

Reflections on charities, academics and practitioners making change happen together¹

Dr Kate Paradine – Visiting Fellow, University of Southampton

“The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don't have any.” Alice Walker

In a book chapter written for an edited collection by Lucy Baldwin on women and the criminal justice system (published in Summer 2023),² I reflect on my experience over the last few years of campaigning as CEO of [Women in Prison](#) (until July 2022). I make the case that if academics, charities and practitioners are to maximise our impact and finally create a sea change in the imprisonment of women (and more broadly across the criminal justice system), then we need to focus on how we act collectively for change.

As with so many areas of public policy, these are dark days for criminal justice and for a long time I have felt a sense of collective ‘learned helplessness’. This is evident at the ‘front line’ of the system in prisons, charities, policing and the courts and at all levels of leadership, from practitioners through to senior officials and government ministers. The term ‘learned helplessness’ (originally coined by Seligman and Maier in the 1960s)³ is usually applied to individual situations of repeated abuse and describes a response to stressful or traumatic situations in which a person or animal feels (learns) that they have limited control over outcomes, leading to feelings of helplessness, lost motivation and a collapse of problem-solving skills. These feelings persist even when they actually *do* have control over an outcome. When that hopelessness and fatalism infects a system like criminal justice it risks sounding the death knell for positive change. It’s also a survival tactic - managing expectations and limiting disappointment so everyone can ‘keep going’ through relentless crisis and change.

Dynamics of individualism and competition, often encouraged in the current system, are one way in which the status quo can be maintained; by undermining efforts at collective action and collaboration. Whether you are leading a service providing charity bidding for contracts or a campaigning charity entering a funding competition with one of the independent trusts and foundations, or securing publicity for your campaign ‘ask’, competition and its undermining of collaboration keeps those fighting for change ‘in their lane’ and separated from each other. Academics have their complex world of competition to contend with that has its own similar unintended – or perhaps ‘baked in’ – consequences.

In the last few weeks, I’ve been thinking about how we can change this, and some of the things that are already happening to dig us out of this trench of despair. A great deal of work has been done on how we address ‘learned helplessness’ on an individual level, in the context of abuse, and many of the actions apply to tackling systemic learned helplessness:

- 1) **Belief that change is possible** – This is the shared belief that there is hope and that we do have the power to make a difference – individually and together. Do we believe this? Do we think we have power, or as Alice Walker observed, have we given our power up by thinking that we don’t have any? If we think we don’t have power, then who does?
- 2) **Think big with a shared vision of what the future looks like** – One of the features of feeling trapped in a relationship with someone who is abusive is the inability to imagine a future outside of that situation. There is an old saying ‘The fish can’t see the sea’, and while criminal justice change has to be driven from both inside and outside the system, it feels like there is a real poverty of imagination in terms of our vision for what the future could look like. At a research symposium organised by the [Criminal Justice Alliance](#) (CJA) in March 2023 the focus was on building trust across the criminal justice system. A wonderful interactive session involved a rainbow of post-it notes and coloured pens, with people contributing from different professions, disciplines and sectors to think beyond today to an imagined future, where trust is embedded across the system. It struck me how rare and precious these opportunities are. My own belief is that we need to develop a clear and unwavering focus on the big vision of a very different future to sit alongside the narrative of ‘here and now’ reform. This means the ‘long game’ of building a strong case which centres the lifeline and anchor of community-based support (including that from women’s centres

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² Baldwin, L. (ed) (2023) *Gendered Justice: Women, Trauma and Crime*. Waterside Press

³ Seligman, M.E. & Maier, S.F. (1967) Failure to escape traumatic shock. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 74(1), 1-9

and other specialist services). We can argue for the multiple reforms needed to make the current system better, but we now have decades of proof that treating reform and abolitionist visions as mutually exclusive has not served us well.

- 3) **Set goals** – One of the problems with the criminal justice system is that we are awash with recommendations, plans, strategies and reports on what needs to happen next – from Coroners, Parliamentary Committees, HM Inspectorates, numerous advisory boards as well as academic papers and analysis. There is so much evidence of the current system not working that it can be overwhelming to know which shameful fact to pick on next. What we lack is a set of shared goals, where we can see our own (and our organisations’) places in the jigsaw puzzle of change. The [Prison Reform Trust](#) have made forensic use of local and national data to break down the concrete goals for change that constitute the Government’s strategy on female offending to produce a [tracker](#). In their [Tackling Double Disadvantage Ten Point Action Plan](#), [Hibiscus Initiatives](#) and partners have set out ten actions for change needed for Black, Asian and minoritized women caught up in the criminal justice system. There is a question for me about how we use examples like this to break down and organise our goals collectively across the criminal justice system. As the Roman philosopher Seneca observed, if we don’t know which port we are sailing to then “no wind is favourable”.
- 4) **Achieve successes of the ‘little victories’** – The founder of Women in Prison, Chris Tchaikovsky loved the Joan Baez quote “Little victories and big defeats” – the notion that you survive the potentially overwhelming task of systems change by focusing on the small incremental victories needed to reach your shared vision. This is so difficult when we lack a big vision and clear shared goals. The whole system, particularly the consistent backdrop of competition means that even the ‘little victories’ can become weapons between us – like who ‘owns’ the victory and gets to use it in their next funding bid or campaign – rather than causes for shared celebration and building on as a foundation to secure the next small win towards whole systems change.
- 5) **Connect with others and consider different viewpoints** – I believe strongly that as charity leaders and academics, we don’t have enough time and space for reflection together – in teams and across partnerships. I know I am not alone in feeling like we are trapped in the echo chamber of those already converted to the need for deep change and wonder what could be achieved if we invested in coordinated action focused on harder to influence audiences. The problem with the echo chamber is that whilst being frustrating, it can also feel safe and part of ‘learned helplessness’ survival to ‘tread water’ where you are. I worry that we are not thinking in terms of planning incremental steps towards a big vision, but are more often ‘head down’ to the next battle that comes at us, and that we desperately need a shared strategic and evidence-based approach to our use of language, key messages and priorities for change. Organisations like [Clinks](#) have started investing in collective framing training for charities so that strong and consistent messages can be developed together. How can we build collaborative partnerships to agree communication strategies across sectors and organisations whilst avoiding both ‘group think’ and inadvertently creating a monolithic world view which holds back our collective imaginations? There is increasing investment in reflective practice and initiatives like cross-organisational Action Learning Sets, including in service providing and campaigning charities like members of the new [National Women’s Justice Coalition](#), and charities like [Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations](#) (ACEVO) and [Shelia McKechnie Foundation](#). The [Criminal Justice Alliance](#), [Agenda Alliance](#) and many others are making brilliant progress on building the collective and individual strengths of people with direct and diverse experiences of the criminal justice system. This is an area where there has been real change in understanding with leaders and organisations starting to share power and leadership in meaningful ways.

A common thread running through my observations about learned helplessness and the challenges and barriers to change is a need for stronger coordination, collaboration and collective action. The biggest challenge we face now I believe is not changing what others do and think (MPs, ministers, the public), but in developing new tools of collaborative leadership between us, crossing disciplines and sectors with academic researchers working alongside campaigning and service providing charities and people with direct experience of the system, so that power is genuinely shared in service of the big vision. I conclude in my chapter for Lucy Baldwin’s collection:

“There is hope. We can change things, we know it and there are the small victories which prove we have started, but the real lasting systems change will only happen if we change. In the words of June Jordan, “We are the ones we have been waiting for”. It all starts with us.