

# Women's services: a sector silenced

Briefing for MPs, 17th January 2024

## New report finds:

- **84% of Britons** think women who have experienced rape and violence should have access to female-only services
- **charity leaders** report bullying and coercion of staff and trustees who advocate for women-only rape and violence support services
- **service users** face risk of males in female spaces; experience fear, loss of trust and re-traumatisation; and may self-exclude from support services

**Sex Matters calls for the government to urgently amend the definition of sex in the Equality Act to protect the women's sector and other single-sex services.**

## Summary

A major new report launched today by Sex Matters reveals that **leaders in the women's sector** who advocate for female-only services are **routinely subjected to investigations, ostracisation, bullying and employment**

**loss**, and have been pressured into adopting policies that compromise women's welfare and safety.

Yet a new poll has found that the **British public strongly backs single-sex support** for women who have been the victims of rape, assault or domestic violence, with **84% supporting female-only services**.

The report, titled *Women's services: A sector silenced*, is **the first of its kind globally**. It is based on **interviews with 19 leaders** of women's charities and organisations, and a **representative poll** of the public.

The lead author of the report was social-science researcher Matilda Gosling, and **Jess Phillips MP, Karen Ingala Smith** and **Shonagh Dillon** were among the sector leaders interviewed.

Interviewees warned that service users are not only being put at **risk of attack, but experience fear, loss of trust and re-traumatisation**, and **may self-exclude from support services**.

**Because the law is not clear that "woman" means female**

- **Services for women and their children are undermined**. Women are made to feel unsafe and trust in the service is destroyed. Safety is compromised and some women self-exclude.

- **Sector leaders are being silenced.** Sector leaders face vitriolic personal accusations, investigations, disciplinary procedures and potential loss of employment and funding.
- **Organisations are in turmoil.** Decision-makers are hamstrung and internal cultures become toxic. Scarce time and financial resources are spent on dealing with tension, complaints and conflicts.
- **Services are compromised.** Organisations cannot communicate their services clearly or signpost referrals safely. Meaningful data and therefore knowledge about what is needed are lost.
- **The sector is losing clarity of purpose.** Leaders of organisations are afraid to state clearly that they offer single-sex services; some make ambiguous statements.
- **The public-policy environment is hostile.** There is strong pressure from commissioners and funders to be “trans-inclusive”, and many organisations are ambiguous about their policies.
- **The needs of trans and gender-questioning service users are not understood.** The needs of transmen, detransitioners and gender-questioning young people in particular are ignored.

## Case examples

- Katie Dolatowski, a trans-identifying male convicted of the sexual assault of a child gained access to a **trans-inclusive refuge for women and children** in Leeds in 2022 by changing his name and identity documents. (Reported in *Yorkshire Evening Post*.)
- Edinburgh Rape Crisis is run by a trans-identifying male, Mridul Wadhwa, who has said publicly that “bigoted” rape victims with “unacceptable beliefs” on gender-identity ideology should be “challenged” and “re-educated” on transgender rights as part of their recovery. (Reported in *The Herald*.)
- Another case raised in the report was that of a woman who was sexually abused in her teens and **wrote to NHS Brighton** to request that she had only women care for her. She received a letter from the trust saying: **“We consider this to be bigotry”**. (Sarah Summers on crowdjustice.com)

## UK in breach of Istanbul Convention?

The report **coincides with the visit this week of a group of experts on women and domestic violence from the Council of Europe**. They will be warned by women’s rights campaigners that lack of clarity in the Equality Act puts the **UK at risk of being in breach of the Istanbul**

**Convention**, the most comprehensive international legal framework for tackling violence against women and girls.

Recent legal judgments about the definition of “sex” in the Equality Act 2010 have determined that “woman” can include male people if they have a gender-recognition certificate.

The **turmoil within the women’s sector** follows from the **destruction of clarity in the law, including the public-sector equality duty that was meant to ensure women’s needs are considered.**

Without a clear protected characteristic of sex, the **Equality Act does not protect the interests of women.**

**Sex Matters is calling on the government to:**

- **urgently amend the definitions of woman and man** in the Equality Act to remove the effect of the Gender Recognition Act on this law (this would not remove protection against discrimination for trans people, as there is a separate protected characteristic of gender reassignment)
- **amend Section 22 of the Gender Recognition Act** to allow information-sharing, in order to operate clear sex-based rules and safeguarding without fear of criminal charges

- **provide clear guidance to people applying for gender-recognition certificates**, explaining that these do not give them the right to access services or spaces set aside for the opposite sex.

The report also calls for:

- **sex to be recorded and recognised across the criminal justice systems** of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland
- the **Equality and Human Rights Commission** and charity regulators to issue clear guidance for the sector
- the **women's sector** to speak up clearly and defend its purpose.

## Links and resources

- Full report: *Women's services: a sector silenced*:  
[sex-matters.org/sector-silenced/](https://sex-matters.org/sector-silenced/)
- Summary report and poll results:  
[sex-matters.org/sector-silenced-summary/](https://sex-matters.org/sector-silenced-summary/)

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