

About toilets, women, and men

Recently, Amsterdam court has sentenced a young woman for public urination. Key arguments in the court's decision were hygiene, self-control, and flexibility. What can we learn from facility management?

Low density of female toilets

In her defence, offender Geerte Piening relied on the argument of discrimination. When she realised she had to go to the toilet, she walked back to her latest pub. The attempt was unsuccessful, it was closed; as were others. The low density of female versus male public toilets (1:35) forced her to urinate publicly in Amsterdam city centre during night time. She mitigated her visual exposure by using a concrete block and two girlfriends. Hence, in her view a fine was not justified.

It is not forbidden to use men toilets



The counter argument was that she could have realised to go to the toilet earlier. Moreover, the public prosecutor argued that low density is no argument. Public urination is forbidden due to hygiene. In an analogy, she was told that absence of garbage cans was no reason to litter either. The judge (only orally) added that it is not forbidden to use a public urinal for men: “it may not be pleasant, but it is possible.”

Flawed arguments

What about these counter arguments? They seem flawed. If hygiene is of matter to authorities then why not have a sufficient number of toilets that serve the needs of both men and women? Moreover, littering cannot be compared with urinating, because it does not involve an urgent physiological need. And what about an offense against public decency if women would follow the judge's advice? Using a men's public urinal is for women not only unpractical and unhygienic, but in some cases also embarrassing and during night time even potentially dangerous due to visual exposure. In a so-called Amsterdam 'krul' (curl), for instance, the lower body parts are visible: it shows when a toilet is occupied. It was designed for people standing, not for people sitting.

Media storm

Nevertheless, Piening was fined 90 euros by the judge. In the Netherlands, the sentence has aroused public indignation. Media stepped in and the whole thing exploded. An action group was set up and a wonderful event was organized, stimulating women to publicly use public male urinals as suggested by the judge. During the event, the reported experiences of women were hilarious. It clearly shows how ridiculous the advice was. Women need substantial support allowing change to take place: the provision of more facilities for women.

Cart blanche for women?

In the Netherlands, a judicial verdict is one of the sources of justice. As such it has public consequences. The verdict suggests that the public prosecutor and judge may have been afraid of societal

consequences: a cart blanche for women urinating publicly and/or a push on the construction (costs) of more toilets for women in order to avoid such behaviours? But the latter is exactly what is necessary here. Currently, the ones responsible for this skewed distribution of public toilets, such as decisionmakers at local authorities, can hide in silence.

Long queues for women

But what is the essence of this problem on a societal scale? Clearly, women are disadvantaged in the context of toilet use. In facility management practices, this is a well-known fact. Persistent queues at female toilets in (semi-)public settings with large numbers of visitors, varying from gas stations along highways to buildings for cultural performances and (public) events, show that women are served worse than men. In many cases the supply and demand do not match at all. There is literally too little space for female restrooms and there are too little outlets. Whispered causes are that toilets are considered unimportant in design and construction projects, the relative silence of women, professional blindness of designers, lost or marginalized voices of women in the design of buildings and public spaces, men creating more problems in cases of too little toilets, un-sexiness of toilet design, and a general unawareness that the problem can be solved relatively easily.

Unlock refreshing ideas

New generations of designers and decisionmakers should give more space to women in the built environment. Find refreshing insights and new creative solutions. Practitioners show us examples which are a delight to stay in. In railway station Leiden Netherlands Railways

shows that it can be done: clean toilets in an ambiance with wonderful scent, design, music, and fresh water (above image). Organize a design contest: beautiful, colourful, clean, and sufficient supply is possible. Why not involve students? Ask students to come up with a solution! With female top designers, facility managers, and cleaning staff in the jury! Show future generations that it can be done!

Time for action

Authorities should allow for change in toilet design and distribution: financially, legally, and in any other way necessary to solve the problem. Moreover, the number of toilets should always match the nature of the users. More women at cultural performances: more female toilets. In the event industries such shifts take place, with gender neutral toilets. Dutch women can pride themselves in supporting Geerte Piening. It may be a real challenge to design toilets that fulfil the needs of both men and women, but it can be done! Queues can be solved. I trust that their uproar has a long-lasting impact on the emergence of new designs and the presence of more and better toilets for women.

Epilogue

As a management discipline facility management serves the primary process of organisations and is being associated with a broad spectrum of supportive activities varying from the design and management of buildings and technical systems to services as cleaning, security, and catering. Among many other things, designing, operating, and maintaining toilets are in the core business of facility management.