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Moderator questions in Bold, Respondents in Regular text.

KEY: Unable to decipher = (ia + timecode), **Phonetic spelling** = (ph + timecode), **Missed word** = (mw + timecode).

Moderator: It's Monday 16th December, and I'm with Marai Larasi. Marai stepped down as executive director of Imkaan earlier this year, after ten years. Imkaan is the only UK-based second tier women's organisation dedicated to addressing violence against Black and minoritised women and girls. Marai is sharing her experience of working in the women's voluntary community sector and campaigning for women's rights, for the Sisters Doing It For Themselves archive. Marai, if we can begin with you talking a little bit about how you got into the sector.

Marai Larasi: Sure. Thank you. So, first thing's first, it's really amazing to be a part of this conversation, and I want to just acknowledge Women's Resource Centre and Viv for having the vision to create, for us, some kind of moving, living, breathing archive, you know, that takes account of diverse women's journeys. Just to acknowledge that. So, in terms of my own journey, and how I got into the work, beginning at the beginning is very complicated for me. I was born in London to Jamaican parents, and what that means ancestrally is a pathway that has enslavement, trafficking, colonisation, forced hybridity and so forth. I was born here, but raised in the Caribbean, in the mountains of Jamaica, and my activism actually started there. My activism started much more with early Jamaican socialist politics, and when I came back to live in London and I, kind of, moved back and forth between here and the States, I knew that I wanted to work with women, but I didn't completely know what that looked like. I knew I wanted to make a difference, in terms of a certain type of feminist activism, but again, like, I had no idea how to make that meaningful. So, I'd been in Jamaica, and then in the States, and I came back and I went and did some admin work at what was then Camden Women's Aid. I did some admin and a bit of volunteering and the manager at that particular refuge said to me, 'You've got a way with this work. Do you want to do some paid refuge work.'

I was just, like, 'Oh my God, I'd love to,' and that's how it started. That was my first experience of feeling like I had come home. That was the first version of coming home to a place where I felt like I was able to work my politics. I loved doing refuge work. It was hard, in many ways, but it was also a real gift and a real privilege in so many ways, and I loved the kind of conversations that I had with women who were using those services, but I also loved the kind of conversations and the learning that was taking place all the time, within the staff team in the organisation. Basically, that was my entry into the women's sector, 25 years ago. And, yes, I feel like in many ways-, I don't know how much I am a child of the women's sector, but I'm definitely a child of the women's movement and I see the sector as an important part of that. I don't see the sector as a central thing in that. I see the sector as a particular dimension of a really

critical women's slash feminist and, in my, case black feminist movement space. So, that's the background. That's the entry to the work.

Moderator: You talked about your work in a refuge as being your entry point. Did the women's first refuge, back in the early '70s, have any impact on you?

Marai Larasi: I'm a little bit younger, and so for me, I suppose, the relevance was that I knew about this. I was aware of this thing that had happened with Erin Pizzey, and the setting up of, you know, a refuge accommodation, etc. So, it had impact on me, I suppose, emotionally and intellectually, but I wasn't around when it was happening, if you like. I think, perhaps, what was more significant and critical for me was understanding when services that were by-and-for black women, minoritised women, were starting to be set up, on these islands, and I'd say once I started to become aware of why specialist services that are by and for minoritised women, black women, why those services are so important, it's not that the importance of the first refuge diminished, but in many ways the importance of that specialist space felt like it resonated at a deeper, more personal level for me. So, yes.

Moderator: Thank you. Who inspired you, and inspires you now?

Marai Larasi: Oh, my gosh. That's so, like, huge. Okay, so, I have been inspired mainly, actually, by the women that I've worked with. So, that's whether those are women who are using services, whether those are women that have worked in the organisations that I've been fortunate to work for. I've been inspired by my mum, who is fierce, and my grandmother, who was just ridiculously, absurdly soft and tough at the same time. So, I've been inspired by several generations of warrior women in my own family, in my own bloodline. And then, there are people like June Jordan and Audre Lorde and Maya Angelou and Avtar Brah. Women like Gail Lewis and, you know, Shirley Chisholm and Claudia Jones. There are whole generations of particularly, I'd say, black feminists. Angela Davis. I read Angela Davis' *Women, Race, & Class* when I was, you know, in my late teens, and reading that book was critical around how I felt like I had found a space where all of me was being understood and represented in one text. So, I'd say I've been inspired by an amazing group of women. I've been inspired by Sabrina Qureshi, you know, the coordinator and founder of Million Women Rise. So many. So many women have, you know, inspired and continue to feed my sense of self, intellectually, emotionally and psychically. Sometimes it's not always the usual suspects. It's not always the women in the Academy, or the women that are the big, kind of-, you know, the people that everybody knows about, or who people have read. I'm inspired by my daughter, who's a young, black feminist activist. I love her fierceness and her softness and her wisdom, and her unrelenting commitment to holding a certain black, British space. Just so many. So many women inspire me.

Moderator: Can you expand on how your mother and grandmother inspired you and changed you?

Marai Larasi: Yes. Sure. So, my mother is generation windrush. My mother came to these islands in the 1950s, and she had had, for all intents and purposes, quite a conservative upbringing. You know, her father was a lay preacher, so she came from this Christian upbringing, but she was the first girl in her family to wear trousers. She was very much

focused-, (TC 10.00) the girls in that family always had a relationship, you know, they always worked outside of the home, so there was the whole thing around valuing education and so forth. My mother came here and she made a life here. She could have stayed in England. She could have stayed in London. She loves London, but I remember in the late '70s, there was a point where she went, 'I'm going to go home because I want to go and look after my people.' And, she left London, where she loved, and she loved it. My mum's a midwife, so she also trained as a midwife when lots of black nurses were being trained here in London, but not that many were making it into their midwifery. You know, black nurses were being actively blocked. She had always wanted to be a midwife. She had absolute clarity about that, and she did it. There was something I learned from my mother. Ridiculous determination. My mother was driven. She went home to Jamaica, because she always felt like she had two homes, London and her home in Clarendon, in Jamaica, and she went to that home and worked in the local hospital.

She worked in her day job and she also did work at the level of community, in the sense that if a woman was going into labour in the middle of the night, my mother would be called, sometimes, to come and deliver this baby, in this woman's house, in the middle of the night. Her work ethic was basically one of, 'I care and therefore I'm going to do it.' She always had this attitude that no man was ever going to tell her what to do, which I really appreciated. She didn't defer to men. It's not that she didn't like men, there were men that she liked, but, you know, still my sisters and I are referred to by friends as Pearl's girls. She trained us to be independent, and to be independent in the way that we think about the world. She trained us to have a good, strong sense of ourselves as individuals, but always connected to community. And she got that from her mum. She got that from her mum, who taught her to always have her own money, always to hide money from her husband and just also to do what she needed to do as a woman. There was something about those women being loving, being fierce, feeding everybody, looking after everybody while at the same time not suffering fools gladly. I can see that in myself and I can see that in my daughter, you know? So, yes.

Moderator: You talked about a book by Angela Davis, and this being critical. How did that change your perspectives?

Marai Larasi: So, *Women, Race, & Class* is, like, one of those texts that so many feminists will encounter, and I think, particularly, us as black feminists. Angela Davis talked about the connections between the different aspects of who we are, as women, as black women. You know, she talked about class dynamics, she talked about how class is racialised, and she acknowledged us. Angela Davis spoke for us. She did, if you like, such a powerful, political call out of racism and class oppression and patriarchy and misogyny, and without calling it intersectional, she essentially spoke to the intersecting concerns of black women. I hadn't read anything before that wasn't calling on us to split ourselves into different fragments, because my engagement with the feminist movement had pretty much defined womanhood in terms of white womanhood, and sometimes white heterosexual womanhood, but definitely white womanhood, and black women's specific concerns about racial injustice weren't being dealt with within feminism. Similarly, within, you know, racial justice work, our positions as women, as black women, weren't being prioritised. Angela Davis, in one amazing text, just captured this narrative and she talked about class, and how you can't disconnect class from race, and for me that was so very important, as someone who was now living back in London,

who'd had a Jamaican middle-class upbringing, but by virtue of being a black Londoner, at that point in time, didn't have the trappings of this Jamaican middle-class upbringing. I was struggling to understand my class position in London and she just articulated all of that so powerfully that I felt, again, like I was understood in a way that I wasn't finding myself understood more broadly.

Moderator: Can you describe your approach to leadership?

Marai Larasi: I think I am probably not a great manager, but I'd like to think I'm a pretty alright leader in the sense that my approach is very much about collaboration. My approach is somewhere between focusing on what we need to do collectively, while at the same time feeling very much committed to my individual accountability. So, my approach to leadership is really fragments of who I am and fragments of what I've learned, knitted together perhaps not in the best way. Sometimes I muddle along in this called leadership, and sometimes it means-, quite a lot of times it means a willingness to put my head above the parapet and be the person that gets taken down if necessary. But, equally, for me, it's really important to lead from the middle, from the edge, from wherever I'm positioned at that point, so my approach to leadership perhaps doesn't fit into any, kind of, leadership theory. I'm just a black dyke, out here, trying to make a difference to our world, and in that people think I'm a leader, but in so many ways my leadership is probably just my activism and me just getting on with it, to be really honest. I'm just doing because we need to do, and like Alice Walker says, 'My activism is the rent that I pay for living on the planet.' I just see myself as doing that, and if that then has me be viewed as a leader, then I will take that on board and acknowledge that, but I do not think that that makes me singularly better at any of it, or more significant, or more important. I just see myself as, yes, in service to something that is bigger, and more significant, than my individual existence, while at the same time knowing that my liberation is bound up in the collective liberation. So, I guess my leadership is just purely about commitment and action, and getting on with it.

Moderator: Can you give us an example of your service?

Marai Larasi: Oh, God. Okay. I'm going to say this thing because it's perhaps something that I've become known for, but it was perhaps one of the things that I felt the most conflict around. So, in January 2018, I was one of a group of activists who attended the Golden Globes awards in California, as part of the launch of Time's Up, and I attended along with a group of other activists, most of whom were black women slash women of colour. I attended as, if you like, a red-carpet guest of a very well known celebrity. And when I was first approached by someone from her team, I'd met her. We'd done some work together, so by then had some kind of relationship, if you like (TC 20.00), like, a working connection. I was, like, no, why, and really struggled with this idea of me taking myself off to LA and wondering, how does that even fit? How would I have any kind of accountability to my, you know, black, lesbian feminist community here in London? I spoke to my children. We were in Jamaica at the time. They were pretty much just, like, 'If not you, then who?' My son actually said that to me. And in that moment, a penny dropped for me around us showing up in spaces that we wouldn't normally show up in, and the importance of the visibility of this particular body, this body that is black, that looks a particular way, that is immediately spottable as the lesbian thing, the importance of that and the connection to what I do here, on

these islands. And so I went, I did it, and it was completely confidential, doing it. My entire thing around it was, I will only do this if we can bring this money back, if we can bring this focus, if we can bring this back to these islands, you know? If I can bring this home. And that's what we did. And coming out of that, we then launched work here that then led to the Justice and Equality Fund, which is something that Rosa, the only women's fund here, is managing.

The thing about that, it was incredibly high profile, but it was also fraught with tension, and for me that's what my leadership looks like. It looks like it's never tidy and straight forward. It calls on me to do things that I don't immediately feel comfortable with. I'm actually pretty shy. I don't like-, you know, I can talk, as you can hear, and I can speak to 2,000 people, but if you put me in a room to do, like, networking, or any of those things, I'm, like, 'No.' But also, I didn't want any of it to be about me. I really wanted it to be about the work. After that, a young lesbian spoke to me about the importance of seeing somebody like me dressed in a tuxedo, looking the way that I looked in that space, and other women have since said to me, over and over again, what it meant for them that it was me, what it meant for them as black women, what it meant for them as queer women, what it meant for them that it was somebody from the movement here, what it meant for them that it was somebody from the sector, what it meant to them that it was somebody who's African-descendant, what it meant to them that I have dreadlocks. That for me is part of what the leadership is. It's showing up, even when I don't want to, because it matters.

Moderator: So, what would you say motivates you as a leader?

Marai Larasi: The possibility of a different, more amazing, free world. One where we have truly created our collective liberation. Now, seven generations into the future, I'm motivated by transformation. I'm motivated by women not being harmed by men. You know? I'm motivated by the end of racism. I'm motivated by the downfall of capitalism. I'm motivated by equality for disabled folk. I'm motivated by all of it. Like, I want us to have a courageous, just, free and safe planet. That. I am driven by that. It keeps me up at night and it puts me to sleep at night.

Moderator: How do you think women's leadership is different from men's? Or do you think it's different?

Marai Larasi: If you'd asked me this twenty years ago, I'd have been able to answer really easily. I don't know that. I think there are periods where it has been. I think there are spaces where it is different. I think we have to be more nuanced about that now, in the sense that I think Margaret Thatcher was a woman, you know, and she did great damage to our countries, right? I don't believe that women are biologically predisposed to better leadership. I don't think that. But, I think there are ways that most of us are socialised, that if we allow ourselves to bring those experiences and those qualities to our leadership, I think it can be quite magical. I think if women are supported to lead in the ways that take account of difference, then that can be really great. If women are supported to lead in ways that help us to create space for other women, then that is very often different from the way that men are taught to lead. I think women are trained to work much more in ways that are collective, and I think that that's really powerful, but I think that actually one of the things that's happened is that the

professionalisation and the neo-liberal, kind of, agenda in the sector has meant that that type of leadership is being discouraged. So, to lead now, in our sector, in our movement, you have to lead from the front, you have to actually be invested in hierarchies, you have not to check your power, you have to behave in ways, in exactly the ways, that we spent decades critiquing men about. And so, I think it's a lot more complicated now.

Moderator: So, what would you say are the specific qualities that women could and should bring to leadership?

Marai Larasi: Well, I'd say we're diverse, so I don't think it should look one way. For some women, it's going to look like they're in complete kick-arse mode, and that's what they do, and that's fine, because again we're not supposed to be biologically predisposed to anything. But, if you're going to say to me for our movement for our sector, what do I think we need? Collaborative working, versus the obsession with competition. Holding each other to account in ways that are caring and not about tearing strips of each other off each other. Reflection. Dialogue. Passion. Rage. All of those things, but care, like, genuine care. I worry sometimes at how cruel we have become with each other in this sector, because we are a sector increasingly, and not a movement. I think if we started to inject more care and more accountability, we might do something very different. I think an accountability not to donors, not to the state, but to each other and to those people that we think we are least accountable to, I think probably that would feel like it was shifting something for me.

Moderator: You've touched on this. What issues are dear to your heart? Were and are. And, how do you think you've influenced change?

Marai Larasi: I'd say the issues that are dear to my heart, I mean, I've already spoken about, probably ad nauseam. I'd say an intersectional approach to addressing violence against women and girls, which is a thing that, for me, I've tried to work through. Making sure that we are not calling on people to fragment themselves any more than the state and the system is already fragmenting us. Stop asking black women to be black today and a woman tomorrow, and disabled the next day and a lesbian on Friday. Actually recognise that some of us are all of those things. For me, what's dear to my heart is that we actually build, or work, in that way. We go to the places where there is the most acute marginalisation and we work from there, and we support women's autonomy from those places, rather than our version of how we think things should be done. What's important to me is that we stop behaving like change automatically means dilution. Change can mean expansion. If we don't start taking into account, for example, the levels of violence against our disabled sisters, we are actually missing something critical. If we don't start dealing with where older women (TC 30.00) fit into this work, where younger women fit into this work, just where differently positioned folk sit in this work, then we are doing harm, and every time we are pushed around this, we get paranoid and we look down. I always think of that term, 'The lavender menace.' You know? That whole thing about the lesbians taking over the women's movement, while the women's movement has been built on the blood of lesbians and the irony of that. It's the same thing. We need to see expansion. Not as empire-building, I'm not talking about that, but we need to see expansion of who we are as important. We need to create solidarity within, with different social justice spaces.

In terms of how I think I might have influenced change, I'd like to think by being a bit of a difficult, but occasionally conciliatory, human being. I'd like to think that my presence in the work has supported particularly younger activists. I know, at different points in time, other black women say to me, it's important that I've been here and that I am here, and that when they see me speaking somewhere, it gives them hope and it makes them feel like somebody is talking in ways that are connecting to their beliefs, and their hearts. I think that's probably the thing that I've brought. I've brought myself, my ancestors, my community, my body, and I think that's probably where I've had influence. And I'm argumentative, and loving at the same time. I hope that that's made a difference.

Moderator: Can you expand on how you have brought all these elements of yourself, how you bring all these elements of yourself, together to make change happen, or to inspire other women?

Marai Larasi: That is a bit of a tough one, Helen, because some of it is, quite frankly, I don't know another way. When we started this conversation, when I said to you about my ancestry and the thing about forced hybridity, I'm the product of European slavers and enslaved people. Therefore, in this body I carry that contradiction. I carry that pain, I carry that triumph, I carry the resistance. You know? I carry the love, the rage, all of it. And so, therefore, I'm ever always bringing that. I'm never silencing any aspect of that unless it's strategically important to do so at that point. There's something for me around the importance. Part of what's happened in this work, when we moved from being a movement to being a sector, we stopped having permission to show up as the women that we are. We suddenly had to create distance between ourselves and the women using services, distance between ourselves and the clients. This narrative that became, like, some, kind of, version of the NHS, or social services, versus us as women collectively transforming the planet. I'm not interested in that. My biology, my biography, my intellect, my spirituality, all of this matters, and this is all that I bring to it. I can't pretend otherwise, and we have been forced to pretend. We've been forced to pretend that we're not invested in our liberation. We've been forced to distance ourselves from the work. And I'm not distant from it. I'm not objective. I think, in truth, if you say to me, what I really bring, it's the lack of objectivity, because actually I am angry, I'm pissed off, I'm upset, I'm hopeful, I dream. I'm also terrified. I'm outraged and at the same time not outraged. I'm taken aback but not surprised. All at the same time. For me, telling the truth about that is perhaps the thing that I can do the best, you know, I can do most effectively. And knowing that, in me being honest about that, it helps to create space for other women to be honest about that.

Also, quite frankly, I call out the bullshit. Like, I am not going to sit and pretend that our sector is well-behaved, and I don't mean well-behaved in, 'Well-behaved women never make herstory,' I mean we are harming each other, in our sector and I tell the truth to us about that. I also tell the truth to politicians, and to civil servants, and to foundations. There is something about the fact that I'm probably relatively polite most of the time, but I don't suffer fools gladly. I don't have to be disrespectful to be honest, but I am going to speak truth to power. That's what I'm here to do. I am not here simply for me. I'm here for all of us. At the same time, I'm not invested in my own importance. I see myself as important as a human being, but I don't see myself as any more important than anybody else, and I don't see myself as indisposable or indispensable. I'm, like, 'While I'm here, I've got stuff to do.' It's the integration. My way of

thinking, my body, all of me, is necessarily integrative. I don't even know if that's a proper way of putting it, but maybe there's something about that forced hybridity and the way that I've had to transmute that in myself that means that I'm constantly transmuting that for this work. I don't have the luxury of distance from it, because for me I've got skin in the game. My life is at stake, and the lives of the women around me are at stake. That can have me wake up crying, while at the same time going, 'Okay, through these tears I'm still going to carry on anyway.' That I learned from my grandmother.

Moderator: You've talked about this, because everything you've said has been this. How has your involvement in this sector impacted on you personally?

Marai Larasi: So, the sector has been my joy and pain. I have grown up in this work. I love and loathe it. It has given me life and energy, and wisdom and healing. Healing, absolutely, and at the same time it has exhausted me, and had me, if not broken, then certainly dented at points. I'd say I have a life-long sisterhood and community and allyship and friendships, and all of that, as a result of this work, and being a part of this sector. I really see myself as having had the gift of being a part of something that is extraordinary. But, it has also been painful and unbearable and disappointing, and all of those things at the same time. And so, it's not one thing. You know? Maya Angelou wrote that book, *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*. For me, I wouldn't have changed any-, like, I just think it's been a privilege, you know? And now, I work on the peripheries of the sector. I'm, like, this independent activist consultant person. And so, I'm, like, in and out of it. It's my place. It's, like, you know, particularly the black women's sector is home. You know? Imkaan was home. It's what I understand. But, I would say I'm much more of a movement than of a sector, and the sector happens to be the professional version of the movement.

Moderator: How do you think Imkaan and the women's sector as a whole influenced and change women's structural position in the UK?

Marai Larasi: Oh, my God. Without us? Oh, God. You know, I don't think we- (TC 40.00), this is one of the reason's I'm so glad this project is happening, because I don't think who we are as women and the influence of this sector on our world is truly understood, or has been captured. For me, everything from women's place in public office to how we understand what's acceptable in our society is so rooted in this sector. I think about the fact that, you know, there are women that benefit from the women's sector without even knowing it. The women who do work about everything from sexual harassment to forced marriage might not even be a part of the sector but are only able to do that because this sector, this movement, created the foundations and the conditions for them to do that. If I think about Imkaan, I don't know what our sector, what our movement, would look like without Imkaan. Imkaan has held the line, has been the thing that has pushed back, with our members, against the wholesale decimation of black services, of BME women's services. Those services continue to support women to save their own lives and continue to support women to have expectations beyond being harmed. That's critical in terms of our world and our society. I dread to think what our world would have looked like without this movement, without this sector and without organisations like Imkaan. I can't imagine even what our sector would look like without Imkaan, because we would not have the level of push-back against intersecting oppression and against, kind of, racialised misogyny and patriarchy that we have

if we didn't have Imkaan as an entity. I think there's a way that this has been part of the lifeblood of these islands, you know? Yes.

Moderator: What do you think have been the greatest achievements of women's collective action?

Marai Larasi: Oh, God. I'd say, we might not feel it right now, but just keeping going. Like, we might not feel it. We might be in the pain of it, but continuing to hold doors open for women to enter, to find safety, must never be underestimated. Angela Davis talks about recognising that times are hard but also making sure that we acknowledge that change has happened, and they're going to keep pushing back, but the change nevertheless has happened, and we continue to hold the line. I'd say, from making sure that services are there to changing laws, and changing laws for example even around immigration control, to setting standards around how and what women's lives should look like to contributing to work around equal pay. I'd say, I can't think of an area where our work hasn't had influence. There are specific moments and, you know, legal judgements, and all of those things, and I don't want to underplay those things, but for me it's much more that we continue to work, to create a better world for women collectively. That feels like, and I know at points in time it feels horrible, and like we're in the wilderness, or in some kind of mad desert, but actually I think we have done amazing work, and we have influenced everything from art and literature to how we live our lives, and I think that that's huge.

Moderator: What do you think still needs to be done?

Marai Larasi: Oh, God. So much. So much. But, I want us to rethink whether it needs to-, so, I want us to actually lead and hold that work, but I don't want all the emotional labour to be ours, because we're knackered. What needs to be done is we need to actually get better at creating space for younger women, for women that aren't the usual suspects in terms of what a good feminist is supposed to look like. What needs to be done is we need to work with ourselves and on ourselves, to transform how we do the work. We need to reclaim what our radical politics looks like, so it isn't hijacked by hate, and what needs to be done is we need to end violence against us. That's a huge undertaking, and that's life-long work until we end intersecting oppression. Like, we're here for the long haul, as far as I'm concerned.

Moderator: What are your thoughts on the future for women's rights?

Marai Larasi: That we have the fight of our lives on our hands, but I would say, for anybody who says that they are going to take our rights away and it's going to just be that, they haven't met us. There is something about how much we are underestimated, and I just think, if you want to underestimate us, go ahead. We're going to do this anyway. So, even if you think you're taking our rights away, you might take our rights away in law, you might take our rights away in name, you're not going to take our rights away because they're ours. We fought for those rights, and I am descended from people who were enslaved. I don't take that lightly. I know that whether people give us our liberation or not, we claim it. That's where I am with it. It's not like I would be okay with legal changes, or any of those things, or human rights legislation changing. All of that is absolutely critical and foundational, but I know who we are, and I know the power of our sisterhood, and I know that we are not done. We are just

beginning, as far as I'm concerned. And so, I'm, like-, the future looks bright. You know? However difficult it might feel right now, for me the future looks bright.

Moderator: Thank you. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

Marai Larasi: No. That's it. Thank you so much.

Moderator: Thank you. Thank you.