AIMS For a better birth...

Introducing Raham Project

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By Faiza Rehman

Raham Project is a registered Community Interest Company, based in Peterborough. It is currently funded by the Peterborough and Cambridgeshire Integrated Care system. This company is created out of my own experiences as a British Pakistani, a mother of two young children and a qualified midwife. As I was growing up, I would hear stories from various women from within my community discussing collective experiences of birth, life, and death. These stories took place in safe circles of trusted women and these women had voices and experiences worth listening to.

Stories of motherhood and birth fascinated me. I would feel joy hearing about the community support provided to women during their birth and postnatal period; this support mechanism was emphasised as being essential when women had their children. My mother was 16 when she gave birth to my brother; he was born at home in a small rural village in Pakistan. My mother was surrounded by her tribe of women at that time. Culturally, men were not expected to be part of the birth and this coincided with dad working abroad. My father was informed about the birth of my brother via a cassette recording that was received by him a week later; communication through such measures was common at that time. My mother was encouraged to walk, squat, eat, drink and rest when she needed to. She often spoke about comfort measures, like the group of women massaging her back, and after a day or so of labour, she birthed her baby at home. She described the experience as the hardest thing she had ever done; however, she never doubted her ability to birth. She remembers the joys of the space she shared and the feelings

she felt. My brother didn't breathe straight away so they held him upside down over a Tava (a flat chapati griddle) which was heated quickly and they splattered water on it so the steam stimulated him to breathe. I recognise this was their form of stimulation for a baby based on previous knowledge and experiences they had. From birth onwards she was relieved from doing any home duties and rested as she learned to breastfeed and take care of her newborn baby. She did not leave the home for the first 40 days after her birth, and all the women took it in turns to support her to rest with her newborn.

These positive stories were often followed by the reminder of the cruel inequality and inequity that families faced because of the part of the world they were born in. For example, my aunt had numerous miscarriages, nine live children and four who passed away within the early months/years of life. I recollect travelling to visit my family in the summer holidays as a child and meeting one of her newborn babies. I look back and realise she was most definitely small for gestational age, and I am almost certain now she was born preterm. She died a few weeks later. I recall hearing about a woman that gave birth at the same time as my mother - she died because they believed her placenta touched her heart. Initially, I assumed this happened because they lived in a poorer country, but as I developed my passion for all things midwifery, I learned that despite living within the UK there was a disparity in health outcomes for ethnic minority mothers as well as mothers who lived in the most deprived areas[1],[2].

At Raham Project, we offer support to mothers with ethnic minority backgrounds and their partners. The support is focussed around pregnancy, childbirth, and the post-partum period – with an emphasis on maintaining and improving maternal mental wellbeing. The support ranges from informational, emotional and advocacy.

We engage directly with our community by creating digital media content to help represent, educate and raise awareness about the perinatal period. The content is simple to understand and when key themes are suggested by people, we then take them further to create informative videos. We have begun to focus on creating videos in Mirpuri, a language understood by most people within our local Pakistani community.

Finally, we offer monthly listening sessions. This is where we hold online monthly events to listen to people that connect with us; we then use their voices and stories collectively to give feedback to our Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Local Maternity and Neonatal System. These stories are shared within a safe space of trusted women. If people wish to have a one-to-one conversation, we offer this on a case-to-case basis. Over time, we have developed a small voluntary online peer support group led by mothers from diverse ethnic backgrounds for mothers that identify with them.

Raham project continues to develop and support families from ethnic minority backgrounds. We are developing links with other charities such as Cambridgeshire, Peterborough and South Lincolnshire Mind and Barnardo's. We're looking forward to creating a partnership project of a central hub space for minority ethnic women local to Peterborough.

These are early but exciting days. We are currently based in a small city, but the power of social media

has provided us with access to people from other places and there is scope for us to grow all across the UK.

We have and will continue to be the voice of those who either need to be heard or want to strive for change, a change that will require a whole community.



Author Bio: Faiza Rehman was born and raised in the U.K. in a tight knit south Asian family. She is the mother of two young children and a qualified midwife, who has been practising since 2011. She comments, "I am hugely passionate about all things midwifery and ensuring we care for families so they emerge from their birth both physically and emotionally safe. This passion has driven me to start a grassroots organisation: Raham Project, a platform to support families from diverse ethnic backgrounds".

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[1] MBRRACE-UK Saving Lives, Improving Mothers' Care 2017-19, November 2021

[2] MBRRACE-UK Perinatal Mortality Surveillance Report for births in 2019, October 2021