

# Female-friendly public toilets in Bangladesh: an assessment in Chattogram City

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◀ **Photos 1-2:** Public toilet in Chattogram, managed by WaterAid Bangladesh and local partner Dustha Shashtha Kendra.

## Key points

- No clear guidelines issued for public toilet operation and maintenance (O&M) or construction, highlighting women friendly requirements from the higher authorities.
- High cost of land/space for those toilets that did provide proper access, design and privacy.
- Most existing public toilets in Chattogram are not managed to a reasonable standard, which causes poor operation and maintenance.
- The newer WaterAid/Dustha Shashtha Kendra (DSK – an urban partner of WaterAid Bangladesh) – managed toilets catered for females and people living with disabilities through their provision of menstrual hygiene materials, female attendants and accessible cubicles for wheelchair users.
- The surveyed toilets were lacking in basic hygiene elements such as handwashing facilities and regular cleaning.
- More public toilets are needed at other cross-sections within the city, and these should be constructed to stringent guidelines to ensure their female-friendliness.
- In the short-term, existing facilities could be improved by the provision of cleaning materials, the addition of privacy features, and consideration of the needs of menstruating women.

## Introduction

Sanitation is a basic human right. Sustainable Development Goal 6 calls for universal access to sanitation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations. However, many people, in particular women and girls, often still cannot go to the toilet when and where they need or want. In 2018 WaterAid, in collaboration with UNICEF and Water & Sanitation for the Urban Poor (WSUP), published [\*Female-friendly public and community toilets: a guide for planners and decision makers\*](#) to address this gap and offer guidance for meeting the requirements of women and girls. This guide drew heavily on the experiences of WaterAid Bangladesh and others in pioneering such an approach. The guide provides detailed information on the essential and desirable features that make toilets female-friendly, and these fall under the following headings:

- 1. Safe and private**
- 2. Cater for menstrual and other hygiene management requirements**
- 3. Accessible to all**
- 4. Affordable and available when needed**
- 5. Well-maintained and managed**
- 6. Meet the requirements of caregivers and parents**

WaterAid Bangladesh has constructed five inclusive public toilets in Chattogram city, in collaboration with the Chattogram City Corporation. Following this, WaterAid Bangladesh commissioned an assessment of all public toilets in the city of Chattogram to map their locations, assess the overall status of the facilities within the city, and to explore the difference between operational modalities.



### Profile of Chattogram

Chattogram is the largest sea-port and second largest city in Bangladesh, with more than six million people living in an area of 160km<sup>2</sup>. As the primary business city in Bangladesh it attracts high numbers of internal and external commuters, leading to a high demand for public toilets.

The city corporation generally leases out the toilets to private operators through a competitive bidding process. However, political influence often plays a role in the process, leading to management of the toilets lying with profiteering enterprises. These enterprises frequently lease out the toilets and adjacent spaces to small businesses, while the facilities fall into disuse and disrepair. Poor institutional arrangements, malpractice by leaseholders, and lack of supervision by the regulatory authority have resulted in an ineffective and dysfunctional system.

## Methodology

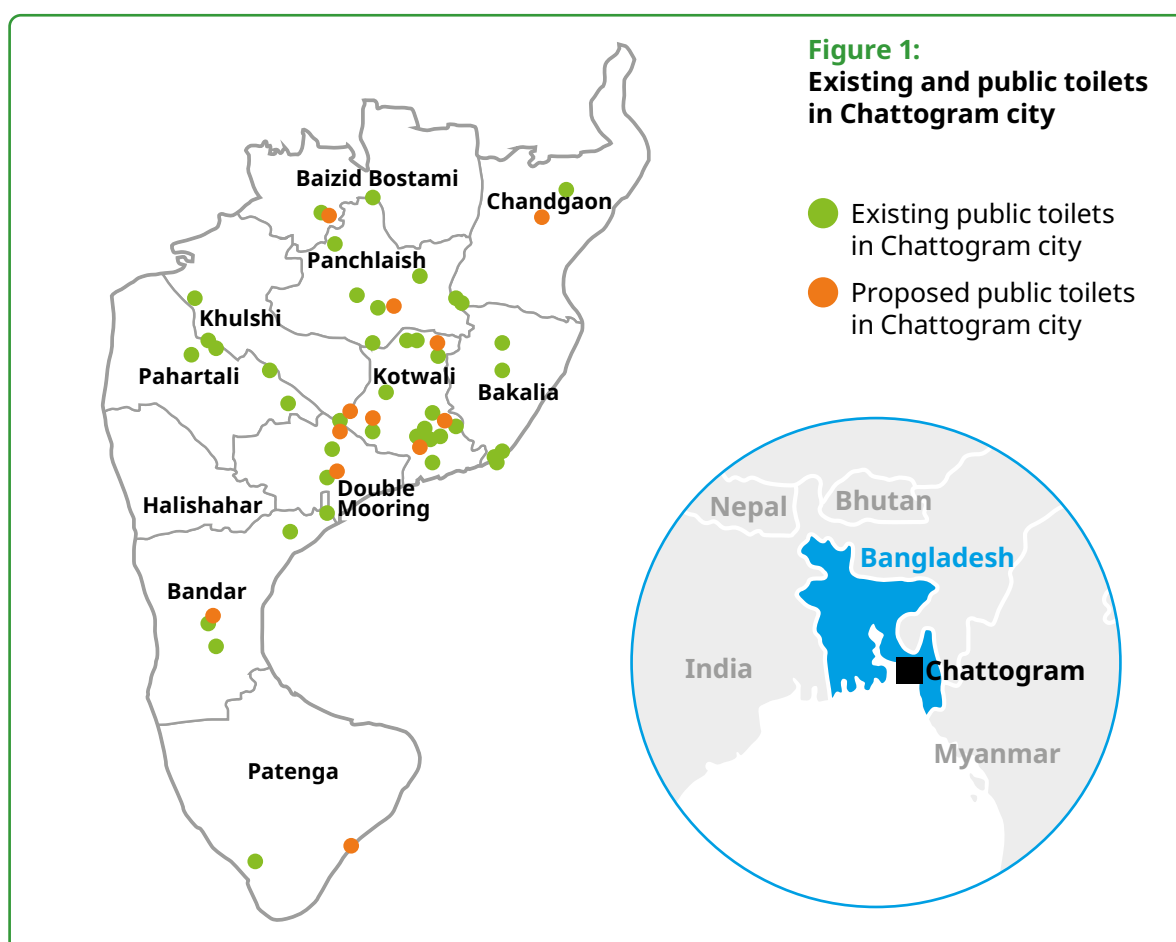
B-SCAN, a disabled people's organisation (DPO) in Bangladesh, was engaged as a partner by WaterAid Bangladesh to help carry out the assessment. A team including people living with disabilities therefore conducted this assessment.

The list of available public toilets was prepared and identified in collaboration with Chattogram City Corporation (CCC). All toilets were physically surveyed, and data collected using the mWater platform.<sup>1</sup> Focus group discussions and key informant interviews were carried out with users, toilet attendants and other stakeholders. Additionally, an accessibility audit was carried out of selected toilets by B-SCAN female staff with disabilities.

**Public toilets:** sanitation facilities aimed primarily at people working in or passing through the area, rather than local residents. They tend to be near public spaces or activity areas including markets, commercial areas, commuting points, parks, religious and tourist areas. This assessment did not look at community toilets.

## Summary of results

A total of 52 public toilets were identified in consultation with CCC. The team was able to locate only 45 (two were abandoned, two had been demolished and three were under construction), all of which have been considered in this study. Twenty-eight are managed by CCC through a leasing system, 12 are managed by market communities or filling stations, and five are managed by WaterAid through its partner DSK, in collaboration with CCC.



<sup>1</sup> mWater is a water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) focused data management system. mWater provides a free, scalable technology platform that enables data-driven management by governments, utilities, water authorities, NGOs, and private sector partners. It is designed to use modern mobile and cloud technologies to help democratize data. Accessed at: <https://www.mwater.co/>.

The table below shows the scores under the headings described in the introduction and shown for each different management type. Each element is standardised to a score out of five. The table is colour-coded for ease of reading – with green being good, orange average, and red bad or very bad.

	Facility owner ► ▼ Facility features	Managed by CCC	Managed by market committee or petrol station	Decentralised management (WaterAid/ DSK)
1.	Safe and private	1.5	2.5	4.2
2.	Cater for menstrual and other hygiene management requirements	1.3	1.8	3.8
3.	Accessible to all	0.5	1.5	4.3
4.	Affordable and available when needed	1.6	1.2	4.2
5.	Well-maintained and managed	1.4	1.4	4.3
6.	Meet the requirements of caregivers and parents	0.0	0.0	2.9
	<b>Likert score</b>	<b>1.05</b>	<b>1.4</b>	<b>3.9</b>
	<b>Status</b>	<b>Very bad</b>	<b>Very bad</b>	<b>Good</b>

The visibility of the toilets varied, though the majority did not have clear signage. Toilets were on the whole well-lit and had working locks. Most of the toilets did have attendants, but only 11 had a female attendant – important for making women feel comfortable. Additionally, 62% of women reported they did not feel safe using the toilets at night (1).<sup>2</sup>

Only 16% of toilets had separate handwashing basins for male and female users, and only 20% had a cubicle for bathing or showering. Half the toilets didn't have running water – instead caretakers had to collect water for handwashing. Two toilets had sanitary napkin provision (2).

The toilets were not well-adapted for disabled users, with only three ramps. Forty-one of the 45 toilet blocks were completely inaccessible to wheelchair users due to the door width. There was no evidence of adapted taps or tactile signage, and only seven toilet blocks had raised commodes (3).

The WaterAid/DSK toilets were open for 16 hours a day – the others varied from 8-24 hours. User fees ranged from TK.1-10, with 11 of them not charging at all – these were usually the toilets inside markets and petrol stations (4).

<sup>2</sup> Numbers refer to facility features (from table above).

Cleanliness was mostly ranked as bad with an unacceptable level of hygiene, and most caretakers were found to clean on their own schedules or following a complaint from users. Many toilets did not have adequate cleaning materials, and even more lacked basic maintenance tools (5).

In terms of variation between management models, the WaterAid facilities charged on the higher end of the fee spectrum but had higher than average daily use. This might be due to the fact that these toilets are on the whole better maintained, with a dedicated management committee and more female-friendly and accessible features. These were the only toilets to make sanitary napkins available for example, and one of the toilets had a breastfeeding area. They are also the only toilets to have ramps and space for wheelchair users.

► **Photo 3:**  
Public  
toilet with  
no privacy  
managed  
by City  
Corporation.



► **Photo 4:**  
WaterAid/DSK  
managed  
K C Dey Road  
public toilet.





## Quick wins and long-term actions

There are some simple and low-cost improvements that could be made to make the public and community toilets more female-friendly in the short term:

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 a separate 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 CCC instead of an income-generating initiative

## Acknowledgements

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The summary was produced by Joanne Beale (consultant), and supported by Ellen Greggio, Andrés Hueso González and Priya Nath from WaterAid UK.



### 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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