

## Episode 25 | CFAB's Cultural Family Life Library transcript

Welcome to CoramBAAF Conversations, a podcast series dedicated to adoption, fostering and kinship care. We asked children, social care professionals, and experts by experience to join us to share with us and you, our listeners, their experiences, reflections and knowledge. I hope you enjoy.

Hello, I'm Clare Seth, I'm one of the Kinship Consultants at CoramBAAF and I'm delighted today to be joined by Chloe Hubert from CFAB Children and Families across Borders. So before I ask Chloe to introduce herself, I'm just going to give a little bit of information about CFAB.

So Children and Families across Borders is the only UK charity with an international children's social work team and the only UK member of the International Social Service ISS network. They identify and protect the most vulnerable children who have been separated from their families. In complex and often dangerous situations, due to conflict trafficking, migration, family breakdown or asylum related issues. They work with partners in 130 countries and are experts in social work in an international context, cross-border child protection cases, care proceedings requiring cross-border cooperation and overseas placements. So for the purpose of our chat today, then we will just be. Referring to Cfab rather than the the full title. So Chloe works in the post placement support project, so would you like to introduce yourself?

Thank you, Claire. Yeah, my name is Chloe. And as close that I've worked at Cfab on the post Placement support project and my role there is to support families who are uniting in the United Kingdom. Many have had quite arduous journeys to come here to get here. And my role is to support with holistic casework. So that can be supporting families to access housing, to access benefits, to access education, to access health services, both physical health and mental health. And then once we start working with families because we are set up to work in in a holistic way, we then support with all kinds of other things as well. These can be kind of accessing justice services or other further legal advice depending on what their situation is.

So very fascinating and varied role. By the sound of it, and kind of just gives us a flavour of the work that C fab undertakes, which is really helpful. Thank you. So corn bath has a service called outbound permanence, which is very different, I think from the work that CFAB undertakes in that it advises local authority, our local authority members on overseas placements. So if it helping social workers thinking about the assessments that they might need to undertake. Of a kinship carer who lives overseas. So outbound permanents have country guides with some information about a country, including the

kind of legal processes that people might need to consider, but I understand that C fab's cultural family life library is very different to that, so I wondered if you could tell us a little bit more. About the cultural family life library and what was the motivation behind it?

So the cultural family life library is actually a series of guides for social workers, introducing them to the history and cultures of families in diaspora communities in the UK. Say and see if I've initiated this project because serious case reviews have highlighted that social work professionals sometimes require further support to work with families whose culture or religion is unfamiliar to them, so training can help inform, practise and avoid the risk of. Enabling situations that sometimes put children at risk. Some professionals also feel that they lack the tools or confidence to build on cultural strengths that the families may already have, or to question certain practises.

So.

Which then potentially hinders better outcomes for children and with one in three children born in 2022 to a foreign born mother, it is of growing importance that social workers receive more support for working with diaspora communities. It's also important to emphasise that we are aware that these guys will not provide a complete. With a view, they're designed really as a starting point and there will be many complexities and differences. Which they do not cover.

My understanding is that you've the the guides are. Written for Jamaica and Romania so far.

That's correct, yes.

OK. Thanks, Chloe. That's a really interesting starting point. So you have already touched on it a little bit, but could you just maybe expand a little bit more on why it is important for social workers to know about the history and culture of diaspora families, please?

I think before I answer that question, I'll probably make 2 points and the first point is that each and every family unit is unique and so each and every family who is in diaspora will be unique as well. And the second point is that as well as having a shared or a collected kind. Of history with other. Diaspora families from a particular country or particular ethnicity, each family would also have its own experience of that shared history and will also have its own family history. And the same applies to culture. So a family may share a certain generic culture with other families from their country or their ethnicity, but they may also practise the cultural traditions differently, and they may not even practise. Them at all. And so each family will have its own individual family culture. And and I think when we know something about the history and the culture, both the generic and the individual of the

families that we're working with, that's when we can begin to Co create a rapport of trust with the families at cfab on the post placement support project. I work with my colleague who speaks Arabic, and I speak Farsi. That we are already able to start communicating with families in, in their language. I also think that by wanting to know more about the families history and culture, we're actually showing respectful curiosity. We're showing the family that they. Matter to us. We're showing them that we want to know about them and little things, you know, even if we we don't speak the language of the family that we're working with by showing an interest in their culture, by showing an interest in their language, you know, by attending a home visit and maybe saying hello, how are you in their language and maybe even getting it wrong or, you know, it, younger children will start laughing at us. That kind of builds that rapport and something else as well is that by knowing something of the family's history and culture, we can make sense of what the family is telling us directly and. And we can understand their responses and their behaviours. For example, our family, who's been living in a refugee camp in another country. They may find it very difficult to settle here in their in their new accommodation in the UK, the children may not have been at school, they may have, you know, only experienced sporadic education. And we may have to impress upon the family the importance and the legality of the children registering at school in the UK. So I think what I'm trying to say is that by knowing about the culture and the history of of the. Family we have a context for working with families and we can build on the strength and the resilience that they already have. Many of these families have experienced extended periods of separation from loved ones and friends. They've lived with a lot of uncertainty. Some of them have experienced years of war and food insecurity, so they've already survived this much and this far. And this says something about their spirit and their ability to adapt and to grow. And we'll only ever know about that if we actually take time, not only to learn about their history and their culture, but also to take time to engage with them as people, as India. Rules. And if we do that, then we can work to improve outcomes for children.

That's.

Just so interesting to hear you describe it in that way and to put the context of the experiences of the family families that you work with. So thank you. And are there particular challenges that social workers might face when working with families from different cultures?

Yes.

Yeah. I mean, I think there are lots of challenges. I think one of the biggest ones is a lack of cultural literacy. To me, this looks like not knowing what things mean, not understanding the context, looking at a situation from a western point of view. And therefore imposing our

own values, our own views and biases on a situation and one of the obvious points is the language barrier, which may or may not exist. You know, some of our families come from English speaking countries or speak English well. So for example, that's a, you know, to get a, let's say, for example, the social worker doesn't speak Amharic. That's an easily. Solved problem. We get an interpreter but the greater challenge I think however is actually understanding what is being said. What is the family trying to share indirectly and directly to us, and that's if we aim to work from a person focused and family centred approach. And this means giving the family time and space to land, to adjust to life in the UK and to express themselves. And I'll just give you a little kind of a little story, a little anecdote about this idea of imposing our own ideas and values on people I was born to working with a family originally from Somalia.

And the young person told me a story about what something that happened to him and it and it stayed with me and I and I referred to it. Austin actually. And he described how one day he was in a meeting with his social worker and his mother. And the social worker was, you know, telling him off, reprimanding him, really. And then she said, you know, look at me when I'm talking to you. And as he was looking at the social worker behind him or next time his mother was telling him in Somalia, you know, to lower his gaze and not to have direct eye contact. With the social worker. Because it was a sign of disrespect for a young person to be looking into the eyes of someone who is in a position of authority and who is older than you, and this young person, and we need talks about that. He laughs about it. But I think it's it's a very good example of. This young person being caught between the expectations of his mother, who wanted him to show respect to the social worker and the social worker, you know, imposing her own values on him. Another thing that I would say as well is that when we're looking at challenges faced by social workers is I could refer you. What's the article on our? On our website, actually, who is responsible for this child and this shows two important trends. There are two trends that can be observed from this article and that is that children from black ethnic groups are overrepresented in care, and that nearly 1/3 of social workers have reported witnessing racism. Directed towards families or service users. By colleagues or by managers, and this is in a recent survey. So my question is, is there a correlation between black children being overrepresented in care and there, you know, being almost 1/3 of social workers reporting racism being directed towards families or service users by colleagues and by managers. And let's see if I were also concerned that there isn't enough. Guidance or good practise available to social workers, and this was emphasised in our recent Freedom of Information request in, in which we discovered that local authorities are recording the citizenship and nationalities of children in care interchangeably. And this can have a huge impact on their immigration status, particularly for children who are in care and who don't have British

citizenship or whose immigration situation or status is insecure. Our research also revealed how some local authorities are exploring overseas placements for children, and some aren't. It's very, it seems to be quite haphazard. So in order to achieve a family first approach as promoted by the Department for Education and Social work, England social workers in all local authorities need to consider a child's culture background and wider family connections.

So I think that leads us beautifully on to the next question really is just thinking, is there anything? More specific that you can say about how cultural training can help social workers improve outcomes for children, because that's obviously the focus, isn't it? Of all of the workers considering whether there are overseas family members who could look after children or those those needs that children have, can you talk a? Little bit more about that undergoing.

Training can help social workers improve outcomes for children, but also we would advocate, and this is something that we do a lot on the post placement support project is spending time with the families that we work with as well. It means that as practitioners, we're starting to understand the context in which a family is living and operating, both by receiving training and also by actually spending time with those families. It means that we're not imposing our own values and assumptions and we can begin to understand how other families work and function. And so we're working with the families as opposed to working against them. Receiving training and showing that natural curiosity also means that we can intervene earlier when we know that children are at risk of harm, and it's by understanding that cultural context and working holistically that we can improve outcomes for children. I was speaking with one of my colleagues actually, and we were talking about how storytelling. Is an is an important part of life story work within social work, for example, and trauma informed practise also highlights the importance of storytelling for families and the way we work at cfab when we work with. Families is through sharing a meal or a cup of coffee. Give space and time to listen to the stories and provides time for the social worker to use their active listening skills. And as we listen to family stories, we are validating and helping the family to construct and to make sense of their experiences. This is 1 practise that we've lost a lot in our Western. Past based culture, but it's part of the everyday life in Middle Eastern.

And this is how knowledge is shared. This is how people make sense of the world. This is even how children are provided with boundaries and how disagreements are resolved. So by listening to the stories and the narratives that the families are telling us, we can work to improve the outcomes for children. So as well as training, spending time with the families,

but also by listening. To what the families are telling us, and we can work to ensure that children are kept safe.

So what you're describing is international, internationally informed and culturally sensitive relationship based social work and practise, isn't it? So having that understanding of the family and really appreciating their culture and what's important to them through spending that time talking and listening to them. So I think that's really key that I think it's. Something that isn't necessarily covered in social work training. So I can really see the benefits of additional training for social workers.

The outbound permanent service is a specialist advised service for local authorities that are core and bath members and who are looking to place children in care with kinship carers living overseas, and it's the only one offering advice on all legal orders, including adoption, visit [corambaaf.org.uk](http://corambaaf.org.uk) or. E-mail [outbound@CoramBAAF.org.uk](mailto:outbound@CoramBAAF.org.uk) for more advice or information. Thank you.

Have you got any examples about how or can just talk a little bit about how might a lack of understanding of specific cultural practises potentially put children at risk?

Yeah. So I think rather than talking about specific cultural practises, I think it's more helpful to talk about harmful practises, harmful practises can happen in any cult. To so I would advocate that we need to move away from the idea that harmful practises such as female genital mutilation or forced marriage or domestic abuse are cultural practises, because I think if we label them as cultural, we're labelling cultures as good or as bad, and the labelling of a culture and some of its practises. Bad may contribute to an increase in the blatant racism. Which is already already evident, as we have seen with almost 1/3 of social workers reporting racism from their colleagues and managers towards service users and families, and referring to harmful practises as cultural means that as a practitioners we may also be too fearful to deal with instances of potential abuse or harm because they are feared as. Cultural practises and we don't want to appear to be culturally insensitive and my Third Point about this as well is that we risk offending people who belong to certain cultures and who do not engage in harmful practises such as FGM or domestic abuse or forced marriage. To give an example of that, just to kind of put it in some kind of context, I mean it may or may not surprise you to know that domestic abuse only became a criminal act in the UK, 1976 under the domestic violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act. Obviously, we've come a lot further since then, but it even though. Domestic abuse is a criminal act. It still goes on in the UK, across all backgrounds, across all socioeconomic groups and religious affiliations. I don't think we would call domestic abuse in the UK a cultural practise, so I'm using this example to show you that harm and abuse can happen in any culture and in any country, and I think we should see domestic abuse, female genital

mutilation, forced marriage as practises that are harmful and as methods of control and as. And as abuses of power, just as is domestic abuse. And to give you another example of this. In a previous. Role I before I worked at Cfab, I was facilitating a workshop on forced marriage at a school and one of the teachers there related how a 16 year old student had approached him to say that she was scared to go on holiday that summer because she thought that her parents. Maybe trying to force her into marriage and the teacher said that he had not known what to do and had said in the end he did nothing because for him it was a cultural matter. And herein lies the danger. Because if we. Label something as a cultural practise, then we may fear to talk about it and even to take action about it. And this girl never came back from her holiday, and that was, you know, I was quite shocked. And the teacher himself was was shocked but hadn't known what to do or where to go for help. So by talking about harmful practises generically, we also recognise that there is a foundation of human rights that applies to all of us, regardless of our culture. Or which part of the world we we may come from. So this means that no 16 year old girl, regardless of her culture, should be forced into marriage. And so I think by operating from that basis, it is easier to have a conversation with families about harmful practise, such as forced marriage rather than thinking we are offending someones cultural practise. So I would say that it is important for social workers to receive training in harmful practises such as. Forced marriage, faith-based abuse, or FGM? Just as they receive training in child abuse, it should be standard training so that science can be picked up quickly and children are not left in situations where their health and lives are at risk. Furthermore, practitioners need to listen to children and young people, so if a child or a young person informs us that their family members have made threats to kill them because they're refusing to marry the person that they. That has been chosen for them or they are bringing dishonour on their family or their families and members are telling them that they're possessed by an evil spirit. Then then this needs to be taken seriously and no one should ever be told to return back home when threats have been made against them. I would say again, you know that these threats must be taken seriously and practitioners need to be aware of the signs and to have the confidence and the support to challenge to self reflect and to act and to intervene. And I think I would probably just refer to the case of Victor, Victoria, Columbia, who was killed by her aunt and her aunt partner in 2000. Where there was speculation that race may have played a part in the lack of intervention. But as Jack Jackie Smith, who was home secretary from 2007, said, there are no cultures that condone child abuse, and I think it's really important, you know, that we remember this and that we've come away from believing that, you know, these harmful practises are cultural. And I'd also like to mention the case of Shafilea Ahmed. Who was aged 17 when she was murdered by her parents in a so-called on a killing in 2003 because she brought shame in inverted commas on her family. And also the case of Banaz Mahmood, who was killed after Sheffield Ahmad

in 2006 and although she was 20 when she was killed by relatives, she had been forced into a marriage at the age of 17 and when she approached the police for support and protection shortly before her death, and she even gave them a list of the men who were going to kill her. The police did not take her request for help seriously, calling her manipulative and melodramatic. So at the same time, it's very important that a balance is called for, but at the same time that training I think is so important for social workers so that they are able to pick up on the warning signs and then to intervene in cases when children are at risk of harm, yeah.

And you've given really powerful examples there. Thank you. And just really highlighting the fact that it's not about labelling certain cultures as practising in those harmful practices, but it is. It's a wider, it's a much wider issue and it comes down to, doesn't it? Respectful curiosity and being having the confidence and like you say, the relationship with the families to ask the questions that you need to be able to ask without fear of offending somebody's cultural. And their practices, because actually the safety is the the child is paramount. UM, thank you. So are there any examples you can give of strengths from different cultures that social workers can use?

Yeah, some of the families that we work with come from cultures where there is a very high value on caring for the extended family and the group culture, including a corporate kind of parenting. So and an extended family culture. And and this is a strength because these provides resilience for refugee families in the context of war and separation and bereavement, allowing the family to adapt to the most traumatic of circumstances. And at Sisab, we're currently working with a number of families who are caring for a sibling, a niece or a nephew who has been orphaned as a result of war and the adaptability of the family has meant that these children continue to be cared for within the family context, which is promoting their identity and culture. Needs and the family have powerfully advocated for them successfully to come to the UK, to continue to be cared in the context of the extended family and this extended family model is providing a support system to the children and young people throughout their whole life. We're also working with children with families rather where children are being looked after by non biological caregivers. So again, as a result of war, children were looked after by friends or distant relatives in the country of origin, and sometimes on arrival in the UK. The validity of these relationships are questioned without the desire of the young person being taken into account, and there have been cases when young children are young people. Sorry, not children so much, but young. People around the ages of 14-16 have been taken into care, you know, and wanting to stay with people who for them are, you know, parents. Or aunties or uncles, although they may have no biological link with them, but for them they are their parents.



And I think one last thing I'd like to say as well on when we're talking about strengths, when we work, that's the fab with our families on the post placement support projects, we do home visits and so we recognise that when we enter the homes of our families. We're entering as guests and it will take our shoes off. We'll dress. But we're also very aware of the importance of hospitality and time and space in many cultures. Us and we use this to establish a rapport with families, so we will take time during the visit to share food if it's offered to drink coffee or tea together to receive this hospitality and this can help families to feel empowered that they're not just service users, but that we we're working together to establish trust. And this changes the power dynamic and the families and know that we are working together to improve the family circumstances and to improve their outcomes. And it's often during these times that they're often opportunities to hear the stories and we use this time to listen to family. It's.

And by listening to families, you can have a much greater understanding of their needs and the support that they require and the needs of the children that you're helping to protect. So as we said right at the start of our chat, see fab works with 130 different countries and at the moment there. There are two cultural family life library guides and that have been produced for Jamaica and Romania. Are there plans in the pipeline for any further guides?

There are indeed, so Nigeria and Pakistan guys should be released in the autumn. We're currently in the drafting process. And if anyone from the communities or anybody would like to contribute to these guys and we would really love to hear from you and in addition, we are also hoping to start work on a guide on Poland. So that would be after Pakistan and Nigeria, it will be. Poland.

Excellent. Thank you so much, Chloe, for your reflections and insight today. It's been really fascinating to hear you talking about the work that you undertake and we very much look forward to reading the new guides when they come out in the. Autumn. Thank you.

Thank you for having me. Thank you very. Much.

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