

Agenda

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

At a glance

Agenda, the alliance for women and girls at risk, works to build a society where women and girls are able to live their lives free from inequality, poverty and violence. They have four staff members, and annual funding of around £230,000 is provided by a portfolio of charitable trust foundations (with no statutory funding).

Focus of the case study

This case study focuses on #ThisisMyStory, Agenda's social media campaign that aims to raise women's voices by sharing their experiences of multiple disadvantage in their own words.

What does advocacy mean for them?

Agenda campaigns for women and girls facing abuse, poverty, poor mental health, addiction, homelessness and contact with the criminal justice system to get the support and protection they need. The organisation was formed in 2015 to advocate for change for this group.

The aim of #ThisisMyStory, which started in 2017, is to address the need to give women facing multiple disadvantage a voice and overcome the stigma and negative attitudes surrounding them. The campaign drives wider change among policy makers, services and in public attitudes.

Agenda sees challenging social attitudes as a key part of its core mission to improve the services and policies for women and girls with multiple disadvantages. They believe that a policy campaign is *'always more powerful when you have a human story around it and you can humanise it'*. The campaign also encourages other organisations across different sectors, e.g. criminal justice, drugs and alcohol etc., to reflect on how much they draw on experts with lived experiences and *'how much are we reflecting on the reality of these women's lives in our work'*.

'Advocacy', in this campaign, means giving authority to people with lived experience: *'Being seen and heard, you're never ever going to beat that feeling after you've not been seen and heard for so long'*.

The impact of this reaches beyond the women sharing their stories and affects others going through similar experiences: *'It's ... for other women who see that and may think "this woman's told her story, maybe my story is valid"'*.

What's worked?

Thoughtful planning and relationship building with campaigners is at the core of this work. It means engaging *'on their terms [and] in their space'*. Preparing campaigners is a careful process which requires the team from Agenda to have safeguarding procedures in place, as well as a flexible way of working. Only once they feel ready are the women asked how they would like to share their story. They will be asked questions like 'How do you want to tell your story?'; 'If you want to be anonymous, is there anything in the story that might identify you?'; and 'How might this impact you in ways you might not have thought of?' *'It's the work done behind the scenes to get that woman to a point where she's thinking, "this is my platform and opportunity to put it out there"'*. Agenda also offers women the opportunity to stop the process at any time or to remove the article if they change their mind about sharing their story.

Agenda maintains the relationship with women after their story is published, sharing potential opportunities for them to be involved with, for example, developing Agenda's campaigns, speaking at events, meeting a minister or writing follow-up thought pieces for the media.

For some campaigners, sharing their experiences on this platform has supported their recovery. One woman said she was *'able to have different conversations with people in her life'* and that the campaign has given her *'more boundaries to say no, I'm not running and hiding now'*. This campaigner said, *'when you do tell your story and [can] be proud of that story in the end, and say that happened to me but I understand it and accept me. It's a really empowering powerful feeling for someone that's had a lot of power taken away from them'*. The impact of this empowerment reaches beyond the women sharing their stories, and validates other women going through similar experiences.

Within the violence against women and girls sector, there are many small delivery organisations that are under massive pressure to provide services with cut budgets. As an alliance, Agenda helps to *'bring organisations together who may not necessarily have the resources to do a campaign'*, so collaboration is a significant feature of their work. The partnership enables organisations' to make the most of their collective strengths as well as *'reach out to others' audiences'*.

Challenges/what we've learnt?

Agenda has found that developing strong relationships with officials and civil servants and suggesting constructive ideas about *'what the solution or the legislation or the guidance looks like'* and any unforeseen implications of a piece of legislation is very helpful for advocacy work.

The team strongly believes that for women with multiple disadvantage it is particularly important to model inclusive advocacy: *'If we don't model that then we simply are never going to persuade other people to do it. So as much as possible, that's the way that we try and work'*.

They are very aware of risk and put a lot of thought into it. Implementing necessary measures to reduce any risks of re-traumatisation requires significant resources. Agenda's relationships with frontline support organisations are therefore vital so that the women they engage with can access, through other services, the support they need during the process of revisiting their experiences.

Agenda understands the importance of having internal clarity about what their goals are – the team is encouraged to *'internalise and own the mission'* of the organisation. This allows them to look at their mission through different perspectives and lenses – *'Finding ways to tell [people] your story that resonate with them. And then doing that in a way that is completely compatible with your values and your organisational goal but does speak to who they are and what they want to do'*.

They have seen the power of incremental change in raising awareness, and the interconnectedness of #ThisIsMyStory and other policy-making agendas: *'It's a campaign that's about creating a space, giving women a platform, and gently in small ways over time changing who gets to have a say on issues we speak about'*.

Maintaining this campaign and creating an ongoing programme of support or training for women with lived experiences is *'resource intensive'* and an area Agenda is hoping to be able to develop further, convincing funders that this is a valuable area of work.

Providing a 'human face' to campaigns whilst avoiding tokenistic representation of women with lived experiences is vital. Ensuring that their work is authentic and *'rooted in clear evidence'* is paramount for Agenda. As one campaigner said, *'They don't make the story fit their agenda. It is what it is. In the past, I've fed into other things and they've only taken their part because it magnifies their needs. But Agenda take it all'*.

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.