



A Feminist Public Restroom



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Cover design by Katarina Uittenbogaard. Graphic production: Hasselgren, Selberg & Partners AB, www.hsop.se

Foreword

Increasing safety in public spaces is all about creating an adequate environment where everyone feels welcome. When it comes to crime prevention, efforts directed towards increasing the feelings of safety should take on a situational perspective. This way, by taking local and very specific measures, the local context will not only be taken into account but also capitalized. A key aspect of situational prevention is to create a lively public space which is attractive to all of society's various groups. Consequently, more people will visit the place, increasing the flow of people and the social control.

Therefore, an increased focus on the interests and needs of various social groups is fundamental for situational crime prevention. Here is where a feminist perspective on urban planning plays a key role. The concept of feminist urban planning helps us understand how we can create a public space that takes into account social structures, affects people's experiences and behavior and, ultimately, can increase public safety. An increased awareness of who is actually taken into account when public spaces are planned for, can help shed light on certain social structures. Thereby, changes are enabled.

The Safer Sweden Foundation is the initiator of Network for Feminist Urban Planning. The network's objective is to bring together professionals in the field and develop the concept of feminist urban planning, share information and spread inspiration. As a part of this network, The Safer Sweden Foundation has during the spring of 2019 mapped the public restrooms in the area of Norrmalm, Stockholm. This was carried out by taking into account that public restrooms are important factors in determining people's possibilities to move about and circulate in public spaces unhindered. However, historically, there has been a wider availability of public restrooms for men than for women. The purpose for mapping out public restrooms in Stockholm is to investigate how accessible they are, particularly with women's needs in mind. There have been a number of observations included in the study where the number of women and men using the restrooms has been counted. Mapping all these factors makes it possible to show how feminist urban planning can contribute to an increase in levels of safety and gender equality in public spaces.



Magnus Lindgren
Secretary General
The Safer Sweden Foundation

Urban planning from a **feminist** perspective

The way we plan and shape our public spaces is one of the many contributing factors in building an equal society.² The aim of this leaflet is to show how feminist urban planning can be used to highlight and change certain structures and relations that impede equality in public spaces. The subject itself, namely public restrooms, is just one example of how sex and gender affect the possibilities of women and men to access public spaces on equal terms.

Safety can be defined as the absence of certain risks such as crime and civil disorder, while perceived safety is defined by each individual's perception of their own safety.³

Safety and perceived safety

We focus mainly on crime prevention and how factors like safety and the perception of safety affect people's health and their access to public spaces. The Swedish National Council for Crime Prevention's survey "Nationella Trygghetsundersökningen" (Swedish Crime Survey) shows that more women than men feel unsafe in their neighborhood in the evening. More women than men also report that they avoid going outside due to feelings of unsafety.³ In other words, safety plays a key role in enabling people to move around freely in public spaces. The fact that women feel less safe than men shows that this is also a matter of gender equality.

In Sweden, 36% of women report that they feel unsafe in their neighborhoods at nighttime. The equivalent for men is 19%.³

Feminist urban planning

Gender equality is a democratic endeavor, which aim is that people should get to live their lives freely without being limited or hindered in any way by gender stereotypes or a lack of safety.⁴

In Sweden, 48% of women in socially disadvantaged areas report that they feel unsafe in their neighborhood. The equivalent for men is 22%.²⁵

The aim of feminist urban planning is to even out and satisfy the needs of different social groups. It can be accomplished through the adaptation of critical policies and approaches to the way public spaces are used. This is an effective way to increase safety and gender equality in public spaces.

Feminist urban planning can be defined as *a critical approach which aim is to satisfy the needs of different social groups within urban development.*¹

Public woman

Given that women had long been shut off from education, politics and professional activities, those responsible for planning, drawing and building cities have historically been men. The public sphere has been dominated by men while women's places have been at home. For centuries the idea was that women should not move freely around in the city. The expression "public woman" was, for example, used as a synonym for prostitute in Sweden. Even though society has now changed considerably, urban planning is still based upon certain traditional notions about what is "feminine" and "masculine", in relation to public space.⁴

10% of women in Sweden report that they avoid spending time outdoors due to feelings of unsafety. The equivalent for men is 2%.³

At planned outdoor spaces for spontaneous activity, located in Stockholm, 74% of the people using them are male, out of which 80% are boys between 7 and 19 years old.⁵

The United Nations' global goals for sustainability stipulate that by the year 2030, the world's countries should provide public spaces that are safe, inclusive and accessible, particularly for women, children, older people, and people that are differently abled.



The feminized city landscape

Voting rights in Sweden

Once women got voting rights in the year 1919, they increasingly began taking part in public activities such as decision-making, politics and professional activities. Most of the women that worked in architecture and urban planning did so within the state or municipal sectors. Normally, they would be involved in matters related to housing, day-care centers, schools, retirement homes, parks and gardens. In other words, it was tasks mainly related to traditional roles that women were supposed to be experienced in doing, such as housing, care and caregiving.⁸

Public restrooms (or "public comfort facilities", as they were referred to) were first inaugurated in Stockholm in the year 1792. They were placed at Kornhamnstorg (in Gamla stan), Packartorget (currently Norrmalmstorg) and Stadsgården.¹¹

International organization

This is a phenomenon that has taken place even outside Sweden. Women have exercised their influence in the planning of cities like London, Dublin, Toronto and Chicago, where the issue of public restrooms was one of the main subjects of concern⁹. Women's organizations in the cities mentioned above, as well as in other parts of the world, demanded the establishment of children's clinics and OB-GYN clinics, public bathhouses, parks, playgrounds and restrooms. These women argued that, from a social perspective, restrooms are necessary assets in the urban environment. However, their demands were often met with the argument that this would either be too expensive or aesthetically displeasing. Nevertheless, this did not stop the city from building urinals for men. The fight carried out by women in cities across the world was about pushing the boundaries of what was considered private out in the public and, at the same time, feminizing the city landscape. This meant also the inclusion of social concerns in the urban planning process.

Public restrooms in Stockholm

In Sweden, women have long been making demands on the subject of public restrooms. In the year 1920, social democratic women proposed a law advocating for free restrooms in Stockholm. The bill included a certificate by Sweden's first female medical doctor, Karolina Widenström, in which she asserted that an overly full bladder in women as well as men could cause sickness and painful symptoms. Moreover, Widenström wrote that, given that women had to leave their homes for several hours for a number of reasons, it was therefore imperative that the municipality arrange free public comfort facilities for women.¹⁰

The bill rested in the office of traffic and city planning for five years until it was approved, and the office endeavored to requesting funds for the building of new public restrooms in the city. It was however argued that there would be complications in carrying out the project, citing high expenditures and difficulties to keep the facilities clean.¹⁰

Number of public restrooms in Stockholm^{11, 12}

1930 : 14 staffed

1960 : 32 staffed

1987 : 14 staffed

2019 : 78 unstaffed

The number of urinals in Stockholm has up until now been considerably higher. Between 90 and 100 from the beginning to the middle of the 20th century, with an increase to 141 urinals in the 1980s.¹¹ Today, however, the number of urinals remains at 37.¹²

How has the development been in your municipality?

A feminist public restroom

Safe public restrooms have to do with the right to freedom from violence, the right to safety and good health. That there are fewer public restrooms available for women than men is problematic in many ways. Among other problems, this can lead to an increased risk of developing gastrointestinal problems, incontinence and urinary tract infections.¹³

Hygiene and Health

In her thesis *Restroom Usage in Selected Public Facilities: A Comparison of Females and Males*, Sandra Rawls indicates that, on average, a visit to the restroom takes twice the time for women than for men.¹⁴ Rawls explains that this is due to the fact that two out of three men use urinals, while women always need to sit down, which is less convenient and takes extra time.

The fact that women have access to fewer facilities than men, especially when women require extra time, can lead to irregular or missed restroom visits, which, in turn, can result in an increased risk for development of gastrointestinal, urinal or bladder-related problems.

Women that menstruate or have other types of vaginal bleeding in connection to pregnancy, for example, need access to spacious, hygienic restrooms with soap, water and sanitary bins. The space in restrooms is often limited so it is difficult for women to sit on the restroom without touching walls and other surfaces around. This means that it may be impossible for women to change their pads or tampons without coming into contact with unclean surfaces. As such, factors like having enough space and a well thought-out plan for how sanitary bins and the sink should be placed have significant implications for women's health.^{15,16}

Within the project of mapping out restrooms in the Normalmalm area, the term public restroom was limited to include only restrooms that are managed by the municipality and are available to the public.²⁴



Only 1 out of 10 users of public restrooms in the Normalmalm area is a woman.²⁴



In public restrooms in Stockholm, 70% of the users choose to use the free urinal instead of the pay restrooms, whenever this option is available.²⁴

Women can also have the need to use restrooms more often than men. This is due to, among other things, the necessity to change menstrual hygiene products and also to the fact that incontinence is more prevalent among women than men.^{17, 18} Other reasons for women having the need to visit public restrooms more often than men include, for example, that they often take bigger responsibilities for the care-giving and nursing of children.¹⁹ Women can also need a public restroom to breastfeed.

Other groups for whom easy and safe access to public restrooms is particularly important include, for example, older people, among whom incontinence is more prevalent, and people with different types of prostate or gastrointestinal diseases. For these groups of people, accessibility to public restrooms plays an important role in their ability to move around freely in the city.

Security and safety

For a restroom to be safe, the user's needs and rights to bodily integrity need to be satisfied. That is why it is important that the locks are reliable. This means that they should be easy to lock up and unlock from the inside and that no one can open them from the outside, unless it is authorized personnel or rescue professionals in case of an emergency.²⁰

A feminist, intersectional analysis of public restrooms needs to take into consideration the violence and discrimination experienced by transsexual people when they are forced to identify themselves as cisgender men or women.^{21, 22, 23} Restrooms that are separated by gender or sex are places where gender norms are monitored and perpetuated, and where people that break against gender binary divisions run the risk of being subject to hate and discrimination.²³

50% are pay restrooms

About half of the restrooms that women can use in Stockholm are pay restrooms. Men, on the other hand, always have the option to use a urinal, which is free of charge.²⁴

0%

None of the public restrooms in Stockholm City are staffed.²⁴

0%

None of the public restrooms in Stockholm City have sanitary bins or baby changing stations or tables.²⁴

Criteria

Accessibility to safe, secure and hygienic restrooms is an essential part of good health. It can also be a precondition for the ability of people to circulate freely and unhindered in public places. In Central Stockholm, considerably fewer women than men use public restrooms, even if studies show that women have a bigger need for them than men. Therefore, it is time to clearly establish that public restrooms should accommodate the specific needs of women and, at the same time, should be made accessible for users with special needs.

Use the following checklist in your city to see for yourself if public restrooms meet these criteria!

Is there running water and soap?

Is there toilet paper?

Is there a sanitary bin within reach of the toilet seat?

Is the restroom gender neutral?

Is the restroom spacious enough so that two people can fit in at the same time?

Is the restroom accessible to everybody?

Does the lock work?



Is it evident when the restroom is occupied?

Is the restroom free of charge?

Are there staff members who regularly clean the restroom to ensure it is sanitary and clean to use?

Is there a baby-changing table or station in the restroom?

Are there any hooks to hang your clothes or bags on?

Is the restroom located in a spot where it can be monitored or safeguarded?

Is the city free of urinals that do not offer women the same opportunities to access and use a restroom?

Our demands

These are our five demands to ensure that there be a more relevant position for public restrooms in the urban environment. If these demands are met, attractive places in the city will be promoted, which will benefit society as a whole, including businesses, and meet the global goals.



Every municipality should work out specific guidelines or policies that regulate the location, layout and administration of public restrooms.



All public restrooms should be **free of charge**.



There should be a **formal social control** in the vicinity of the public restrooms.



There should be **enough restrooms** in the public environment, so that people's free movement is not hindered or limited.



The private sector should, **in collaboration with** the public sector, address the issue of public restrooms.



The Nette Toilette Model – A shared responsibility between municipalities and business owners

During the decades of 1970 and 1980, budget cutdowns led to a shortening of the opening hours of staffed public restrooms in Stockholm. Instead, restrooms operated by staff members were replaced by pay restrooms. Today, there is no longer any staffed public restrooms left, to the detriment of important factors like surveillance and maintenance.

In Germany, there is a model known as “Nette Toilette”. According to this model, municipalities subvent business owners, who, in turn, allow the public to use their restrooms for free. This is a good solution in which municipalities, together with other active parts in the public environment share a common responsibility to offer restrooms that are both free of charge and that can guarantee a high degree of social control.

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NETWORK FOR FEMINIST URBAN PLANNING

The Safer Sweden Foundation is the initiator of the Network for Feminist Urban Planning. The network's objective is to bring together professionals in the field and develop the concept of feminist urban planning, share information and spread inspiration.

Within the framework of our work, we take an intersectional approach to the development of the concept of feminist urban planning. This means that we, during our discussions, are aware of the fact that neither “men” or “women” are completely homogeneous social groups. Instead, factors like ethnicity, class, gender, among others, can determine the possibility of people to affect or influence the way public landscape in different ways. We strive for an inclusive and equal society, where all society's groups have the possibility to assert their position and influence.

Become a member of the network and help us develop these concepts! Becoming a member means that you are positive about the general concept of feminist urban planning. It would also mean that, to the best of your abilities, you will contribute actively during network meetings and can help drive this development forward, for example through active discussions and debates and innovative thoughts or ideas.

A FEMINIST PUBLIC RESTROOM

Feminist urban planning can be defined as a critical approach which aims to satisfy the needs of different social groups within urban development.

The objective is to work towards an including and equal society, where all society's groups have the possibility to assert their position and influence. Public restrooms are a good example of a facility that affect people's ability to access and use shared public spaces.

The Safer Sweden Foundation has during the spring of 2019 mapped out the public restrooms in Central Stockholm. The purpose for mapping out public restrooms in Stockholm is to investigate how accessible, safe and secure they are, particularly with women's needs in mind. This analysis has shown that women have less access to public restrooms (and of lesser quality), and that the majority of public restroom users are men. To that effect, the foundation has developed a checklist that can be used to ensure that public restrooms are made available and accessible to more people, and thus contribute to the creation and betterment of safe, secure and attractive public spaces for all.



Nätverket För Feministisk Stadplanering

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