

## Chapter 4

# Fiona's Story

*Fiona Gilbertson*

I had been involved in activism around HIV and sex worker rights for about 25 years. At that point I was in long term abstinence based recovery. I knew that there was a recovery movement but I did not have that much interest in it because it seemed to be a lot about service provision and health.

I watched a film called *The Anonymous People* and there was a clip to do with the war on drugs. It showed Nancy and Ronald Reagan, and I think it triggered a kind of trauma response in me. I just remembered what that time was like, the stigma, fear and ignorance towards people who use drugs

I started reading about the impacts of drug policy and then watched a film called *The House I Live In*. It describes the war on drugs as a holocaust in slow motion, a war on people, specific people, minorities and poor people. I live in an ex mining town in County Durham and I saw the similarities, poverty, unemployment and hopelessness. I remember thinking this film is about America, but this is what is going on here. I started showing that film to my friends, current and former drug users, people who had lost family. I just kept getting people into the house to watch it. When there were about six of us, we formed Recovering Justice. Our first goal was to create a bridge between the recovery movement and the drug policy movement

When you watch *The Anonymous People*, it talks about a recovery movement, so I thought there is one movement – and here is this other one drug policy, and they could be affiliated. When I would speak to drug policy reform people there was often an awful lot of animosity towards recovery. I would go to conferences and people would start to tell me what recovery was without actually stopping to ask what it meant to me. So without any lived experience, they would just say ‘these people are crazy, they are doing this and that, killing people, telling them they have to do this’.

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One of the things I am fascinated by is movements, how they develop, who is involved, what the message is that unifies or ultimately divides people. I was really privileged to be part of the HIV movement in the beginning. It was a diverse group of people who came together. I was proud of that. Twenty years later, I was sad that in the major retrospectives the women weren't there, the drug users weren't there and the sex workers weren't there, everything was focussed on gay men. So it's like who tells the story, who carries the story and who is doing all the work in the background often gets whitewashed out to make things more appealing or less complex to appeal to whatever audience or funder you are trying to engage.

The first public event that we did, we got Transform the drug policy foundation up to a recovery walk that Annemarie Ward of FAVOR UK was putting on. She was very brave to do that. The Walk was focussed on recovery not policy. We talked about the war on drugs, 'this is impacting your communities, we need you to help us to end prohibition' basically all the drug policy messages. Transform imagined that recovery people would be prohibitionist – all these ideas that people have about each other without actually speaking to each other. And what actually happened was people were like – 'yes we get this, drug policy crippled my family, half of my community is in prison, there are no rehab beds'. We were fundamental in starting that debate, that conversation between recovery and drug policy. Now, thankfully its mainstream and almost all recovery organisations talk about the need for policy change.

We try to avoid polemic debates. We hosted in an event in Glasgow and everyone was like 'bring Peter Hitchens' a prohibitionist bring him and we can show how stupid he is to win people over. No, we will bring four people who have fundamentally the same values and we will let them speak quietly from the stage and it is the audience that we will convince. You don't need to excite them with a debate. You can win them through opening their hearts and minds.

When we speak to MPs, councillors in our area we take a local voice. If it is about HIV, then I might tell my story. If it is about prolific offending we take somebody that we know, in our community. And they will say 'here is my story' – but in a policy context – so not 'I took heroin and got in with a bad crowd and was led astray', but saying 'my dad left at 14, I was arrested at 15 for smashing windows you spent *X* amount on keeping me in prison rehab or heroin assisted treatment would have been a 10th of the cost'. They highlight the points when they needed help but there was no help, and what actually happened to them. Sometimes we take mothers, we follow the same approach, highlighting help that was not received and the cost of services that created trauma for them and their children.

We have no funded positions and I regret that we have not got the capacity to build up a whole range of those voices and really work with them, but what I like is that we are committed to being faceless, anonymous. I am not the face of Recovering Justice if we are going to speak to Police and Crime Commissioners or social services. I just drive the car and there will be three women who have had their children removed or women who have been in prison for their substance use. They are the voices, the stories.

Seeing those two films, *Anonymous People* and *The House I Live In*, seeing how they were linked together, realising that there were two movements, and also

looking at the divisions (which are getting less) between harm reduction and recovery. The assumptions, the idea that people outside of recovery define it. Everyone assumes recovery is 12 Step or abstinence based, a moralistic thing. I remember taking someone to meet a drug policy activist. She was a current sex worker. You could see the drug policy activist was very surprised. What do you think people in recovery are? They are just normal people who don't take drugs anymore.

So there were all these silos and divisions and I thought if we can break these down and work together. That came from being part of the HIV movement in Edinburgh when there was nothing, you were meeting in clinics, seeing each other across rooms. And then we got this service called Mainliners and it was for all people with HIV and their families. It was run by people with HIV. A lot of money then started coming in and we divided, we divided because we were fighting over who got the money and it became professionalised.

Mainliners did not get the money. We were to 'risky'. We were just invited to workshops – there was one on how to decorate your own coffin. Something happened to that energy. Then there was an issue around a hospice, a hospice for people with HIV. Public opinion was against it. But then Princess Diana hugged a gay man with HIV, and it was like, well the gay men are ok now. I remember sitting in a room, three drug users and we were like 'we get why people would not want us in that space. So we won't use it. Just tell people it is a hospice for gay men'. None of us knew what was wrong with saying that. The hospice did allow us in and still some died carrying that belief. There was always the idea they would come back for us. They didn't. The services were dominated by and designed completely for gay men. Everyone else was left out and I felt that was unfair.

That feeling of unfairness and being written out informs me in *Recovering Justice*, I always ask who is not in the room and why, what barriers are keeping people from speaking.

We have had a focus on women in the last two years. We noticed our early events were predominantly male and a lot of men would speak. So, I started talking to some of my women friends about the barriers to women being at events and barriers to them speaking. It is often the same in Narcotics Anonymous. About 70% are men. Men get more rehab beds as they cost less to send, they don't usually have childcare considerations. They would go off to rehab and then come back and say 'my ex isn't looking after the kids properly ... I have reported her to social services'. So even within that small community of people who were IV drug using, there are judgments and stigma the same hierarchies – 'I might be a junkie, but at least I am not a junkie mother'.

Women who have children are just the most stigmatised group the most stigmatised, over 'surveilled' and underserved group. That is why we said let's have a focus on trying to bring those voices forward.

Grassroots community development is so important for bringing in women. Meeting locally, having a coffee, a one to one, talking to women. There is always a collection of women in every community who are running something that does not cost anything. There will be a breakfast club for homeless people, a food bank – you can always find these women, diamonds, often older women, with huge embodied knowledge and understanding of social justice.

It is slow and considered work with women who use drugs. You can't just turn up to a workshop and show great videos and hand out leaflets on how the World Health Organisation defines stigma because the stigma is embedded in them. They will tell you they were bad mothers, they will tell you a story, 'I was a bad mother and social services took my kids' to protect them', the same way a man will tell you 'I went to prison because I was a bad person'.

It is a difficult journey to ask somebody to go on. Because if you are bad you almost have some control over that – or an illusion of control – 'I am a bad mother' – I have done something. But to take people on a journey that shows that the system that they are living in is damaging and stigmatising towards them as mothers that take drugs, that their children were removed not because they were bad parents but because of a horrendous piece of policy – that is difficult. You can see it, you can see they realise things could have been different. Realising that poverty, class or race was the thing that saw them criminalised rather than offered evidence based treatment. There is that look that people get when they realise they have been fucked over. I love that look and I feel we have a responsibility to not abuse, tokenise or misuse it. You can't then just throw them on the front line and say 'I want you to talk at a conference'. You have to sit with them and listen to what they want to create.

For me there is something around the 12 Step fellowship it holds people till they can take care of themselves – yes it does have many failings, but it is the only anarchist type organisation that I know – there are no leaders, no membership fees or records kept – they are not affiliated with any other organisation. At its best it is a nurturing community. I have been to meetings all over the world and met some incredible people. You can just turn up. Whoever is opening the door to those meetings, holding those keys, active in serving the community those are the people we connect with.

We have been incredibly lucky we are based in County Durham. We had Mike Barton who was Chief Constable and Ron Hogg who was the Police and Crime Commissioner – both of those men came out and said they were for drug policy reform. That created an environment where those debates were much easier to have and invited us into them

Mike Barton and Ron Hogg lived in a Labour area, they were both men at the end of their careers, they were able to speak out. They were in fairly safe positions and they had a huge amount of integrity. But still, we were at the will of two men. Now County Durham has lost both of them. So what will the next people want to do. That is why it is so important to change policy. We cannot rely just on the goodwill of powerful individuals.

We tried to lobby and meet up with politicians in Westminster. Really quickly we realised it was a complete waste of time except for the Scottish MPs. In Scotland though, there is an appetite for change. I believe there is compassion and open mindedness in Scotland, whether this is actually followed though ... it is a small country, with an idea of fairness and justice, it is less of a toxic class system, I find Westminster so toxic, and the media are appalling. For policy change in a small country you need a few good people, good people at all levels. There is a big recovery movement not based solely on abstinence, there is great family support,

access to government and media support from the Daily Mail so a better freer infrastructure in Scotland.

Whatever your activism is, I imagine it comes from a wound, and unless you acknowledge that and deal with it, you are screaming into a void. So to take a whole bunch of women in that state and have them shout at an authority because they had their children removed. I want to get them to a place where they have some sort of acceptance. You know when they have done that because they will say 'I know I cannot change it for me, but I can change it for someone else'.

When you are in a room, and everyone knows everyone else's secrets, their stigma, and when the people in that room know the structures that allowed this to happen to them, that is when you can get them to a place where they can think about what they want to do. A woman will say, 'this is what happened to me and now I am going to advocate for a women and baby unit'.

It is horrifying when you talk to women, who say their babies were born in withdrawal and then taken away. And you talk through it with them, hear how they were told all through their pregnancy that if they failed a drug test, their baby would be taken away from them. And then they talk about how there were people at the birth, and then she had to sign a piece of paper and then the baby was taken away. And you say, 'so was that withdrawal that the baby had or what happens to a foetus when it is in a stressed womb and then not allowed to be with its mother after being born'. That is quite devastating stuff. They have been lied to. The whole drug war is one huge lie after another. We unpick that with them. It takes time. Listening is important. It builds compassion. If you give them time and space, they don't just want to rage but to change things, to challenge policy.

I still see a real problem with professionalisation of fundraising and advocacy. I just don't understand this, the use of buzzwords, the institutionalisation. Funders seem completely risk averse. NGOs can act like companies building empires. It is always about expansion. I think Recovering Justice, will have failed if in 15 years' time we have 20 people working for us. I want to be able to identify women in the community, and ask what we can do to make their project self-sustaining. How do we give away knowledge to make others self-sustaining?

We have been told it is threatening to big NGOs that we put on a major events, bring speakers to Scotland, run a session in parliament, and we can do that – for less than £4,000. I can do that because I work with communities, with my networks, I have years and years of this work. If I need a venue, there is always someone I can phone and ask if I can have it for free. That is a real threat to these large organisations. You see the same mistakes being repeated.

Recovering Justice was set up about five years ago. I always had this dream we would be like a collective, a network, a body of knowledge and experience. If a guy in town X wants to set up a Recovering Justice, then great, go ahead. They don't have to be accountable to us as long as they agree our core values, and actively seek peaceful solutions to ending the war on drugs. We don't need to be an expensive professional organisation.

What have I learned through all these years of work? That I have an incredible amount of power, not that I am special, just the power individuals have. I also know I am really privileged because I have always been loved. That creates a cushion. I can go out and listen to the most harrowing stories and see setbacks in human rights and justice and go back and have so much love, honesty and joy in my own house with my husband and animals.