



ASSIST NEWSLETTER — ISSUE 3 – SEPTEMBER 23, 2025

International Day of Sign Languages - Accessible Communication in Maternal Healthcare

International Day of Sign Languages

Welcome to the third edition of the **ASSIST Project** newsletter, released in celebration of the International Day of Sign Languages, proclaimed by the UN General Assembly in 2018. This day is an opportunity to support and protect the linguistic identity and cultural diversity of all Deaf people, hard of hearing, deafblind and other sign language users—an issue directly linked to our work on improving access to maternal healthcare for mothers with disabilities.

According to the World Federation of the Deaf, more than 70 million Deaf and hard of hearing people live worldwide, over 80% of them in developing countries, using more than 300 different sign languages. These are fully fledged natural languages, distinct from spoken languages, and recognized as equal in status under the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

Yet, access to sign language interpretation and other accessible communication methods is far from guaranteed. In our research, mothers with disabilities have shared the challenges they face when communication is not accessible in maternal

healthcare. In this edition, we explore these barriers further and share recommendations for change.

We also bring you the latest news and updates from our consortium partners, highlighting progress, collaboration, and shared efforts in advancing inclusive maternity care for mothers with disabilities.

Want to make a difference? Here's how you can contribute!

Subscribe to our newsletter and follow us on social media to stay informed and engaged.

Advocate for the rights of mothers with disabilities by raising awareness and speaking up for equal healthcare access.

Participate in events and discussions organized within the ASSIST Project framework.

Connect with us to explore collaboration opportunities or share valuable insights.

💡 **Every action counts—join us in driving**

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About the project

The **ASSIST Project** is a three-year project co-funded by the EU under the Erasmus+ Programme, aiming to reduce discrimination and attitudinal biases among healthcare professionals when treating women with disabilities during motherhood.

The Project will offer training to medical students and healthcare professionals to provide more inclusive and welcoming care, supported by a Digital Ecosystem using a Virtual Learning Environment and 3D simulations. It also promotes advocacy to drive policy change and strengthen NGO capacity, emphasizing positive behaviour and inclusive practices in healthcare. To achieve these objectives, the **ASSIST Project** has brought together a consortium of three higher education institutions from Italy and Greece, as well as seven organizations from Greece, Belgium, Italy, Norway, and Ireland, focusing on the rights of mothers, persons with disabilities, education, and digital innovation.

[🔗 Learn more about the project on our website! 🔗](#)

Breaking Barriers: Accessible Communication in Maternal Healthcare for Mothers with Disabilities

SEPTEMBER 23: INTERNATIONAL DAY OF SIGN LANGUAGES

Access to maternal healthcare is a fundamental right—but for many mothers with disabilities, communication barriers make this experience unnecessarily difficult

and sometimes unsafe. This section relies on research conducted in Work Package 2 (WP2) of the **ASSIST Project**, which gathered testimonies from mothers with disabilities across partner countries, including national contributions from Croatia focusing on mothers with deafblindness. Our recent research highlights the challenges faced by mothers who are Deaf, hard of hearing, deafblind or have other communication needs, emphasizing the urgent need for accessible maternal healthcare services.

One participant shared: ***“When I was in the hospital, no one explained to me what was happening. They spoke quickly, and I couldn’t understand. I felt invisible.”***

Another participant shared: ***“They spoke to my interpreter instead of me. I felt invisible.”***

Sign language interpretation, easy-to-read materials, and other accessible communication methods are not always available in clinics and hospitals. The Croatian data show that mothers with deafblindness face extreme isolation and lack access to adapted information or communication support during pregnancy, labour, and postpartum care.

As one mother summarized: ***“I needed more time to ask questions, but the doctor was in a rush. If they listened, I would feel safer.”***

Inclusive communication not only ensures that mothers understand medical procedures and advice but also empowers them to make informed decisions about their health and wellbeing. The WP2 research found that reproductive autonomy is frequently undermined: many mothers reported minimal

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consultation in care planning and, in some cases, pressure to avoid pregnancy. It strengthens trust between healthcare providers and patients, reduces stress, and contributes to better health outcomes for both mother and child.

Another participant explained: ***“They gave me papers full of complicated language. I needed something simple, easy to understand, but I didn’t get it.”***

Our research also shows that simple interventions—such as training staff in basic sign language, offering video interpretation services, and providing accessible written materials—can make a significant difference. The Croatian survey revealed that 100% of mothers with deafblindness had not been screened for postpartum depression or anxiety, highlighting the urgent need for disability-informed mental health support. By embedding accessible communication into maternal healthcare, we move closer to a healthcare system that truly serves all mothers.

As part of the **ASSIST Project**, we are committed to sharing these insights, providing practical recommendations, and supporting healthcare providers in implementing inclusive practices. Only by addressing these barriers can we ensure that every mother, regardless of her abilities, receives the care and support she deserves.

Recommendations for Accessible Maternal Healthcare

1. Provide Sign Language/Deafblind Interpretation

- Offer qualified interpreters for appointments, prenatal classes, and hospital visits.
- Include both on-site and remote video interpreting options.
- Ensure guide-interpreters/Deafblind interpreters are available, particularly for mothers with dual sensory impairments.

2. Train Healthcare Staff

- Provide basic training in sign language and communication strategies for people with sensory disabilities, including those with deafblindness.
- Include mandatory disability awareness and inclusive communication training for midwives, nurses, and obstetricians.
- Raise awareness of the unique needs of mothers with disabilities

3. Accessible Information Materials

- Prepare materials in plain language, braille, large print, and easy-to-read formats.
- Ensure digital content is screen-reader compatible.

4. Inclusive Appointment Practices

- Allow extra time for consultations to accommodate communication needs.
- Encourage the presence of support persons when requested by the patient.
- Create space for personalised birth plans and collaborative decision-making with mothers with disabilities.

5. Use Assistive Technologies

- Implement text-to-speech, speech-to-text, and video relay services in clinics and hospitals.
- Provide accessible digital communication channels for scheduling and follow-up.

6. **Patient-Centered Communication Policies**

- Encourage mothers to communicate their preferred mode of communication in advance.
- Document communication preferences in patient records to ensure continuity of accessibility.

7. **Promote Awareness and Advocacy**

- Publicize the availability of accessible services in maternal healthcare.
- Advocate for policy changes that embed accessibility in all maternal healthcare programs.
- Collect disaggregated data on maternal health outcomes for women with disabilities, including those with deafblindness.
- Support national awareness campaigns challenging stigma and promoting inclusive reproductive justice.

Call to Action: Make Maternal Healthcare Accessible for All

Accessible maternal healthcare is not just a goal—it is a right. You can help make a difference for mothers with disabilities by taking action today:

1. **Healthcare Providers:** Implement accessible communication practices in your clinics and hospitals. Provide sign language interpreters/Deafblind interpreters, easy-to-

read materials, and assistive technologies to ensure every mother is heard and understood.

2. **Policy Makers and Administrators:** Advocate for inclusive policies and allocate resources to make maternal healthcare accessible for all. Ensure training programs for healthcare staff include disability awareness and communication strategies. Include mothers with disabilities in policy design and monitoring from the earliest stages.
3. **Researchers and Practitioners:** Share your findings, best practices, and innovative solutions that promote inclusive maternal healthcare. Collaborate with organizations representing mothers with disabilities to co-create effective programs.
4. **Community and Civil Society:** Raise awareness about the importance of accessible maternal healthcare. Support initiatives, share resources, and amplify the voices of mothers with disabilities. Develop peer support structures and parenting resources for mothers with disabilities, including those with deafblindness.

Together, we can ensure that every mother, regardless of her abilities, receives the care, respect, and support she deserves. **Join us in advancing inclusive maternal healthcare today.**

Latest updates on the project

ASSIST Training Course

The **ASSIST Project** is in the process of developing a comprehensive online training course aimed at healthcare professionals, students, and civil society actors to foster more inclusive maternal healthcare for mothers with disabilities. Delivered in English, French, Italian, and Greek, the course will feature six modules covering key topics such as eliminating attitudinal

barriers, protecting reproductive rights, transforming healthcare facilities, recognising the role of caregivers, and strengthening advocacy. This training will not only enhance knowledge but also challenge persistent biases and contribute to building more respectful and equitable healthcare systems across Europe.

Virtual Reality Scenarios

To complement the training, ASSIST is creating a 3D Simulation of an Inclusive Clinical Environment with six immersive scenarios. These virtual reality experiences will allow learners to step into different clinical spaces, identify accessibility challenges, and practise inclusive communication and care. By simulating real-world encounters, the VR scenarios add unique value, bridging the gap between theory and practice, and empowering future and current healthcare professionals to deliver welcoming, respectful, and accessible services to mothers with disabilities.

Get Ready for Our Info-Days Across Europe!

We are excited to announce that four Info-Days will be held in our partner countries in the upcoming months – Brussels, Dublin, Athens, and Turin! These events will showcase the project's courses, traineeship opportunities, and educational resources, while bringing together mothers with disabilities, students, policymakers, and civil society for dialogue and exchange of good practices.

The Info-Days will be hybrid, allowing both in-person and online participation, and will provide a unique opportunity to learn, connect, and share ideas.

Stay tuned for more details, including dates, agendas, and registration information – you won't want to miss these engaging events!

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