

## **A space of one's own: dedicated for women and gender diverse clients utilising community drop-in services**

A Space of One's Own: Gender-Responsive Harm Reduction for Women and Gender Diverse Clients utilising community drop-in services

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### **Background:**

Women and gender diverse people who use drugs (PWUD) face disproportionately high rates of trauma, violence, and stigma, which often create barriers to care. Mixed-gender Harm Reduction settings, while essential, can unintentionally replicate exclusionary dynamics. In response to community feedback and observed service gaps, cohealth, a Victorian community health organisation, established a dedicated, gender-specific drop-in space at a Melbourne site.

### **Model of Care:**

The initiative provides a weekly session held outside regular hours exclusively for women and gender diverse clients, allowing for prioritising safety, dignity, and peer connection. Tailored supports include harm reduction, health education, and access to peer and clinical staff. The model is low-barrier, trauma-informed, and shaped by those who use it.

### **Implementation and Impact:**

In its first year, the group ran weekly with 4–10 participants attending, and has become a place of respite from significant life stressors. It has fostered open discussions around reproductive, sexual, and women's health, identity, and respectful relationships. This culture of trust and safety has allowed women and gender diverse clients to connect, share experiences, and access care they might otherwise avoid. Furthermore, it has enabled opportunistic care, leading to referrals to allied health, housing, legal and social services, as well as follow-up health assessments and shared health resources.

### **Conclusion and Future Directions:**

This pilot demonstrates how community-informed, gender-responsive models increase engagement and access among underrepresented groups. Next steps include formal evaluation, expanding health and social supports, building peer-led and culturally safe programming, and investing in space, workforce, and service pathways to embed and grow the model.

### **Policy Implications:**

Services should be funded and supported to implement gender-responsive Harm Reduction models as part of core service delivery. This approach aligns with national strategies on gender equity and trauma-informed care, and may help reduce long-standing disparities in access and outcomes for women and gender diverse PWUD.

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