



Valuing Lived Experience: Position Paper

(JULY 2026)

Purpose

This position paper, developed by Illawarra Women's Health Centre (IWHC), outlines how lived experience is a vital form of expertise embedded across our services. It highlights how involving women with lived experience improves service design and delivery, strengthens trauma-informed care, and supports meaningful advocacy and systems change. While recognising potential challenges, including tokenism and emotional burden, this paper details how IWHC integrates the voices of women with lived experience through structured and ethical engagement, ensuring women are active partners in shaping the services we provide.

Our Role

Illawarra Women's Health Centre plays a critical role in supporting women from diverse backgrounds and life experiences who may be navigating complex health, social, and systemic challenges. Within this context, women's personal journeys through health challenges, trauma, caregiving, discrimination, and recovery are recognised as legitimate and essential forms of expertise.

Integrating lived experience across service design, delivery, and evaluation strengthens women's health outcomes, improves service responsiveness, and aligns with feminist, trauma-informed practice. Women accessing our services are not passive recipients; they are active contributors whose knowledge is vital to creating meaningful and effective systems of care.

Endorsed by The Council of Women 4th July 2026

Our Position

1. Lived Experience is Valid Expertise

Lived experience provides insights that cannot be replicated through professional or clinical training alone. Women who have navigated health systems, violence, and social disadvantage bring a nuanced understanding of barriers, needs, and pathways to recovery. Honoring lived experience as expertise complements professional knowledge and enhances service quality by grounding decisions in real-world realities.

2. Improves Service Design and Accessibility

When women with lived experience actively participate in co-design, services become more accessible, responsive, and empathetic. Their insights help identify barriers to access and inform practical solutions that better meet diverse needs. This approach moves engagement beyond token consultation toward meaningful collaboration, ensuring services reflect and respond to the experiences of those who use them.

3. Strengthens Trauma-Informed and Person-Centred Practice

Embedding lived experience supports trauma-informed approaches by prioritising safety, empowerment, and strengths-based perspectives. Women's contributions help ensure services avoid re-traumatisation, reflect their voices, and are delivered with compassion. This fosters environments where women feel respected, heard, and supported in their healing journeys.

4. Drives Advocacy and Systemic Change

Women with lived experience can translate personal insights into advocacy that bridges gaps between policy and practice. Their voices challenge stigma, reshape narratives, and encourage services to recognise service users as agents of change.

5. Builds Empowerment and Community Connection

Engagement in lived experience roles enables women to transform difficult personal experiences into meaningful contributions. This fosters empowerment, strengthens community connection, and reinforces IWHC's feminist values of collaboration, equity, and shared power.

From Position to Practice

Lived experience is a critical and legitimate form of expertise that enriches women's health services across all areas, from design and delivery to advocacy and evaluation.

IWHC supports this position through:

- Providing person-centred, trauma-informed care and support as the foundation for all services and programs
- Ensuring appropriate frameworks, training, and guidelines are in place to enhance collaboration and support women with lived experience
- Engaging women with lived experience in planning service direction and co-designing new services and programs
- Engaging women with lived experience in delivering services and programs
- Engaging women with lived experience in mentoring and supporting staff and program participants
- Conducting surveys and evaluating outcomes with women who attend our services
- Holding focus groups with program participants
- Focusing on problem solving and system improvement when suggestions are made and feedback is received
- Celebrating our volunteers and history by recognising the women who advocated for and established strong foundations for women's health services in the region
- Hosting community events and social gatherings for women with lived experience in the Illawarra
- Implementing a Clinical Supervision and Wellbeing Policy to reduce the risk of vicarious trauma

Conclusion

By embedding lived experience at every level, IWHC creates services that are more inclusive, responsive, and effective for women in our community. We bring together women's collective knowledge, professional expertise, and evidence-based practice. Strong frameworks, ethical practice, and genuine collaboration help reduce risks such as tokenism and emotional burden. Ultimately, valuing lived experience reflects our commitment to feminist principles and trauma-informed care, ensuring women are not only supported by our services but central to shaping them.

Endorsed by The Council of Women 4th July 2026

References

Illawarra Women's Trauma Recovery Centre. Lived Experience Advisory Network Framework (2026).

This paper was developed in collaboration with staff and women with lived experience who attend our services. Illawarra Women's Health Centre – Lived Experience Statements (including Weaver feedback on recognising lived experience as expertise and the contribution of women with diverse lived and professional backgrounds).