

Women and Public Facilities in Taiwan

Revising Policies on Public Spaces

Herng-Dar Bih, translated by Susanne Ganz

Space is socially constructed, just like language. The arrangement of space reflects and reinforces gender, ethnicity, and class relations in society. However, teachers and designers in the field have been utterly insensitive to gender. Only after the emergence of the women's movement and feminist thinking did people awaken from their 'gender-blind' consideration of public spaces.

Awakening, the first feminist organization in Taiwan, was founded in 1982. Many other women's groups were formed after the abolishment of martial law in 1987. Since then, 'gender and space' policies were promoted in three ways:

- i) Legislation: for example, the Sexual Assault Prevention Act, the Sexual Harassment Prevention Act, the Gender Equality in Employment Act, and the Gender Equity Education Act were all passed within the last ten years.
- ii) Participation in a Government Committee: the Commission on Women's Rights Promotion issued the Women's Policy Guidelines in Taiwan with a chapter on women's safety in public spaces.
- iii) Social Movement: particularly the Women's Toilet Movement and the campaign for breastfeeding rooms, which I discuss in this article.

Although feminist thinking is still neglected in most educational settings within the fields of urban planning and architecture, the past decade has witnessed significant progress towards more gender-sensitive policies and their implementation in the areas of public restrooms and breastfeeding rooms. These are two factors which greatly affect women's ability to be mobile, to participate in the public domain and to engage in work outside their homes.

The Women's Toilet Movement: Demands for New Policies

In 1996, Wang Ching-ning, the head of the Women's Studies Club at National Taiwan University (NTU), was elected head of the National Taiwan University Student Association on a gender platform that included improving the women's toilets on campus. Also in 1996, Peng Yen-wen, a graduate student at the Graduate Institute of Building and Planning, took an elective independent studio course focusing on toilet planning and design. During the term, Peng, the NTU Student Association, and the university's Research Center for Gender and Space joined hands to conduct a comprehensive survey of the more than 100 campus toilets. They surveyed the number of female and male toilet stalls and the availability of urinals, in addition to assessing floor space, lighting, ventilation, location, flooring, washbasins, coat hooks, waiting space, doors, and barrier-free facilities. Seizing the opportunity of Women's Day on March 8, the student association released its inspection report on campus women's restrooms at the campus entrance. It was called 'The March 8 New Position on Women's Toilets Allows Me to Pee at Ease.' Aside from announcing the survey results, a piece of street theatre was performed which caught the eyes of various television stations and print media. A successful press conference greatly encouraged the survey organizers. On May 4, together with the Coalition of Female Students of Universities, the NTU Student Association and Research Centre for Gender and Space held another press conference in one of the men's rooms at the Taipei Railway Station with the slogan: 'Seizing the Men's Rooms.' On May 5, they held a male versus female urinating competition at Ta-An Forest Park to measure the average time



Taiwan's Women's Toilet Movement banner: "The March 8 New Position on Women's Toilets Allows Me to Pee at Ease."

men and women take at a urinal and water closet. These two events brought to public attention the unequal gender distribution of public restrooms.

The women's toilet movement continued to gain momentum. With strong public pressure, officials at all levels and people's representatives, one after the other, expressed their concern. They demanded that the Construction and Planning Agency, which oversees public restrooms, change the existing regulations. On October 21, 1996, the Ministry of the Interior amended the relevant section of the 'Technical Regulations for Buildings — Building Facilities' and markedly raised the number of women's restrooms in public buildings. Under the new regulations, elementary and junior high schools, for example, have to provide one toilet for every 50 males, one urinal for every 30 males, and one toilet for every 15 females. Under the old regulations the ratio was one toilet for every 35 females.

Since many public restrooms charged a fee to female users, while males did not have to pay anything, protests were held at the Taiwan Motor Transport Company's west-side bus terminal against regulations requir-

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ing women users to pay. Soon, women's restrooms at highway rest stops no longer charged female travelers for toilet use.

As a result of the women's toilet movement of 1996, public restrooms and related gender issues received widespread attention from the general public and the government. Women were consulted in the formulation of laws, policies, planning, and design. The Taipei City Government designated 2001 the 'Year of the Public Toilet' and declared that making the necessary improvements was an important duty for the city's administration during that year. Public toilets were required to become 'not dirty', 'not smelly', and 'not wet.' Not only did the ratio of men's to women's restrooms reach the standard of one to three, but women's toilets in public spaces around Taiwan also started to improve in the following ways:

- Direct redesigning of men's rooms into women's rooms: for example, after the 'seizure of men's rooms' at the Taipei Railway Station, one men's toilet was redesigned into a women's toilet.
- Flexibly regulating use: during events, performances, or exhibitions in places such as the Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall and the Taipei World Trade Center, certain men's restrooms are assigned for female use simply by hanging a sign on the doors.
- Switching the location of male and female restrooms: for security and privacy reasons, women's rooms were in the past often put in corners that were far away from the lines of movement. As a result, contrary to what was intended, they became dangerous spaces. Out of safety considerations, the New Student Building at National Taiwan University converted the men's rooms near lines of movement close to staircases into women's rooms. At the same time, women's rooms, which were hidden behind the staircases so that passers-by were not able to see them, were changed into men's rooms.
- Women's restrooms were fitted with alarm bells and other service equipment such as hooks, toilet paper, and liquid hand soap.
- The women's restrooms at highway rest stops no longer charge fees for use.

Although the Women's Toilet Movement has brought about some important changes, there is still a lot for us feminist activists to do. The new regulations for toilets in public buildings do not apply to existing, older buildings. Since most toilets are in existing buildings, women will have to continue lining up for quite some time. We need to persuade government, schools, and corporations to reconstruct, refurbish, and bring the toilets in their existing buildings up to new standards. We also need to propose unisex toilets. These will provide more choices for women, reduce time spent waiting in line-ups, and solve the obvious difficulties experienced by transgendered people. Thirdly, given the inequality between men's and women's toilets, we must encourage women to use men's toilets when there are no male users — provided they take their personal safety into account.

New Planning and Design Standards for Breastfeeding Spaces

The World Health Organization adopted an important resolution in 2002 declaring that receiving breast milk is an infant's basic right and suggesting that breastfeeding should continue until the child is more than two years old. Yet statistics show that Taiwan's breastfeeding rate gradually declined from 95 per cent in 1962 to 40 per cent in 1996. In 1999, the rate of women who breastfed during their stay at hospital maternity wards, rose again to 55 per cent, but only 20 per cent of these mothers continued to breastfeed six months after giving birth.

The Gender Equality in Employment Act, which was adopted in 2001 by the Legislative Yuan (the legislative assembly of Taiwan), stipulates in Article 23 that: 'An employer with more than 250 employees shall set up child care facilities where mothers can breastfeed and change babies.' However, even if breastfeeding rooms may be helpful to breastfeeding women at work and when they go out, the rooms exist only in name if they are set up in inappropriate locations or if they are not well maintained. A survey was recently conducted of 381 breastfeeding rooms, which had been set up by the private sector with subsidies from the Department of Health. The survey found

that the average user rate for such rooms in schools, public transit stations, and public office buildings stood at less than 20 visits per month. In three locations, the user rate for these breastfeeding rooms stood at zero, including the one at the Tataka Visitor Center in Yushan National Park. Seventeen breastfeeding rooms were transferred to other uses or closed after the government subsidies ran out. The survey also discovered that the design of some breastfeeding rooms was not discrete enough, that signs were not clear enough, and that some rooms were simply too small (only 1 ping or 3.3 square meters). Some breastfeeding rooms were even locked during business hours for more 'convenient' control. Often people did not know how to get the keys and gave up trying to use the rooms.

A survey by the Breastfeeding Association of Taiwan found that many breastfeeding women in Taiwan make do with whatever kind of room is available. The most common deficiency of breastfeeding rooms is that the place is only shielded with cloth curtains and thus lacks privacy. There is also too little space, tables and seats are often not strong enough, and there are no electrical outlets. Even if the user rate is low, we should not deny the need for breastfeeding rooms; instead we must enforce standards and improve their location and accessibility. For example, locating breastfeeding rooms in remote corners of public places gives the problematic message that breastfeeding is an activity that should be done clandestinely.

Nor are breastfeeding rooms well designed in public transportation systems. Only 19 of 105 railway stations have breastfeeding rooms. Only four express trains are equipped with a breastfeeding room. On long distance trips, breastfeeding mothers have to express their breast milk or breastfeed their babies in the toilet. Besides the discomfort and inconvenience for mothers, other passengers and cleaning staff complain about the toilets being occupied for too long. Last November one woman who breastfed her baby in the Taipei Story House was forced to leave the building because of her 'indecent' behaviour. After that, more than 30 members of the Breastfeeding Association of Taiwan

came to nurse their babies in the Taipei Story House to demand the right to breast-feed in public. In response, the Taipei City Government is now proposing to adopt the 'Taipei Public Space Breastfeeding Ordinance' which would include fines of NT\$30,000 (approx. US\$ 1,000) for anyone who interferes with or prevents mothers from breastfeeding their children.

Breastfeeding the next generation should be seen as a sacred task, but in many societies breastfeeding mothers are not given the respect they deserve. The Breastfeeding Association of Taiwan has therefore launched a movement for the improvement of breastfeeding rooms. The first location was set up in the A8 Building of Shin Kong Mitsukoshi Department Store in Taipei City's Sinyi District. The Association spent between NT\$20,000 and NT\$30,000 out of its own budget to create a breastfeeding room within a limited space. The room was designed to focus on the needs of mothers and infants so it is more frequently used. The seats, for instance, which originally faced curtains directly, were turned sideways so that a mother can conveniently draw the curtains to increase her sense of security. The Association asked specialists to create chairs

of different sizes and heights to accommodate mothers and children with different body shapes. This breastfeeding room also provides leg rests and folding tables for belongings.

BREASTFEEDING ASSOCIATION OF TAIWAN



Breastfeeding room designed by the Breastfeeding Association of Taiwan

Decision-Makers and Users: The Gender Gap Remains

Policies, plans, and the design of public places still do not reflect women's needs and often exacerbate discrimination against women. A very important reason remains that the majority of people who make decisions about policy, planning, and design in Taiwan are male. Rarely do these men recognize the value of consult-

Department	Number of female full-time teachers	Number of full-time teachers in total	Per cent of female full-time teachers
Grad. Inst. of Building and Planning, National Taiwan University	0	7	0%
Department of Urban Planning, National Cheng Kung University	1	14	7%
Department of Architecture National Cheng Kung University	1	24	4%
Department of Architecture Tamkang University's	2	19	11%
Department of Urban Planning, Feng Chia University's	1	13	8%
Department of Architecture Feng Chia University's	3	20	15%
Department of Architecture Chung Yuan Christian University's	1	12	8%
Dept. of Architecture and Urban Design Chinese Culture University	2	15	13 %

ing citizens and users, especially when these citizens and users are women.

This problem may well stem from deeply entrenched inequalities within the space planning professions themselves. In the university programmes, which train the next generation of design professionals (e.g., architecture, planning, and landscape architecture), women teachers are vastly under-represented. Male-female teacher ratios in Taiwanese programmes are listed in Figure 1.

Moreover, women account for roughly 20 to 30 per cent of the students in planning and design professions and the share of licensed female architects is a mere three per cent. Outside the university environment, women are even more under-represented. The Taipei Urban Planning Committee has just four women among its 21 members. The same goes for the Taipei Urban Design, Land Use and Development Permit Review Committee.

Amazing changes reflecting women's needs have occurred over the past decade in Taiwan. However, much more remains to be

changed. More feminists need to participate in the planning and design of space and more planners and designers need to become feminists. More women are needed in powerful positions that enable them to make decisions about the built environment. And perhaps most importantly, gender mainstreaming is needed to bring about the kinds of systemic change that can contribute to the creation of more gender equitable cultures, values, processes, and decisions. ❧

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Further Reading:

Greed Clara, **Inclusive Urban Design: Public Toilets**, Architectural Press, Oxford UK: 2003

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