

# Gender Inequality in Public Toilets from the Perspective of Urban Feminist Theory

Yaxuan Qiu \*

The University of Waikato Joint Institute at Hangzhou City University, Hangzhou City University,  
Hangzhou, China

\* Corresponding Author Email: yq67@student.waikato.ac.nz

**Abstract.** This study examines gender inequality in public restroom access through the lens of urban feminist theory. While many cities adopt a 1:1 ratio for male and female restroom facilities, this seemingly equal distribution results in unequal outcomes. Women often face longer wait times due to biological differences, caregiving responsibilities, and restroom design biases. Studies show that women wait up to six times longer than men and use restrooms for longer periods. Inadequate amenities and safety concerns further exacerbate these disparities, particularly in developing regions. This paper utilizes key urban feminist concepts, such as intersectionality, spatial justice, and participatory planning, to provide a framework for addressing these issues. The study argues for solutions such as increasing women's restroom facilities, implementing gender-neutral restrooms, and revising building codes to create more equitable public spaces. By incorporating women's needs into urban planning, this research further advocates for genuine gender equality in public restroom access.

**Keywords:** Gender inequality, public toilets, urban feminism.

## 1. Introduction

In public spaces worldwide, the allocation of restroom facilities for men and women is typically equal in terms of size and number, commonly following a 1:1 ratio. New York City, for instance, uses this ratio in its public toilet distribution as indicated by its open data. However, this seemingly fair distribution does not reflect actual equality in outcomes. Women frequently face longer queues and waiting times compared to men, leading to inconvenience and, more importantly, revealing a significant issue of gender inequality. This disparity arises due to several factors including biological differences, social norms, and design biases, all of which disproportionately impact women in public restrooms.

Despite the equal allocation of restroom facilities, women's needs and behaviors differ from men's, which leads to unequal outcomes in public spaces. The surface-level fairness in restroom distribution does not account for these nuanced differences, making the current system inefficient and inequitable.

This study explores the issue through the theoretical framework of urban feminism and uses objective data to emphasize the inadequacy of the 1:1 toilet ratio. Rather than adhering to a simplistic, formal equality in restroom allocation, it advocates for an approach that considers women's specific needs. Public planners should explore solutions such as increasing the number of stalls in women's restrooms or introducing gender-neutral facilities to address the issue. By implementing more inclusive urban planning practices, this research aims to advance true gender equity in access to public spaces.

## 2. Existing Issues in Public Toilets

The issue of gender inequality in public restrooms is pervasive globally. Women often face longer wait times, insufficient amenities, and restroom designs that do not cater to their specific needs. These problems highlight the critical need for more equitable resource allocation in public spaces.

## 2.1. Longer Waiting Time for Women

Women frequently experience significantly longer wait times for public restrooms. According to Greed, women can wait up to six times longer than men to use public restrooms [1]. Biological differences between men and women are central to understanding this discrepancy. A study by Bovens and Marcoci suggests that women, on average, take 178.9 seconds to use the restroom, compared to 118.4 seconds for men [2]. This difference can be attributed to several factors. First, women often need to manage more complex clothing, which requires additional time to undress and dress [3]. Second, menstruation management requires additional time for changing sanitary products and washing hands more thoroughly [1].

Moreover, women often assume caregiving responsibilities, such as assisting children or elderly family members in public restrooms. This adds further time to their restroom usage, as these duties are time-consuming and often performed by women [4]. The unequal allocation of restroom facilities, therefore, places an additional burden on women, perpetuating gender inequality in public spaces.

## 2.2. Inadequate Amenities

Women's restrooms are often inadequately equipped to meet their needs. Studies indicate that women's restrooms frequently have fewer fixtures compared to men's restrooms, despite women's higher usage needs [5]. This problem is particularly acute in countries like India, where many areas lack adequate facilities for women. Cultural norms, insufficient infrastructure, and safety concerns exacerbate the issue, limiting women's ability to participate fully in public life [6]. The lack of adequate restroom amenities not only inconveniences women but also poses serious health risks. Poor sanitation and insufficient access to restrooms can lead to infections and other health problems, disproportionately affecting women in developing countries [7]. The disparity in restroom amenities between men and women highlights a significant area where public policy and urban planning must address gender inequality.

## 2.3. Design Bias

Traditional restroom designs are often biased toward men's needs, neglecting the specific requirements of women. For example, public restrooms typically provide urinals for men, which allow for quicker usage, while women must rely solely on stalls, which take longer to use. This discrepancy in design contributes to the longer wait times women experience.

One example of more female-friendly restroom design can be found in Vienna, Austria. The city introduced public restrooms designed specifically with women's needs in mind, incorporating features such as sanitary product dispensers, private spaces for menstrual hygiene management, and baby-changing stations. These designs reflect an understanding of the unique challenges women face in public restrooms and offer practical solutions to address them [8].

Although caregiving should be regarded as a shared responsibility between parents, social norms often place this burden disproportionately on women. Promoting nurseries and gender-neutral caregiving spaces is one way to challenge these traditional gender roles. Such spaces foster gender equity by encouraging shared parental responsibilities. Nurseries, therefore, represent an important step toward more balanced caregiving roles for both mothers and fathers.

In developing countries, the issue of restroom access is even more pronounced. UNICEF in 2020 reports that up to 25% of women in some developing regions lack access to adequate sanitation facilities. This lack of access not only affects women's health but also limits their ability to participate in public life, perpetuating gender inequality on a global scale.

## 3. Theoretical Framework: Urban Feminism

Urban feminism provides a critical lens through which to examine gender inequality in public restrooms, addressing the ways that traditional urban planning and design practices have marginalized women's needs. This section explores the core tenets of urban feminism, including intersectionality,

spatial justice, safety, accessibility, and participatory planning. These ideas collectively challenge the notion that public spaces are neutral and instead highlight how they are shaped by gendered power dynamics.

### 3.1. Intersectionality

Urban feminism emphasizes intersectionality, a term first coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, to describe how social categories such as gender, race, and class overlap to create complex systems of discrimination and privilege. In the context of public restrooms, intersectionality reveals that restroom inequality does not affect all women equally. For example, women of color, low-income women, and women with disabilities face compounded challenges when accessing public facilities.

An example of intersectionality in restroom access is observed in homeless shelters and facilities in major cities like Los Angeles, where women who are both low-income and minorities face difficulties in finding clean, accessible, and safe public restrooms [9]. Inadequate public restroom facilities force many homeless women to use unsafe locations or forgo using restrooms altogether, placing them at greater risk of health problems and sexual violence [1]. This example illustrates how intersecting identities exacerbate the gendered inequalities of public restroom access.

In addition, transgender individuals face even greater challenges due to a lack of gender-neutral facilities. Research shows that transgender people are often harassed or denied entry into gendered public restrooms, leading to heightened anxiety and avoidance of public spaces [10]. Incorporating intersectionality into urban planning could help planners ensure public restrooms are accessible to all, including marginalized women and nonbinary individuals [11].

### 3.2. Spatial Justice

The concept of spatial justice, popularized by urban theorist Edward Soja highlights how public spaces and resources are unevenly distributed based on social hierarchies, including gender. Spatial justice in urban planning seeks to ensure that all groups have equal access to public facilities, including restrooms. In the case of public restrooms, equitable distribution means providing women with access to adequate and safe facilities, which often requires more resources than men's restrooms due to women's longer restroom use and caregiving roles.

A specific example of spatial justice in action can be found in the United Kingdom. In response to long wait times for women's restrooms, the British government passed legislation mandating that new public buildings have a higher ratio of women's restrooms compared to men's. This was done to address women's longer restroom usage times and their higher likelihood of accompanying children or elderly family members into restrooms [11]. The legislation explicitly acknowledges that a 1:1 ratio does not achieve true equity and instead implements measures for substantive equality in access to public spaces [3].

In India, the problem of spatial injustice is particularly severe. A 2021 World Bank report found that women in rural and urban India lack sufficient access to public restrooms, leading to serious health and safety risks [6]. The lack of restrooms in urban areas forces women to walk long distances or find secluded spots, increasing their vulnerability to violence and harassment. Spatial justice, in this case, requires not only an increase in the number of restrooms but also addressing the social factors that limit women's access to these facilities.

### 3.3. Safety and Accessibility

Public safety is a central concern for women in urban spaces, including restrooms. Traditional restroom designs often fail to account for women's heightened safety concerns, such as poor lighting, secluded locations, and insufficient security measures. Feminist urban theorists argue that urban spaces must be designed with women's safety in mind, considering factors such as restroom location and the surrounding environment.

An example of this issue is seen in Mexico City, where women's safety in public spaces has become a pressing concern. A survey conducted by the UN Women Safe Cities Initiative found that

over 60% of women in Mexico City felt unsafe using public restrooms in parks and subway stations due to poor lighting and the risk of harassment [12]. To address this, city planners began retrofitting restrooms with better lighting, emergency call buttons, and more prominent locations in public spaces. These measures not only improve safety but also encourage women to participate more freely in public life.

In addition, Vienna, Austria provides a positive example of gender-sensitive urban planning. As part of its 'Gender Mainstreaming' initiative, Vienna's city planners introduced women-friendly restrooms in public parks. These restrooms are designed with women's safety and comfort in mind, including bright lighting, emergency alarms, and easy access from well-trafficked areas. This initiative also incorporated feedback from women's advocacy groups, ensuring that the restrooms addressed the actual needs and concerns of women [11].

### 3.4. Participatory Planning

Participatory planning emphasizes involving marginalized groups, including women, in the urban planning process. This approach ensures that the voices and needs of diverse populations are considered in the design of public spaces, leading to more equitable outcomes. As Leonie Sandercock argues, top-down urban planning often overlooks the needs of women, resulting in designs that prioritize male experiences and neglect gender-specific concerns [12].

An example of successful participatory planning can be found in Stockholm, Sweden, where city planners collaborated with women's advocacy groups to redesign public restrooms across the city. The groups advocated for more family-friendly restrooms, which include baby-changing stations and areas for breastfeeding, acknowledging that caregiving responsibilities often fall disproportionately on women. The inclusion of these features resulted in restrooms that cater more effectively to the needs of women and families, reducing gender inequality in access to public infrastructure [1].

In a similar effort, New York City launched a 'Public Bathroom Equity' campaign in which women's organizations and local community groups were involved in the redesign of public restrooms across the city. One major outcome was the installation of more gender-neutral restrooms in busy public areas such as parks and transport hubs. The campaign highlighted that providing equal space for women's restrooms was not enough; rather, urban planners needed to consider the diverse needs of women, nonbinary people, and caregivers. These examples show how participatory planning can help create more inclusive public spaces by giving marginalized groups a voice in urban design [13].

## 4. Achieving Equality in Public Toilet Distribution

Addressing gender inequality in public restroom access requires solutions that go beyond the current one-to-one ratio of restrooms for men and women. Strategies such as increasing women's facilities, implementing gender-neutral toilets, and promoting participatory planning can help rectify these disparities and create more equitable public spaces.

By understanding the needs of women and other marginalized groups, urban planners can create more inclusive and equitable restroom facilities that promote true gender equality. As demonstrated by initiatives in cities like Vienna, Stockholm, and Mexico City, incorporating feminist urban theory into public space design can significantly improve the quality of life for women and ensure fair access to public resources [11].

One strategy to address the gender disparity in restroom access is to increase the number of facilities available to women. For example, Sweden has taken progressive steps toward gender equality by implementing gender-neutral restrooms and increasing the number of women's restroom facilities. This approach reduces wait times for women and provides more inclusive options for people of all genders. Sweden's policies reflect its commitment to gender equality and offer a model for other countries to follow [14].

Another solution is to introduce gender-neutral restrooms, which can accommodate all users regardless of gender. Gender-neutral restrooms promote inclusivity and accessibility by providing a safe and convenient space for everyone, including people who do not identify as male or female [3]. These facilities also reduce the pressure on gender-segregated restrooms, helping to alleviate the long wait times.

Public restrooms should also include amenities such as baby-changing stations and accessible stalls to accommodate users with caregiving responsibilities or disabilities. By providing family-friendly and accessible facilities, public planners can create restrooms that cater to the diverse needs of all users, promoting equity and inclusivity [1].

To ensure long-term progress toward gender equality in public restrooms, building codes and regulations must be updated to require equitable restroom distribution. It argues that policymakers should mandate a minimum number of women's restrooms in new buildings and public spaces [1]. By revising building codes, cities can create public spaces that better reflect the needs of all users and promote gender equality.

## 5. Conclusion

The issue of gender inequality in public restroom access, often masked by the seemingly equal 1:1 ratio of male and female restrooms, highlights deeper systemic problems in urban planning. Women face significantly longer wait times, inadequate amenities, and design biases that fail to consider their specific needs. These challenges are exacerbated by biological differences, social norms, and caregiving roles, leading to unequal outcomes in public spaces.

Urban feminism provides a valuable theoretical framework to analyze these disparities, emphasizing the importance of intersectionality, spatial justice, safety, and participatory planning. By incorporating women's unique requirements into the design and distribution of public restrooms, as seen in cities like Vienna and Stockholm, true gender equality can be achieved. Gender-neutral facilities, increasing the number of women's restrooms, and creating family-friendly spaces are practical steps toward more inclusive urban environments. Revising building codes to mandate equitable restroom distribution further ensures lasting change.

Ultimately, achieving gender equality in public restroom access requires a multi-faceted approach, combining both practical solutions and a theoretical understanding of the power dynamics shaping public spaces. By acknowledging and addressing the unique needs of women and marginalized groups, urban planners can create more just and accessible public spaces for all.

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