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## Factors Influencing Sign Language Interpretation Service in Ghana: The Interpreters' Perspective

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### Cover Page Footnote

The Ghana National Association of the Deaf is to be thanked for making the Directory of Ghanaian Sign Language Interpreters accessible. We also express our gratitude to the participants in the research who responded to our interview questions, and to our language editors for their thoughtful editing.

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to provide insights into factors influencing sign language interpretation services in Ghana. Participants for the study were purposively selected and interviewed based on the principle of saturation. In all, 14 participants were involved in the study. These participants were selected using GNAD's Sign Language Interpreters Directory. An inductive approach was used to analyze the obtained data thematically. The study established that despite having self-acclaimed sign language interpreters in Ghana, none had received a formal qualification in sign language interpretation. However, all participants were in their pursuit of obtaining a diploma in Ghanaian Sign Language Interpretation. Other factors, such as misunderstanding the role of sign language interpreters among individuals who organize public events, were barriers to sign language interpreters. Misconceptions about the role of sign language interpreters by the deaf and weak interpreters' association, which interpreters feel deny them legal protection, were found to be affecting sign language interpreting services in Ghana. To succeed, there should be a vibrant sign language interpreter association. Universities should consider running programs on sign language interpretation. Education targeting individuals who organize public events and deaf people is highly recommended.

## INTRODUCTION

Ghana is a multilingual nation with about 79 indigenous spoken languages and four different sign languages (Nyst, 2012). Sign languages are natural languages that evolve from deaf communities, including interpreters, friends, and families of deaf people, as well as people who are deaf or hard of hearing (Andriakopoulou et al., 2007). Ghanaian Sign Language (GhSL) is the most widely used communication means by the deaf communities in all formal and informal settings in Ghana (Fobi & Oppong, 2019; Fobi, 2021). Though the number of deaf people who use GhSL for communication is unknown, available statistical data suggest that about 300,000 deaf people constitute approximately 1% of the Ghanaian population (Ghana Statistical Service, 2012). Again, individuals with sign language competencies typically use GhSL to facilitate communication for deaf people in various programs and settings, including education, health, court, TV, and religious and political platforms (Adeoye et al, 2022).

Generally, the role of sign language interpreters in the deaf community can never be underestimated; interpreters constitute the “voice” of deaf people (Andriakopoulou et al., 2007). The right of deaf people is likely to be violated when there is a lack of qualified interpreters, service providers, and training curricula and institutions, as well as the absence of a code of practice to encourage the professionalization of the interpreting field (Sandrelli, 2015). Nevertheless, the professional development of sign language interpreters, in some instances, changed the position of interpreting from being a product of the community to being a product for the community (Bontempo et al., 2014). So, in such a context, friends and family members no longer took on the role of the interpreter, and deaf people became consumers with less direct control over interpreters and their training (De Wit & Sluis, 2015).

Currently, in countries like America, sign language interpreting is a practice profession just like medicine, teaching, and law enforcement rather than a technical profession. The profession involves learning and applying technical skills, which are always used in a dynamic, interactive social context (i.e., with patients, students, and citizens/suspects, respectively) (Dean & Pollard, 2011). So as such becoming an interpreter requires training, certification, and accreditation (Napier, 2004; Harwood, 2017). Such requirements are necessary as access to information for deaf people is now viewed as a human rights issue (McCartney, 2016; Hauland & Allen, 2009). In the United States, for instance, several legislations, including the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), require society to accommodate deaf people in every public event. Ghana, hoping to achieve something similar, passed the Ghana Disability Act (715). Besides, Ghana owns signatories to international treaties, including the United Nations Conventions on the Right of Persons with Disabilities.

Despite these policies, people with disabilities, including the deaf, are usually marginalized and mostly find it difficult to access public spaces. The unfortunate situation seems to contribute to the slow establishment of sign language interpreting services or professions. Ghana still has no formal structures regarding who qualifies as a professional sign language interpreter. Friends and family of the deaf accompanied and signed for the deaf during programs and other events. On most occasions, teachers of the deaf and sign language tutors double as signers for the deaf. Few organizations can work with permanent individuals who facilitate communication for the deaf. (For this study, individuals facilitating communication for the deaf will sometimes be called sign

language interpreters in this document). For example, tertiary education institutions with deaf students typically engage the services of graduates with Bachelor of Education in Special Education who acquired sign language skills through their program.

Also, the head office of the Ghana National Association of the Deaf (GNAD), a Non-Governmental Organization located in the country's capital, Accra, always has a permanent sign language interpreter(s) who facilitates communication during events or programs that involve deaf people. Aside from these, almost all other individuals facilitating communication for the deaf during events or programs double as other career workers and only avail themselves for events or programs involving deaf people. There is no pay structure within the public space for sign language interpreters. So, when necessary, individuals permanently employed to facilitate communication for the deaf are placed under other payment structures matching their academic qualifications. For example, individuals facilitating communication for deaf people at tertiary education institutions are generally employed as technicians under the pay structure and later assigned by their respective heads as 'sign language interpreters. As defined by their leaders, their primary role is facilitating communication for the deaf in all facets of their studies. The situation is, however, not different from a contract or part-time individuals who facilitate communication for the deaf during events and the like. Lack of standardization on approved rates for individuals who facilitate communication for the deaf has resulted in individuals quoting their amounts (allowances) after programs. Or worse, program organizers decide on some amount to pay as they try to assess the relevance of the involvement of deaf people in the program or events.

The Ghana National Association of the Deaf (GNAD), in its attempt to recognize individuals who are experienced and committed to facilitating communication for the deaf across the country, made a Document titled "Sign Language Interpreters Directory." The Document was to aid the public, especially individuals who organize events or programs that involve deaf people (program organizers), in identifying individuals with sign language competencies. With support from donors, some individuals listed in the Directory occasionally receive training to build their capacity. In 2017 about 25 individuals who have previously benefited from the donors-sponsored capacity building and assessment programs organized by GNAD were again enrolled in a Diploma in Ghanaian Sign Language Interpreting program. The program was part of the GNAD project and was hosted by the University of Cape Coast (UCC<sup>1</sup>), Ghana, through a collaboration.

This effort by GNAD was also among the steps to ensure individuals who have their names in the Directory attain formal training in sign language interpreting and subsequently get publicly recognized sign language interpreters. It was again the first academic qualification that sought to train individuals in the field of Ghanaian sign language interpreting. Though, Diploma<sup>2</sup> in Sign language Interpreting per the current educational trend in Ghana is insufficient as diploma programs in the tertiary institutions quickly fade out. Institutions that award diploma qualifications are upgrading to award degrees.

GNAD effort and other endeavors to streamline sign language interpreting services or to have a professional body for sign language interpreters in the country are yet to be actualized. As

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<sup>1</sup> UCC is one of the accredited public Universities in Ghana

<sup>2</sup> In Ghana degree is four years of post-senior high school education or 2 years of post-diploma education, and diploma is 2-3 years of post-senior high school education

of now, individuals who facilitate communications for the deaf during public events are mainly recruited through the deaf attendees. This practice allows deaf attendees, especially the GNAD executives, to use their preferred interpreters, perhaps friends or family members with sign language competencies. In many instances, individuals who are known to some sections of the deaf population and with enough competencies in sign language but lack connection to GNAD Executives receive less recognition and have less chance to interpret for deaf people during programs or events.

Implicitly, the quality of sign language interpreters can significantly influence or fosters the development of the deaf community or individuals. Research conducted among sign language interpreters in a country where proper systems and structures exist for professional sign language interpreters has revealed that there is a high turnover and burnout rate for those who work in the profession (Dean & Pollard, 2001; McCartney, 2016; Schwenke, 2012; Watson, 1987). Variables identified in those studies encompassed role conflict, role overload, poor working conditions, unrealistic expectations of the interpreter held by the interpreter himself or herself and/or others, a lack of skill of the interpreter, and work in video relay settings. In a similar study McCartney (2016) noted that factors such as deaf family members, ethnicity, education level, certifications, satisfaction, and/or family income can account for the individual to take up and retain sign language interpreting as a profession (McCartney, 2016). Again, Powell (2013) mentioned that monitoring and supervision are vital elements that can influence an interpreter's performance. According to Dean and Pollard (2001), lack of mentoring and supervision "endangers the size and stability of the already insufficient interpreter resource pool by failing to attend to the retention and early professional development of graduates." If proper mechanisms are not instituted, and interpreters continue to leave the field, the profession will be in worse need of people than we can see today (McCartney, 2016). Paradoxically, the demand for interpreters and translators is projected to increase by 46% from 2012-2022 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). These indicate a global concern on how to retain the interest of sign language interpreters. As already discussed, Ghana is yet to establish a sign language interpreters' profession and is more likely to struggle in developing this novel profession. Therefore, in this study, the interest of individuals who facilitate communication for the deaf community was of concern. Their perspectives on influencing the emerging sign language interpreting career or services were ascertained.

## METHODS

### PARTICIPANTS

The study participants were 14 sign language interpreters interviewed based on a principle of saturation (Saunders et al., 2018) (see Table 1). Participants were accessed through the Ghana National Association of the Deaf (GNAD). GNAD has a Directory for Sign Language Interpreters in Ghana that includes names of recognized sign language interpreters who are primarily used for programs that involve deaf people (Ghanaian Sign Language Interpreters Directory, 2015). These interpreters (185) across the ten regions of Ghana were mostly males (128, 69%). Further inclusion is as follows 1) interpreter with at least five years of interpreting experience within the deaf community 2) interpreter who can interpret from at least one of the local dialects and English to GhSL and vice versa 3) interpreter selected by GNAD to pursue a Diploma in Ghanaian Sign Language Interpreting at the UCC. The inclusion allowed us to choose the most experienced GhSI interpreters out of 185 in the Directory. Twenty-two (22) out of the 185 met the inclusion criteria,

and they all agreed to participate in the study; 14 out of the 22 people were interviewed based on a principle of saturation. These participants were interviewed at the UCC campus while pursuing GNAD sponsored program, Diploma in Ghanaian Sign Language Interpreting.

### **DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENT**

A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data from the GhSLs interpreters on factors influencing sign language interpreting in Ghana. The interview guide was designed based on the study objective and extensive literature review on similar subjects (Andriakopoulou et al., 2007; Crasborn & Bloem, 2009; Haualand, 2009; Napier, 2016), together with our field experiences in sign language interpreting. The interview guide was made up of 4 sections; the first section sought information on the demography of study participants, followed by the education and training of participants and how it affects interpreting, organizational influence on sign language interpreting, and how the attitude of the deaf people influences sign language interpreting. Each of the last three sections had at least five probing question items. To enhance the credibility of the instrument, a pretest was done on three sign language interpreters with at least five years of interpreting experience and also recognized as an interpreter for deaf people at the local Federation within the Kumasi Metropolitan Assembly (KMA<sup>3</sup>). The pretest data were not considered in the data analyses but helped us merge probing questions with repeated answers across some sections. Ambiguous questions were also removed, and questions that resulted in unwanted responses were deleted; again, issues that required much time for deliberations were noted and followed as such during the primary interviews.

### **DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE**

Letter introducing the study and the team of researchers was made available from the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana. The research team was also introduced to the study participants at the UCC by GNAD. This was made possible because study participants attended classes together each day while pursuing a Diploma in Ghanaian Sign Language Interpreting. Afterward, the research team discussed the objectives of the study with the prospective participants and enquired about their willingness to participate in the study; all the 22 participants expressed their desire to participate. Issues on how to reach them were discussed, days and times available to the study participants were noted, and almost all the participants declared their unavailability for the study during the weekdays, as they closed from classes late and exhausted. To locate each prospective participant, telephone numbers, hall of residence, and room numbers were taken. Interview appointments were scheduled only during the weekends, mostly on Saturdays, with few people interviewed on Sundays. The interviews were conducted within the month of August 2018. Each of the interview's sections lasted between 30-50 minutes. After 14 interviews, data saturation was reached, as no new themes were emerging (Saunders et al., 2018). After discussion, the authors ceased the data collection and used the information for the study report.

Each study participant was briefed on the possible risk involved in participating in the study, as some sections might require them to recount stressful interpreting events. They were made aware that, irrespective of the fact that we were introduced to them by GNAD, partially

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<sup>3</sup> KMA is among the 7 Metropolitan Assemblies in Ghana

indicating their support for the study, they can still withdraw their participation anytime without any repercussion. Interviews were conducted in English, a common language understood by both parties. Each participant who agreed after being introduced to the possible risk was made to read and sign the informed consent form. The participants were interviewed in their rooms within the hall of residence at UCC. Although there was a predetermined interview structure, when appropriate, we encouraged the participants to expand on other issues emerging during the interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded with permission from all the participants.

## **DATA ANALYSES**

The audio records were shared among three members of the research team for transcribing, and a timeline was set for the completion of the transcribing. All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. To ensure the accuracy of the transcribed data, the transcribed interviews were shared among the remaining research team to correspond with the original audio-recorded interviews. About 85% of the transcribed data were correct, and the remaining team made inputs to improve the transcribed data. To further enhance the credibility of the findings, the interview transcripts were printed, and copies were again emailed to all the participants to confirm or provide feedback on whether their voices had been accurately captured (Patton, 1999). Most of the transcripts were untouched, with a caption stating 'accepted.' Yet, 3 of the transcripts were received with a few corrections fixed and some statements revised.

An inductive approach was taken to analyze the data thematically (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Foremost, we read through the data severally to familiarize ourselves with the content; initial notes were made during this stage. Afterward, the data were coded by highlighting some phrases and sentences and giving labels (codes) to describe the content. After coding, we started creating themes by searching for patterns, interconnections, mapping, merging, and collapsing some of the codes to a broader theme. The formed themes were reviewed by checking their usefulness and actual representation of data, which resulted in the recaption of some themes. A story or passage was created for each theme, and quotations were extracted to support the findings.

## **FINDINGS**

This section describes the major themes highlighted by the participants during the interviews and other issues that emerged during the interviews. None of the participants have gone through any formal qualification, indicated their educational level and that of the deaf sometimes influence the quality of sign language interpreting. Lack of understanding of the role of sign language interpreters to the public and, most importantly, those among individuals who organize public events was a major barrier to sign language interpreters in Ghana. Also, a misconception of the role of sign language interpreters by the deaf was mentioned by participants as an unpleasant situation they encountered. Additionally, how weak GhSL Interpreters Association denied interpreters from legal protection and subsequently impacted their services. The following sections present in detail the key findings highlighted.

### **DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS**

Table 1 presents the demographic information of the participants. As indicated in Table 1, most (n=10, 71%) of the study respondent were males, and the majority (n=10, 37%) of the study participants were between the ages of 31-35. The highest education participants had obtained a

Degree<sup>2</sup>, but a higher number of participants (n=8, 57%) had a diploma as their highest educational qualification. Regarding their occupation, half of the study participants (n=7, 50%) assume sign language interpreting as their main occupation, while the rest have their main occupation as teachers, civil servants, and others but assume sign language interpreting as a side job. The study further revealed that the majority (n=6, 44%) of the interpreters have more than twenty years of interpreting experience in the deaf community. Participants stated they learned sign language from different sources, including; Deaf Community, deaf parents (CODA), schools, and church. Yet, the church emerged as a high (n=9, 64%) source for participants who acquired sign language, while one respondent (n=1, 7%) learned sign language from school.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of participants

| Category  | Frequency (n) | Percentage (%) |
|---|---------------|----------------|
| <b>Sex</b>  |               |                |
| Male  | 10            | 71%            |
| Female  | 4             | 29%            |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>14</b>     | <b>100%</b>    |
| <b>Age Range</b>                                      |               |                |
| 20-25   | 2             | 14%            |
| 26-30   | 3             | 21%            |
| 31-35   | 5             | 37%            |
| 36-40   | 2             | 14%            |
| Above 40  | 2             | 14%            |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>14</b>     | <b>100%</b>    |
| <b>Level of Education</b>                             |               |                |
| Senior High School (SHS)                              | 2             | 14%            |
| Diploma   | 8             | 57%            |
| Degree  | 4             | 29%            |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>14</b>     | <b>100%</b>    |
| <b>Main Occupation</b>                                |               |                |
| SL interpreter  | 7             | 50%            |
| Teachers  | 3             | 21%            |
| Others  | 4             | 29%            |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>14</b>     | <b>100%</b>    |
| <b>How long have you interpreted for deaf people?</b> |               |                |
| >10 years   | 2             | 14%            |
| 10-15 years   | 4             | 29%            |
| 16-20 years   | 2             | 14%            |
| 21-25 years   | 5             | 37%            |
| < 25 years  | 1             | 7%             |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>14</b>     | <b>100%</b>    |
| <b>Where sign language was learned</b>                |               |                |
| Church  | 9             | 64%            |
| Deaf community  | 2             | 14%            |
| Deaf Parent (CODA)                                    | 2             | 14%            |
| School  | 1             | 7%             |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>14</b>     | <b>100%</b>    |

## EDUCATION AND TRAINING OF SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS

One of the factors that were identified to influence participants' competencies in performing sign language interpreting was the lack of formal qualification in the area of sign language interpreting. The data gathered indicated that none of the participants had gone through any formal qualification to become an interpreter. Though all participants (n=14) specified they have had some form of informal training, mostly from GNAD, and none of those trainings lasted more than a month. In addition to GNAD's training, participants indicated that religious congregations organized training programs. Participants further noted that the nature and focus of the various programs attended were to train interpreters on how to communicate and behave towards deaf people when interpreting. For instance, an interpreter recounted, "... GNAD, focused mainly on the psychological aspect, you have to know your clients well, and based on that for proper interpreting" (Male Interpreter 1). Another interpreter noted that the GNAD training, for example, focuses on training interpreters on how to behave and how deaf people process, appreciate the information, and perceive sign language interpreting. (Female Interpreter 15)

Additionally, the study participants indicated how well they have benefitted from such training programs. The study findings show that participants, through the trainings, have come to appreciate diversity among deaf individuals and how to factor that in sign language interpreting. The following comments highlight the various ways participants have benefitted from the training programs; "It has enhanced my signing ability, in terms of production and delivery, skill, accuracy and all the parameters involve in signing" (male interpreter 12). Another interpreter narrated;

*... Yes, very well. I quite remember when such training programme were not there, it was very difficult to stand in public to interpret. This was because I will be thinking my co-interpreter is somewhere watching me and if I don't sign or interpret well, he or she will criticize me. So, such programs equipped me with the skills and knowledge needed and also build my confidence. (Male Interpreter 2)*

Another interpreter also related;

*Yes, that was when we went to Kumasi for some time, it roused my zeal to learn the sign language because I got to know so many things that I was lacking behind, I thought I know it all, but no! it was until I went for training upon training that I realized there is more room for improvement. (Male interpreter 9)*

*Oh yes! I have, it has help me to know that all clients (deaf persons) are not the same, it helps to vary my interpreting at different settings, example, if he's a non-school person how to interpret and if he's an educated person how to interpret. (Male interpreter 13)*

Likewise, an interpreter indicated how such training helped him appraise himself by saying, "I have benefited a lot because the training exposed me to my weakness and how to improve on them." (Male Interpreter 7). Additionally, some participants (n=3) realized the differences between signing and sign language interpreting through such training workshops. An interpreter stated;

*... It was very effective. It gave a broad light on certain things. Mostly those of us with deaf parents, sign language interpreting is the same as signing, but the workshops, it helps me to know the differences. I have also come to appreciate that communicating with my mother doesn't make me a sign language interpreter. (Female Interpreter 8)*

## EDUCATION LEVEL OF BOTH THE DEAF PEOPLE AND SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS

Another concern from almost all participants (n=11) was interpreting for deaf individuals with no or low formal education. Participants noted from their experiences that deaf people, especially those in junior high schools, have low competencies in the English language. This normally translates into their comprehension when interpreting from English to sign language. This, according to participants, delays the interpreting process and sometimes misses some points from the presenters as they have to use all means to explain certain concepts to those who do not understand before proceeding. On this, an interpreter noted

*... this really makes things very difficult for you the interpreter. In some instances, while the presenters continue with their speech you have to break and spend some time explaining issues that are not clear to the deaf audience. This results into missing a lot of information which the interpreter cannot be blame [sic]. (Male interpreter 2)*

Another interpreter recounted;

*I have experienced this several times; when interpreting for some junior high school deaf students and similar groups, even some of those in the senior high school, initially, I will think I am making sense to them? but not knowing their level of education is very low, and this has made it difficult for them to understand what I am signing. (Male Interpreter 3)*

However, some participants (n=7) mentioned that in an attempt to ensure every deaf person, irrespective of their educational background, benefits from their signing (interpreting), they resort to the use of non-GhSL variation (other indigenous SL variations) to encode the message. Also, some interpreters indicated resorting to using other interpreters who are very competent in using non-GhSL variations (other indigenous SL variations) for the event. Below presents how some interpreters coped.

“I do produce a normal sign for everyone to benefit irrespective of the educational background” (male interpreter 4).

*Well, I must say because of their educational level it sometimes makes interpreting difficult, especially when the person has not been to school at all. In such scenarios, you have to be extra cautious and try making use of many unconventional signs (other indigenous SL variations) (male interpreter 12)*

*... I remember an incident like that, and I had to rely on a CODA girl because she normally interacts with deaf children and has learned the sign language from them; in fact, she was the one who signed to their level for them to understand that day (Male interpreter 11)*

Yet, few participants (n=2) did not see the education level of deaf people as a concern while interpreting. They have a standard way of interpreting for all groups of deaf persons irrespective of their education level. For instance, one interpreter noted, “personally, I do produce a normal sign for everyone to benefit irrespective of the educational background” (male interpreter 4).

Moreover, more than half of the participants recommend reporting to the program or event venue early enough to search for the diverse deaf group and interact with them to know their respective backgrounds and educational status so as to be informed of the choice of words (sign) and interpreting style to follow in the actual program or event. The following statements illustrate some solutions to how participants endeavor to meet the needs of individual deaf people with low and no formal education.

*Mostly, I go to the program venue early before the time and interact with the deaf people to find out their backgrounds and other things. Through that, I got to realize the best interpreting style and the choice of signs (words) to use when interpreting (male Interpreter 14)*

*First of all, I go there early and introduce myself by saying I am the interpreter “hi, hi (sign)” then I will go head interact with them and ask their names. I do this to know the kind of deaf people I will be interpreting for and their educational level, so I would know the type of words (sign) to use during the interpreting. (Female interpreter 5)*

Interestingly, an interpreter noted that the educational qualification of sign language interpreters also affects sign language interpreting. He humbly admitted that their inability to decode the message well to deaf people is sometimes due to their educational background. He narrated;

*The higher your education, the more efficient you become in your interpreting. For instance, when you have been assigned to interpret a seminar at the tertiary level, the type of English they will use is very high, which affects my interpretation because of my background (male Interpreter 6)*

## **SOCIETAL RECOGNITION FOR SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETING SERVICES**

Almost all the participants (n=13) indicated one of their biggest challenges in the interpreting field is the lack of recognition by people who organize events that include deaf audiences. Participants noted that the event’s organizers have little knowledge, if at all, about the role of sign language interpreters. According to participants, individuals who lead as organizers for programs and events see them as doing nothing so relevant to deserve a reward. Additionally, participants noted such event organizers assume sign language interpreting as an easy task or just meant for fun. Some participants shared their experiences on this by saying;

*...they don’t see it as a profession, and they don’t even recognize what you have done. They just know that you are there throwing your hands (signing without any meaning) like that. And what does that mean? (male Interpreter 3).*

Another female interpreter added;

*...you just came and throw our hands (signing without any meaning) and go away, someone can tell you, you just throw your hands, throwing your hands is nothing difficult so let’s give you this (that is the amount of money to pay) (interpreter 8)*

This perception of the work of sign language interpreters, according to the majority of the participants (n=11), stems from how they view deaf people. The study participants noted that leaders or organizers of events that involve deaf audiences perceived deaf people as sick and also

as a property of sign language interpreters by referring to them as ‘your people’ and, for that matter, rendering sign language interpreting for this group should not call for any incentives. For example, some participants sadly noted;

*“some people don’t value deaf people; the same thing has affected us the interpreters (female interpreter 14).*

*“always they regard deaf people as sick people, they will tell you, your people are here too!” (interpreter 2)*

All the participants who have assumed sign language interpreting as their full-time work, and some part-time sign language interpreters, indicated that program or event organizers do not consider them in their budget, unlike other service providers. According to them, the reason behind such failure was not recognized as professional work, as other reasons noted earlier. Some participants mentioned that program organizers regard payment or allowances for interpreters as not their responsibility but rather the deaf individuals. One interpreter recounted, “Organizers always want to credit our services; meanwhile other resources persons receive instant pay (allowance) after their service, and they will leave us (interpreters) behind.” (male interpreter 9).

Another interpreter narrated;

*They will tell you at the end of the program that we didn’t budget for sign language interpreters. Hmm, for them, they don’t see interpreters’ allowances as their responsibility, yes, not at all; they see it that the deaf have to pay you, not them. And at times, they only give you something small to cover your transportation (male interpreter 12)*

More so, about half of the participants noted leaders or organizers of such events think sign language interpreters should sit together with the deaf people in the general audience instead of standing or sitting in front of the deaf people and the audience. According to participants, the organizers perceive that standing in front or on the platform will distort their program setting. Poor setting arrangement affects not only deaf individuals but also the interpreters, as indicated by some participants (n=9) that it affects the quality of sound heard and the audio for interpreting. The comments below detail how the event organizers think sign language interpreters should position themselves during programs;

*Also, concerning the sitting arrangement, if you are not around or you do not speak out, they will put you somewhere or at the back, forgetting that the program should benefit each and everyone, including the deaf (Male interpreter 2)*

*...even where the people will sit is an issue; they know deaf people have been invited, but still, where they will sit, they don’t know. They just consider them among the general audience, assuming they can sit anywhere, anyhow, for us to interpret for them (Male Interpreter 7).*

Some participants (n=3) who think program or event organizers should do the right thing subsequently took time to educate them at the end of program proceedings. On this, one interpreter recounted;

*sign language interpreting is something new in Ghana, and a lot of people are not aware of our services, and a lot of program organizers also do not even know that they pay interpreters after signing or services. So, whenever I find myself in such a situation, I keep quiet and educate them that sign language interpreting is a profession for some people, so they should regard it as such. (Male Interpreter 13)*

Likewise, some participants (n=5) indicated that as part of the ways to enlighten program organizers on proper conditions for sign language interpreting, they normally report to the venue before programs, so to speak to the organizers of the events before the start of the program. Some interpreters stated;

*Because I am aware program organizers do not know about sign language interpreters, I normally report to the program venues early before time. for instance, if the reporting time is 8 o'clock, I can be there early before the time to make arrangements before the start of the program. (male interpreter 10)*

*what I do is I go there early, very early, and when I go, I tell the organizers that I am the interpreter, so the deaf people are supposed to sit here because if the deaf doesn't sit here, they will not benefit from the program, sometimes they will tell you this place is not for them then I have to explain to them to understand that the deaf people cannot be at the back. (female Interpreter 5)*

### **INTERPRETING FOR LONG HOURS**

The study found that many interpreters interpret alone for long hours during program sessions. According to the study, participants do that affect the quality of their work. However, participants (n=9) indicated they had no option as organizers were unwilling to hire additional interpreters. Some participants admitted they sometimes have the opportunity to invite other interpreters but are normally thwarted by the little amount assured to receive after their service. The comments below present concerns of respondents;

*As for interpreting alone for long hours, who cares? as I told you earlier, people think sign language is for fun and don't regard it as a task that involves all your senses. But the issue is if you interpret for long hours, it affects the deaf people because genuinely you get tired and everyone is looking at you, and you can't take a break and leave the deaf like that. So, you will try your best ... (female Interpreter 11)*

*Oh! I must admit sometimes we can go to programs with some interpreters to support us, but the issue is you yourself don't know what is installed for you, so can you go ahead and invite other interpreters. I recall I did that before, and my friend felt I had disappointed him. (male Interpreter 6)*

### **SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS' ASSOCIATION**

The predicaments interpreters encountered in rendering their services were attributed to not having a robust professional association by almost all participants (n=11). It was further noted by most

participants (n=12) that no law exists in Ghana to protect the interest of sign language interpreters. Participants, according to the findings, were not surprised as they indicated that the law could not protect something that does not exist. The comments below sum up how interpreters perceive weak association has served as a detriment to their interest;

*If we have an association, then we will be recognized, and the law will protect us. if we have a proper association, the correct association, then the law will protect us, but if we do not have it, so we are not recognized; how can the law protect something which is not recognized (female Interpreter 5)*

*for me, I don't know anything about any law, I don't know if there is any law that protects interpreters, but I think they should be a law to support our work. But I sometimes blame the weak interpreters Association; if it was vibrant, they should have come out with measures or laws to protect our interests. A lot of things happened to us, and if we were to be protected by law, it would be very easy to protect ourselves. (Male interpreter 3)*

*I don't know because there is no law; for instance, some of my colleagues complain that they did this and they were not paid, and you cannot take them to court because there is no law backing the interpreters (male interpreter 6).*

Interestingly, an interpreter attributed the inability to have a law to protect interpreters in Ghana to not having enough deaf people who have been able to climb high on the educational or academic ladder to advocate for interpreters. He noted;

*... you know, before we can get to that level, we should ask ourselves how many deaf people have made it to the top and, regarding their education, how many have higher education? Those people would have ensured service providers make their services accessible to them by providing sign language interpreters. You see their education level they don't have... erm... we can't count about 100 people who have (male Interpreter 9)*

## **INTERPRETING PROGRAMS WITH DIFFERENT LANGUAGE SPEAKERS AND ACROSS OTHER DISCIPLINES/SETTINGS**

Interpreting unfamiliar or foreign accents was noted among some participants (n=3) as a factor that influences sign language interpreting. Participants indicated sometimes they find it difficult to understand and interpret deaf people when white people are speaking. One interpreter narrated; “in fact, I must say I find it difficult to interpret the accents of the white's people, I mean the foreigners, is not only easy and also they speak too fast...” (male interpreter 13)

Likewise, some participants (n=5) revealed that they encounter challenges when interpreting across various settings. Some participants indicated that interpreting became a challenge when terms or jargon that were not known to them were being used. An interpreted said;

*... as an interpreter, you must know everything in every setting. Hmm, though it's hard to know everything, we are all trying our best. For instance, I know a few court terminologies, but I am learning more so I can function as an interpreter in the courtroom; I was taught this after my first interpreting in the courtroom. when they mention some words, you may*

*take it to mean something else, but it may be a term with a different meaning in that setting.*  
(female Interpreter 11)

However, another interpreter indicated it was not an issue to interpret across different settings. She indicated before such a task, she read and had some fundamental understanding before is time to do the interpreting. She narrated;

*No, because I read a lot; when I am going somewhere with the deaf, I will ask you questions, what are we going to do, you give me a little knowledge about it, then I will start doing my own investigation or research to see the possible terms to learn before the program (female Interpreter 5)*

### **DEAF PEOPLE MISCONCEIVE SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS**

About 80% of the participants indicated that most deaf people perceive sign language interpreters as people who are taking advantage of them, and without them, life would have been difficult. This perception, according to some participants, affects them, but they just have to corporate because they have no permanent job aside from sign language interpreting. On this one full-time interpreter said;

*Yes, some of them have that mentality that if not me, you will not get money... Mmm, what will you do? It sometimes affects me because if there is no program that involves a deaf audience for me to interpret, where will I be? Do you understand? (male interpreter 4)*

Yet one of the interpreters indicated she only heard such comments from colleagues' interpreters but personally has not encountered that. She stated;

*Personally, I haven't experienced that; I've been hearing it from my co-interpreters because sometimes I just go and interpret for them, and I don't take the money; I would rather give them money, but some of the other interpreters have been saying it. (female Interpreter 5)*

## **DISCUSSION**

The study explored the experiences of sign language interpreters by assessing the factors influencing sign language interpreting in Ghana. Several factors were identified; among these were; no or low education among deaf people, interpreting programs that involve individuals with a different accent and multilanguage, lack of recognition of the role of sign language interpreters among people, and institutions that organize events or programs which include the deaf audience, interpreting for long hours, lack of law to protect interpreters and misconception among deaf people towards the role of sign language interpreters.

Before identifying these challenges, the study found that a majority of the interpreters were males, and also majority were between the ages of 31-35. Data on sign language interpreters elsewhere, especially in the European world, found many females (Crasborn & Bloem, 2009; MacDougall M.A., 2012). So, finding otherwise can suggest that this emerging career in the Ghanaian context is not so attractive to females, and the youth are not much interested in this career. This might be why half of the interpreters were not taking this career as their main

occupation, and even the full-time self-identified interpreter does so because that is their only hope. Still, they are more likely to be part-time interpreters if only they find a permanent job.

Contrary to this, a report by Sandrelli (2015) stated that becoming an interpreter is the aspiration of many young trainees who register for interpreting degrees worldwide. Again, the current study revealed that educational institutions are not doing much when teaching and learning sign language. Almost all respondents were introduced to sign language outside schools. This is not surprising as sign language became a course widely known to Ghanaian students in the year 2016 after it was introduced to students in the nursing and midwifery colleges by their Council (Myjoyonline.com, 2016). The history of deaf education and sign language in Ghana and most West African countries was started by Jack Andrew Foster, a black American and a missionary (Kiyaga & Moores, 2003). Implying religious organizations have been very instrumental in the African deaf community, and the findings from the study attested to that as the majority of interpreters were introduced to sign language in church.

Very few countries, excluding Ghana, have formal education and training opportunities for interpreters (Haualand & Allen, 2009). As indicated earlier, the profession is probably not attractive to the youth. Higher educational institutions demonstrate almost zero interest and fewer considerations for building capacities in the area. The situation is likely to perpetuate in countries where deaf people enjoy less privilege or creating an enabling environment for the deaf community is of little concern. The right of deaf people might infringe upon without qualify interpreter (Haualand, 2009). It should be noted again that conversational fluency in oral language and sign language alone does not automatically qualify a person as an interpreter (Sandrelli, 2015 & Andriakopoulou et al., 2007). Becoming a qualified SL interpreter is not standardized across the globe; it varies from country to country, but structures remain missing in countries struggling to establish SL interpreters' associations (Napier, 2004; Stewart, Schein, and Cartwright, 2004).

Interpreters' attitudes towards particular dominant sign language can make the development of other indigenous sign language variations linger. In the current study, GhSL interpreters perceived GhSL as a standard and normal language for deaf people in Ghana. This assumption contracts the evolution of sign languages as natural languages (Campbell, 2007). Further, it can impede their zeal required to acquire other indigenous sign languages. Again, lack of formal education on the part of the deaf should not be a major concern to interpreters. Likewise, sign language interpreters cannot frame their success in interpreting effectively for the deaf on their educational background.

Nevertheless, an individual has to be proficient enough in his/her dialect or language to appreciate the message in that language (Obosu et al., 2016). Evidence indicates that deaf people mostly lag behind their hearing counterparts in language acquisition (Malloy, 2003). Obosu et al. (2016) noted that deaf people are mostly denied the required knowledge and information due to language barriers.

The home environment, specifically parents, has a key role in the language acquisition of their children (Opoku et al., 2020). Most deaf children are born to hearing parents who lack sign language skills. In effect, they grow up without language or sign language skills. Furthermore, in many parts of Africa, particularly Ghana, deafness is regarded as a curse from the gods (superstitions believe), and the conditions are highly unwelcome. Parents spend more years and exhaust every effort to 'correct the defect' (Gadagbui, 1998). This and other reasons delay the acquisition of sign language and end up limiting deaf people's access to information. To complicate

issues, these diverse deaf populations are normally seen as a single group with equal communication needs. So, these populations are normally provided with an interpreter(s) with GhSL competencies, only assuming the interpreter can function effectively for all. Unfortunately, some deaf people, regardless of their age and onset of their condition, lack engagement with the deaf community and cannot appreciate better GhSL interpreters because those deaf people can use some other indigenous SL variations known to perhaps no or only a few SL interpreters and deaf people.

Education on the proper setting for the deaf audience in programs has not gone far, as confirmed in the study. The need to include deaf people in public programs has become imminent due to emerging human rights laws (Haualand, 2009; UN, 2014; Ghana Disability Act, 2006). Limited knowledge of the society on issues relating to sign language interpreting, as manifest in the study, was a challenge among interpreters. Program organizers' attitude towards interpreters, as they sometimes refer to the deaf as 'your people,' can indicate that deaf people are seen as sick (Retief & Letsosa, 2018). A study by Powell (2013) recognizes a need for a clearer understanding of what sign language interpreting entails. This seems missing among program organizers as they think allowing interpreters on the platform will distort their program setting. Less recognition from program organizers resulting in unfair treatment among interpreters, was linked to weak sign language interpreters' community or association. Some studies (Powell, 2013; Dean, 2001; Hetherington, 2012) maintained that monitoring and supervision are key to the operations of sign language interpreters. The lack of these can endanger the size and stability of the already insufficient interpreter resource pool.

The international standard of sign language interpreters' practices recommends at least 30 minutes of interpreters during conferences or program proceedings (Gile, 2018). Yet, the situation was far different as found in the study that one interpreter signed for a long period without any assistance from a co-interpreter. The issue of not having functional laws, policies, and a proper code of ethics will not only make interpreters suffer in the hands of program organizers but can also jeopardize their health (Gordon, 2017). Additionally, people's interest in this emerging career will forever diminish (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015), and if not careful, this profession will always be regarded as a charity (Deng, 2018). Though some claims by interpreters that not seeing more deaf people ahead of the academic ladder cannot outrightly be debunked, doing more as interpreters association can help the deaf people and interpreters gain more recognition (Sandrelli, 2015). Further, this assertion indicates interpreters' inadequate training and education in the interpreting field to accommodate the diverse deaf community and also aid them in distinguishing between sign language and the varying educational backgrounds of the deaf.

Another unexpected and unpleasant challenge identified among sign language interpreters was a misconception among deaf people about the role of sign language interpreters. Instead of deaf people perceiving sign language interpreters as any other services provided, such as doctors, teachers, and the rest (Dean & Pollard, 2011), they were viewed by the deaf people as opportunistic who were taking advantage of their condition. This probably explains some findings from the study that the education level among deaf people is low. A study by (Haualand, 2009) acknowledges that Acquiring literacy largely depends on formal educational experience, and many deaf people in various countries around the world experience a sub-standard education or no formal education at all. Also, it can suggest that such deaf people defined their condition from the medical model of disability.

Further, the study found that deaf people regard sign language interpreters as their friends and can call anytime they find themselves into trouble or in dire need is consistent with some past assumptions that Sign language interpreting was considered a helper, or service field, also labeled as “women’s work,” similar to “cashier, secretary, elementary school teacher, and registered nurse or nurse’s aide” (Cokely, D. 2005; Stewart, Schein, & Cartwright, 2003). Though, according to participants comes with some benefits in saving the lives of some deaf people. Yet, the families of deaf people can be encouraged to learn sign language so that many personal issues can be dealt with at home without involving interpreters.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the study findings, the following recommendations are made to stakeholders for further consideration.

Foremost, higher education institutions collaborating with Deaf Associations and the emerging Sign Language Interpreters Association should develop a degree program for sign language interpreters. This could probably make sign language interpreting an attractive career. Individuals with theoretical knowledge of sign language interpreting seem rare, especially in Ghana. Hence, those with the practical skills and the right educational qualifications could be sponsored to receive the necessary education, so with time, higher education institutions will have the required human resources to sustain sign language interpreting programs. Likewise, the emerging Sign Language Interpreters Association and Deaf Associations can seek sponsorship through proposal writings for some members who have the qualification to pursue a degree in sign language interpreting.

Again, the emerging Sign Language Association should come out strong and make itself more visible and recognized to the public. This could be possible by selecting well-dedicated and committed executives who collaborate with some members to develop a policy on sign language interpreting. Also, these executives should help develop a working code of ethics for all sign language interpreters. Consequently, those who want to become interpreters should be certified by the Association together with Deaf Associations through a means of assessment; this should happen after the individual has attained a reasonable educational qualification set by the two bodies. This will probably encourage individual interpreters to attain some reasonable educational qualifications. Likewise, there should be a public education by the Association and Deaf Associations on the terms and conditions of engaging sign language interpreters. The Deaf Associations, in supporting this effort, should educate and warn its members about engaging interpreters who are not certified. In its policy documents, the emerging Sign Language Association should clearly state the implications of assuming a position as a sign language interpreter without following the set standards.

Formal education among the deaf should be of main concern to the Deaf Associations, Sign language Interpreters Association, and the Deaf community. Formal education for the deaf will help ensure all deaf people are being introduced to GhSL, as GhSL is the main language for instructions in all deaf schools in Ghana. Deaf Associations with the Sign Language Interpreters Association should make enough effort to identify deaf individuals without any formal education and their families and educate them on the relevance of education. Those with some level of education should be encouraged to pursue higher so that they will be seen within most sectors of the economy. If the nation realizes its contribution, prioritizing interpreting services that will

support deaf people to function within their respective areas will not be an issue. Again, enough education among the deaf will help them appreciate the relevance of sign language interpreters.

Likewise, the emerging sign language interpreters Association and Deaf Associations should educate the public on the role of sign language interpreters and the human rights issues involved in having deaf people at public events without an interpreter. Also, the responsibility of organizers in terms of remuneration for interpreters.

## CONCLUSION

The study explored the factors affecting sign language interpreting in Ghana. The main aim was to discover possible factors affecting sign language interpreters. It emerged from the study that, though all the interpreters have had some form of training either by GNAD or their church, none have had any formal qualification relating to sign language interpreting. This was because there is no higher education institution with programs on sign language interpreting in the country. Hence, future action should be taken to help sign language interpreters receive some formal qualification in sign language interpreting. Also, lack of recognition among events or program organizers towards sign language interpreters was the main challenge identified among interpreters. Most of these organizers acted out of ignorance; this calls for public education on the role of sign language interpreters as well as the responsibility of program organizers. Higher education among sign language interpreters alone is likely to minimize the challenges sign language interpreters encounter. Educating the deaf should equally be of concern as it will help deaf people appreciate the actual role of sign language interpreters. Some of the factors affecting sign language interpreters are closely linked to not having a strong and functional interpreters association. Henceforth, the vibrant association is recommended to develop policies and laws that protect sign language interpreters' interests.

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