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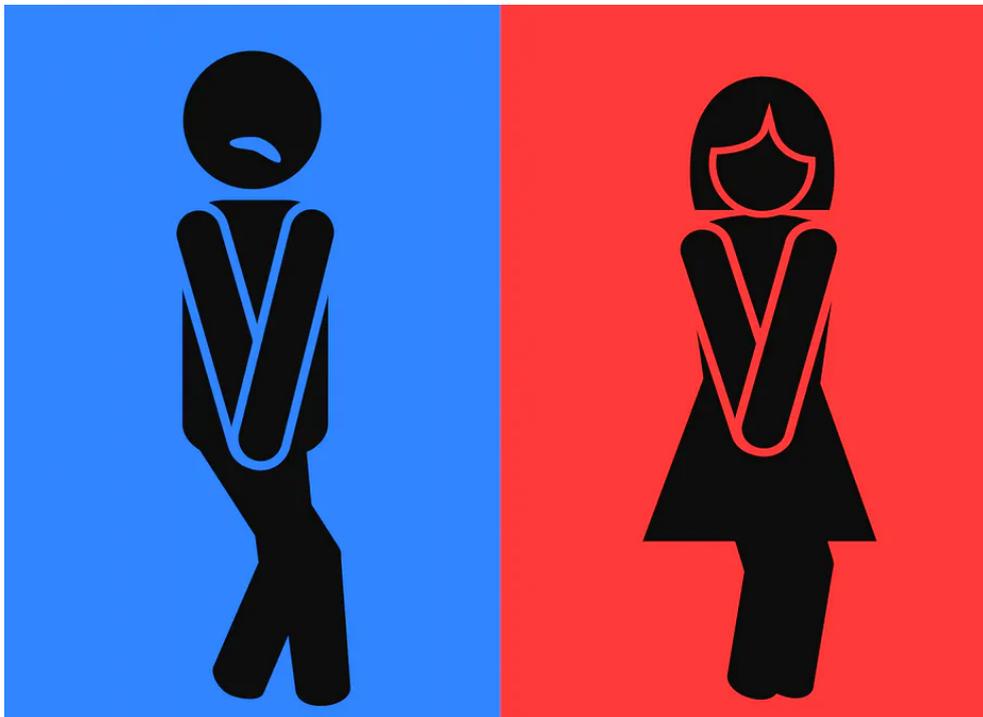
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Britain's public toilet shame: time for equal access to decent facilities for all

August 5, 2020 3.52pm BST



The coronavirus lockdown has amplified the problem of access to clean and safe public toilets for everyone. Shutterstock

As lockdown began to be relaxed in England from mid-May and people started venturing out for the first time since March, crowds flocked to parks, beaches and other beauty spots to take exercise, enjoy the outdoors and reunite with friends and family. While the taste of freedom may have been sweet, the smell often wasn't.

At the time, with most public toilets still closed, queues around the block for those that had opened and other options out of use (in shopping centres, cafes and pubs), people who were "caught short"

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turned to the only places on offer. Parks, bushes and residential streets were left with smelly deposits from the general public.

Our work, which explores sustainable ways of managing human waste, points to an important topic for reflection post lockdown: the inadequate provision of safe, clean public toilets in the UK that are fit for purpose.

Most non-disabled people from affluent countries don't often need to plan their day around toilets: it's a case of "flush and forget". Lack of toilet access is more frequently associated with **low and middle-income countries (LMICs)**, where an **estimated two billion people** still lack access to safely managed toilets, leading to deaths from diarrhoea and other sanitation-related diseases such as cholera, typhoid and polio. But inadequate toilet access has long been a feature of life for many people in the UK, too.

Toilet inequity in the UK

Long before the COVID-19 crisis, disabled people and those with gastrointestinal disorders such as Crohn's disease and colitis, have been forced to navigate toilets that are inaccessible, restricted and policed. This impedes their participation in everyday activities that non-disabled people take for granted.

The pandemic has amplified this problem. Sanitation is more than just a means of disposing of bodily waste – it facilitates participation in society. Accessible toilets mean **citizenship, dignity and belonging**.



People with disabilities or special health conditions and needs have long had to deal with poor toilet provision across the country. Shutterstock

Apart from ableism, other important discriminatory dimensions are sex and gender. Women's toilets are frequently undersized compared to men's – despite menstruation, pregnancy and caring responsibilities for small children which all necessitate more frequent and longer bathroom use. This design flaw is a standard that has existed for decades and has only recently been reviewed.

While secrecy around menstruation is often highlighted in other societies, it is easy to overlook the culture of silence around periods in the UK, which compounds inadequate provision of facilities for women and menstruating people. Public toilets can also be uncomfortable or even hostile environments for trans and non-binary people – particularly when gender-neutral facilities aren't available.

This sort of discrimination is compounded by the reduction of public toilet provision over the past decade, and can result in the digestive system and periods becoming a “leash”, preventing some people from venturing far in case there is no access to a toilet.

Cleaning and maintenance of toilets is vital. But sanitation workers and cleaners remain largely unrecognised and undervalued, even though their public health contribution should arguably receive similar appreciation to that of porters and cleaners in hospitals. Instead of being protected, toilet cleaners – among other typically low-paid but essential workers – are more at risk of contracting and dying from COVID-19.

This highlights another humbling truth for the UK: discriminatory treatment of sanitation workers is not an issue reserved only for LMICs, but occurs within our society too.

A better future

Easing of lockdown has prompted urgent discussion about how to reopen public toilets safely. Innovations such as foot-operated flush pedals, one-way systems and sensors for water, soap, paper towels and bins reduce shared touchpoints and proximity. But this is a timely opportunity to consider how equitable and suitable provision for women, trans and non-binary people, and the needs of disabled people can be addressed. The economic and societal benefits of adequate public toilets have never been clearer.

The crisis also highlights the importance of responsible attitudes towards the collective good. Many actions can be taken by individuals to reduce asymptomatic spread, from wearing a mask to diligent handwashing and closing the toilet lid after use.

As bars, pubs, and other places reopen, a sense of personal responsibility towards societal health, and respect for sanitation workers who facilitate it, will be more important than ever.

Toilets function as a bridge between public and private spaces, signifying who should and shouldn't be present. They stand as political symbols of power and inclusion. With COVID-19 reshaping how we move and interact in public spaces, it is time to recognise the importance of public toilets – and the people who look after them – to equitable, dignified and healthy participation in public life. Now more than ever, we must appreciate that nature's call can only be put on hold for so long.



Sanitation

Crohn's disease

People with disability

Public toilets