

## **Report back to The Funding Network**

### **1. Name of your organisation and date funded by TFN:**

The Baobab Centre for Young Survivors in Exile received funding from TFN as a result of a meeting on 9 September 2014

### **2. What was the project you sought funding for from TFN?**

What are its aims and objectives? Have these changed since receiving TFN funding?

Over the years the Baobab Centre has had twice as many referrals of boys and young men as girls and young women. The girls and young women attending the Baobab Centre have very different ways of expressing and dealing with their experiences than the boys. They tended to be much more wary of groups and much less trusting of others. Last year, we reached a point where some girls and young women, who have been attending individual psychotherapy for a period of time, said that would like to attend a young women's group. Following a pilot for this group that attracted good attendance and positive feedback, we applied to the Funding Network for funding for a young women's group. The aim of the group was to provide a space for mutual support and group psychotherapy. It was intended that the group support these young women to find their voice and develop their ability to reflect and solve problems with others while also building their resilience, coping strategies and self-esteem.

Thanks to the generosity of the members of The Funding Network in September 2014, we were able to work to set up this group and in discussion with this group of young women who felt that they could not commit to attending the group more than once a month, agreed to hold the group on a monthly basis. To date we have held thirteen group sessions in all and have eight regular attendees. The young women attending currently come from five different African countries: Congo, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Uganda. Of this group all have experienced sexual violence in different contexts: some from traffickers or the customers of the traffickers, some from soldiers in the context of organized violence and war, and some were vulnerable young girls alone who needed protection, care and involvement, but who were in fact exploited and abused by those who were meant to care for them.

These experiences have led to five key themes in our group therapeutic work, which are:

- Recognizing and meeting our own needs and caring for ourselves;
- How we develop skills for discernment and discriminating between people who we can truly trust and who will treat us with respect and dignity and those who are likely to use others as objects or part objects;
- Getting to know the different parts of ourselves; both our strengths and vulnerabilities and beginning to accept, process and to integrate these different aspects of who we are.
- Making good relationships, and;
- Facing the Past and Planning for the Future.

The aims and objectives of the group have not changed.

### **3. Were you able to do this work as you described it in your application and presentation?**

Yes. The group is young and new and is building slowly but surely. Though it currently meets once a month, this may change to fortnightly over the course of the next year as some of the young women are keen to do this though it is not yet a big enough core group.

Three of the group members have babies or young children and we provide regular childcare for them during group sessions. The group is therefore a space that is free from the responsibilities of motherhood for 1.5 to two hours each month where they can share feelings and thoughts that they certainly cannot and would not express in front of their young children.

The attendance at the group is good. We generally meet at the Baobab Centre, but we have had one outing to Hampstead Heath which only two of the young women had visited previously. The group members enjoyed being together in a new place. Several said that they did not imagine that such a beautiful place was so accessible. Such comments highlight just how isolated many of the young people are and how restricted and constricted their lives are.

Some young women in our group have also as a result of their increased self confidence from attending the Young Women's group also been able to participate in our music and philosophy groups. Two attended our annual therapeutic retreat and were active in all the group work and one performed in our music concert, while the three others attended the concert and supported the singer. The concert took place after weeks of practice in song writing and in musicianship.

### **The Themes Covered in Our Group Sessions**

During this year of work we have aimed to build the group and to build trust. Friendships between the young women have become established slowly, gently and gradually. The young women brought many issues to the group and during this year we have had opportunities to discuss the following:

- The issue of roles and the expectations on girls and young women in their countries of origin and in the UK. We have begun exploring how these roles are organized during childhood and adolescence and impacted by culture and religion, and their responses to these roles and expectations.
- Internal and external conflicts, between wanting to please the expectations of missing or dead parents versus their desire to find their own paths and to pursue their own interests and careers.
- Attitudes towards females from male peers and their views on these.
- Secrets, fear of betrayal and trust issues including the desire for intimacy and the fear of betrayal.
- The humiliating and abusive aspects of their pasts (human rights abuses, rape, trafficking, being treated as a commodity)
- Struggling with separation and loss, grief, bereavement and mourning for absent, missing and lost parents.
- The issue of motherhood, missing their mothers; in particular in terms of support during pregnancy, labour and the early years of looking after babies and toddlers in a strange culture. Explorations of what it is to be a mother in the absence of any family support and guidance. Explorations of trying to find ways to manage unbearable emotions brought about by a series of overwhelming and traumatic experiences and at the same time coming to develop parenting skills here in the UK in a different culture with different expectations on young mothers and different levels of support.
- Exploring issue of low self esteem, lack of confidence, in the context of the particular pressures of certain aspects of UK society, 'the BLING culture and how to address the void of feelings related to loss and emptiness and abandonment without being excessively materialistic.
- Exploring their future paths, studies, searching for employment etc.
- Exploring prejudice, racism, racism and xenophobia and the resulting loss of opportunities.
- Managing depression and painful menstruation that is a consequence of rape.

- Exploring the kinds of women they want to become.
- Exploring issues of culture and history; what to celebrate and take and keep, what to adapt, what to let go of.....and in fact this is a constant process of reflection and re-evaluation
- Exploring childhood and memory, strength and resilience using the metaphor of finding the roots inside us of a tree that has been uprooted.
- Using the group to find your voice and to practice using the voice in the group. This is a process that develops confidence in speaking and expressing ideas and the capacity to assert yourself after experiences of humiliation and abuse. This small group work is reinforced in other group work that takes place at the Baobab Centre and in our community meetings so young people can in a contained and facilitated environment learn to assert themselves and to disagree with others without fear of violent responses.
- The group nurtured care and appreciation and the development of dignity and of self respect by celebrating birthdays, milestones and achievements e.g. getting asylum, getting a place in college.

#### **4. If you were not able, please explain what happened and why?**

Can you quantify any changes? Eg ...expanding number of employees, number of projects, geographical scope.

The reason that we have not had more outings is that we have had initially to build both the therapeutic alliance between the workers and the group members and trust between the girls. This is a slow and ongoing process. It is important to keep in mind that each group member has experienced gender specific human rights abuses and that they have all been separated from their parents (most have lost both parents) and live in the UK alone. All attend one to one individual psychotherapy sessions. It has taken a long time for this group of young women to feel able to join a group and to share their experiences and thoughts and feelings about their past and their present lives with other young women outside their individual psychotherapy sessions.

The group is young and new and is building slowly but surely.

#### **5. Can you measure, assess or describe the change that happened as a result of this work?**

What actual change did the funded project generate? What proportion of the project/work did TFN fund (eg all/x%)?

#### **The Consequences of This Work in The Baobab Centre Young Women's Group**

In general the changes as a result of work undertaken in this group are that we are seeing in general a more relaxed group of young women, more able to talk openly to each other about the issues that concern them and more able to trust others and take on responsibilities. For example:

A troubled young woman who had a long history of neglect and abuse from her stepmother and a later history of being used as a commodity for domestic servitude and sexual abuse, not only attended the group but also our music workshop and our therapeutic retreat (with another member of the group). She not only developed her abilities to write songs and to perform songs from her culture, she also performed these in front of two hundred people with warmth and sincerity and humour at our Concert in July. On the retreat she participated in a variety of sporting activities with the whole group and clearly enjoyed being with everyone. She was able to go off and find privacy when she needed this. She cooked a whole meal for seventeen people, was generously able to praise the boys who helped her who were less confident cooks from different cultures to hers and was able to speak confidently in a mixed gender group. Even six months ago this could not have happened and she would have avoided contact with boys in a group.

A second young woman who was taught to repress painful emotions as a matter of cultural pride was able to discuss in the Young Women's group the pressures on her of being a single mother and her profound grief at the loss of her parents and siblings, and able to share both her feelings and some of the variety of coping strategies she had developed as a young and first time mother.

A third young woman, who is a former child soldier who experienced during her early and later childhood years a series of overwhelming and violent abuses, was able with the help of the other young women in the group to appreciate just how far she has come in learning how to manage her potentially overwhelming emotions while caring for her child. The group members were able to remind her of her strengths and resiliencies and enable her to shift from presenting herself as an overwhelmed and traumatised victim to a thoughtful and reflective and strong young woman.

**The group works with young women whose internal worlds are fragmented as a result of trauma. The central aim of the group is to enable each young woman to become aware of the various aspects of themselves, their strengths and their vulnerabilities, and to face and process these. Each young woman also participates in individual psychotherapeutic work and the group provides a place to process their experiences in a different way, with others.**

#### **Some Quotes from the Group Participants**

- One young woman in our group complained that she was experiencing unmanageable pressure from her community to study nursing, even though she wanted to become an accountant. In the group the other young women responded to her as follows one saying:

*'It's a racial stereotype for African girls to become nurses and carers.'*

- And another: *'You are a caring person but you are also really good at maths.....You should follow your heart or you will suffer more in the end for making a decision to please others.'*
- Another girl shared her experience: *'I had no good female role models growing up so I had no expectations for myself as a girl.....but now I am at university and studying biological sciences.'* This young woman changed her degree from a specialist degree in biochemistry in a prestigious university to a more general degree.....She remarked:
- *"I only started the first degree to fit in with my parent values about status and make them, and the part of me that is like them, proud, but these days I can see that the torment of that decision was too great for me and the pressure of the course was too much and I feel so relieved to be myself.'*

Other comments include:

- *'A girl's group is serene, calm and more sympathetic'*
- *I had a really lovely day. I never realised that I could just jump on a bus and in twenty minutes reach this lovely park.*

And comments on the group:

- *' This makes me feel loved and appreciated.'*

- *'I am becoming more assertive, just a little bit at a time.'*

### **Some Thoughts and Aims For the Future of the Group:**

- To build on the work we have begun in order to enable the group members to work through and process their muddles, conflicts and worries about past and present difficulties and about regulating and managing their strong thoughts and feelings and memories.
- To further build and consolidate the group and to welcome and integrate new members as and when this is appropriate in order to deepen our discussions and explorations around self esteem and finding our voice and life directions.
- To ensure that all group members develop their self esteem and self confidence in parallel with the stabilising of their emotional and developmental functioning.
- To explore, learn and make a commitment to self care and self nurture.
- To develop skills in discernment and judgement, and to explore the barriers to and possibilities of trust in others and sharing.
- To explore further the key themes of culture and identity.
- To explore further the pressures and the dilemmas of being a young black girl in UK society in the present.

The TFN funding covered the costs of all of the work undertaken.

### **6. As a result of presenting at TFN, did you experience any of the following;**

New volunteers to your organisation - yes, we have one new volunteer who is a childminder who provides childcare for the young mothers who attend the group.

Further funding from institutional funders - yes we have continuation funding for the group

### **7. Could you give us an estimate of how many people have been reached by the TFN funded project/work and by how much?**

8 young women, but this number is due to expand slowly over the coming year. However, impact of the group and the strengthening voice of the young women in the Baobab Centre has reached all aspects of its work, including in its community meetings and activities. The reach therefore has permeated through to our larger community of 59 young people who attend the Baobab Centre regularly.

### **8. Can you tell us any personal stories to highlight the value of funding from TFN?**

See above

### **9. Since presenting at TFN, has your organisation undergone any significant change(s) which our donors would be interested to know about (these changes do not need to be related to the experience of presenting at TFN).**

No, our organisation has not undergone any significant change. However, this year we have faced new challenges as cuts in services become more severe, competition for resources increases and the negative tenor in the political and media debate about asylum heightens. Stories of asylum seekers 'bypassing/transiting through safe countries', and seeking a migration outcome as opposed to refuge have presented asylum seekers as not being entitled to protection, thereby constructing notions of 'illegitimacy' in the public mind. These descriptions belie the fact that none of our young unaccompanied minors had a voice in choosing the destination to which they were sent or trafficked - as children.

These negative perceptions and the racism that many of our young people encounter have a significant impact on our young population, as demonstrated by the following quotes. Such issues are frequently the focus of discussions in community meetings, our psychotherapy groups and activities such as our philosophy workshops:

*'When people tell me to go home it hurts twice because it reminds me of everything I lost and also that I have no home to go back to.'*

*'It is easy to hurt someone with the words 'asylum seeker' or 'benefit thief.' If the people who swore at us were in our shoes they would know how hard it is for us. It is important to know about other cultures and what is going on in the world.'*

One focus of our work this year has been to challenge local authority housing departments in relation to their interpretations of priority need and vulnerability as it relates to our young population. In doing this we have worked closely with housing solicitors building the network around us of experts who are able to support us in working for the best outcomes for our young community members. We prepare specialist clinical reports in response to questions from specialist lawyers who are skilled in challenging local councils.

**10. Do you have any other comments regarding TFN funding?**

The Funding Network grant has been an invaluable to the Baobab Centre, allowing us to develop a core part of our service to the girls and young women we support ensuring that we continue to respond to their changing needs of our young population.

**11. Can you please include any relevant photos or clips that may relate to the project.**

Sadly due to the sensitive nature of our work we are not able to share photographs of this group and the activities and outings undertaken. Apologies.