When 15-year-old Pusuli Akaliza was born in a small rural village of mu Rugarama in Kayonza District, her family celebrated the arrival of a healthy baby girl. Her round face and wide, curious eyes immediately captured everyone's heart. But as she grew, her mother noticed something unusual, Pusuli struggled to speak and respond to sounds.

"The little girl who once charmed everyone now struggled to hear or form words," recalls Mama Sharon, her guardian. Over time, the challenges of her disability quietly began to shape her life. "People suddenly started claiming that she was cursed. Pusuli was left in her grandmother's care after her mother remarried."

Today, she spends her time at a tailoring shop, quietly watching other children in school uniforms pass by — excluded from the classrooms she longs to join. Her story is not unique. Across Kayonza and other rural communities, children living with hearing or speech impairments still struggle for acceptance and education.

Pusuli is not alone. In Kayonza, 17-year-old Ishimwe Nsengiyumva was born with a speech impairment. While other children play football, Ishimwe sits on the sidelines, unable to hear whistles or follow instructions — a victim of stigma and isolation. This is the reality faced by thousands of children with speech disabilities across rural Rwanda, where inclusive education remains a promise still in progress.

Policy commitments and persistent gaps

At the policy level, Rwanda has long prided itself on its commitment to "education for all," a mandate enshrined in the 2018 Inclusive and Special Education Policy, which guarantees a place in school for every child. Yet, despite free education, many children with speech or communication disabilities in rural communities find the door closed to them; they are left at home, unseen and unheard, with little hope for the future.

The main challenges extend beyond access to classrooms, they are rooted in stigma, lack of resources, and limited awareness. Elie Kwizerimana, Program Manager for Chance for Childhood-Rwanda, a non-profit NGO working with children with disabilities, explains: "Stigma, discrimination, and high dropout rates are some of the barriers faced by disabled children and families. Children with deaf impairment often can't participate in daily activities, including sports like others. They are called derogatory and disrespectful names, which prevents them from

feeling confident and comfortable.”



Children with who are deaf can’t involve in sports activities because of communication problems courtesy photo by NCDP

Beyond classrooms, exclusion continues in play and social life. Children with hearing loss cannot hear whistles or instructions in sports and often do not qualify for adaptive games designed for physical disabilities such as wheelchair basketball or sitting volleyball.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), about 15 percent of the world’s population has some form of disability, with higher prevalence in developing countries. The UNESCO report further indicates that children with disabilities are 2.5 times more likely not to go to school than their non-disabled peers.

The Ministry of Education (MINEDUC) 2024 report recorded 138,937 learners with disabilities. Yet, in rural Rwandan communities, only 8.4 percent attend school. In 2022–2023, out of 4,456,419 learners, 40,342 (0.9%) had disabilities. Julienne Mukayirege, Acting Director of the Special and Inclusive Education Unit in MINEDUC, said that 21,615 are females and 17,322 males.



Source: Ministry of Education

Learners with physical and mental challenges make up the biggest share (35.5%), followed by those with specific learning difficulties (19.4%), visual impairments (13.4%), and speech and language difficulties (12.6%). These numbers reveal how much work remains to make schools accessible and responsive to all learners.

Pre-primary children with disabilities comprise only 0.5 percent of 540,998 students, highlighting major gaps in interventions. At the secondary level, the number increased slightly from 4,849 to 4,983 between 2022 and 2023, representing 0.6 percent of total secondary school students (729,998).

Currently, there are 11 specialized schools for children with disabilities, offering tailored curricula and specialized equipment. For instance, in the Western Province, the School for the Deaf in Nyabihu District accommodates just 70 students — 10 per

class — from Burera, Ngororero, and Nyamasheke districts. However, poverty and limited awareness continue to hinder progress. **Read more**; An Exclusive interview with Nyabihu School For the Deaf

Emmanuel Ndayisaba, Executive Director of the National Council of People with Disabilities (NCPD), noted a strong link between disability and poverty: “Most children with disabilities we have are coming from poor families,” he said.

Emmanuel Ndayisaba, the Executive Secretary of the National Council of Persons with Disabilities (NCPD) Photo by Rwanda Dispatch

From stigma to empowerment: Bridging gaps through sign language and community efforts

The barriers extend far beyond classrooms. Eric Niyoyita, Chairperson of the Rwanda National Union of the Deaf (RNUD), said communication barriers, social exclusion, and limited access to education and healthcare are worsened by budget constraints. “Sign language is not yet recognized in the constitution alongside Kinyarwanda, French, and English,” he noted, adding that policymakers do not fully grasp its importance.

For families, the struggle is both emotional and practical. Françoise Nakimana, a parent in Huye District, said she could not take her daughter to school because they were isolated at home. “It used to be shameful,” she recalled, “because of how people looked at us differently.”

“For people with hearing impairment, having interpreters on television, for example, ensures we also receive vital public information. These are not privileges; they are rights,” added Kwizerimana. “Sign language is structured, not random gestures. Each sign has meaning. The challenge comes when children return home, and parents don’t understand it.”

While government policies set the framework, NGOs are driving inclusion at the grassroots. Chance for Childhood supports 50 schools across Rwanda, training teachers to identify and assist learners with hearing or speech impairments, providing resources, and raising awareness through radio talk shows. Since 2015, the organization has worked with Nyabihu School for the Deaf to train teachers in sign language and assessment strategies.

The non-profit also works closely with RNUD, which provides volunteers to support teachers in sign language instruction and classroom communication. Eric Ngabo, Program Manager at Nyabihu School for the Deaf, explained, “We train two people per household in basic sign language so knowledge is shared even when the child is away. We also provide materials, books, and teacher training to keep parents involved.”

Community awareness has also been key. Nakimana adds that after being encouraged by Chance for Childhood to join cooperatives, parents were trained to understand that their children are as normal as others. “It made us understand the importance of bringing them to school to study, so they can associate with others and regain self-esteem.”

Mukashema Dative, disability advocate and Executive Director of the Rwanda National Association of the Deaf (RNADW), emphasized that learning sign language at home bridges children’s worlds — from giggles with friends to watching television news together. “Inclusion begins at home,” she posted on X. “For five years, we uplifted Deaf culture and sparked transformative change.”

An info graphics diagram showing key barriers of speech or communication impairment

Turning policy into practice: The way forward

The Government of Rwanda is scaling up support. According to the Situational Analysis Report on the Rights of People with Disabilities (2022), 49 percent of teachers received specialized disability training in 2024. The Rwanda Education Board (REB) trained 560 teachers in inclusive education, 1,400 in sign language, and equipped 32 schools with materials for students with disabilities.

Plans are underway to build five specialized schools in four provinces, including Kigali, for children with autism and other intellectual disabilities. Education Minister Joseph Nsengimana said 3,646 schools now have at least one teacher trained in inclusive education, and 60 percent of schools in each district provide specialized support. He noted that Rwanda has become a powerful reminder of our shared responsibility to leave no child behind.

Minister of Education Joseph Nsengimana Courtesy photo by MINIEDU

Yet challenges persist. While children with disabilities sit for national exams like others, Ngabo urged that their performance is often unfairly judged. “They learn a language through another language, so their answers may look different. Non-signers may see their answers as incorrect,” he said. “Deaf children should be marked by trained sign language interpreters; just as blind students’ exams are marked in Braille.”

Beyond education, access to healthcare remains limited. Dr. Jerome Mfitumuka, Director General at Kabutare District Hospital, said, “When Community Health Workers alert us, we advocate for financial support to ensure that disabled children receive treatments.”

The National Child Development Agency (NCDA) confirmed that MINEDUC aims to ensure that all schools become inclusive, with teachers trained in sign language. UNICEF’s Child Protection Chief, Leon Muwoni, recommended that Rwanda continue tackling child disability issues at all levels: “The support starts at the policy level and extends to districts and communities,” he said.

What’s needed now is collaboration across sectors and continuous capacity building for frontline staff. Despite these efforts, Rwanda’s journey toward inclusive education hinges on a shift from policy to practice. Children like Pusuli and Ishimwe still represent the daily reality of exclusion.

True inclusion requires targeted funding, well-deployed teaching strategies, and persistent campaigns to replace stigma with understanding. It means giving every child a voice, a classroom, and a chance to shine, because no child should be left behind.