

## The Baobab Centre for Young Survivors in Exile

### **Beginnings**

The Baobab Centre for Young Survivors in Exile **has run since 2008**. The Centre runs as a non-residential therapeutic community where young people whose trust has been broken can develop friendships and a sense of being part of a supportive community. The Centre holds a holistic and integrated child and adolescent centred approach and young people can engage in therapeutic work and receive support for as long as is necessary.

The Baobab Centre became a company limited by guarantee in 2009 and a charity in 2010. The Baobab Centre exists to offer specialised therapeutic services to some of the thousands of children, adolescents and young people who arrive in Britain each year fleeing from the trauma of organized violence and child and adolescent specific human rights abuses. The young people with whom the Baobab Centre now works come from 22 different countries and many more ethnicities; some were child soldiers, some trafficked for sexual purposes, and many were raped. All have experienced torture and abuse, been victims of organised violence and experienced profound personal losses in their young lives; many have experienced the murder of their parents. Many have been imprisoned and tortured. All experience chronic and complex trauma, difficulties with separation, loss and mourning and the consequences of displacement.

### **The Centre's Aim is to address vulnerabilities and resiliencies.**

The Baobab Centre holds a holistic and integrated approach where we meet young people's practical, developmental and mental health needs in one place, aiming to provide different social and psychotherapeutic interventions that both address their vulnerabilities, enable linking to old resiliencies and the development of new resiliencies. Our eventual aim, after a period of time in our small and transitional community, is that young people feel able to take a position in the community and feel able to participate in community life.

### **The young people's experience & The Centre's response**

The majority of the young people attending the Baobab Centre have been separated from their families and come to the UK unaccompanied after painful separation, disappearance or death. They have lost their families and are *alone* in a strange and often hostile country, having suffered unimaginable terrors and hardships. Most come from communities that for a variety of reasons have divided and turned on themselves so that young people have been exposed to adults solving conflicts over beliefs and values, resources and power with the use of violence. The Baobab Community gives young people the opportunity to explore conflict and community life in a safe environment and this to repair broken trust in other humans and to develop self-confidence.

Extreme, prolonged and cumulative violence, loss and trauma results in *fragmentation* on many levels, developmental, psychological, physical, mental and emotional. The Baobab Centre offers one place for our young people in which to be '*held in mind*' and '*held*' on many levels by a group of people from different disciplines all working closely together on their behalf.

As one Afghani young man said *'before if any problem occurred I would go straight home and talk to my mother and father, but home no longer exists. So now, whatever happens, I always come here to the Baobab Centre first'* Our model of support in many ways seeks to replicate the lost families, homes and communities of our young people. We aim to provide a place which creates safety, containment and allows a processing of their terrible experiences, allowing them to move forward after becoming stuck or going backwards in their development after a series of traumatic experiences and to *regain missing stages of their childhood and adolescence and move into adulthood in their own way at their own pace.*

The variety of casework, therapies and support *under one roof* allows them to move between services and even back and forth as they need, ie – moving between individual therapy (building trust with one person) to group therapy and opportunities to participate in community meetings and sports, music, arts and social activities. This is an innovative, holistic and pioneering approach where the structure of the organization aims to be congruent with its ethos and services and to regularly keep in mind and to review the needs of the young people and to make sure our services fit the needs of the community members.

### **Meeting young people's needs now**

Over the past year we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of destitute young people accessing our support.

1. We are seeing an increase in homelessness due to stricter assessment criteria and widespread funding cuts. There is less support provided to vulnerable people and an expectation that charities will 'pick up the pieces' despite no real increase to charity budgets due to overall rise in costs.
2. We have seen an increase in the number of people excluded from accessing rights and entitlements. Mainstream services such as housing, healthcare, benefits systems have shifted from providing a case by case assessment process to excluding those who are less able to participate and cope with such systems.

Services have been privatized and contractors are being given statutory responsibilities and there is a lack of monitoring.

An example is housing providers who are merely real estate agents or prison providers,( both completely untrained to meet the developmental needs of troubled and distressed children and adolescents who are stuck in their development after trauma, ) who are contracted to provide care services to vulnerable young people who have a history of trauma and loss and many difficulties in their home countries, on their journeys into exile and in exile in the UK. We have identified very concerning situations whereby young people are forced to put up with poor conditions and treatment and has ended up with young people being evicted and made destitute.

### **Cause of destitution**

A cause of destitution in our experience is the lack of application of policy into practice. For example guidance issued to Home Office officials or social workers in local authorities upholds that practice should always take the 'best interest of the child' into consideration when making decisions on asylum claims and support plans for their future. We have identified continued gaps in practice, which can often lead to a young person becoming destitute as a result of refusals and negative

assessments. Young people are forced into a long process of challenging decisions through legal processes. This can take a very long time and cause immense stress and pressure for young people, placing them at further risk of harm.

*We are very concerned about the proposed further cuts in legal aid as many of our young people are forced into seeking legal support to challenge poor practice by the Home Office or Social Services or if they have through bad luck been very poorly represented in the early part of their asylum claims. The limit on legal aid will mean more young people will be faced with no option other than to suffer and face destitution as lawyers will not be paid for the preliminary work required to gain permission to pursue a judicial review.*

### **The rights of children seeking protection**

The Baobab Centre works within the context and obligations of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 3 paragraph 3 and Article 39 in particular state:

#### **Article 3**

- States parties shall ensure that the institutions, services and facilities responsible for the care or protection of children shall conform to the standards established by competent authorities, particularly in the areas of safety, health, in the number and suitability of their staff, as well as competent supervision.

#### **Article 39**

- States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation, or abuse; torture or any form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and punishment; or armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.

The convention provides a framework for supporting our young people. Our concern is the lack of reference to these obligations across other agencies responsible for the care of young people and lack of training and experience in how to make use of this very helpful and important convention.

### **What would improve the system**

A way forward for the future is there being more focus on supporting this group of vulnerable young people at an earlier stage of the journey, on arrival or when they first come to the attention of authorities and communities. Identifying traumatic experiences, potential risks and support needs at the initial point of contact would help towards a more coherent response.

### **Recommendations**

- We support the idea of there being an independent 'Guardian' allocated to unaccompanied migrant children to ensure their voices are heard and their rights are upheld throughout the process of their asylum claim and pathway support plans.
- There is a definite space for professionals to be working together more intensively to share knowledge and ideas across sectors. The divide between authorities such as the home office and social services and the non-government sector continues to be a barrier interfering with support provision for this vulnerable group.

- At the Baobab Centre we run a series of regular Baobab Talks about issues relevant to these involved in the care and treatment and support of young asylum seekers and refugees. We often present at conferences, offer training to agencies, participate and contribute to policy submissions and strive to link with other agencies that have an impact for separated refugee children and young people.

### **Our hopes and a dream**

We would like to expand our Centre to meet the demand for our services though we wish to limit the number of young people actively involved in our community at any one time so that we can sustain the sense of community and the intimacy of relationships that can potentially develop. Our vision is to have a larger building with perhaps eight rooms where our therapeutic community can expand. This would allow us to offer more opportunities for individual and group therapeutic support, casework advocacy and arts and community events. We dream of an open arts studio where arts based therapeutic work can take place, a large kitchen where we can share meals and young people can learn to take care of themselves and eat healthy foods -and a garden as alternative spaces to rooms and a place that our young people have as another home.

On a smaller level when thinking about funding, we have an increased demand for our destitution support. We currently are unable to meet the demand and have to prioritise allocation of our resources. This is very difficult as everyone who needs destitution support are suffering in some way or another, often due to bureaucratic systems failing them: for example, benefits have been stopped as their medical certificate is lost in the benefits office or if they are homeless and have no access to funds of any kind. Raising money for a destitution fund is one of our key priorities.

Jodie Bourke  
Senior Social Worker  
Baobab Centre for Young Survivors in Exile  
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