

## **Will Justice Finally Be Delivered for Deaf People Unable to Communicate with Health Workers or Access Health Information?**

14 September 2022

[KAMPALA]. Today the Constitutional Court heard Petition 29 of 2017 filed five years ago by the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER), an NGO dedicated to advancing social and economic rights in Uganda, together with the Uganda National Association of the Deaf (UNAD) and other members of the deaf community. The case challenges the state's failure or omission to provide sign language interpretation at health care facilities, an omission that affects nearly 1.1 million Ugandans who have hearing loss.

*"Our interactions with deaf people across the country revealed a national health system that ignores the unique barriers they face in accessing healthcare" observed Allana Kembabazi, ISER Program Manager. "When a lack of sign language interpretation means that an entire deaf community is unable to access health care or health information the same way that other members of the public can, we are dealing with discrimination."*

UNAD's Executive Director paints a dire picture, *"The lack of meaningful communication and access to information in a health care setting exclude millions of deaf people and exacerbates health inequities. We are unable to communicate with health workers. We can't get basic health information. This is our everyday reality."*

Failure by the state to provide sign language interpreters to deaf people at health facilities and its failure to require that such interpreters are availed violates their right to privacy and confidentiality.

*"The reality is that deaf patients are deprived of their full bodily autonomy, privacy, access to information and the stakes are higher for women with disabilities when health workers are unable to communicate even basic medical information to them,"* noted Labila Sumayah Musoke, ISER's Program Officer- Right to Health.

Following the hearing today, the five Justice panel of the Constitutional Court noted they would deliver judgement on notice. The petitioners remain hopeful.

*"Today's court hearing comes five years since ISER & UNAD filed the petition. In the meantime, this ongoing violation due to government's failure to act has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is imperative that the Court pronounces itself in this matter and orders government to prioritize sign language interpretation in health facilities to ensure equitable access to healthcare,"* remarked Atori Elizabeth, Legal Officer at ISER.

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**For further information, please contact:**

Atori Elizabeth, Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER), [info@iser-uganda.org](mailto:info@iser-uganda.org) or [eatori@iser-uganda.org](mailto:eatori@iser-uganda.org), +256703068569