



From toilet insecurity to toilet security: creating safe sanitation for women and girls

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For women and girls in low-income areas, the consequences of inadequate sanitation include fear of harassment, experiences of violence, and psychosocial stress. When safe, usable toilets are not available, women and girls face three types of toilet insecurity: (1) the material reality for many women and girls that they do not have access to a toilet; (2) the risk of venturing out for open defecation if there is no toilet; and (3) having access to a public toilet, but one that is unusable (e.g., filthy) or unsafe (e.g., insufficient lighting), so that women and girls accept the risk of going for open defecation. © 2015 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

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INTRODUCTION

Toilet insecurity is not due solely to the absence of adequate sanitation. It is primarily due to gender—the social process that creates men and women as separate, unequal categories. Gender inequality is the source of the three types of toilet insecurity; it is fundamental to the reasons that women and girls are harassed or attacked when going out for open defecation. Changing conditions of toilet insecurity to toilet security will occur when gender inequality is placed at the center of sanitation policy. A change in gender relations can reduce open defecation in poor countries.

Approximately 1.1 billion people practice open defecation worldwide, most of them in South Asia. The prevalence of open defecation in poor places has serious consequences including loss of life, loss of health, and loss of wages due to illness. For women and girls specifically, the consequences of inadequate sanitation include fear of harassment, experiences of violence, and psychosocial stress. Gendered solutions to sanitation provision and usage are few, despite considerable research into the problem.^{1,2} When safe,

usable toilets are not available, women face what I call *toilet insecurity*. The minimum required for gendered solutions to sanitation is that they plan for women's^a security. My concern in this piece is with formulating gendered violence as the critical element of toilet^b security, and therefore, gendered sanitation policies. To make this argument, I draw on the work of feminist sanitation scholars and professionals, documented approaches to gender equity and gendered violence, as well as my own 18 years of experience and research on gender, development, and WASH in rural and urban India.

The term *toilet insecurity* has multiple, gendered meanings. The first insecurity is the material reality for many women that they do not have access to a toilet, either at home or in their community. The second meaning of toilet insecurity captures the insecurity surrounding a woman's daily need to go for open defecation if she does not have a toilet. Every day, she faces the unknown as she makes her way to the places she goes for open defecation. As a woman in Jaipur (India) said, 'The threat is always there.' Finally, the third toilet insecurity is having access to a public toilet,^c but one that is inadequate or one that a woman cannot use safely. *Inadequate sanitation* includes: too few toilets, poor quality, poor design, no locks on doors, lack of cleanliness and maintenance, insufficient lighting, and other infrastructural factors that render an existing toilet unusable to women (Kulkarni et al., unpublished data).³ Having

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access to a toilet does not insure freedom from attack or fear of violence and harassment if toilet conditions are unsafe or so disagreeable that they force women to defecate in the open (Box 1).

Many current sanitation policies recognize that women have specific sanitation needs. For example, squatting is a vulnerable physical position, menstruation means a need for privacy to manage flow and bodily hygiene, and pregnancy can mean greater frequency of urination, constipation, and less mobility. Women's toilet insecurity, however, does not stem from their biology any more than men are biologically wired to commit acts of violence against women.⁴ The foundation of toilet insecurity is due to gender—a relationship of constructed difference and subsequent inequality between men and women.⁵ An understanding of gender as created through ongoing social processes can initiate a transformation of toilet insecurity from women's problem to a gendered problem, from technical solutions to social change.

Many sanitation professionals are aware of the connection between inadequate sanitation and intersecting social inequalities such as poverty and gender.⁶ Feminist WASH professionals link women's physical insecurity and psychosocial stress *not only* to a lack of sanitation, but to women's subordinate position to men.^{2,7} Toilet insecurity hinges on the threats of violence, harassment, and stress that women face due to inadequate sanitation. Because in most societies they do not have the same *de jure* and *de facto* rights as men and boys, an absence of adequate sanitation increases women's vulnerability to violence and harassment.⁷

The lack of adequate sanitation in the first place may be taken as an indicator of gender inequality. The absence of a household toilet may signal that women are neither decision makers nor do they control finances at the household scale. As men are both the least likely to use toilets and the controllers of household income, they are also the least likely to be convinced that a toilet is a good investment.⁸ As a woman said in an interview in Cuddalore district, Tamil Nadu (India), 'Even if we want to construct a toilet in the house, the men say that it is not important.' Urban governments make decisions that give women less access to public sanitation facilities than men, thereby sending a message about low expectations for women's participation in the public sphere. Women are under-represented in government almost universally, and male-dominated decision-making bodies are often gender blind when it comes to sanitation, *i.e.*, they do not consider women's and men's different sanitation needs when planning and budgeting.

TOILET INSECURITY OVER THE LIFE COURSE

Over the life course, women and girls in poor places experience toilet insecurity differently. They have different experiences based on their rank in social hierarchies of class, caste, religion, ethnicity and occupation, their status in their natal or marital households, and their physical abilities. These positionalities change as girls grow up and women grow old, moving through life's stages. Gender norms vary from place to place, country to country, and also over the life course; in turn, they impact women and girls' toilet insecurity.⁹

Drawing on the first definition of toilet insecurity, toilet insecurity for school-going girls begins with the absence or inadequacy of toilets. Although evidence linking girls' school attendance to school toilets is inconclusive, existing research suggests that school toilets may be one factor influencing girls' educational achievement. Toilet insecurity is compounded for menstruating girls who attend schools that have no water for washing, lack discrete disposal facilities for soiled materials, and without private spaces where girls can manage menstrual hygiene.³

In patrilocal societies, a daughter-in-law moves into the lowest rank of the household hierarchy. She often has the least ability to request that household income be spent on building a toilet—even when her wages contribute to that income.⁵ Her dependency can translate into conflict avoidance, *e.g.*, staying silent instead of requesting a toilet, and/or in reporting incidences of attack or harassment out of fear of repercussions from her new family. Expanding on the second definition of toilet insecurity, toilet insecurity is more than the uncertainty facing a woman or girl when she goes for open defecation or to a public toilet. It also includes an inability to tell anyone if an incident occurs (Kulkarni et al., unpublished data).

Toilet insecurity is exacerbated in societies where women and girls embody family honor and their behavior and mobility is strictly controlled by male family and community members. Leaving the house and seeking privacy to defecate are actions that expose women and girls not only to sexual attack, but to subsequent violent repercussions in the form of forced marriage or so-called 'honor killings' to 'wash away the family's shame with blood.' Even a suggestion or rumor of a girl's 'immodest' public behavior on the way to an open defecation site or public toilet can ruin a girl's reputation and that of her family.⁹

For mothers with young children, toilet insecurity includes the risks that must be taken to meet

BOX 1

GENDERED INSECURITY

- Having access to a toilet does not insure women's freedom from attack or fear of violence.
- Toilet insecurity is more than the uncertainty facing a woman or girl when she goes for open defecation or to a public toilet. It also includes an inability to tell anyone if an incident occurs.
- Unless we place gender transformation at the *center* of sanitation policy, women's toilet insecurity will remain.

their own physical needs and those of their children. Middle-aged women, on the other hand, may experience greater toilet security than at any other time of their lives. Outside employment in a place that has a toilet, the self-confidence that comes with experience, a stable position in her household, a supportive husband, and adult (male) children can all serve to support a middle-aged woman and provide some protection within her community (Kulkarni et al., unpublished data).

For many elderly women, growing old can mean a return to vulnerability due to physical impairment, ill health, and/or reduced mobility. While the elderly in many places are accorded great respect, open defecation sites and public toilets can still be dangerous to get to and dangerous to use for older women.

SANITATION POLICY FOR TOILET SECURITY

National sanitation policy is fundamental to subsequent decisions at lower levels of government. Policy documents indicate goals and plans of action to achieve them. Sanitation policies drive programming and budgeting, making their contents key to creating toilet security. Additionally, research and analysis of programming outcomes are needed so that gendered sanitation policy formulation is an iterative process.¹⁰ The question must repeatedly be asked: Is women's toilet security better than it was before? For whom is it better, worse, or unchanged?

India's *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan–Grameen* (Clean India Mission–Rural; SBMG, hereafter) is a fiscally ambitious plan to end rural open defecation in the country. I use it as an example here because

India has more than twice the number of open defecators as the next 18 countries combined.¹¹ As Coffey et al. suggest, solving the problem of open defecation in India is solving the global sanitation crisis.⁸ The SBMG guidelines for equity and inclusion prioritize providing women and pregnant women with toilets (as well as other marginal groups). Women are to be included at every stage from planning to post-implementation management. Women and girls' gender-related requirements and sensitivities are to be taken into account. Nongovernmental organizations are tapped to disseminate information on menstrual hygiene management and to develop economic models for sanitary napkin access. Funding is available to raise awareness and skills among all stakeholders.¹² For a country that accounts for 59% of the world's open defecators, SBMG policy has laudable goals and addresses a monumental challenge.

We should beware, however, of terms like 'monumental challenge' and 'global sanitation crisis' as they can foment a false urgency, compelling policymakers to focus on the building of toilets without consideration for women's needs, i.e., they are gender neutral. Current guidelines like SBMG appear to indicate that gender neutral policies are behind us. Nevertheless, some initiatives focused on women-targeted toilet-building are gender negative—they reinforce gendered inequalities—as in the case of Rajasthan (India), where families were encouraged to build latrines as a means to make women's seclusion complete.^{5,13}

Gender sensitive sanitation approaches that target women in their roles as productive workers (waged or unwaged) or recognize that women have special needs (e.g., SBMG), do not necessarily add to women's toilet security, however, because addressing gendered violence does not come into the scope of programming. UN-INSTRAW categorizes policies that are gender positive as those that: (1) attempt to redefine gender roles; (2) seek to equalize access to resources; and (3) change social norms to promote program success.¹⁴ A sanitation policy like SBMG might be tailored to be gender positive for toilet security, e.g.: (1) encourage men to share the burden of water fetching for toilet use; (2) plan to build more toilets for women than men; and (3) discourage the social acceptability of men using public toilets as gathering places.

Creating gendered toilet security depends on policymakers—as people, as empathetic human beings—recognizing inequality between men and women as socially produced. It depends on them grasping that within this relationship women are

vulnerable to violence, with some women being more vulnerable than others due to cross-cutting characteristics such as religion, caste, age, and so on.¹⁵ I would argue that gender mainstreaming has occurred to the extent that there are few policymakers that intentionally advocate for additional vulnerabilities to be visited on women and girls, but there remain some who accept gender neutral programming and thus support policies that elicit gender negative outcomes, i.e., reproduce toilet insecurity.

Radical then are those policymakers and practitioners who insist that gendered inequalities must be redressed if the practice of open defecation is to be halted. UN-INSTRAW places gender transformative policy and programming at the extreme end of its spectrum of gender approaches. I assert that unless we place gender transformation at the *center* of policy, women's toilet insecurity will remain. Current approaches, like SBMG, shy away from tackling gender inequality head-on, but that is what is required.

Sanitation approaches that focus on building the right *kind* of toilet may reduce toilet insecurity by incorporating the geographically specific needs of women who will be using the facility, but they cannot equalize relations of power between men and women that lead to toilet insecurity. Substantial research on rural and urban public toilets has compiled a variety of reasons that women forego existing facilities, face the risk of attack or harassment, and cope with the stress such conditions bring.^{16,17} An individual household toilet appears at first glance as the best solution to toilet insecurity, but it is well-known that multiple barriers impact the building and use of individual household toilets (e.g., cost, space, water, and pit emptying). Gender also matters for who uses the household toilet in ways that propel women into unsafe situations. 'It does not feel good that our daughters-in-law and we [in-laws] use the same toilet. That's why they go in the jungle for defecation,' a man in Uttarakhand (India) explained.

As House et al. demonstrate so clearly, gender-based violence (GBV) and WASH cannot be disconnected, so I now turn to GBV frameworks that offer solutions to turn toilet insecurity into toilet security.^{7,9} To put Moosa's theory of change for ending GBV into a toilet security frame: (1) empowering women is both the means and the end to toilet insecurity; (2) women and girls have a right to toilet security; and (3) sanitation projects must be accountable to women and girls.¹⁸ Sanitation programming must build women and girls' access to resources, skills, and sense of inner capability (as Rowlands

puts it, 'power within'¹⁹). Funding is necessary for initiatives that foster women and girls' rights. WASH policy has the potential to change gender relations, attitudes, and norms if women's particular needs are part of a conversation about toilet *security*, i.e., beyond a conversation that fails to connect toilets to gendered inequality and violence. If relations, norms and attitudes about gender change, then greater equality between men and women will reduce both GBV and open defecation.

Strengths-based approaches are a gender transformative approach that might be adapted to address toilet insecurity. Strengths-based approaches are grounded in the idea that all individuals have strengths, and all communities have capacities that can be drawn on to create positive change.²⁰ Making individual and community strengths explicit is motivating and self-reinforcing for constructive changes.²⁰ In initiatives targeting gender equity, Willetts et al. found that supporting men's and women's reflections on gender relations can draw out what men and women value and what changes to gendered inequality they would like to see in the future.²¹ A strengths-based approach that targets men and women both avoids 'naming *all* men as responsible for gender inequality' (my italics) and thus softens men's resistance and defensiveness, which may hinder future changes.²¹ Strengths-based approaches that reinforce men's positive behaviors have been effective in countering domestic violence and have been used in campus rape prevention programs.^{22,23} Dialogue about men and women's roles in their families and communities has the potential to build on men's positive contributions to women's toilet security and create more of it.

CONCLUSIONS

In their piece on gender and sanitation, Corbett and Mehta argue that a lot is expected of sanitation or of women and girls' access to it, i.e., sanitation is expected to 'fix' everything from public health to education to economic conditions.²⁴ Social change across scales and spectra will occur: women's decision making power; women's economic productivity; changes in gender roles; and greater equality in society.¹⁴ But the evidence indicates that women and girls' access to a toilet has little influence on gender inequality. Sanitation is not inherently gender transformative. Toilet security cannot occur unless gender inequalities are prioritized, above sanitation. Such a statement may appear ridiculous or radical or dangerous given the size of the open defecation problem

and the havoc it wreaks on health, wealth, and life. But is it, when research makes clear that sanitation provision and/or behavior change alone cannot eradicate open defecation? For that to occur, we must target women's toilet insecurity. Placing greater expectations for social change onto sanitation is not my goal. My goal is to turn the focus away from building toilets toward tackling the gender inequalities that produce toilet insecurity. The social processes that create gender can be redirected as a critical piece of successful sanitation interventions.

The empirical analysis of Hudson et al. indicates that the security of women is key to state security.²⁵ The authors' foundational argument is that gender inequality, in and of itself, is a violation of women's security. Their data show a correlation between the ways women are dominated at the microscale and the mechanisms used by the state to dominate other/weaker groups. My argument connects to theirs in its assertion that gender inequality creates toilet insecurity, which is a violation of women's security. Hudson et al. conclude that to protect the rights of women and eliminate gender inequality is also to work toward state security and world peace. Similarly, I conclude that to prioritize women and girls' toilet security by eliminating gender inequality will also promote state security and world peace.

I have argued above for gender transformative sanitation policies as the way to end toilet insecurity.

Women's subordinate position in society is the most basic reason that women cannot use public toilets without fear or experiences of sexual violence or harassment. Fear and stress surrounding the use of inadequate public or private sanitation drives women to defecate in the open, where they also may experience fear, stress, harassment, and attack. For some women and girls, the problem begins with the absence of any toilet facility at all. For others, a toilet exists but is not secure, or cannot be used for a host of reasons that push women toward open defecation and its risks. All three forms of toilet insecurity must be eradicated. We must move beyond policies of providing women with toilets to policies committed to changing the overarching, lived context of unequal relations of power between men and women. Solutions to the global sanitation crisis begin with transforming toilet insecurity to toilet security.

NOTES

^a Toilet insecurity certainly includes girls, and the reader is asked to bear this in mind throughout the piece.

^b I use the term toilet for stylistic reasons, although in many poor areas only latrines are possible.

^c By 'public toilets' I mean both toilets built for residents of a geographically specific area and those for use by the general public.

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