

# Making the invisible visible

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When I trained as a nurse in the 1990s, I was the only Arab in my cohort. It was evident then that I was embarking on a journey, knowing that, despite having friends around me, I would never really 'fit in'. Fast forward 27 years and, despite the diversity within the NHS, I am yet to meet a Chief Nurse in the UK who is Arab. That tells me a lot about how little has changed for the community to which I belong.

The Arab world consists of 22 countries in the Middle East and North Africa (*Box 1*) and on 15 March 2021 the Arab Board of Ministers of Health declared that all Arab countries would celebrate Arab Nurses and Midwives Day annually on 3 November. The aim of holding such a day is to commemorate the significant efforts of professional nurses and midwives and their valuable contribution to healthcare sectors across the Arab world. The day, and the celebrations organised within each country, are intended to promote a sense of community and collaboration between nurses and midwives across each healthcare sector.

The nursing and midwifery profession in the Arab world is developing rapidly and migration to the UK from the Arabian Peninsula goes back decades. The vast majority form part of what is sometimes called the 'Arab diaspora', that is, ethnic Arabs or people descended from such living outside the Arab world.

## The UK picture

In the UK, British Arabs often share similar cultures, language and identity despite being from different Arab countries. Many British Arabs reside in the bigger cities such as London and Birmingham and are largely from Egypt, Morocco, Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq and the Gulf States and there are sizeable and long-established Arab communities all across the UK, for example in Cardiff, South Shields and Newcastle upon Tyne.

Many Arabs migrated to the UK as far

### Box 1. Countries in the Arab world

■ Algeria	■ Kuwait	■ Qatar
■ Bahrain	■ Lebanon	■ Saudi Arabia
■ Comoros Islands	■ Libya	■ Somalia
■ Djibouti	■ Morocco	■ Sudan
■ Egypt	■ Mauritania	■ Syria
■ Iraq	■ Oman	■ Tunisia
■ Jordan	■ Palestine	■ United Arab Emirates
		■ Yemen

back as 1860, when we saw many Yemenis arrive via Aden, and in the early 20th century, when we saw many Iraqis settling in London in the 1930s. Arab migration to the UK grew significantly in the 1940s and 1960s.

Despite this, the absence of a separate British Arab nursing and midwifery association limits national and international collaboration in nursing and midwifery, including in research. This is because all Arab countries work together in a co-operative way, with the support of the World Health Organization and the International Council of Nurses, to improve the status of and education programmes for nursing.

## A call to action

I had always intended to set up an association specifically for Arab nurses and midwives in the UK, the first of its kind. When in 2022 I received a phone call from a desperate Arab nurse who needed advice and support from someone she could identify with, I realised there was an absolute need for Arab nursing and midwifery in the UK to be visible. The nurse had come across my name after I had written an article for the Royal College of Nursing. In that article, I described myself as 'a proud Yemeni from the Black Country'.

It was that phone call that accelerated my intentions, and I decided then I needed to act; that was the beginning of the British Arab Nursing & Midwifery Association (BANMA).

The need to belong – to connect deeply with other people and secure places, to align with one's cultural and subcultural identities

and to feel like one is a part of the systems around them – appears to be buried deep inside our biology, all the way down to the human genome (Slavich and Cole, 2013). However, despite its importance, many people struggle to feel a sense of belonging. Socially, a significant portion of people suffer from social isolation, loneliness, and a lack of connection to others (Anderson and Thayer, 2018).

The Nursing and Midwifery Council only made it possible in 2021–2022 for registrants to identify themselves as being Arab. Since then, the numbers have been increasing. In March 2023, 588 nursing and midwifery professionals were on the register as being Arab, up from 393 in 2022, an increase of 49.6% but I know there are more from all over the Arabian Peninsula.

BANMA has been set up to represent and support Arab nursing and midwifery staff in the UK and make them more visible. I am a registered nurse and my cousin Afrah Muflihi, is a midwife – we will ensure that BANMA plays a crucial part in making sure Arab nursing and midwifery staff are given the same opportunities, that the same doors are opened. We want to make the invisible visible.

For further information contact info@banma.org.uk and visit the website (Banma.org.uk). **BJN**

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