

Community-Embedded Peer Advocacy Summary Centred on Refugee and Asylum seeking women Grace Shook

The advocacy system helps people who are making important decisions about their life. Instead of providing advice, advocates help in this process by providing information and sharing their advocacy partner's views to relevant people.

Currently, advocacy comes in many forms:

- Independent advocacy: Peer advocacy and citizen advocacy
- Collective advocacy: Focused on groups

These forms often take place in formal, professional independent advocacy organisations. This project is about exploring how advocacy can work at a grassroots level within the New Scots community. It also focuses on peer advocacy, which is where the advocate and advocacy partner share a similar life experience or background.

Advocacy is typically provided for specific groups of people, such as people with mental health issues, drug or alcohol abuse issues, or learning disabilities. Currently, there are no advocacy services in Scotland specifically for New Scots women. In this project we tried to understand how an advocacy support network for New Scots women would be beneficial for this group, especially for asylum-seeking and refugee women.

The 'Our Rights, Our Communities' project has shown that community-embedded peer advocacy works well for women with refugee or asylum-seeking backgrounds because it increases trust, allows for stronger communication between the advocate and advocacy partner, and breaks down existing barriers for women trying to access traditional advocacy.

Even in the grassroots context, peer advocates must receive in-depth and ongoing training in order to have the knowledge to be an advocate.

There are many barriers participants may face when trying to attend these training sessions. Facilitators of the training sessions must consider language barriers, transportation issues, and family support. Facilitators must make the training accessible by reimbursing travel expenses and providing on-site childcare. These strategies allow for more participants to take part in sessions.

In terms of the training sessions themselves, it is important that facilitators give culturally-sensitive and culturally-competent training by considering the participants' lived experience.

The most important point of the training is to build participants' confidence, develop self-empowerment, and build a support network participants can rely on. Through this, participants can share their knowledge and skills within their community by providing advocacy support and training other women, and thus creating a sustainable community-based support network.

Besides these more practical challenges to providing advocacy, there are also structural issues. There may be tension between independent advocacy and community-embedded advocacy due to how they are organised.

Community-embedded advocacy groups may lack the essential components of independence:

- Structural independence
- Financial independence
- Psychological independence

If these components are not met, then the group is unable to join independent advocacy networks which represent the interests of advocacy groups and provide training. In this way, community-embedded advocacy groups are at risk of exclusion from the wider advocacy sector.

Community-embedded advocacy and independent advocacy organisations may also treat the issue of bias differently. Participants in the 'Our Rights, Our Communities' project believe that utilising their lived experience as an asylum-seeker is beneficial when providing advocacy to other asylum-seekers because it builds trust and may help the advocacy partner overcome an extremely difficult situation. However, a principle of independent advocacy is that advocacy partners must be protected from bias. This further excludes

community-embedded advocacy from the wider advocacy sector and underplays the benefits shared lived experiences has for asylum-seekers.

Here are the steps other groups may take to form a community-embedded peer advocacy support network:

- Participants should identify the type of advocacy support network they want to create and their target community.
- Participants should create a plan for identifying further training and professional development courses so that the peer advocates are keeping up to date with new developments and are expanding their skillset.
- It would be helpful to secure a physical location for the advocacy support network, create a phone number and email address, and a rota system for the peer advocates.
- They should also create consent forms and screening questionnaires for the advocacy support network.
- Participants must also decide if the advocacy sessions will be appointment-based, drop-in, or a mix of both.
- Because advocacy work can be emotionally and mentally draining for peer advocates, strong resiliency measures, such as a support group for peer advocates to debrief or a mentorship programme, must be applied to protect the peer advocates' mental health.



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