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# From *The Help* to *Roma*:

How The National Domestic Workers  
Alliance Is Transforming Narratives In Pop Culture



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Founded in 2007, the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) is the nation's leading voice in the U.S. for dignity and fairness for millions of domestic workers, the majority of whom are immigrants and women of color. With more than 60 affiliate organizations and local chapters, NDWA is winning improved working conditions while building a movement rooted in the human dignity of domestic workers, immigrants, women, and their families.

### **WHY BUILD A CULTURE CHANGE STRATEGY WITH FILM?**

Film, at its best, allows us to immerse ourselves in another person's identity and perspective: to see through their eyes, walk their path, feel the sting of their tears, let our hearts expand joyfully with theirs. Over the course of a few hours, film can transport viewers across time and space, allowing us to explore a different reality. Done right, a film has the power to change not just one viewer's understanding, but millions of people sharing the same story and meeting the same characters.

Some stories “test the limits of our existing frameworks for understanding: asking us to redefine work and family, private and public, practical and emotional,” says Ai-jen Poo, founder and executive director of the NDWA. And some films, like 2018's Academy Award-winning *Roma*, “give us the opportunity to reflect on all the moral choices of our time. So that we may together write a new, more humane story about our shared future.”

For more than a decade, NDWA has implemented strategies that harness advocacy, policy, innovation, and culture change to advance its overall mission as it works to address intersecting issues relating to the representation of immigrants, women of color, domestic workers, and low-wage workers. NDWA works with a broad range of partners—including the entertainment industry—to change how Americans value care, women, families, and our communities.

Every day, more than 2.5 million domestic workers care for and clean our homes. Domestic workers are the nannies who take care of our children, the house cleaners who bring order to our home, and the care workers who ensure that our elders and loved ones with disabilities can live independently (↗) and with dignity.

With a workforce that is largely hidden behind closed doors, the challenge of reaching and organizing domestic workers is significant. Additionally, domestic work has always been associated with women, and as a profession, with women of color. NDWA has long understood that bringing dignity, respect, and value to this work requires changing norms, feelings, and beliefs about the work itself and the people who do it.

This is a story about how NDWA took risks, experimented, and paved the way in partnering with the entertainment industry, developing their own internal capacity and expertise, and how this history provided the roots for trusting, authentic relationships to form around *Roma*.

### NDWA'S NARRATIVE VISION

For NDWA, a strategy focused on changing the beliefs and mental models that help people make meaning of the world is a goal in and of itself. The organization doesn't approach narrative and culture change strategies as just tactics to further policy change, and its team understands that working in the emotional terrain of people is not linear, and the outcomes are unpredictable. "The emotional life of people is as much a part of our reality as anything rational or research-driven," NDWA asserts.

NDWA's culture change strategy is built on the recognition that there are two types of truths, and both of them matter: what's factually true, and what's emotionally true. It is true that domestic work—being a nanny, a housekeeper, or a caregiver for the elderly, for instance—are types of employment; that people earn money to pay their bills and support their own families.

When most of America's labor laws, like the Fair Labor Standards Act, were originally drafted in the 1930s, domestic workers were deliberately left out. Workplace standards like a minimum wage, overtime pay, or protections against sexual harassment in the workplace are rarely extended to domestic workers, including the right form a union and collectively bargain, a right afforded under the National Labor Relations Act to most workers in the private sector. Many domestic workers do not earn a living wage and work without access to health care, paid sick days, or paid time off. Because of domestic workers' unique workplaces—in other people's homes—the struggles they face are largely out of the public spotlight.

"Domestic workers perform some of the most intimate tasks in our lives and yet there is a clear distance between us," Ai-jen says. Their responsibility to provide care places them within the family, and yet their role as employee places them outside of it." Domestic workers take care of what is most important to us, yet they are often the least valued and the most vulnerable.

So NDWA presses on both fronts—what is factually true and also emotionally true: "At the heart of our troubling reality and what enables it to continue is a cultural narrative that fails to see the women who do this work as fully human; they are less than women, less than mothers, less than fully human. From the historic and pervasive mammy trope and images of whitewashed nannies to more recent representations of Latina house cleaners in film and television, on a spectrum of demeaning to exoticizing, all have failed to represent a fully



human experience,” Ai-jen wrote (↗) for *The Hollywood Reporter*. “Roma fundamentally disrupts the notion that the women who do this work are less than women, mothers, lovers, and heroines. It puts at the center the unsung heroism of the work. And it poses a question: What would it look like to honor them in a new way? Now that we see, what could we do differently?”

### **CONNECTING POLICY, ORGANIZING, AND NARRATIVE CHANGE STRATEGY**

NDWA seeks to build power on three intersecting fronts:

- 1. Political power**—the ability to change policy, and to elect and remove policymakers.
- 2. Economic power**—raising wages for workers and improving labor markets, as well as partnering with the private sector to create good jobs in the care industry, and to hold companies that are creating jobs accountable.
- 3. Narrative power (↗)**—the ability to change the rules and norms that our society lives by.

NDWA’s expertise in organizing and policy change shines through in their cultural work. “Having cultural strategies embedded in a social movement means you can exponentially increase your impact in the real world, because you can leverage culture change strategies with others, and connect mass audiences to policy or technology solutions that are in motion already,” says Ai-jen.

Since 2007, NDWA has built a community of more than 200,000 domestic workers, who are organizing and advancing their legislative power in advocating for living wages, benefits, days off, and legal protections. In 2010, domestic workers achieved a major policy breakthrough, winning the first statewide Domestic Worker Bill of Rights in New York—a bill (↗) informed by the needs and protections identified by more than 200 domestic workers.

"Domestic workers perform some of the most intimate tasks in our lives and yet there is a clear distance between us."





Since then, eight other states—Oregon, California, Connecticut, Illinois, Massachusetts, Hawaii, Nevada, and New Mexico—have passed domestic workers’ rights legislation. And in July 2019, Senator Kamala Harris (D-CA) and Representative Pramila Jayapal (D-WA) introduced the first-ever federal bill to ensure comprehensive rights for domestic workers. The Domestic Worker Bill of Rights Act proposes to include domestic workers in common workplace rights like freedom from harassment and discrimination, as well as a written agreement with clear expectations about pay and time-off policies, and establishes a groundbreaking mechanism for continuing to raise standards, a Domestic Workers Standards Board.

While domestic workers drove these legislative actions, they were supported by NDWA’s culture change strategy, which is designed to advance public awareness and provide people with the tools to reimagine the role, value, and rights of domestic workers in the United States.

NDWA’s culture change strategy focuses on people acknowledging, and recognizing, domestic work as work, and building cultural awareness of the value, humanity, and visibility of the women who do the work.

### **ACTIVATING A CULTURE CHANGE STRATEGY IN FILM**

“A lot of the traditional models for making change didn’t work for domestic workers, so we had to get really creative ... We’ve always seen ourselves as an advance team for the social justice movement,” says Ai-jen, explaining how they looked early on at the pop culture change space as a place for potential impact.

#### **The Campaign: *Be The Help* (2011)**

NDWA’s first major foray with the entertainment industry was in 2011 with the film *The Help* (Participant) in partnership with FUEL Change, a creative studio founded by culture change strategist Bridgit Antoinette Evans (currently executive director of Pop Culture Collaborative). As a guide to Hollywood and the entertainment industry, Bridgit helped them understand the assets they already had—and what they had to develop.

Initially, NDWA identified three major barriers to their goals of helping people’s understandings and behaviors in relation to domestic workers:

1. *Invisibility*. “How do you value what you don’t see?” That was the question that surfaced during NDWA’s narrative strategy process. Most Americans don’t know that millions of domestic workers are working in our homes and taking care of our families.





2. *Lack of protection.* The majority of Americans don't realize that decades-old legislation intentionally excludes domestic workers from basic labor protections like safe work conditions and basic pay. And too often, when people think about a worker, the last kind of person they may think of is a domestic worker.
3. *Cultural devaluing of women's work.* The work of care and cleaning has been associated with women historically, and with Black women and women of color as a profession, often taken for granted and not understood as real work or a profession.

In 2011, Hollywood announced a major film based on the bestselling novel *The Help* by Kathryn Stockett. The feature film, featuring Octavia Spencer (who won a Best Supporting Oscar for her role) and Viola Davis, focused on two Black domestic workers in the South in the 1950s. While some Black women, particularly Black feminist scholars, had criticisms of the film, NDWA used the film as an opportunity to portray domestic workers and create a conversation about the real lives of domestic workers today.

With FUEL and support from Participant, NDWA designed a multi-part pop culture intervention strategy centered on two of Hollywood's most significant industry moments: the Golden Globes and the Academy Awards. Beginning with in-depth media spokesperson training for dozens of domestic workers, NDWA was able to issue a press statement responding to media coverage each time *The Help* received an award or accolades. As a result, most articles featuring awards for the film's stars also featured a quote from a domestic worker, yielding unprecedented coverage of domestic worker voices in dozens of major entertainment press outlets, including *People*, *US Weekly*, the *LA Times*, and *Entertainment Tonight*. In addition, sponsored by *Essence* magazine and Iman Cosmetics, NDWA hosted red carpet Golden Globes and Oscar parties in New York, Los Angeles, and 20 other locales. By partnering with Octavia Spencer, Viola Davis, Cicely Tyson, Harold Perrineau Jr., and other artists on events, NDWA's bold approach put domestic workers into the industry's conversation.

In January 2012, when Octavia Spencer received a Golden Globe award for her role in *The Help*, she quoted Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "All labor that uplifts dignity in this country is worthwhile." NDWA sent out a press release connecting her comment with the real-life domestic workers around the country and with the pending California Bill of Rights for domestic workers.

"We got more media attention [at that moment] than we had in all of our bill of rights campaigns combined," says Ai-jen. "After we saw what was possible through the 'Be the Help' campaign, we were invested for life."

The organization began dedicating general operating resources towards culture change work and building partnerships with the entertainment industry. But at that time, funders were just beginning to learn about culture change work, and partnering with the entertainment industry was rare. Unbound Philanthropy was one funder that was excited about supporting NDWA's culture change work, as executive director Taryn Higashi explains: "Culture change is optimally an organization-wide effort," she reflected. "It's most effective when there are experienced people responsible for the cultural work, but the organization as a whole gets educated and is able to support and participate in it."

NDWA's learnings from the campaign support this sentiment, and have carried forward into the organization's theory of project-specific cultural strategies. Among these:

- Strong, trusting relationships with content creators and storytellers is critical to maximizing the impact of an entertainment industry, film-based strategy.
- Moving the real life stories of women and those at the margins into the center of a pop culture campaign of this scale and reach is critical.
- Integrating popular culture strategies with policy advocacy, organizing, innovation, and other strategies helps maximize the impact of all of the work.

The ability to raise the visibility and profile of domestic workers and those who employ them were two key strategies of the pop culture campaign with direct impact on the political and organizing strategies to advance the California Domestic Worker Bill of Rights. Early on in the campaign, NDWA's organizers and leadership with direct experience as domestic workers anchored press pieces and high-profile media moments, including awards night coverage and red carpet interviews.

On the heels of *The Help*, NDWA also collaborated with *Saturday Night Live* and *Parks and Recreation* actress Amy Poehler. At the 2011 *Time* 100 gala, Poehler publicly thanked and celebrated her child-care providers, leading to

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an ongoing commitment to raise awareness about domestic worker rights. In 2012, she helped create a PSA that fueled a petition campaign focused at women who are supported by other women working in their homes, often with their children. This media campaign aligned with on-the-ground mobilizing, events, and actions pushed the passage of the California Bill of Rights in 2013, after seven years and two vetoes. (↗)

These lessons—from infrastructure development to cross-sector collaboration and relationship building—that emerged in 2011, have evolved and expanded over time. In 2017 NDWA hired a full-time staff person to create partnerships in the entertainment industry, one of the first social justice organizations to do so. They continued to cultivate relationships that gained traction, visibility, and genuine partnerships and allies in such major moments as the 2018 Golden Globes Awards launch of #TimesUp, leading into the Oscar campaign for the Academy Award-winning film, *Roma*.

### ***Roma: Making the Invisible Visible (2018)***

In early 2019, after building momentum for a pop culture for social change field—sharing resources, experiences, and expertise with both philanthropy and the field itself—NDWA capitalized on seven years of learning, experimentation, relationship building, and infrastructure development to launch a highly successful campaign around the Academy Award-winning film *Roma*, bursting open the conversation about the visibility and value of domestic workers.

NDWA reconnected with Participant, which co-produced *Roma*, which centers on the story of Cleo, an indigenous woman who works as a live-in domestic worker for a middle-class family in Mexico City. An intimate, emotionally complex story about the bonds and fractures of family relationships, as well as the dynamics between a middle class family and Cleo, *Roma* is set against the sociopolitical upheaval of Mexico in the 1970s. The black and white film, shot in Spanish and Mixtec, is a semi-autobiographical take on the upbringing of the film’s writer and director Alfonso Cuarón and is said to be “a love letter to the women who raised him.”

Through Participant, NDWA formed a strong, trusting partnership with Alfonso. With NDWA’s, Participant’s and Alfonso’s values and goals aligned, this close-knit team created a campaign that put domestic workers at the center of the conversation about *Roma*, connecting the dots between the film’s central character and the approximately 70 million domestic workers globally lacking worker’s rights. “We were able to take one story in our culture and pry open the window for the conversation [about domestic workers], and move towards actual solutions,” notes Ai-jen.

Nicole Starr, Vice President of Social Impact at Participant, recalls that the early bonds of their *Roma* partnership began to form when she participated in a meeting hosted by the Pop Culture Collaborative, and connected with Kristina Mevs-Apgar, Creative Partnerships Director at NDWA. “We had a film centered on an indigenous domestic worker—it’s not often you see a character like this in cinema, and that really spoke to us,” says Nicole. She realized the film could be used to create a social impact campaign around domestic workers, and she reached out to NDWA. “It was really beneficial to have a prior relationship with NDWA, to understand how they approach their work and what incredible culture change strategists they are.”

In September 2018, Participant invited Ai-jen and Rosa Sanluis, a former domestic worker from Mexico, now an organizer living in the Rio Grande Valley, as guests at the Venice Film Festival, for the world premiere screening of *Roma*. No one—not even the actors themselves—had seen the film yet.

When the film ended much of the audience was stunned into silence, but eventually, Rosa articulated the sentiments that so many domestic workers have expressed after seeing *Roma*: “That was my story.”

But it was after the premiere when the active partnership began to form. “Basically, the second Alfonso arrived at the event celebrating the premiere, he came to talk with us about the movement,” says Ai-jen, recalling the evening reception where she met Alfonso for the first time. “He was really focused on understanding Rosa’s organizing, understanding our global connections to workers in Mexico and throughout Latin America. He wanted to talk about how the film could be of service to the movement.”

"We were able to take one story in our culture and pry open the window for the conversation [about domestic workers], and move towards actual solutions."

Immediately, NDWA began to work with Participant to design a campaign. NDWA built the campaign goals around the narrative analysis they had been developing for years—understanding that the dominant narratives about domestic work and workers was limiting NDWA’s ability to achieve meaningful change in the lives of workers, and identifying the kind of narrative environment they needed to create to engage audiences at scale. It was also important for NDWA, Alfonso Cuarón, and Participant to share the understanding that *Roma* is not a “movement” film—one created because of a movement’s own goals—

but a complex, nuanced, artful film developed outside of the domestic workers movement but that speaks to their concerns, values, and priorities.

Thus, the campaign goals were to 1) increase the visibility and value of domestic work, turning the attention of moviegoers and fans of *Roma* towards the reality of domestic workers today; and 2) to accelerate the adoption of solutions that concretely support economic security and dignity for domestic workers.

NDWA, Alfonso, and Participant were also united in their goal to center domestic workers in the conversation about *Roma*, to lift up their voices, and to include them as a key audience for the film. As an initial step, NDWA and Participant sequenced screenings of the film in five major cities across the country, and held post-screening focus groups so that domestic worker leaders could see the film first, and then use the film as an organizing tool in their communities.

“This film was more about seeing who Cleo is, being honest and real about the ways she experienced abuse, the complexity of what a domestic worker experiences in a family, and the deep love of her for the children and the children for her,” says Karina Muniz-Pagan, an organizer who led domestic worker engagement for *Roma*. NDWA subsequently held nearly 20 screenings with more than 2,200 domestic workers, who would then lead the campaign locally.

Daniela Contreras, a lead community organizer at NDWA in New York, described a screening of the film for local members: “They left with so many tears of joy and pride. It was like a transformation.” Domestic workers often feel a little ashamed, said Daniela, who herself spent many years as a domestic worker before working with NDWA. “As an immigrant, you come to the U.S. for a better life. But the better life is being someone else’s servant, in a way. With this movie, they saw their value.”

“Right out of the gate,” says Ai-jen, “we had an army of over 2,000 women who could use the film as a tool to build the movement.”

Other audiences they sought to engage included employers or families who rely upon domestic workers and caregivers, adults who were raised by caregivers, families of domestic workers, women who see their own success as tethered to the success of other women, and content creators and distributors in the entertainment industry who care about authentic representation.

Netflix was *Roma*’s distribution partner, and soon after (↗) the film premiered on the streaming channel, *The Hollywood Reporter* published the feature article, “On the Politics of *Roma*,” following Ai-jen’s earlier op-ed “How *Roma* Reveals the Complex Reality of Domestic Work.” (↗) Ai-jen and Alicia Garza, NDWA’s Strategy and Partnerships Director, also co-authored a piece for





*In Style* (7) about the relationship between the two main characters—Cleo and Sofia, the mother—who are trying to hold the family together: “They offer an entry point for us to reflect on what real solidarity between women could look like. Cleo and Sofia remind us to look for our interdependence and reach for one another.” This piece was geared towards women who see their lives as intertwined but also acknowledge the inherent differences that exist due to hierarchies of privilege and power, and the families and employers of domestic workers.

*Roma* was nominated for 10 Academy Awards, including Best Actress, Best Supporting Actress, Best Foreign Language Film, Best Screenplay, and Best Picture. Netflix ran an extensive Oscar campaign that included television ads, billboards, experiential events, curated screenings, and receptions. Netflix also integrated the NDWA campaign into their strategy, as Alfonso acknowledged that the social justice organization had developed its own mainstream traction around the film. Specifically, during February a portion of all *Roma*’s U.S. ticket sales were donated to NDWA, advertised through full-page ads in *The New York Times*, *The LA Times*, and the *Washington Post*.

At every step of the way, as the film gained more and more momentum, NDWA, Alfonso, and Participant “passed the mic” to domestic workers and moved the conversation towards solutions. At the Los Angeles premiere in December 2018, to an audience of 700 entertainment industry leaders, Alfonso introduced Ai-jen, who drew the connections between Cleo and the millions of domestic workers around the world—driving home the importance of authentic representation in Hollywood and the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights, and informing them about Alia, a revolutionary online, worker-owned platform developed and launched by NDWA to help housecleaners access benefits.

In January 2019, Alfonso and Ai-jen attended the Golden Globes together, where *Roma* won Best Motion Picture for a Foreign Language Film and Best Director. While walking the red carpet, reporters from all over the world asked Alfonso traditional industry questions about the film. Alfonso took this moment to turn the attention towards Ai-jen, offering her an opportunity to speak about the NDWA’s work and the importance of the film through the lens of the domestic workers movement. “He connected the film to this issue every step of the way,” recalls Nicole..

NDWA then partnered with *The New York Times* to create an Op-Doc, featuring Jacqui Orié, an NDWA member who has been a nanny for over 18 years. Jacqui speaks about how even though *Roma* was set in the 1970s in

**"Right out of the gate we had an army of over 2,000 women who could use the film as a tool to build the movement."**



Mexico, she is one of two million domestic workers who face similar struggles in the U.S. today. She implores Congress to pass the first National Domestic Workers' Bill of Rights: "Think about how you would feel going in to work with no worker rights."

NDWA also pitched press and led a robust digital campaign, including a microsite, [Roma.Domesticworkers.org](http://Roma.Domesticworkers.org), featuring a self-produced launch video, a PSA starring Alfonso Cuarón, and a short video for Oscars weekend, which together garnered over 93K views; more than 24,600 people have visited the site. NDWA held a Twitter chat on domestic employers and told the stories of the #HeroinesInOurHomes over social media. Celebrities like Kerry Washington (with over 5 million followers) tweeted about *Roma*, linking back to NDWA. Overall, there were 8,700 mentions of NDWA's *Roma* campaign on Twitter, both from existing advocates and new supporters and influencers. Other notable engagements came from Bloomberg TicToc and *Yahoo News*. In total, NDWA had more than 700 media clips in connection to their work around the film.

Partnering with Participant, NDWA then turned towards hosting an Oscar watch party at the Jane Club in LA. Co-hosted by notable activist-artist celebrities and influencers, including Eva Longoria, Rashida Jones, and #Me-Too movement leader Tarana Burke, the NDWA event was covered by over a dozen major media outlets, including *People* and *Entertainment Tonight*, garnering nearly 4.5 billion media impressions. Coordinated with the support of the public relations firm Elle Communications, NDWA kept a tight focus on its key message: "a special celebration of the true heroines in our homes, the domestic workers around the country."

"For Participant to co-host a party with you for the Oscars—that includes not just a roomful of advocates but A-list stars—takes real chops, long-term, deep partnerships," says Adey Fisseha, a Senior Program Officer at Unbound Philanthropy.

On February 24, *Roma* took home three Oscars: Best Director, Best Foreign Language Film, and Best Cinematography, and the moment for reaching an audience of 25 million came alive. When Alfonso received his award, he thanked the Academy for recognizing "a film centered around an indigenous woman—one of the 70 million domestic workers in the world without work rights, a character who had been historically relegated to the background in cinema."

After celebrating the historic wins at their own Oscars party, NDWA's Daniela describes attending Participant's official post-Oscar party with a group of 50 other NDWA members. "We got off the bus and walked down a long staircase. Everyone turned around and all I saw were camera flashes and people



clapping. I have never seen such beautiful, huge smiles on our members' faces. From being a domestic worker to being at this event, being acknowledged that you have a seat at that table too, that is a moment we will never forget. I felt we were the ones who had won the award."

"One of my favorite photos from that evening is one of Alfonso, Steven Spielberg, David Linde [Participant CEO], and a few of the domestic worker advocates—all celebrating the moment together," says Nicole. "I love it so much because we wanted to bring value and dignity to their work, and center their voices, bring them to the table, making sure they were leading what we were doing the whole way. It was really beautiful to see all of that unfold."

In June 2019, at the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity, Alfonso spoke on the relationship between art and activism in a session with Ai-jen and David Linde. During the discussion, he reflected (↗) on what he learned through this partnership: "To do this in a genuine way, all you do is put yourself at the service of the [social impact] organizations you're working with," he said. "Not trying to tell them what to do, but actually for them to lead the message ... It has to be a genuine commitment... These relationships have to come from a standpoint of honesty."

Ai-jen asserts that a remarkable circle of trust, authenticity, passion, and intense focus undergirded all of the relationships that made this particular campaign so successful, one that focused on "transformative" rather than "transactional" relationships and built on shared values and goals. Circumstances regarding the campaign and the film changed constantly, but there was trust at the center of it.

"Strategic partnerships are not only formed between entities but between individuals. Building these one-to-one relationships requires time. Nicole [Starr] and I were in constant communication, as the stakes were tremendously high for all parties involved. In an ever-changing landscape, we had to balance competing interests and complex power dynamics, but always with a commitment to our partnership," says Kristina Mevs-Apgar, NDWA's Creative Partnerships Director.

For NDWA, it was an opportunity to center the women—women of color, immigrant women, and indigenous women—at the heart of the domestic worker rights movement on a mainstream, pop culture platform. And for Alfonso, it was his life story. For Participant, it spoke to the mission and vision of creating content that has the potential to inspire social change, as well as catalyzing partnerships to bring that impact to life. These relationships "enabled a kind of expansiveness, creativity, learning, agility. That was part of why it was so impactful," says Ai-jen.

NDWA has documented that *Roma* and the connecting campaign catalyzed a cultural conversation that inspired real-world culture and policy changes by:

- Increasing the visibility and value of domestic workers in mainstream culture
- Organizing domestic workers and empowered them to see themselves as central protagonists in society and culture
- Accelerating the adoption of solutions that concretely support economic security and dignity for domestic workers including the National Domestic Worker Bill of Rights and Alia.

### **METHODOLOGY: HOW HAS NDWA BUILT ITS CULTURE CHANGE PRACTICE?**

**Experiment and Explore.** Core to NDWA’s DNA and to the group’s success, Ai-jen compares the organization’s approach to movement building to space exploration, and NDWA, as a “mothership.” NDWA deploys exploratory teams (staff and consultants) to explore new terrains, like Hollywood, or the tech industry, or a political arena; the team is able to report on what they’ve learned and explored and are able to articulate “here’s what it will take, what we need, here’s the strategy.”

NDWA’s approach as “the advance team for the social justice movement” means that they have been out in front, trying new things, experimenting, failing, learning, iterating, and celebrating one breakthrough after another, harnessing the momentum of each campaign, as they continue to drive towards solutions built on people’s interest and empathy towards domestic workers and fueled by actions they can take in their own lives.

**Build the Team.** When NDWA began the work of exploring culture change strategies and building a theory of change in 2011 around *The Help*, Ai-jen made an intentional decision to share strategies—and engage in practices and tactics—with the entire organization. Meaning that domestic worker organizers, policy writers, and communications staff all participated in culture change trainings and ideation sessions, and provided input and practical implementation assistance for aspects of the culture change campaigns.

“With all of this work, says Ai-jen, “it’s about having really strong organizers who have expertise in this arena and can do all the things that organizers do—develop campaigns, build partnerships, look for opportunities and leverage points, and prepare for threats.”

Over time, NDWA shifted from consultant-led culture change strategy development to internal strategy development with the onboarding of full-time staff, starting with Kristina Mevs-Apgar, Creative Partnerships Director, and supported by staff, partners, and strategic consultants, all of whom have developed and cultivated knowledge and experience with implementing campaigns driven by pop culture change strategy.

That said, it is worth noting that while in the throes of the *Roma* campaign, other opportunities were passed up or delayed because of limited resources. A dedicated culture change department with significantly more financial and staff support could further transform the scope of their work at this scale.

**Invest in Narrative Strategy.** One of the reasons the *Roma* campaign was so successful is NDWA's long-term investment in narrative change. It took years for NDWA to be able to arrive at the elegant and seemingly simple narrative vision of domestic workers being invisible and undervalued, to them being visible, valued, and fully human, with domestic work as "the work that makes all other work possible."

NDWA also valued cross-sector collaboration in their narrative strategies—insisting that reaching mass audiences at scale requires *both* a pop culture strategy and a grassroots organizing strategy. This theory has evolved in a variety of interlocking issues and organizations, from immigration to gender justice to elder care, in partnership and collaboration, with initiatives Ai-jen has helped found: Caring Across Generations, the gender-justice focused Make It Work, and NDWA's latest coalition campaign, Families Belong Together.

**Create Deep Partnerships.** Over the years, NDWA's experiences collaborating with, learning from, and sharing strategy with the entertainment industry has contributed to a shared sense of trust, possibility, and exchange and meant that they had developed not just significant expertise, but stature in Hollywood that influenced how they were able to partner on the *Roma* campaign.

NDWA's more recent Hollywood organizing has included consultation and collaboration on films and television shows addressing domestic work, human trafficking, sexual violence and harassment, immigrant rights and inclusion, racial and gender justice, child care and elder care, aging and the sandwich generation, and voting rights and voter mobilization. These issues have been

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addressed with shared projects like Families Belong Together, Caring Across Generations, Make It Work, and Supermajority, as well as in its own affiliates and chapters, through We Dream in Black and the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights campaigns. They have also been active leaders and partners with #Me-Too, TimesUp, Alianza Nacional de Campesinas, MomsRising, and Jobs with Justice, among other local and national social justice organizations.

They have also led on integrating culture change strategies into rapid response organizing. For example, when the 2018 #WhereAreTheChildren hashtag was trending on social media in response to reports of 1,300 “missing” immigrant children, they worked with a coalition of organizing groups to reshape the public conversation to focus on the practice of family separation rather than “finding” the children. Together they launched the Families Belong Together campaign with a national day of action for migrant families on June 30, with over 700 local events drawing an estimated attendance of 200,000 people across the country and receiving 16,000 press hits. During this time, NDWA not only led on overall coordination, but in organizing artists and influencers who helped educate and activate their audiences around the brutal separation of families at the border.

NDWA is also a founding member of Storyline Partners, dedicating staff time and resources to help build this collective of nonprofit organizations that collaborate with the entertainment industry to ensure the storylines of misrepresented and underrepresented communities are accurate, timely, and authentically reflect the world they live in. They have also built multiple levels of collaborations with individual artists like America Ferrera (and the organization she co-founded, Harness), Jane Fonda, and rapper Logic, who called for the end of family separation at the 2018 MTV Video Music Awards (VMAs) with Families Belong Together.

**Connect Program Areas.** NDWA’s narrative and culture work is also strengthened by being nested in a suite of strategies that support and inform one another, including their political and economic power-building work.

For example, NDWA created its own technology innovation lab to develop products and private sector strategies that improve the quality of jobs in the care and cleaning industries, jobs that have historically been dominated by women and women of color. The lab’s first major product, Alia, an online, worker-owned platform to help house cleaners access benefits launched nationally in December 2018 after three years of experimentation, testing, and iterating. Directly connecting Alia to the *Roma* campaign, NDWA was able to harness the interest and empathy felt by the film’s audience, and move them towards solutions on the Alia platform.

## FINDINGS

- An organization's **pop culture for social change strategy is multi-pronged, long-term**, and requires:
  - Investment and expertise (leadership, staff and/or consultants) in the design of a narrative vision, theory of change, and identification of targeted audiences;
  - A commitment to building an organization-wide understanding of the role of culture change to advance its overall mission;
  - The ability to advance strategic experimental initiatives to learn, identify, assess, and hone in on the campaigns, tactics, and relationships needed to advance that vision;
  - The capacity, knowledge, and skills to build, maintain, and advance multiple levels of relationships, consultations, and active partnerships with the entertainment (and other mass media) industry around multiple rapid response and longer-term initiatives at the same time;
  - The skills to engage in mass audience activation through strong digital and earned media campaigns.
- **Culture change strategy should not be done in isolation.** It is deeply integral to, and should be integrated with, organizing and policy change goals. When culture change strategies (e.g., audience engagement campaigns, culture change research, storyline development, cross-sector collaborations) connect with policy and organizing solutions, it can exponentially increase impact in all areas.
- **Successful cross-sector partnerships between social movements and entertainment** require a deep commitment of time, staff and leadership with the skills to understand each other and the capacity to work together, and the formation of trust on all sides.
- **Experimentation and risk-taking are key to culture change strategy design and evolution.** Lessons learned during those explorations inform the whole institution (and larger social movement). Experimentation also requires funders to be willing to offer flexible support that is not tied to one specific outcome. Philanthropy should “loosen the reins—people have to be given flexibility because opportunities come unexpectedly,” says Adey Fisseha of Unbound Philanthropy.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Pop Culture Collaborative has invested in its grantees along a strategic, field-building continuum: **Pathbreakers**, who have been doing this work for many years, where needs include the ability to move deeper into collaboration in the industry, expand capacity and thought leadership, and engage in mass audience activation strategies at scale; **Early Adopters**, who have great experience in the pop culture for social change field, but may not have long-term culture change goals and strategies in place, where philanthropic support can help to build strategy, increase capacity, and begin testing new approaches; and **New Recruits**, who are relatively new to the culture change space, but important to grow the community around narrative change goals, engage in early testing, and engage in the broader pop culture for social change field to collaboratively build strategy and partnerships.

For social justice organizations engaging in pop culture for social change, the Pop Culture Collaborative recommends that foundations and donors:

- **Support multi-year investments in pop culture for social change strategy.** This infusion of support, especially early in the development of a culture and narrative change strategy, affects the trajectory and success of organizational-led pop culture for social change and narrative strategies.
- **Provide general operating support that specifically includes narrative or culture change strategies as an integral component of the funded work.** This proactive inclusion strengthens the overall organization, and also provides it with the ability to engage in culture change design, experimentation, and learning.
- **Create grant programs that offer core support for narrative and culture change programs, strategies, and projects.** As an organization's strategy evolves and stabilizes based on early experimentations and learnings, core support for an organization's culture change program, and specific affiliated projects, helps organizations maintain and expand capacity (via consultants and staff), engage in cross-sector partnerships and/or consultations, nimbly advance rapid response narrative campaigns and advance long-term campaigns.
- **Offer support for pathbreaking leaders to provide peer mentorship that builds the field.** Similar to other pathbreaking social justice organizations advancing long-term pop culture for social change strategies (such as Color of Change and Define American), NDWA is building infrastructure both for their own work, but also for the movement, through ongoing peer-to-peer mentorship and investments in new multi-organizational initiatives such as Storyline Partners.

Pathbreakers will be called on more to do this type of educating, infrastructure, and field-building role. Philanthropy can include a budget line item in grantee's budgets for mentorship to new and emerging field actors. "People who have broken ground have a lot to teach us," says Adey. "The generosity and collaboration [of these leaders] in whose path we follow can't be underestimated."



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