

Impact of Social and Personal Empowerment Course on Quality of Life, Self-Esteem and Psychological Well-Being of Trans- and Cisgender Women Who Use Crack Cocaine in Recife, Brazil

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Context about the Free School of Harm Reduction and the Todas Livres Course

The Free School for Harm Reduction, based in Recife, Brazil, is a politically engaged organization that empowers individuals affected by drug war policies across Brazil, Latin America, and the Caribbean. It protects human rights and promotes citizenship by implementing harm reduction strategies that address the intersectional needs of people who use drugs, while also fostering political engagement and training for both users and professionals. Building on support from the Viiv Innovator Grant and the Viiv Healthcare Positive Action Program, the project developed the “Todas Livres” Course—a six-month comprehensive training covering HIV/STI prevention, harm reduction, sexuality education, financial literacy, conflict resolution, and emotional well-being—with complementary mobile outreach and a Drop-In Center providing essential healthcare and support services.



Information about HIV/STIs is discussed



HIV/STIs testing at Escola Livre

Women and Access to Rights

Women who use drugs encounter formidable challenges in accessing essential services, including healthcare and sexual and reproductive care, as reflected by marked gender disparities in service usage at Psychosocial Care Centers (CAPS). Research shows that in certain centers, up to 83% to 88% of the services are rendered to men, creating ratios that can reach as high as 4:1 or 5:1, while in other settings, only 14% to 16% of services are provided to women, with specialized centers sometimes reporting figures around 17% and broader studies around 39%.

These disparities underscore how structural biases—rooted in gender, race, and class—worsen the vulnerabilities faced by women, placing them in a state of double marginalization. Despite these significant obstacles, many women are proactively mobilizing, creating supportive community networks, and seeking alternative pathways to expand their access to rights and vital health services. This collective resistance highlights the urgent need for more inclusive public policies that promote non-stigmatizing care and establish safe, tailored spaces to address women's unique needs, ultimately fostering their autonomy, dignity, and empowerment while contributing to overall community well-being.



Discussion on consent and sexual violence



Working group (left) and certification party (right)

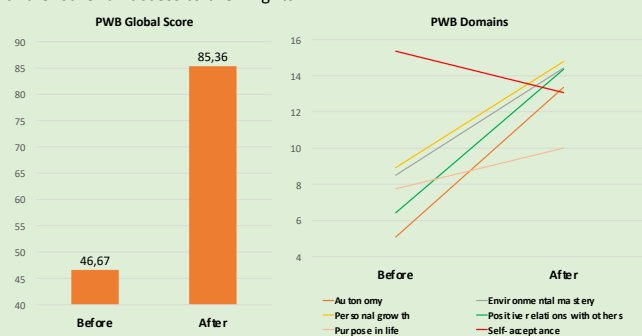
Harm Reduction as Access to Social Justice, and Social Justice as a Health Indicator

Harm reduction transcends merely mitigating drug-related risks, acting instead as a transformative pathway to social justice by ensuring that health care includes access to rights. This approach reduces stigma and tackles entrenched inequalities—especially for vulnerable women—thereby challenging conventional service models where evidence shows that women represent only 14% to 16% of users in many mental health centers. Such disparities highlight the urgent need for tailored, non-stigmatizing care and active listening practices that uphold women's dignity, autonomy, and citizenship, ultimately fostering stronger community bonds and enhancing overall well-being.

Profile of Women and Results Achieved in the Social and Personal Strengthening Course – Todas Livres

The Todas Livres Course reached a diverse group of vulnerable women who use drugs—women who often begin substance use earlier, with 26.7% starting before age 15 (compared to 15% of men), engage in more intense daily consumption, rely on sex work (21.4%) to support their addiction, and have experienced sexual violence at an alarming rate of 54.3%. Over a six-month period, the intervention offered weekly sessions and a monthly incentive of 200 reais (approximately 40 dollars), providing comprehensive services that included HIV/STI testing and treatment, education on self-care practices, development of personal survival strategies, financial management, conflict resolution training, and critical reflection on violence, vulnerabilities, drug use, and human rights.

Preliminary evaluations using the Ryff Psychological Wellbeing Scale – PWB ($p < 0.05$ for $N=15$) revealed an 83% increase in overall psychological well-being and a remarkable 163% boost in autonomy, with improvements in other dimensions ranging from 30% to 124%; self-esteem increased by 15.5%, and quality of life showed modest gains. Almost all participants underwent health testing and were referred for necessary treatments, while coordinated referrals to a broader Care Network further enhanced their recovery. The intervention has significantly transformed lives by reducing or eliminating substance use, improving mental health, enabling transitions to stable housing, and promoting digital inclusion through access to smartphones and digital applications. These promising results underscore the potential of tailored, multidimensional interventions and highlight the need for continuous, expanded, and long-term strategies to empower vulnerable women, overcome structural disadvantages, and ensure full access to their rights.



Conclusions and Recommendations: Harm Reduction as a Paradigm for Social Change and Access to Rights

Our integrated intervention clearly shows that harm reduction is a transformative paradigm for social change and access to rights for vulnerable populations. By combining care practices with economic and personal strengthening, this approach effectively addresses the immediate risks of substance use while dismantling systemic inequities—evidenced by CAPS data that can reach ratios of 4:1 or 5:1 in favor of men—underscoring the need for inclusive, tailored services. The Todas Livres Course yielded significant improvements in psychological well-being, autonomy, and overall quality of life by enhancing access to vital health services, stable housing, and digital inclusion, thereby laying a strong foundation for long-term social and economic stability. Based on these findings, it is crucial to adopt harm reduction as a core public policy pillar to foster social justice and ensure equitable access to rights for the most at-risk groups.

Based on these insights, it is imperative to adopt harm reduction as a central pillar of public policy for fostering social justice. Key recommendations include:

- Adopt harm reduction as a central pillar of public policy to foster social justice.
- Scale up inclusive programs, such as the Todas Livres Course, to extend tailored support to vulnerable groups—especially women facing intersectional challenges.
- Institutionalize multidimensional care by integrating health, economic, and digital inclusion strategies into sustainable, non-stigmatizing care networks.
- Strengthen cross-sector partnerships among local health services, community organizations, and digital platforms to build cohesive systems that facilitate referrals and comprehensive support.
- Implement systematic data collection and long-term evaluation to continuously refine interventions and ensure lasting improvements in autonomy, well-being, and quality of life.

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