

High-quality shared toilets can reduce women's feelings of stress due to fear of violence

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Quick read...

- This Policy Brief summarises research which looked at causes and levels of psychosocial stress among users of traditional shared latrines and high-quality shared toilets in Maputo (Mozambique)
- The findings suggest that high-quality shared toilets can substantially reduce feelings of stress associated with fear of robbery, physical assault or sexual assault when using the toilet
- However, fear of violence was not totally eliminated, reflecting high crime levels in these communities, and suggesting that additional measures (such as improved compound fencing) may be necessary

Rationale

In many slum communities in Africa and Asia, many people live in rental compounds in small rooms that do not have space for private toilets. Such people necessarily rely on shared sanitation facilities. It is widely believed that these shared facilities do not offer security for women and girls, particularly when using the toilet late at night.

This Policy Brief summarises the findings of a qualitative research study that aimed to identify causes of psychosocial stress among users of shared sanitation facilities in slum communities in Maputo (Mozambique), and to compare stress levels between users of traditional shared latrines and high-quality shared toilets. The study was carried out by researchers from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.

Context

This study was carried out as a supplementary component of the wider MapSan evaluation, which is assessing the health impacts of a shared sanitation intervention implemented in 2015/16 by WSUP. The intervention involved construction of "shared toilets" and "communal sanitation blocks" (CSBs). Both variants are typically located within defined compounds; both are constructed with cement blocks and a metal door; both are pour-flush systems with septic tank. Shared toilets are single toilets (single seat), in compounds of 20 or fewer people. CSBs have one seat per 20 people, and also have a piped water connection. Most facilities were constructed in compounds which already had a grossly deficient traditional shared latrine: a typical before-and-after situation is illustrated in the photos below.



Urban Sanitation Research Initiative

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Methods

The study used in-depth qualitative interviews to allow for rich exploration of sanitation-related psychosocial stress (psychosocial stress that results from the physical and social environment). The researchers conducted 96 interviews with shared facility users, as well as focus group discussions and unstructured observation sessions. Iterative, structured approaches to data collection and analysis were used. Sample sizes were deliberately weighted to focus on women (75% of interview respondents). Women respondents were from three groups: users of traditional latrines (n=19), of shared toilets constructed under the intervention (n=22), and of CSBs constructed under the intervention (n=29).

Findings

The researchers identified four main causes of sanitation-related psychosocial stress among men and women: stress related to **safety and security**; stress related to feelings of **inadequate privacy**; stress related to feelings of **disgust**; and stress related to **interpersonal conflicts** around community management of the toilet.

In this Policy Brief, we focus specifically on the findings around stress among women in relation to safety and security. For full details of methodology and findings, readers should consult the journal article to be published soon. The main findings were as follows:

- Considering all toilet categories, safety concerns related to toilet use were mentioned by approximately two-thirds of women. This was driven, in part, by the perceived high levels of crime in these communities. One user of a traditional latrine reported *“I fear that because of the way that the bathroom is, you think about going out for the bathroom, while there may be a hidden person who can beat or kill you, rape, so many things that happen around here”*.
- The proportion of women respondents reporting stress related to safety and security among shared toilet users (48%) was markedly lower than among women using traditional latrines (80%). Of 25 women respondents who compared feelings of safety and security before (when they used a traditional latrine) and after (with a new facility), 16 (64%) reported that their security had improved since the construction

of the new toilet. One shared toilet user reported *“Before this bathroom, we had a precarious one, it was constructed of tyres and stones... so when this bathroom was constructed, we had many benefits because we can now wash the bathroom, we have energy, we feel safe, because we have a door, now we can use it at night... inside and outside, we can lock the latrine.”*

- Improvement in feelings of security was related to factors such as better construction, the presence of doors with locks, and – in some cases – new latrines being within compound walls.
- While feelings of safety and security improved among shared toilet users, the proportion of women CSB users reporting stress related to safety and security was the same as that seen among traditional latrine users, approximately 80%. This may be related to the larger user-group size for CSBs and would support the widely held view that user-group size is a useful simple “minimum standards” criterion for shared toilets.

It is important to note that this was a relatively small non-randomised study, and that the findings are specific to a particular location and a particular intervention. The conclusions of the study, as regards possible effects of shared sanitation improvements on feelings of stress related to safety and security, should therefore be taken as indicative rather than definitive.

Policy implications

Where dwelling sizes are too small for private toilets, shared toilets are the only real option. This research supports the view that high-quality shared toilets can lessen women’s feelings of stress related to safety and security. However, in slum communities with high endemic levels of crime, the problem is unlikely to be fully resolved. This research suggests that shared sanitation interventions should pay careful attention to design features which can improve women’s security: these include solid construction with lockable metal doors, outside and inside lighting, placement in a relatively secure location within the compound, and small user group. However, in some situations there may be additional requirements (for example, improved fencing of the compound), and indeed broader measures to reduce levels of crime and increase women’s security in the community.

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