

Sexual equality and sanitation

Hanging on too long for porcelain parity is more than a nuisance for women

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Rex The She-pee brings relief

THE scene is familiar, infuriating, and usually met with resignation. Women, legs crossed in discomfort or desperation, wait in line for the lavatory while men saunter in and out of their loos. It is a common sight at theatres, sports grounds and other public buildings.

Sanitation and women's rights are closely linked. West Virginia barred women from jury service until 1956, claiming courthouses lacked female toilets. In 1994 a Texan firm fired dozens of women rather than provide extra lavatories. Until 1993 female senators had to jostle with the tourists visiting Capitol Hill, because no rest rooms were assigned to them.

In poorer countries unequal provision means more than just discomfort. Studies in countries such as Ghana and Cameroon suggest many girls at secondary school miss a week of classes when they have their period, or drop out altogether when they reach puberty. Rude boys plus inadequate or missing girls' toilets make calls of nature

embarrassing or outright dangerous. In India some 330m women lack access to toilets. Many wait until night, raising the risk of rape, kidnap and snake bites. Amnesty International complained on July 7th about the similar plight of women in Kenya's slums.

Now things are changing. About half the states in America now have porcelain-parity laws, as do Singapore and Hong Kong. A bill now before Congress mandates equal provision of toilets for men and women in federal buildings. In 2005 New York City decreed that women must have twice as many outlets as men, though like the bill now before Congress, it applies only to new buildings and those undergoing substantial renovations. Japan's tourist areas typically provide two or three times as many toilets for women as do South Korea's or Taiwan's. New Zealand has ruled that under human-rights legislation, no woman should have to wait more than three minutes to go to the loo.

Surprisingly, the European Union has yet to plumb the depths of this issue, as have most member states. Britain has no legal requirement for provision of toilets for the public at all. Under the 1936 Public Health Act, still in force, local authorities can provide public conveniences but do not have to. Workplaces have to provide a certain number but are not required to have any more for women than men. Clara Greed, of the British Standards Institute's "revision committee on sanitary installations", argues that Britain's unfairness stems from laws written by men who thought ladies ought to stay at home. Ms Greed recommends that the new standards provide for twice as many public toilets for women as men, but with flexibility: shopping centres, largely used by women, need more; sports events, where men are thicker on the ground, need fewer.

Experts such as John Banzhaf, a law professor at George Washington University, agree that just mandating equal numbers of toilets is not enough. Defining equality, he says, is surprisingly complicated. Sanitary facilities are typically assigned by area. But up to 12 urinals can fit into the space taken by three to four sit-down toilets. Kathryn Anthony, an architecture professor who works with the American Restroom Association, says that equality should be measured in terms of speed of access at times of maximum capacity. This could mean up to four times as many fixtures for the ladies.

One reason for that is that men and women use lavatories differently. In a 1988 study conducted for Virginia Tech, Sandra Rawls Oltmanns and Savannah Day calculated that women take on average almost three minutes to go in, go and go out. Men manage in just 83.6 seconds. Another study, looking at the time people actually spend in toilet stalls, reckoned that men take between 32 and 47 seconds and women 80 to 97. Either way, women spend twice as long as men.

Curmudgeonly men might argue that it is unfair to subsidise women's other bathroom-based activities, such as fixing make-up or chatting, or the extra privacy of individual toilet stalls. But some biological and social factors inevitably weight the scales. Menstruating or pregnant women have to go more often and for longer. Since they generally (but not always—see picture) urinate sitting down, women have to spend longer undressing. They are also more likely to be helping children.

Another solution is to make more toilets unisex (already common in some countries). Ms Anthony says this is fairer: either there are no lines, or everyone has to wait. They

also make life easier for transgender people by eliminating the need to make a public choice. A sprinkling of unisex loos has appeared even in America, at places such as La Jolla Shores beach in California. But please lift the seat.