



comfortable in such facilities, such as butch lesbians sick of being consistently challenged in female bathrooms, or trans women who support non-trans women's right to single-sex spaces, would then be able to use those gender neutral spaces too — if they wanted to.

That being said, there are four main reasons not to switch to multi-user gender neutral bathrooms *alone*. These are (i) that rates of assault against women go up in mixed-sex spaces; (ii) that this can exacerbate the problems of sexism in the workplace; (iii) that sex-segregated spaces are important to women for a variety of more and less pressing reasons; and (iv) in general, employees do not want them. I'll take these in turn, as I go drawing on excellent work done by others on this topic. Note that none of (i), (ii), or (iv) apply when we're talking about single-use gender neutral bathrooms, i.e. fully enclosed rooms with a toilet and a sink; but these might involve losses from (iii).

### **Rates of assault**

A Freedom of Information request made by [The Times](#)[2] revealed that unisex changing rooms at public swimming pools increase the risk of assault for women and girls. [The Independent](#)[3] reported on the same story that 'just under 90 per cent of complaints regarding changing room sexual assaults, voyeurism and harassment are about incidents in unisex facilities'. This makes sense, of course; the opportunity simply isn't there in single-sex facilities, and it is there, for opportunistic men to take advantage of, in mixed-sex facilities. From 2017–8 in the UK, there were 134 reported incidents, and 120 of these occurred in gender-neutral changing rooms, while only 14 occurred in single-sex changing rooms.

Now this is *not* a finding about bathrooms, so of course it could turn out that there's something different about swimming pools that doesn't apply to bathrooms. One obvious difference is that people are fully naked in changing rooms, and that changing rooms tend to be large, open spaces, while people are only partially naked in bathrooms and bathrooms have lockable cubicles. For these reasons, we might expect *fewer* incidents of sexual assault, voyeurism, and harassment in mixed-sex bathrooms than in mixed-sex changing rooms. But the general fact that mixed-sex changing rooms are more dangerous for women should give us pause in thinking about other kinds of mixed-sex spaces.

### **Exacerbating sexism in the workplace**

I've been thinking about this a lot since my friend told me about what her workplace has done. Her workplace, like many high-powered workplaces, is male dominated. She has one colleague who is openly sexist and who is constantly trying to undermine her. Her bosses are male. What happens in a workplace where women have problems with men, and they're forced to share intimate space with those men?

It can lead to the women using the bathroom less than they need to, which can create health problems, such as kidney infections. It can also lead to the women using the bathroom when they need to, but feeling uncomfortable and self-conscious about it. (It should be noted that it can also lead to *men* feeling uncomfortable and self-conscious; see the section below called 'What employees want').

I've had a workplace with a male colleague that I absolutely loathed, and who treated women — including me — in objectionable ways. It was bad enough worrying about running into that colleague in the corridors or the photocopy room; I would have *hated* it if I could have also run into him into a multi-stall bathroom. These spaces, more than other common spaces in workplaces, tend to have low traffic, and so we can feel much more vulnerable in them.

Women who experience any kind of sexual harassment or objectification in the workplace will not want to share bathrooms with their harassers. Indeed, as I'll say more about in the next section, single-sex bathrooms can be safe spaces *away from* harassers, sometimes the only such space for women in an entire building. The psychological importance of such spaces should not be underestimated.

## Importance of single-sex spaces to women

Fair Play for Women have a fantastic [article](#)[4] that goes through a whole bunch of reasons why female bathrooms are important to women. I'll recap those here. They include miscarriages, periods, incontinence, emotional crises, escape from the control of men, escape from harassment by men, grooming, and childcare.

*Miscarriages.* One in four pregnancies miscarry, and miscarriages are messy. Women can't control where these happen, so they can end up happening at work, or in public toilets, if she is not lucky enough to be at home. When the bathroom a miscarriage happens in is single-sex, the woman can be alone, or in the company of other women (who it might have happened to, or who it might happen to, or who can at least fully understand what it might be like). When it's mixed sex, she is forced to have her personal tragedy and the mess it makes witnessed by men.

*Periods.* Women bleed, and in some cases this, too, is messy. We might bleed through clothes and then need to wash them, standing in our underpants at the sink scrubbing at the item, standing in our underpants at the hand dryer waiting for the fabric to dry out. Most women won't want to be seen by colleagues in that state, *let alone* be seen by colleagues who they don't like, or perceive as sexists, or believe to have an inappropriate sexual interest in them. Women who use mooncups and prefer to rinse them between uses will need to use a sink, and in a multi-user facility with sinks not in the cubicles, this will mean being seen by others. Being seen by other women, most of whom have and can understand periods (and none of whom are aroused by the thought of periods, which is an actual kink that I had the misfortune to read about recently), is okay. Being seen by male colleagues or male bosses, not so much.

*Incontinence.* Pregnancy, internal injuries from childbirth, menopause, and regular hormonal changes can all cause incontinence, which can also be difficult and messy to deal with in bathrooms in the same ways that I just explained.

*Male-free moments.* There's a whole other set of reasons to protect single-sex bathrooms that tend to get less airtime in this debate. There's a lot of focus on the risk of sexual assault, or other kinds of crimes like voyeurism and sexual harassment. (In discussing a shift to entirely gender-neutral spaces, people are more willing to talk about this risk, but they say the risk is very minimal. In discussing in principle sex-segregated spaces that in practice segregate according to gender identity, people are less willing to talk about this risk, simply asserting that trans women 'are not male' (which of course they are), or that trans women are male but their gender identity or gender dysphoria somehow exempt them from exhibiting male-socialized behaviour against women and girls — for that argument see [this piece](#)[5], and for a reply see [this piece](#)[6].) What gets overlooked is the simple importance to women of *having spaces free of men*.

Fair Play for Women cover a bunch of reasons why this is important. They talk about how when men want to talk about something they can simply meet for a pint or a coffee and do so, but when women meet to try to talk about something they're often interrupted by men (actually they say 'geezers', which is a lot more fun) hitting on them. Relationship problems can occur for couples whose primary socialising is done together with their partners, so sometimes escaping to a bathroom with the other women is the only way to debrief and get advice. Women with abusive or controlling husbands are guaranteed a few minutes without them in women's bathrooms, where they might seek support from a female friend, or simply a brief respite from their partners. Women can escape to bathrooms in pubs or restaurants when they are being harassed by men (likewise in a workplace when stuck in an uncomfortable situation with a male colleague; this doesn't work if the male colleague can simply follow you in).

*Grooming.* Women for whom it is important to meet the standards of attractiveness dictated by our current gender norms will want a space for grooming, which can be more enjoyable when done together

with other women, but which is a kind of ‘behind the scenes’ process which many would prefer men not to be privy to (this is *absolutely* how I look when I wake up. What?).

*Childcare.* Finally, women take their kids to the bathroom, or help other mums who have kids in the bathroom, and many women will simply feel more comfortable (and more safe) doing this in a single-sex space.

Something that Fair Play for Women don’t talk about, but is nonetheless implicit behind a lot of what they stand for, is a woman’s right to say “no”, to set her own boundaries and have them respected. Some women feel a lot more comfortable in single-sex bathrooms than they would in mixed-sex / gender neutral bathrooms. That, alone, should be enough for workplaces to leave single-sex bathrooms in place. Women have had enormous historical problems in saying “no” and having men hear, and respect, that statement. Most public spaces are mixed sex; there are few places left where women have the right to be fully free from men.

Men can be exhausting and frustrating to be around (and yes, *not all men*, obviously. But some men, perhaps even many men, and most importantly, we don’t know in advance which ones). If women want to retain the right to access the few spaces where they can be sure of being free from male-socialized behaviour, which *many* women do (even if some, like the feminism-is-for-everybody intersectional feminists, don’t), then they should be able to. After all, the intersectional feminists are more than welcome to use the additional gender neutral spaces. The mere fact that *you* don’t mind sharing a bathroom with men (I’m looking at you, lady philosophy colleague, you know who you are) doesn’t mean your choice should be imposed upon the women who do mind.

[Addendum, 8th January 2019): A reader got in touch and pointed out that I’d missed something crucial in this section, namely *menopause*. Symptoms of menopause can include heavier-than-usual periods, hot flashes, sweating, fatigue, anxiety, and panic attacks. Women experiencing these symptoms will need spaces to be able to deal with this, including doing things like changing clothing, splashing water on their faces, cleaning up period leakage, just taking a few moments out to rest during a demanding social interaction, etc. So menopause should have been in the list above, along with miscarriages, periods, and incontinence].

### **What employees want**

Bathrooms are places where things happen that some people are embarrassed about. (If you want to read more about this, Nick Haslam has written a whole [book](#)[7] about it). Some people are embarrassed about poo, and the sounds and smells that it involves (more women than men, I suspect, due to their being socialized to be *pleasing to men*, which poo fumes probably aren’t). I used to know someone who refused to poo at work *even when the bathroom was female only*, simply because there were cubicles in a main room rather than single fully-closed rooms. Some people would be mortified about the possibility of pooping in a mixed-sex bathroom at work and coming out of the cubicle to confront their boss standing at the sinks. (Ali Wong has a great bit about this in [her first Netflix special](#)[8]).

Some people have similar discomfort about peeing at work (Fair Play for Women report that more than four million Brits have ‘shy bladder syndrome’, which makes them afraid to pee outside of their own homes). There’s also the process of dealing with tampons or sanitary pads (which in the case of the former, unless you’re a monster who uses environmentally terrible applicator tampons, will involve emerging from the stalls with blood on your index finger). I sometimes feel embarrassed just washing my hands with more careful scrubbing of one finger when there are other women in the bathroom, let alone men.

A Loose Women poll in 2017, reported at [their Twitter account](#)[9], found that 65% of voters — [mostly women](#)[10]—said they wouldn’t use a unisex toilet (as of 2nd Jan 2018, [the poll was still open](#)[11], and the ‘no way’ response had come down to 58%, the ‘Yes it wouldn’t bother me’ response up to 42%;

although this change may be explained by backlash following a [negative article](#)[12] *Pink News* ran about it).

Sociologist Elizabeth McClintock attended a 2015 meeting of the American Sociological Association and wrote about the association temporarily designating all the multi-user bathrooms at the conference venue unisex, and the effect this seemed to have upon conference-goers. In particular, *men* weren't using those bathrooms. They would see the unisex sign taped over the door and turn away. When she talked to some of the men about it, those who had turned away said they were concerned that their presence in the bathrooms might make women uncomfortable, and that they might be misinterpreted as watching women (in a creepy way); those who had actually used the spaces said that they were uncomfortable about the differences in etiquette (men don't chat, avoid eye contact, and don't use adjacent stalls, they said). McClintock argues in [her article](#)[13] that "men express a greater sense of vulnerability and discomfort in public multi-user... restrooms than women do".

Some countries, like Sweden, have made impressive inroads into tackling the ways that men and women relate to one another, mainly by addressing toxic masculinity head on. In those countries, mixed-sex spaces make more sense. If we thought less, as a society, of the differences between men and women, and *could* sensibly think less of the differences (which would mean drastically reducing the incidence of male violence against women, and male sexual objectification of women, for a start), then men and women would probably be more comfortable with peeing, pooing, and washing bloody fingers in front of each other. As it is, though, we haven't made the same inroads as Sweden, and most men still prefer to use bathrooms separate from women, and most women still prefer to use bathrooms separate from men (I'm writing from Australia, but having also lived in New Zealand and the United Kingdom, I'm confident it's also true there, and probably in many other countries).

Of course, this is just to comment on two simple categories, men and women. Women want bathrooms free of men, and men want bathrooms free of women. If we only cared about those people's preferences, then we shouldn't make bathrooms unisex / gender neutral. But where does this leave all the people who do not take themselves to fit simply into these two categories? I mentioned already that gender neutral spaces are important for nonbinary people, trans people, and other people who do not conform to gendered norms of appearance. Nothing that I've said here against getting rid of single-sex spaces requires taking a stand on which bathrooms trans and nonbinary people should be using. *Even if* we decide to segregate according to gender identity rather than sex, it's still better to retain segregated bathrooms than move to mixed sex bathrooms. But I think the considerations given so far support mostly sustaining sex-segregated bathrooms.

In my view, trans *men* and female nonbinary people should use whichever bathroom they're most comfortable using, and trans *women* and male nonbinary people should (with few exceptions) use either men's bathrooms or gender neutral bathrooms. Trans men pass better as men (than trans women pass as women) so are less likely to be clocked and challenged; and men don't particularly care about trans men using their bathrooms. Trans women, on the other hand, in general do not pass as women, which makes them more likely to be clocked and challenged; and many women care a lot about trans women using their bathroom. They don't care about trans women *per se*, who don't pose any particular threat over and above the threat that male people pose. But they do care about trans women as *male people*, because as we've seen already, male people do pose a threat, and there's no evidence to suggest that trans women as a class are exempt from that (I talk about this point more [here](#)[14], and [here](#)[15], with Emily Vicendese). Making gender neutral bathrooms available removes the conflict of interest over this particular space between trans women and non-trans women.

### **In conclusion...**

There are a bunch of really good reasons to keep single-sex bathrooms in place, in particular that they are important for women. But that doesn't mean companies should drop the idea of gender neutral bathrooms altogether. There are good reasons to *add* gender neutral bathrooms to the existing bathroom

provisions. Several companies are already doing this, [including the University of Melbourne](#) [16], where I work. Taking single-sex spaces away hurts women as a way of helping trans and non-binary people, while adding gender neutral spaces in addition to single-sex spaces helps trans and non-binary people without taking anything away from anyone else. Gender neutral spaces as third spaces works for everyone.

### Notes:

- [1] [https://fairplayforwomen.com/young\\_old/](https://fairplayforwomen.com/young_old/)
- [2] <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/edition/news/unisex-changing-rooms-put-women-in-danger-8lwbp8kgk>
- [3] <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/women/sexual-assault-unisex-changing-rooms-sunday-times-women-risk-a8519086.html>
- [4] <https://fairplayforwomen.com/miscarriages-pub-toilet-gender-neutral/>
- [5] <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4090-i-m-not-transphobic-but-a-feminist-case-against-the-feminist-case-against-trans-inclusivity>
- [6] <https://uncommongroundmedia.com/gender-identity-preclude-male-violence-reply-finlayson-jenkins-worsdale/>
- [7] <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9780230368248>
- [8] <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5066574/>
- [9] <https://twitter.com/loosewomen/status/850312349768704000?s=21>
- [10] Link out of date (redirects to generic page).
- [11] <https://www.itv.com/loosewomen/get-involved/poll-would-you-be-happy-to-use-unisex-toilets>
- [12] <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2017/04/07/loose-women-really-dont-understand-gender-neutral-toilets/>
- [13] <https://www.psychologytoday.com/au/blog/it-s-man-s-and-woman-s-world/201509/why-some-welcome-unisex-bathrooms-and-some-steer-clear>
- [14] <https://www.feministcurrent.com/2018/08/16/penises-dont-kill-people-people-penises/>
- [15] <https://uncommongroundmedia.com/gender-identity-preclude-male-violence-reply-finlayson-jenkins-worsdale/>
- [16] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/06/18/transgender-australians-face-ingrained-biases-even-if-the-bathroom-issue-hasnt-spawned-legal-debate/?noredirect=on>

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