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CONTRIBUTION MADE BY THE DEPUTY MINISTER OF GENDER EQUALITY, POVERTY ERADICATION AND SOCIAL WELFARE, BERNADETTE MARIA JAGGER (CMP) TOWARDS THE MOTION BY HON. ALEXIA MANOMBE-NCUBE (MP) ON RECOGNIZING OF NAMIBIAN SIGN LANGUAGES IN THE COUNTRY AND THE APPOINTMENTS OF SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS ON LIVE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES.

Date: 20 SEPTEMBER 2023

Hon. Speaker, Hon. Members

I rise to make a contribution towards this very important Motion tabled by the Hon. Alexia M. Ncube, the Deputy Minister who deals with People living with Disabilities in the MGEPEWS. This Motion speaks on recognizing Namibian Sign Languages in the country and the appointment of Sign Language Interpreters on Live Parliamentary Debates.

Hon. Speaker, Hon. Members

Research (results) from the African Sign Languages Resource Center indicates that out of the 2.6 million people in Namibia, there is a deaf population of 8,300. It is noted that more than 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents. It is also a fact that no Mother would know that during her pregnancy stage, that she is bearing a deaf baby. Medical Practitioners also do not immediately tell a Mother the moment the child is born, that the child is deaf.

In her motivation, the Mover mentions that only 563 deaf children are enrolled in Resource and Inclusive Namibian Schools of which these inclusive schools are found in only five regions in this country and Resource Schools in five towns. Therefore, Hon. Speaker, Hon. Members, Sign Language learning options seem to be limited in schools in Namibia. This put parents in a challenging situation to send their children who are deaf far away from home just to acquire sign language. Parents find it hard to give away their children for schooling because they fear that children will not be safe. Equally so, is it a challenge for the parents to learn the language to communicate with a deaf child. The biggest challenge really, is the communication hurdle. Many communities still believe that a school for the deaf might not offer the same quality of academia that hearing school offers. It must be understood that Parents are not able to communicate with a child who is deaf, if they do not use sign language. It is widely argued and believed that many **hearing** parents, if not all, are unaware of the importance and avenues to learn Sign Language. It is however worth noting that the Association for Children with Language, Speech and Hearing Impairments of Namibia (CLaSH offers a basic introduction to Namibian Sign Language for Parents and Family members of young deaf children and a basic 3-month introduction for interested public. Of course, there are other institutions that have similar programs to assist and/train parents to understand and use sign language. Hon. Speaker, Hon. Members: Sharing such information as Peoples' Representatives is very crucial. We should help families to build their children in general and in particular those living with disabilities to help them shape their own futures in order for them to take part in their own development and in the development of their communities and their countries.

Sign Language cannot be fully realized in its entirety if it is not part of the curricula in all stages of education. It is therefore my believe Hon. Speaker, Hon. Members that Sign Language must be part of School Curricula and become a mandatory subject in the Namibian school system. It is believed by teaching Sign Language in schools, not only develop the confidence of deaf children to make friends and express themselves more, but hearing children will also gain the skills to communicate more with them (children who are deaf). School Parents, Learners in schools and the general public must be sensitized that people who are deaf in general and children who are deaf, in particular, **are not unfortunate and very disabled** and therefore do not have a life in their lifetimes. Experts in Sign language argue that Sign Language serves as a visual stimulation of speech and language development and helps to reduce negative social behaviors, increase social behaviors and increase social interactions.

Hon. Speaker, Hon. Members, I urge that all Offices, Ministries and Agencies must as a matter of urgency employ people who are deaf alongside sign language interpreters. This category is forever excluded in governing institutions, not even mentioning Company Boards. If we advertise positions, we say people with disabilities and those from marginalized communities are encouraged to apply. Well they do; just for a person who is deaf, to walk in an interview room where none on the interview panel members can understand sign language and there is no interpreter. Let us close that gap between the hearing category and the category of the Deaf, once and for all.

As I conclude, Hon. Speaker, Hon. Members: Let me leave you with a quote from George Viditz. It reads as follows and I quote: "Sign Language is the noblest GIFT God has given to deaf people."

I support the motion. I thank you.