

## Special education for children in Qatar: challenges and limitations



Raising children with special needs can be a challenging journey, but what makes it more challenging is the inaccessibility of special resources in Qatar, according to parents of children with special needs. Lack of information on special resources, high fees of special educational institutes, and lack of inclusivity in mainstream education are all hurdles that these parents are facing.

Qatar, a small oil-rich nation in the gulf has developed exponentially over the past couple of years. Investing in the country's accessible education system has also been among the government's top priorities. But as the country prepares for the upcoming 2022 FIFA World Cup, the focus has shifted from education to massive urban development projects such as construction of new roads and buildings. Thus, the problem of lack of policies on accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities remains.

In a recent in-person interview with Joelle El Sokhon, the founder of Family Hope Center, Sokhon said, “The government was carrying out a lot of awareness and educational campaigns for children with disabilities but now it has all come to a halt as everyone is busy with football, we still need to spread more awareness.”

For children with disabilities, the situation is delicate as they require special educational, medical, and social assistance to be integrated into society. Parents raising children with special needs in Qatar face many structural hindrances while trying to access resources meant for their children.

Sabika Shaban, a Pakistani Canadian expat who relocated to Qatar ten years ago with her two neurodivergent children, Soha and Sahil, faced similar struggles while trying to access special resources for her children.

“There are resources that are available in the country. However, just to get information on them can be a real challenge,” said Shaban in an interview at her office at Hamad Bin Khalifa University.

Her experience with the system, and the lack of educational and social support, inspired her to found Qadr (Qatar Disability Resource), a platform and support network where parents of children with special needs share information pertaining to resources which are otherwise difficult to access in the country.

The lack of a streamlined system where parents can access information on the appropriate educational, medical, and social resources for people with disabilities affects their ability to provide a quality education to their children.

Shaban, for instance, recounted her experience of trying to search for a school for her elder daughter, Soha, who suffers from a rare developmental disability. After building a foundational education at the Family Hope Center in Doha, Soha was finally deemed ready to be integrated into mainstream education, but what Shaban discovered was that no school was willing to take her in.

“I remember sitting down with an Excel sheet, a spreadsheet of 40 schools that I called and got rejected by each and every one of them,” recalled Shaban.

After pushing harder and finding a way through the system, she was finally able to enroll her daughter into a newly opened British school in Doha because it was looking for new admissions. Even after that, it was a constant struggle to keep her daughter at the school as her teachers weren't acquainted with her condition or trained to deal with her behavioral needs.

Sokhon, who's center mainly focuses on helping children with disabilities integrate into mainstream education, explains why this is the case. She says, “schools do not understand the difference between behavioral and psychological therapy, they offer psychological therapy but what these children need is behavioral therapy.”

Behavioral therapy is a way to teach children with disabilities to alter their beliefs or behaviors to avoid negative emotions and to refrain from actions, such as biting, which could harm the people around them.

Moreover, the high cost of special education centers is another challenge that parents have to deal with. Shaban, who pays a total of QAR 200,000 annually for her children's education, explained how unsustainable the private sector is.

“If you talk about anyone within a low middle-income bracket and no employment coverage, forget it. These parents either have to keep their kids in therapy centers or they are rotting at home with no access to education,” Shaban said.

She also further elaborated on why it is not possible to get her children educated at a cheaper cost in public schools. “The public sector is only Arabic-speaking so non-Arab speakers cannot access the government schools. So you either pay the money or scrape to get the money or you don't give your child an education.”

Another hindrance faced by parents trying to enroll their children into special schools is the lack of inclusivity and the restricted access based on nationality. For example, Renad Academy, which, according to Shaban, is considered to be one of the best schools in the country for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), grants admission to Qatari nationals only.

The rationale for this discriminatory policy, according to a spokesperson from the school, is that “non-Qatari parents cannot afford the school’s high fees.”

However, despite these structural hindrances, Qatar has been working to improve inclusive education for children with disabilities, and there has been progress in the past decade especially in terms of social awareness campaigns.

According to Rania Abou Ghaida, a college program coordinator for Best Buddies, a global volunteers association aiming to provide social inclusion to children with disabilities, the country has come a long way in raising awareness about disabilities in society. “There is still a stigma but there is a huge improvement in the society as a whole,” said Ghaida during an interview from her office at Best Buddies Qatar.

However, parents still believe that a lot more needs to be done in terms of inclusive policies to help children like Soha achieve their full potential. Shaban said, “my daughter is smart, she is just below average, but she is smart. She just needs a chance to prove herself.”

##

**Source List:**

Joelle El Sokhon, Family Hope Center: +974 31232123

Rania Abou Ghaida: +974 55640083

Sabika Chaban: +974 33375067; sshaban@hbku.edu.qa

Renad Academy: +974 44541974