

Why women have to queue for the toilet – and what it says about how cities are designed

MARTÍNEZ CAPARRÓS, Belén

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/37119/>

This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

Citation:

MARTÍNEZ CAPARRÓS, Belén (2026). Why women have to queue for the toilet – and what it says about how cities are designed. The Conversation. [Article]

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

Why women always queue for the toilet – and what this says about how our cities are designed

Do you remember the last time you had to queue for a [toilet](#)? If several examples spring to mind, the chances are you were standing in the women's line. Whether at theatres, airports, shopping centres or festivals, the pattern is the same: men breeze in and out with barely a wait, while women stand in line.

In most public buildings, toilet space is divided by floor area, giving men and women roughly equal space. While this might appear fair, [research](#) on gender and toilet design has shown that equal floor area does not result in equal access. It assumes that men and women use toilets in the same way and for the same length of time, an assumption built directly into most public toilet designs.

Men's toilets usually combine cubicles with urinals, which take up less space and can be used more quickly. Women's toilets rely entirely on cubicles, so even when both sides occupy the same area, men's facilities can serve more users.

Time matters too. [Women generally take longer](#) because they need to sit rather than stand, often wear more complex clothing, and are more likely to be menstruating, pregnant or managing conditions such as incontinence or urinary tract infections.

Many design standards are still based on a “[default male body](#)”, assuming a fast pace, standing and minimal time spent in the toilet. When spaces are organised around men's bodies and routines, delays are easily blamed on women's behaviour – that women “take too long” – rather than on how toilets are designed.

The most visible consequence of these design standards is the queue outside the women's toilets. But, as my [research](#) shows, there can also be economic and health consequences. For mobile workers like taxi drivers, time spent standing in line is time not spent earning.

The cost of toilet disparity

And it's not just about the queue – availability of toilets at all is a design decision that affects women more than men, who are more likely to be able to go wherever they'd like.

For most [women](#), queuing for the toilet is a minor irritation that they absorb into the day without much thought. Yet the more serious costs of toilet disparity became clear to me while [researching](#) women who work as taxi drivers in Spain.

When I asked about the frustrations of the job, their first answer was rarely traffic, difficult passengers or long shifts, but toilets. Finding a toilet while on shift often required careful planning and long waits, leading to lost income. Their male colleagues, meanwhile, seemed to come and go in minutes.

Rosario, a 26-year-old Uber driver, described needing the toilet while working as “the drama of the job!” Like many other drivers who participated in my research, she explained that she planned her route around known toilet facilities. Others reported avoiding drinking water so they would not need to stop “all the time”, while some linked recurrent urinary infections to “holding it for too long”.

These strategies become redundant when menstruating. As Juana explained: “You have to get organised and force yourself to stop. So after a service, you don’t just go to the nearby taxi rank to get a new client. Instead, you have to drive to a petrol station so you can go to the toilet first.”

[Research](#) has long shown that public toilets are not neutral pieces of infrastructure, but reflect deeper assumptions about whose bodies and behaviours are taken as the norm. In particular, norms of modesty and privacy mean that women are expected to use [enclosed cubicles](#), while men’s facilities prioritise speed and efficiency through open urinals.

It is also anatomically easier – and often socially accepted – for men to urinate at the side of a road or elsewhere when there are no public toilets available.

Women’s privacy is carefully designed for, but their time is not. [Research on “toilet parity”](#) shows that increasing the number of cubicles or creating gender neutral cubicles can significantly cut women’s queues with little impact on men. Experiments at large events, such as the use of [urinals for women](#), show how rethinking capacity can virtually eliminate waiting.

For the women in my research, the frustrating quest for a toilet is not just about waiting, but about dignity and the right to occupy the city on equal terms. Toilets, in this sense, become a quiet but powerful indicator of who public space is really designed for, and whose bodies are still expected to adapt.