

Power for good, in partnership – the Remand Collective and philanthropy

— by Jo Wells

In 2024, Firebird asked the CEOs of 6 national charities working on women's justice and rights a key question: how can we support you to advance change together? How can we be more than the sum of our parts?

Further conversations and less than a year later, an outcomes focused collaboration, The Remand Collective (RC), **to end the unjust and unfair imprisonment of women awaiting trial or sentencing**, was launched. An intentional coming together of 7 national core organisations, 12 justice experience women and at the time of writing 3 Foundations pooling funds, to build a movement of change.

Why remand? At any given point in 2025, over 900 women were in prison on remand, comprising **over a quarter** of the overall female prison population. Numbers have increased steadily over the past ten years, up 47% compared to 2015 and are growing faster than the male remand population. **This despite a well understood principle of innocent until proven guilty and a general legal presumption in favour of bail¹**. In the context of court backlogs, minimal support for those in prison awaiting trial, high levels of self-harm in remand wings, the societal impact on children, and the cost to taxpayers, the growing numbers of women in particular – given the non-violent nature of the vast majority of cases – is alarming.

Remand also happens to be one of the few areas, where government have an opportunity to do something positive that is not unpalatable to the public. In the light of recent publicity on early prison release and prison capacity, ending or substantially reducing remand populations could be a tactical win, sustainably easing pressure.

The work of the RC is just getting going, after the necessary period of trust building, strategy setting and fundraising that is central to any successful and sustainable collaboration. As CEO of Firebird, and with long years of experience in both philanthropy and social justice, here are some key reflections:

- The RC was born of a simple, but urgent question – change is too slow, numbers of women in prison are going up not down, despite cross-party agreement that they should be reducing – what can we do about it together? **To what extent are funders willing to really interrogate deeper blockers to change?** And, crucially, are we willing to pivot our own plans/behaviours/approaches to respond to what we hear? Remand was the carefully thought through answer to a question I posed, with compelling evidence that this was an issue that had not had the attention it deserved. Having asked the question, we held and hold responsibility to support answers and respond with resources – financial, human, strategic.

¹ Unless there are strong grounds to believe that they will not come to court, are going to commit further crimes or interfere with witnesses

- **Are we funders bold enough to be transformative catalysts for change and unapologetically use our heft for good?** One of the great privileges of philanthropy is the ability to be ambitious alongside and on behalf of others. It is precisely because we are one step removed, and the risks of the work are not felt so deeply by us, that we can afford to be bold. We have a unique opportunity to be real partners, using our independence to share the emotional burden, the vision and the responsibility with campaigners, charities and women who have lived this system. Leveraging money for collaboration, in a way that the competitive funding system does not incentivize for others.
- To that end, **do we actually want to win and do we understand what that takes?** In the current context of political polarisation, resource scarcity and rolling back of rights, are we willing to back the work over the time needed? Society grasps the investment needed to build a new company, the risks, the energy and commitment, and yet, it is assumed or hoped we can change embedded structural injustices with modest grants to organisations. The RC understood from the outset that a minimum financial envelope was essential (£800,000), to even begin to make a dent in this issue. We are grateful to other funders for backing the work and hope more will come on board. There are many variables and challenges ahead, but if we are serious in our intent for change, then as funders we need to actively create the minimum conditions for success upfront.
- Investing in co-production and lived experience is critical to social justice. I have personally led this work through my career. The RC feels unique and radical in recognizing that CEOs, women with direct insight into our justice system and funders all have equally vital roles to play. It embraces a deeper truth **in practice** that it is **the diversity of experience, knowledge and skills that will advance change**. Not the subjugation of one group, for the advancement of another, but the credible coming together of all. To that end, the RC strategy is led by 'Compass', members comprising a unique blend of sector expertise, women with lived experience and a seat for Liberty Grace representing the 400 plus women sitting in prison on remand at any given time. It is not easy work; it requires self-awareness and low ego to know when to step forward and when to stand back. But it is also imbued with joy and hope; the burden of urgency, shared with purpose.

The Firebird Foundation, itself sits within a Collective alongside other legal entities collectively deploying both grant making and investment capital to advance gender justice and equality. We aim to actively bridge worlds. To sit with one foot in communities driving social justice, and the other in hallowed spaces, investment firms, art galleries and institutions where culture is shaped. This gives us a unique opportunity to learn how different communities can work together for wider good.

A female entrepreneur struggling to access the crumbs of start-up capital for whom men get the lion's share, may empathize with the realities of their sisters who have spent time in prison. Both, albeit in widely different ways, victim to an unequal world, struggling to realize their potential without the necessary support in place. For the Remand Collective to succeed it will need to engage the public in its work, to shine a light on the women, incarcerated before trial, in growing numbers. To seek support and solidarity in worlds that feel apart, and to call upon philanthropy to take risks and use its networks and power to advance justice.