

# Interview with Lisa Dando, Rokaiya Khan and Abbi Ayers

## The Value of Women's Centres

*Lisa Dando is the Director of Brighton Women's Centre (BWC).<sup>1</sup> Rokaiya Khan is the Chief Executive Officer of Together Women (TW).<sup>2,3</sup> Abbi Ayers is the Strategic Development Director of the National Women's Justice Coalition (NWJC).<sup>4</sup> They were interviewed by Jackie Lowthian, Clinks Women's Network Coordinator who has worked in the voluntary sector for over 30 years influencing change in the way that the criminal justice system responds to women and girls.*

This interview took place on 15 July 2024, soon after the election of the new British government.

**JL: In the context of the newly elected government, what will be the impact for women you work with, if the changes in the Labour Manifesto are fully implemented?**

RK: The new government has got the potential to significantly improve the lives of the women and girls we support, but I would emphasise the word potential. The introduction of pre-release plans and purposeful activity in prisons could ensure better prepared reintegration for women back into the community. I also think we've got some huge opportunities around prisons and local employers and employment opportunities, given the background of the prisons and probation minister Lord Timpson. I think voluntary sector women's organisations, like TW, are incredibly well-placed to support that. I also think that the intention to eradicate violence against women and girls could significantly strengthen and address some of the root causes that lead women into the criminal justice system (CJS). Overall, it's really positive and the messaging aligns so much more to our women's centres' vision mission and purpose. I also see some risks. One of the root causes for many of the women landing in the CJS is being victims of violence and not having access to safe, secure accommodation. We've

just looked at our data and identified where women have failed and gone back through that revolving door — it's as a result of no access to proper safe, secure housing. I know there's a plan to build more properties and develop housing but I'm not sure how that relates to access for the women we support. I think that addressing that element of it is critical, which could then really help to address some of the key ambitions in their manifesto.

**LD:** I really like the use of Rokaiya's word 'potential' - I think it's a good way of describing the current situation that we're in. I definitely feel much more hopeful, I feel really positive about the appointment of James Timpson and hope this leads to some radical change to the system that we've long been campaigning and advocating for. Again, I think it sounds positive in terms of what's being said around sentencing reforms and ensuring that there are really robust pre-release plans in place for when women leave prison. I'm slightly concerned that the focus still seems to be coming from a kind of male-centric position in the sense that it talks a lot about employers and preparing for when people come out of prison based on a pathway into employment, which is something that James Timpson stands for and I think it's worked fantastically and I really applaud his company for the work they have done in that space but I wonder what it means for those women that we know to be living

- 
1. Brighton Women's Centre has supported women in Sussex for 50 years, based in Brighton City Centre, supporting women who have faced abuse, trauma, poverty, homelessness, or are in contact with the criminal justice system. They provide services across Sussex from Crawley, to Worthing, Eastbourne, Hastings, and some parts of Kent.
  2. Together Women supports women and girls across the North of England. TW was established in December 2006, funded by the Ministry of Justice to develop a gender-specific approach to women in the criminal justice system and those at risk of conviction. TW became an independent charity in 2009 and currently operates women's centres in Leeds, Bradford, Hull, Sheffield and HMP New Hall, with operating hubs in Halifax, Huddersfield and Wakefield.
  3. BWC and TW are led by women, for women, offering trauma informed, holistic support to help break cycles of abuse and help women to move out of the criminal justice system.
  4. National Women's Justice Coalition (NWJC) is an alliance of 26 women's organisations, including BWC and TW, from across England and Wales that share a collective mission to drive systemic change to reduce the stigmatisation of women and girls in contact with the criminal justice system and improve outcomes for them.

with a lot of multiple disadvantages and for whom employment isn't necessarily the first thing on their agenda. And it's the same I think in terms of the talk around purposeful activity in prisons. I'd really like to see a very clear women-specific pathway in these policy approaches, really focusing on whether women need to be in prison in the first instance and what we can do to bolster community sentences, keeping women in their communities at home with their children.

We haven't heard anything yet about what this new government is going to be doing in terms of a Female Offender Strategy, or I hope it will be called a Women and the criminal justice system strategy, so I'm keen to hear what they might say in that space. And also, I think what is really important is accommodation and all the points that Rokaiya has made, about accommodation which is by far the biggest issue that we need to get right for women. We really struggle to find that safe secure accommodation and that is the highest priority for when women leave prison that we need to get right. We have just produced a report ourselves which we're about to launch in partnership with Commonweal Housing which talks about what a safe and secure and trauma-informed accommodation provision could look like which is interesting in the sense that it is quite different from what we've seen elsewhere. I hope that the government will take account of some of these more recent consultations and collaborations to really plan for what would be a much more positive experience for women who get themselves caught up in the system.

**AA:** It would be really nice to see a honing in now on women's experience of the CJS, specifically because although the broad aims are clearly quite welcomed and aligned to the thinking within the sector, there is no clear route outlined for addressing women's experiences when we are talking about improving outcomes for people leaving prison. We recognise that there are distinctly different ways to support men and women impacted by the CJS so I feel there needs to be a particular focus on that. I feel there is a will to look at this problem in much more of a reflective capacity given that we are seeing the appointment of people who understand the problems, the root causes of offending, demonstrating commitment to supporting people.

In terms of the manifesto in its entirety, prior to the government being formed, it looked promising. The focus on victims of violence could impact the women's

sector if there is more adequate resourcing of services and better understanding of how women's experience of violence intersects with their experience of the CJS. I also thought it was interesting there was a real commitment from Labour to focus on young people. The Young Futures programme, that they talked about, developing community hubs that provide intervention and support for people, but specifically for young girls who otherwise might be swept into the criminal justice system. So, it will be interesting to see how the implementation of that type of thinking and those kinds of programmes could benefit partners of ours who are working specifically with young women through early intervention and diversion programmes.

**JL: Is there enough support in the community for women, if early release measures were applied more rigorously to them, to free up space in the women's estate?**

**LD:** I don't know whether what we've currently got in terms of pre-release support is exactly what we need and there are concerns about the resource that's available within probation and within community services. I think there needs to be something more about stopping the flow of women going into prison at this point and using the capacity problems with our prison estate as a rationale for stopping that flow of women

into the system.

**RK:** Huge numbers of women who we know shouldn't be in prison in the first place, all of the stuff we know prison does to women, and I absolutely feel it could address some of the key challenges in prisons right now. My fear is that the bigger focus, because they want big impact, will be in the male prisons, releasing a lot of men but applying it to women could be a quick win and produce greater outcomes. Particularly, since there is a real acceptance that a lot of women shouldn't be in custody. We've got to be clear about what provision looks like in the community if it's properly resourced. Then it could potentially have huge benefits.

**JL: This question is for Rokaiya and Lisa. What work are you involved in to support women and girls.**

**LD:** I've been thinking about a phrase that someone used to describe it recently— 'Everyday Magic' I think that really resonates for me because it's

Consultations and collaborations to really plan for what would be a much more positive experience for women who get themselves caught up in the system.

quite hard to make it tangible what that magic is that happens between that woman and her support worker. And even using that phrase, 'support worker' doesn't feel sufficient in this kind of work. Because it is so much about seeing women as human beings and the experts of their own experience and listening to what's going on in their lives and trying to walk alongside them to make sense of that and navigate the systems and the structures, the multiple services, and expectations that Community Orders put on them to be at certain places at certain times and behave in certain ways. And it is so incredibly bespoke because every woman's needs are so different to the next woman's, so we can't have one size fits all. It's about being able to provide a diversity of different kinds of support, whether that's about mental health support, or childcare provision or a foodbank so a family can eat that week, or a referral into statutory services — homelessness services, health services, child protection, being with a woman at a child protection case conference — it is so different depending on what is going on for the woman.

Unless we can tackle those interlinked and complex issues that have forced a woman into the CJS then we are never going to be able to help her to stay away from it and get her life back on track. Why would women choose to put themselves into such a dysfunctional system as the CJS, if they could live their lives differently, which would enable them to not find themselves in that place. To answer your question, it is a complex picture and the work that the staff do here in building trust with women to support them in a bespoke way, really works. It is a magical mixture that not even I understand how it works, but we know from the data and the evaluations we do that it does produce the outcomes that we want to see.

**RK:** It's incredibly difficult to articulate. I am going to try and pick out some of the things that women say about what women's centres are and what they mean to them. If there were two words, I would want to use it would be trust and choice. They are incredibly powerful, and we try and keep that as our central focus for women. And that's what women tell us, that they feel heard and valued is incredibly important, and that's what helps form that all important relationship. I think that's what we all try and create. We've had lots of discussions about the structure of some of the contracts that we deliver, and we know that on paper, none of them really work for women. So, I think we as Women's

Centres and our staff are so brilliant at taking the contract on paper but delivering it in a way that is incredibly meaningful, outcome focused, choice-led and trust-based for women. And that is what really helps to create engagement. We see that through women who want to continue to engage in our support long after orders and enforcement has finished. One of the things that I think is really important is the therapeutic support. We have programmes that probation say you must deliver, and focus on root causes of offending/re-offending. We try to provide a balance of therapeutic support groups, practical sessions, conversations and counselling. Some of them might be breakfast clubs that the women run, Knit and natter groups, and it's that holistic thing, it's a bit of everything. I don't think I've done it justice but just trying to explain, the magic that Lisa describes. I love that word, it's magic.

It is a magical mixture that not even I understand ... but ... it does produce the outcomes that we want to see.

**JL:** How do you contribute to the broader changes that we all want to see in terms of social justice and social policy, and have you got evidence to support this?

**RK:** I don't think we are brilliant at evidencing impact, and we can do a lot better. I think what we try to focus on is the voices of women and what they tell us about the difference that the support has made. We've seen a big difference over the last 18 months as we've been able to recruit data analysts and senior data people who are going to help us to really extract the voices of the women. What we hear all the time from women is:

*'You've really improved my mental health'*

How do you evidence that? It's so important. Women will 'say':

*'I've really improved my confidence and self-esteem, I never used to get up in the morning but now I can take my kids to school because of the support I've had you've helped me to do that.'*

So how do you really do that unless it's through story telling? The journey and the stories of women are what we try and promote and share. In terms of

impacting on social justice, we do so much but we are not great at evidencing that. There is a piece of work happening through the Effective Women's Centres partnership with a collective of women's organisations, working with an organisation called Trusting Path, that are helping us to pick out and showcase all of that added social justice value of the work that we do every day. I think that we can capture numbers until we're blue in the face but what do they really tell us? We feed-in to the Justice Data Lab with a focus on reducing reoffending but the wider impact of our work, in terms of all that practical support and healthcare, all the stuff we know we impact day in day out, all of that is done through the stories of women's journeys.

**LD:** I don't think I agree that it's about us not doing it very well, or not being so good at it. I think it's more about what matters to the women in terms of how we evaluate success or outcomes. It feels like we are a round peg being squeezed into a square hole. That the way we work as a women's centre and the way that we put women's voices at the centre and wrap services around them, means that we can't possibly be subject to the same kind of scientific sort of historically agreed methodologies for demonstrating success. I think that's why we ended up doing the work that we did with Trust Impact, with yourselves Rokaiya and Anawim – Birmingham's Centre for Women, why we ended up with a theory of change (ToC) that looks so different from what we'd had in the past. Where we decided our outcomes needed to be as defined by the women — 'heard, held, happier and hopeful'. Which are miles away from what we'd previously agreed as being reduced risk, improved psychological wellbeing, all the things that we know commissioners and funders want us to assess success on and of course, we do that too because we have to, but we felt really strongly that actually none of that made any sense to the women or made a difference to the women's lives, so we completely revamped our ToC to make sure we had measurements that would actually have some kind of meaning for the women themselves. Which is what we're here for, and I do take issue with this complaint that we're not very good at evidencing what we do. I strongly believe it's because we're being asked to evidence the sorts of things that aren't what women want us to evidence or are meaningful for them. Of course, we've had social return on investments done for the organisation, we've had the Justice Data Lab research done, we've got a figure that evidences our

Delivering it in a way that is incredibly meaningful, outcome focused, choice-led and trust-based for women.

reduction in re-offending rate, there's a previous report that encompasses a group of women's centres that also evidenced that, we've got the Women's Budget Group report, we've got so many reports and evaluations, the work that Clare Jones did at Calderdale. There's so much there, yet it doesn't seem to matter how much data we produce we're still being constantly asked to demonstrate our success rate. Well, ask the women! As you say, Rokaiya if we listen to their stories and hear their journey, that should be all that matters.

**RK:** I completely agree with everything you said, and maybe didn't articulate well what I was trying to say. I think we are not very good at evidencing all of what you've just said, in a way that twists it around. Nobody is really interested in all of that, what we want to evidence. And how can we get to the point where funders, commissioners, politicians and everybody else is interested in all of that because you're right that together we've completely turned on its head the things that we want to capture and the outcomes that we want to evidence and show. But we've not got there yet and we're trying to feed-in some of that to our monitoring and reporting but nobody's interested, they want to see the hard numbers. We know what matters and we think that's incredibly important, because that's what the women tell us is

important.

**JL: What agencies are you working with at local level to help achieve the mission you have and what challenges does that throw up?**

**RK:** I can honestly say we wouldn't be able to deliver the work, in the way that we do it, without the partnerships that we have at our women's centres. They're phenomenal and so diverse, and that's the richness of what we can offer to women, and they span a whole spectrum — mental health support, housing, solicitors, legal advice, childcare support. But it comes at a price, maintaining those relationships. Often this is done because we provide facilities free of charge and the use of our buildings. You need to nurture them, continue working closely and make sure there's that wider offer. And it's also incredibly important to have really strong partnerships with the justice sector. That can be challenging, but we do that really well with probation, police, courts. And where we have the greatest outcomes for women and the strongest partnerships are where we have co-located probation

officers in our buildings, who are absolutely bought-in to that holistic, trauma informed, women-centred approach and those specialist women's services. Where Offender Managers are specifically focused on women's needs — it's those partnerships that really enable you to get the best outcomes for the women. We've had many instances where women potentially might have been breached but through that partnership approach, we've been able to work with those Offender Managers within our women's centres, so I think it's incredibly important. And I just wanted to mention some of the sub-contracted partners we have in our Commissioned Rehabilitative Services contract, who are there to provide some real specialisms around accommodation or specialist support for Muslim women in prison, mental health charities. It's that which enables us to offer enriched support, but it often comes at the expense of the host organisation, but we wouldn't be able to do it without them.

**LD:** There is a wealth of agencies that we must work in partnership with to achieve the outcomes we do. All of which are funded in their own way, but we need to ensure that their support is accessible to women in the CJS. These women are citizens too and have a right to that support that is commissioned, there doesn't need to be separate provision. But there are challenges.

Partnership working is really time and resource intensive because it's all about communication, trying to make sure that everybody is working together in a joined up and effective way. It's so much about the relationships between individuals within those partnerships and having that appetite to really want to make partnerships work. But also, it comes down to systems and structures. It's so unhelpful to have things commissioned in silos so women have to be assessed and reassessed. Support plans drawn up in one agency and then another agency. The inability of data systems to talk to each other, information-sharing systems having to be agreed and progressed, which means it's really hard to make sure everybody is signed up to working with the same systems in the same way.

I think often why we find such terrible situations occurring with deaths of people, sadly is when the systems aren't working in a joined-up way and people just aren't communicating with each other effectively and efficiently. And I think this is the biggest challenge for us as women's centres when we are working with women across so many different pathways of need. It

also means we are working with multiple agencies and so making sure that the woman at the centre of that is kept safe and free from harm, not just in terms of what she is experiencing in her own life but just in terms of how systems and structures work can be a real challenge. And somebody has to be on top of it, and ultimately that can come down to our case workers who are the ones that are holding the ring around the woman and making sure that other agencies are staying linked in and there is a shared responsibility for that woman's support.

**JL: Abbi, can you describe the collaboration that forms the basis of the NWJC and what does systems change look like?**

**AA:** The establishment of the NWJC was to create solidarity across the sector, to build strength for women's organisations and to address the sustainability issue that was impacting so many women's services. So that there was a united approach to securing gender-specific, trauma-informed support for women both in the community and in custody. The partners that originally formed the coalition saw it as an opportunity for collaborative action by a group of organisations spread across

England and Wales, dealing with different challenges in different geographical and local regions that were united by their shared values and that unity was because they had the same strategic aims, and they shared a mission to improve outcomes for women. So, by collaborating and forming this entity there was an opportunity to strengthen the voice of women's centres and specialist organisations, and in doing that, increasing the collective capacity for influencing the change we want to see.

Systems change would mean fundamentally creating positive change for women that would increase and safeguard their access to high-quality, sustainably-funded, trauma-informed, gender-responsive holistic support, which at the same time would decrease or even eradicate women's experiences of the individual, the institutional, the structural inequality, discrimination, racism and disadvantage that we know women experience through their contact with the CJS.

So, there was this collective approach to amplifying those messages and collaborating strength across the sector so that we'd have more clout, more

All of which are funded in their own way, but we need to ensure that their support is accessible to women in the CJS.

impact. And this is really what drives the coalition now. As it gets bigger, as we bring in more partners with different specialisms, increase our representation across England and Wales, we have that opportunity to harness a wealth of expertise, and both lived and learned experience from across the sector to drive change that women tell us they need.

**JL: Can you say more about ways of working as a coalition?**

**AA:** There is an inherent agreement amongst the partners that we wanted to develop a model of feminist leadership, so that there was no dominant organisation around the table and every organisation that had an expertise and a voice to bring regarding women's services could be included. Recognising the differing capacities of partners, not in implementing a structure that required continual input, that recognised different priorities and capacity, but as a whole, the coalition could operate with a core staff, me as development manager driving the work, but being led by the priorities that the partners were saying were most important to them. We evolved workstreams around those priorities and our wider strategic aims. They specifically relate to influencing and amplifying the voices of women, and that is encompassed by our shared messaging work, and how we consult with our partners to understand what the priorities look like for their organisations, and the challenges and risks they face. And where we align in our values and our mission statements, so that shapes the singular voice of the coalition, and we can confidently speak on behalf of our 26 partners because there is that recognition and trust in the membership group that we are all on the same page. There is the value that our partners place on women-led services and co-production, and engagement and participation with women as experts by experience. That has helped us to drive work around involving women in our strategic development, in our influencing capacity, in honing our voice within the sector. The work being developed within that strand is being led by the partners within the coalition that have that organisational experience. The success of this particular coalition is that there is a trust and faith within the membership that certain organisations are well placed to lead certain branches of work.

There are opportunities for organisations to learn from each other, to share good practice in ways that

benefit their organisation as well as the collective. There is hopefully a value to a partner to be both part of a wider body of work but to also learn from their peers, their sisters within the sector, and that has really helped to galvanise the work and to inherently engage organisations in different ways and at different levels, given different capacities.

The values and commitments that the coalition set out very early on in its establishment helped to underpin all this work. So that the commitment to anti-racism and the recognition that we need to address not just the racism that exists within the wider sector, but acknowledge the challenges that besiege our partners, specifically those that are specialist organisations delivering very targeted support, or those that are very small and poorly funded. Understanding what those challenges look like and being able to advocate and represent those challenges as a collective is really valuable for us, to be the critical voice so no one organisation has to put their head above the parapet, they can literally rely on the collective voice of the coalition to amplify their concerns and voice their issues.

I think that's worked really well on a number of policy issues where we've had the opportunity to be consulted. For example, on unsentenced women and the probation reset, and the vetting issues that impact our partners, we've been able to speak on behalf of everybody and that helps to strengthen the unity, and the trust embedded in this coalition.

**JL: You've all spoken very powerfully about your work and the value of collaboration in this space. To finish up, can you sum up in a sentence the value of women's centres?**

**LD:** Given gender inequality still exists, a safe space for women in a society that is still predominantly run by and designed for men.

**RK:** Women's centres have the potential to transform lives. By offering a sanctuary where women can access support, therapeutic and practical, tailored to their individual specific needs.

**AA:** Women's centres are demonstrably the most effective way to support women to break free from harmful cycles of trauma and criminalisation, and to feel empowered to equip themselves with the tools they need to heal, to prosper and to thrive.