



HICRG Advice paper: All Gender Facilities

1. Introduction

The topic of All Gender bathrooms was the focus of the Health Infrastructure Consumer Reference Group meeting in September 2024. This topic was initially raised by CRG member Sue Webeck. The meeting was attended by 8 CRG members, 15 ACTHD staff, 3 community organisation representatives.

It featured speaker Vik Fraser, the Executive Director of [A Gender Agenda](#), and panel members C Moore (HCCA) and Bianca Rossetti (Mental Health Consumer advocate). The panel members shared personal experiences, and stories from their communities to highlight how All Gender facilities could benefit people with invisible disabilities, trans and gender diverse people, parents and children and carers and people being cared for.

While this paper and the discussion which informed it was centered around the needs of people attending/using health facilities, the advice it provides applies equally to the health workforce, in terms of their need for All Gender facilities in staff spaces. Inclusive infrastructure design supports the safety and wellbeing of the health workforce too.

Design choices send a message about the values of your organisation. Where safe, inclusive and accessible facilities are located, how many are available and the barriers that exist to accessing them, sends a message about how well the needs of vulnerable populations will be met within your facility. (Vik Fraser, A Gender Agenda).

2. What are All Gender toilets?

All Gender toilets are facilities that can be used by everyone. They do not have gendered signage, and do not require the person using them to define into a gender. Some All Gender toilets incorporate additional facilities e.g. accessible toilets, baby changing facilities, or showers.

Installation of All Gender toilets, along with other types of toilets e.g., single gender, unisex accessible, ambulant, Accessible Adult Change Facilities (AACF) and Assistance Animal Relief Areas support the principles of access and inclusion. They provide the opportunity for people to make choices about which toilet they may need or prefer to use based on their individual requirements. ([All Gender Toilets - We just want to go to the toilet! | Access Institute](#))

3. Background to the issue

The current approach to the provision of public toilet facilities in health facilities in the ACT is usually to provide the amount of space required by the [National Construction Code](#) in two equal spaces, designated and signed *Male* and *Female*. The female space is divided into

individual lockable cubicles and the male space a combination of cubicles and shared urinal. Both are contained in a room also with handbasins, dryers etc.

In addition to this, an adjacent lockable space is designated an accessible bathroom for one person and signage indicates that it is simultaneously *accessible* and *unisex*.



This arrangement of space and signage does not always:

- meet the needs of some community members and is increasingly out of touch with community expectations
- support inclusivity for people with diverse gender identities, people with disabilities and their carers,
- provide a suitable space for parents (in circumstances when accompanying a child of a different gender)
- provides access to enough facilities for women, given that women ultimately end up with less toilets labelled as *female* and longer queues.

In the National Construction Code proposed changes consultation paper (July 2024), the paper acknowledges that the Code '*uses outdated and inconsistent gender terminology*' ([All-gender sanitary facilities - Australian Building Codes Board - Citizen Space](#)). The issues raised in this paper are about both the design of facilities the signage used for facilities

4. Improving the signage (terminology)

Currently the most common signage uses terminology about the sex of someone using the facility, rather than their gender.

Sex refers to biological differences. These could be chromosomal, hormonal or reproductive.

Gender refers to socially constructed roles, behaviours, activities, and expectations associated with femininity and masculinity.

As communicate heath says:

While it may be tempting to use these terms interchangeably, it's not accurate. It's not always as simple as male = man and female = woman. Some people are intersex, meaning their physical sex characteristics aren't typically male or female. And for transgender, non-binary, and agender people, their gender doesn't "match" the sex

they were assigned at birth ([Let's Talk About Sex \(and Gender\) — CommunicateHealth](#))

We will explain in section 5 why unisex facilities are not always a safe or appropriate alternative for people who need an All Gender facility, but the term unisex is also not appropriate.

Unisex facilities are designed for men and women but might still have gendered spaces within them such as separate male and female sections or cubicles. This approach still assumes that it is a binary of male or female. The idea is to accommodate 2 sexes but not everyone. Unisex toilets are often also toilets for people with disabilities (accessible toilet).

All Gender facilities are explicitly designed to be inclusive of all gender identities. A few (but certainly not all) identities include non-binary, genderqueer, Brotherboy, Sistergirls, intersex and transgender people. All Gender facilities are gender neutral and avoid any gender-specific labels or divisions and are intended to provide a safe space for everyone, regardless of gender.

To summarise - the use of the term 'gender' (All Gender) in toilet facility signage is preferable to 'sex' (unisex, female or male) because it speaks to people's identity, rather than physical/biological characteristics they may or may not have.

5. Who does this affect?

Access to safe and adequate sanitation is a human right.

It is a reality for some people that they cannot visit some places or attend events because there are not safe, suitable toilet facilities for them. This includes, at times, not being able to access healthcare. Our speakers and group members shared examples of this that they had experienced.

Problems people encounter include:

- Harassment by other people (the 'toilet police'), including security guards, who judge them not to have the correct identity to use that facility. The policing of access to toilets, in some cases with threats, abuse or violence, by other people is the issue which is common to all the groups whose experiences are detailed below.
- Unsuitable identity options to choose from in bathroom spaces
- Lack of access to bathroom space- This could be an issue of not enough facilities (queues for women) or that the space available doesn't meet needs (not big enough for people who need a carer, space for equipment such as parenting or disability aids).

The experience of a lack of access and/or safety, and the subsequent anxiety it causes, means that people's lives and choices are restricted by inadequate provision of public bathrooms. This is unacceptable.

Gender diverse people

The issue of “bathroom policing” and harassment from members of the public or security is a real risk when using m/f bathrooms or unisex accessible bathrooms.

Being judged on whether your appearance matches another person’s gender expectations or told that you are in the “wrong place” is the best-case scenario. This can escalate to physical harassment and abuse. Anxiety and uncertainty around the possibility of confrontation and concern about personal safety when trying to use a bathroom can be enough to restrict a person’s choices about going to that place at all.

Group members discussed the value of having All Gender signage in situations of confrontation.

“It means I don’t have to argue or justify myself - the infrastructure is doing it for me”.

You may be asking the question - why can’t people with diverse gender identities use the Unisex Accessible stall?

Technically a Unisex Accessible toilet can be used by anyone. Its design has more space and extra/different equipment to make it more suitable for people with disabilities. However, having a diverse gender identity is not a disability. Despite the availability of Unisex Accessible toilets as an option for everyone, there is a perception in the community that a unisex accessible toilet should **only** be used by a person with a disability. Once again, this perception leads to the interference of ‘toilet police’.

Given that there may also be a lack of accessible toilets for people with disabilities, many gender diverse people would prefer to leave Unisex Accessible toilets for the use of people with disabilities.

People with a disability

Disabilities can be invisible (not apparent to other people) or vary in severity at different times. This can mean that people with disabilities may face judgement/harassment from other people who cannot, quite literally, ‘see’ their need to use accessible facilities, and additionally, as previously mentioned, do not understand that anyone may use accessible toilets.

Group members discussed how this perception can lead to dehumanising encounters.

“people with invisible disabilities are repeatedly having to “prove” and justify why they need support, and whether they deserve it unfortunately”

“it is quite paternalistic to be speaking on behalf of communities you are not in”
(referring to non-disabled people who confront people for using the disabled toilet when they cannot clearly see their disability)

The number of accessible toilets in a space usually meets minimum compliance requirements. From a functional perspective, especially in health care facilities, it would

make sense to provide increased numbers of accessible toilets for people with disabilities, as there will be a higher proportion of people with a disability concentrated in a health facility than in the general population. Their access is further reduced if the accessible stall is also the only one suitable for gender diverse folk, parents, and people who are accompanied by carers.

Carers and parents

If you are a different gender (or people assume you are a different gender) to your child and you escort them into a bathroom you may also be confronted or face abuse/ harassment from people who do not understand why you are in the space. This applies to parents of young children and also to the parents or carers of adults with disabilities.

“Any mother of a son will also appreciate unisex toilets so they don't have to send their son into the men's unaccompanied.”

Binaried toilets (m/f) can be a problem for men caring for their babies – often the baby change tables are placed in the female bathroom so dads are faced with the decision to either change the baby on an unclean/unsuitable surface or go into the female bathroom where they will be unwelcome. As a member said:

“Often the baby change tables are placed in the female bathroom so dads are faced with the decision to change the baby on an unclean surface or go into the female bathroom.”

Women

Women's bathrooms are given the same amount of floor space as men's facilities. However, more toilet facilities can be fitted into a male bathroom because shared urinals are commonly installed for men and they take up less space. This means that people using male bathrooms have more available places to go than people using the female toilets. The amount of space overall may be the same but the outcome of the design is that the access to a toilet is not equal.

1. Concerns and ways to mitigate them

The main concerns raised by people against the adoption of All Gender bathrooms are personal safety, hygiene and cultural issues.

Safety concerns focus on the potential for assault in the private space provided by the traditional bathroom layout. Safety concerns can be largely mitigated with a change to design: provision of single lockable stalls which open onto a semi- enclosed space such as a corridor or a part-open room.

Hygiene concerns are a facilities management issue rather than an infrastructure one (i.e. a more frequent cleaning schedule or automatic cleaning is required).

Cultural concerns include a strong preference for bathrooms designated for a specific gender. These can be provided within a mix of All Gender accessible bathrooms. Some schools are now taking this approach.

6. What is currently required by standards?

Current guidelines state that bathroom facilities should be appropriate to

- The number and gender of the occupants; and
- The disability or other particular needs of the occupants

The Code requires a minimum number of male and female facilities. This means that all-gender facilities are optional and additional only after a certain number of male and female toilets have been built.

7. Examples of good practice



Sign examples from [Transhub showing how you can outline what a stall contains](#)



[All Gender Toilet sign at Melbourne Airport that explains who can use the facility, and nearby alternatives](#)



Local example - Belconnen Library has dual stalls with both the male and female icon to indicate anyone can use the stall. It is great to see the stalls are labelled with both, it would be better if they were more neutral (labelled as All Gender instead)



Local example 2 – the signs on North Canberra Hospital Emergency department stalls

Recommendations

Provide

- Lockable single stalls
- All-Gender signage on each stall
- Signage with icons on each stall that indicates what equipment is inside (e.g. toilet, change table, disability supports)
- Some bigger stalls to accommodate space for equipment or carers
- [Universal design](#) (e.g. follow universal design principles when choosing door fittings)
- Stalls opening onto common space which is semiprivate but not fully enclosed

The outcome of this design change is that at any time, *most of the stalls are suitable for use by most of the people.*

Where to find out more

- You can get training for your organisation from A Gender A Gender about how to better support the LGBTQIA+ community. They also have some great resources in their online [information hub](#)
- Learn more about why we need gender neutral bathrooms (the construction code, the law, and myths) on this [TransHub webpage](#)
- Learn about the [proposed changes to the National Construction code](#) in Australia that would make it easier to label facilities as gender neutral
- Learn more about sex and gender [What are sex and gender anyway? — TransHub](#)