

Female-friendly public and community toilets: summary of assessments in four countries

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◀ **Figure 1:**
An example
of the exterior
of a female-
friendly toilet
block

Background – the female-friendly toilet guide

In 2018 WaterAid, Water & Sanitation for the Urban Poor (WSUP) and UNICEF published [Female-friendly public and community toilets: a guide for planners and decision makers](#). This guide outlined the need for female-friendly and inclusive public and community toilets, highlighting the fact that poor access to sanitation disproportionately affects women and girls due to their social roles, cultural roles, responsibilities, restrictions, biology and physiology, including menstrual needs. The guide then went on to outline essential and desirable features needed to make toilets female-friendly under the broad requirements that public and community toilets should:

- 1. Be safe and private**
- 2. Cater for menstrual hygiene management and other hygiene requirements**
- 3. Be accessible to all users**
- 4. Be affordable and available when needed**
- 5. Be well-maintained and managed**
- 6. Meet the requirements of caregivers and parents**

The second half of the report was dedicated to assessing the gaps at city and local levels, with suggested approaches for addressing them. These assessments could then be used to develop local strategies and implement changes to city and municipal guidelines around construction of shared sanitation facilities.

Following the publication of the guide, WaterAid country programmes developed in-house tools for conducting surveys of existing public and community toilets in selected towns, in order to pilot the methodology. The results of these are given in this report, along with the lessons learnt along the way and suggestions for organisations or stakeholders who wish to carry out similar city-wide assessments.

Participatory city-wide assessments

Four pilot assessments

WaterAid, in collaboration with municipal leaders, piloted participatory city-wide assessments of public and community toilets in four countries, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Toilets assessed as part of a pilot of the Female-friendly public and community toilets guide

Country	Municipalities	Number of toilets assessed	
		Public	Community
Tanzania	Babati	5	0
India	Central Indian City	14	4
Nepal	Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Kritipur and Madhyapur Thimi	115	0
Bangladesh	Chattogram	45	0

Three of the countries built surveys using mWater¹ and one using KoBo Toolbox,² both mobile-based data management platforms that enable data to be collected offline using a mobile phone or tablet, and then uploaded to a common server. Using these tools, it was possible for countries to create checklists and surveys using the features of female-friendly toilets given in the guide, but adjusted to suit their own contexts.

Data collection

In most cases, toilets were identified through discussions with district and ward health officials, reviews of public health records, and data from the municipalities. Local enumerators then visited each of the identified toilet facilities where they conducted a visual assessment, as well as carrying out semi-structured interviews

¹ <https://www.mwater.co/>.

² <https://www.kobotoolbox.org/>.

with the caretakers as a minimum. In Tanzania, it was ensured that a male and female enumerator was present at each facility to enable a full survey to be conducted. Additionally in India and Bangladesh, focus group discussions were held with female users, cleaners and other stakeholders, and in Bangladesh an accessibility audit was carried out of selected toilets by women with disabilities.

Results

In all the surveys, toilets were generally found to be within solid structures with a reasonable level of privacy afforded to female users. There was significant variation between countries, showing that it is important that these assessments are done on a local scale and in collaboration with local government, rather than taking learnings on a national or global level. On the whole, however, it was found that public and community toilets are not meeting many of criteria suggested in order to make them female-friendly and accessible to all users.

- All countries found that **cleanliness of facilities** was a problem, though this had different causes in different locations. In some it was seen as a user education issue, in others the cleaners did not have the necessary materials to do their job, and sometimes it just seemed to be seen as the default state.
- **Accessibility for users with disabilities** also scored very poorly – in some cities there was not a single toilet cubicle in the city that could be used by a person in a wheelchair for example. Ensuring toilets are accessible to all users contributes to inclusion, health, poverty reduction and economic empowerment objectives. This includes people with disabilities, pregnant women, small children and people who are injured or sick.
- The availability of **handwashing units** varied hugely between countries – in some areas of cities there was no way to practise basic hygiene, but in the reviewed city in India, for example there were handwashing units in all facilities, with a high percentage having running water.
- In Bangladesh and India **privacy** was often brought up in user interviews and discussions, and there was a lot of concern that facilities were designed in such a way that female users felt they could be seen – particularly when using more communal areas such as menstrual pad vending machines or handwashing basins.
- No countries had existing **local guidelines** for assessing public or community toilets, and each assessment brought up a need for more stringent national and/or local standards for female-friendly toilets.
- Across all four countries, no public toilets had any facilities to help parents or caregivers manage the **needs of children and babies**, such as space for baby changing or breastfeeding.

Each pilot assessment led to recommended actions ranging from quick wins or short-term actions to medium- and long-term ones. Table 2 below shows an example of this from Bangladesh.

Table 2: Recommendations for Chattogram City, Bangladesh, as a result of an assessment of female-friendly public toilets

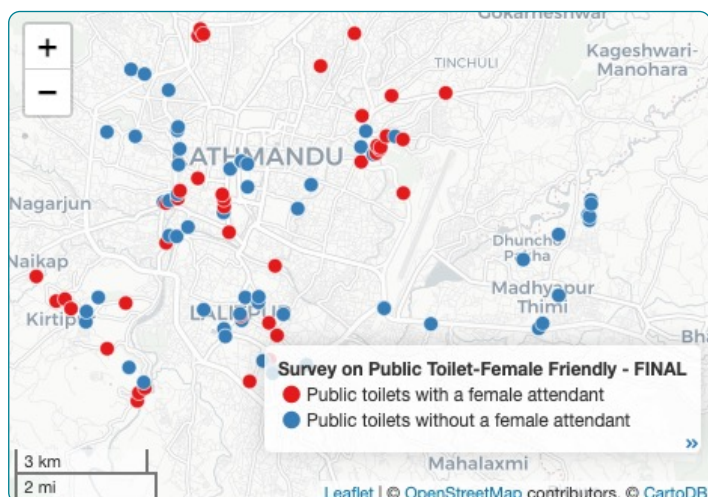
Short term	Medium term	Long term
Ensure the interior of toilets are not visible from the outside	Employ female attendants	Construct dedicated female cubicles with their own entrance and an accessible cubicle for disabled users
Stock a supply of menstrual hygiene materials for purchase by customers	Adapt toilets to include a ramp and an accessible entrance for wheelchair users	Certain areas of the city have been identified where more public toilets are needed and can be constructed – these new constructions should follow female-friendly and accessible guidelines
Establish management committees to hold caretakers to account and ensure that female users and people living with disabilities are represented	Consider installing CCTV to make female users feel safer when using the toilets	Develop guidelines for future public toilets and carry out regular audits on existing facilities
Ensure toilet cubicles contain hooks and ledges to enable women to free their hands	Improve accessibility to handwashing facilities including soap	Advocate for public toilets to become a service provided by Chattogram City Corporation (CCC) instead of an income generating initiative

There were some really strong examples of toilets that had taken the needs of women and girls into account: the ‘She Lounge’, in India and five toilets constructed by WaterAid in Chattogram, Bangladesh. She Lounges contain a resting place for women, providing toilet facilities, personal hygiene items for sale and a comfortable place for women to sit and rest or to nurse infants. The WaterAid toilets had accessible cubicles for wheelchair users, sanitary napkins available for purchase and a dedicated management committee. They had a higher daily use than others in the city despite charging slightly higher fees.

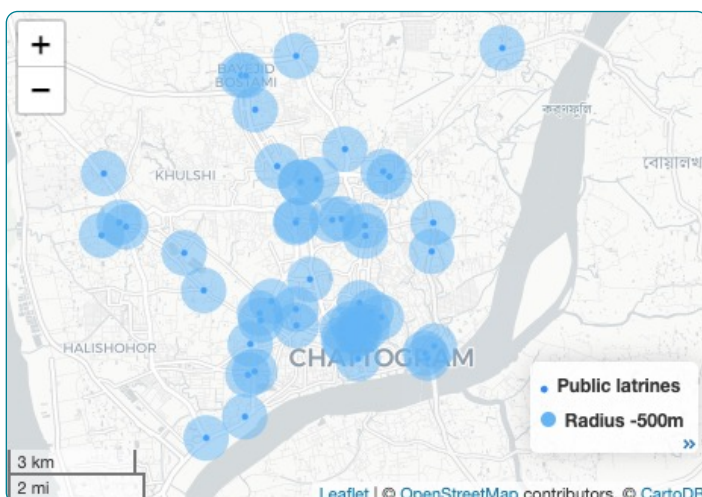
► **Photo 1:**
A She Lounge
in India



It is possible within the software to create maps using the survey results, which are extremely useful advocacy tools and can also be informative for females. For example, Figure 2 may help women who only want to use a facility with a female attendant, and Figure 3 quickly highlights areas that are not within easy walking distance of a public toilet. It would also be possible to produce maps of toilets that are accessible with a wheelchair, or that have baby-changing facilities, for example.



▲ **Figure 2:**
A map showing public toilets in
Kathmandu, with those that have
a female attendant in red



▲ **Figure 3:**
Public toilets in Chattogram
with zones marked showing a
500m radius of accessibility

Reflection on the guide

Following these pilot studies, WaterAid has been able to reflect on some of the recommendations in the guide and how they are reflected in practice.

Factors affecting operator's comfort and health

One thing not specifically mentioned in the guide, but which Nepal and Tanzania both assessed, was working conditions for operators. This was found to have a knock-on impact on users, as a well-trained and ethically employed operator would be much more sensitive to the needs of women and girls. It would also hopefully increase the number of women holding that position if the conditions for working met their needs. This included: giving staff regular breaks e.g., lunch, paid sick leave, a chair and/or bench from which to work, reasonable working hours, health insurance, protection against unruly customers, a living wage and salary payments made on time.

Number of cubicles

All toilet blocks had equal numbers of men and women's cubicles: the guide specifies additional cubicles for women due to the amount of time a cubicle is required by the different sexes. However, the surveys made it clear that the important question is whether there are enough cubicles for women – which meant asking questions around the availability of cubicles when needed and any queue times for both men and women, to ensure that female users are not waiting longer than male users – rather than questions around numbers of cubicles. These questions should be asked in interviews or focus group discussions with female users to make sure their experiences are captured.

Access to resources and materials

Where cleanliness and maintenance were a problem, it would have been useful to learn more about the reasons behind this. Some of the countries therefore added questions about the availability of maintenance tools, cleaning materials and equipment and PPE, as well as consumables such as cleaning soap, and soap and toilet paper for the toilets.

Lessons learnt and suggestions for future application

Contextualising the assessment

Different municipalities and countries will have different local and national standards concerning public and community latrines. These standards should be written into any assessment to enable meaningful conversations with the relevant authorities about how to act on the results.

Logistics of carrying out an assessment

Assessment teams should be made up of more than one person and at least one female, and ideally the accessibility aspects should be assessed at the same time as this assessment, by ensuring organisations of disabled people are part of the assessment team. The assessment is designed to be participatory and where possible local government, and the owners and managers of the facility (where different), should accompany the assessment team.

Experiences from the pilots suggest that at least two hours is required for each facility, to take into account the time taken to carry out observations including an [accessibility and safety audit](#),³ an interview with the caretaker, and at least one focus group discussion with female users.

Scoring the assessment

If comparing across facilities or between towns is important, then it is important to use a consistent scoring methodology and one that aggregates across categories. In WaterAid's pilots a variety of scoring systems was tried including Likert scales, presence/absence marks, prose responses and multiple-choice questions. Likert scales, i.e. giving something a score from 1 to 5 based on a subjective assessment, is more nuanced than a simple presence/absence checklist approach – but the scores lose their meaning fairly quickly when averaged across several questions or multiple facilities. Checklists, when written well, enable a more objective assessment (often requiring less training for enumerators) and the scores can be averaged to give a meaningful percentage of features present for each sub-category.

Mapping and using the results

The power of using a mobile data collection tool such as mWater is that the results can be mapped, as demonstrated above. This is a vital step towards discovering where there are geographical gaps in availability of facilities. It is therefore necessary that data collectors have a device that can record GPS, and preferably also take photos. The results would ideally be owned by the municipality and shared with any third-party operators or managers of public and community toilet facilities. The data should be used to inform government policy, advocate for improvements on a municipal scale, and give practical suggestions for immediate adjustments to individual facilities. Working together with local leaders on these assessments is key to ensuring that the results are used to catalyse change.

³ This is also available on mWater.

Acknowledgements

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Additional information:

- The *Female-friendly public and community toilets: a guide for planners and decision makers* can be accessed at: <https://washmatters.wateraid.org/publications/female-friendly-public-and-community-toilets-a-guide-for-planners-and-decision-makers>
- This assessment was part of a series of assessments done across four countries – Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Tanzania. The summary of each country assessment as well as a four country overview report can be accessed at: <https://washmatters.wateraid.org/publications/female-friendly-public-and-community-toilets-a-guide-for-planners-and-decision-makers>
- An assessment tool to help assess the female-friendliness of public and community toilets can be accessed on the mWater WASH data management platform (free and open access) at: <https://formlink.mwater.co/#/90ec9f061ae041c583643de0fea05095/409d75577b6f460ea13a167facec5678?branding=mwater>



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