

# Women's Habitat

*Etobicoke, Ontario*

## Key Insights:

- Forming a staff committee can be a useful way to involve and empower staff. This needs to be balanced by a bottom line from management, establishing inclusion as a core competency and expectation for staff. It should be an accordion, coming from both sides.



**Shelter Profile:** [Women's Habitat](#) operates a 25-bed shelter for women and children experiencing violence, as well as outreach services, counselling, transition and support services, housing assistance, and parenting support. They have outreach workers who speak a variety of languages, in order to support the diverse community of women they work with.

**Making Changes:** Women's Habitat had an anti-oppression committee and a visible rainbow flag. Yet, they realized that there was no point in saying they were inclusive if their actions and services didn't match those words. In response, their management and staff teams came together to make changes. In particular, it was helpful to have the insights of a staff person who had come to them after working at a homeless shelter that was further ahead in supporting gender diverse individuals. They also identified staff champions who could move this issue forward – often younger staff who were more attuned to the subject. Overall, **it was both a bottom up and top down effort, and that made it effective.**

They have changed their intake forms to include people's pronouns, and the staff include their own pronouns in their signatures. They find that it is **very helpful for staff to share their own pronouns with residents** because it opens space for conversations with residents, and encourages clients to share. For example, one of their staff shared in a group circle with young people that they identify as 'they'. Once the staff member had shared this, one of the teenagers felt comfortable sharing that they also identified as 'they'. Women's Habitat specifies in their materials that **they serve people who identify as women**, to indicate to people who are looking for support that they serve trans women and cis women.



Women's Habitat has also found it helpful to **work with other organizations**. They are currently working with Spring Tide to audit their policies and see how they can continue to improve them to be even more inclusive and supportive of gender and sexually diverse people. Women's Habitat has also found it helpful to **visit other shelters** who have already incorporated change successfully, to learn from them.

**Overcoming Barriers:** Women's Habitat found that **people need the opportunity to talk about their fears** and ask questions. Women's Habitat created space for this at staff meetings, and identified ways to work with other organizations who could assist with training staff.

Women's Habitat also realized that it is not reasonable to expect residents to be inclusive if not all the staff members are acting inclusively. So **they had to work with their staff first**, before they could expect these changes from residents.

*“You have to be ready to have frank conversations, and to make mistakes. Training is important, as is self-reflection. What are your limitations?”*



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