

**LIFE & STYLE**

# Women, first and foremost

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**Dr Evita Fernandez dispels all misconceptions about midwifery and hopes to address issues concerning women through 'Naari'**



Her gentle smile belies the steely determination of her vision. Dr Evita Fernandez, Managing Director and chief consultant obstetrician, Fernandez Hospital, firmly believes in women empowerment and asserts that it should start with providing them with informed choices, specially in the area of child birth. Known for her initiative in creating

awareness about midwifery, Dr Evita is now adding another forum to raise opinion and reach people - *Naari*, a quarterly magazine to be edited by Ratna Rao Shekhar.

At a cosy and charming event held to launch the magazine last weekend, Dr Evita shares the need for the newsletter. “We wanted to create a space for women to discuss issues without hesitation and help raise awareness on sensitive issues surrounding pregnancy and birthing. *Naari* will be a channel to focus on these aspects. We are hoping to reach policy makers and women activists through *Naari*.”



While travelling across the country with her colleague from England Inderjeet Kaur, a consultant midwife at Barts Health at Royal Hospital in London, Dr Evita was appalled at the conditions in labour wards in private and public hospitals. “What really upset me was the lack of respect and dignity to the women who are birthing. If a woman does not have a positive birth experience, it scars her for life – emotionally and psychologically..that’s one of the causes for postpartum depressions and it affects their bonding with the child,” says Dr Evita.



She states a fact when she mentions that there's an epidemic of C-sections now. "We stopped believing in the ability of the woman, we've lost that wonder that a woman can actually give birth in the natural way. We've become so interventional, we made birth, a medical emergency. In what is natural and beautiful if left alone, we started interfering unnecessarily. So I felt we need to talk about that somewhere, we need to gather and start a movement across the country. Women should realise that they have choices and labour and birthing is not supposed to be like this."

We have 22 million births in this country every year and 80 percent can be dealt by midwives, feels Dr Evita. Unfortunately in India, a midwife is perceived as an untrained and unskilled woman who's called for emergency cases in rural areas. On the contrary, midwives are trained to look after women right from the time they conceive through their pregnancy, birth and immediate care of the baby and work with the mothers for six weeks and help them with contraceptive advice as well. So when there's a professional midwife with the mother who has no complication, then the doctor can focus on the women who need surgical procedure.

At Fernandez Hospital, a Professional Midwifery Education and Training (PMET) programme, offers a new dimension to maternity care. Elaborating on the prerequisites for a midwife, Dr Evita says "In India, we need to have a registered nurse, with a basic three year diploma. If she's had a year's experience in maternity services then she'll go into an intense 18-month training. This is generally the practice the world over. But in some

countries, they allow what they call 'direct midwifery'. You could be an undergraduate or an architect and had three babies and suddenly realised that you want to do midwifery. For such aspirants, it's a four-year degree. You don't need to be a nurse. But over four years you understand anatomy, physiology, everything concerning pregnancy and labour and birth.. They'll make excellent midwives because they are coming into this profession because of a calling.."

To build a midwife force has its own challenges. While pregnant women do not understand what professional midwifery is all about, it's obstetricians who can be a stumbling block. "I can't tell you the frustration I experience when I talk to them. I say open up your labour wards, employ midwives, work along with them. Knowing that a mother is looked after by a midwife can be comforting... you can focus on mothers who need surgical procedure and outpatients. It's a combination of problems. Not understanding what goes into the training of midwifery is a major one. When you don't understand you have fear."

What else is on the anvil for Dr Evita? "I want to build a low cost hospital. My heart is in the community. We've always served the middle class. We are working with the Telangana government, specially in district hospitals in Karimnagar where we are training 30 nurses to be midwives. Our focus is to bring back compassion and kindness into our labour wards, the respectful care to the poorest of poor who has no voice. I feel very strongly about that. But all this would not be possible but for Inderjeet who came from the UK and pitched tent with us. I want to get back to the community to build a chain of hospitals, God willing, in the next couple of years."

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