



**Merchants Quay Ireland**  
Homeless & Drugs Services

A close-up, profile view of a woman with her hair tied back, wearing a blue surgical mask. She is sitting on a grassy area, holding a gold-colored mug with both hands. She is wearing a dark blue hoodie. The background is a blurred green lawn.

# A SPACE OF HER OWN

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The need for gender  
specific services for women  
experiencing homelessness  
and addiction

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*“I was mentally abused, physically abused and when I was a kid I was sexually abused. When I worked as a prostitute and that, I got raped, I got attacked, I got all sorts done to me.” - Maura, MQI client*

*“Nobody has ever sat me down and asked – ‘what's your story?’” - Anne, MQI client*

*“Without a shadow of a doubt, I would have 100% used a women’s only centre if there had been one in Dublin. Even the sound of it just makes me feel safe, gives me a sense of comfort.” – Joanne, MQI client*

## The context

Ireland has been experiencing an unprecedented public health threat since COVID-19 first arrived here. While the pandemic has touched all our lives, its effects have been felt most keenly by vulnerable groups who rely upon services like Merchants Quay Ireland to protect them from harm. At MQI, we have seen this first hand.

Marginalised groups, such as people experiencing substance misuse, women, sex workers and LGBTQI+ people are among the hardest hit by the pandemic. These groups are already at risk of poor health and as result have been at increased risk from the virus.

The isolation caused by the pandemic has resulted in anxiety, domestic abuse, and mental health issues.

This country has a lack of specific services for women experiencing addiction and homelessness. As well as this, there is a lack of gender sensitivity in the services that are available, as these services are largely accessed by men, which can create an intimidating atmosphere for women who have experienced trauma. Often, women are reluctant to engage with services as a result, for fear of stigma and judgement. Further unique barriers for accessing services include the fear of children being removed from their care, lack of access to childcare and other familial responsibilities.

Women in addiction already face high rates of sexual violence, coercive control, and abuse. COVID-19 exacerbated the issues facing women, often leaving women isolated in abusive situations, or with deteriorating mental health as a result of the anxiety, loneliness and stress caused by the pandemic.

With the end of the pandemic in sight, it is vital that we support women in their engagement with services and help them to address the issues of addiction, homelessness and trauma.

The Government has pledged to invest in our economy and society in order to drive our country back to growth. It is essential that this investment is seen not just in bricks and mortar, but in our greatest resource: our people. Investing in the future of those who use Merchants Quay Ireland's services will ensure not only that their health and dignity is protected but their human potential, at last, is realised.

One of the objectives of *Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery: A Health-Led Response to Drug and Alcohol Use in Ireland 2017-2025* is improving access to services for women. The Programme for Government also recognises that women face barriers to accessing and sustaining addiction treatment, arising from an absence of childcare, the prevalence of gender-based violence, and the need to develop targeted interventions aimed at responding to their needs.

It is now time to act.

## The identified need for gender specific services

The Women and Harm Reduction International Network (WHRIN) is a global platform that aims to reduce harm for women who use drugs. They outline the different challenges and risks that women experience when using drugs, for example reporting “significantly higher mortality rates”, higher rates of HIV, sexual and intimate partner violence than the general female population, as well as an intense social stigma that poses a significant barrier in women’s access to services.

WHRIN recognizes the need for “gender sensitive harm reduction services”.

In a broad context, it is worth noting:

- 42% of people in homelessness are female.
- The average age at death of women who are homeless in Ireland is 38 years, while for men it is 44.
- In 2017 there were 211 female drug related deaths – a 7% increase on 2016.
- Women who experience extensive violence and abuse are 8 times more likely to be drug dependent.
- One third of the 271 million people who use drugs globally are female.

In 2019, MQI engaged with female services users, as part of our Action Research Project undertaken by Dr. Sarah Morton of University College Dublin - funded by the South Inner-City Drugs & Alcohol Task Force. This research showed that women highly value support provided in gender-specific spaces, and that these spaces are crucial to facilitating emotional and physical safety for women, especially those who have experienced trauma and abuse.

The report showed:

- Trust is a key issue for women with complex needs as they have often been on the receiving end of so much hurt.
- Immediacy is key for the successful pathway through addiction, homelessness, residential and support services. Overall, the pathway through services needs to be flexible, with speedy access, integration of services and above all else, inclusivity. Services must be inclusive of women with complex needs, women with or without children, migrant women, LGBTQI women etc.
- We must be cognizant of the vulnerability of women with complex needs leaving care to becoming trapped in unhealthy relationships, substance use, crime and violence.

This supported previous academic research that showed women experiencing addiction and homelessness face specific challenges.

- Women can experience infantilism – being treated like a child, feeling judged for their substance use, previous mistakes. Women struggle with rules and regulations and their

movements and routines dictated by services/staff. (European Research Conference on Homelessness- Feantsa (Barcelona 2017).

- Women who inject drugs experience high rates of gender based and intimate partner violence (IAS Policy Brief: Women who inject drugs: Overlooked, Yet Visible: March 2019)
- Women with complex needs may also be engaging in sex work, either through financial need or as result of coercion, trafficking, or exploitation. Ruhama found (2018) that among sex workers contacted during their outreach activities: 34% were either homeless or at risk of homelessness and 50% reported experiencing problems with drugs or alcohol.
- Migrant women may present to services with additional challenges, including language issues or worries about their legal status which may make it difficult for them to speak openly about their challenges or to navigate health, homeless and addiction services (Mayock & Sheridan, 2012).
- The LGBTQI community is under presented in the literature although they can experience homeless and addiction.
- Approximately half of substance users have co-occurring substance use and mental health disorders (EMCDDA, 2015a). The exclusion of people with a dual diagnosis from programmes or services may have a great impact on women then on men, since some psychiatric disorders such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder and the use of psychoactive medication is more prevalent among women (UNDOC, 2016).
- Experiences of stigma are more likely among women who use drugs, who are often perceived as contravening ascribed roles, primarily those of mothers and caregivers. (EMCDDA, 2017)

Globally, women are disproportionately affected by poverty, discrimination, interpersonal violence, and exploitation. These burdens are greatest for those experiencing multiple forms of marginalization such as drug and alcohol problems, homelessness, mental ill-health, contact with the criminal justice system and involvement in prostitution or sexual exploitation.

Evidence from Ireland and from around the world proves the case for gender specific services for women.

## **The services that could make a difference**

In responding to the challenges facing women today accessing homelessness and addiction services, it is imperative that we provide gender responsive and trauma informed services to support women with complex needs, women with or without children, migrant women, LGBTQI women, women with drug problems, pregnant and parenting women, women involved in sex work, women who may have been trafficked, women leaving care and prison.

Services need to be comprehensive to address the multiple issues that face women. The pathways need to be flexible, with speedy access, integration of services and, above all else, inclusivity.

To that end, we need to secure long-term funding for a Women's Centre which would provide a 'one-stop-shop' for access to information and support across health, addiction, gender-based violence, coercive control, legal issues, education, and employment support, counselling and mental health services. Services need to be holistic and comprehensive in order to address the multiply issues that women face. Studies have found that such spaces increase feelings of safety, respect and dignity among women who use drugs and who have experienced abuse.

If we want better outcomes for women then we need better policies, allowing us to adapt our services to better support our female clients. We must understand and invest in services that work for them.

Providing safe and stable housing for women as they exit treatment or interventions is also key, as is investment in appropriate education, training skills development to ensure staff have the competencies to encourage women engage with services and to intervene for them effectively.

In Ireland, we are beginning to fully grasp of the complexity of the issues faced by women in homelessness and addiction, and are seeing how these issues, when not properly addressed, result in tragic outcomes for women and for their children. Many services are committed to supporting women, but this can be very challenging if the first thing we cannot do is provide her with a safe, risk-free environment to talk to us.

We know that building trust is so important, and women dealing with complex issues need to know they can access safe spaces where they can start to build trust with service providers. Only then will we see significant improvements in outcomes for women dealing with multiple issues.

Our vision, in summary, will see:

- Delivery of **services that recognise and respond to the unique and complex challenges faced by women** in Ireland today. These services will be delivered in a safe, supportive, non-judgemental environment.
- **Trauma informed services** that allow women to address their complex issues. We want to promote these services in a female-friendly fashion to encourage more women to engage with these services earlier. For women who have experienced trauma and those subject to intimate partner violence, trauma-informed treatment approaches are recommended. Combatting ongoing violence requires collaboration between health, social services, and justice services.
- A "low threshold" **female-only wellbeing centre** in Dublin that acts as a safe haven in the city centre where vulnerable women can feel welcome and heard. It will act as a space where shame and stigma are understood, and complex needs are addressed. This service will aim to be holistic in its approach. It will harness, collaborate with and link in with all relevant services offered across the city.

- **Training and upskilling of staff** to work with vulnerable women who experience trauma, violence, and abuse. It will be ensured that those staff have the skillset for reducing risk and harm for vulnerable women. It is important that they have the right knowledge, attitudes, and skills to enable women to receive appropriate responses.
- A **further research** project, to be undertaken by Dr. Sarah Morton, UCD, in partnership with Merchants Quay Ireland, which will explore the intersectionality of women's problematic substance use within an Irish context. This study will explore the needs of women who are dealing with multiple issues including problematic substance use, with a view to gaining an in-depth understanding of their life experiences, substance use trajectories and how these relate to factors such as motherhood, poverty, social exclusion, residency status, trauma, intimate partner violence, transactional sex, homeless and incarceration.

## The next steps

Research shows an urgent need for gender-specific services for women. Now that we have the plans in place to provide those services, it is time for action. To that end, MQI is urging all stakeholders to:

- **Talk**

Speak to decision-makers, funders, and the Government about helping MQI to make gender-specific services a reality.

- **Engage**

For our part, MQI will engage with Government to provide a funding stream (both capital and current) to deliver gender-specific services as soon as possible.

- **Broaden the debate**

Ensure that the unique experiences of women are always considered within the framework of public policy on homelessness and addiction, and not just as an adjunct to policy development.

## About Merchants Quay Ireland

Merchants Quay Ireland is a leading Irish charity working with people experiencing homelessness and people who use drugs. The organisation provides services ranging from crisis and case management, healthcare services, harm reduction and family support to residential and community detox & rehabilitation, aftercare, and prison-based addiction counselling.

