

## **Prospects for the Deaf Improve**

A school instructs students in sign language, opening a new world of possibilities for many.

Fauzia sits in the front row of a class of 14 boys and 4 girls. The attractive 17-year-old quickly answers the questions posed by the teachers.

What makes this class different from most others in the country is that it is conducted in sign language. Fauzia, like the other students in her class, suffers from a hearing and speech impairment.

"About a year ago I was watching a sign-language programme on television when I learned about this school," she said through an interpreter. "I had the feeling that if I joined, I might learn something."

Fauzia, who was born deaf, had developed a makeshift sign language to communicate with the world. But now that she is attending school, a move her family fully supports, she has been able to acquire a much broader range of communicative skills.

She now sees a bright future for herself.

"It has been a very good experience for me and I would like to become a doctor and help others with these special needs," she said.

The school, Family Welfare Focus, first opened nine years ago in a rented house in the Qala-e-Fathullah district of Kabul. Operated by a local non-governmental organization, the school has received support over the years from a variety of international organizations, including Care, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Germany's Agro Action. It is currently supported by a three-year grant from Save the Children-Sweden.

Students under 18 study the normal curriculum provided by the ministry of education while older students receive two years of vocational training in such skills as carpentry, shoemaking, tailoring, metal work and leather sewing.

So far the school has placed 150 of its graduates in jobs in those industries.

All courses are taught in sign language, a special version developed specifically for Afghanistan. School officials said they use over 2000 signs, about 30 per cent of which would be recognizable to those familiar with international sign language.

In May 2004, the school was able to expand when it moved into a new facility paid for by the Japanese government in Khaikhana, northwest of Kabul. At about the same time, Afghanistan Television, RTA, started broadcasting a nightly two-minute news wrap-up for the hearing-impaired.

"It was when television started showing sign programmes all over the country that people began taking an interest in joining the school," said Professor Syed Asghar Haidari, head of the school. He said it now has 280 students.

Haidairi said he hope the school will be able to further expand its programmes.

"We have also contacted the ministry of higher education to establish a department in Kabul University catering for the needs of those with speech and hearing impairments and they responded favourably," he said.

Syed Daudshah Hashimi, 33, a teacher at the school, also presents the sign-language news on Afghan TV.

"We transmit news in sign language every night now and we will also be trying out signing on other programmes," she said. "Many viewers appear to find great benefits from it."

Through an interpreter, students told IWPR how much the school had changed their lives.

"If this school hadn't existed, I would have remained illiterate," said Wida, 19, of Kabul. "'I want to be a teacher in the future and train others like me to become literate."

Ramin, 30, from Logar province graduated from the carpentry department two years ago. "Now I am an independent carpenter and I can match what any other carpenter might be able to make," he said. "In the past year I became engaged and would like to get married in the coming year. And now I am fortunate because I am able to provide for my wife."

Mudzgan, 28, from Mazar-e-Sharif but currently living in Kabul, graduated last year and is now a tailor. "I go to the bazaar to see what sort of clothes people are wearing," she said.

"I get a feeling for what they like and dislike, then I make up the popular styles and distribute them through the markets. I can earn around 300 US dollars a month.

"Just because I can't speak and can't hear doesn't make me stupid. In fact I think I'm a lot smarter than many people.

"I would urge the parents of any child with a speech or hearing disability to send them to a school such as this where they can learn a skill and be able to help their families," she said.

Shahabuddin Tarakhil is an IWPR staff reporter in Kabul.

**Location:** [Afghanistan](#)

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