

# VIRGINIA WOOLF'S DREAM: CAN WOMEN HAVE A ROOM OF OUR OWN TODAY?

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On March 28, 1941, a renowned British author, feminist thinker, and a relentless advocate for women's right to a space of her own, Virginia Woolf, took her own life. This week, we remember her work, and whether Woolf's metaphor for women's autonomy in practice has been realised in law.

In 1928, Virginia Woolf was invited to deliver lectures at two women's colleges at the University of Cambridge. This would become the inspiration for the book 'A Room of One's Own' that was published in 1929 - a feminist manifesto that argues for a woman's right to her own space.

In the book, Woolf makes incisive points about the need for a space to think, to create, and the means to sustain it. This metaphoric room could symbolise different aspects of a woman's life: a space free from domestic chores and responsibilities, maternal tasks or just the unending expectations of a woman's servitude. Woolf clarifies that only when such a space is available for us, would we be able to move away from being objects, to becoming subjects, capable of independent thoughts and desires. Ironically, during the lectures, she was denied access to certain areas of the university due to the fact that she was a woman. The rules of the times were so rigid that even with her fame and success, she was not considered to have the same rights as a nineteen year old male student. In her book she wrote in defiance of the rule: "Lock up your libraries if you like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind." Woolf has since radically transformed the feminist outlook on women's lives.



But even after almost a century since her death, the pursuit of 'a room of one's own' has not become any easier for women. . In fact, it has become more complicated. Now, the question is not only whether women deserve our own space, but whether the very notion of a female-only space can exist at all.

## **Ask and You Shall be Denied: Laws to Protect Women That Changed Over Time**

### 1. The story of CEDAW

Worldwide, law never considered women as a distinct class; it was forced to change this archaic position through sustained political, feminist intervention, and through women insisting 'human' couldn't be a neutral term if it consistently only meant men.

This is why CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) is of significance. Adopted in 1979 after decades of political advocacy, it is the singular global legal instrument that sets out to centre women, to name sex-based discrimination, and to endeavour to address it in a systematic and structural way.



And it is this act of specificity - naming women as a group of right holders, and naming what is against women and our rights in law and practice - that triggered the backlash: **CEDAW was accused of being exclusionary and anti-men among other things**. While countries like the US had no trouble understanding the gravity of discrimination that women faced, it objected to CEDAW. Their argument was: CEDAW was contrary to the US constitution - to accept a legal framework focussed solely on women, was discriminatory... against men. To this day, the US has not ratified the Convention. Similarly, Iran never ratified it because it would be contrary to Sharia, and just un-Islamic.

While the world has followed the male default for centuries, the moment it is altered, even partially, it is deemed discriminatory, and condemned as intolerable. Laws written with a universal masculine default are still considered the norm. Laws written specifically for women are put through extensive scrutiny, in need for justification, just plain suspect. This scrutiny takes different forms, and is well-known to any women who at least once in her life raised a question about discrimination that women and girls face:

What about men?

What about them?

What about that?

What about <everyone/everything except a woman>?

This derailment via what-about-ism dilutes the struggle of our sociopolitical class as females. To make matters worse, once the word “woman” is accused of being exclusionary, asked to be expanded, it can no longer function as a legal class of its own. Protections become hard to define, even harder to enforce. Essentially, the category of ‘female’ becomes easy to reinterpret. Our existence dissolved not just into men, but to an ever expanding list of identities and groups.

## 2. The Istanbul Convention

What was envisioned to be a landmark treaty on the prevention of violence against women did not remain untouched for very long. At the time the convention was drafted, under pressure from the conservative states, “domestic violence” was included - alongside violence against women - into both the title and operative provisions, thus expanding the scope of what the convention originally set out to do: centre protection of women from men’s violence. At the same time, Article 4(3) - the nondiscrimination clause - was broadened to include “gender identity”. While all these changes don’t essentially eliminate the provisions created for women, they create a space for interpretive flexibility. States are now able to cite the broader “domestic violence” and the “gender identity” inclusion to justify “gender-neutral” or mixed-sex services and spaces.

For example, the way Finland initially implemented the convention illustrates how elasticity in language leads to neutralising/diminishing women’s spaces. While the convention clearly marks violence against women to be its central focus (Article 2(1)), it also allows (under Article 2(2)) states to apply its provisions to *all* its victims. Finnish authorities relied on this clause in their decision to neutralise their shelter services. In doing so, they moved the focus from women affected by male violence to a generalised service provision for everyone.

This reinterpretation was criticised by GREVIO which is the convention’s monitoring group of experts that insisted that states must remain committed to ensure dedicated services for women.

### 3. The EU Law

European Union's law allows single-sex spaces and services where proportionate and justified. For example, Article 23 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights recognises that equality between the two sexes must be ensured in all areas, while also allowing for "specific advantages" to uplift the underrepresented sex. This objective is crystallised in the [Directive 2004/113/EC](#), that governs access to goods and services. While it lays down the general rule of equal access between women and men, it also permits specific differences in treatment where proportionate.

This includes provision of single-sex services particularly where it is created as a response to sex-specific needs and harms. As such the creation and continuation of services like shelters, crisis response centres and female-only associations and clubs, all fall within this provision of the directive.

Recognising equality cannot be achieved by merely pretending differences do not exist. Women's biology - girls' puberty, menstruation, pregnancy and maternity, menopause, contraception and abortion, cervical cancer and PCOS, to name only few examples - all require a differentiated approach in service design and provision, in addition to women-specific consequences of male violence, discrimination and trauma that should be treated in a tailored, sex-specific manner.



**Equal treatment, differentiated treatment and targeted positive measures can all co-exist in law and practice, and in the European Union, they do not constitute discrimination or "exclusion" of any group.** However, what the law permits on paper becomes impossible to operationalise in practice because of expansive reinterpretations of who a woman is. As a result, female-only services and spaces are treated not as a right, but as discrimination.

#### Erasure of Sex

Across Europe (and globally), the data is crystal clear: violence against women is overwhelmingly perpetrated by men. The WHO [reports](#) that one in four women become a victim of violence at the hands of men. The neutrality shift has been [lobbied](#) heavily by the lobby groups. Despite the [persistent rate](#) of women at the receiving end of violence, exclusive services meant to protect them are either "neutralised" - where men who claim to be a woman are being permitted in the same space - or are being shut down.

Ireland was one of the first European countries to adopt self identification (2015). For example, a violent male who goes by the name "Barbie Kardashian" who [threatened](#) to rape, torture and kill his mother, was placed in female prison (Limerick Prison).

In Spain, the Trans Law ("Ley Trans") that passed in 2023 has created significant [challenges](#). Despite warnings by feminists, shelters and female prisons are made available for men, by groups by removing 'sex' as a legal distinction. Male offenders are [asking](#) for transfers to female only prisons, or female-only services according to the new law.

Similarly, in Germany, the "self determination Act" (Selbstbestimmungsgesetz) that [passed](#) in 2024 that challenged exclusive access to women at the protected refuges (Schutzräume). The refuges are now faced with permitting males with feminine gender identities, or facing "anti-discrimination" lawsuits.

In other western countries outside of the EU, too, single-sex services for women are facing similar problems. The Vancouver Rape Relief centre was one of the longest-running feminist shelters - a "room" to some women to be free from abuse - [lost funding](#) after refusing to change their services to mixed-sex.

Until 2024, the Edinburgh Rape Crisis centre appointed a male who identifies as a woman the CEO. When faced with criticism from women's rights groups, 'Mridhul' Wadhwa the then CEO said sexually abused women who refuse to take part in mixed-sex services for rape victims, should "reframe" their trauma.

These instances drive home the point that the harder we try to prove - through data, scientific evidence and figures - that violence is sexed, the stronger the backlash becomes.

### **Woolf's Dream of Women-Only Spaces: Still Not Ours to Own**

The reality is that even after all this time, women still struggle to find a room of our own. And if we do have a room, there is no control over who enters or exits it and when. If we don't have the agency to define our spaces, and every attempt to name ourselves as an exclusive sex-class is met with hostility, what remains of our political existence? If the law can be applied to recognise our sex-based differences in principle, but this law is ignored, not implemented or interpreted in a way that makes it obsolete, what aspect of our lives does this law actually protect?

We are being told that "inclusion" is justice, and refusing to adhere to this new norm, attempting to bring nuance is essentially hatred. In the end, women are being displaced. If words, lives and abuse were to be neutralised, in a world structured for male domination it simply restores to a male default, and women bear the consequences of it, again.

Virginia Woolf talked about something acutely fundamental to the lives of women: without space, there is no thought; without thought, there is no freedom, no concept of self. And even after a century since she dreamed of this, we are unable to set boundaries and have our space.

And in the end, while the room exists as a vision, it is still not ours to own.