



## Showcase: Save The Woman

[Save The Woman](#) began in Nigeria with the aim to reduce women's reoffending rates by empowering women through learning skills such as business skills in prison to find employment and better their future. It expanded to Middlesbrough in 2015.

The CCSF Learning Hub team chatted with Olalekan Odeyeyi (Ola), Chief Executive Officer, about its 'Africentric Parenting Skills 101' course, part of their 'Building Bridges, Breaking Barriers' project. We discussed what the online delivery meant for them and how they built trust with the people they support. John Atkinson, Community Action Officer from Middlesbrough Voluntary Development Agency (MVDA) and a partner of Save The Woman, and Chido Murinda who shadows Ola, also joined the conversation.



*Save The Woman*

### What does Save The Woman do in Middlesbrough?

We are trying to act as a bridge between social services and families. For example in 2019, two women complained to us that their children were taken into care. Looking at local authority data, we saw a higher number of children from African communities taken into care. The local authority said it was due to abuse or neglect, those were the identified issues.



*Community conversation, Teesside University*

We applied to The National Lottery Community Fund in May 2020 and we did a community conversation, a grassroots discussion. We invited MPs, social services, the mayor, local councillors and parents to discuss children in care. We looked at the cultural competency of the service providers and the cultural understanding of different communities.

While lobbying the local authority to improve their training for social workers, we realised parents might also do something wrong. That's why we set up an Africentric parenting course taught in an Africentric perspective so parents appreciate potential for misunderstanding so they can

communicate appropriately and take account of the latest legal position when making parenting decisions. The course explains the Eurocentric worldview, takes a positive African centred approach to parenting so parents can be empowered to bring up children who value their culture and understand the Eurocentric context in which they live. The course aims to support parents to understand UK law, as what's acceptable in one culture isn't acceptable in some areas.

### How did the COVID-19 pandemic impact how you were delivering the Africentric parenting course?

Initially our target was people in the local area – Middlesbrough, Stockton, Darlington. We wanted to do in-person training but, when the pandemic erupted, we had to shift online. That has been positive for us as we were able to reach more people and liaise directly with families who don't live locally. Since we started it, 248 parents have attended the course online. However, thousands more benefited through our YouTube channel in London, Milton Keynes, Sunderland, Manchester, Edinburgh, the USA, Canada, and Italy. People are engaging and commenting. We realised this is a global issue: in every area a migrant is relocated to, they experience this problem.

### What helped you to grow and reach more people?

We give the kudos back to the parents. All we were doing was advocacy support but the first parent speaking out has opened doors for more parents to speak out. The majority of people believe word-of-mouth because they have passed through and benefitted from it directly, rather than hearing from a stranger they don't know anything about.

We never thought of developing a course in the UK, but now we have. We've gone the extra mile because of the needs of the families. We were surprised, we didn't anticipate this growth in such a short period of time. We've also had to engage other organisations to improve the training and grow in scope.

### What other organisations did you involve and why?

**Olalekan Odedeyi:** We needed staff development and professional support so the strongest relationship we've got is with the MVDA. That's where John Atkinson comes in. They strengthen, guide and support us. We also partner with organisations like Family Mediation Centre, the partnership was vital as there is a manual on parenting here in the United Kingdom. Family Mediation Centre was able to facilitate the course 101 using their expertise. Currently we are seeking for more resources, which includes legal experts in family law to support the community.

**John Atkinson:** It's a core part of our work really. Sharing a variety of ideas, speaking to government officials and supporting activities. Save The Woman are raising awareness of issues

that affect them in a constructive way and we want to support them. We have a very diverse and constantly changing population in Middlesbrough and the systems are still not adequately adapted to the needs of the people who are expected to use them. It can be a culture shock. For example, service providers seem oblivious to the fact that they're sending information in written form, in English, to people who don't speak English or can't read, so have no idea what they are trying to communicate. There's still so much work to be done. Through a single issue, Save The Woman has highlighted a whole range of themes and issues across so many different challenges that migrant groups are experiencing.

### **How did you develop trust with the families and what were the challenges?**

**Olalekan Odedeyi:** We developed trust with parents prior to moving the course online, because it's a difficult conversation. The first parent to come to us took 9 months to speak out as she passed through this traumatic experience of her children being taken into care all alone. This led another parent to join after a few months. They also benefitted from this course and spread the word.

The latest Ofsted report found the children's social care services inadequate in our area, so if people see an organisation trying to improve local services they say, 'Let's go there'. It's about prevention and early intervention. As partners, MVDA promotes our course on their platform, which gives people more confidence in us. We have limited resources but because of the trust we established, our course got attention. This helped us find the funding.

### **When delivering the course online, how do you create safe spaces for people?**

The training is two hours per session, but we let the parents know that the last 30 minutes is going to be a family clinic off the record. They can share and seek advice as individuals and talk about the issues that ethnic minorities face every day. They support by giving strength to other families that are going through the same thing as they are and are in the same box. They know that these sessions are confidential. Where the trainers invite people to the course, I ask them to identify themselves, otherwise, I'll put them in the waiting room until I clarify. Every individual must have registered for the course. So, once they can see it is a safe environment and you keep to your word, they are fine.

### **With this big success online, why return to offline?**

You can never compare physical interaction with online, many people miss it. We support local parents with court attendance, with meetings with the social services when their children are being taken into care, when they need people to be with them for support. People in Scotland want us there too, but we can only offer a call. When you are there, you can see their feelings.

A parent invited us to their first meeting with social services and as soon as we got there, we could see a change. She could relax a bit. She felt pressured, possibly due to prejudice or an imbalance of power between the social services and the parents or the mistrust between them. The parents that come for courses might need to hand over some of that stress, you know? Having coffee together, alone, is enough.

### **Has that been frustrating, not being able to provide that offline support?**

It's challenging because someone will be crying, you know. What do you do? We send them a link to the video and say, 'Calm down, look at what we have taught, start putting into practice what you've learnt'. The little consolation we can give, we give but it's not the same as if we were physically present.

Findings from a recent Ofsted visit said more work is needed to understand the diverse needs of children and families to improve Middlesbrough's Children's Services - that's what we discuss. Diverse and cultural needs. Some children display challenging behaviour, but social services don't carry out autistic assessments. Instead, they find the parents neglectful and abusive and take away the children. One of the children said, 'To be in care is bad but to be black and being care is twice as bad'. I'm very sure local people benefit more from our support than those online.

### **In the future, will you retain online support as well as face to face?**

Yes, because there is a global need. Initially we thought people were over excited, but we realised that knowledge is powerful. What you don't know, you don't know. Now social services are coming to us asking how we can replicate this course for their teams. We work with educational organisations and the police on multi-agency decision making to see how we can do things better for families. In the financial year 2019/2020, local authorities spent £9.93 billion on children's social care services. Rather than wait for an investigation, why not support those families? The course that we are running is just a token of that cost.

### **John, what do you think we can learn about building trust and connections, from the experience of the past year?**

**John Atkinson:** Some of the lessons are negative. If social services refuse to engage with the community, if they don't listen to it, then it will raise its voice and organise and fight back, and it will use the media to highlight what's going on. Save The Woman has raised the issue of bias in the system. But a new relationship is available at speed if you sit down, have an honest conversation, and actually make the changes that communities are asking you to make. You can save time and money.

## Ola, how has Save The Woman listened to the community to inspire change?

**Olalekan Odedeyi:** If there is a concern with a service provider, coming to listen to them and reach a positive outcome. Going to the provider and coming back to the family gives them more trust. One way is just taking a message and one way is doing something with the message. We do the right thing with messages to give families strength and an opportunity to positively change. For instance, one family was told their children will not return for 18 years. We supported them, went to court and within two months got a new date for the children to return to the family. When we started, Middlesbrough had one of the highest numbers of children in care. With our dedicated campaign, we're at 500 now, from 700.

## What advice would you give other small organisations about building trust and connections through the pandemic?

**Olalekan Odedeyi:**

- 1. Community voices are so important.** Make sure you're good at documenting and feeding back to the community, to make sure you're on the same page. Don't take a message from the community without bringing back to them what you've done with the message.
- 2. Identify your objective and goals because you have to be focused.** You need to establish a brand and what you stand for.
- 3. No matter what you have, look out for networking opportunities.** Collaborate - partner, if possible - with bigger organisations. Working with the MVDA and others has given us opportunities. Service providers see that there is a link between us and listen more than if we were alone as a small organisation.

**John Atkinson:**

- 4. It's important for organisations like MVDA, for our credibility, to be seen standing beside groups fighting for justice.** Otherwise, our reputation is damaged. We must be there for everybody and make an effort to maintain the trust of the communities that we serve. Sometimes that's not comfortable. The local authority is our major funder and we're getting in conflict, but that's the nature of our role.

**Chido Murinda:**

- 5. It's important to celebrate small wins happening through organisations like Save The Woman, because it shows that there's progress, no matter how small it is.** It inspires others to reach out and to start acting. We have 20 fewer parents who are going to suffer the traumatic experience of having kids in the care system. It is making a significant difference.