

AVA – Case Study Two

Case study: Small charities and social change
Field: Violence against women and girls

At a glance

AVA (Against Violence and Abuse) is committed to ending gender-based violence and abuse across the UK by supporting survivors and challenging social attitudes. They are funded by a mix of charitable trust foundations, and have no statutory funding. Their annual income is around £450,000 and they have 10 staff.

Focus of the case study

The focus of this case study is Breaking Down the Barriers, a national commission into women facing multiple disadvantage which was published in March 2019. AVA worked in partnership with Agenda, funded by Lloyds Bank Foundation.

What does advocacy mean for them?

AVA is part of the women's sector, but they have *'always looked for gaps in what's going on'* and for opportunities to collate and convene existing forces. *'The time was right for there to be a bigger piece of work around gender and multiple disadvantage. It had been happening in different arenas and this was an opportunity to pull that work together'*.

There was a second reason why AVA felt well placed to be heavily involved in this report:

'Where an organisation is "at", is about not only the projects they've done but the set of people that work for them that gain an understanding about those networks'.

The project came out of a growing agenda around the meaning of 'multiple disadvantage' in the UK. According to AVA, *'the term multiple disadvantage refers to those people who face multiple and intersecting inequalities including gender based violence and abuse, substance use, mental ill health, homelessness, being involved in the criminal justice system and the removal of children'*.

One of AVA's strengths is their ability to look for gaps in research, evidence or provision that they can draw attention to and build on. Part of AVA's role in this project was as a *'connector ... pulling in the voices of all*

women into the sector'. Creating a space for conversations about different specialisms within the sector was a significant aspect of this work – recognising that the challenges vulnerable individuals face are not isolated, and that vulnerable people may require support from multiple services.

The core aim of Breaking Down the Barriers was to understand the experiences of women facing multiple disadvantage, and to create a set of clear policy and practice recommendations about possible actions at a strategic and national level. But AVA also had an interest in *'making sure we raise the profile of specialist organisations and give them a platform'*. *'We've seen the decimation of specialist women's services over the last few years. This was an opportunity to think about their place in all this'*.

What's worked?

AVA was in a very good position to undertake this project, having already worked on overlapping issues of gender-based violence and abuse, drug and alcohol use, and mental health. Specifically, 'Mapping the Maze' had looked at services across the country to see what was available for women facing multiple disadvantage: *'we were hearing [of] challenges but also positive examples. There are pockets of really good practice across the country that we wanted to profile'*. *Tied into this was a desire to 'raise the profile of specialist organisations and give them a platform'*.

As a non-frontline organisation, it made sense for AVA to work in partnership with Agenda, an organisation that had specific experience of working with people facing multiple disadvantage within the prison system. Their peer researchers, who are fully trained, conducted the interviews, wrote them up for the report and were involved in the analysis of the data. Having a clear safeguarding agenda was important to create a safe and productive environment, especially when working alongside traumatised individuals and conducting peer research.

For AVA, meaningful inclusion means giving power and influence to people with lived experiences and avoiding tokenistic representation: *'When you create space for people to participate this can be a really important tool for people's wellbeing and to feel like they're making change in their own life'*.

AVA took a three-pronged approach: *'Women are saying this ... Practitioners are doing this ... People running things are doing it ...'*. The 'Mapping the Maze' work with disadvantaged women had made them aware of the examples of good practice within the VAWG sector but also of the many gaps. Practitioners were also brought to the table, as were *'people with agency in a "big power" sense'* – people who could engage and use the recommendations, influencing at a *'higher political level'*. AVA is using the approach to maximise the usefulness and relevance of the report findings, feeding information to an MP involved in the report while continuing to gather learning and evidence.

The partnership with Agenda allowed each organisation to play to its strengths and for work to be shared between them – as when Agenda led

conversations with practitioners while AVA focused on the policy-level mapping. The benefits of partnership working are many: for example, AVA have continued to work with the same group of peer researchers and are now training them to co-deliver training themselves on the practicalities and principles of peer research.

Challenges/what we've learnt?

For AVA, every project adds to the learning. In this particular one, they became very conscious of the 'hidden work' of advocacy – time spent by organisations on developing relationships and following leads about who needs to be involved in the conversation. *'This takes hours of time that's not always recognised'*. Listening is vital to advocacy, but organisations also need time and space to reflect, which can be difficult, especially without core funding.

The things they have found to be most important to achieve their specific aims are: having testing grounds, *'groups of people with experience to validate and critique'*; meaningful inclusion of the voices of individuals with lived experiences; and coalition and consensus building – bringing the *'necessary people to the table'* to initiate long-lasting and embedded change.

In contrast, lack of communication between services and sectors was described as a significant challenge that restricted AVA's work. Added to this is the problem of ministerial move-around and general lack of stability across government. Through their research into this report, AVA recognised that we often operate in silos, from the structures of government through to the local level of how funding plays out. For example, public health funding at the local level is not always in communication with local government. The report uncovered the need to bring sectors together to break down siloed working.

Knowing your audience means adapting your message according to who you're trying to influence. AVA sees this as a strategy for managing the risk of being ignored: *'Understanding who you're trying to influence and why, and what their role and position is'*, as well as understanding whose views are seen as valid within those contexts.

Funding that enabled AVA to change direction, be linked with other organisations, and be more flexible in their approach, was much valued. Flexibility is essential in a small organisation, particularly when handing over projects when staff move on – keeping momentum and relationships going in a project that has been developed *'based on people's passions'*.

One ongoing question for AVA is, *'Are we acting for or with?'*. AVA is well aware of the challenge of using their experiences of working 'with' to try to advocate 'for' – *'to give others a platform without speaking over them – how do you put people to the front and what does that look like. How do you not make involvement tokenistic? If you are speaking for, what consent is there to speak for?'*

This is the case study of one of 11 organisations we spoke to from four fields: criminal justice; homelessness; migration; and violence against women and girls. These case study organisations had annual incomes between £50k and just over £1m. We are incredibly grateful for the rich and open insights that were shared with us.

The case studies are part of IVAR's study *Small Charities and Social Change*, which builds on existing research, drawing on the experience of 11 organisations, to explore the role and contribution of small charities in more depth. It asks how and why small charities are challenging, shaping and changing policy, practice and attitudes. It discusses the challenges and opportunities that they face in doing so.

The report and case studies can be found here www.ivar.org.uk/social-change.