

SANITATION

Bog-standard: survey rates workplace toilets

Private sector facilities found to be mostly fine, but government loo's lag and more must be done for women and minorities. Matthew Hattingh reports.



Winston Churchill, so the story goes, went into the House of Commons WC, where he saw Clement Atlee relieving himself at one of the urinals. Churchill strode past him to a urinal at the end of the room. Seeing an opportunity to tease Churchill, Atlee asked "What's the matter, Winston, shy?" "Not at all," replied Churchill, "it's just that every time you see something large, you want to nationalise it."

The exchange is probably apocryphal, but it does give us pause to ponder on the subject of public toilets, particularly those at the workplace, where visits are practically unavoidable and encounters with colleagues occasionally exceed the bounds of friendly banter. So, how do South Africans regard the toilets and change-rooms at the factories or offices where they work? Are

they sufficiently private and safe? Are they sufficiently inclusive? What's wrong with them and how might they be made better?

This, in summary, is the substance of two related reports published by the Water Research Commission (WRC) in September 2022. *Sanitation at the Workplace – Evaluating Existing Sanitation Infrastructure at Public, Commercial, Mining and Industrial Workplaces*, subtitled *Status Quo (WRC Report No. 2870/1/22)* found the condition and cleanliness of workplace toilets and the laws and regulations governing these were, on the whole, up to scratch and on par with international practice. However, toilets at public sector workplaces were letting the side down.

The second report, subtitled *Best Practice Guideline for Workplace Sanitation (WRC Report No. TT 893/22)*, was intended to assist with updating the regulations and to inform policy- and decision-making. It took a considered look at women's toilets and pondered what should be done to make the places where we do our ablutions safer and more private. Increasingly, "access to bathrooms based on gender identity" has become a hot-button topic, and the report mulled over measures to make facilities inclusive for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and other people.

The report found religious minorities were neglected and "vast improvements" were needed to aid disabled workers, including installing handrails, lower toilets and secure toilet seats.

The first report noted that the Employment & Labour and Minerals & Energy departments, which are responsible for policing workplace sanitation, have a limited number of inspectors. The Labour Department must keep tabs on 900 000 workplaces, so inevitably toilets don't get much attention. "The inspector's primary goal is enforcement of labour employment conditions and terms of employment with little to no emphasis on the state of sanitation facilities at the workplace," the report said.

Its authors, Dhanashree Naidoo, Temperance Sebele, Ciaran Chidley and Jacqui Davis found lots of literature on public sanitation facilities, but little on the facilities at South Africa's workplaces. They set out to correct this with a review of the regulations and through an online questionnaire. It surveyed the extent to which toilets, showers and change-rooms were within the rules and asked users how things might be improved.

The regulations in question fall under the Occupational Health and Safety Act; the Mine Health and Safety Act; and the National Building Regulations and Building Standards Act. These include a slew of standards and statutes, laying down the law on everything from toilet seats and paper (must-haves); to shower floors (slip-free and sloped); to the number of showers, toilets and urinals required for a given number of workers, men and women.

The various policies and the legislative framework were found to be adequate, appropriate and consistent, with no overlap between the responsibilities of the different departments. "The legislative framework compares well with international legislation," the authors said. However, they felt the legislation's definition of workplace sanitation should be expanded to include change-rooms to better align the needs of the industrial and mining sectors.

Twenty-one respondents in seven provinces and three sectors (more on this shortly) participated in the survey. They answered quantitative questions – giving Yes or No answers, but with the opportunity to make comments. Follow-up telephone interviews helped fill in any blanks respondents left in the SurveyMonkey questionnaires.

The questions were arranged into a number of broad themes, the first of which concerned access.

Ninety-five percent of respondents confirmed they could go to the toilet at any time, but 52% said they had to ask for a key. Public sector facilities were found to be the most restrictive, particularly in Limpopo.

"The literature review has shown that managing the key to the sanitation facility is often a technique used to monitor the productivity of employees. In some instances, women found it to be undignified to request a key to use the toilet," the authors said.

Soap and running water were available, according to all the respondents, and they reported the toilets always flushed. Toilet paper was always at the ready, according to 95% of respondents (the rest got it on request). Towels of some sort or hot air blowers were available for 85% of respondents. The 15% not provided with means to dry their hands mainly worked for the state in the Free State and Limpopo.

Ninety percent of respondents said the facilities were cleaned during a shift. Service providers, on-site janitors, or employees did the work in roughly equal proportions. Problems with the facilities were generally fixed within a day, said 80% of respondents.

"While unisex facilities may be welcomed by some, others may feel threatened or uncomfortable sharing facilities with other genders, especially in the context of a country struggling with gender-based violence."

Hot water was available to more than 80% of respondents, with the public sector trailing other sectors by some margin. There were no reports of missing toilet seats and in most cases urinals flushed.

Change-rooms were said to have adequate seating, but one-third were used for meals despite not being separated from the toilets. This was against regulations and the "only real non-conformance" issue the survey found.

Eighty-one percent of respondents were happy with the facilities. Those who weren't flagged a lack of warm water, the absence of facilities for disabled people, or wanted shower curtains replaced with doors. Some were unhappy that the women's toilets opened onto the factory floor and others called for better quality hardware and bigger or newer facilities.

Maintenance was an issue for only 5% of respondents, who felt it should be outsourced.

However, the research was done during the Covid-19 pandemic and the authors felt this may have coloured responses. Seventy-seven percent of respondents said the facilities were either very efficiently and effectively operated or moderately so. "This response is viewed with suspicion as many respondents were



All the respondents indicated soap and running water were available in their workplace bathrooms.

concerned about how the responses to the research would affect the ability of the organisation to commence with work during the Covid restrictions.”

Similarly, the authors were sceptical of the entirely positive response to the question, “Are the facilities maintained in a hygienic condition?” “It is possible that respondents were concerned about the impact of their response in light of the Covid-19 virus as well as the concern they may not be allowed back at work if the facilities were unhygienic and could exacerbate the spread of the virus,” they said.

The pandemic proved a headache to the team in other ways too.

“The survey was delayed by four months to allow wider participation, however, both the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal were dealing with the first wave of the virus when the survey recommenced after the delay of four months,” the report said.

The team initially requested participants do the survey online, with the researchers guiding the survey, but this proved unfeasible because most staff were working from home. “The team requested the assistance of union shop stewards to undertake the survey as it is in their interest to ensure employees are provided with reasonable sanitation facilities. Once again this was not always possible because of the lockdown restrictions.”

Eventually, the team let the participants complete the survey

when they could go to work, where they had access to data. Lockdown prevented the team making site visits so they were unable to independently verify the data.

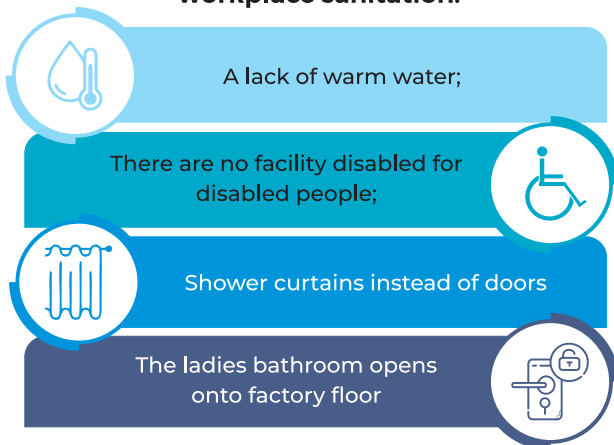
The other serious difficulty or limitation the researchers faced stemmed from Covid too. At least eight mines agreed to participate in the research but later, fearing staff might be exposed to the virus, denied access. This meant fewer workplaces were surveyed than intended and it forced the team to infer their findings for the mining sector from the literature review. All questions pertaining to the Mine Health and Safety Act were removed from the survey.

The remaining questions sought to gauge whether facilities were gender and culturally sensitive, and to learn how well disabled people were accommodated.

Where separate toilets were available for men and women, an “alarming” 52% of cubicles did not have locks, with a “direct impact on the safety of women”. Nineteen percent of respondents reported their facilities did not separate toilets by gender.

Only one commercial facility catered for cultures or religions aside from the dominant Christian faith by providing Eastern toilets and washing facilities for Muslim prayers. This was “an area for improvement given the diversity of cultures in South Africa”.

Less than a fifth of respondents indicated their dissatisfaction with the following aspects of workplace sanitation:



Thirty-eight percent of respondents said no facilities were provided for disabled people, with the public sector being the worst culprit. This was true of all the provinces surveyed, with 60% of government employees surveyed reporting no disabled facilities.

What should be done?

The second report, by Naidoo and Davis, sought to answer this. It offered guidance for those managing, renovating or building new facilities by detailing the many regulations that apply. It also touched on technologies that may be put to use. These included smart lighting sensors that save energy, hands-free taps and flush valves. But the authors cautioned that as much as South Africans should learn from abroad and keep up to speed with changes, our architects and engineers must pick technology that is durable and appropriate for local and workplace conditions. One size does not fit all; sites and sectors differ. For example,

some workers deal with hazardous materials and must have ablutions to suit; a mine may have more permanent sanitation facilities above ground which may or may not be sewered systems, but temporary non-sewered sanitation below. Similarly, pains must be taken during planning to ensure a design “does not conflict heavily with the cultural preferences” of users.

There were environmental considerations too. The authors quoted former Water and Sanitation Minister Nomvula Mokonyane, who in 2015 urged more regulation and licensing to push developers to build greener facilities that use less water, recycle and rely less on waterborne sewerage.

The authors called for increased regulation and vitally, that the rules be enforced. They said that while developers, planners and employers should as “far as possible” factor inclusive design into new facilities, there was scope to improve things in existing buildings. This would protect people’s dignity, give the disabled a better deal, help women feel safer and generally “reinforce tolerance”.

Getting all this right won’t be easy, though.

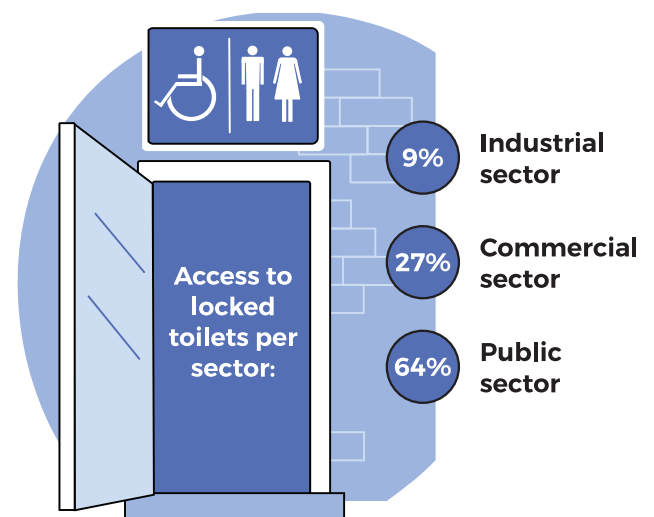
There are broader considerations, including the capacity of the

departments to enforce the regulations and the reality that people’s needs clash. As the authors observed: “While unisex facilities may be welcomed by some, others may feel threatened or uncomfortable sharing facilities with other genders, especially in the context of a country struggling with gender-based violence.”

Then again, it doesn’t necessarily require the wisdom of Solomon to sort out sanitation problems.

“Rather than waiting for issues to arise within the organisation,” the authors recommended employers “design for inclusivity from the beginning.” Where finances allowed, they suggested workplaces provide unisex facilities in addition to male- and female-only facilities.

The report quoted a number of learned works that made relatively simple, concrete suggestions, including “individual direct entry stalls, doors designed to ensure privacy as well as well-lit facilities” to ensure the safety of users. Also mentioned were tiled surfaces to aid cleanliness and the importance of sound budgeting, education and communication to ensure continued maintenance and the convenience of users.



“Thoughtfully placed mirrors can increase security, especially in women’s restrooms, by allowing a line of sight from the entrance to the back of the restroom without compromising privacy,” the authors suggested.

Better sanitation in the workplace is do-able, but here’s plenty to reflect on.

To access the *Best Practice Guideline for Workplace Sanitation (WRC Report No. TT 893/22)*, visit: <https://wrcwebsite.azurewebsites.net/wp-content/uploads/mdocs/TT%20893%20final%20web.pdf>