

After Her Own Experience in Foster Care, Maleeka Jihad Works to Keep Families Intact

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By [Chantel Ross](#)



Maleeka Jihad, who goes by MJ, is the founder of MJ Consulting. Photo by Tiffany Phillips.

Maleeka Jihad, who goes by MJ, was just 10 years old when she and her siblings were removed from their Oklahoma home. As her only active parent at the time, her father had been forced to leave MJ and her four siblings home alone while he worked a graveyard shift as a hospital janitor. MJ was the oldest child, and she was in charge of the little ones until her father came home in the early morning hours.

But a call to the child welfare office dismantled her family, she said.

MJ describes the next 15 months in foster care as another trauma, something she as an adult she would come to see as the criminalization of poverty. Determined to counter that destructive narrative, she received her master's degree from Tulane University Graduate School of Social Work. After moving to Colorado, she worked first with the nonprofit Savio House in Denver — which provides in-home therapeutic treatment to children to keep struggling families intact — and later as a clinical consultant to the Rocky Mountain Children's Law Center in Colorado.

In 2017, MJ, now 33, went into private practice, drawing on her personal and professional experience to create the [MJ Consulting](#) firm. Her goal is “to be doing whatever it takes to have these children remain within their birth family.”

In her practice, MJ works with birth parents, relatives and caregivers, conducting home-study evaluations, appraisals of whether courts have provided “reasonable efforts” to allow a parent to reunify with a child in foster care, and assessments of parent-child interactions. Through education, advocacy, partnerships and direct services she also instructs professionals and the public on the negative impacts of the child welfare system.

MJ is currently working on her Ph.D. in leadership development and social justice at Fielding Graduate University in Santa Barbara, California.

This conversation has been condensed and edited for clarity and length.

Your mission statement describes its aim of “dismantling culturally incompetent practices and mitigating such practices’ impact on the community by challenging sources of oppression and inequality in the child welfare system.” Tell me more of how you go about doing this?

Foster parents don’t know what kind of child is going to come into their home. Sometimes they’ll just say, these are the ages that we want, and then everything else is open. Well, because of that, there is not a lot of conversation around the child’s ethnicity. So, for instance, our home study goes a little further and says, how will you keep that child within their culture? If they are Latino boys, how are you going to keep them within that Latino culture? What does that look like for you? How are you going to implement that?

We go over any case that may need to be looked over a couple more times through fresh eyes and an anti-racism lens.

How would you define “social and cultural responsibility” within the child welfare system?

Specifically, we are looking at how you integrate the birth family into the child’s case. So often, the birth family is isolated because they’re judged for their mental health issues or substance abuse issues. How are you being respectful, responsible and integrating the birth family into and continuing to build that attachment?

There are many biases where professionals don’t want them to have the opportunity to be a parent, instead of helping that parent heal or receive appropriate treatment. It’s more of a punishment tool. So we evaluate that, and we look at that and call that out.

“Cultural competency” has become somewhat of a buzzword. How would you define cultural competency, and what specifically is needed in the child welfare field?

We don’t subscribe to that language. We use “cultural respect” because the respect piece is understanding the values and beliefs of a population, in order to respond and meet their needs. That is much more respectful, that is much more open to having a conversation,

rather than dictation. We see (cultural) competence as more of a dictation, a check mark, like: 'We've done this, done.'

When we're talking about respect, we're talking about how do we value their differences, how do we value their beliefs that are different from ours, and how do we respond — according to their value system — these diverse clients or these diverse communities that we work with? The child welfare system is completely missing that. They are missing that not only on a level of different ethnicities and cultures, but they're missing that on the piece of classism. There's a lot of classism involved.

Tell me more about your concept of “conflict-free adoption?” What does that look like?

When I think of conflict-free children, conflict-free adoption, I believe these are adoptions where the parents will be able to say, I cannot raise these children. Please take care of them. So conflict-free children are children that are not fought over, that you did not have to destroy one family to complete yours. Something that a lot of adoptive families say is that “our family is now complete.” But, what did you destroy? What family did you make incomplete to complete yours?

How would you like the child welfare system to go about achieving a “conflict-free” adoption?

I want more ethical adoption, and that would look a lot different: The foster home has a relationship with the birth parents, and they continue that relationship that is fostered in this environment of trust. Right now, the way that a lot of cases that I've been on, the foster parents and the birth parents are kept entirely separate.

In a perfect world, birth parents would be able to get the services and treatment that they needed to be well enough to care for their children, and that foster parent is forever in their life. That foster parent is not someone that the birth family had to compete with to get their children back. They were never the enemy. They were always supportive and loved the children. So then, the children have an extended community. They have an extension of the communities that the birth parents chose for them. That would be the perfect world.

How do you feel the foster care agencies that you've worked with have treated birth families? What could be done to improve this treatment?

I feel uncomfortable with the idea of adoption agencies working with the Department of Human Services. Their goal is to adopt. They will say that “we want the child that is, you know, the highest probability of being able to adopt.” When that is on the back burner, then that changes the trajectory of the case. When there is a family that people deem healthier, better, more financially stable, and whatever, the case's trajectory is like, well, we don't have to worry about parents right now because we have a family for this child.

I'm in a lot of cases where maybe the birth parents do not have it together. They don't have a home, and they don't have support, whatever. But an auntie or a grandparent is still able to get overlooked. Even if they're a healthy home, even if they can provide to meet the child's needs, they still get overlooked for something better, and the better is usually white, with more money.

About the Author

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Chantel Ross is an Emma Bowen Fellow and summer reporting intern for The Imprint. She is a recent graduate from the University of Washington, where she studied Journalism and Public Interest.

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