



1993-2025

# YOU +ME ON THE DANCEFLOOR



Fragmented harm reduction  
initiatives across Malta's night  
time economy.



# A LITTLE ISLAND IN THE MEDITERRANEAN.

Malta boasts a prolific nightlife and clubbing scene. Originating between the late 80's and early 90's nightclubs and bars turned into dancefloors mushroomed up in the entertainment hub of the island, St Julians, better known as Paceville, but also in other areas across the island. Amongst which one finds in existence till this very day clubs such as Liquid Club, Gianpula fields, and Numero Uno. In the early 1990's Malta also experienced the first wave of illegal raves going by the name of Sex Is Nature [SIN] Parties. It is interesting to highlight that despite Malta's small size and even smaller number of people following the electronic dance music scene (especially when looking at the underground scene), various international names including Carl Cox, Faithless, Van Buren, Richie Hawtin, Derrick May, and Laurent Garnier played in Malta, sometimes even more than once. Large scale festivals such as Glitch Festival attract thousands of tourists, securing Malta's place on the global electronic music scene map. As an evolving subculture, dancefloors in Malta embody a parallel cultural space of dedicated artists and loyal followers, changing, innovating and adapting over time, whilst directly contributing an estimated 7.9% of Malta's GDP.

On Sunday 18th August 1996, the news portal The Malta Independent reported that a 17-year-old boy became Malta's first-recorded ecstasy victim. In the months predating this tragic death, one man by the name of Salvatore Muscat decided to kick start Safer Dance Culture, a peer-led movement providing informal harm reduction services for people attending music festivals.



The Maltese Islands, known for their crystal-clear blue waters and breathtaking cliffs.

Through the exchange of important harm reduction information obtained via cooperation with the Manchester-based LifeLine Project, Salvatore introduced the first comprehensive harm reduction tools for all people using drugs in Malta. The advice predominantly focused on educational material on both the benefits and risks of drug use, and ways to mitigate risks, including the availability of free water. Salvatore's work attracted negative reactions by the national agency against drug abuse and other political figures advancing a War on Drugs philosophy. In fact, the then head of the National Drug Intelligence Unit in an article to the Malta Independent underlined that 'most definitely; harm reduction is not a policy of instructing potential and actual drug abusers on how to use potent psychoactive drugs for recreational use with safety. This would be an illusion and a hopeless task.' Due to increased social and legal pressures, Salvatore's work fizzled out and Malta continued to adopt a full scale war on drugs approach.

Trying to map the history of the electronic dance music scene in Malta, and trends related to drug use, health and harm reduction across the night-time economy, or society in general is no easy task. The same goes for harm reduction services beyond the medicalised origins linked with heroin use.

In an article on local newspaper Malta Today, young social worker Mark Farrugia observed that one of the most pressing issues negatively impacting the human rights of people who use drugs in Malta is the lack of inclusive dialogue between stakeholders and policy makers, in particular the complete absence of the voice and views of people who use drugs in discussions concerning their needs and well-being. Farrugia (2024) laments that till this very day, Malta is one of the few EU countries with no low-threshold services for people who use drugs, and no drug checking services accessible for the community.



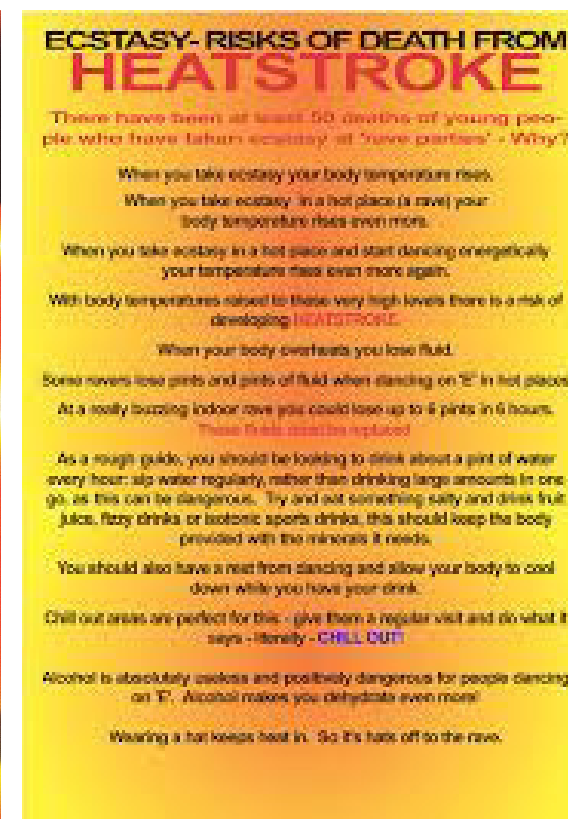
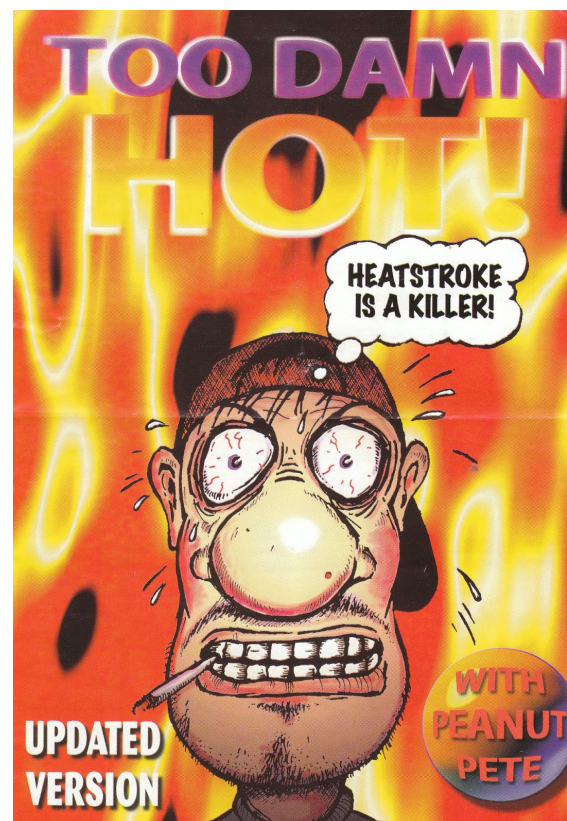
Flyer's marketing events in the late 1990's and early 2000's.



A unique study for Malta is that by Dr Mario Mifsud (2013) mapping the physical and chemical characterisation of 3,4-Methylenedioxymethamphetamine ecstasy tablets in Malta between 2006 and 2011. The study included also one on one interviews with people arrested by the police at an outdoor event in August 2010. Mifsud (2013) identifies alcohol as the primary drug of consumption for the majority of people attending electronic dance music events. Furthermore, the most common used illegal substances after alcohol were cannabis, ecstasy and cocaine.

Mifsud (2013) notices that becoming unwell is not uncommon at these events, and this is most attributable to high levels of alcohol consumption and issues related to hot and crowded atmospheres. He also reported that those consuming ecstasy consume between one and four tablets depending on personal preference, and potency. Two thirds consumed vitamins, minerals and a nutritious meal before the event, and some expressed positive views to the possibility of having their substances tested for potency and the detection of unwanted chemicals. Some expressed the wish to test their tablets for curiosity and/or health reasons. Other substances consumed apart from cannabis, and cocaine, included LSD, Ketamine, Viagra, and psychedelic mushrooms.

Taking a socio-political approach to clubbing in Malta, Gorg Vella (2023) looks at the rave as a contemporary political phenomenon and through a number of one-to-one interviews with different stakeholders maps the local scene between 1993 and 2021. He observes that media reporting and debates on the electronic dance music scene focused predominantly on drug abuse, and promiscuous sexual behaviour. In fact, the Maltese rave scene, especially people organising and attending these events were portrayed as culprits of harm and as villains. Vella (2023) concludes that despite repeated attempts by 'villains' to be part of decision making and policy developments concerning their profession and life, including during the Covid19 period, participation was close to inexistent.
























Lifeline Project Manchester educational material made available in Malta by Salvatore Muscat in 1996.

In an unpublished qualitative study, Zampini and Mamo (2021) looked at narratives from the dancefloor and gave centre stage to various stakeholders. More specifically Zampini and Mamo (2021) interviewed a small number of people attending electronic music events and organised an online discussion with people from the industry, such as event organisers, DJ's and producers. Many participants to the People and Dancefloors Malta project felt that music, clubbing and drug-taking had an overall positive effect on their lives, allowing them to have fun, make connections with others, nurture a passion for music and becoming part of a community. However, most participants explained that they rarely speak about this part of their life with their work colleagues or parents. Participants explained that they often feel misunderstood by others, as mainstream depictions of clubbers are largely inaccurate. The main reason is attributed to the negative stereotypes attached to people who attend electronic music events and the risk of being picked up by the police for consuming an illicit substance. Zampini and Mamo (2021) observe that the average age of the project participants is 30 years old, and thus it becomes clear that identity and social status are in conflict. People constantly negotiate between their 'real' self and their 'public' persona. When considering the potential criminal consequences people may face when consuming an illicit substance, a golden unspoken rule exists:

“what happens on the dancefloor stays on the dancefloor.”

Table 6a.10 MDMA tablets seized at EDM parties which had similar physical features (visual and measurable) and dose to the batches of tablets.

Tablet / Batch	Year	Breakline	Logo	Mass (mg)	Diameter (mm)	Thickness (mm)	A.I.	Dose (mg)
	2006 / 2007	no	no	438	/	6.10	BZP	207.3
Batch 2	2006	no	no	432	/	6.10	BZP	206.4
	2007	no	euro	210	8.08	4.30	MDMA	56.4
Batch 17	2007	no	euro	214	8.11	4.39	MDMA	57.7
	2007	no	D&G	211	8.09	4.37	MDMA	57.1
Batch 18	2007	no	D&G	194	7.01	4.08	MDMA	53.9
	2007	no	heart	201	7.02	4.13	MDMA	57.1
Batch 19	2007	no	heart	200	7.02	4.13	MDMA	57.2
	2007	no	kangaroo	196	7.03	4.38	MDMA	57.2
Batch 21	2007	no	kangaroo	202	7.09	4.38	MDMA	60.1
	2007	no	euro	202	7.10	4.38	MDMA	60.6
Batch 24	2008	yes	star	240	8.09	3.57	MDMA	47.9
Batch 25	2008	yes	star	241	8.09	3.58	MDMA	48.8
	2008	no	smiley	202	7.13	3.59	MDMA	13.4
Batch 26	2008	no	smiley	203	7.13	3.59	MDMA	12.9
	2008	yes	question mark	202	7.13	3.59	MDMA	12.9
Batch 27	2008	yes	question mark	193	8.10	3.44	MDMA	42.6
	2008	yes	heart	194	8.10	3.45	MDMA	43.5
Batch 28	2008	yes	heart	211	8.21	3.29	MDMA	19.9
	2008	no	tulip	213	8.22	3.30	MDMA	20.5
Batch 31	2008	no	tulip	209	8.20	3.28	MDMA	19.6
	2008	yes	versace	242	7.12	5.39	MDMA	40.3
Batch 33	2008	yes	versace	258	7.11	5.34	MDMA	43.8
	2008	yes	route 66	236	8.39	4.94	MDMA	61.6
Batch 40	2008	yes	route 66	236	8.40	5.08	MDMA	62.8
	2008	no	tulip	209	7.12	3.23	mCPP	60.3
Batch 41	2008	no	tulip	206	7.10	3.20	mCPP	58.5
	2009	yes	versace	268	8.20	4.24	MDMA	50.3
Batch 44 and 45	2009	yes	versace	276	8.21	4.38	MDMA	51.8
	2009	yes	versace	274	8.19	4.39	MDMA	57.5
	2010 / 2011	no	E=mc <sup>2</sup>	218	9.06	3.01	MDMA	53.7
Batch 40	2010	no	E=mc <sup>2</sup>	209	9.04	2.75	MDMA	50.6
	2010	cross	route 66	237	9.09	3.06	MDMA	58.1
Batch 41	2010	cross	route 66	237	9.09	3.01	MDMA	60.2
	2011	cross	lacoste	238	9.08	3.27	MDMA	66.2
Batch 44 and 45	2011	cross	lacoste	224	9.10	3.18	MDMA	62.4
	2011	cross	lacoste	246	9.08	3.36	MDMA	69.3
Batch 44 and 45	2011	cross	lacoste	252	9.20	3.20	MDMA	65.3
	2011	cross	lacoste	241	9.21	3.51	MDMA	61.9
Batch 44 and 45	2011	cross	lacoste	249	9.20	3.48	MDMA	64.3
	2011	cross	lacoste	248	9.20	3.48	MDMA	65.3

Key: For the batches the numbers given are the means.

A glimpse of the XTC tablets found in Malta between 2006 and 2011, including pharmacological content.

## HARM REDUCTION MALTA – A CAT WITH A MISSION.

In late 2019, Karen Mamo kick started an online educational initiative on Facebook and Instagram called Harm Reduction Malta. In 2025 Harm Reduction Malta has now established itself as a leading voice advocating for best practices promoting welfare and safety across the electronic dance music scene. Despite a time-lapse of over thirty years, Karen is rekindling Salvatore's dream for a safer dance culture in Malta.

The Harm Reduction Malta logo evolved during the years reflecting different collaborations, yet maintaining true to its original purpose. The choice of a cat to act as a logo was specifically selected by the founder Karen Mamo. Cats, especially black cats in Christian societies, have frequently been persecuted, and negatively depicted as a threat. In reality, cats are very intelligent, they are also independent, and resilient to life's adversities. To represent the struggles and misperceptions linked with people who use drugs, the Harm Reduction Malta logo aims to use the image of a cat to challenge negative perceptions, whilst empower positive social and political change.

Throughout 2020 and 2025, Harm Reduction Malta continued to increase its followers and is today reaching over one thousand and five hundred people across different channels. The active online presence, with an average of two posts per week continued to accentuate the role of peer-led language and dialogue to ensure messages leave a positive and long-term impact. Ultimately, Harm Reduction Malta remains committed to promote and bring about tangible improvements in the lives of people who use drugs in Malta.



How the Harm Reduction Malta logo has evolved through the years.



During this same period, Karen Mamo actively contributed to various media articles and Opinion Pieces addressing human rights, drug use and drug policy, and ongoing developments related to emerging trends and practices. Work by Harm Reduction Malta is frequently featured on international and local newspapers including the various educational, discussion and outreach initiatives taking place beyond the confines of the dancefloor.

The first educational booth was set up at the Bubble Festival in October 2019. Thanks to a collaboration with Drugs and Me (UK) people attending the festival had an opportunity to learn more about prevention of risks from substance use and other behaviours related to the night-time economy. In 2022 Harm Reduction Malta, People and Dancefloors, and the European Coalition for Just and Effective Drug Policies (ENCOD) organised a number of workshops on health, pleasure, and safety at Earth Garden Festival. In 2023, in collaboration with People and Dancefloors, Harm Reduction Malta developed the first festival care guide for Malta, including pre, during and post party care and welfare tips. A few months later, in December 2023 a screening of the People and Dancefloors documentary at the University of Malta, and a panel discussion with various stakeholders from Malta, facilitated a discussion on the evolving nature of the scene, including persistent challenges and risks. Building on this momentum, in February 2024 Harm Reduction Malta together with the University of Greenwich, People and Dancefloors and Correlation European Harm Reduction Network [CEHRN] facilitated a workshop and roundtable discussion on welfare across the night-time economy. Participants developed a number of recommendations addressed at different stakeholders, including the industry, the media and policy makers. The event included also the launch of a civil society report on emerging drug trends in the EU. This was the first time peer-led voices from Malta were being included in a report on drug use across the EU.



Harm Reduction Malta practical care guide for the festival season.

In 2024, Karen Mamo was invited by the Chairperson of the St Julian's Town Management Committee to give a presentation on welfare across the night-time economy to stakeholders hailing from government, police, and the entertainment industry. The discussion highlighted the role of harm reduction in advancing safer night-time experiences for all, and its contribution to help the Committee apply for the Purple Flag award, an award given to town and city centres that meet high standards in managing their evening and night-time economies.

Harm Reduction Malta was also asked to develop educational tools for young people between the ages of fourteen and fifteen. In March 2024, Karen Mamo delivered a number of prevention and educational talks with students attending the St Clare College, in Pembroke, Malta, and developed a guiding workbook to help students better understand harm reduction tools for people who use drugs.

Throughout these years collaboration with international partners has been pivotal. The list of international partners is provided below:

- Correlation European Harm Reduction Network
- ENCOD
- Drugs and Me
- Sonar Berlin
- People and Dancefloors [University of Greenwich]
- Talking Drugs
- Kosmicare

New posters developed in collaboration with Liquid Club and Boomerang Festival with our new branding, designed by Mark Casha.





Collaborations with venues, and local event organisers across the night-time economy such as In.di.go WAX Malta, and Boomerang Festival focus primarily on education and the exchange of best practices to reduce risks associated with various behaviours including hearing care, hydration and nutrition, substance use, and sexual consent. The provision of free basic welfare tools such as hydration sachets, condoms, sanitary towels, and fresh fruit are a first for the local scene.

These basic initiatives are also prompting a broader conversation on harm reduction across the night-time economy, including access to anonymised drug checking [pill-testing] services, and the availability of potable water fountains [bottled water in a club costs €3.00, whereas in supermarkets it costs between 0.50c to €1.00].



At a local Cannabis Festival sharing an educational space with NGO ReLeaf Malta (April 2025)

# CHALLENGES

- Lack of structured approach to welfare, care, and safety across the night-time economy.
- Negative perceptions on people attending electronic dance music events and drug use in general have been directly related to the human rights risk environment experienced across the scene between 1996 and 2025.
- Despite legal changes in 2015 (Drug Dependence Treatment Not Imprisonment Act; under 2 grams and/or pills depenalised and carrying a fine) and 2021 (Partial Decriminalisation of cannabis possession and cultivation), no accompanying educational, and financial investment on the broad application of harm reduction tools across the night-time economy have been developed.
- Lack of evidence based data collection tools, poor mapping and understanding of local drug trends, and no structured information on emerging new drug trends and/or practices across different communities of people who use drugs.
- No access to basic preventive tools such as access to accessible and affordable water, educational material for safer consumption practices, and pill testing services acting as an early warning system to identify adulterated, synthetic or potent substances.
- Fragmented attempts by grassroots in 1993 and 2025 to establish harm reduction best practices across the night-time economy, sometimes hindered by national services, and the industry.
- No percentage from the national prevention budget allocated to the provision of welfare services across the night-time economy.



Welfare table set up in collaboration with Hacked Techno Events Malta



## REFLECTIONS.

From the early SIN parties in the early 1990s, to most recent large-scale events such as Glitch Festival, the electronic dance music scene in Malta evolved from a relatively small and demonised underground scene to one attracting a large number of tourists and representing 7.9% of GDP. Nonetheless, despite the evolving nature in terms of numbers, type of events, and dancefloors, people attending electronic dance music events in Malta have since the early 1990's suffered from serious institutional shortcomings and a relatively negative portrayal on the media.

The studies by Mifsud (2013), Zampini and Mamo (2021) and Vella (2023) highlighted the continuous tension between socially ascribed norms and perceptions on substance use, socialisation and pleasure, and personal experiences on the dancefloor, including exposure to unnecessary risks. The identified challenges point towards the inexistence of harm reduction tools across the night-time economy in Malta. From something as simple as free or affordable drinking water to educational, drug testing and warning messages about commonly consumed substances, people in Malta continue to be kept in the dark. Unfortunately, people in Malta continue to be unnecessarily exposed to increased risks of overdose and/or ingestion of unwanted chemicals.

Although there is no internationally agreed upon definition of harm reduction, Harm Reduction International defines it as follows; *Harm reduction is grounded in justice and human rights. It focuses on positive change and on working with people without judgement, coercion, discrimination, or requiring that they stop using drugs as a precondition of support.*



Panel discussion with stakeholders as part of the People and Dancefloors documentary screening

When looking at Malta, barriers linked with the lack of meaningful participation by people who use drugs identified by Farrugia (2024) reflect a stagnant environment and a non-aligned approach between national services and realities on the ground.

One may therefore underline that in the past years, outreach work carried out by Harm Reduction Malta and collaborations with small scale organisers across the electronic dance music scene were the only source of educational information and welfare services. As shared by participants to the People and Dancefloors Malta study, what happens on the dancefloors stays on the dancefloor. This is a clear reflection that people engaged with the scene continue to live a dual life, one which has to conceal from the rest of society the 'guilty pleasure' of being part of the 'underground rave culture'.



Harm Reduction Malta's contribution to the Support don't Punish Campaign



## CONCLUSION AND HOPES FOR THE FUTURE.

From acid house and industrial techno of the early to mid-1990's to the eclectic reality of today, the electronic dance music scene in Malta continues to transform from one generation to the next. The small yet fervent family of electronic music artists active on the islands for the past decades powered the creation and maintenance of high-quality events, investing heavily in personal development, including better sound, and lighting technology. As an evolving subculture, dancefloors in Malta embody a parallel cultural space of dedicated artists and loyal followers, changing, innovating and adapting over time, whilst directly contributing an estimated 7.9% of Malta's GDP.

The availability of educational and harm reduction tools to address risks related to behaviours linked with the night-time economy have been frequently discredited through social and institutional means. Salvatore's collaboration with the Manchester-based LifeLine Project back in 1996 and Karen's revival of a safer dance culture through Harm Reduction Malta since 2019, are indicative of a fragmented grassroots attempt to provide welfare and care services for people attending these events. Furthermore, as presented by findings from Mifsud (2013), Zampini and Mamo (2021), and Vella (2023), people attending electronic dance music events have been frequently misrepresented and misunderstood by policy makers and those in decision making roles.



The time lapse of over 30 years in between Salvatore's initiative in 1996 and Karen Mamo's educational venture in 2019 [Karen was 9 years old in 1996] highlight the ever-persistent attempt by the community to provide basic services and restore dignity to thousands still predominantly perceived by policy makers as 'villains'. Furthermore, it is also a strong reminder on the centrality to promote and invest in grass-roots initiatives and facilitate cross boarder collaborations between peer-led organisations and researchers. In fact, one observes that in Malta, despite a growing electronic dance music scene and legal changes depenalising and decriminalising certain activities related to personal possession and cultivation of drugs, national services tasked with advancing prevention and harm reduction services have not been capable of branching out from the confines of 'a medicalised interpretation and application of harm reduction'. This is indicative of national services still prioritising a War on Drugs approach as opposed health, human rights and welfare policies. One of the most worrying and persistent pain is the non-accessibility to potable water, a recurrent issue since 1993, and one which could seriously endanger the lives of those attending these events.

In conclusion, Harm Reduction Malta remains conscious of the pivotal role of advancing evidence-based research tools, and human rights advocacy promoting the voice and well-being of people who use drugs in Malta. To this end, one augurs that Malta's national prevention programs allocate a percentage of resources and finances to address the needs of people who use drugs in a recreational setting and expand non-stigmatised services and tools beyond the morally driven confines of a medicalised interpretation of harm reduction.



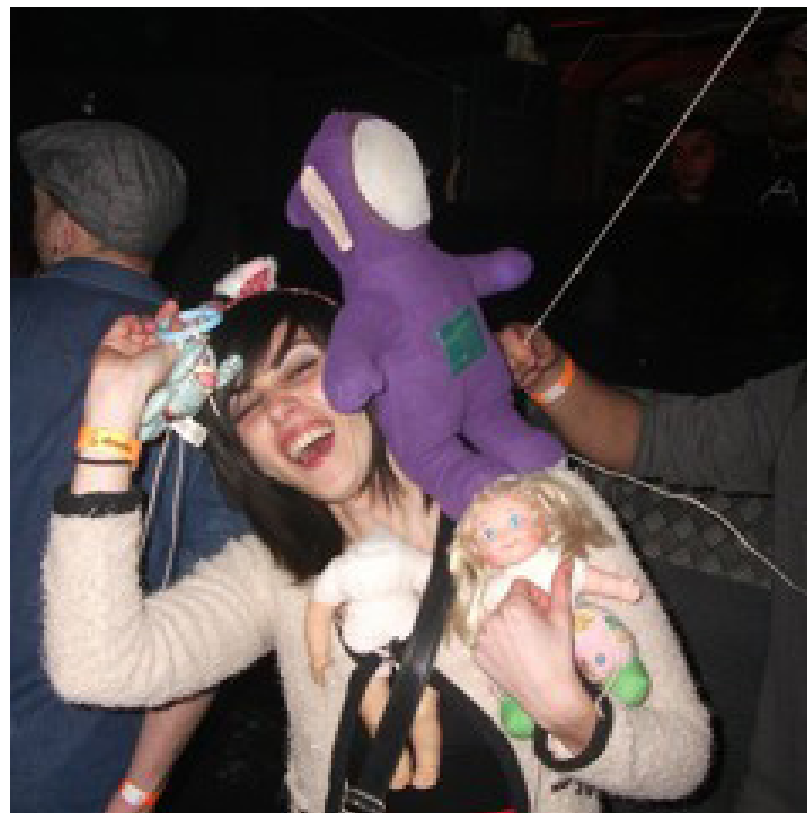


After all, harm reduction is grounded in justice and human rights.

Harm reduction is an expression of love...

- Better monitoring of national drug trends through more frequent general population surveys and other inquiry tools specifically addressing hard to reach communities.
- Availability of community drug checking services, and harm reduction education, including peer-led and community driven early warning system for increased potency and adulterated substances.
- Full access to peer-to-peer harm reduction educational and preventive tools on safer practices such as methods of consumption, drug interactions etc.
- A dedicated welfare and harm reduction contribution-fee by venues/bars licensed to host more than 500 people, thus ensuring direct reinvestment in providing welfare services such as affordable and/or free potable water, access to condoms, sanitary towels, and hydration sachets, and the availability of non-alcoholic options [smoothies and fresh juices/fruit].
- The establishment of a multi-disciplinary welfare team (including the meaningful participation of people who use drugs) focused on promoting inclusive, and safe night-time experiences, thus prioritising public health and 'people centred policies'.

Karen Mamo  
June 2025.



The author during her early clubbing days, circa 2007.

