



# Constructed gender discrimination: Reflections on a long and winding road

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## Abstract

Fundamentally, it would be expected that men and women are treated equally, also where private matters such as the access to toilets is concerned. Previous research reports on how gender discrimination is embedded in the design of public toilets, resulting in (dis)similar outcomes. This study, however, goes beyond simply comparing the number of toilets available to men and women, and also engages in the different experiences, associated by a male or a female using toilets while travelling for leisure purposes. Data were collected during a 12-day leisure trip departing from Johannesburg, visiting the south of France, and ultimately the city of Moscow. A mix-method of data generation was followed, incorporating quantitative observations of ablution facilities, as well as autoethnographical comments, which formed the qualitative part of the research. Quantitative data were collected from 16 sites. The quantitative data confirm previous findings that, at a numerical level, men have more access to toilet facilities than women. At a perception level, it could be reported, that in general, access to the immediate use of toilets facilities was similar for both men and women, and that in most cases the facilities were perceived to be well kept and hygienic. Specifically, perceptions regarding the facilities differed along gender lines, with men seemingly having less concerns regarding hygiene in the facilities, and women perceiving men to have easier and faster access to the use of toilets. As for access and experiences about toilet facilities, the words of the song “The Long and Winding Road” seem to ring true, as the road always leads you to the same “door”. From these travellers’ experiences, the message is clear. Men and women differ, and serious efforts need to be made by those involved in the travel and tourism industry to accommodate both genders. As discussed later in the article, the solution does not necessary lie in communal ablution facilities. Some suggestions for the improvement of the ablution-related travel and tourism experience are offered.

**Keywords:** Gender discrimination, travel, holiday, toilets, access, sanitary conditions.

## Introduction

Men and women may differ from each other in some fundamental ways (Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis & Sam, 2011; Lamb, Pleck, Charnov & Levine, 2017; Munroe & Munroe, 1975), but within the present time frame males and females are deemed to be equal, or equal but different (Cascio, 2010; Nicolaidis, 2015). Some of the first legislation regarding equality was passed in 1868 in the United States of America (USA), giving all citizens access to the country’s resources (Bill of Rights of 1789, with amendments added in 1868 and 1870). The United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) promotes equality and dignity internationally, as does Chapter 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996) locally. Particular to gender-based rights, the United Nations’ Commission on the Status of Women (1946), and in the USA, the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1972 Equal Rights Amendment, affirmed women’s rights. In South Africa, the 1997 Basic Conditions of Employment Act and the 1998 Employment Equity Act promote gender equality and the affirmation thereof, compared to previous discriminatory practices (South Africa, 1998). Despite the aforementioned legislation, discrimination against women persists (Triana, Jayasinghe, Pieper, Delgado & Li, 2018), and remains a topic of great interest (Anisman-Razin, Kark & Saguy, 2018; Cislak, Formanowicz & Saguy, 2018).





Figure 1 graphically displays the different functionality of toilets. It shows that with urinals (for men) there is no need to get in and out, having to open, close, lock doors and then open these again, or any need to wipe a toilet seat (O'Dwyer, 2019). Women are in general more aware of hygiene and engage more often in handwashing (Anderson, Warren, Perez, Louis, Phillips, ... & Misra, 2008; Johnson, Sholcosky, Gabello, Ragni & Ogonosky, 2003). They also use soap more often (Garbutt, Simmons, Patrick & Miller 2007), which all accounts for more time spent in ablution facilities. Furthermore, different tasks are performed in ablution facilities. Menstruation, and the associated unwrapping and placing of sanitary products (O'Dwyer, 2019; Pinsker, 2019; Raucheisen & Jones, 2019), contribute to additional time spent in female restrooms. The "pleasures" of pregnancy also include more frequent trips to the toilet (O'Dwyer, 2019). Remaining within the context of this biological theme, certain health conditions result in more frequent emptying of the bladder. These conditions occur more commonly amongst women, such as cystitis (a bacteria-driven urinary tract infection that females are more exposed to, given the shorter travel distance from outside the body to the bladder (O'Dwyer, 2019). Furthermore, women need to remove more items of clothing when visiting the toilet (Raucheisen & Jones, 2019), subsequently spending more time checking and adjusting their clothing afterwards (O'Dwyer, 2019). Women are also more likely than men to have children with them (Raucheisen & Jones, 2019), requiring assistance, which can delay their stay in restrooms. This results in women using, on average, 90 seconds to visit the toilet, compared to 60 seconds for men (Ghent University, 2017). George (2018) reports about 90 seconds for women, and 40 seconds for men.

Despite the above-mentioned factors which require women to visit toilets more frequently than men, and spending more time in doing so, women are often afforded less toilet facilities than men. This is because, whilst equal square metre facilities are provided in buildings by architects (George, 2018; Pinsker, 2019), one urinal requires less space than one cubicle (O'Dwyer, 2019), resulting in the fact that an average toilet area can accommodate 20 to 30% more toilets for men (urinals and cubicles) (Ghent University, 2017). Since men's and women's bathrooms are often equal in size, it means men have more toilets (Raucheisen & Jones, 2019). This unequal distribution is reported across the globe (Gershenson & Penner, 2008), covering developed and underdeveloped countries (Moore, 2009). More specifically, Moore refers to toilets and tourism in a chapter called "Colonial visions of 'third world' toilets: A nineteenth-century discourse that haunts contemporary tourism." This forms a chapter in the Gershenson and Penner (2008) book entitled "Ladies and gents: Public toilets and gender". Specific to tourism and public toilets, Steyn (2012, 2014, 2015) reports that toilets are disproportionally allocated in the selected locations he visited in the USA, South Africa, and China, with the USA having the most equal distribution and China the least equal.

The outcome of this disproportionality in the available number of toilets, as well as differential use, is that at a typical busy restroom women could wait as much as 34 times longer than men (Raucheisen & Jones, 2019). This is evident from the long lines often witnessed at toilets for women (O'Dwyer, 2019; Sprague, 2018; Matthews, 2018). In a survey conducted in the United Kingdom 59% of women reported that they regularly stand in line, compared with 11% amongst men (George, 2018). It may easily be concluded that the "designers and providers should use a more equitable rather than an equal allocation of space and facilities, so women can take the time they need in a toilet without having to pay for it by waiting longer" (O'Dwyer, 2019, no page). The above words of O'Dwyer (2019) resonate well with the need for the fair and respectful treatment of women regarding toilets (Greed, 2019; Li, 2018; Ramster, Greed & Bichard, 2018). Urgency to address the present disparities exists on at least three levels. At a political level, it could be argued that "[a]t particular historic moments and in different locations, the absence of toilet facilities has signalled to various subordinate social groups that they are outsiders to the body politic and that there is no room for them in public space" (Gershenson & Penner, 2009, ix-x). Psychologically, or maybe sociologically, it could be said that toilet facilities are "mirrors with which we can examine the way we want to see both ourselves and



others” and that “buildings give materiality to the behavior that we consider orderly and, ultimately, enforce this order” (Schweder, 2009, 182). Within an environment of embracing equality, this results in serious cognitive dissonance (see Festinger, 1957), which could in turn result in psychological problems. At a medical level, the effects of delaying urination, due to queuing, are negative and well-documented (Palmer, Willis-Gray, Zhou, Newman & Wu, 2018; Pierce, Perry, Gallagher & Chiarelli, 2019; Zhou, Newman & Palmer, 2018; Zhou, Xue, Liu, Zhuo, Tu & Palmer, 2019).

## Methodology

The setting of the research was a 12-day leisure trip starting from Johannesburg, visiting the south of France, and ultimately Moscow. The researcher and his co-researcher<sup>3</sup> intended to visit all ablution facilities which naturally presented themselves during the trip, to count the number of toilets available in each setting, and also to note their experiences whilst using the facilities. As no data were collected from individuals, no ethics application was applied for.

A mix-method of data generation was therefore followed, counting the number of toilets per setting, and making autoethnographical notes (Ellis, 2016; Hughes & Pennington, 2016). Both urinals and cubicles (containing a typical Western-style toilet) were counted in the areas allocated to men and women, and the autoethnographical notes were compiled following the journey. As no data were collected from individuals, the need to gain ethical approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee was unnecessary. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the university.

## Results

Quantitative data were collected from 16 sites. Reported on, are the number of toilets, divided into urinals and cubicles, as well as the number of hand wash basins, as it was argued that queuing at these could also extend the time spent in ablution facilities. [Interesting to note is that in some ablution facilities the hand wash basins and the mirrors are separated – which could be designed with the aim of reducing time spent at the basins.]

**Table 1.** Toilets and wash basins per setting and per gender (Source: Author’s own)

Country	Site	♀/♂	Urinals	Cubicle	Toilets	Basins
South Africa	ORT Airport <sup>1</sup>	♂	8	10	18	9
		♀	-	12	12	8
Qatar	Doha Airport <sup>1</sup>	♂	11	11	22	15
		♀	-	23	23	15
France	Nice Airport <sup>1</sup>	♂	8	11	19	8
		♀	-	13	13	10
	Nice Train Station	♂	3	2	5	2
		♀	-	3	3	2
	Avignon Train Station <sup>2</sup>	♂	3	2	5 <sup>3</sup>	1
		♀	-	4	4 <sup>3</sup>	3
	L’Abbaye de Notre Dame de Sénanque	♂	4	2	6 <sup>3</sup>	2
	Fontaine-de-Vaucluse <sup>4</sup>	♀	-	3	3	2
Marseille Airport <sup>1</sup>	♂	6	1	7	1	
	♀	-	2	2	1	
Russia	Sheremetyevo Airport <sup>5</sup>	♂	7	6	13	5
		♀	-	6	6	4

<sup>3</sup> The primary researcher is the author of this article. The co-researcher is the researcher’s wife, Lydia von Wielligh-Steyn, who assisted with the collection of data in the ablution facilities allocated to women, and who shared her experiences of using the toilet facilities. She also assisted in the editing of the document.



(Moscow)			-	-	-	-
	Gum Shopping Centre <sup>6</sup>		8	6	14	5
			-	8	8	4
	Okhotny Ryad Mall <sup>7</sup>		5	7	12	4
			-	14	14 <sup>3</sup>	5
	Gorki Park		2	3	5	2
			-	4	4	3
	Luzhniki Stadium		22	8	30	10
			-	20	20	6
	Tsum Shopping Centre		4	2	6	3
			-	6	6	5
	Domodedovo Airport <sup>1</sup>		11	11	22	11
			-	14	14	11
Qatar	Doha Airport <sup>1</sup>		15	28	42	15
			-	28	28	14
South Africa	ORT Airport <sup>1</sup>		8	7	15	8
			-	11	11	8
Total	Men		125	117	241	101
	Women		-	171	171	101

<sup>1</sup> Two ablution facilities were visited at this site. <sup>2</sup> A fee of €0.90 was payable for the use of the facility. <sup>3</sup> A queue formed in front of this ablution facility. <sup>4</sup> Patrons were asked to make a donation of €0.30 for the use of the facility. <sup>5</sup> Failed to collect data. <sup>6</sup> A fee of P0.90 was payable for the use of the facility. <sup>7</sup> A fee of P0.50 was payable for the use of the facility.

The results confirm previous conclusions (see Steyn, 2012, 2014, 2015), namely that more toilet facilities are generally available for men than for women. According to these studies, men had access to 58.5% of all toilet facilities available, and were not required to queue at these facilities to obtain access to the services.

## Findings

The findings are presented as reflections from the author and co-author on the most distinct experiences during their 12-day journey.

Starting off at the international departure terminal of Oliver Tambo (ORT) Airport in Johannesburg, the male author was pleasantly surprised by the fact that a cleaner was present at the ablution facilities to systematically clean each cubicle before use. This was shared with the co-author, who confirmed that she had experienced this before in female facilities. It was therefore not unique to male facilities where one might have presumed that the constant cleaning was necessary due to careless males urinating without taking proper aim.

Whilst using the gender-neutral toilets during the flight from Johannesburg to Nice, it was noticeable how the quality of the facilities deteriorated. In the beginning everything was pristine, but towards the end of the flight, messy and careless urinating by standing men made the experience extremely unpleasant. The author experienced this as a nuisance, whilst the female co-author found it revolting. Toilet seat covers were available, but due to the general mess, these were not practical to use.

The airport at Doha is huge, with several toilet facilities available throughout the building. The authors visited the facilities closest to the disembarkation area. There were no queues and the facilities were clean. It would be fair to state that, based on the authors' experience here, and despite the unequal distribution of toilets in this particular instance (see Table 1), no gender-based discrimination was perceived at the time the facilities were used.

The flight from Doha to Nice lasted only 6.5 hours, which might explain why the toilet experience was less painful than on the longer flight from Johannesburg to Doha. Clearly, flight attendants need to give more attention to the state of the toilet facilities on longer flights. Nice Airport's toilet facilities did not stand out for any particular reason. In Nice, the authors



were fortunate to dine at a Michelin-starred restaurant in the city later that evening. The 14-seater restaurant had one gender-neutral toilet, catering for the patrons as well as for numerous staff members. Despite the fact that the facilities were clean and beautiful, with upmarket toiletries and décor, a queue did form at times, which was a rather unpleasant experience in such exquisite surroundings.

The Nice train station is a modern complex. However, the restrooms were located at the extreme end of the building and not easy to reach. These were paying facilities, which could be problematic for someone in a hurry. The cleaning staff were mostly involved in collecting fees and no visible cleaning took place during the visit. Despite this, the cleanliness was acceptable, in both the male and female facilities. Undesirable individuals were probably deterred by the payment of the 0.90 Euro fee.

The gender-neutral toilets on the train between Nice and Avignon were simple, and not in perfect condition – something that is often experienced on train journeys. Clearly the cleaning staff did not find it a priority to maintain high standards here. Avignon's train station is an ultra-modern facility, although the restrooms resembled facilities previously seen in Eastern Europe. Ladies in blue uniforms collected fees from users. The facilities were not particularly clean and there were queues at both the male and female toilets.

Entering the Provence region, it was found that facilities in the various small villages were rather basic. While visiting a few small towns in the region, the authors did not find signs of gender discrimination, apart from the long queues experienced at the women's toilets at the visitors' centre of L'Abbaye de Notre Dame de Sénanque, due to the disproportional distribution of toilet facilities. It could (partially?) be explained by the fact that the establishment is run by male monks.

An interesting aspect of the public toilet facilities in the town of Fontaine-de-Vaucluse, was the mounted soap bar at the wash basins. This was perceived as rather unhygienic by the female co-researcher, in contrast to the (male) author, who found it to be an ingenious practice as it kept the wash basin free from soap residue.

Flying from Marseille to Moscow was a bit of an ordeal. There was nothing worthwhile reporting about at the airport's departure lounge, but the Aeroflot airplane seemed dated with the service rather reminiscent of the Communist era. The gender-neutral toilets, however, resembled the facilities experienced on Qatar Airways' more modern airplanes, which furnishes further proof that airplane facilities tend to be rather mediocre. Given the delay in the departure to Moscow and the subsequent late arrival in that city, there was no time to explore toilet facilities at the Sheremetyevo Airport. The next day the authors set off to explore the flamboyant underground travel network. Very few ablution facilities were visible. The payable ablution facilities at the Gum shopping centre, the Okhotny Ryad Mall and the Tsum shopping centre were not easy to use, as cash had to be handed over at each occasion. At the Okhotny Ryad Mall, due to long queues at the gender-neutral toilet at McDonalds, it was decided to use the paying toilets of the centre, as it was assumed that the queues would be shorter. However, it did not make a significant difference.

The major purpose of the trip was to attend a rock concert at the Luzhniki stadium in Moscow. The German heavy metal band, Rammstein, performed here as part of their 2019 European tour. The show was attended by 91 000 enthusiasts. The crowds obviously put huge demands on the ablution facilities. The (modern) stadium has a capacity to house 91 000 people. The facility was packed to maximum capacity, with beer flowing freely. Surprisingly, the ablution facilities were full, but there was no visible queuing at either the male or female toilets. Both researchers felt that, given the huge volume of concertgoers, the ablution facilities were adequate.



The rest of the trip in Moscow, at Domodedovo Airport, Doha Airport, and ORT Airport provided run-of-the-mill experiences. However, it was noticeable that the eager toilet seat cleaner was not present in the arrival lounge of ORT Airport. Would weary returning travellers perhaps be less in need of a clean toilet seat than departing ones?

After discussing the trip in its totality, the researchers came to the following conclusion: Arriving at a toilet door, or getting access to a door, irrespective of gender, can be problematic. Doors (cubicles housing toilets) are rather scarce and mostly unhygienic when shared with men (see the inuendoes depicted in Figure 1). The words of The Beatles' song, "The Long and Winding Road" (Lennon & McCartney, 1970), aptly describe the fate of travellers – men and women – who have to answer the call of nature and always end up at the same similar-looking cubicles. Here are the lyrics, describing the burning need, and the inevitable outcome.

*The long and winding road  
That leads to your door  
Will never disappear  
I've seen that road before  
It always leads me here  
Lead me to your door*

*The wild and windy night  
That the rain washed away  
Has left a pool of tears  
Crying for the day  
Why leave me standing here?  
Let me know the way*

*Many times I've been alone  
And many times I've cried  
Anyway you'll never know  
The many ways I've tried*

*And still they lead me back  
To the long winding road  
You left me standing here  
A long long time ago  
Don't leave me waiting here  
Lead me to your door*

*But still they lead me back  
To the long winding road  
You left me standing here  
A long long time ago  
Don't keep me waiting here  
Lead me to your door*

*Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah*

Source: Lennon and McCartney (1970)

## Discussion

The count data, in other words the quantitative material, clearly indicates that architects, and more damningly politicians, have ignored the plight of more than 50 percent of the population with regard to decent ablation facilities. This could only be due to lack of concern and incompetence, as this matter has been in the public domain for an extended period (see Gershenson & Penner, 2008). Women are allowed access to less than 50 percent of all ablation facilities globally, despite the fact that it is public knowledge that they need more



access, for biological reasons set out elsewhere in this article. It is shameful that architects continue to ignore this need, and concerning that women do not insist on redressing this matter.

It would be acceptable to state that gender-based discrimination at ablution facilities is embedded in the design thereof (George, 2018; Schweder, 2009). Redesigning (Penner, 2009) may therefore be an answer. However, Greed (2010, 124) states that architects' "obsession with structural and technical issues predominates over social, ergonomic, health, equality, accessibility, and liveability issues, with women's needs peripheral." This obviously obstructs fast change. Pinsker (2019, no page) quotes Christopher Chwedyk, a building-code consultant at the firm Burnham Nationwide, who states that "from an economic standpoint, it doesn't make much sense to increase the number of toilet fixtures if that's going to decrease the amount of rentable area in a building," implying that toilets don't make money, are quite expensive to install, resulting in developers having no financial instinctive to go beyond what the regular codes require. In the USA, the so-called "potty parity" legislation advanced the supply of more toilet facilities (Huh, Lee, Park & Park, 2018), but has not solved the problem (Pinsker, 2019). Codes suggesting ratios vary between 1:1, 3:2, and 2:1. Li (2018) reports on a "toilet revolution" in the Chinese province of Yunna. There the public toilets in general urban areas and railway passenger stations are set at 3:2, and in more crowded places such as sport stadiums and airports at 2:1. Hong Kong building regulations apparently specify that there must be 1.6 female toilets for every one male toilet in public places (O'Dwyer, 2019). To solve the queuing, and the human rights problem, and assuming that toilets will remain segregated, women would need a third more cubicles than men to account for the extra time spent in these facilities (George, 2018).

Many suggest the use of gender-neutral toilets (Hendricks, 2018; Mbambo-Thata, Du, Lang, Lau, Mostafa, Mehra, ... & Raju, 2019; Saunders & Crilley, 2019) similar to what can be traditionally found on aircraft, trains or buses, portable toilets and wheelchair accessible toilets. In an experiment, it was found that using unisex toilets, the waiting times for women decreased from over 6 minutes to less than a minute and a half (Ghent University, 2017). However, not all agree (Hendricks, 2018; Sanders & Stryker, 2016). Some state that the biological needs of women should be respected, specifically related to menstruation (Greed, 2016). Then there is also the issue of safety (Belur, Parikh, Daruwalla, Joshi & Fernandes, 2017; O'Dwyer, 2019) and privacy (Antonioni, De Feo, Fardin, Tamburrino, Khan, Tie, ... & Angelakis, 2016). Safety in and around toilets is a concern worldwide (Colker, 2017; Hasenbush, Flores & Herman, 2019), including South Africa (Gonsalves, Kaplan & Paltiel, 2015; Ngidi & Moletsane, 2018; Scorgie, Foster, Stadler, Phiri, Hoppenjans, Rees & Muller, 2016). It could be argued that gender-natural facilities might constitute a safer place for transgender women (Pinsker, 2019), while others state that women's safe spaces are being reduced, and that these spaces should be preserved, and not neutralised (George, 2018). With regard to privacy, Pinsker (2019) reports that in cases where urinals and cubicles were hosted in the same ablution facility, the "women didn't mind being in the presence of men using urinals, and that men wouldn't mind women being there either", and only a few complaints were registered. However, the need for privacy, particularly for women, should not be ignored (Katsuno, Gregorio, Lomboy, Nonaka, Hernandez, Estrada, ... & Kobayashi, 2019; Scorgie, Foster, Stadler, Phiri, Hoppenjans, Rees & Muller (2016).

Women could also be reluctant to share toilets with men for reasons of cleanliness (O'Dwyer, 2019). George (2018, no page) states that she "would rather share a public toilet with the cleaner sex", referring ironically to handwashing practices, which women tend to engage in more often (Anderson et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2003). However, toilets (cabins) used by men are contaminated with deposits of urine on and outside of the toilet bowl (Chris, 2019), as evident from patent applications in this regard (Kopes, 2019; Marra, 2015). Speirs, Hurd, Belden, and Truscott (2015) report that "even a sharp shooter can create a mess". It is thus unlikely that cubicles used by men would remain as clean as those exclusively used by





women. The majority of men, even at home, are still standing up to urinate – despite the request of their wives to sit down (McCurry, 2007).

In this research it was found that men and women differ in their evaluation of facilities. The most basic need is of course to be relieved – in privacy. This applies to both men and women. Given the structure of public toilets, however, privacy seems to be a more important issue for women. Urinating against a tree is perhaps more acceptable for the average man compared to a woman engaging in the same behaviour (O'Dwyer, 2019). This study therefore attempts to send out a call to authorities (health departments and regulators), developers, and responsible architects to create more facilities for women.

Complaints about dirty urinals may be as scarce as actually finding clean ones. However, this aspect does not really matter when a man is urinating. No visible germs are transferred. This is in sharp contrast with cubicles, found in both male and female ablution facilities, and also in gender-neutral facilities. Though the men's facilities may be more messy, women experience similar problems regarding hygiene. This implies that all toilets, particularly those gender-neutral toilets on long haul trips, need regular cleaning, to satisfy (the (average) user. Also, given the lack of advances in the design of the gender-neutral cubicles provided on airplanes (many of which are still hosting ashtrays), designers are challenged to provide better, slicker solutions.

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