



GENDER EQUALITY IN TOILETS: Bridging The Gender Gap In Sanitation, Beyond The Numbers

A framework for empowering women with sufficient, well-maintained, inclusively designed, and fully equipped toilets at homes, schools, workplaces and public spaces

RESEARCH BRIEF #7

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INTRODUCTION

What do toilets have to do with gender equality and inclusion? Well, everything! If one has to understand the status of women or the third gender in a society, one just has to peep into its toilets!

Toilets are a foundation stone of public health and also play a critical role in protecting the environment (UN). While toilets are a basic necessity for everyone, women and girls have different sanitation requirements than men and boys; and they face a different set of challenges for accessing facilities. This is due to biological factors (menstruation, pregnancy etc) and due to their assigned roles and power dynamics in society (expectations of 'dignity and modesty', greater risks of harassment and sexual violence, responsibilities as main caregivers etc) ([Wateraid Guide for Female-friendly public and community toilets in India](#)).

Unfortunately, owing to the gender blindness of the world "built by men, for men", women's sanitation requirements have largely remained unmet for a large part of history. Consequently, the absence of adequate and hygienic toilet facilities most often makes women postpone or hold back their physiological needs and holding back urine for long causes infections and can lead to issues with bladder muscles as well as kidneys. Consequently, ensuring universal access to safe sanitation by 2030 is a major Sustainable Development Goal and a development priority for India.

However, the "availability" of toilets is not the only concern for women. Using dirty and unhygienic toilets or not being able to change sanitary products for too long can increase the risk of infection, while not washing hands after changing menstrual products can help spread infections such as Hepatitis B. The lack of hygiene and sanitation has been responsible for a large share of infant and maternal mortality in the world.

Therefore, an assessment of the extent of gender mainstreaming of toilets needs to be looked at through multiple dimensions, including availability, accessibility, design, maintenance/hygiene, safety, features and facilities.

A clean, hygienic, lockable, gender-segregated space is needed, with access to sanitary products and disposal systems, for women and girls to manage menstrual hygiene and pregnancy –
United Nations

These parameters must be captured while building toilets in various spaces where toilets usually must be located. This paper presents an overview of the status of gender inclusion in toilets in India's homes, schools, public spaces, and workplaces; and provides a framework for making toilets inclusive by incorporating various dimensions around four parameters – Availability, Maintenance, Facilities and Design (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Four-Pillar Framework for Gender-Inclusive Toilets



The following sections list of details of the ways and means of implementing the framework in homes, schools, workplaces and public spaces.

1. TOILETS FOR WOMEN IN HOMES

Traditionally, toilets were not built within the premises of houses and open defecation was the norm. Even now, millions of women and girls have to walk more than 300 meters from their homes to use available latrines (Amnesty International). Open defecation poses several challenges for women's health and well-being. Since women try to defecate before the sun rises, they are exposed to physical attacks and sexual violence in semi-darkness. Without access to toilets at home, women of all ages have to wait for nightfall to relieve themselves in the open or go to public toilets. The need to control the urge to urinate causes urinary infections and other health hazards. Females especially suffer without easily accessible toilets when they are menstruating, pregnant or disabled.

[Research](#) has shown that in India, women defecating in the open report a 32% higher rate of sexual assault and rapes. In comparison to a woman from a household with an in-home toilet, a woman in a household with no toilet is 47% more likely to face peeping by men, 36% more likely to be subject to flashing, and 32% more likely to be eve-teased. 58% of

the households in rural India reported safety concerns for women as the main reason for getting a toilet constructed within the house premises.

In 2014, the country launched an unprecedented and unparalleled program in the world to date: the Swachh Bharat Mission (Clean India Program) that provided for equipping every household with toilets by 2019. And India has successfully managed to bring down the proportion of its population with zero-sanitation access, from 63 % in 1993 to 17% in 2021, as measured by various rounds of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) (Figure 2). Consequently, 83% percent of households have access to a toilet facility; with much higher accessibility in urban areas (96%) than in rural areas (76%). India also declared itself open-defecation-free in 2019. The report '[Access to toilets, and the safety, convenience and self-respect of women in rural India](#)', published in 2020 showed major improvements in women's safety and convenience across various dimensions.

Figure 1 – India's Progress Towards Zero Sanitation



Source: [National Family Health Survey \(NFHS\), various rounds](#)

Nevertheless, more progress is still needed and several challenges persist. For instance –

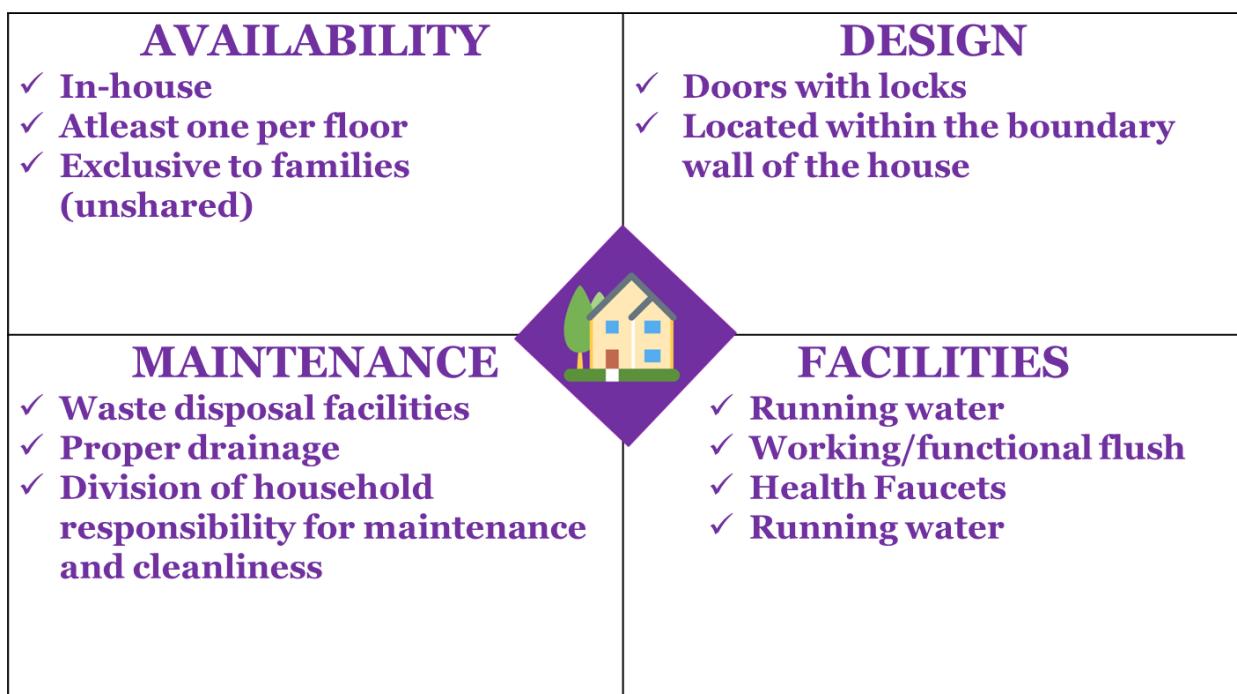
- As per [National Family Health Survey \(NFHS\) 2019-21 \(NFHS – 5\)](#), 19% of Indian households still do not use any toilet facility, meaning that they practice open defecation. Many households reportedly deployed the sanctioned Rs 12,000, meant for building toilets, for other purposes as there was no verification by the government.
- NFHS 5 also showed that 11% of urban households and 7% of rural households use a shared facility that brings people into contact with human waste and can lead to the transmission of cholera, typhoid, and other diseases.
- A [survey by the National Sample Survey Organisation \(NSSO\)](#) in 2017 had found that nearly six out of the ten toilets built by the government under the Swachh

Bharat Abhiyan do not have a proper water supply, making them unusable ([Source link](#)).

- The lack of responsibility towards the task of maintaining the toilets after they're built has led to many of them being in a state of disrepair or being vandalized. In many cases, the toilets have been abandoned or are being used as storerooms and chicken coops.

Therefore, it is recommended that all households need to have access to in-house toilets, verified by the government, and with running water, proper drainage and continuous maintenance.

4-Pillar Framework for Household Toilets



2. TOILETS FOR GIRLS IN SCHOOLS

The availability of separate toilets for girls and boys was listed as a compliance requirement under India's Right to Education (RTE) Act of 2010. The guidelines by the World Health Organization ([WHO](#)) state that there should be one toilet per 25 girls and one female staff and one toilet per 50 boys with one male staff. The Swachh Bharat Swachh Vidyalaya [scheme](#) states that there should be one toilet and three urinals for every 40 students.

According to the [Annual Status of Education Report \(ASER\) 2013](#), the percentage of usable toilets for girls in schools increased from 32.9% in 2010 to 53.3%. As per the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2022 fraction of schools with useable girls' toilets increased from 66.4% in 2018 to 68.4% in 2022.

A [2020 survey of 1,967 co-educational government schools](#) found that 40 percent of toilets in these schools were either non-existent or simply unused. Close to 72 percent had no running water (2020 survey of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG)).

Separate and hygienic toilets for girls at school is a necessity for ensuring privacy and menstrual hygiene, the lack of which has shown to cause of absenteeism or even gradual dropouts among girls. Research has shown that for girls' schools, there is a [positive, statistically significant](#) relationship between toilets and enrolment, and the relationship is stronger for secondary schools than for primary schools. In Tanzania and Bangladesh, there was an annual increase of 10% in the enrolment of girls following the construction of separate toilets. A [study](#) in Kenya showed that attendance in school increased as the number of available toilets per student increased, and the effect was greater for older students and for girls. This, say the researchers, suggests that privacy concerns are important for adolescents and that this has an impact on their school attendance.

[Research for India](#) also showed that the construction of toilets across schools in India in 2003 led to a significant rise in student enrolment, with girls exhibiting a higher increase in enrolment than boys at both the primary and upper-primary levels. Interestingly, compared with unisex latrines, the provision of gender-specific latrines yields a higher positive impact on girls' enrolment. This is especially true in upper-primary schools, indicating that girls tend to value safety and privacy more as they grow older. The lack of an efficient sanitation infrastructure directly impacts education, especially for girls. [Research suggests](#) that girls tend to miss school six days a month on average due to the inability to manage their periods at school. This eventually contributes to almost 23% of girls dropping out of school on reaching puberty, which critically undermines their potential as individuals and future workers.

GIS@School: An app developed by the Madhya Pradesh government

[GIS@School](#), is an app implemented by the state across all its 125,000 government schools. The crowd-sourced Android-based mobile app allows students, teachers and government authorities to capture geo-tagged and time-stamped photographs and information about existing, non-functional and missing infrastructure or amenities — such as drinking water, separate toilets for boys and girls, clean kitchen for mid-day meals and boundary wall, among others — to ensure schools comply with the required provisions.

If the [government](#) wants to promote girl education, they have to improve basic facilities for girls in schools. However, it is not just the availability [but hygiene that also needs](#) to be taken care of because children, especially those who are used to good sanitary facilities at home, still avoid using school toilets, resulting in problems like dehydration, urinary

infections, constipation and other digestive issues. Provision for menstrual products and waste disposal should also be a part of services in school toilets.

Additionally, education and awareness building in girls about toilets usage and personal hygiene is important, as there [is a positive association](#) between level of education and quality of toilet facilities. With increases in women's education, quality of toilet facility improves steadily. By explicitly discussing toilet practices, much of the shyness and reluctance to discuss and learn about toilet types that secure sanitary conditions necessary for healthy living may be reduced. Enriching the curriculum at the secondary school level with facts and concepts of sanitation is likely to improve sanitary toilet practices.

4-Pillar Framework for Girls' Toilets in Schools

<p>AVAILABILITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Separate toilets for girls and boys ✓ At least 1 toilet per 25 girls 	<p>DESIGN</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Child-friendly design ✓ Located in an easily accessible, well-lit and un-secluded area ✓ Designed to ensure privacy ✓ Have doors with locks <p><i>Involve opinions and feedback of women/ girl children while designing</i></p>
<p>MAINTENANCE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Regular waste disposal ✓ Proper drainage system ✓ Regular cleaning and disinfection of the toilet unit ✓ Orientation and education of students to ensure safe and hygienic use of toilet <p><i>A dedicated cleaner/helper would be advisable</i></p>	<p>FACILITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Sustainable and continuous water supply ✓ Working/functional flush ✓ Health Faucets ✓ Mirrors (for girls to check stains on clothes) ✓ Hand washing soap ✓ Sanitary napkins, stored in a child-accessible cupboard or shelf

3. WOMEN'S TOILETS IN WORKPLACES

Women's toilets have been and continue to be a major factor behind the women's participation in various jobs and vocations, across every industry and every level, be it in the formal or informal sector. Back in the time, companies routinely [refused to hire women](#) on the grounds they didn't have toilet facilities for them. And although it has become less of an issue, many working women continue to work in offices with only unisex washrooms in the offices. From construction sites to corporate offices, having separate washrooms for women had remained a non-priority for employers for a very long time. Even today, [women bus drivers and conductors](#) expressed to have separate toilets or restrooms for female staff at bus depots.

Not having toilets is a problem that even women leaders at the highest levels have faced, globally. [Sheryl Sandberg, Ex-COO](#) of Facebook and author of the book *Lean In*, was one of the first women to openly talk about the lack of access or availability of women's toilets faced by pioneering women in Boardrooms and at the CXO levels. However [evidence](#) shows that the increasing number of women at senior levels has been the real driver for change that has improved the availability and quality of women's toilets. For example, even in India, "There [was no toilet for women on the director's floor](#) at the *Reserve Bank of India* before *Amrita Patel* was nominated to its board, but she made sure one was put in.

In recent moves, central and state governments have sought to address the paucity of women's toilets across various dimensions and sectors. In March 2022, the Union finance ministry asked all [public sector banks and financial institutions](#) to take the necessary steps to provide separate toilets for female bank workers in all public sector banks. In October 2023, the [Delhi Government](#) directed all construction sites to have separate toilets for women. And in January 2024, India's Ministry of Labour and Employment issued an [Advisory for Employers to promote Women's Workforce Participation](#), in which it called for the provision of clean, accessible, and separate toilets for women in Construction sites.

More than the availability, it is the [lack of proper hygiene](#) which is continues to remain the bigger problem. This is due to due low priority attached to clean ladies' toilets for the female workforce, inconsistent or non-existent water supply, and lack of sanitary waste disposal facilities. Often the toilet flushes are not functional, the light bulbs are fused or the doors are broken. Another problem, common in factory offices, is to have just one ladies' toilet in a distant corner, which makes it embarrassing for women to walk up to.

While there is a lot of evidence from toilets in offices in the large tier-one city and metropolitan cities. But there are stories from smaller Tier-II cities as well that demonstrate the plight of working women who have to use unisex or unhygienic toilets. For example, in Hapur, a small-town India, there are [13 Women Judges who face a toilet deficit](#) as only one out of the four tiny and inconveniently located toilets for women at the Hapur district court is functional. But even the functional toilet is at an uncomfortable location and its door is cracked and there is no water.

The lack of separate clean workplace toilets often means that women either completely avoid taking bio breaks relieve themselves at work (even during menstruation) or they have to bear the discomfort of going outside the workplace to use washrooms. Some even have to take an off day when suffering from heavy flow days of periods, and the ones who had to attend didn't bother to change their sanitary pads during office hours due to the absence of an appropriate disposal system. Some completely avoided taking bio breaks; a few also restricted their water intake while at work.

Design biases have meant that organisations allot larger space to men's toilets to reflect the larger number of men in the workplace, thereby leading to longer queues outside women's toilets. An equitable workplace would need to allot more space to the women's toilets as the cubicles require larger space than urinals in men's toilets.

Therefore, there is a dire need for enhancing women's restroom facilities in workplaces, irrespective of the number of women who may currently work there. The restroom should be thoughtfully designed with an adequate number of stalls, cleanliness, and security features like well-lit areas and emergency call buttons, and privacy that respects and protects users.

4-Pillar Framework for Women's Toilets in Workplaces

<p>AVAILABILITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Separate washrooms for men and women ✓ At least 1 latrine for every 25 females (labour law) 	<p>DESIGN</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Located within the office premises at a convenient, comfortable and safe location ✓ Easy and safe to access in a visible location avoiding dark or isolated areas ✓ Doors with lock ✓ Toilets should not be next to the pantry or coffee stations ✓ The galleries/path to the toilet should be well-lit
<p>MAINTENANCE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Regular waste disposal ✓ Proper drainage system ✓ Regular cleaning and disinfection of the toilet unit <p><i>Companies may also include in-house sanitary audits</i></p>	<p>FACILITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Sustainable and continuous water supply ✓ Working/functional flush ✓ Health Faucets ✓ Mirrors ✓ Hand washing soap ✓ Sanitary napkins dispensing machine ✓ Sanitary waste disposal bins ✓ CCTV cameras outside the washroom ✓ Emergency bell ✓ Separate lactation room

4. GENDER INCLUSIVE TOILETS IN PUBLIC SPACES

Lack of toilet facilities in public spaces is largely a feminist issue because, unlike men, women cannot relieve themselves just anywhere. Women are also restricted in their capacity to maintain menstrual hygiene. Where public or community toilets are inadequate, poorly maintained or lack women's basic requirements, it negatively impacts the movement and productivity of women and girls and thereby restricts their ability to

participate in social, economic and community activities. Having a toilet is a fundamental boost to gender equality, as well as health, education and economic opportunity.

The availability of public and community toilets for women on the streets in urban areas continues to be low, although public spaces like shopping malls, movie theatres and other entertainment zones have a better availability. Bus stops and railway stations often lack infrastructure such as separate women's toilets and rooms for breastfeeding and childcare, although airports are the best equipped public spaces when it comes to availability of clean and hygienic toilets.

The bigger issue that a large number of people have reported is the lack of hygiene, cleanliness and maintenance of public toilets in their area, district or city. A 2017 study by ActionAid India showed that 35% of 229 surveyed public toilets in Delhi did not have a separate section for women. Further, 53% of women's toilets did not have running water and 45% toilets did not have a mechanism to lock the door from inside. A study on why women don't use public toilets conducted with reference to Hyderabad and Secunderabad revealed unhygienic conditions (92.5%), insufficient water availability (69.2%), caretaker being male (57.5%), joint infrastructure (53.6%), and feeling of insecurity (36.4%).

Inappropriate location has also been a major concern. Public toilets are often poorly designed and located on walk-paths, making it uncomfortable for women. Visibility emerged as another major concern for women and girls, influencing their perceptions of safety. Obstructions on walk-paths caused by vehicular parking, inappropriate positioning of street lights, garbage bins, signages, and dumping of construction debris also contributed to lack of access to public spaces for women.

Another major problem that remains unaddressed not just in India but the world over, is related to the design and planning of public toilets which stems from a lack of gender perspective in architects when designing a public toilet. They fail to take into consideration the unique physical, physiological and societal requirements of women, because of which they take longer in the washroom, such as

- a) Their biological constitution – women's bladder is smaller because their body needs more space for the reproductive system, they menstruate and they do their needs sitting down.
- b) Their social roles - women are almost always in charge of taking their children to the toilet.
- c) Their clothes are different - while a man only unzips his pants, a woman must undress half her body to urinate.

However, the physical space allocated for a female toilet is usually the same as that of a male one, and this also generates inequality. Men's urinals take up less space and it is

common for the female area to be reduced by baby changing stations, larger mirrors and perhaps a decorative couch. Therefore, Women have fewer toilet units in the same square meters. This leads to long queues in front of women's toilets in any airport, malls, movie theatres, sports ground or discotheque: rows and rows of women waiting to gain access. According to a survey conducted by [Yougov](#) in the UK, 59% of women say that they almost always find a huge line when they go to a public toilet, compared to 11% of men. The University of Ghent conducted a study on how all these factors increase the time women spend in the bathroom by 50% compared to men.



"If you want to know the position of women in a particular society, look at the line formed in the toilets" – [Clara Greed](#)

[At the U.S. Capitol](#), female lawmakers up until recently had to use a distant restroom meant for tourists, since there were none directly adjacent to the House floor. This inspired the creation of **"Potty Parity"** Movement. Potty parity refers to a law that guarantees that in public facilities the proportion of toilets must be 2:1 or 3:1 in favour of women.

[In Hong Kong](#), building regulations now specify there must be 1.6 female toilets for every one male toilet in public places. Designers and providers should use a more equitable rather than an equal allocation of space and facilities, so women can take the time they need in a toilet without having to pay for it by waiting longer.

There have been a [few recent initiatives](#) that have attempted to address the challenges of women's toilets in public spaces, such as –

- [Pink toilets](#) in U.P's Gautam Budh Nagar have multiple facilities including sanitary napkin vending machines, incinerators to dispose of menstrual waste, hygienic

toilets and a separate area for breastfeeding mothers. The vending machines will give sanitary pads at a subsidised rate of Rs 5. Buckets, towels and soaps are also available for free for bathing.

- [Bindii: The Red Dot Revolution movement](#) was on a mission to provide women in Mumbai access to clean toilets and good menstrual hygiene services. The mission built toilets complexes in four locations of Mumbai and has installed more than 100 toilets in schools, corporate offices, and public areas, moreover, they have taught people and children about menstruation and has helped them deal with periods safely. The movement helped Mumbai women get access to clean toilets and is provided school girls with sanitary napkin vending machines and incinerators.
- [Suvidha toilets in Mumbai](#) have come up as a unique example, where public toilets are being used and maintained by the community only with their cooperation. Apart from toilets, people have an access to laundry, bathroom, and drinking water services by paying a nominal fee. Facility for washing hands and feet is available. Not just this, these toilets offer facilities of sanitary napkins, panic buttons, CCTV cameras, etc.
- Under the '[Sthree](#) initiative , the Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation has converted its scrapped buses into toilets equipped with facilities. The bus-turned-toilets are equipped with three Indian toilets and two western toilets, an incinerator and a sanitary pad vending machine, a baby changing facility, a wash basin, solar sensor lights with self-generated solar power, etc. A scrap bus is converted into the 'Sthree Toilet' at a cost of Rs 12 lakh and the facility was paid for by the Bengaluru International Airport Authority as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR).
- Some states have now started installing '[Smart She Toilets](#)' to provide clean and safe sanitation facilities for women. She Toilets are already in cities like Hyderabad, Pune and Thiruvantapuram, and will be coming up in [Bangalore](#) soon. Most of these toilets include facilities like a western-style toilet, a wash basin, a napkin-vending and incinerator unit, a voting machine (for feedback on how clean the toilet is), and baby feeding and diaper changing stations.

Emerging from the discussion on challenges for women in public toilets and the learnings from existing initiatives, it is evident that ensuring adequate access to public toilets for women is crucial for promoting gender equality and ensuring the dignity and well-being of women in society. Investing in and maintaining public toilets that are accessible, hygienic, and safe for women is a fundamental aspect of ensuring women's rights, health, and overall empowerment. The rest rooms must be of the correct size and have facilities to enable women's menstrual, maternity and caregiving requirements.

In addition, gender-neutral restrooms in addition to existing gender-segregated restrooms may be considered for the safety and comfort of transgender, non-binary

individuals. There could also be family toilets – to support caregivers but also for those who wish to use gender neutral toilets.

4-Pillar Framework for Female Toilets in Public Spaces

<p>AVAILABILITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Separate washrooms for men and women ✓ Equitable allocation – the proportion of toilets must be 2:1 or 3:1 in favor of women. ✓ At least one gender neutral and/or Family Restroom should also be provided 	<p>DESIGN</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Separate male and female sections with the entrances facing different directions or at a sufficient distance ✓ Easy and safe to access in a visible location avoiding dark or isolated areas ✓ The size of stalls should provide ample space for both a female and an additional child or a disabled or elderly relative
<p>MAINTENANCE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Regular waste disposal ✓ Proper drainage system ✓ Regular cleaning and disinfection of the toilet unit ✓ Routine monitoring and evaluation of this infrastructure ✓ Monitoring of menstrual waste disposal practices 	<p>FACILITIES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Sustainable and continuous water supply ✓ Working/functional flush ✓ Health Faucets ✓ Mirrors ✓ Hand washing soap ✓ Sanitary napkins dispensing machine ✓ Sanitary waste disposal bins ✓ Diaper changing station ✓ Separate area for lactation room ✓ CCTV cameras outside the washroom ✓ Emergency bell

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Studies have shown that about [50% of toilets built by Indian governmental programs](#) are not used for their intended purpose and there is still in a need to improve the social acceptability of toilet use. It is vital to conduct regular assessments and devise strategies to enhance the sanitation facilities for women in rural and urban areas, at home as well as in schools, workplaces and public spaces. Building new female-friendly toilets where needed and upgradation of sub-standard toilets with female friendly features should be a continuous process. Further, it should be ensured that the processes of construction, operation and maintenance, and monitoring of such facilities are gender inclusive.

Women's Toilets

Adequate
Accessible
Functional

Who comes
1st?
Women or
Toilets?!

Running Water

Hygienic



Diaper changing station

Sanitary-pad
dispensing machine

Sanitary-pad
Disposal



Family Toilets



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Ellenomics is on a mission to change the economics of women in India.

On our agenda



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