

Why gym'll fix it in bid to break down racial prejudices

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A mum-of-four has launched a business venture to provide Muslim women with a safe place to socialise outside the home. She spoke to Jane Cartledge

EVER since she was a little girl Safiya Saeed's mother's living room has doubled as an impromptu hair salon.

Aunties, cousins, sisters and grandmothers all styled each other's beautiful long, dark hair in the only way they knew.

A trip to the hairdressers or a preening session at the salon were off limits by virtue of their Islamic faith.

The women would quite literally let their hair down in the privacy of their own home when the men were out of sight and the curtains were closed.

Some of the younger women, with a more westernised attitude, may have been confident enough to take a trip to the hairdressers and remove their Hajib headscarf.

But they quickly realised that most mainstream hairdressers weren't sensitive to their culture or religion.

Safiya, a Somalian mum of four who moved to Sheffield aged 13, says she knows many young women who have infuriated their stylist after demanding their hair be covered up the moment the hairdryer is switched off.

It's for these reasons that 34-year-old Safiya decided to open her own women-only salon and gym in Burngreave. But there's much more to this feminine oasis than just straighteners and Swedish massage.

Safiya's dream has survived prejudice from her own community to become a reality and Saf Saf's on Spital Hill is now a thriving drop-in centre for hundreds of women who, until now, have been isolated in the home.

"The high street in Burngreave is completely male orientated from the cafes to the shops," says Safiya, who can't resist a smile knowing she's making long-awaited in-roads into a male dominated culture.

"The women don't have anywhere to go socially. There's nothing for teenage girls apart from Surestart and not everyone wants to have kids or study. I've opened this building as a haven for women and I say 'come in and have a cup of tea, have a chat'.

"Just because a woman wears a Hajib it doesn't mean she should feel bad about herself or let her health and beauty regime go."

Safiya, fully supported by her family and second husband Fahad Bagadai, has completely renovated a dilapidated old building overlooking Spital Hill.

It's small but well equipped gym, airy lilac beauty room and chintzy salon below with old fashioned freestanding hairdriers can't be accessed from the main road - but that's the whole point.

"We keep the doors locked and the blinds can be pulled for ultimate privacy. That way, women can relax, take off their scarves and talk about things they can't talk about elsewhere."

Safiya's project has been made possible by investment from social entrepreneur charity Unltd but securing finance hasn't been her only obstacle.

"As a woman in this community, it's really difficult to be taken seriously . When you break out and do a so called Western idea then people say 'why do you want to do that?'. Then they try the guilt trip saying 'why do you want to leave your children and start a business?'

"If I didn't do it someone else would and I tell them that my children are going to grow up whether I'm working or not.

"At the end of the day it starts with me. If I'm happy and content, they will be too.

"I needed to be a fantastic example to my children and I needed to be able to show people and the community I could do something, particularly after my divorce."

Safiya's business has the blessing of her parents and shopkeeper husband who himself works seven days a week.

Her mum looks after her four children - the youngest is just 12 months - while the business gets off the ground.

She says she can count on one hand the number of successful Muslim businesswomen but that doesn't dampen her infectious enthusiasm.

"I need to help people and benefit people, it's in my nature," says Safiya, flashing another broad, lipsticked smile.

"I sleep smiling at night - stressed, migraine? Probably. But I sleep soundly knowing it's mine and it's down to my hard work."

Safiya worked solidly for three months getting Saf Saf's ready for the women of Burngreave and surrounding areas.

Then she spent six weeks on an intensive training course for women in business.

The result is that Safiya knows what it takes to make a business succeed.

Saf Saf's is a social enterprise as well as a business and her staff are self employed. For £22 a month women get access to the gym, a relaxing meeting space, a sewing room where they can work on dresses and can book into the beauty salon or hairdressers.

"We're starting free counselling sessions with a qualified counsellor and I'm hoping one day to have a sauna and Moroccan scrub.

"A lot of the elderly Asian and African women miss the sun so saunas are great for their arthritis.

"There are great health benefits to this project and it's not just about providing women with a space to meet, it's about providing a service and empowering them."

Safiya's loyal team speak no less than six languages between them meaning no one is left out.

"We're getting the boys ringing up and booking their mums in," says Safiya, who lives in Sharrow and attended Abbeydale Grange.

"They say she's worried about coming down because she doesn't speak English but to us that isn't a problem at all. We're here for all women of all ages."

Saf Saf Hair and Health can be found at 149a Spital Hill, Burngreave. Telephone 0114 273 0248.

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