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Ardavan Guity
Gallaudet University

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Unveiling Linguistic Equity:
Two Deaf Women Highlight Sign Language in Iran

ARDAVAN GUITY
GALLAUDET UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

The emergence of awareness of sign language and deaf culture in Iran has brought attention to the need for language rights within the deaf communities of Iran. Deaf Persian/Iranian women face a unique and challenging situation, experiencing oppression on two fronts: gender and being deaf. These women aspire to achieve their dreams but often encounter restrictions imposed by Iranian society. This study focuses on the narratives of two deaf women, highlighting their journeys, overcoming obstacles to advance themselves in society, and striving for equity, independence, and self-determination. The story of Katayoon Guity showcases her journey as a successful artist, while Farzaneh Soleimanbeig’s story revolves around her contributions to linguistics and her advocacy for deaf education. Their experiences encompass various aspects, including childhood, education, and employment, showcasing their determination to break barriers. They inspire us with their resilience and shed light on the transformative power of sign language in Iran. Their life stories encapsulate their dedication to enhancing the welfare of the deaf communities of Iran and paving the way for a more inclusive society.

INTRODUCTION

In Iran, women experience barriers and restrictions by a complicated societal system on a daily basis. Along with gender issues, the Persian/Iranian society is not as progressive or enlightened as it could be about sign language and deaf culture. Deaf women thus face oppression on two fronts, with one being gender and the other being deaf. The author of this article is a Persian male now living in the United States and he holds a special place in his heart for deaf Persian/Iranian women. The author is a linguist and is aware of the sign language rights that the world’s deaf communities have been advocating for years. Sign language being visual makes it fully accessible for acquisition and use for deaf populations worldwide. The author is also fully aware that the equity, independence, and self-determination for women must be tied to those rights.

For comparison, the United States has its share of mistreatment of women. Both hearing and deaf women treated as second-class citizens is an ongoing problem. Women paid less for the same work performed by men serves as one example. American women were once widely expected to produce and raise children and not work outside the home. Those women could not inherit family property, could not vote, and could not begin divorce proceedings (e.g., Kerber et al., 2016; Lerner, 1993; Opdycke, 2000). The overall situation for American women has improved due to how they have fought for their rights over the years. Unfortunately, the social advancement for women is more challenging in Iran and much work needs to be done.

The author wants to note that there is substantial information available for hearing Persian/Iranian women for learning how to succeed in society, but the same is not true for deaf women. The published stories of successful deaf women living in Iran are next to none. This sparse information on deaf women in Iran is not acceptable. The purpose of this article is thus to generate information on deaf Persian/Iranian women who make groundbreaking achievements.

1 Some people prefer ‘Iranian,’ and others prefer ‘Persian’ as their identities. Therefore, for the remainder of this article, both words are combined as ‘Persian/Iranian.’
advancements in their education and careers. The narrative research framework was adopted to help lay out the deaf women's life stories in an insightful and thoughtful manner.

**A QUICK LOOK AT IRAN**

Iran is located in western Asia, and its neighbors are Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan. As ranked by the size of the population, religions found in Iran are Islam (both Shia and Sunni), Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and the Bahá’í faith. By law, women wear a headscarf with a manto or a full head-to-toe chador (Hanna, 2020). Deaf women are expected to follow this law along with hearing women. Both elementary and secondary schools are segregated by gender. With schools for deaf children, it depends on which cities they are located in, thus some are segregated (with one unit for boys and the other for girls, for example) and others are co-ed. The universities in Iran are co-ed. Below is a map of Iran.


Deaf women in Iran are known for working as teachers, skilled artisans, haircutters, and clothing stitchers. Many work at home as housewives. There are some deaf women that are active in deaf organizations. However, these women rarely become leaders in their communities. This pattern is consistent with how Iran has a male-dominated society. Obtaining a passport serves as an example of how women experience subordination to men. If a woman is married, she has to get permission from her husband to receive a passport.

The current political situation in Iran includes the women's rights movement. Women are calling for more equity within Iranian society. Hearing women in Iran are highly restricted in their appearance and activities as compared to American women. Deaf Persian/Iranian women survive under conditions even more restrictive in Iran.

The fact that deaf people in Iran are widely viewed as sick and abnormal is unfortunate and in great need for correction. The negative view of hearing loss causes many families to keep young deaf children at home, not showing them to their relatives or the public (see A. Guity & Siyavoshi, 2020 for further discussion regarding the social problems and challenges for deaf women and deaf people in general in Iran).

See the Encyclopedia Britannica at https://www.britannica.com/place/Iran/Religion for more information on Iran's religions.
Important terminology for this article includes the sign language of Iran being called Esharani (A. Guity, 2021). Like what is known for American Sign Language (ASL; as used by deaf people in the United States and parts of Canada), Esharani demonstrates linguistic properties such as phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics (A. Guity, 2022). The Persian/Iranian deaf community has its cultural aspects, which are similar to what deaf people have created and maintained in the United States (A. Guity & Siyavoshi, 2020; also see A. Guity, 2021 for the historical accounts of the signed language and deaf culture in Iran, https://acadeafic.org/2021/02/11/sign-language-of-iran/).

Sara Siyavoshi published a thesis in 2005 about the use of sign language in Iran. During that time, Dr. Khosrow Guity, a hearing man and grandfather of the author of this paper, volunteered as secretary-general in the Iranian National Center of the Deaf (INCD) in Tehran. He knew that Esherani is a natural language that is distinct from spoken language. His article detailing his position on sign language, “Sedaye Nashenava,” was published in the quarterly journal of INCD (A. Guity, 2022, p. 19). Esharani is not yet recognized as an official language.

The Study

The author (of this article) who assumed the role of researcher for the study undertaken is deaf and was raised in Iran and has been involved in the deaf community there. Although the researcher currently lives in the United States, he maintains a strong connection with Iran, including visiting his family there on a regular basis.

The narrative research framework was adopted for this study of deaf Persian/Iranian women, using the seven steps outlined as follows by Creswell & Guettermann (2020):

Step 1: Identify a phenomenon to explore that addresses [a social] problem.
Step 2: Purposefully select an individual from whom you can learn about the phenomenon.
Step 3: Collect the story from that individual.
Step 4: Restory or retell the individual's story.
Step 5: Collaborate with the participant-storyteller.
Step 6: Write a story about the participant's experiences.
Step 7: Validate the accuracy of the report (p. 524-527).

The lack of information on deaf Persian/Iranian women constitutes the problem that the researcher wants to address. The definition of successful deaf women in Iran includes making significant contributions to society that includes the deaf communities of Iran. The question is: What is the story for a successful deaf Persian/Iranian woman?

For the study, the researcher selected two deaf women that live in Tehran, the capital of Iran, that he believes are excellent role models. The author knew both women well with one being his sister and the other being his acquaintance. The participants understood the purpose of the study undertaken and were happy to participate and share their life stories. The first two steps for research were done at this point.

The researcher then did the third step by collecting the stories from the two participating women on an individual basis. All communication was done in Esharani. Restory, the fourth step, includes four parts, which are: a) building past, present, and future, b) building in place or setting, c) describing their stories, and d) analyzing their stories for themes. The researcher identified early childhood, educational experiences, workplace experiences, turning points, and accomplishments as the primary themes from the data. For the fifth step, he collaborated with the women to discuss their stories. Once done, the author wrote a life story for each of the two women as the sixth step. After that, the author did the seventh and final step by checking with the participants to ensure that their written stories are accurate.

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3 Due to the same family last name, the first letter of the first name will be added for the remainder of the article to ensure clarity of who is referred to.
4 A. Guity’s dissertation focuses on lexicon and grammar in Esharani. Also, see Valli et al. (2011) and Sandler and Lillo-Martin (2006) for detailed information on ASL and other sign languages.
5 Also, see Padden (1980), Rutherford (1988), and Reagan (1995) for examples of the cultural aspects as found in the deaf community in the United States.
If there is a single word to describe Katayoon Guity, it would be her being a trailblazer with a number of achievements to her name. K. Guity is an accomplished and highly respected artist. The path to success was not easy and was filled with barriers and restrictions.

**Early Childhood**

In March 1983, K. Guity was born in Tehran to deaf parents who led a middle class lifestyle at home. The parents were employed as teachers in a school for deaf children. The household was linguistically rich for K. Guity with the use of Esharani. K. Guity communicated freely as a native signer with the family and through the family’s involvement in the deaf community clubs and organizations. Figure 1 shows K. Guity as a young girl at home.

It is important to note the significance of the photo depicting K. Guity wearing a swimsuit. Having a swimming pool at home allowed K. Guity to learn to swim at an early age. K. Guity soon found herself on a swim team and competed against other swimmers, both deaf and hearing throughout Iran. K. Guity won several medals. Regrettably, she never was able to join the Deaflympics.¹ The reason was that the swimsuits at Deaflympics were too skimpy, showing specific areas of skin that were forbidden to be seen according to the law and customs in Iran.

When K. Guity’s parents were young children themselves, they went to different schools for deaf children. Her father taught art at the Baghcheban School for the Deaf No. 3 while her mother left teaching at the same school to raise her daughter. When K. Guity was three years old, her brother (who is the author of this article) was born. During their upbringing, they became close siblings. Figure 2 shows K. Guity and her brother playing together – riding a tricycle at home.

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¹ See https://www.deaflympics.com for further information on this sporting event.
Educational Journey

K. Guity started schooling at the very young age of two. The school is for deaf children and is co-ed. Figure 3 shows K. Guity and her mother participating in a program especially set up for mothers and deaf children. The school that she attended was strictly oral, meaning that all deaf children had to learn through Farsi as the spoken language. The teachers were all hearing and did not sign. K. Guity experienced language abuse when she had to endure a linguistically restrictive environment in school. K. Guity disliked attending speech therapy sessions or using hearing aids.

When K. Guity was seven years old, she moved with her female classmates to the Nimrooz School for the Deaf (that her father attended years ago). This time, the new school was segregated with two units, one for the boys and the other for the girls. K. Guity loved to work on art and chose graphic design as her major in high school. The fact that her father was an art teacher had a big influence on K. Guity. Her mother is also artistic, which was helpful for K. Guity.
For college, K. Guity decided to pursue the study of graphic design. She took a national entrance exam, which had questions in Farsi about Farsi literature, biology, mathematics, English, and other academic subjects. After passing this test, she became eligible for an Associate of Arts (AA) degree in graphic design.

She then enrolled at Soore University, a semi-private university in Tehran, where she had a supportive professor in Victoria Karimi. They were able to discuss critical issues relating to deaf people, sign language, and their culture for her thesis. At that time, such topics were unheard of. She was relieved and grateful to learn that her professor accepted her proposal. The title of her AA thesis that was completed in 2003 is “Deaf and Sign Language.” Her thesis covers Esharani, along with deaf history, deaf culture, linguistic rights, bilingualism, and laws impacting the lives of deaf people in Iran (K. Guity, 2003).

K. Guity did drawings of sign sequences with written Farsi translations underneath them and included them in her thesis. K. Guity also created a glass figurine with a rose depicting the internationally known ‘I-LOVE-YOU’ sign for her thesis. Figure 4 shows K. Guity holding the figurine (without the rose). K. Guity’s thesis was eventually published in the Deaf Encyclopedia of Danac, which is a collection of articles written in Farsi (Esfandyari et al., 2009).

K. Guity was determined to continue her higher education experience. She took another national exam and became eligible for an art major for a bachelor’s degree at Soore University. K. Guity’s major was once again graphic design, and her thesis title is “Dream” (K. Guity, 2011). The artwork included in the thesis is a mix of modern and traditional styles. She used sixteen boards to draw on, which concluded her final product. The boards showed how deaf people have a dream without saying it explicitly in words, and one of her boards is shown in Figure 5. After this, she hosted an exhibition to sell the boards and donated the money from her sales to an organization to support cancer research.

![Figure 4: K. Guity and her 'I-LOVE-YOU' figurine work. Photo courtesy of the author.](image)

While at Soore University, K. Guity worked hard and earned excellent grades. Based on her achievements, the university decided to allow her to pursue a Master’s degree in art. This time, she did not have to take an exam for admission. This is where K. Guity started to work on the old portrait photographs that include Iran’s history for her Master’s thesis. The title of her thesis is “Investigating the Photographic Features in Portraits of the Naseri Qajar Period” (K. Guity, 2014). K. Guity also included the old pictures of Esharani signs (which hold a great historical value, but were not recognized at the time) in her Master’s thesis (see Figures 6a and 6b).

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7 As a major in graphic design, her bachelor’s thesis is not a written piece; instead, it is a piece of visual art.

8 The thesis format is similar to her AA thesis, a combination of written Farsi and artwork.
In all, K. Guity's theses and artworks celebrate the Persian/Iranian deaf community. K. Guity's artwork was displayed at a variety of exhibitions. She received many awards in Iran and abroad. With K. Guity's accumulated art experiences, she developed and provided a De'VIA (or deaf art) workshop several times in Iran and neighboring countries. Those workshops focus on educating the public on why sign language and deaf culture must be presented in the arts.

**Employment Experience**

In 2004, K. Guity completed her AA degree at Soore University and found employment. This occurred after the death of Mr. Abolhassan Hashemi, a talented deaf artist who worked at the Traditional Arts Research Institute of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts in Tehran. The head of the art institute was encouraged to hire K. Guity by his deaf widow, Mahin Bahadori. K. Guity accepted an unpaid internship offer that evolved into
full employment, thanks to her accomplishments in traditional art through pottery, ceramic items, and tiles.

It is important to note that a total of five deaf men had worked at the preeminent art institute. Their names are: Parviz Gholi Fekri, Abolhassan Hashemi, Hossein Refahi Daher, Hassan Taghavi, and Gholamreza Talebi. Two deaf women had supposedly worked at the institute, but their names are lost to history. K. Guity herself tried to track down the names for the women, but she did not succeed. Figure 7 shows K. Guity's interaction with co-workers at the institute. Please note that the communicative interaction is made possible through the hearing co-workers signing with K. Guity. Given the strong tradition of deaf people working at the institute, hearing co-workers have been finding it imperative to learn how to sign.

![Figure 7: K. Guity (left) signs with her co-worker at the Traditional Arts Research Institute of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts. Photo courtesy of the author.](image1)

For the impact that K. Guity made on Iran's cultural heritage, there is one particular accomplishment that must be recognized. Figure 8 shows K. Guity standing before her artwork that was installed in the front of the President's office of Iran. She designed and drew the tiles that are displayed with much prestige.

![Figure 8: K. Guity and her tilework in front of the President's office of Iran. Photo courtesy of the author.](image2)
More Turning Points and Accomplishments

There are other aspects to K. Guity's life story that deserve elaboration. When she was growing up, her family participated in the deaf clubs and organizations. She wanted to give back to the community when she reached adulthood. She got involved in the “Youth Deaf Section” of the Iran National Center of the Deaf, which she holds much passion for. K. Guity also attended a variety of deaf conferences. She is aware of the importance of staying informed about the issues that are important for deaf people, especially for how their quality of life can improve.

2012 was a pivotal year for K. Guity when she first learned about sign language and deaf culture. Her education was biased towards spoken language, and deaf people were viewed as deficient. It prevented K. Guity from knowing what is important and positive. Tessa Padden, a deaf advocate, linguist, trainer, and interpreter came to Iran from the United Kingdom to give a workshop in Iran. Padden spent a few days talking about sign language and linguistics. K. Guity became enthralled with the shared information. K. Guity's life has never been the same since then. She always remembers how Padden changed her life.


![Figure 9: K. Guity and Tessa Padden at her workshop in Zanjan – 2012. Photo courtesy of the author.](image)

It was next year in 2013 that K. Guity attended the first conference of deaf women ever in Iran. That conference helped her realize the importance of advocating for deaf women living in her country. K. Guity then attended the SIGN6 International Conference of Sign Language in Goa, India to better understand sign language and deaf culture issues.

K. Guity had gotten involved in many projects and social media. K. Guity translated written Farsi to Esharani and Esharani to written Farsi for the benefit of deaf people living in Iran.

Later in 2018, K. Guity began working for a public university that specializes in people with different needs. This university has a unit for deaf students. She was hired at the Fereshtegaan International Branch of Islamic Azad University as the first deaf female faculty member. K. Guity and her deaf students communicated in Esharani in the classroom.

K. Guity teaches Art, History of Art in Iran, The Art of Islamic Civilization, Foundations of Visual Arts, and more. At the grand opening of the university, K. Guity felt honored to cut the red ribbon in front of the university president, government officials, and faculty. Figure 10 shows K. Guity cutting the ribbon.

10 [http://nadindia.org/Articles/1081](http://nadindia.org/Articles/1081)
Activism is what K. Guity found important to pursue. In 2020, a protest was held in front of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting building in Tehran. An artificial Signing Exact Farsi (SEF) system was mistakenly thought to be more appropriate for interpreters to sign on television. One interpreter who supported SEF insultingly said that Esharani was an inferior language and shouldn’t be used on national TV. K. Guity found this kind of treatment for her native and natural language of Esharani to be oppressive. Deaf people said that they have language rights to their native sign language. K. Guity participated in a peaceful protest to correct this problem in the media industry. Figure 11 shows a group of protesters that includes K. Guity.

Finally, K. Guity is the mother of a hearing daughter (Children of Deaf Adults – CODA; see Singleton and Tittle, 2000 for further details on this population). Figure 12 shows K. Guity and her CODA daughter. K. Guity is able to juggle many responsibilities as a mother raising her daughter while being employed at the art institute and teaching university classes.

Figure 10: K. Guity cuts the ribbon at the grand opening of the university. Photo courtesy of the author.

Figure 11: On the left side, K. Guity holds the poster “The Sign Language of Iran is our Right!” Photo courtesy of the author.
Farzaneh Soleimanbeig is another trailblazer most worthy of note. Her contributions to society are tied to the field of linguistics. This woman has pursued higher education to where she is now in a doctoral program doing research on Esharani. Like what was discussed for K. Guity, Soleimanbeig had to overcome a variety of barriers and restrictions.

**Early Childhood**

Soleimanbeig was born in Sanandaj, a Kurdish community west of Tehran, in 1986 to a hearing family. Upon finding that Soleimanbeig was deaf, her parents researched what the education system had to offer and decided to move to Tehran because this city had the most resources for deaf children. Soleimanbeig's father worked as a teacher, and her mother was an athletic trainer. Upon having a deaf daughter, the mother changed her career so that she could teach deaf children. The same holds true for the father. He stopped working with hearing students in a regular public school and transferred to a school for deaf children. Both parents were very committed to their deaf daughter's education.

**Educational Journey**

Soleimanbeig started attending the Baghcheban School for the Deaf No. 7 when she was two years old. She attended the co-ed Kindergarten for two years. Most of her peers were from deaf families, which gave her a strong exposure to Esharani. Soleimanbeig acquired the sign language from her peers and became a native signer. The fact that many of the children of deaf parents live close to where Soleimanbeig lived provided her with additional socialization opportunities outside the school. However, Soleimanbeig had to endure oralism at the school (which is similar to what K. Guity went through). Despite the age differences between Soleimanbeig and K. Guity, they knew each other at the Nimrooz School for the Deaf. Figure 13 shows Soleimanbeig as a young child.
A big change in Soleimanbeig's education occurred when her parents decided to move the family back to Sanandaj. The parents were not satisfied with Soleimanbeig's primary and middle schooling under the deaf education system. For this reason, Soleimanbeig was placed in a regular public school where hearing students attended. The parents hoped that the education quality would improve. However, the situation for Soleimanbeig became difficult because everything was new to her. The fact that she did not have a sign language interpreter made the classroom learning extremely restrictive. It was on a weekly basis that a representative (an itinerary teacher of the deaf) from the Ministry of Special Education came to see her. These meetings were not helpful. Soleimanbeig's parents resorted to hiring private tutors to help with their daughter's education.

An unique opportunity came to Soleimanbeig to learn English. When she was ten years old, her mother decided to send her to an English class after school. In this program, Soleimanbeig observed that the teacher taught English as a second language, explaining English concepts to the students in Farsi. Farsi played a supporting role for hearing students in learning a new language. The concept of bilingualism stayed with Soleimanbeig. Soleimanbeig struggled to read and write Farsi. Her parents were exasperated with this outcome because they thought that having their daughter educated in a regular public school would solve the literacy problem, but it did not. The literacy challenge for Soleimanbeig was more complex, and that there is a great need for a reform on how Farsi or any other spoken language literacy is introduced to deaf children (see Hoffmeister and Caldwell-Harris, 2014 and Caldwell-Harris and Hoffmeister, 2022 for further discussion on the difficulties associated with spoken language reading for deaf children).

What becomes clear is that while growing up, Soleimanbeig was not aware of her own language, Esharani, and how it made learning educational concepts accessible. This explains why she (or her parents) could not ask the school or the education system for what she needed. This is especially true for bilingualism where Esharani and Farsi literacy can be connected for more successful learning outcomes.

During the whole time of schooling, including high school, Soleimanbeig did her best in learning Farsi literacy skills regardless of her circumstances. Upon graduating from high school, Soleimanbeig decided to pursue an undergraduate education with a major in English. Remembering how hearing students learned English through Farsi left an impact on her. With her major in English, she hoped that she could find some answers for the benefit of deaf children's education.

Soleimanbeig took the national entrance exam for her higher education ambitions and was delighted to learn that she passed it. While taking classes at Islamic Azad University for two years, Soleimanbeig experienced more challenges. She found that she had to listen to spoken English activities, which are inaccessible for a deaf person. This caused Soleimanbeig to change her major from English to English translation. The latter focuses on translating written English materials, which was less restrictive for Soleimanbeig. The new major's courses still
required listening and talking activities, but not as much as it was for the old major. Some restrictions thus remained with Soleimanbeig. She would make good grades for writing and translating classes, but not good grades with the listening and speaking classes.

Soleimanbeig's graduation with a bachelor's degree in 2006 is commendable. The barriers were multiple, including how Soleimanbeig did not have any sign language interpreter to help her follow the lectures for her undergraduate education. Professional sign language interpreters were and are still non-existent for Iran. Soleimanbeig focused on reading textbooks and other materials and managed to keep up with the coursework.

More Turning Points and Accomplishments

At the time when Soleimanbeig struggled with her English major (before she changed it to English translation), she shared her concern with one professor. The professor did something that left an impact on the deaf woman's life. He suggested she translate American Sign Language to Farsi to fulfill the course requirements. The professor assigned Soleimanbeig to find an ASL news website, pick a video, and write a translation into English and Farsi. She told him she did not know ASL and needed time to learn a new sign language. The professor allowed her two months to do her homework. What Soleimanbeig did was watch a lot of ASL videos. She practiced a lot to gain receptive skills in ASL. When she was ready, she found an ASL news video on YouTube and then tried her best to translate ASL into English and Farsi.

The professor also asked Soleimanbeig to answer a few questions: What is the sign language of Iran? Do you know the sign language of Iran? What is the name of the sign language of Iran? This is where Soleimanbeig started to develop an awareness for sign language and deaf culture. Esharani had originally been called Farsi Sign Language. There was some confusion as this name gave the impression that it was connected to Farsi, the spoken language of Iran.

Soleimanbeig then learned more about sign languages in general when she took a Research Methods course. The Research Methods professor was very knowledgeable about sign languages due to completing linguistic studies in the United States. This professor helped Soleimanbeig learn how ASL has been used to teach English as a second language in American schools for deaf children. Soleimanbeig appreciated her new knowledge on bilingualism, but she realized that the research information about Esharani was scant at the time.

Soleimanbeig also benefited from attending the Third Iranian Deaf Student (University) Forum in Ghom, Iran (http://deaf-eghlid.blogfa.com/post/18) in 2011. The conference provided different deaf- and sign language-related workshops that were of high value for this woman. One workshop that Ardavan Guity, the brother of K. Guity and the author of this article, gave on the history of sign languages prompted Soleimanbeig to make the life changing decision to pursue linguistics.

It was in 2013 that Soleimanbeig became a graduate student in the University of Tehran's Linguistics Department. In developing her Master's thesis with a focus on sign language, she encountered a problem. Professors in her department did not know anything about sign language. Soleimanbeig did not let this situation stop her. She found and read articles and books on sign language linguistics from the United States. The fact that she knew English helped her get through this literature.

Soleimanbeig found a Master's thesis about the sign language of Iran that Sara Siavoshi wrote in 2006. A hearing linguist, Siavoshi was the first person to write about Esharani. Soleimanbeig wanted to meet Siavoshi in person, but that proved to be impossible. Siavoshi lived in the United States at the time to pursue her doctoral program at the University of New Mexico. Soleimanbeig accepted the challenge to do her research on her own.

Before the time that Soleimanbeig defended her Master's thesis, she was able to locate an interpreter who volunteered to voice for her defense. The title of Soleimanbeig's successful thesis was “The Representation of Word Formation Process in ZEI” (2017). The focus of her thesis was on how Esharani signs were created and by whom. ZEI is the acronym for Zaban Eshareh Irani, which is translated as 'Iranian Sign Language'.

During the time of higher education, Soleimanbeig enjoyed a close relationship with the deaf community. She tackled the challenge of how many deaf people did not develop a good understanding about their own language, Esharani. There was a controversy stirring in the deaf community over the concept of Signed Exact Farsi (SEF)\textsuperscript{11}.

\textsuperscript{11} These signed systems are similar to Manually Coded English (Signed Exact English and others) found in the United States and Canada. See Wilbur (1979) for examples of different signed systems invented in the United States. Also see Supalla and McKee (2002) for a review pointing out deficiencies of the artificial signed systems as compared to natural sign languages such as ASL.
Soleimanbeig was perplexed at the idea that this sign system was put together to help ‘standardize’ the language of deaf people in Iran. Soleimanbeig explained that SEF is artificial, thus should not be used to replace Esharani, the natural language of deaf people (see Eastman, 1980 and Maher, 1996 for a similar problem that American deaf people struggled with related to signed English systems in the 1970s and 1980s). Adding to the confusion was how some deaf people in Iran did not believe Soleimanbeig’s assertions that Esharani stands as the rightful language for them. A local deaf organization going as far as providing SEF classes to hearing people who wanted to learn how to sign became a problem all of its own.

Soleimanbeig taught Farsi to deaf adults who never attended school in Tehran, Iran at the request of a deaf organization from 2013 to 2016. As a result of her interactions with her students about Farsi, she developed a better understanding of Esharani as a contrasting language. Soleimanbeig never forgot her experience as a presenter to an organization for non-signing hard of hearing people in 2016. These people had a strong belief in oralism and did not support sign language at all. Soleimanbeig was persistent in breaking down resistance against Esharani.

In 2018, Farzaneh became a member of the National Network of Iranian Deaf NGOs (NNIDN, NGO refers to non-government organizations), leading the committees for the sign language of Iran and for sign language interpreters. During the same year, she worked on the conference committee of sign language interpreters for the First National Congress of the Deaf in Tabriz, Iran. Figure 14 shows Soleimanbeig appearing on the stage at this important deaf community event.

Figure 14: Soleimanbeig at the First National Congress of the Deaf in 2018. Photo courtesy of Soleimanbeig.

Soleimanbeig had the opportunity to work with A. Guity, the author of this article. They developed a syllabus for an Esharani course for dissemination through NNIDN. Also, a mini-conference of sign language linguistics was held in 2018. It was Soleimanbeig and A. Guity that helped establish such an important event for research and scholarship. Figure 15 shows Soleimanbeig and A. Guity along with three other participants at the conference.

Soleimanbeig also worked with A. Guity as an assistant researcher to help collect the data for his doctoral dissertation (A. Guity, 2022). They traveled to many Iranian cities to collect data on Eshranai. Soleimanbeig demonstrated her strong passion to learn about linguistics and how to best work with deaf people for sign language research purposes.

In 2020, Soleimanbeig started working as an adjunct faculty at Islamic Azad University. She joined K. Guity as a team and taught Esharani, English, and sign language linguistics to deaf and hearing students. Figure 16 shows Soleimanbeig being part of university life.
In 2021, Soleimanbeig and A. Guity started online training via a webinar series for the deaf individuals who wanted to become Esharani teachers through their university. Many individuals from different cities participated in the online learning program. Soleimanbeig and A. Guity prepared those participants to get a certificate. Also, Soleimanbeig became involved with a committee that set up a professional code of conduct and standards for sign language interpreters working in a courthouse. This work is related to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities from the United Nations (Payvand, 2018).

In addition, Soleimanbeig worked with three other authors to publish a book, “An Introduction to Iranian Sign Language” (Soleimanbeig et. al., 2021; see Figure 17 for the book). Such an authoritative source for Esharani as the legitimate and natural language of deaf people in Iran is much welcomed.
Finally, Soleimanbeig decided to enter a doctoral program in linguistics at Islamic Azad University. She was able to complete all the courses during the difficult time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Soleimanbeig enjoyed having a sign language interpreter when taking those classes online. Iranian society has changed with more awareness of the need for sign language interpreting services for Iran. At the time of writing this article, the only thing left for Soleimanbeig is taking an exam to start her dissertation work.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

What has been learned from the two Persian/Iranian deaf women, K. Guity and Soleimanbeig is about their overcoming a variety of barriers and restrictions. The fact that both women assume leadership roles must be commended. Another point centers on K. Guity and Soleimanbeig learning about their own language and culture for empowerment. They are making an impact on Iran as a country. Farsi as a spoken language in Iran had the unmerited dominance in the education of deaf children. Both women who participated in the study were victims of oralism when they were young and attending school.

The deaf women who shared their stories demonstrate that they can do anything they have set their minds to do with patience and perseverance. K. Guity and Soleimanbeig are both signers with different backgrounds with the former having deaf parents and the latter having hearing parents. They also have different schooling experiences with K. Guity attending a school for deaf children until her high school graduation while Soleimanbeig went to a regular public school for most of her education. They arrived at the same conclusion that they found it imperative to support Esharani and deaf culture. Esharani as a sign language that serves deaf people as a native and natural language becomes a rallying call for both women.

K. Guity and Soleimanbeig had attended universities in Iran as students regardless of the accessibility issues. It took some time, but both women did get their degrees and become part of the university system by teaching a number of courses themselves. The women succeeded in giving back to their deaf communities through advocacy and education. Iran is clearly changing as a society thanks to these two deaf women. In reference to K. Guity and Soleimanbeig, the statement that serves as a closing for this article is: *If these two Persian/Iranian deaf women can, then all deaf women in the world can.*

At the time of this writing, there has been a record-breaking uprising in Iran after the death of a 22-year-old Iranian woman in police custody. Her name was Zhina (Mahsa) Amini, and she was a Kurdish Iranian. When she was killed by the government, it impacted the country and the world. Many people got involved and used the phrase “zan, zendegi, azadi” which means “Woman, Life, Freedom.” Hopefully, this situation will change the whole Iranian government system for women and deaf women in the future. Deaf women in Iran would become more empowered and their voices would be heard as a result. The future of deaf women in Iran is bright, as deaf women of many different identities in Iran will become more visible in society.
About the Author

It is a great honor for the author to be one of the contributors to this journal’s special issue featuring deaf women. When his former Gallaudet University professor and mentor, Dr. Arlene B. Kelly, asked him to submit a paper on deaf women in Iran for the special issue, he was grateful for the opportunity to make a contribution to the field of ASL/Deaf Studies. The author being a Persian male writing about women may surprise some readers, but it serves as a hope for women living in Iran. The author supports the feminist goals of equity, independence, and self-determination. As part of working with the deaf communities in Iran, the author tries his best in bringing the two deaf women up (who participated in the study) to the world stage as role models through this publication.

While interviewing K. Guity and Soleimanbeig about their challenges and achievements as deaf women in Iran, the author found it rewarding and humbling at the same time to document their life stories. The motivation for this kind of work is simple. The author wants to generate more support and empathy for deaf Persian/Iranian girls and women and deaf women in all other countries who experience a variety of barriers and restrictions. When the readers of this article are inspired by the stories that K. Guity and Soleimanbeig shared, the author will see that his writing assignment from Kelly fulfilled its purpose.

References


Linguistic Equity


