

**Why single-sex services matter:**

**Privacy, dignity, safety and choice**

**July 2022**



# Introduction

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Single-sex services have begun to be attacked as old-fashioned, and not inclusive. Many organisations have become confused about whether they should provide them at all, or if they do whether they should expect everyone to follow the rules.

Without any consultation, many single-sex facilities have been replaced with “gender-neutral” (mixed-sex) facilities, or facilities that are “inclusive” of members of the opposite sex, based on self-identified gender. What have been absent are the voices of ordinary service users, particularly women.

From 12th to 21st February 2022, Sex Matters ran an online survey. We received 7,062 responses – an extraordinary number in just over a week.

The voices we heard are not representative of the population, but they do capture in detail the practical, emotional and safety reasons why single-sex services matter to those who responded. 90% were women, and nearly half shared experiences of sexual assault, exposure, voyeurism and harassment, and their longstanding effects. Their stories were both shocking and commonplace. There were far too many to include them all.

The survey reveals a crisis in inclusion for women and girls as single-sex facilities and clear policies are removed without consultation or consideration: from changing rooms in shops and sports centres, facilities in schools and hospital wards, public toilets, and facilities in pubs, clubs, theatres, cafes, restaurants and gyms.

Our respondents describe how the removal of female-only services and spaces creates a hostile environment for girls and women, harming their privacy, dignity and safety, and excluding them from public life.

# Wider evidence

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Our research provides rich qualitative data: thousands of individual perspectives about the impact of the loss of single-sex services, from those who value them. This summary features just a few of these voices. More detailed findings from many more voices can be found at [sex-matters.org/single-sex-services-voices](https://sex-matters.org/single-sex-services-voices)

Our research confirms what representative surveys also show: that many people value separate facilities for women and men, and expect them to be provided on the basis of sex, not gender identity.

For example, a YouGov poll on 27th January 2022<sup>1</sup> showed that **87%** of people wanted separate toilets for men and women, either on their own or with a gender-neutral option in addition.

**Only 7%** wanted gender-neutral only. 45% of people say they generally feel uncomfortable using a gender-neutral toilet in a public place.

A recent survey by More in Common<sup>2</sup> found that while 43% of people were willing to agree with the statement that “A transgender woman is a woman”, only 29% thought that someone who self-identifies as a transgender woman should be allowed to use women’s toilets, and only 19% thought they should be allowed to compete in women’s sports.

Research by the Equality and Human Rights Commission<sup>3</sup> showed that **95%** of women using women’s services preferred to receive them from a female-only organisation. A survey by the sexual violence counselling organisation Aurora New Dawn of 629 of their service users<sup>4</sup> found that 100% of them wanted to retain single-sex peer support groups and 95% of female victims prefer a female member of staff for one-to-one counselling.

<sup>1</sup> YouGov (2022). Support for separate toilets for men and women, and gender neutral toilets in public spaces

<sup>2</sup> More in Common (2022). Britons and Gender Identity: Navigating Common Ground and Division

<sup>3</sup> Hirst, A. and Rinne, S. (2012). The Impact of Changes in Commissioning of Women-only Services. Equality and Human Rights Commission

<sup>4</sup> Aurora New Dawn (2022). By and for women

# Summary

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## 1. Single-sex services matter to women

- The most important reason given for wanting single-sex services was privacy and dignity (98% of respondents).
- Nine out of ten respondents to our survey were women, but **people of both sexes said they prefer single-sex privacy** in everyday situations such as changing, washing and using the toilet, and in hospital wards.
- **Almost half the women who responded had experienced sexual assault** in their lifetime, and this made privacy and security in everyday single-sex services particularly important for them.

## 2. Losing single-sex services harms inclusion

- Many women said they **self-exclude** from services which are no longer provided as single-sex or separate-sex.
- 61% of respondents said they had already experienced male and female facilities being **replaced by “gender-neutral”** facilities.
- Many respondents clarified that **sex means biological sex, not gender identity**. 45% had experienced **“trans-inclusive”** rules that allow males to use women’s services.

## 3. Guidance is needed to give everyone confidence

- When we asked where people were most concerned about losing single-sex services, the top two answers were **hospital wards** and **women’s services**, followed by **public toilets** and **schools, colleges and universities**.
- 95% of respondents agreed that the **Equality and Human Rights Commission** should provide guidance for service providers to help them follow the law.

# Everyday privacy

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**99%** of the UK respondents who valued single-sex services agreed with the statement “I want to be able to change, shower and use the toilet in privacy, away from members of the opposite sex.”

More than 3,000 people wrote detailed comments on this one question.

# Inclusion

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“ Without being able to change, shower and use the toilet away from the opposite sex it would stop me wanting to exercise, go out and try new things. ”

Female, Scotland, 45–54



“I’m a Muslim woman and the thought of sharing female only spaces with the opposite sex just further alienates me and ensures that I spend less time in public spaces. It’s unfair that the idea of inclusivity centres marginalised men’s feelings and safety over women.”

Female, England, 25–34

## Privacy and safety

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**“Being able to walk into a space and know there will only be other women in there, I can breathe out and get on with what I need to do – be it have a shower, change my clothes or do my female business – in peace and privacy.”**



**Female, England, 25–34**

**“** Changing, showering and using the toilet are things that happen in private. Most people don't want to do any of those things in front of anyone, even people we know, let alone an unknown member of the opposite sex. **”**

**Female, Scotland, 45–54**

**“As a survivor of childhood sexual assault and rape, I never feel safe in changing rooms, showers, or toilets when men enter those spaces. Having endured extreme male violence I have every right to male free spaces.”**

**Female, Wales, 55–64**

## Ease of use

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**Removing urinals makes toilet seats and floors unhygienic. Making toilets with urinals mixed-sex is humiliating for both men and women.**



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**Speaking as a man, I miss the urinal. I doubt very much females enjoy sitting on a urine soaked toilet seat.**

”

Male, England, 45–54

“I don’t want to stand with my penis in my hand in the same space as women I don’t know any more than they would want to share that space with me.”

Male, England, 55–64



## Periods and pregnancy

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**I have had my first period in a public toilet, had to go to toilets to cry, had to go to toilets when pregnant and hormonal at work and needed space. I have helped a young girl who had her first period in a public toilet. Women support one another in these spaces.**

**Female, England, 35–44**

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**I have had a miscarriage in a public toilet, had to breastfeed a baby in a public toilet, had to pump my breastmilk in a public toilet.**

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**Female, 55–64**

## Particular needs

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Work female cubicles now mixed. Men's toilet still remains. No female only toilets now. The disabled toilet is now used more by women as a result.

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Female, England, 45-54

“My 21-year-old daughter has learning disabilities and needs to have single sex spaces to keep her safe from predatory males. “

Female, Scotland, 45-54

“I have two small children. I have at times left the toilet door open to accommodate a toddler and a pram so we all have room to use the toilet. I do not want to leave my children unattended in a public toilet facility. “

Female, Wales, 35-44



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If my abusive ex-husband had known I was going out to places where there were men, he would have completely banned me from ever leaving my house at all.

Muslim, Female, England, 45–54

“I am Jewish and I do not expose myself to any other male except my husband.”

Jewish, Female, England, 35–44

“

My Christian faith teaches me that my modesty is important and that nakedness is something revealed to only very few people. I feel uncomfortable being forced into situations of intimacy with strangers of the opposite sex. ”

Christian, Female, England, 45–54

## A place of safety

**Almost half of the women who responded said they had experienced sexual assault in their lifetime, and that this was a reason they valued single-sex spaces.**

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**I have anxiety attacks, due to rape, and need somewhere to feel safe in public, away from men. Men’s behaviour often makes me feel uncomfortable, no matter how they present.**

”

**Female, England, 55–64**

“When women see a man in their single sex space we know immediately that he is there for nefarious reasons and we are probably the victim. We must be able to say ‘No’ to this without being labelled bigots or transphobes.”

**Female, Scotland, 45–54**

## Fears are justified

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“I have been followed into a women’s toilet by a man who went into the cubicle next to me. As I opened my door he stood just inside his cubicle and orgasmed over the floor looking at me.”

**Female, England, 35–44**

“I was assaulted by a man in a swimming changing room when I was 11 years old. He was entitled to be in the mixed sex changing room. He followed me in and there wasn’t another person around to help me or question why he was there.”

**Female, England, 35–44**

“I was attacked by a 6 foot 2 drag queen in high heels and his friend in a female toilet. They were both gay so just interested in intimidating me but can’t say that helped much at the time.”

**Female, England, 55–64**

“I have experienced men looking over loo cubicle walls, under doors and through ill-fitting changing room curtains with mixed facilities.”

**Female, Scotland, 55–64**

# Health and personal care

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**95%** agreed that “If I or a member of my family needed intimate personal care it would be important that we could specify the sex of our caregivers.”

Professionals also recognised this need.

**Every single person has the right to decide who looks and who touches their body, it is the first thing I have taught my young children!**

**Female, England, 35–44**

**A male nurse cared for my mother in hospital when she was close to death and it made her uncomfortable. She didn't have the strength to ask for a female nurse.**

**Female, England, 55–64**

**I could never have a cervical smear test from a man. I just would rather risk cancer.**

**Female, England, 55–64**

**As a nurse I can say patients do not want intimate care from males, they just don't. They want dignity and privacy when they are vulnerable.**

**Female, England, 45–54**

**I have experienced an intimate exam from a member of the opposite sex and found it traumatically reminiscent of the sexual assaults I've been subject to.**

**Female, Scotland, 45–54**

## Hospital wards

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My mother-in-law was in a mixed sex ward in a geriatric hospital. A male dementia patient tried to get into bed with her, twice. She was terrified.

Female, Scotland, 55–64



“I spent time as an inpatient on a mixed sex psychiatric ward. I was uncomfortable at night and found it difficult to sleep as there were men wandering the ward and not many staff around. This had a direct impact on my mental health.”

Female, Scotland, 35–44





# Support and friendship

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**87%** of respondents agreed with the statement “Women and girls, and men and boys, sometimes need to meet up in single-sex organisations and groups to share interests.”

## A place of our own

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I work in a secondary school. Every time we survey pupils about sex education, they request single-sex assemblies and lessons as this is an issue where they are most comfortable amongst single-sex peers with a teacher who matches their sex.

**Female, England, 25–34**



**“Girl guides was a safe haven for me growing up, a place away from boys and men who sexualised me. A place just to be a girl away from male judgement.”**

**Female, England, 35–44**

**As a middle-aged woman, I have accessed menopause support groups as well as social events for women. The atmosphere and feeling of openness is very different from that of normal social situations in a very positive way.**

**Female, England, 45–54**

**“As a lesbian the single sex spaces, that allowed me to meet with my women friends and lovers, was a safe space for me. There should still be single sex spaces where women aren’t threatened by men in any shape or form.”**

**Female, England, 55–64**



**“Being in women-only societies at university or at work has made a difference to me**

**professionally – when the training is targeted for women and addressed specific sex-based barriers – it really helps to be in a single sex environment.**

**Female, England, 45–54**

**“ I work in a male dominated industry and have been discriminated against on the basis of my sex. The support of other women has been crucial for me. ”**

**Female, England, 35–44**

# Recovery and refuge

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Nearly half of female respondents to our survey said they had experienced sexual assault. Women cannot identify which men are dangerous.

While recognising that not all men mean them harm, women cannot identify which men are dangerous, and **many highlighted how important it is to have women-only services such as counselling and shelters.**

# Counselling

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“I was assaulted at 16, the female only services gave me the confidence and time to process and heal and rebuild my confidence.”

**Female, England, 25–34**

“I would not have called the rape crisis line I eventually got courage to call if I’d thought there was the slightest risk of a biological male answering the phone. That one phone call I did make was key to my ability to carry on living.”

**Female, England, 55–64**

“I received counselling for the rape from a female trauma counsellor, through the NHS: I saw the counsellor one-to-one. [...] You cannot recover from trauma in a setting where your trauma-response is being reactivated. You need to know you are in a place of complete physical safety. That means a female-only space.”

**Female, Scotland, 45–54**

“I would not have felt able to discuss what happened to me had my counsellor been male, or had there been a male in my support group. Without that support group, I would not have been able to recover.”

**Female, England, 65 and over**

# Shelters

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After experiencing domestic violence I did not want a strange biological man in my house. I had a panic attack when the plumber came round. I felt panic I cannot imagine it is never right to allow biological males into refuges or women's prisons.

**Female, England, 35–44**



**“I used to work as a volunteer for Women’s Aid. Women fleeing from domestic abuse are particularly vulnerable and need specialist care where they feel safe. Men in those spaces increases their trauma.”**

**Female, England, 55–64**

**“As both a survivor myself and someone who works with survivors it is impossible to provide trauma-informed care to women who have experienced male violence if males are present.”**

**Female, England, 45–54**

Sex matters in life and in law.  
It shouldn't take courage to say so.

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