Azima Dhanjee *is a Child of Deaf Adult (CODA), Co-founder/CEO of ConnectHear, and Board Member of the Social Enterprise World Forum (SEWF). She is an alumni of the Institute of Business Administration (Class of 2020), with a Bachelor's in Business Administration. Most recently, Azima has been recognised as the Pride of Pakistan by Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR). She is also a Diana Awards recipient and has been mentioned for her efforts in Forbes, Pioneers Post and various other publications. Furthermore, ConnectHear is the winner of TiE Women Global Competition among 40 chapters, Young Innovators Award by the World Summit Award, the P@SHA ICT Awards as well as the Standard Chartered Women in Tech Competition. Additionally, Azima has represented Pakistan in Kenya as a Global Encounters' Participant; in Senegal as an English Language Instructor; and in the United States of America as a Cultural Exchange Ambassador.*

Question 1:

What policies are most needed to improve accessibility and inclusion for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community and how can advocates push for these changes?

Over 5% of the world's population – or 430 million people – require rehabilitation to address their disabling hearing loss, including 34 million children hence from a Child of Deaf Adult (CODA) perspective, the most needed policy is to mainstream Deaf accessibility in our society by educating children from a young age about the Deaf community around them. This foundational approach can foster a more inclusive society where Deaf individuals are recognized and accommodated from the start.

A comprehensive policy must commence with the provision of rehabilitative and early intervention services, offering guidance and assistance to parents of Deaf children, a significant proportion of whom exhibit a lack of awareness regarding Deafness and the Deaf community. The provision of early support can have a considerable impact on the development and integration of Deaf children into society. It is of the utmost importance to guarantee access to sign language in a multitude of sectors. In the context of education, this entails the implementation of policies that mandate the provision of certified sign language interpreters and the provision of assistive technologies, such as hearing aids, captioning services, and visual alert systems, in educational institutions. In the field of healthcare, medical practitioners are obliged to provide sign language interpreters, virtual sign language interpretation applications and other communication aids in order to guarantee that individuals who are Deaf receive appropriate medical care. Furthermore, public services and communication must be made equally accessible. This entails the implementation of sign language interpretation, captions and subtitles for all public service announcements, broadcasts and media, thereby ensuring that individuals who are Deaf have equal access to important information.

In Pakistan, it is of the utmost importance to conduct a comprehensive census in order to ascertain the total number of individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing. The current lack of data represents a significant obstacle to the development of targeted interventions and focused rehabilitation projects for this community. The initial stage in the process of implementing effective policies and ensuring that the needs of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing are met is the collection of accurate data.

Advocates are of great importance in effecting these changes. It is estimated that by 2050, over 700 million people, representing one in every ten individuals, will have disabling hearing loss. It is therefore imperative that disability champions are appointed in every public and private organisation in order to advocate for this change, even if it starts with smaller interventions. This process should be approached incrementally, with each step building on the previous one. Furthermore, it is imperative that leaders within the Deaf community raise their voices and demand inclusion. A notable example of successful advocacy is the issuance of driving licences to the Deaf community following a bill change in 2018 in the Sindh province of Pakistan. By focusing on these key areas and implementing these policies, it is possible to significantly improve accessibility and inclusion for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community, thereby ensuring that every Deaf individual is able to participate fully in society.

Question 2:

How do you see the role of government in supporting the rights and needs of people with disabilities, especially in regions where accessibility is often overlooked?

It is of paramount importance that the government plays a pivotal role in the process of disability inclusion. In Pakistan, it is imperative that a comprehensive census be conducted in order to ascertain the precise number of individuals who are Deaf or hard of hearing. The current dearth of precise data hampers the development of targeted interventions and focused rehabilitation projects. The initial step towards the formulation of efficacious policies that address the requirements of the Deaf and Hard of Hearing community is the accurate collection of data.

Furthermore, government-mandated public and private partnerships have the potential to significantly enhance interventions for people with disabilities. It is of the utmost importance to provide support to social enterprises and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that are dedicated to the rehabilitation of individuals with disabilities and their integration into mainstream work environments. Such partnerships have the potential to facilitate the development and implementation of innovative solutions and services that are specifically designed to meet the needs of individuals with disabilities.

The implementation of government policies that mandate job opportunities in both the public and private sectors for people with disabilities has been demonstrated to be an effective strategy in numerous regions. In Pakistan, for instance, such policies have influenced a significant number of companies to provide employment opportunities for this demographic. However, the enforcement of these policies remains inconsistent due to the provincial nature of their implementation following the 18th amendment. It is therefore necessary to adopt a more coherent and unified approach in order to ensure equitable treatment across all provinces. Companies that fail to comply with these policies should face fines, thereby providing an incentive for adherence to inclusive employment practices.

A robust legislative framework, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in the United States, provides an exemplary model for ensuring the rights and opportunities for persons with disabilities. The ADA mandates equal access to employment, public services, and accommodations, thereby significantly improving the livelihood of individuals with disabilities. It also includes provisions for reasonable accommodations, ensuring that workplaces are adaptable to the needs of employees with disabilities. This type of comprehensive legislation can serve as an inspiration to other governments, encouraging them to create and enforce similar laws, thereby ensuring comprehensive accessibility and inclusion.

Question 3:

Given the essential role that disability support networks play in providing resources, advocacy and community for people with disabilities, what are some effective strategies to increase their visibility and recognition during Disability Pride Month?

It is crucial to recognise the reasons behind the necessity of providing support to the aforementioned support network. Additionally, it is vital to comprehend the difficulties these individuals face in navigating the world, the challenges they encounter in attempting to reconcile their identities between two distinct communities, and the necessity for them to establish their own community. What are the benefits to them of greater awareness, so that their loved ones can be integrated into the mainstream and avoid mistreatment? Therefore, they do not experience distress when faced with the possibility of their loved ones being left behind in situations where the lack of accessibility accommodations, such as captions in movie theaters, ramps at bank entrances, or sign language interpreters in hospitals, may pose challenges. As a child of a Deaf adult, I have experienced unexpected expectations from those around me and have had to learn to let go of these burdens without succumbing to feelings of guilt. The support system begins to function as a substitute for the individual with a disability, rather than providing the individual with their own support network.

Currently, there are CODA groups in numerous locations around the globe, and the experiences of CODAs are largely similar, regardless of ethnicity, nationality, or other demographic characteristics. In the context of Disability Pride Month, it is also important to acknowledge the lives of those with disabilities and to consider how we can draw inspiration from them to improve our own lives, regardless of whether we have a personal connection with disability or are dependent on them. Furthermore, it is empowering and encourages independence for persons with disabilities if they are treated as individuals rather than always relying on their family members. It is important to celebrate these days in order to create awareness and remind the silent support providers that they are not alone. In addition, developing online and physical resource hubs can provide support networks with the tools and information they need. These hubs can offer guidance to parents and guardians, share best practices, and create a space for support network members to connect and share their experiences.

A notable example of this phenomenon is ConnectHear and the closely-knit Deaf community, as well as the community of sign language interpreters with a Deaf background. CODA Pakistan serves to unite CODAs from across the country, providing them with a source of mutual support. The Karachi Down Syndrome Program (KDSP), initiated by a parent of a child with Down syndrome, is now primarily managed by the family network. This initiative has brought hope to numerous parents, offering their children access to quality education, skills development, and employment opportunities.