

Signstation – Question and Answers
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Q&A International aspects

Is there signing in other countries?

Yes ... wherever Deaf people have been able to meet together, sign languages have developed. We know that all developed countries have sign language among their Deaf communities and even in many Developing countries where there are few schools and limited opportunities for Deaf people, sign languages have emerged.

Is it the same all over?

No, sign languages vary in their vocabulary (the individual signs) from one country to the next and even within one country – eg in Belgium, there is a French Sign Language and a Flemish Sign Language, corresponding to the different communities.

So the conditions vary?

Yes, the impact of being Deaf in Europe may be much less because of all the services that are available – but also, some people have argued that it is easier to be Deaf in a less developed society as there are more manual jobs or agricultural occupations.

Does that mean that Deaf people are recognised differently?

Yes, there are laws in Sweden, Denmark and Finland, for example, which recognise sign language and parents and others can automatically learn to use their sign languages. More recently, Portugal and Greece have passed laws to recognise sign language. In Britain, the Department for Work and Pensions in 2003, announced that they recognised British Sign Language – there is however, no law about this as yet.

Which countries are most developed for Deaf people?

An interesting question, as although services may develop, this may not always mean that Deaf people are happy. For example, when we asked hearing people in the UK do you think that Deaf people's lives have improved through the services we now offer (interpreters and signing on television) there was a very positive response. Ask the same question to Deaf people and they are much less satisfied. Sometimes services are provided for what hearing people think is best for Deaf people without actually checking with Deaf people what they believe to be best.

However, we can say that Sweden and Denmark have fewer barriers to Deaf participation than other countries. The USA, with massive resources and powerful laws, is by far the most developed in terms of services to make Deaf people part of society.

Do they have more Deaf people?

Compared to the UK, yes but only a small population in comparison to China where there are 5 million Deaf people. Certain countries have higher percentages of people who are Deaf for example in Africa, where certain diseases which cause hearing loss are more prevalent. However, worldwide averages are generally thought to be about 1 in every thousand babies who is born with a hearing loss and about one in two thousand become members of the Deaf community and use sign language.

What about jobs for Deaf people?

Deaf people in the UK are relatively well off in regard to employment. We normally say that Deaf people tend to be under-employed rather than unemployed. It is hard to obtain definitive figures but typically half of the Deaf community has work compared to about 70% of the hearing community (remember this is different from those registered unemployed). In many countries, eg Spain or Greece, the figure of employed Deaf people can go as low as 25%. In Developing countries, this figure would be very low indeed.

Why are there these differences?

There are complex factors but a key one is attitude. If people do not believe that Deaf people can work – because they can't talk, then they will be barred from the workplace. Once it can be demonstrated that Deaf people *can* work, it is more likely that employers will seek them out. Sometimes, this means that highly intelligent Deaf people are locked into lower paid jobs.

Are there international associations of Deaf people?

Yes there is a relatively long history of Deaf interaction across national boundaries. The International Sports Federation for Deaf people was formed in 1924 and this now organises Deaf Olympic Games every four years www.deaflympic.com .

The World Federation of the Deaf was formed in 1951 and is active in 127 countries – see www.wfdeaf.org

There is also a European Union of the Deaf which represents Deaf interests in the EU and has membership in all of the countries of the EU – see www.eudnet.org

Deaf people have fewer problems in travelling aboard as they are more prepared to communicate in visual ways and when Deaf people get together from different countries they develop an inter-language based on the signs of each sign language. They are more easily able to communicate across language boundaries than hearing people.