

focus

Disabilities

Make us heard, say the deaf

The UAE is making progressive advances in education, work and society for deaf and mute citizens. Yet frustrations remain for those with the disabilities who say the world has yet to recognise their full potential, **Asmaa Al Hameli writes**

Shaikha Mohammed has some big dreams to chase. One day, she plans to pursue a degree in interior design. All the 28-year-old Emirati needs is a chance to prove herself.

That is not easy, however, as Ms Mohammed is almost completely deaf. She struggles to understand what others hear easily and must rely on lip reading and sign language.

Sipping a latte at a Pappa Roti cafe in Abu Dhabi, she explains through her signer: "I am not completely deaf, I can hear a little."

Then she begins talking about her upbringing. "We are seven children," she says in sign language. "Four boys and three sisters. Three of us are deaf."

She learnt sign language at Zayed Higher Organisation for Humanitarian Care and Special Needs.

She studied until high school but it was at this point that her formal education ended.

"I can't go to university because there is none for people like me," she says with a laugh.

"I would love to study abroad, but I need someone from [the] family to accompany me."

Her deafness has left her speech impaired to such an extent that it deprives her of basic interaction with her compatriots and others at social gatherings.

When she steps out of the house, she says, she must be in the company of another family member. "It's very difficult to communicate with people. I get a headache. Writing isn't convenient all the time."

Ms Mohammed also struggles with using sign language to express herself.

"What I have noticed with Shaikha that she is using home sign language more," says Aysha Shamas, the signer.

Each deaf child develops their own sign language which can be only understood by them, she explains. During the interview with *The National*, Ms Shamas has to repeat herself several times to convey the message to Ms Mohammed.

"Both parties have their own language," says Ms Shamas, whose husband is deaf.

Communication is particularly difficult when you have individuals who are both hard of hearing and have a speech impairment, she says.

Asked about her outlook on life, Ms Mohammed says: "Thank God for everything. I am only uncomfortable with my job. I want to change it."

Ms Mohammed has been working for an Abu Dhabi bank for seven years and finds the work undemanding.

"My job is entering data into the computer," she says. Her Dh13,000 monthly salary is "very low, and there hasn't been any personal growth in those years".

"Often people either look down on me or sympathise with my case", she says.

"I want people to know that I am capable of doing other work than entering data. But usually they ignore me, saying that I am deaf and can't do much."

She says: "I wish people would



Eiman Al Fazari, 27, speaks via sign language with deaf specialist coach Basheer Mohammed, about her struggle for an education and a good job. Antonie Robertson / The National

understand us deaf people and put some effort into learning the sign language."

Her dream job, she says, would be with an airline: "But I doubt I would succeed in this because of my disability. I hope to find a new job where I will learn, gain skills and get a good salary."

During the past 10 years, the UAE has worked hard to raise awareness about the needs of people with hearing problems.

Shaikha Al Zaabi, a specialist teacher for the deaf at Zayed Higher Organisation for Humanitarian Care and Special Needs, says she has noticed a dramatic change in people's attitudes towards the deaf community.

"Many universities and workplaces are opening doors for the deaf people," she says.

"Al Khawarizmi college, Al Hosn college and recently, three of our deaf students graduated from the University of Sharjah."

There is a plan by the UAE University to unveil special courses for the deaf by the end of this year.

One challenge is the lack of accurate figures on the number of people with special needs in the country, although Ms Al Zaabi says: "From what I know, the rate is high."

She does not believe the solution is special universities for the deaf. "We should merge the deaf and hearing community instead of isolating them from the world. They are not much differ-

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ent from other human beings."

Some of those who suffer the most are children, she says, who are unable to enjoy television or a trip to the cinema.

"In 2008, we worked with the famous Arabic children's channel SpaceToon and created the Arabic alphabet song using the sign language," she says.

"People enjoyed it and learnt the basic signs."

Zayed Higher Organisation is also collaborating with Abu Dhabi Health Services to teach doctors and staff basic sign language when dealing with the deaf, she says.

"We have compiled basic sign language booklets specifically for clinical practitioners to ease interaction with the deaf."

While some in the deaf community struggle to fit in, some have managed to overcome what are often substantial challenges.

Eiman Al Fazari believes she has much to contribute to society. Profoundly deaf, she has no problems in expressing herself in sign language. The 27-year-old Emirati has been fortunate in both her education and career.

In 2010, she left for the UK to study British sign language which improved both her education and communication skills.

After a long search, she found work in a hospital. Her job also includes entering data.

"Getting a job helped me to get rid of depression and open up to the world," she says.

Some of her co-workers are

deaf and the hearing community at her workplace makes an extra effort to learn the sign language, to better communicate with her, she says.

Like Ms Mohammed, she also aspires to complete a higher degree. "When universities ease access for the deaf community, I would specialise in translating English sign language to Arabic," she tells *The National* through a signer.

Once she completes her higher degree, she says, she would like to be the link between the English and Arabic deaf community. "I would also like to open a beauty parlour one day," she says. "I love make-up and beauty products."

The communication barrier is the most serious problem faced by the special needs community, says Basheer Mohammed, who has been teaching and interpreting Arabic sign language for eight years at Zayed Higher Organisation.

There are many categories of sign language, he explains. There is the general sign language used on a daily basis. Then there is the "home sign language" restricted to the home. But when the deaf community meets with deaf friends, they sign much faster.

There are only a few differences between the English and Arabic sign language, he says.

"The Arabic sign language is unified under one umbrella compared to the different dia-

lects," he says. "You meet Arabs from different backgrounds and dialects, but at the end, you understand their speech."

Mr Mohammed's wife is deaf, but their four children have perfect hearing. "Deaf people are focused and sincere," he says.

"When you begin to interact with them more, you notice how much effort they put into everything they do. They are also talented and skilled."

His job includes teaching people sign language, both in government and the private sector. That even includes police stations, in case a deaf person is arrested.

"The government is doing an amazing job to serve those with special needs. The number of signers is slowly increasing in institutions," he says.

Sign language is one of the easiest languages to learn, he says.

To promote independence for the deaf, he says, customer services staff at Etisalat for example, have been trained in basic sign language to serve the deaf community. "The number of companies employing the deaf community is also increasing," he says.

Mr Mohammed says attitudes towards the deaf are a lot more positive than 20 years ago.

"Now it's a matter of time for people to fully internalise the special needs community. Otherwise, this country is treating the deaf remarkably well."

✉ aalhameli@thenational.ae



From left, Emirati Sultan Hamad Saeed Al Shamsi signs out 'family' in Arabic sign language, followed by 'mother' and then 'father'. Mr Al Shamsi demonstrated these examples of sign language to The National last year at the Hear My Voice – Empowering the Deaf conference at Mohammed Bin Rashid Academic Medical Centre, Dubai HealthCare City. Practitioners say signing is easy to learn. Jaime Puebla / The National