

Trauma informed services for women who have been subjected to men's violence must be single sex

Karen Ingala Smith - Chief Executive - nia

One of the most obvious ways to create a safe space for women is to create a space without men. 75% of perpetrators of crimes of domestic violence are male. 92% of those convicted of homicide are male. 99% of those convicted of rape by penetration are male. A gender recognition certificate does not change a person's sex; it does not undo years or decades of sex-role socialisation and it will not stop an abusive man from being abusive. Men are more likely to be violent and keeping men out keeps women safer. This is essential in life-saving services like women's refuges.

But it isn't simply about men's greater propensity to violence, it's about focussing on the needs of women who have been subjected to violence and abuse.

Some women who've been subjected to men's violence develop a trauma response, particularly those subjected to sexual violence and/or childhood abuse. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can develop in response to trauma that may have occurred recently or in the distant past. Those who have experienced sexual trauma, especially whilst young, are at greater risk, with victims of multiple forms of childhood abuse and neglect most at risk of lifetime trauma. Women victim-survivors of child sexual abuse are at least twice as likely to experience adult sexual victimisation. 51% of adults who were abused as children experienced domestic abuse in later life and approximately one in six adults who were abused as a child had been subjected to domestic violence and abuse in the previous year.

After trauma, the brain interprets something that for many people would be unthreatening as a serious threat or danger, for example the presence of a man, particularly where not expected. And like most of us, abused women will read a trans identified man as a male instantly. PTSD/trauma responses happen in a part of the brain called the amygdala. The amygdala detects a threat or perceived threat and can activate a "fight or flight" response. This releases adrenaline, norepinephrine, and glucose into the body, and if the threat continues, cortisol. A part of the prefrontal cortex assesses the threat and can either calm or reinforce the fight or flight response. People suffering trauma/PTSD have a hyper reactive amygdala and a less effective calming prefrontal cortex reaction. The brain becomes overwhelmed by the trauma (i.e. pre-frontal cortex shutdown) leading to disorientation and confusion as the higher functions of reasoning and language are disrupted. Thinking and reasoning can be drowned out by feeling and being. Prolonged stress can lead to permanent change in the prefrontal cortex.

A trauma-informed safe space creates space for action and recovery, and places the woman victim-survivor in control and in the centre. The trauma response described earlier is the antithesis of a space for action and recovery. While this will not apply to all women who have been abused, or apply to those that are affected, all the time, the priority of specialist services should be those women for whom it does; and to create a safe space where women's psychological well-being is prioritised. Whether males are violent or not, whether they hold a gender recognition certificate or not, whether they say they are women or not, keeping males out, can help create an environment in which women can recover.

Gaslighting is a common tactic used by abusers to manipulate their victim(s), making them doubt their own judgement and question their perception. The mantra 'trans women are women', pushed by transactivists and lobbyists, is large scale gaslighting and has been used as propaganda to coerce individuals and institutions into compliance. Women are gas-lighted by their abusive male partners all the time. It is a cornerstone of coercive control. You are not offering a trauma informed environment if you gaslight traumatised women and pretend that someone that you both know is a man, is actually a woman. It is a form of abuse to expect women to share what you say is women-only space with males who say that they are women, because you and they know are not. Our role is to help women to learn to trust themselves again, not replace the confidence-eroding self-questioning that their abuser has filled their head with, with a new version.

This is not about those who are happy to share their space with males who identify as transgender, it is about making sure those who are not, are not those pushed out of services. A safe space, a trauma informed space for women who have been subjected to men's violence – has to be a woman-only space.