OXFORD JOURNAL
OF STUDENT
SCHOLARSHIP

Recognition Without Reception: Deaf Voters and Pakistan Sign Language

Azlan Zaigham Shah
azlaanzshah@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the position of deaf voters in Pakistan reflects a failure of recognition rather than a failure of execution: the recognition of Pakistan Sign Language (PSL) has been made instrumental in one domain and left symbolic in the civic settings where citizens meet the state. The 2022 Access to the Media (Deaf) Persons Act grants PSL statutory recognition, backed by interpreter requirements and criminal penalties, but scopes that recognition to broadcast media. A survey of Pakistan's electoral and disability law shows that general accessibility duties do reach polling stations, but none names PSL or interpretation, and where the law specifies what accessibility at the polls means, it names physical access and Braille. Drawing on documentary analysis, correspondence with a Karachi deaf accessibility organisation, press reporting, and three months of participant observation with a Karachi deaf rights organisation, including a mock polling event convened with the office of the District Election Commissioner, the paper traces this asymmetry across three sites: Pakistan's disability employment quota, the United Kingdom as a comparative mirror, where the operative duty at the polls comes from the 2010 Equality Act rather than the 2022 British Sign Language Act, and the mock polling event itself. Using Maartje De Meulder's distinction between symbolic and instrumental recognition, Terra Edwards' account of intersubjective grammar, and, with stated limits, Elizabeth Povinelli's cunning of recognition, the paper argues that Pakistani law leaves civic settings without a duty to operate in PSL. The available evidence is consistent with the exclusion of deaf voters at the polls, but it does not establish how widespread that exclusion is.

INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that the position of deaf voters in Pakistan reflects not a failure of execution but a failure of recognition: the failure to make the recognition of Pakistan Sign Language (PSL) instrumental rather than merely symbolic outside the one domain where the state has already legislated it. The 2022 Access to the Media (Deaf) Persons Act (Act No. XL of 2022) defines Pakistan sign language as "the preferred language of Pakistan's deaf population" (s.2(1)(l)), giving it the same status as Pakistan's minority spoken languages, and sections 3, 4 and 15 bind broadcasters to interpreter deadlines and criminal penalties. Pakistan's electoral and disability law does place general accessibility duties on electoral institutions, but none of them names PSL or requires interpretation, and where the law specifies what accessibility at a polling station means, it names physical access and Braille (ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2020, s. 16). PSL is recognised, with enforceable duties, where a deaf citizen receives information from the state; where that citizen is received as a citizen, at the polling booth, its recognition remains symbolic. This paper traces where that asymmetry leaves deaf voters. Its claim is structural: the

law leaves civic settings without a duty to operate in PSL. The evidence available on what deaf voters meet at real polls is consistent with exclusion, but it is too limited to establish how widespread that exclusion is.

This is not the same claim as saying PSL is unrecognised. PSL has held statutory recognition since December 2022, with compliance deadlines for broadcasters falling in mid- and late 2023. De Meulder (2016) distinguishes symbolic recognition, a status granted on paper, from instrumental recognition, the operational infrastructure and enforceable duty that make a status functional, and argues most sign language legislation delivers only the former. Pakistan's case sharpens that distinction: PSL's recognition is instrumental in one domain and symbolic everywhere else. A 2025 national consultation convened by the Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training to standardise PSL confirms the shape of the gap from the state's own side: the Federal Minister acknowledged that the absence of a standardised PSL has limited deaf citizens' access to education, employment, justice, and public services (Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, 2025), a state that had legislated a language it had not yet standardised. This paper does not argue that PSL is unrecognised, but rather that its recognition has been made instrumental in only one setting (broadcasting), and has remained symbolic in terms of political inclusion and participation.

Peer-reviewed, PSL-specific linguistic scholarship remains scarce. Pakistan's deaf advocacy landscape, comprising organisations such as the Pakistan Association of the Deaf, Deaf Reach, NOWPDP, and ConnectHear, produces advocacy and practitioner knowledge rather than published linguistics research, and existing academic attention to PSL concentrates on early-intervention and health-framed studies of deaf children rather than on PSL as a language in institutional use (A. Dhanjee, personal communication, 2026). This paper draws on Edwards' DeafBlind scholarship, and on Marie's comparative work on interpreting in India and Vietnam, in part because comparable Pakistan-specific linguistic literature does not yet exist to draw on directly.

The paper builds toward a single argument made across three sections that bring the same failure into sharper focus. Section One sets the workplace as context: four decades of failure to meet a disability employment quota, which shows a longer pattern in which disability law sets targets without building institutional obligation. Because the quota data concern disability in general, the section offers context for the argument rather than evidence about deaf people specifically. Section Two turns to the United Kingdom, not as a model to be copied but as a comparative mirror, to separate what the statutory recognition of a sign language does from what an enforceable duty does, and to isolate what Pakistan lacks. It closes with a survey of Pakistan's own electoral and disability law. Section Three returns to Karachi and a mock polling event, where the asymmetry becomes visible in a single, observable moment: recognition granted in one domain and never extended to the encounter between a deaf citizen and the state at the polling booth.

The workplace and the polling station are two expressions of one underlying failure, but they have very different impacts. In the workplace, the failure is almost silent: a deaf person is simply not hired, or is hired and never really received, and no single moment has to answer for it. At the polling station, the failure cannot stay silent, because the state and the citizen meet face to face, and the state must either open

a space for that citizen's participation or visibly close it in front of her. The polling station is where the same underlying failure to fully recognise PSL is forced into the open and made to declare itself.

The paper also draws on Elizabeth Povinelli's concept of the cunning of recognition: the way the formal act of recognising a marginalised group can itself become the mechanism of exclusion. Povinelli (2002) develops this through an analysis of Australian native title law, where the state recognises Indigenous land rights only on condition that claimants prove an unbroken traditional connection to the land, a condition that reinstates the very authority the recognition claims to repair. The transfer to Pakistan is partial, and its limits need stating. Povinelli's framework was built to describe a settler-colonial state's relationship to Indigenous sovereignty, a history Pakistan, as a postcolonial but non-settler state, does not share. More importantly, the mechanism she describes works through a demand placed on the recognised: claimants must perform a traditional identity in a form the state finds legible, and recognition is withheld from those who cannot. Pakistan's 2022 Act asks deaf citizens to perform nothing. Its limit is not a condition imposed on the recognised but a boundary on the domain in which recognition operates, a mechanism this paper calls domain-scoping. What the paper takes from Povinelli is therefore narrower: the general point that recognition can be granted in a form that leaves existing state practice undisturbed. Domain-scoping is a different route to that outcome, and the paper does not claim it is the cunning of recognition itself.

METHODS

The empirical basis of this paper rests on four strands of evidence, each with a distinct evidentiary status. The first is long-term community familiarity. I have had sustained access to Pakistan's deaf community since childhood, through a family connection to the Sir Syed Deaf Association (SDA), a Karachi-based deaf rights organisation founded in 1986.[1] This familiarity shapes the paper's orientation and the questions it asks, and made the second strand of evidence possible. The second strand is participant observation. Between October and December 2024 I worked as a volunteer with SDA and its project PWDs-Network.net, in a continuous three-month engagement. My formal role was social media manager, but the position placed me inside the organisation's routine work: planning meetings in the run-up to the December mock poll, working sessions with PWDs-Network coordinators, and the debrief held afterwards. It also placed me in the organisation's daily communicative life, watching how hearing staff and deaf members dealt with one another, watching interpreters work and watching what happened in the stretches when no interpreter was available, and in conversation with deaf members, teachers, and staff. The pattern Section Three analyses was visible in that ordinary institutional traffic before it was visible at the polling demonstration.

The engagement's central episode is the Mock Poll Activity held on 18 December 2024 at the Pakistan Disabled Foundation, Karachi, organised by PWDs-Network.net, an SDA project, in collaboration with the office of the District Election Commissioner Central, and attended by more than fifty blind and visually impaired participants. I addressed the room during the speeches and remained at the venue for three to four hours. I spoke with participants who had been taken through the polling demonstration, and

[1]I volunteer with SDA as its social media manager and am related to its founder, Zaigham Mahmood Rizvi. The observed event was organised by an SDA project, and ConnectHear receives SDA sponsorship.

separately with deaf attendees, who had not. Because no deaf attendee took part in the polling demonstration, the event is evidence of how accessibility was scoped, not of what a deaf voter meets at a polling desk.

The third strand of evidence is practitioner correspondence. The paper draws on structured written questions put to ConnectHear, a Karachi-based deaf accessibility and interpreting organisation, and the written responses received. ConnectHear's account of real elections is one organisation's testimony; the paper treats it as indicative rather than representative, and sets it alongside press reporting from the 2018 and 2024 general elections. The fourth, and principal, evidentiary strand is documentary analysis: the 2022 Access to the Media (Deaf) Persons Act, the 2025 Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training consultation on PSL standardisation, the 1981 Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance and its federal and provincial successors, the Elections Act 2017 and Election Rules 2017, the ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Act 2020, the Sindh Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act 2018, the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and press coverage.

Participant observation with Deaf populations, in the sense Edwards (2022) develops it, requires sustained, embedded presence across repeated institutional encounters, close enough and long enough to observe how communication is actually structured between parties, not just reported after the fact. The three-month engagement described above provided that position. I was working inside the organising body rather than visiting it, present across its ordinary operations as well as at the event itself, and close enough on the day to observe how the room was structured, who was addressed, and through which channel. Section Three is written from that vantage.

SECTION ONE: THE WORKPLACE AS QUIET FAILURE

The workplace is the backdrop against which the partial recognition of PSL at the polling station has to be read. It functions here as context rather than evidence: the data available concern persons with disabilities in general, not deaf people specifically, so the section shows the shape of a broader institutional pattern rather than measuring deaf exclusion. In the workplace, that pattern is almost inaudible. Disabled people, deaf people among them, are not hired, and even those who are hired can remain inside an organisation for years without ever being recognised as full participants in the workplace.

In 1981, Pakistan passed the Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance, which introduced an employment quota for persons with disabilities, originally one percent and later operationalised as two percent in federal practice, with non-compliant employers required to pay into a Disabled Persons Employment Fund (Disabled Persons Ordinance, 1981, ss. 10-11; Syed, 2025). After the Eighteenth Amendment devolved social welfare to the provinces, the Ordinance was superseded: the ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Act 2020 repealed it for the federal capital and leaves the quota "as determined by the government", in practice still two percent (Syed, 2025). Provincial laws have since adjusted it unevenly: Sindh raised it to five percent in 2018, Punjab to three percent in 2022, Balochistan to five percent in 2017, and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has held at two percent under its 2014 amendment (Syed, 2025). Across four decades and successive federal and provincial laws, the federal baseline has not risen.

A survey of sixteen government departments in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa found that not one met the quota (Syed et al., 2019). The aggregate was around 0.67 percent against a two percent requirement; Higher Education came closest at 1.65 percent, and Agriculture sat at 0.48 percent (Syed et al., 2019). These figures count persons with disabilities as a whole; they are not broken down by impairment, and this paper found no comparable figures for deaf employees. These are not the numbers of a system straining toward a target it cannot quite reach. They are the numbers of a system that never organised itself around the target at all. The institution never understood itself as actually responsible for receiving the people the quota was for.

Pakistan also ratified the International Labour Organization's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons) Convention in 1994 (ILO Convention No. 159, 1983; ratified 1994), which frames accessibility as something institutions build in advance rather than provide on request. The Ordinance sets a domestic numerical target; the ILO Convention sets an international standard for how the employment of disabled persons should be approached. Taken together, the state has the full apparatus: a statutory quota, an international commitment, a fund to enforce compliance. The failure to bring disabled people into the workforce happened anyway.

That is not a gap in provision. It is what happens when an institution enacts the form of inclusion without taking on the obligation that gives the form its meaning. The form is the visible apparatus: the law on the statute book, the quota as a percentage, the signed convention, the fund with its account. The meaning is what the apparatus is supposed to stand in for: an institution actually treating disabled people as participants it is responsible for receiving, and reorganising how it hires so their presence becomes possible. Pakistan has the form in full and almost none of the meaning. The quota has not been missed because it was unrealistic. It has been missed because no part of the workplace ever understood itself as responsible for the people the quota was for.

Nothing here forces the failure into the open, so the workplace simply absorbs it. A deaf applicant is not turned away in a scene anyone witnesses; she is simply never the candidate the process was built to recognise, and her absence reads as nobody's decision. The failure is distributed so thinly across so many quiet non-events that it never has to be confronted as a failure at all.

The polling station event I will analyse in Section Three is where that quiet absorption stops being possible. When a deaf voter arrives at a polling station, the failure has to happen in front of her. The state cannot quietly decline to process a citizen the way an employer can quietly decline to hire an applicant. The encounter is face to face: the state must either open a space for her participation or visibly close it. Before returning to that moment, the paper turns to the United Kingdom. Pakistan's gap is hard to see on its own terms, because an absence leaves no trace; it becomes visible only against a case where the thing is present.

SECTION TWO: THE UNITED KINGDOM AS MIRROR

The United Kingdom is used here for a specific reason. It is not the most structurally comparable country to Pakistan by income, region, or colonial history; a South Asian neighbour, or a state with a more similar

postcolonial legal inheritance could equally have been chosen, and Marie's (2021) ethnographic work on interpreting in India and Vietnam, discussed in Section Three, brings one such comparison to the fore. The UK is chosen instead because it offers the cleanest available before-and-after case: a single, recent, and well-documented statutory act, the 2022 British Sign Language Act, that gave a sign language statutory recognition in a specific, dateable legal moment, sitting alongside an existing anticipatory-duty framework under the 2010 Equality Act. That combination makes it possible to separate what the statutory recognition of a sign language contributes from what a general, enforceable duty contributes, rather than attributing the difference to a whole cluster of overlapping social and economic differences between countries. The UK is not held up as a model Pakistan should copy, and its own record is uneven, as discussed below; it is held up as a mirror, in which Pakistan's specific absence becomes visible by contrast.

The architecture of recognition in the UK has three layers: a legal duty to make adjustments before any disabled person needs them, statutory recognition of British Sign Language as a language, and operational guidance that turns that duty into practice at the polling station.

The first layer is the 2010 Equality Act, which places an anticipatory duty on service providers to make reasonable adjustments before a disabled person needs them (Equality Act 2010, ss. 20, 29). The institution is responsible for accessibility before any particular disabled person arrives; the duty is not triggered by a request but exists beforehand as a standing obligation. Responsibility moves from the disabled person, who would otherwise have to ask and hope, onto the institution, which has to build the accommodation in before she ever appears. The duty includes providing auxiliary aids, such as a sign language interpreter, where that is a reasonable adjustment (s. 20(5)). It is this duty, not the later recognition of BSL, that carries the instrumental force at a British polling station. Pakistan's 1981 Ordinance does the opposite: it names a target the disabled person is meant to count toward, without naming any obligation the institution holds to make her participation possible. Later Pakistani laws, including the ICT Act 2020 and the Sindh Act 2018, do define the denial of reasonable accommodation as discrimination, but, as Syed (2025) notes, they set no specific, enforceable standard for what accommodation requires.

The second layer is the 2022 British Sign Language Act, which legally recognises BSL as a language of England, Wales, and Scotland (British Sign Language Act 2022, s. 1). Its operative force is narrow. The Act provides that this recognition does not affect any other enactment or rule of law, and its only duties require the Secretary of State to report on how ministerial departments promote BSL in their public communications and to issue guidance (ss. 2-3). It places no duty on returning officers, local authorities, or service providers. By De Meulder's (2016) measure, the BSL Act sits close to symbolic recognition: it changes BSL's status without, by itself, creating obligations in civic settings. The obligations a deaf voter can rely on at a British polling station predate it and come from the Equality Act. What the Act adds is a name. BSL is recognised as a language, not as a communication aid; a communication aid presupposes spoken English as the destination and the deaf person as somewhere short of it, while a language does not need to be translated into anything else to be valid. That status gives guidance, complaints, and advocacy a recognised language to refer to, even though the duty to act sits elsewhere. PSL is used fluently every

day by the Pakistani deaf community, and, since December 2022, has held statutory recognition under the Access to the Media (Deaf) Persons Act, backed by interpreter mandates and criminal penalty, but only within broadcast media. In that respect Pakistan's recognition statute is more instrumental than Britain's: it carries enforceable duties, but within a single domain. The difference between the two countries at the polling station lies not in their recognition statutes but in whether a duty reaches the polling station and is specified there.

The third layer is operational, where recognition becomes concrete on the day of the vote. The UK Electoral Commission's guidance for returning officers, updated ahead of the May 2026 polls, sets out specific provisions for deaf voters: BSL video relay interpreting where requested, awareness training for polling staff, and the Equality Act's anticipatory duty applying at the polling station itself, so that adjustments must be made before any deaf voter arrives (Electoral Commission, 2026). The guidance rests on the Equality Act's duty. An interpreter for a deaf voter could already be required as a reasonable adjustment before 2022, and the BSL Act did not add a duty to provide one. What the guidance needs from the law is the duty's anticipatory character: the instruction to make adjustments without advance notice only makes sense if that duty exists.

None of this is perfect. UK disability organisations continue to document accessibility failures at the polls, and the May 2026 elections drew fresh criticism of polling station design and staffing. But there is something for those complaints to attach to: an enforceable duty that can be invoked, a guidance document that can be revised, and a statutory language status that can be named. The Pakistani polling station offers a deaf voter's complaint little to fasten onto, because the duties that reach it do not say that communication access, or PSL, is part of what accessibility means.

Pakistan's position becomes visible by contrast across all three layers. A general accessibility duty reaching the polling station exists on paper, as the survey below sets out. Instrumental recognition of PSL exists, but only inside broadcast media, where the 2022 Act imposes deadlines and criminal penalty on broadcasters who do not comply; that same instrumental force stops at the studio door. What is missing is the third layer: operational provision that names PSL. No law or guidance directs returning officers to arrange PSL interpreting or to train polling staff in deaf-accessible communication, and interpretation is treated as something to provide only if a voter has asked for it beforehand (Baig, 2024). The Pakistani polling station is not failing to deliver against an infrastructure that has been built; the instrumental recognition that would let such an infrastructure be built has been granted in one domain and withheld from this one.

Pakistan's Electoral and Disability Law

The contrast depends on a claim that needs checking against Pakistan's own law: that no duty to operate in PSL reaches electoral institutions. Four sets of instruments bear on it.

The Elections Act 2017 and the Election Rules 2017 contain disability provisions, but they concern access to the act of voting rather than communication with the voter: special measures for registering persons with disabilities as voters (Elections Act, 2017, s. 48), postal ballots for voters with physical disabilities

who cannot travel and who hold a NADRA disability card, and assistance from a companion for voters who are blind or physically incapacitated (Election Rules, 2017; Baig, 2024). None mentions sign language or interpretation.

The ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Act 2020, which applies in the federal capital, goes further. Section 16 gives persons with disabilities a full right to political participation, requires the Election Commission of Pakistan to ensure that each polling station is accessible to them, and directs that a voter accessibility mechanism be developed, giving Braille ballot papers as its example. Sign language appears in the Act only once, in section 17, which provides interpreters for access to the justice system. The Sindh Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act 2018, which governs Karachi, follows the same pattern. Section 17 affirms the right to vote and to stand for election, and section 6 requires equal access to public facilities and services, but sign language appears only in the provisions on education and television (ss. 9, 21), and interpreters only in the provision on access to justice (s. 18). Both Acts define the denial of reasonable accommodation as discrimination; neither specifies what accommodation a deaf voter is owed.

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), ratified by Pakistan in 2011, is the only instrument surveyed that names sign language in terms that would reach a polling station. It counts sign languages as languages (Art. 2), lists professional sign language interpreters among the forms of assistance that make public facilities accessible (Art. 9), commits states to accepting and facilitating the use of sign languages in official interactions (Art. 21), and requires voting procedures and materials that are accessible and easy to understand (Art. 29). It binds Pakistan internationally, but its obligations become enforceable at home only through domestic legislation, and none of the statutes above carries Articles 9 or 21 into electoral procedure.

The survey therefore corrects this paper's claim in one respect and confirms it in another. Electoral institutions are bound by law: the ICT Act's duty on the Election Commission is a standing obligation, and ConnectHear's description of legislation that asks for provision for disabled voters but sets out nothing actionable fits what the statutes contain (A. Dhanjee, personal communication, 2026). But where Pakistani law specifies what that obligation means at the polls, it names ramps, postal ballots, companions, and Braille, never PSL. The one instrument that names sign language in official interactions, the CRPD, has not been carried into electoral law. In practice, interpretation is treated as a response to individual requests: before the 2024 general election, an Election Commission official told a reporter that a sign language interpreter could not be provided on polling day because none had been requested (Baig, 2024). The British guidance works the other way, asking for adjustments to be in place before any voter arrives. The general duty exists; the specified duty, the one that would name PSL, does not.

The polling station is the central site of this paper because it is the one place where recognition is either granted or refused in a single observable moment, in front of both the citizen and the state. The act of voting is itself an expression of citizenship, the moment the state acknowledges a person as a full participant in public life. A national debate about PSL's legal status is diffuse and slow, and happens nowhere in particular; the polling desk compresses the entire question into one interaction that can be watched. That is what makes it the sharpest available site at which to observe the limits of PSL's recognition.

This is not the first time in Pakistan that access for deaf citizens has arrived through a private individual rather than the state. Boltay Haath, Pakistan's first sign-language television programme, was created in 1984 by Syed Iftikhar Ahmed and his wife Rehana Iftikhar and broadcast on state television through the 1980s, roughly four decades before the state itself made broadcasting without a PSL interpreter a criminal offence (Dawn, 2022). The state's one instance of instrumental recognition arrived in a domain a private citizen had already served unaided for decades, and, per the asymmetry this paper traces, has not yet extended past it.

SECTION THREE: THE MOCK POLLING EVENT IN KARACHI

A polling station is built around speech. The officer reads a name aloud and asks a question to confirm a national identity number; the voter answers, is handed a ballot, goes behind a screen, marks it, folds it, and places it in a box. The entire process assumes that ballot secrecy is meaningful because it follows from a verbal exchange the voter completed independently. The secrecy of the vote is supposed to be the secrecy of a choice made alone.

This structure is not incidental, and it is the analytical centre of the paper. The polling station is not a neutral container into which a vote happens to be deposited. It is a sequence of interactions the state has chosen, in advance, as the procedure through which citizenship is acknowledged. Building that procedure around spoken Urdu is, whether or not anyone experiences it as a decision, the institution's statement about whose participation it expects to receive.

ConnectHear, a Karachi-based deaf accessibility and interpreting organisation, corroborates this pattern well beyond the polling station. In banks, forms are routinely completed on deaf customers' behalf, with staff communicating with a companion rather than the deaf customer directly. In driving licence offices, the same substitution occurs, which is why ConnectHear pushed specifically for interpretation to be introduced at the Clifton branch, so that deaf applicants could complete the licensing procedure independently rather than through a companion. In hospitals, deaf patients must bring their own interpreter, typically a family member, because PSL provision is rarely available (A. Dhanjee, personal communication, 2026). None of these settings falls within the 2022 Act's scope. All of them sit on the civic side of the asymmetry this paper traces.

At real elections, the available evidence points the same way, though it is limited. ConnectHear's correspondence for this paper reports that deaf voters in Pakistan frequently attempt to vote and are not facilitated in doing so: guidance signage is typically absent, and interpretation is not provided despite general legal provision for disabled voters, which, as the survey in Section Two shows, never specifies PSL. Per ConnectHear, no formal brief on deaf-specific accessibility has reached the Election Commission of Pakistan, because disability-access discussion in Pakistan centres overwhelmingly on physical access, ramps and wheelchair clearance, rather than on communication access (A. Dhanjee, personal communication, 2026). A report on the 2018 general election, launched by the Potohar Mental Health Association and covered by Dawn, documented the same pattern at a national scale: no signage for voters with impaired hearing, no Braille ballot papers for blind voters, and inaccessible polling booths and doorways (Kundi, 2018). Reporting from Karachi before the 2024 general election recorded the same

gaps: observers noted that polling staff lacked sign language and that interpreters were absent (Baig, 2024). These sources are few, and ConnectHear's account is one organisation's; together they indicate a consistent pattern rather than measure its extent.

The Mock Poll Activity held in Karachi on 18 December 2024 illustrates the same asymmetry at close range. Convened by a private disability network, PWDs-Network.net, with the office of the District Election Commissioner Central, the event was designed to demonstrate independent and confidential voting for persons with disabilities, and in practice was scoped to visual impairment: deaf attendees were present, and a PSL interpreter interpreted the speeches throughout, but no deaf attendee went through the polling demonstration itself, which was built for blind and visually impaired participants. Interpretation extended to the register of address, where the event explained itself to the room, and not to the register of participation, where a voter would actually be processed, and it came from the organising network rather than the state, which is Marie's (2021) point about recognition work falling onto people rather than institutions. The event took place two years after the 2022 Act defined PSL's statutory status and a year after its compliance deadlines for broadcasters had passed. Because no deaf attendee went through the demonstration, the event cannot show what a deaf voter meets at a polling desk; what it shows is how accessibility was scoped.

None of this means the event excluded deaf attendees, postponed their inclusion, or withheld interpretation. It means something narrower and more telling: the event was never structured to test civic participation for a deaf attendee the way it tested civic participation for a blind or visually impaired one. A blind voter's obstacle at a polling station is legible, and a demonstration built to address it produces a visible response; a deaf attendee at the same event appears, from the outside, to face no obstacle at all, so nothing follows. The absence registered to no one present, organisers, officials, or attendees, as a gap. This is not a criticism of anyone's good faith on the day. It reflects how the event's scope was drawn, along the same boundary the law draws.

It would be easy to read the broadcast/civic split as a logistical gap: electoral law simply has not caught up with media law yet, and with time it will. This paper argues that reading is mistaken. The 2022 Act shows the state can write interpreter mandates, deadlines, and criminal penalties when it chooses to, and did so for broadcasters within a year of the Act's commencement. Electoral and disability law shows that the state has also legislated accessibility at the polls, and specified it as ramps, postal ballots, and Braille. The absence of PSL from that specification is not an oversight working through the legislative queue; it is what the law, as written, actually does. A genuine logistical failure would look like a state that had tried to extend PSL's recognition to civic settings and fallen short. What the law shows is a state that has specified accessibility at the polls without including PSL in it.

Edwards' (2022) work on intersubjective grammar lets this paper state that structural point precisely, with one qualification stated up front: Edwards developed this account from protactile communication among DeafBlind people in the United States, a tactile modality among a specific community. Her argument is used here as a lens for analysing what happened at the Pakistani polling event. Communication, Edwards shows, depends on a shared bodily zero point: a position from which two people orient toward one another and build meaning together. In protactile communication, that zero point is established through

touch, one person pressing "you" into the other's chest, "me" into their own, "here" into the upturned palm, from which the location of a third thing can be specified between them. The point Edwards draws out is that this shared position has to be actively built, and both parties have to commit to the same world for it to hold. In a polling station built around spoken Urdu, the zero point is built around speech. The officer's body is positioned to receive a hearing voter; the voter's body is expected to position itself to be received in that way. There is no equivalent positioning available for a deaf voter. The institution does not know how to occupy a zero point with someone whose primary language is sign.

This is what the ConnectHear pattern, across banks, driving licence offices, hospitals, and polling stations, has in common: a third party, a family member, a companion, an NGO volunteer, offers the institution a body it already knows how to deal with, a hearing body, in place of the deaf person's own, so the exchange happens beside her rather than with her. The Mock Poll Activity shows the boundary behind that pattern in a single, dateable, publicly convened moment. Framed in good faith as a demonstration of independent participation for disabled voters, what it could actually demonstrate was bounded by the same asymmetry the 2022 Act encodes at the level of national law: interpretation for the register of address, not for the register of participation. The event did not fail to deliver something it had promised deaf attendees; like Pakistani electoral law itself, it was never built to test their participation in the first place.

This is where Povinelli's (2002) analysis is useful, and where it stops. In the Australian native title cases, recognition is bound to a condition the claimant must meet, proof of unbroken traditional connection, which reinstates the very authority the recognition claims to repair. The 2022 Act binds PSL's recognition to no such condition; deaf Pakistanis are not asked to perform an identity in order to qualify for it. Its limit is a boundary on where recognition applies. What the two cases share is the outcome Povinelli names: recognition granted in a form that leaves existing state practice undisturbed. The 2022 Act recognises PSL as a language, with real enforcement machinery, and in the same gesture confines that recognition to a domain that leaves the citizen-state encounter untouched. The Mock Poll Activity is where that boundary becomes visible in a single room. A logistical failure is something attempted and missed; a recognition failure is a structure built so that a domain it does not name is left without a duty specific to it. That is the shape of PSL's partial recognition in Pakistan's civic life: not an absence, but a boundary.

The asymmetry this paper documents is not necessarily permanent. The 2022 Act's own National Policy Board includes a seat reserved for a representative of the Deaf community, nominated by deaf Pakistanis themselves. The infrastructure the Act builds is currently scoped to broadcasting, but it is not intrinsically limited to it; whether it extends to civic and electoral settings is a question for future legislative and advocacy work, not for this paper's evidence.

CONCLUSION

This paper has traced a single asymmetry across three sites: Pakistan's statutory recognition of Pakistan Sign Language is instrumental within broadcast media and symbolic everywhere else, including in the civic and electoral settings where citizens meet the state directly. Not a communication aid, and not a status confined to a single sector by oversight, but a complete and equal language whose statutory force

the state has chosen, so far, to enforce in only one domain. That asymmetry runs through all three sections of this paper: the workplace, the UK comparison, and the Karachi polling event alike.

The first section, centred on the workplace, showed the failure at its quietest: a quota that, across four decades and successive federal and provincial laws, has never compelled institutions to receive disabled employees, while, for deaf applicants specifically, recognition of PSL generates no statutory reason for an employer to build the accommodation that would make deaf participation possible. The second, centred on the UK, showed that recognising a sign language and placing a duty on institutions are different acts. Britain's recognition statute is largely symbolic; what reaches its polling stations is an older, general, anticipatory duty, made operational by guidance that names BSL. Pakistan has legislated general accessibility at the polls and enforceable PSL duties in broadcasting, but has never joined the two. The third, on the Mock Poll Activity in Karachi, showed that boundary in a single moment: an event that could demonstrate voting access for blind and visually impaired participants in detail, and could do no more for deaf participants than interpret the room. The three sections are not separate problems. They are one boundary, at three different scales.

Until PSL's recognition is made instrumental beyond broadcast media, no electoral or civic institution has a specific statutory reason to operate in it, and a deaf voter has little to fasten a complaint onto. The polling station built around spoken Urdu was never built to include them, and the 2022 Act, for all its enforcement machinery, was never written to reach it. Everything downstream, the operational guidance, trained polling staff, the statutory obligation to provide an interpreter at a polling station, depends on a single prior step that has not yet been taken in Pakistan: extending PSL's instrumental recognition past the boundary of broadcast media, whether by widening the 2022 Act or by writing PSL into the accessibility duties electoral law already contains. Nothing else follows until that happens. How often deaf voters are turned away in practice is a question for future research with deaf voters themselves; what this paper has shown is that nothing in the law requires a polling station to receive them in PSL.

REFERENCES

Access to the Media (Deaf) Persons Act, 2022 (Pakistan), Act No. XL of 2022.

Baig, H. I. (2024, February 7). Sindh's voters with disabilities hope for better facilities during February 8 elections. *The Friday Times*. https://thefridaytimes.com/07-Feb-2024/sindh-s-voters-with-disabilities-hope-for-better-facilities-during-february-8-elections

British Sign Language Act 2022, c. 34 (UK), ss. 1-3.

Dawn. (2022, March 29). Syed Iftikhar Ahmed, host of sign language-based PTV show Boltay Haath, passes away. *Dawn*. https://www.dawn.com/news/1682415

De Meulder, M. (2016). *The power of language policy: The legal recognition of sign languages and the aspirations of deaf communities* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Jyväskylä]. JYX Digital Repository.

Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance, 1981 (Pakistan), sections 10 and 11.

Edwards, T. (2022). The difference intersubjective grammar makes. *Lingua, 272*, 103303.

Election Rules, 2017 (Pakistan).

Elections Act, 2017 (Pakistan), s. 48.

Electoral Commission. (2026). *Guidance for returning officers: Assistance with voting for disabled voters*. Electoral Commission UK.

Equality Act 2010 (United Kingdom), sections 20 and 29.

ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2020 (Pakistan), ss. 16-17.

International Labour Organization, Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (Disabled Persons) Convention, 1983 (No. 159). Ratified by Pakistan, 25 October 1994.

Kundi, A. (2018, December 1). Persons with disabilities not facilitated during elections: report. *Dawn*. https://www.dawn.com/news/1448679

Marie, A. (2021). Entangled interdependence: Sign language interpreting without recognition in India and Vietnam. *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review, 44*(2), 192-206.

Ministry of Federal Education and Professional Training, Government of Pakistan. (2025, September 30). National Consultation on the Standardisation of Pakistan Sign Language [Press statement]. https://www.mofept.gov.pk/NewsDetail/NmFkMjQwMDMtNWI5Ny00N2JiLTg3YTEtY2ZjYzBkODdiM2Mw

Povinelli, E. A. (2002). *The cunning of recognition: Indigenous alterities and the making of Australian multiculturalism*. Duke University Press.

Sindh Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2018 (Pakistan), ss. 6, 9, 17, 18, 21.

Syed, A. S., Ahmad, F., Rehman, R. U., Khan, M., Asghar, N., & Khan, I. (2019). Employment status of persons with disability in government departments in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. *Annals of Allied Health Sciences, 5*(2).

Syed, J. (2025). *Disability and inclusion in Pakistan: Prevalence, policies, and barriers* (SAAM Working Paper Series 250901). South Asian Academy of Management.

United Nations. (2006). *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, Arts. 2, 9, 21, 29. Ratified by Pakistan, 2011.