

# WOMEN AND TOILETS

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Many women are concerned about the lack of public toilets, and the poor design and lack of facilities in those that do exist. With reference mainly to the United Kingdom, but with global parallels, this paper considers the role of toilet provision in limiting women's mobility and also restricting the freedom of children. Women of all ages and types need toilets. In particular pregnant women and those with babies and small children are adversely affected. Women who are menstruating need toilet facilities, as do the elderly and those with various urinary and incontinence problems. Young, able-bodied, single women also need toilets especially when commuting long distances to work. But public toilet provision historically has been primarily for men, and has been provided and designed by men professionals. Women are usually given fewer facilities than men, but arguably their needs are greater and more varied. Women, at best, have been seen as an awkward addition, and been provided with fewer facilities, resulting in women having to queue and stand in line for toilets. Provision of toilets for people with disabilities has been a relatively recent innovation and the design of 'disabled toilets' was originally mainly aimed at men war veterans rather than women. Baby changing and childcare facilities have been an even more recent introduction, at the whim of local providers, and often mothers are expected to share facilities with the disabled, causing conflict over the use of scarce resources. Trying to use the regular toilets with push chairs (baby buggies) is virtually impossible because of narrow toilet door entrances and limited space within the cubicle, narrow access corridors and poor accessibility overall. Lack of toilets has implications for health and wellbeing and restricts the mobility of the elderly, those with disabilities and children, and undermines sustainability, transportation, inclusive urban design and regeneration policies. It is argued, public toilets policy is a town planning issue, crucial to creating sustainable, efficient, accessible and equitable cities. Ways of integrating toilet provision into city planning and urban governance are discussed.

Firstly I will explain why I am obsessed with researching toilets, basically because they are such a good example of 'contested spaces' in terms of gender, and exemplify in microcosm so many of the issues that women encounter in the city of man. As for definitions my work has mainly been in relation to 'public toilets', which includes both municipally provided toilets, such as the public restrooms still found in many UK cities (and in many other countries too) along with toilets on private premises (such as bars, cafes, malls, shops) to which the public have access. An important component is the availability of toilets when people are moving through

the city, in bus stations, railway termini and other destinations. So I am concerned with 'away from home' toilets. Indeed as the years have gone by I have got involved in all sorts of toilets, including workplace toilets, leisure and sports toilets, tourist toilets, and toilets on public transport systems, stations and termini (or rather the problem of the lack of such facilities in many cases). Following this explanation I will briefly outline 'the problem' and its historical background, with particular reference to the UK, but as a member of the World Toilet Organisation. My interest in public toilet issues arose from when I was doing research on the social aspects of planning and asking ordinary people, what the main problems with cities were, and what they wanted from town planners. Many people, but especially women, said they were concerned about the lack of public toilets which affected their chances of travelling and accessing the city 'comfortably' this being a particular problem for those accompanied by small children. In fact public toilet provision is not a statutory duty on town planning departments in the UK, and is generally seen as a low status, technical role carried out by departments such as 'street cleansing' or 'sanitary engineering'. But, there were so many women-related policy issues to cover, and the chances of success in changing policy and attitudes seemed to be diminishing not increasing with time (Greed, 2005). I gradually moved towards focusing specifically on public toilets, which tied in with my concern about creating accessible, inclusive urban environments. 'Toilets' may be seen as a 'metaphor' as a 'cameo' exemplar, encompassing so many of the issues that concern women within the built environment (Greed, 2003). 'All human life is there', as a study of 'toilets' relates to many issues including, gender, biological issues, sexuality, culture, religion, architecture, public health and medicine, sanitation, public transport and infrastructure inter alia.

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