
Menstruation and Restrooms: The Gender Nonconforming Community's Oppressors

This essay focuses on the struggles of menstruation and public bathrooms for gender nonconforming communities. This topic is important because the barriers faced by gender nonconforming communities are frequently ignored and create a harmful environment. I argue the importance of menstrual product accessibility because it is important for those who menstruate to have the necessary products available in all public spaces. I also argue for bathroom equality because everyone deserves a bathroom they feel comfortable and safe in. I hope to raise awareness about the importance of bathroom equality and convince readers of how beneficial it truly is for those who identify as gender nonconforming to be heard.

Punctual

Statistics at 9am. Archaeology at 10am. Cultural Anthropology at 11am. Tutoring at noon. Lab right after. His schedule is full today. Bathroom break. He finds the only all-gender bathroom in the building. It's locked. He musters up the courage to use the men's room. His period began. It came early. He was not prepared. Toilet paper is the only option.

Reflexivity

The above story does not pertain to me, but it does to many. Although fictional, the

character is represented as a transgender male who still experiences menstruation. Many in this situation, whether transgender, nonbinary, or any other gender nonconforming identity, find difficulty when it comes to using a public bathroom. Many non-cisgender people are not comfortable using a bathroom that is affiliated with the gender they were assigned at birth. These bathrooms can be triggering, as they do not associate with that gender. Many are also not comfortable using a bathroom affiliated with their gender identity, as these bathrooms may not provide necessary products (as in the story above), and may lead to discrimination/harassment, mental and/or physical illness.

As a cisgender woman, I do not have a full understanding of the struggles gender nonconforming communities are faced with on a daily basis. As a member of the LGBTQIA+ community however, I do have an understanding of the impact of discrimination based on how someone identifies. Because I openly identify as a lesbian, I have been told that I have not found the right man yet; I have had horrible sexual comments made toward me, and I have even had illicit pictures drawn on my car. I have also witnessed how public situations, including gendered bathrooms, have

negatively affected gender nonconforming people I know and love. I have watched someone I know be denied access to a bathroom because another person assumed their gender. The situation was very uncomfortable and caused that individual to be noticeably distraught. Although these experiences of mine may not relate to those faced by someone who is gender nonconforming, it goes to show that we live in a cisgender, heterosexual society that discriminates against those outside of what is deemed “the norm.” Because of this, I have made it my mission to educate and advocate for equality for all, regardless of gender identity.

Gender Identities

What does it mean to be cisgender? Being cisgender means “having a gender identity that is aligned with one’s designated sex at birth” (Olson-Kennedy et al., 2019, para. 7). A person who identifies as cisgender may be assigned female at birth based on anatomy and present themselves as such or may have been assigned male at birth and presents himself as such.

What does it mean to be gender nonconforming? For someone to be gender nonconforming, their “gender identity differs to their birth-assigned sex” (Eade et al., 2018, para. 3). This

refers to individuals who may identify as non-binary, gender-fluid, or transgender as example. The term nonbinary refers to “someone whose gender identity can’t be described as exclusively woman or man” (Abrams, 2022). Gender-fluid refers to “the experience of moving between genders or having a gender or presentation that changes over a particular period of time” (Person, 2021, para. 35). “The term transgender refers to a range of identities that do not conform to conventional notions of male and female, broadly referring to individuals who do not identify as the gender they were assigned at birth” (Pollock & Eyre, 2012). A transgender individual for example, may have been assigned female at birth, but they present and identify themselves as male, or assigned male at birth, but present and identify as female.

The Cisgender Struggle

Conversations about menstruation and bathroom usage have always been “taboo” in the United States. Many, regardless of gender identity, are uncomfortable having conversations about menstruation or bathrooms while others avoid the topics completely. Thomson et al. (2019), in “What’s Missing in MHM? Moving Beyond Hygiene in Menstrual Hygiene

Management,” mention the stigmatization of the menstrual cycle in regard to cisgender women and girls. To further that, although menstruation is a normal function of the body for those with a uterus and ovaries, it is still a topic surrounded by misconceptions and stereotypes. Many see menstruation as “gross” or do not understand how menstruation may affect someone physically and/or mentally.

There is no question that menstruation is difficult to endure. Periods may come unexpectedly. Individuals may not be prepared. Many however, face the struggle of not being able to access or even afford menstrual products. According to the article “The Body Image of Women at a Homeless Service Center: An Analysis of an Underrepresented, Diverse Group” by Mitchell et al. (2017), homeless women are part of the population that struggles with accessing menstrual products. These women are also subject to self-esteem and body issues, as it has been found that little to no access to hygiene products and facilities hinder the mental health. It is evident that lacking hygiene products, including menstrual products, may make those who menstruate feel unsanitary, which in turn can have a negative effect on how one views themselves.

It is important to note that homeless women are not the only ones who suffer as a result of accessibility issues in terms of menstrual products. Period poverty is an issue also faced by college students/aged women (Cardoso et al., 2021). Studies show that women who are in college or of that age, may have a difficult time affording necessary menstrual products. This has been linked to higher rates of depression (Cardoso et al.). As with homeless women, college-aged women may feel the weight of societal stereotypes such as menstruation being unsanitary or “dirty.” If one cannot afford enough products for their cycle, they too may begin to feel poorly about themselves. This may cause poor performances in class, lower grades, limited social life, and an overall negative college experience.

Another issue cisgender women face is public bathroom facilities, or lack thereof. Plaskow (2008) writes in “Embodiment, Elimination, and the Role of Toilets in Struggles for Social Justice” the need for more female-oriented bathrooms, as those assigned female at birth take longer than men. Women and individuals who identify as such, may take a long time in the bathroom for a variety of reasons that is not within their control. Menstruation,

UTIs, and pregnancy may increase time spent in the bathroom or the frequency of bathroom usage. Public bathrooms are also, unfortunately, one of the few options many people have in regard to being able to breastfeed their child without fear of ridicule and harassment based on how society deems public breastfeeding in a negative light. These issues all contribute to the differences we often see with gendered bathrooms.

The Gender Nonconforming Struggles

Given that being gender nonconforming is a topic that still may be considered taboo today, gender nonconforming individuals face struggles that those who are cisgender may go through but are usually impacted in a way that cisgender individuals would not understand. For example, cisgender individuals can struggle with accessibility. Menstrual products can be difficult to afford. Public bathrooms may be hard to find. Reproductive health may go unlearned. What does the gender nonconforming community go through as it relates to these issues?

Unfortunately, there is little research that has been done regarding gender nonconforming communities and their struggles besides the research surrounding the mental health of those

within these communities. There is also little research found on the struggles gender nonconforming communities face in terms of menstruation and/or public bathrooms. This is unfortunate because these struggles go unnoticed.

One documentary, however, “Toilet Training (Law and Order in the Bathroom)” focuses on the real, personal struggles that transgender and gender nonconforming individuals face when using a bathroom in a public setting (Mateik & Sylvia Rivera Law Project, 2003). One woman specifically talked about her experiences with public bathrooms before coming out as a transgender woman. When she presented as a male, she was beaten for using a public bathroom for men, as she presented more feminine. Others went on to talk about how, when entering a public space for the first time, they would have to search or even ask for a genderless bathroom. Some of the individuals in the documentary mentioned questioning whether the bathroom they were about to enter would be safe for them or not.

Although many buildings, including schools and stores have introduced the all-gender bathroom, a bathroom that is usually one stall and is not specific to any gender, there are not very many and they are often difficult to come across.

College campuses, for example, often lack accessible all-gender bathrooms, some excluding these bathrooms all together or keeping them locked, as I have personally experienced. These bathrooms, however, are vital to the gender nonconforming community. These bathrooms create a comfortable, safe place for someone who may struggle to use a bathroom that does not align with their gender identity.

Individuals who identify as gender nonconforming or as male, but were assigned female at birth, still often menstruate. As mentioned in the essay opening “Punctual,” the character began menstruating while on his college campus. Because he used a bathroom that was not specified for females, he had no access to the menstrual products he needed, thus leaving him to use toilet paper instead. This is a very real problem, as it often happens in public areas. Bathrooms specified for males or even many that are all-gender, are not equipped with necessary menstrual products.

Why it Matters; Opening Doors

Recognizing the need for accessible bathrooms and menstrual products is important. People should feel safe enough to walk into a public bathroom, but often they do not as they can be

subject to ridicule, discrimination, and lack of resources if they do not conform to a cisgender identity. The lack of resources is also important to highlight, as menstruation is a cycle that occurs in individuals who may not identify as female. These individuals have a right to the products they need without having to enter a gendered bathroom that does not match their identity.

Allowing for the transgender and gender nonconforming community to have access to menstrual products and bathrooms is a start into creating a better, more inclusive community, which would allow for more voices to be heard. Another accommodation for the gender nonconforming community should be ensuring that dead naming, which is using someone's birth name instead of their preferred name, does not happen. Changes in healthcare should be expected as well. For example, healthcare currently does not always provide a safe and inclusive environment. Individuals who are gender nonconforming often have doctors, nurses, and medical providers who lack the proper education on gender identity, which can create a hostile and negative healthcare environment (Pryor & Vickroy, 2019). Educating the community on the needs of those who are gender nonconforming

can ease their way of living. Education can allow for others to understand the needs of, and how to promote a positive environment for, those who are gender nonconforming.

Conclusion

In this essay I focused on how menstruation and public bathrooms create more issues for gender nonconforming communities. The barriers faced by gender nonconforming communities are often ignored, which further creates harmful environments. I argue how menstrual product accessibility for all in public spaces is important. I also argue for bathroom equality for all as everyone, regardless of how they identify, deserves a safe and comfortable bathroom. I hope to continue raising awareness about the importance of bathroom equality and menstrual product accessibility and how beneficial both are for those who identify as gender nonconforming.

Our society often ignores the needs of marginalized groups/individuals. Fortunately, many marginalized groups have found a voice and have been able to improve their way of living. This is not true of everyone. One recent example is Florida, a state that passed a no gay bill, which will no longer allow schools to teach about gay communities.

Transgender women continue to be one of the largest groups targeted for hate crimes. Gender nonconforming communities often find themselves having to pick bathrooms based on their needs and how society views them. This creates an uncomfortable, maybe even hostile, environment for those who are expected to do so. It is important to allow accessibility for all, even for something that may be perceived as

small, such as bathrooms and menstrual products.

Punctual

Statistics at 9am. Archaeology at 10am. Cultural Anthropology at 11am. Tutoring at noon. Lab right after. His schedule is full today. Bathroom break. He goes to one of the all-gender bathrooms. His period began. It came early. He was not prepared. That's okay. The bathroom has what he needs.

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