

INTERVIEW | ENTREVISTA | ENTREVISTA



A conversation with Martina Hall about Mexican Sign Language

Interview by Ioana Cornea*

Martina C. Hall is currently a professor of German, English and Linguistics at the *Escuela Nacional de Lenguas, Lingüística y Traducción* at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). An undergraduate in Communication and Media Studies with a Minor in Media and Film Studies in the United States, she did her Master's in Applied Linguistics at the UNAM in Mexico and is currently working on her PHD thesis in the field of Sign Language and Deaf Education. She has been a language teacher for nearly 20 years in Spain and mostly Mexico in different institutions and educational levels. Her research interests are in the areas of sociolinguistics, sign language and the Deaf community, language teaching and learning, and accessible materials.

Mexican Sign Language (MLS, *Lengua de Señas Mexicana*) was recognized as an official language in 2005, along with Spanish and 68 native languages. MLS has been gaining ground for almost two decades since its recognition, since lately we are experiencing an increasing presence of MLS in different sectors of society. In these times where inclusion and artificial intelligence (AI) have become the leitmotiv of our conversations, MLS is strengthened through the proliferation of courses, the presence on television in programs with high national ranking, in social and academic events. However, despite these achievements, MLS still has a long way to go for linguistic consolidation, training, as well as social sensitivity. In this interview, we want to focus on the Deaf woman, since she has

* Professor in the Department of Translation and Interpreting and in the Bachelor's Degree in Translation at ENALLT, where she teaches courses in specialized translation, translation theories, documentation and terminology for translation, research in translation and interpretation. In addition, she is the coordinator of the Distance Learning Diploma in English-Spanish Legal Translation offered by the same Department. E-mail: ioana.cornea@enallt.unam.mx.

been doubly excluded, for being a woman and for her physical condition. We would like to inquire about how these women access justice, in cases of gender violence, and what strategies exist on the part of the Mexican State for an adequate inclusion.

To find out more about MLS, Martina Hall, professor at the National School of Languages, Linguistics and Translation (Escuela Nacional de Lenguas, Lingüística y Traducción) of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México) will talk to us about the current state of MLS and the situation of Deaf women in accessing justice.

Ioana: Could you comment briefly about the state of Mexican Sign Language in 2024. What has been achieved and what still needs to be done for the language to be recognized?

Martina: As you mentioned in the introduction, Mexico recognized Mexican Sign Language in 2005, and since then laws for people with disabilities and educational laws have been passed to cement the language's place as Deaf people's natural language and consequently the support for its use. These laws have been modified and worked on over the years and many programs have come of them with varying degrees of success. Just this month the General Education Law was modified to state that the teaching Mexican Sign Language as a first language and Spanish as a second must be guaranteed in the Mexican education system. So, there are certainly steps being taken, unfortunately, their reality is very different, because if a Deaf person has access to the language is the result of a complex interrelation of different factors.

For example, even though the laws manifest that interpreters should be provided to have access to public services **or** education, the reality of actually providing or receiving this service is a challenge and a constant struggle. Over the past ten years or so, there has been more information about Deaf people, their language and their necessities in society as a whole and little by little this information is making their real situation more known. More sign language classes have appeared over this time period as well, so in general one can feel more of a presence. Despite this, many families are still dealt with by doctors, where the learning of the sign language is not prioritized, or sometimes not even mentioned. There is still a lot of stigma and misinformation attached to the subject, which obviously has a detrimental effect on Deaf people learning the language and therefore on their access to education, work, and social contacts, among others.

The diversity of Deaf people's situation, language levels, communication strategies, educational needs etc. (Fridman Mintz, 2011) makes it a very complex issue and there is certainly a very long way to go until what is stated in the laws is put into practice successfully. There are a lot of projects, programs and initiatives spread all over the country, which are being implemented by schools, universities, social institutions, government bodies, etc. etc., which I would say are making a big difference Deaf people's lives.

The language has been theoretically accepted, as one can see in the laws, but it's more about working on really understanding what need to be done and getting the programs to work and be implemented in a positive way, not just to check off the "inclusion" box, but to really respond to the needs of Deaf people in their daily lives.

Ioana: Now I would like to focus on interpreting in Mexican Sign Language and in particular court interpreting. How do Deaf people have access to justice? If they want to file a complaint, is an interpreter provided? Who pays for this interpreter?

Martina: The main issue with providing the service of an interpreter is that there is no training, programs or degree set up, where people with a high level of competence in Mexican Sign Language can study to be an interpreter. They learn the language and then learn strategies, specific vocabulary, and protocols on the go while getting different jobs. This lack of training is a massive problem due to the vast contexts, in which good, professional interpretation is vital. This doesn't mean that interpretation services at the moment are bad, but it is certainly an area that needs to be addressed quickly to be able to provide Deaf people the services they are being promised. There are also no exams to show sign language competence, which obviously is a problem as well and therefore there is an informality about the profession, which is not beneficial.

When an interpreter is needed, the responsibility of providing one often rests on the shoulders of the Deaf person, which means they have to pay. If they want to make a complaint or report a crime at a judicial institution, it is the institution's responsibility to provide

an interpreter, but this is seldom the case. They might be told to come back on a different day or make their complaint some other way via whatever communication means they have. This is often the case in institutions, but if we consider situations where something happens in the moment, on the street, and the police deal with the situation, Deaf people are totally at the mercy of their usually uninformed decision - making. Police and service staff are commonly not trained to deal with such situations in a respectful and correct way, preserving their rights, much to the disadvantage of the Deaf person. In more formal situations, like in court, for example, there is an awareness that an interpreter is needed, but providing the interpreter can delay the proceedings.

One also has to consider that situations that have to do with justice often are of a very sensitive nature and the interpreter's role and training is vital to not only translate from one language to another, but to accompany the Deaf person in a process, in which they can feel exposed and vulnerable (Napier & Banna, 2018).

Ioana: During the first quarter of this year, more than 80 thousand calls for gender violence were registered; and Mexico is currently experiencing 2 femicides per day. In this alarming situation, how do Deaf women protect themselves? Hearing women can ask for help, but Deaf women, what do they do if they want to report a case of domestic violence?

Martina: I'd say this is a seriously alarming situation. Deaf women find themselves in a situation of triple discrimination. Firstly, women in general are in more danger of being attacked, used or in situations of danger. Secondly, due to the communication problems discussed above, they have no means of communicating their needs to officials and asking for help. They can't call a helpline; they are totally dependent on their surroundings. Thirdly, they are often perceived as disabled and inferior, which means they have to fight for their rights to be respected.

The most pressing issue is that there is no system set up for Deaf women to ask for help, so being controlled or taken advantage of, is more likely. Their social and support network is vital in this case and makes the most difference. If they have someone they can talk to, then that person can help and guide them through whatever official process would be necessary. But it is really about relying on the people around you to help, and even take action, and I think especially with domestic violence, that is a very, very problematic situation. And this is considering women who have good communication skills in Mexican Sign Language, but obviously there is a huge diversity among Deaf women in their social circumstances, language skills, independence, etc. etc. (Ramsey, 2011) that make this an extremely complex issue that should be addressed with urgency. On top of that, my experience and knowledge are based more in Mexico City, I'd say the situation is even more worrying in more rural areas, where misinformation and more traditional attitudes are prevalent.

Ioana: Language is essential for communication. How is Mexican Sign Language taught? What laws or programs exist? Are there governmental actions for the teaching of Mexican Sign Language and integration of Deaf women?

Martina: The tendency, both nationally and internationally, is towards inclusion of Deaf children in regular classrooms using a bilingual-bicultural model (Enns, 2006), but if they should and how these programs are really implemented is a big problem. As I said before, I think there are a lot of programs and organizations working on these issues, it is a lot more present than some ten years ago, and I'd say they do most of the work. There are more schools, more classes, more institutions and people that recognize the need and are trying to respond to it in their field.

There are certainly more opportunities for hearing people to learn the language, which is important, don't get me wrong, because it means there is more information, knowledge and openness towards the issue. But the real focus needs to be on ensuring the learning of sign language for Deaf people, especially girls and women, and really working on quality teaching of the language. There are semi - private schools that teach in Mexican Sign Language exclusively and other governmental schools that attend to a wide range of pupils with disabilities. In Mexico City, some of these have a high amount of Deaf pupils and therefore have more opportunities to learn and use sign language and interact with others who understand and share their experience, which again is of vital importance and gives them the social connections that can support them throughout their lives, especially in situations of need. It just shows that the language is absolutely vital for them and opens up opportunities for jobs, social support networks, education, knowledge of their rights, and so many other aspects of life that we take for granted.

Ioana: On June Mexico elected its first woman president. Do you think there will be any improvement in the situation of violence for women living in Mexico and especially for Deaf women.

Martina: Yes, I think there is certainly a lot of hope and expectation that a female president will be more aware of issues that affect women on a day-to-day basis, and I really hope that there will be many clear actions on her behalf that show that security for women, all women, is an issue high up on her list. Nevertheless, I think even if more actions are taken in that direction, the points I mentioned earlier put Deaf women in a very different situation. Recognizing the need to ensure access to all public services via Mexican Sign Language means there would have to be a very conscious effort to specifically help women with disabilities and their varying communicative needs and make that a reality. So, there is a lot of pressure and hope that her presence will change things, but it will be down to really tackling the various aspects of the issue by employing the knowledge and experience of experts in the field of Sign Language and the Deaf Community to take clear actions that will help Deaf women in vulnerable situations.

REFERENCES

ENNS, C. J. *A language and literacy framework for bilingual deaf education*. Winnipeg, Canada: Social Sciences and Humanities, 2006.

FRIDMAN Mintz, B. De sordos hablantes, semilingües y señantes. *Panorámica de estudios lingüísticos*, v. 8, p. 93- 126, 2009.

NAPIER, J.; BANNA, K. Walking a fine line – The legal system and sign language interpreters: Roles and responsibilities. *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Professional Practice*, v. 13, p. 233-253, 2018.

RAMSEY, C. L. *The people who spell*. Gallaudet University, 2011.



Received and accepted June 7, 2024