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*Protecting human rights  
in childbirth*

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Registered address:  
Birthrights  
The Apex, 2 Sheriffs Orchard  
Coventry CV1 3PP  
0300 400 3400

8<sup>th</sup> August 2024

Dear Mr Khan,

We are writing from the UK charity Birthrights, which seeks to protect and uphold the human rights of all women and birthing people in the UK.

The Islamophobic and racist violence over the last week have been incredibly painful and heartbreaking to witness. Whilst we are relieved that Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> August did not see the scale of violence many of us had feared, we know that you will be working with stakeholders across London to prepare for any future planned violence and to mitigate the long-term impact of the violence that has occurred so far.

We are writing to ask that in these meetings you also consider the proactive planning and communications that NHS Trusts must undertake to ensure that women and birthing people who are pregnant or have recently given birth are able to safely access the maternity care they need.

The human rights of women and birthing people during pregnancy and birth are already ignored, restricted and violated on a daily basis across the UK, disproportionately impacting racially minoritised and marginalised communities access to safe maternity care. And too often, in times of crisis, these rights are eroded further, as we saw during the Covid-19 pandemic.

We are deeply concerned that there may well be women and birthing people who are due to give birth imminently in areas that are being targeted by the far right, resulting in a significant risk that:

- women and birthing people choosing a home birth (protected under article 8 of the Human Rights Act) will be told that it is unsafe for a midwife to attend their birth



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- women and birthing people in labour may not feel safe to leave their home to birth in their local hospital or birth centre
- women and birthing people may not be able to access other community-based care including postnatal home visits, the timing of which are absolutely critical for both parents and newborn babies
- women and birthing people who are pregnant and concerned about their baby for example reduced foetal movements are unable to or fearful of accessing the care they need in time, particularly out of hours

The first two risks increase the possibility of women and birthing people feeling their only option is an unassisted birth. Whilst unassisted birth is rightly a lawful option in the UK, it is only an empowering option for women and birthing people if it comes from a place of genuine choice, not a restriction of safe alternatives.

We understand the risks that these racist riots pose to NHS staff. However, it is imperative that NHS Trusts are proactively putting in place plans to both ensure maternity staff are safe, particularly racially minoritised staff, *and* ensure they are able to reach women and birthing people in their communities. We have already heard reports that NHS Trusts closed community clinics in some areas that were at risk of riots, without alternative provision being put in place.

Within this context, we are writing to ask you to urge NHS Trusts in London to ensure adequate plans are in place for women and birthing people who are pregnant or who have recently given birth and to ensure that NHS Trusts are proactively reaching out to women and birthing people in their communities about their plans to ensure continued access to care. This means taking extra steps to get maternity teams out to people in their homes and helping women and birthing people to reach hospitals and birthing centres safely, without harm.

We also ask that you lead by example to other metro mayors across the country, by making clear that you are putting this on the agenda.

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The starting point for NHS Trusts, even in crisis, must always be to try to uphold the human rights of women and birthing people. This includes our rights to decide where we give birth, how we give birth, and who is with us when we give birth, our rights to make informed decisions about our bodies and our care, our rights to be treated with dignity and respect, and fundamentally our right to life.

We are more than happy to meet with you or your team, or share a written briefing on human rights during pregnancy and birth, how these are being ignored, restricted and violated on a daily basis across the UK and how Birthrights is working to change that.

We do hope that you will take action to ensure the safety of pregnant women and birthing people in these deeply troubling times, and we hope to hear from you soon on how you are taking this forward.

Yours sincerely,

Shanthi Gunsekera and Janaki Mahadevan  
Co-CEOs, Birthrights