

# enmei

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## Faisal in Focus

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*"The only thing  
I can't do is hear"*  
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Sabina Iqbal*

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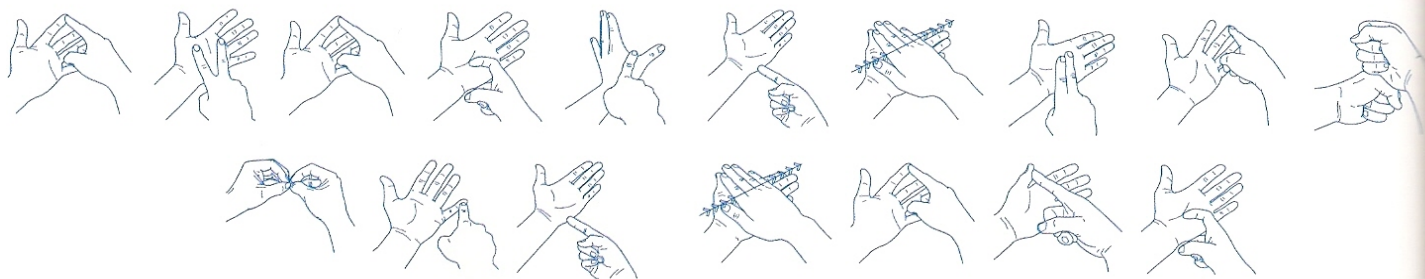
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# Everything but *Hear*

Sabina Iqbal smashes stereotypes and barriers. **Ali Orr** gets a sense of the dynamic and enabled power woman.

**Sabina Iqbal greets me with a smile and a businesslike handshake.** In equal parts smart and glamorous, eloquent and driven, she is successful by anyone's standards. As founder and chair of a pioneering charity, author, a full-time worker in social services, winner of "Women of the Future" awards and married with two young children, it's not hard to see why she was listed as one of the UK's most powerful Muslim women. Sabina also happens to be deaf.

As founder of the groundbreaking charity Deaf Parenting UK, which provides parenting advice to the wider British deaf community, Sabina is at the forefront of debate pertaining to policy and issues affecting deaf parents; particularly addressing the issues of access to public services. Yet she feels there are special issues facing a deaf girl born into an Asian Muslim family. Negative community attitude she feels, is a reflection of the attitudes held across the wider, Muslim World. On her trips to see family in Pakistan she is dealt with like a sick child. "Their attitudes are just so patron-

ising. They'll look at me and say, 'Oh you poor child, we'll pray to Allah for your hearing', and I think, I'm married with kids, I drive, have my own charity, my own job... It's their own children they need to be worried about!"

Such attitudes to deafness are all the more bizarre when compared to Islamic teachings and the legacy of the Islamic civilisation through the middle ages, where a large number of *awqaf*, or endowments, would go towards supporting the education and needs of the disabled communities. While references in the Qur'an deal only with the symbolic deafness of the one whose heart is deaf and blind to the signs of God and are completely detached from physical deafness, the story behind the revelation of the Qur'anic chapter, 'Abasa' sends a clear message about the responsibilities of the community and of individuals. The Prophet was busy addressing a prominent group of dignitaries from the Quraysh tribe in the hope of influencing the wider community when a blind man interrupted him, seeking education

about Islam. In the words of the Qur'an, the Prophet 'frowned and turned away' from him, and was admonished by the revelation which followed. As a result, the Prophet learnt an important lesson in dealing with those with disabilities, and not only was he more supportive and deferential of the man, Ibn al Maktum, from that point on, he also entrusted him with significant responsibilities rather than seeing him as a burden or as someone who couldn't help himself.

Yet, this empowering call is not understood by many of those closest to the deaf community today – the parents. Sabina tells me how she was lucky in that her family was very liberal-minded and supportive of her; she has two brothers, one of whom is close to her in age, and so her parents would always try to treat them equally. Her mother became a volunteer to support Asian parents with deaf children, and is now a social worker, working with deaf and hard of hearing people which she wouldn't have considered if it wasn't for Sabina being deaf. At the time, however, her family was overwhelmed



Sabina Iqbal is the founder and chair of Deaf Parenting UK, a pioneering charity.



and didn't know what to do or where to go, "My first deaf school was a lifeline, it really supported my parents to become deaf-aware, to learn British Sign Language (BSL), and from there they realised their child could learn, and with communication they could achieve anything."

Sabina was also lucky in meeting her husband, Asif, through a friend. "Asif's

"but he's very lucky to have me too!"

There are no accurate estimates as to the size of the deaf Muslim community in the UK, which is in itself a barrier to engagement. Yet for many, it's a case of out of sight, out of mind. This lack of awareness among Muslims of the needs of the deaf community coupled with a negative impression of deafness, from those who run mosques and Islamic

**"MY FIRST DEAF SCHOOL WAS A LIFELINE. FROM THERE MY PARENTS REALISED THEIR CHILD COULD LEARN."**

family was very deaf-aware, they can all sign and I felt so welcome. They were very inclusive." But for many deaf Muslim girls, there are massive problems finding a suitable partner, "What are the chances of meeting a deaf boy who's Muslim? Then on top of that you have the parents' attitude of 'I don't want a deaf girl marrying my son'. I was really lucky to meet Asif." She pauses and adds with a smile,

organisations to the parents themselves, has left the deaf Muslim community to fend largely for itself.

Among the initiatives that have sprung up from within the deaf community in recent years are the Muslim Deaf Group which meets on a monthly basis at the Central Mosque in London, the very first London Deaf Muslim Newsletter, the deaf Qur'an study group run by

Yasser McAndrew, plus Eid events. Sabina tells me about the value of such events, "They're like gold dust. You get to meet so many people and it just normalises you. There was nothing like that when I was growing up."

Examples of the Muslim community embracing and supporting the deaf community may be inspiring, but they are still few and far between. One of the few organisations to have made the link is the Muslim Youth Helpline, whose pioneering EnAble campaign in 2006 tackled head on the issues of disability in the Muslim community. It held a Deaf Awareness Day which brought together deaf and hearing Muslims to promote better understanding.

The East London Mosque (ELM) held their first Friday prayer with signing in April last year, with the translation of the sermon being translated into BSL by deaf support charity, Al-Isharah. The event was so successful it has been carried on every Friday. Assistant Executive Director at the ELM, Shaynul Khan hopes that their initiative will be copied by other mosques, "We have 22,000 people visiting us every week from all backgrounds and hope that this is a starting point to bring different communities together and will be considered by other mosques across the UK."

One worshipper described the ELM event, "After 28 years I feel included in the Mosque." And it is the striving for this level of inclusivity that Sabina wants to see. "There's a tremendous amount the Muslim community can do, attitudes cost nothing. Deafness is not a 'bad' thing. It's a shock, but one which can be overcome." Sabina lists a number of ways that the community can help – providing classes and madrasas that cater for deaf kids, producing educational DVDs with sign language, working with organisations to provide information to the parents of deaf children and young people, as well as reaching out to more deaf Muslim people.

Sabina Iqbal's inspiring example provides a real opportunity to reevaluate our own attitudes towards deafness, and to think what we can do, both individually and collectively to reverse the stigmatisation and marginalisation of the deaf Muslim community. As Sabina says, "Doesn't a deaf Asian Muslim girl already face enough discrimination? At the end of the day, the only thing we can't do is hear." ●