

## METZINERES: SHELTERING AND EMPOWERING WOMEN WHO USE DRUGS, SURVIVORS OF VIOLENCE

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*Metzineres: Providing Shelter for Women who Use Drugs, Surviving Violence* is a model with a comprehensive and holistic approach for women and gender non-conforming people who use drugs. This project came into being in 2017 in Barcelona, Spain, as the first program exclusively for women and gender non-conforming people in multiple situations of vulnerability, which include experiences of violence and trauma. The project currently serves more than 220 women, with the goal of creating direct and immediate access to flexible responses tailored to each person's particularities, in keeping with their expectations, concerns, curiosities, interests, and needs.

### Context and Description

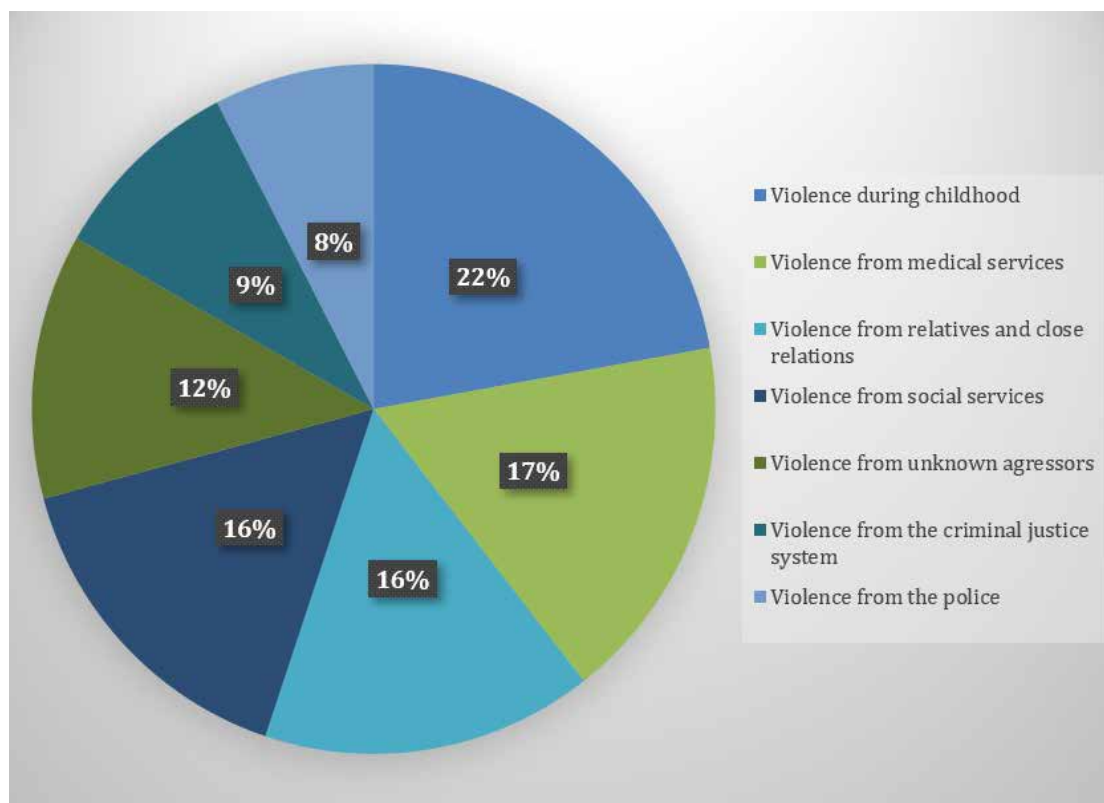
#### *Vulnerabilities Faced by Women Who Use Drugs*

Women who use drugs are disproportionately affected by the negative consequences of problematic use and punitive drug policies, which include more deaths by overdose, more HIV infections, disproportionate sentences depriving them of liberty, and the loss of custody of their children.<sup>2</sup> Generally speaking, these women come from low-income backgrounds, with less access to the labor market and low levels of education — factors that relegate them to a harsh situation of dependence. Having housing, as well as being able to meet their basic needs, is crucial for supporting women and promoting their improved physical, mental, and emotional health and overall well-being. Also, having work is critical for these women's autonomy: It reduces crime and the perception of insecurity, while helping to ease the stigma and discrimination against people who use drugs.

In addition, violence and the use of drugs are two strongly related factors. Women who use drugs are up to six times more likely to suffer sexual harassment and violence, and in the region of Catalonia, Spain, an estimated 40 to 80% of women who survive distinct types of violence use psychoactive substances.<sup>3</sup> Women who have had or have drug-related problems — especially with heroin, cocaine, alcohol, benzodiazepines, amphetamines, or methamphetamines — have similar histories of surviving complex situations of violence throughout their lives. During childhood and adulthood, they experience violence on the part of their families, intimate partners, people close to them and

**“We fight to put an end to drug policies that are more harmful than the drugs themselves, as well as to criminalization that serves to heighten the risks and harm associated with their use. We do not ask for assistance. We demand rights: maternity, housing, access to the labor market, quality social and medical assistance, and, ultimately, to live safe and free; to decide about our own bodies, lives, and emotional attachments.”<sup>4</sup>**

**Figure 1. Accounts of Violence Among Metzineres' Participants**



unknown aggressors; institutional violence by social and health services; and criminalization by the community, as well as the criminal justice system, the police, legislation, and prison institutions. These factors only serve to worsen their situations of exclusion, discrimination and stigmatization.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, they are heterogeneous, courageous, creative, resourceful, and caring women involved in improving their own well-being and that of their community. However, concrete actions by institutions and civil society — although their presence is needed — are still limited and/or inadequate. In Catalonia, the Network for the Assistance and Comprehensive Recovery of Women who Suffer Sexist Violence (*Red de Atención y Recuperación Integral a Mujeres que Padecen Violencia*

*Machista*) has no mechanisms for dealing with drug use, but it does subject women to rules they may find difficult to abide by, including strict schedules, not revealing the location of the service to other people, and, in some cases, a ban on using drugs.<sup>6</sup> The low level of representation of women among the population tended to at the Catalan Drug Abuse Care Center Network (*Red de Atención a las Drogodependencias en Barcelona, XAD*) has led to a sharp masculine bias in its programs, resources and services. This makes it an unsafe environment for women, who are often left unattended due to the complexities entailed by their specific needs. In addition, neither network has the possibility of referring people to other care services, which leaves those women who do not want to or cannot stop using drugs in situations of institutional neglect.

## Creation of Metzineres

The Network of Women who Use Drugs (XADUD) was formed in conjunction with the first study of women who use harm reduction services in Catalonia, which was published in 2017.<sup>7</sup> Once the network finished the study, it continued to exist under a self-management model, and it still meets every week at a community-based cultural center known as the *Ateneu Popular del Raval*.<sup>8</sup> The solidarity, exchange of knowledge, and mutual support that flourished in the XADUD — based on horizontality and autonomy — laid the foundations for the creation of “*Metzineres: Providing Shelter for Women who Use Drugs, Surviving Violence*.”

**Metzineres is an innovative harm reduction model, based on intersectional feminism and peer support, with a comprehensive and holistic approach.**

Metzineres was created in June 2017 within the framework of the Health and Community Foundation (*Fundación Salud y Comunidad*, FSYC), which it dissociated from a year later, in July 2018. At that time, the organization had about 100 women. The positive results achieved in terms of the women’s well-being, the reduction of stigma against them in the community, as well as the good reception given by public assistance networks, drove the project’s development, encouraging the team to continue its activities autonomously. In one of the gestures of support received, the International Center for Ethnobotanical Education, Research & Service (ICEERS),<sup>9</sup> motivated by shared goals and synergies, incorporated Metzineres as one of its programs while the organization was in the process of becoming a non-profit cooperative.

Metzineres is an innovative harm reduction model, based on intersectional feminism and

peer support, with a comprehensive and holistic approach. It is the first program exclusively for women and gender non-conforming people in multiple situations of vulnerability in Barcelona, Spain. Its goal is to create and share flexible responses characterized by direct and immediate access and tailored to each woman’s particularities, in keeping with their expectations, concerns, curiosities, interests, and needs.

The all-female team that makes up Metzineres is interdisciplinary, with two experts in drug policy, gender mainstreaming, and harm reduction; a project officer specialized in law; a coordinator of Women Promoters of Harm Reduction (*Mujeres Impulsoras de Reducción de Daños*, DIRD); a doctor; a social worker; a social educator; a nursing assistant and Kundalini Yoga workshop facilitator; a social integration specialist who is also a graphic artist and designer; and workshop facilitators, volunteers, interns, and neighbors who offer their collaboration and skills.



“Nothing About Us Without Us.” Credit: Metzineres

## Profile of the Women in Metzineres

Metzineres welcomes all women who want to participate, adapting compassionate responses to their complex and changing realities, regardless of how each woman handles her drug use or experiences violence. The initiative puts emphasis on reaching women affected by simultaneous and interconnected social variables.

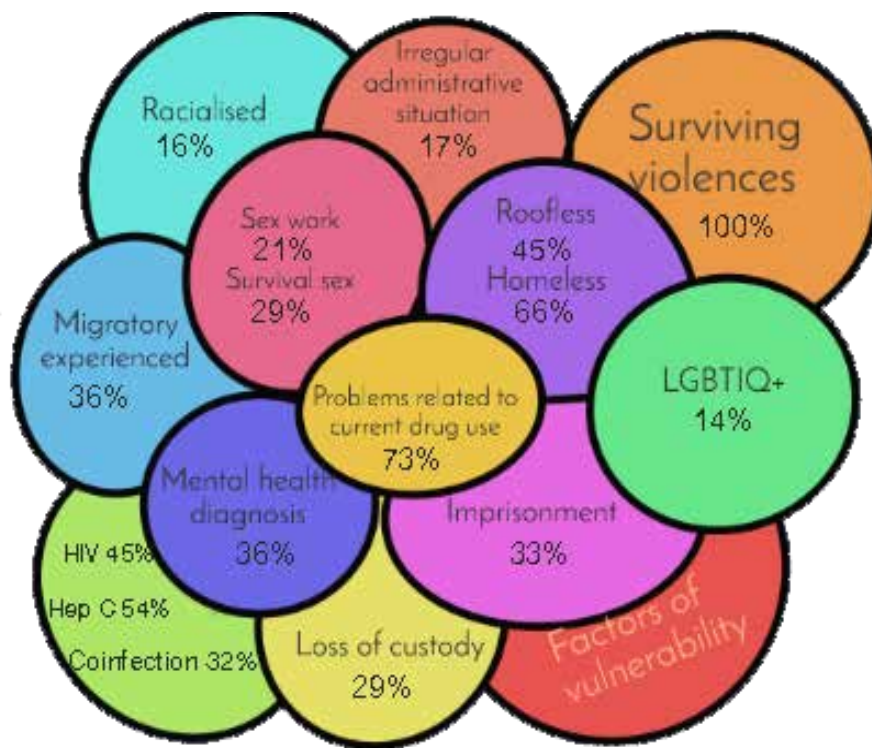
Since its creation, Metzineres has received between 30 and 40 visits per day, with a total of more than 220 women, 10% of whom are trans. The majority of the women are between 30 and 49 years of age. As previously noted, the women who make up Metzineres face numerous, complex situations of vulnerability and trauma. All of them report having histories of violence (see Figure 1).

Seventy-three percent of the women who receive attention at Metzineres have reported problems related to their drug use, particularly with regard to using smokable or injectable cocaine, injectable heroin, and tobacco. Twenty-one percent are involved in sex work, 36% have mental health problems, 66% are in situations of homelessness, 33% were previously incarcerated, 45% live with HIV, and 54% live with Hepatitis C (see Figure 2).<sup>10</sup>

### Therapeutic, Cultural, and Leisure Activities

The activities carried out by Metzineres include cultural outings, excursions, and work in several community spaces, including a vegetable garden. In addition, the women have a social center called “*La VidAlegre*” (“Happy Life”). *La VidAlegre* is open every weekday and includes a full schedule of educational, therapeutic, cultural, and leisure activities. In addition, Metzineres offers medical, social, and health-related interventions, asserting the right to citizenship, to live free of violence, to have basic needs met, and offering a variety of options for connecting, exchanging, showing solidarity, and mutual support. The space also offers clothing, food, a shower, a washing machine, beds, an infirmary, dance workshops, art, and places for supervised substance use. The doctor and social worker accompany all

**Figure 2. Multiple Situations of Vulnerability Faced by the Women Receiving Care at Metzineres**



Credit: Metzineres

**Table 1. Services Offered by Metzineres (Based on 24,685 Visits to Date)<sup>11</sup>**

Services	Number of Visits	Percentage
Food supplements	7,613	30.8%
Chat/mutual support	5,105	20.7%
Lunch	3,123	12.7%
Telephone/Internet	2,582	10.5%
Shower	1,749	7.1%
Daytime sleeping	1,556	6.2%
Self-image	1,332	5.4%
Clothing swap	995	4.0%
Washing machine	651	2.6%
Housing	529	2.1%
Transportation	412	1.7%
Needle and syringe program	424	1.7%
Condoms	154	0.6%

those who request it, with no need for a prior appointment.

### Research and Data Collection

Given its responsibility to produce genuine, rigorous, and updated information about women who have not been taken into account in data collection before, Metzineres makes efforts to use non-intrusive research tools that are respectful of people’s intimacy, confidentiality, and anonymity.<sup>12</sup> Metzineres developed an alliance with the DonesTech group that allows it to move toward technological sovereignty in the gathering of new indicators and tools for monitoring and follow-up, which are applied routinely. As a result, Metzineres has a rigorous database that allows for tracking the availability, coverage, quality, and relevance of its interventions. The constant monitoring of the data enables Metzineres to make pragmatic decisions that continually readapt its programming to the situations and populations on which it has an impact. This system also provides information using new metrics

on the impact of public policies and structural inequalities on people’s daily lives, thereby serving as a key tool for increasing visibility and fighting the stigma and discrimination affecting this population.



Credit: Metzineres

All of this has led to Metzineres being recognized in the research field, and in March 2019, it took part in the “Freedom for Research” side event at the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) in Vienna. The organization’s work was also presented in the

context of an executive training organized by the Pompidou Group on “Incorporating gender dimensions in drug policy practice and service delivery.”

### **Promoting a Drug Policy Reform Advocacy Movement with a Feminist Perspective**

The Metzineres group advocates for ending the failed “war on drugs” and promoting feminist drug policies based on human rights and harm reduction. The organization denounces the lack of alternatives, the barriers to access, and the institutional vacuums that exacerbate control mechanisms, inequalities, social injustice, and exclusion. All of this is rooted in prejudice, stigma, and discrimination, which deepens the problem of the denial of rights. Metzineres presents an innovative and daring grassroots intervention model that is sustained by community-based strategies anchored in human rights, gender mainstreaming, and harm reduction that have proven to be reliable, pragmatic, cost-effective, and in which every woman is a protagonist.

In addition, Metzineres has organized and coordinated with several other networks. Among other events, the group participates in activities on March 8 to promote intersectional feminism; it celebrates the Global Day of Action organized by the “Support. Don’t Punish” campaign on June 26; it seeks to raise awareness about overdose-related deaths on August 31; and on November 25, it works to increase the visibility of the distinct types of violence survived by women who use drugs.

Metzineres has been recognized as an example of good practice by the Ibero-American Network of Non-Governmental Organizations that Work on Drugs and Addiction (*Red Iberoamericana de Organizaciones No Gubernamentales que trabajan en Drogas y adicciones, RIOD*),<sup>13</sup> the organization for social inclusion “Bizitegi,”<sup>14</sup> and the Avant association.<sup>15</sup> The initiative has also gotten more recognition at a national and international level, which has prompted its participation in various events and international conferences linked to scientific dissemination, training and awareness-raising, such as the Harm Reduction International Conference (Porto, 2019) and the International Drug Policy Reform Conference (St. Louis, 2019).

One of Metzineres’ pillars involves working in networks at a local, national, and international level. The organization is part of the Catalan Network of People who Use Drugs (CATNPUD), the Network of Anti-Prohibitionist Women (REMA), the International Network of People who Use Drugs (INPUD), the International Network of Women who Use Drugs (INWUD), and the Women and



Credit: Metzineres

Harm Reduction International Network (WHRIN).<sup>16</sup> A gathering in February 2019 in Barcelona led by the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), the Eurasian Harm Reduction Association (EHRA), and Metzineres gathered more than 30 women who use drugs from distinct parts of Europe, Eastern Europe, and Central Asia, and culminated with the "Barcelona Declaration."<sup>17</sup> This gathering consolidated important alliances at an international level for the rights of women who use drugs, popularizing the hashtags #narcofeminism and #femdrug.<sup>18</sup>

With the aim of sharing this model with the greatest number of people possible, at the conference in Porto, the Metzineres team (with the collaboration of CASO, *Agencia Piaget para o Desenvolvimento*, Doctors of the World, WHRIN and INWUD) was responsible for opening a Safe Space for women and gender non-conforming people, which included a room for supervised drug use, the distribution of materials, and training on harm reduction. By accompanying both people at the conference and also local women who use drugs but who were not directly involved in the event, this turned into an opportunity to share experiences as well as to determine next steps.

### **Promoting Alliances and Joint Projects**

Part of Metzineres' success has been possible thanks to a vast map of enriching alliances, including with several departments of the Government of Catalonia, the City Council of Barcelona and the District,<sup>19</sup> along with entities that assist with drug dependence, which have been denouncing the lack of institutional support for women who use drugs for years.<sup>20</sup> Agreements with universities and research groups contribute to raising the visibility of Metzineres' impact, as well as to expanding its model and approach.<sup>21</sup> Cooperatives, associations and other collectives have

enabled its consolidation in community networks and social economy and solidarity networks that work on building sovereignty and self-management.<sup>22</sup>

## **Results and Challenges**

This initiative consisting of around 35 supportive encounters a day that promote the well-being of more than 200 courageous women has produced extraordinary results, exceeding expectations for success. The women and gender non-conforming people who turn to Metzineres recognize that they are using less drugs; have improved their physical, emotional and mental health; spend more time in social and health care networks; and are more likely to go to other shelters. The stigma they initially perceived in

**The women turning to Metzineres reported using less drugs; having improved their physical, emotional and mental health; spending more time in social and health care networks; and being more likely to go to other services.**

the neighborhood has disappeared, and they are now considered an essential part of the community and agents of change for improving the area. Metzineres also has an impact on policies to address drug dependence, forming part of advisory and training groups, and its influence has been felt in other support spaces that seek to incorporate its model into their daily practices.

One of Metzineres' main challenges is that it only has a rented garage space, located in the Raval neighborhood of Barcelona. Amid a neighborhood gentrification process, and despite countless efforts thus far, it has been impossible to find an adequate space to accommodate its growth and address the women's needs. Despite the significant progress

made in just two years, Metzineres continues to face an extremely precarious financial situation in the short, medium and long term, as it has not yet secured funding continuity or sustainability.

## Key Resources

Metzineres, <https://metzineres.org>

Roig, A. (4 June 2019), *A taste of Metzineres*, [https://prezi.com/q5rvks8u42\\_y/a-taste-of-metzineres/](https://prezi.com/q5rvks8u42_y/a-taste-of-metzineres/)

The Barcelona Declaration, <https://idpc.net/alerts/2019/04/the-barcelona-declaration>

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## Endnotes

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4. Press release signed by Metzineres, XADUD (Network of Women who Use Drugs) and REMA (State Network of Anti-Prohibitionist Women), on the occasion of 8 March 2018
5. Metzineres (August 2019), *Metrics*, <https://metzineres.net/>
6. For more information, see: <https://www.slideshare.net/donesenxarxa/vm-diagnosi-xarxa>
7. Fundació Àmbit Prevenció i CEEISCAT (2017), *Acceptabilitat i viabilitat d'un estudi d'intervenció basada en estratègies d'apoderament i enfoc de gènere per tal de disminuir els danys associats al consum de drogues. XADUD, Xarxa de Dones que Usen Drogues*, [http://salutpublica.gencat.cat/web/content/minisite/aspcat/vigilancia\\_salut\\_publica/vih-sida-its/05\\_CEEISCAT/publicacions-cientifiques/informes/Informe\\_XADUD\\_.pdf](http://salutpublica.gencat.cat/web/content/minisite/aspcat/vigilancia_salut_publica/vih-sida-its/05_CEEISCAT/publicacions-cientifiques/informes/Informe_XADUD_.pdf)
8. For more information, see: <http://www.ateneudelraval.com/>
9. For more information, see: <http://www.iceers.org/>
10. Metzineres (20 November 2019), *Metrics*, <https://metzineres.net/>; Roig, A. (4 June 2019), *A taste of Metzineres*, [https://prezi.com/q5rvks8u42\\_y/a-taste-of-metzineres/](https://prezi.com/q5rvks8u42_y/a-taste-of-metzineres/)
11. Metzineres (20 November 2019), *Metrics: Foundations*, <https://metzineres.net/>
12. The data is updated and published daily at <https://metzineres.net/>
13. For more information, see: <https://riod.org/>
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15. For more information, see: <http://www.asocavant.org/jornada-tecnica-adiccion-violencia-genero/>
16. For more information, see: <https://www.facebook.com/CATNPUD/>; <https://www.mujerescannabicas.org/>; <http://www.inpud.net/>
17. For more information, see: <https://idpc.net/alerts/2019/04/the-barcelona-declaration>



18. For more information, see: <https://www.awid.org/>; <https://harmreductioneurasia.org/>; <https://www.awid.org/news-and-analysis/war-drugs-war-womxn-who-use-drugs>
19. Support provided by the Raval *Subdirección General de Drogodependencias*, and the *Departamento de Trabajo, Bienestar Social y Familias de la Generalitat de Cataluña*, la *Agencia de Salud Pública de Barcelona* and the *Distrito de Ciutat Vella-Fundación*
20. *Fundación Salud y Comunidad (FSYC)* and *Asociación Bienestar y Desarrollo (ABD)*
21. Agreements with the programs, *Máster de Investigación e Intervención Psicosocial de la Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona*, and the *Diplomatura de Postgrado en Arte Terapia de la Universidad de Gerona*
22. *Coópolis*, *Fundación Altarriba*, *Observatorio del Conflicto Urbano*, *la Imprenta Colectiva de Can Batlló*, *la Casa de la Solidaridad*, *el Lokal*, etc.

*This series aims to share examples of innovative approaches that incorporate a gender perspective and the principles of public health and human rights into drug policy. Such innovations will have the best possible outcomes only when they are accompanied by more fundamental drug law and policy reform. However, in the absence of broader reforms, or carried out in conjunction with such reforms, these innovations can help break the vicious cycles of poverty, social exclusion, drug use, involvement in the drug trade, and incarceration that plague so many poor communities across the Americas today. Global Innovative Approaches is a tool that accompanies the publication [Women, Drug Policies and Incarceration: A Guide for Policy Reform in Latin America and the Caribbean](#).*