

## **JAPAN**

Association: National Research Association for Sign Language Interpretation (NRASLI)  
Reported by: Etsuko Umemoto

### **GENERAL**

POPULATION: 127 million CAPITAL CITY: Tokyo

### **DEAF PEOPLE**

Association: Japanese Federation of the Deaf (JFD), 22,197 members (April 2011)  
Legislation to protect the rights of the Deaf: Japanese Constitution  
Deaf education: 106 deaf schools  
Sign language: Japanese Sign Language  
Spoken language: Japanese

### **SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS**

#### Number of interpreters

- 1,535 professional interpreters (NRASLI survey 2010) – 233 regular employees (19.4%) and more than 80% of precarious workers
- About 10,600 registered interpreters (fiscal year 2002)

#### Association of interpreters (nationwide body)

- Japanese Association of Sign Language Interpreters (JASLI) – 1,918 members (June 22, 2010)
- National Research Association for Sign Language Interpretation (NRASLI) – 10,603 members (March 31, 2011)

#### Training of interpreters

- Training courses in institutions of higher education
  - In 1 four-year college and 3 technical colleges (1 national and 2 private)
    - 2 - 4 year training period
    - Original curriculums in each institution
- Local training courses for general public
  - In each prefectures
    - Subsidized by the national and local governments
    - Implementing bodies are such as local deaf associations
  - Consists of 12 hours of lectures and 78 hours of practical trainings (90 hours in total) through 3 courses (Further Basic Course, Applied Course and Practical Course).
- It is appreciated that interpreters are trained at government expense, but programs are insufficient in quality and quantity in terms of training of professional interpreters.

#### Certification and assessment of interpreters

- National Sign Language Interpreter Certification System (from 1990)
  - Administered by an institution authorized by the Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare, institutionalized under the provisions of “Ordinance of Ministry of Health and Welfare on Authorization of Assessment/Certification of Sign Language Interpreting Knowledge and Skills (Notification #108 of the MHW)” (national certification).
- Certification exams by local prefectural governments

- Certification at local level (since 2001)
- 45 prefectures adopt the same examination (designed by National Center of Sign Language Education)
- National Sign Language Proficiency Test (from 2006)
- To judge attained communication skill of sign language learners
- Classified into 6 grades

## **Situation of Sign Language Interpreters in Japan**

### **Great East Japan Earthquake**

- On March 11, 2011, a strong earthquake and following tsunami hit Tohoku and Kanto districts in Japan caused an unprecedented disaster. It especially devastated coastal area of 3 prefectures in Tohoku district (Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima). Also, the tsunami triggered a nuclear accident at the Fukushima plant, which delayed electric supply, so they couldn't use fax machine or mobile phone in the area and it was so difficult to confirm their safety. A large number of evacuees are forced to live under harsh conditions due to damaged roads and gas shortage, which prevent necessary items such as food, water, medicine, hearing aid battery, flashlight and clothing from reaching the disaster-struck area.
- Radioactive pollution caused by hydrogen explosion at the Fukushima nuclear plant is a significant problem. Nobody knows how the damage spreads as they are struggling to cool reactors now. This has a huge impact worldwide.
- JFD launched the Central Headquarters for Disaster Relief for Deaf People in the Great East Japan Earthquake immediately after the earthquake, and its first meeting was held by JFD, NRASLI and JASLI on March 18. The meeting was attended by 12 partner associations and observers from Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW), Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology and Cabinet Office. This means the support system for the deaf people was organized.
- NRASLI made detailed recommendations on how to dispatch interpreters, and a great contribution to start definite and practical actions.
- Interpreters in Tohoku district are victims themselves and are completely exhausted mentally and physically. But there is no one yet who is prepared to accept volunteer interpreters, so, for the time being, interpreters and hearing signers working at local governments, Information Centres for the Deaf and social welfare councils are dispatched to the site.
- It is necessary to support communication in every aspect of daily life and ensure information access of deaf people over a long period of time. If disaster-struck area will be prepared to accept volunteers, support efforts will be even more rewarding.
- Impact of economic stagnation
  - There is no sign of economic recovery in Japan and employment situation has been deteriorated, so people are leading tough life. Some colleagues who don't have leeway in terms of financial, time and mental state claim that they are not able to participate in works and activities. The welfare budget has been cut, and socially vulnerable people can get little support. Therefore, we believe activities aimed at realizing a society where the basic human rights are protected are significant.

### **Situation of Japanese Deaf People**

- Guarantee of information accessibility after the earthquake
  - Sign language interpreters were provided at the press conference of Chief Cabinet Secretary at the prime minister's office, two days after the earthquake for the first time.

Then, interpreters have been provided at the press conferences of Prime Minister, Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry, and Minister of State for Promotion of Energy Conservation, so that the deaf people have been able to access real-time information. It all started before the earthquake, when JFD and other organizations of the disabled lobbied against amendment of Basic Act for Persons with Disabilities, urging the government to recognize Japanese sign language as an official language. However, some TV companies did not screen interpreters at press conferences of Tokyo Electric Power Company about the nuclear accident. There is a need for interpreter and closed caption for all TV news.

- Towards the ratification of the UNCRPD (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities)
  - Domestic legislation has been initiated since 2010 for the ratification of CRPD. The background may be as follows:
    - Services and Supports for Persons with Disabilities Act began in April 2006, and it imposes 10% burden on welfare services users. Because of this 10% burden, some users tend not to use the welfare services, and it has made the problems clear that the disabled have difficulties in their social participation and that they have lost their hope. Also in sign language interpreters dispatch services, some local governments introduced the 10% self-pay.
    - NRASLI, JASLI and JFD have got together to insist that “Communication is the right to live” and to set up the Anti- Services and Supports for Persons with Disabilities Act Headquarters and started a campaign demanding the repeal of the act.
    - In 10-30 Great National Forum, held on Oct. 30, 2009, MHLW declared in front of 10,000 participants that they should repeal the Services and Supports for Persons with Disabilities Act and that the people involved should be engaged in building a new system. And also, on Jan. 7, 2010, the court concluded with the agreement between the government and the 71 plaintiffs, who had brought the act to the court insisting that the act violated the constitutional rights to live.
    - In such social background, a review of the domestic law which is necessary for a ratification of CRPD started by the Cabinet decision of Dec. 2009, and Headquarters for Disability Policy Reform was set up with Prime Minister as its Director-General. The Headquarters consist of 24 people, of whom 14 members are persons with disabilities and their families. This is a milestone never before. Deaf delegates from JFD, All Japan Association of Hard Hearing People and the Japan Deaf-Blind Association are selected respectively as members of the Headquarters.
    - Council for Disability Policy Reform has two expert divisions; Welfare Law Division and Antidiscrimination Law Division. They both have discussions respectively together to amend Basic Act for Persons with Disabilities. We made the brochure “We Love Communication” about problems for and wishes of deaf people, and are working on a signature activity and dissemination of the brochure with other related organizations.
    - They first discussed to amend Basic Act for Persons with Disabilities, but the problem is that “rights of persons with disabilities” are not specified. It is good news that Article 3 has the statement “languages (including sign language)”, but it is still uncertain whether the statement will be surely specified.

- Also, efforts are being made in order to enact “Information Communication Law” (Draft) and “Sign Language Act” (Draft).

### **Two Achievements in the World of Sign Language Interpretation after 2007**

- Both of the interpreters’ associations have become General Incorporated Associations: NRASLI in 2010 and JASLI in 2009. That means they are socially recognized as organizations with a certain power.
  - Advanced social recognition is expected to help widen our activities. Also, JFD, JASLI and NRASLI in cooperation with each other operate National Centre of Sign Language Education, which has sign language research, development of human resources, e.g. sign language interpreters, and accommodation.
- Survey of sign language interpreters
  - NRASLI does a nationwide survey of the labour and health condition of employed sign language interpreters once every five years. It is a great achievement that the survey is being done across the country. Following issues have been found in these surveys:
  - In the 2010 survey, approximately 80% of interpreters found non-regular workers, such as part-time and temporary workers, and over 90% are female. The average age continues to rise since 1990. In 2010, about half of interpreters are aged over 50. Under unstable work condition without social recognition as a profession, it seems impossible to develop young interpreters.
  - Campaign to spread the brochure “We Love Communication”
  - Domestic legislation has begun to ratify CRPD and we are working with deaf organizations on the campaigns to spread the brochures and to collect signatures so that we can get people to have better understanding. The slogan "Nothing About Us Without Us" has become fixed among us through the campaigns.

### **Two Problems in the World of Sign Language Interpretation after 2007**

- Professional establishment of sign language interpreters system
  - The sign language interpreters dispatch service in Japan should be implemented by municipalities, and its basic style is that a registered interpreter will be sent upon the request from a deaf client. At present, 74.06% of the municipalities have carried out the system, but the problem is that it doesn't rise higher than paid volunteers, with its reward, compensation and training insufficient. Expansion of employment is required so that sign language interpreter can be established as a profession.
  - Only 27.62% of municipalities have carried out “Sign Language Interpreter Establishing Service” although the business menu has the service on it and municipalities should put sign language interpreters in administrative bodies or centres for disability services and provide sign language interpretation services. As stated in the above, sign language interpreters are needed to improve their employment conditions. The problem is that only a few interpreters can visit deaf people and most interpreters can only provide interpretation services to visitors to the bodies where they are put.
- Health problems of sign language interpreters
  - It is also a big issue that environmental improvement should be done so that sign language interpreters can keep good health and do their job. Some interpreters have lost their health because of, as described above, insufficient sign language interpreter system, lack of understanding of the employers, lack of awareness of interpreters themselves, and so on. Currently some interpreters who had continuous sign language

interpretation services with registration to six offices suffer from health problems and have gone to court in order to get certification of the problem as work injury. In First Instance, the court judged that their neck-shoulder-arm disorder was caused by the sign language interpretation, however, the court didn't take their work in six offices into consideration but considered it individually and ruled unfair and dismissed the claim, insisting that their disorder was not caused by their job.

- We need to improve the rate of having a medical check-up for neck-shoulder-arm disorder, ensure the dissemination of prevention manual, and promote environmental improvement so that we can keep doing our interpreting job in good health.

#### **What we can offer to WASLI during the next 2-4 years**

- We offer, among Asian countries, as much support as possible to the countries who ask for help to establish sign language interpreters training system, to establish a system of sign language interpreters, to establish sign language interpreters' organizations, and financial support to participate in sign language interpreters meeting in Asia, and so on.