

Abianda's reflections on the death of Aisha Cleary

Overview

In August 2019, a young woman called Rianna Cleary was remanded to HMP Bronzefield, Europe's largest women's prison. Rianna had only turned 18 a few months earlier and was several months pregnant when she was remanded.

In September 2019, Rianna went into labour, alone in her cell, where she gave birth without support of health professionals or prison staff. Her baby girl, Aisha, did not survive.

All those at Abianda send our deepest condolences to Rianna for this awful loss.



An [Inquest Touching the Death of Aisha Cleary](#), led by Mr Richard Travers, H.M. Senior Coroner for Surrey, was published on the 28 July 2023 and was [summarised](#) by [Inquest](#), a charity providing expertise on state-related deaths and their investigation to bereaved people, lawyers, advice and support agencies, the media and parliamentarians.

This Inquest tells some of Rianna's story and the story of the professionals, services and systems that were meant to support her and keep her safe, but with so many missed opportunities and failings. This is a story that is deeply familiar to Abianda, and which underpins why the organisation was founded and why we continue to work hard

to shine a light on girls and young women affected by violence and exploitation, such as Rianna, and provide the gendered, culturally, and contextually competent support they deserve.

The Inquest provides a detailed overview of the key events in the timeline of professional involvement in Rianna's life and failings in safeguarding practice, so this won't be repeated here. However, there are several themes that the Inquest touches on, which are worth further exploration. It is noted that the full context of Rianna's experience and life aren't known to Abianda, including her telling of her story, her wishes or her feelings.

So, these themes are explored drawing on the broader experiences of girls and young women.



Written by Nicky Hill, Head of Services



Adultification and Bias

Young Black women and professionals' use of language

Rianna herself is quoted as asking the question:

I wondered if I was being treated differently from [other women in prison] because of my race, because I was young, or because of my past.

This is one of the very few focuses in the analysis of this tragic case that highlights that Rianna is a Black young woman.

International research on the concept of adultification bias has demonstrated that Black girls experience a bias in professional understanding and responses, rooted in systemic racism and oppression. Especially within statutory services and the criminal justice system.

The concept proposes that Black girls are, consciously and unconsciously, viewed by professionals as being older than they are and so better able to make informed choices and decisions, as well as being more able to keep themselves safe, than their chronological age and developmental stage would suggest. This can inform a range of professional judgements that relate to assumed emotional or practical capacity and resilience to 'cope' with stressful, harmful, and abusive relationships and situations and so obfuscate analysis of harm that requires robust, multi-agency and potentially statutory child protection responses.

This concept has been championed by [Listen Up Research](#) who have been UK leaders in this field for several years and who explore the impacts in the context in [safeguarding and criminal justice](#) settings.

This bias also links to the language of professionals that was cited within the Inquest, specifically the term of 'gangster' that was applied to Rianna, and which the professional who used the term, accepted had no basis in fact.

Language has functions beyond simply communicating information. Language has the power and potential to convey values, shape understanding, frame context, evoke emotions and influence professional responses. This is particularly relevant in the framing of girls and young women in relation to gangs and which regularly obfuscates the reality of vulnerability and exploitation.

Abianda has undertaken focused participatory work with young women to explore how they understand the term 'gangs' and what [this means to them](#). Young women highlight that the term can be both a barrier to the reality of their lives being understood by professionals and the provision of support that is focused on their wellbeing, welfare and safety. The intersection of race, gender and the gangs narrative is also explored by a [recent report](#) by the [Milk Honey Bees](#) project in Lambeth. This highlights the concept of intersectionality, which is described by its most significant originator,

Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw*, as being focused on the "understanding of the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking" which centres on the experience of Black girls and women.

*Crenshaw, Kimberlé Williams (1989) "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." University of Chicago Legal Forum 1989:139–67, p. 149



Child Protection Frameworks

Child Criminal Exploitation, County Lines and Modern Slavery

Abianda is clear that children, defined by the Children Act (1989) as those under 18, cannot consent to abuse. So when they are groomed, coerced, manipulated or are forced by circumstances into a constrained 'choice' to commit crimes, they require a professional response within child protection frameworks and not the criminal justice system.

County lines are explicitly referenced within the Inquest, and whilst the details as they relate to Rianna are not in the public domain, the reality of this form of Child Criminal Exploitation must be understood and considered. Abianda is the specialist, gendered provider of support for girls and young women as part of the MOPAC-funded [Rescue and Response](#) service.

Rescue and Response is a pan-London County Lines support service for children and young people up to the age of 25 who are exploited by county lines drug distribution networks operated by Organised Criminal Groups (OCGs) and subject to criminal exploitation. The project was launched in 2018 by the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime and is the first county lines support service to operate at scale, across the whole of London.

The [2022 Strategic Assessment](#) of the Rescue and Response service highlights the low levels of identification of girls and young women exploited through this form of organised crime and explores the observations and learning that contribute to this systemic invisibility of girls and young women.



The exploitation of children and adults at risk within county lines, when this involves their use to move drugs across the UK, falls within the legislative framework of the [Modern Slavery Act \(2015\)](#) and legally should be considered as human trafficking.



When this legislative framework is applied, there is a requirement to consider the need to apply the [National Referral Mechanism](#) (NRM). This is a framework for identifying victims of human trafficking and ensuring they receive appropriate support. An NRM referral should always be considered if there are concerns that a child or young adult is being criminally exploited and these referrals can be made by a small group of professionals including social workers and the police.

There is no indication that this happened for Rianna, and this is a trend seen for many girls and young women. Abianda delivers high quality training for professionals on the Modern Slavery Act and the National Referral Mechanism, informed by the experiences of young women. To find out more see [here](#).

The Inquest, as well as these underpinning themes, highlights the need for high quality relational support that includes advocacy for girls and young women, which is central to Abianda's support and practice.



Abianda's Work

Decreasing risk and harm

The primary focus of Abianda's work with young women and girls is to:

- Reduce involvement in or impact of county lines and child criminal exploitation.
- Decrease risk in young women's lives as a result of the impact of county lines and increase stability.
- Reduce the levels of harm that a young woman experiences in this context.
- Establish an effective local professional network around the young woman who will provide ongoing support to address their wider need to reduce the risk of exploitation related harm.



Abianda practitioners will work shoulder-to-shoulder with young women, building trusted relationships, to provide rights-based advocacy support. Practitioners deliver a structured programme of support based on Solution Focused Brief Therapy approaches and techniques to deepen understanding of their lives and support development of critical awareness, access to tools and confidence in themselves to enable them to reach their best hopes for their futures.

Abianda will support the young woman to access services, assessments, resources and support that she is entitled to, in order to

bring about stability in her life, reduce harm and ensure that the young woman can continue to progress in her life positively and healthily.

Abianda support young women to have their voices heard amongst the professional network that may be orbiting them, to ensure they are better connected with these services and that they are able to influence the decisions that affect their lives.



Abianda also utilises a participatory approach that involves the voices and lived experiences of young women and girls to shape service delivery and policy development which informs all that we do. It's important that the voices and experiences of young women who receive services are shaping how they are delivered.

Abianda also challenge oppressive practice, holds services to account, and works tirelessly to ensure that young women's safety and developmental needs are met.

This approach is focused on keeping girls and young women out of the criminal justice system and ensuring that remand to custody or custodial sentences are the last resort.



Pregnancy and Prison

Keeping pregnant women out of prison

It is Abianda's belief that no pregnant woman should be in prison and so fully support the current [Level Up](#) campaign which highlights that in the last two years, two pregnant women have given birth inside UK prisons and their babies have died.



Prison will never be a safe place for pregnant women and new mothers. But every year, pregnant women are detained and give birth in UK prisons, and 1 in 10 give birth in their cell or on the way to hospital according to a 2020 Nuffield Health research report: [Locked out? Prisoners' use of hospital care in England and Wales](#).

Even if the worst doesn't happen, toxic stress during a mother's pregnancy affects her baby's development. Prisons are extremely stressful and traumatising environments that negatively impact your mental and physical health – and if you're pregnant, the impact on you and your child is long-lasting.

The majority of women enter prison for sentences of six months or less – which is enough time to lose your home, job and be totally cut off from your family and support networks.

When a woman is supported in her community, she is able to tackle the issues that swept her up into crime in the first place. In her community, she's able to get support to give her child the best start in life, including easy access to antenatal and postnatal healthcare.

Rianna's experience is tragic and heartbreaking, but is not isolated or uncommon. The time is now for us all to work together to see and hear young women and ensure they have lives where their best hopes are realised.

