

Interview by Dominic Bascombe, cR Editor, Children's Legal Centre

Protecting African children:

Debbie Ariyo,
chief executive of AFRUCA
(Africans Unite Against Child Abuse)

Over the past few years, the African community in Britain has repeatedly had to rebut accusations of practices of witchcraft. Two cases of abuse based on claims of witchcraft- the killing of Victoria Climbié in 2000 and Child B in 2005- led to fevered speculation in the media that there were hundreds of cases of such abuse in Britain's African community.

Those claims were eventually proved to be unfounded, but the African community has remained stigmatised as one where child trafficking and abuse of 'child witches' is rife.

This is a perception that Debbie Ariyo, chief executive of AFRUCA (Africans Unite Against Child Abuse) is keen to change. Debbie, a board member of the newly created Independent Safeguarding Authority, pointed out that it is important that any such abuse is dealt with, but labelling the African community as abusers was simply wrong.

"This is not just an African problem. Some people think that we are trying to stigmatise the community when we talk about this, but we have had many people from other communities saying that the

same things are happening there," she explained.



"There is a spotlight on the African community; both negative and positive. Because of that, we can see all the spots and a lot is being done by different parties to address that. So in a way, we're in a better position than other communities because we are able to identify our problems and deal with them. In

other communities, for the most part, if nothing is being said, nothing can be done."

Raising concerns about cases of witchcraft also has certain difficulties.

"It's the most difficult element of our work because there are many people who think that we are trying to attack churches" said Debbie.

"What we say is that places of worship must be sanctuaries for children. This is not about attacking people's belief. You can believe whatever you want, but in terms of how that impacts on children, we need to be very careful about what we do. So if you believe in witchcraft, there is nothing wrong with that, but if you are transferring that into a negative practice on children, there is a problem."

AFRUCA began as an online advocacy program devoted to improving the welfare of young African children facing abuse when they were brought to the UK.

Debbie explained: "We started in May 2001, after issues like the death of Victoria Climbié, Damiliola Taylor and others. These were all cases of newly arrived young people in the UK, coming from different countries, and encountering so many issues: either being bullied at home or school, or harmed and abused at home by carers, or being killed. I was in the civil service then and the issue for me was: 'how do we advocate as a community for the welfare of our children? How do we begin to resolve these issues that lead to all these young people being bullied and killed?'"

An online awareness raising campaign quickly mushroomed into something bigger:

"Peoples' reaction to the campaign was that this was such a serious issue, more needed to be done. So we decided to hold a conference in January 2002. Many issues came out from that around providing support for parents in understanding child protection so that they can be aware of what the law says; support for young people coming to the UK; issues around the trafficking of children; and issues around providing support for community groups generally working with children and families."

Today, AFRUCA is one of the few charities providing support to African children on a national level. Whilst a plethora of organisations exist to provide certain aspects of specialist support, few concentrate on African or Black and Minority Ethnic children on a national scale.

"There are many Black-led charities working at a local level, but nationally, there is probably only AFRUCA and the Victoria Climbié Foundation, so there is a huge gap in terms of addressing issues especially in the black community. There is only so much that two organisations can do. For example, there are issues around child sexual abuse which is coming to the fore a lot, but nobody is talking about it in our community. There is trafficking of children from other parts of the world, but nobody is talking about that."

As the organisation grew, they quickly became aware that there was a need to focus on the increasing prevalence of children being trafficked into the UK.

AFRUCA has hosted training events and conferences in Lagos, Nigeria

and Dublin, Ireland, to help provide support and awareness to young people who are trying to escape or have already escaped from being trafficked.

The Irish Republic was chosen as a prime site for an AFRUCA awareness raising event given that many African children brought into the UK do so via other European countries. Another awareness raising program in Lagos helped the organisation explain to parents and other stakeholders that sending their children abroad to be looked after by strangers was not necessarily safe. We termed that event: *Denouncing the Better Life Syndrome to highlight the seemingly ease at which some parents are willing to give their children away to total strangers in the search for an elusive "better life"*.

"One of the difficulties we had was that it was difficult for people to understand how working in a home in the UK could be as terrible as being trafficked for sexual exploitation," Debbie explained. "So we try to highlight the consequences of domestic servitude for young people: the psychological, emotional, and physical abuses involved and potentially sexual abuse. When they come out of that situation- for whatever reason, whether they have been chased out of the house or if they run away- they don't know who they are because they have no identity and that creates another set of problems for them."

Recent funding from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) will also help the charity establish a regional office in the North of England. Based in Manchester, the office will help to expand the scope of their work and

ensure that they can reach out to many more African children and families who are in need.

Internationally, AFRUCA works in partnership with an organisation in Ghana to support street children who, either because of poverty or for other reasons, have been thrown out of their homes and on to the streets. The project enables them to get off the streets and into education. For those who have parents, they are provided with funds to set up a small business to support their families. This pre-emptive action could make a long term difference, said Debbie. "A lot of those young people we are supporting are prone to being trafficked. It's possible that we will have helped to safeguard a lot of young people that could be trafficked to any part of the world including the UK."

This international aspect to AFRUCA places them in a unique position to address the problem of child trafficking and international abuse. Debbie explained: "We are trying to get the funding to enable us have a presence in Africa. There are many charities working with children across Africa, but if we had a presence anywhere there, we would probably be the only known African-led charity working at both ends of the spectrum to deal with child abuse and safeguarding issues. For example, if we are working on trafficking issues in Nigeria, it would help us to address the issues that make it easy for children from there to be trafficked to the UK. If they manage to get to the UK, we would be able to help them at this end. Additionally, we have experience and expertise in dealing with the issues here, and that is something that we can transport or transfer over there in Africa."

It's easy to believe that there simply isn't a legal framework or government policy to address child abuse in Africa, but that is not the case.

"Many African countries have their own Children's Act," explained Debbie.

"It's there and many of the things that are covered here [in the UK] are covered in their own laws. The problem is that they are not enforced in any way or form. They are just on paper. Places like Ghana, Nigeria, and Kenya have very good policy and regulatory documents but there is no implementation. For example: there is a law against female genital mutilation, against trafficking children, against having child domestic servants in Nigeria but nobody has ever been convicted of any of those. Almost all middle class households in Nigeria have domestic servants!"

She continued: "It's changing peoples' mindsets in terms of how they think about children. The issue of poverty come into play. When we held our Conference in Nigeria in 2003, we were telling parents: be careful to not just give your child to anybody. The replied was: 'ok for you to talk, we are the ones here suffering. If we send this child to London to work as a domestic servant, she is going to earn some money and we can use that to support the rest of the family'.

So there is the perception of children being a key contributor to the household economy. The perception of children there is not the same as we have here.

A girl of 10 years, who is menstruating, is old enough to be married off in some cultures in Africa. The idea that that girl child will not be capable of domestic work doesn't make sense to people. There

are many cultural issues that we have to be aware of in our work with children here in the UK."

However Debbie is adamant that cultural issues cannot justify the abuse of children.

She said: "There are some practices that are so damaging that you need to address them quite strongly. Issues such as child marriages are extremely damaging to children, not only in terms of what they go through as young "wives", but the impact on their bodies from giving birth at ages 12 or 13.

Having a baby can be very damaging at that age. It destroys the internal organs, can lead to the development of fistulas, vaginal leaking and so on. By the age of 15, they can be divorced by their husbands and nobody will ever touch them again – and they remain like that permanently."

She continued: "The use of children as servants is equally damaging. You see young children destroyed when they are denied the opportunity to go to school. There are also issues around Female Genital Mutilation and the negative impact on children. These are all key practices that are so destructive to childhood that you cannot help but say that they are issues that need to be thoroughly combated, no matter the culture."