able to access to information sessions on cyberbullying provided by public bodies and schools. However, no specific measures are undertaken to address the specific target group of deaf people on prevention against cyberbullying and to raise awareness within their linguistic and cultural communities.
5. **Recommendations to Member States to address cyberbullying against deaf persons:**
6. States, especially States Parties to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, must facilitate the use of sign languages in official interactions with deaf persons, under Article 21(b). It is of utmost importance that public-oriented information on cyberbullying, online platforms usage, and remedies in case of cyberbullying, should be given by the public authorities in the languages used by the deaf persons, being their national sign language and/or Indigenous sign language. It applies not only to information shared in the national spoken language of the country in the form of broadcasted information and live videos, but also in the national written language in the form of flyers, online informative posts, and online educational tools on cyberbullying.
7. The services, especially in the justice system, provided to deaf victims of cyberbullying, should be accessible in national sign language, *inter alia*, through the provision of professional and accredited sign language interpreters. Article 9.2 (e) of the CRPD highlights the obligation of States Parties to the CRPD to take appropriate measures to facilitate the provision of sign language interpretation services as part of the accessibility requirement.
8. Deaf children and youth have the right to protection from cyberbullying and to education in their national sign language on how to prevent cyberbullying and to report in the occurrence of a cyberbullying situation as a victim or a witness. They should be provided this information at school as well as from their family members, and the States should facilitate the provision of accessible information to them by collaborating with (youth) national associations of the deaf, organisations working with deaf people, including deaf children, and schools.
9. Particular attention must be addressed by the States to the rights and needs of deaf children and older persons, especially those who have intersecting identities such as indigeneity, and they must take measures, in consultation with national associations of the deaf, to ensure that deaf children enjoy the full protection and guarantees against all forms of violence and discrimination according to Article 16 of the CRPD, as they are exposed to higher risks of online violence and abuse.
10. Ultimately, it falls under the general obligation of the State Parties to respect, fulfill and promote the human rights of persons with disabilities, including deaf people, by engaging them meaningfully in the decision-making processes, in line with Article 4.3 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and its Committee’s General Comment 7 on the participation of persons with disabilities.



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1. The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is an international non-profit and non-governmental organisation and has a membership composed of national deaf associations from 136 countries. The WFD has a consultative status with the United Nations and is a founding member of the International Disability Alliance. We promote the human rights of deaf people in accordance with the principles and objectives of the United Nations Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and other Human Rights Treaties. As the representative body, the WFD strives to ensure that deaf people across the world are equipped with the knowledge, tools, and strategies to advocate for, achieve, and defend their rights. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. DeafKidz International (DKI) is a registered British non-profit that works to respond to the safeguarding and protection needs of deaf children and young people in low resource and complex settings. Deaf led, DKI works to ensure deaf children are able to live their lives and safely and without fear of physical, sexual, emotional abuse and neglect. Furthermore, DKI works to ensure deaf child victims and survivors of abuse access clinical, social welfare and criminal justice support as required and appropriate. DKI is currently working in South Africa, Pakistan, Zambia, Cambodia and India delivering a range of safeguarding and protection programming. In addition, DKI is working with the To Zero initiative and the global Safer Futures Hub to end childhood sexual violence and exploitation within a generation. See <https://deafkidzinternational.org/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The European Union of the Deaf Youth (EUDY) is a European Non-Governmental Organisation for, by, and and of young deaf persons, promoting and supporting the interests of all young deaf persons in Europe. Its membership is composed of 31 deaf youth organisations and youth sections of the National Associations of the Deaf in Europe. To achieve its aims, EUDY encourages the active co-operation between national organisations of deaf young people in Europe and the promotion and co-ordination of European-wide activities for the deaf young people and their representative organisations. It also represents the deaf young people at the European Union level for the purpose of addressing the interests of the deaf young people in the decision making process along with the policy makers and other stakeholders. For more information, please consult: <https://eudy.info> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)