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## **World toilet Day 2021: toilets are seats of gender equality! Why? Because the gendered taboos surrounding toilets & sanitation deeply impact women and girls**

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# World toilet Day 2021: toilets are seats of gender equality! Why? Because the gendered taboos surrounding toilets & sanitation deeply impact women and girls

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According to Tatu Mtwangi Limbumba, a sanitation expert and member of the Tanzanian OVERDUE project team, traditional taboos surrounding excreta and toilets have been eroded in African cities. For example, in Kenya or Tanzania, the mixing of a mother-in-law's excreta with that of her son-in-law, which once prohibited the construction of indoor latrines, is no longer an issue, and is being replaced by "modern aspirations" such as indoor and public toilets. Are these modern aspirations free from taboos?

When the feminist organisations [CFCEM/GA \(Coordination des Femmes Congolaises pour l'Équilibre dans les Ménages/Genre en Action\)](#) in the **DRC**, [GEPALEF \(Genre, Parité et Leadership Féminin\)](#) in **Ivory Coast**, [SiMIRALENTA](#) in **Madagascar**, and

[OGDS \(Observatoire Genre et Développement de Saint-Louis\) in Senegal](#)

interviewed women for the Voicing Just Sanitation campaign launched by [OVERDUE](#) with support from [L'Etire Egale](#), few of these “traditional” taboos were mentioned. Instead, respondents spoke of :

**enduring social rules** that silently organise sanitation practices along gender lines, distributing opportunities and constraints, often to the detriment of women,

**prejudices** which surreptitiously **relegate women to the end of the toilet queue**, as well as to the **very end** of the list of **employable people** for paid sanitation jobs, in the private or public sector,

**multiple constraints**, preventing **their safe access** to toilets in public spaces, especially in urban areas, and in particular during their menstruation,

Above all, the women interviewed described the **non-recognition of their contributions** to sanitation from families and communities, but also from politicians and public authorities.



Figure 1: Nyawera Market public toilets, Bukavu, DRC (CFCEM/GA, 2021)

### **So what are we talking about?**

Harmless or even positive (protective?) “modern taboos” for women, or prejudices that feed gender discrimination, rooted in social gender relations and endorsed by public authorities? On the basis of the testimonies collected and to open the conversation, we have drawn up an initial list of ten points (not prioritised) which **articulate taboos, clichés and prejudices, that push intimate bodies and**

## gender hierarchies into the field of public policy:

### 1. Women's digestive systems are different from men's

This is what one might think when listening to Angèle Koué, a feminist activist in Côte d'Ivoire, talking about the taboos and prohibitions that surround women's use of the toilet. In the courtyards of the concessions, women must not be seen too often around the toilets and must go after men. They should **not make any noise or leave any smell** when using the toilet. They can be repudiated for this. [Women's bodies, even in their most basic biological functions, must respond not to nature, but to patriarchal culture.](#) However, the privacy and dignity of girls and women are often undermined by inappropriate facilities in both private and public spaces.

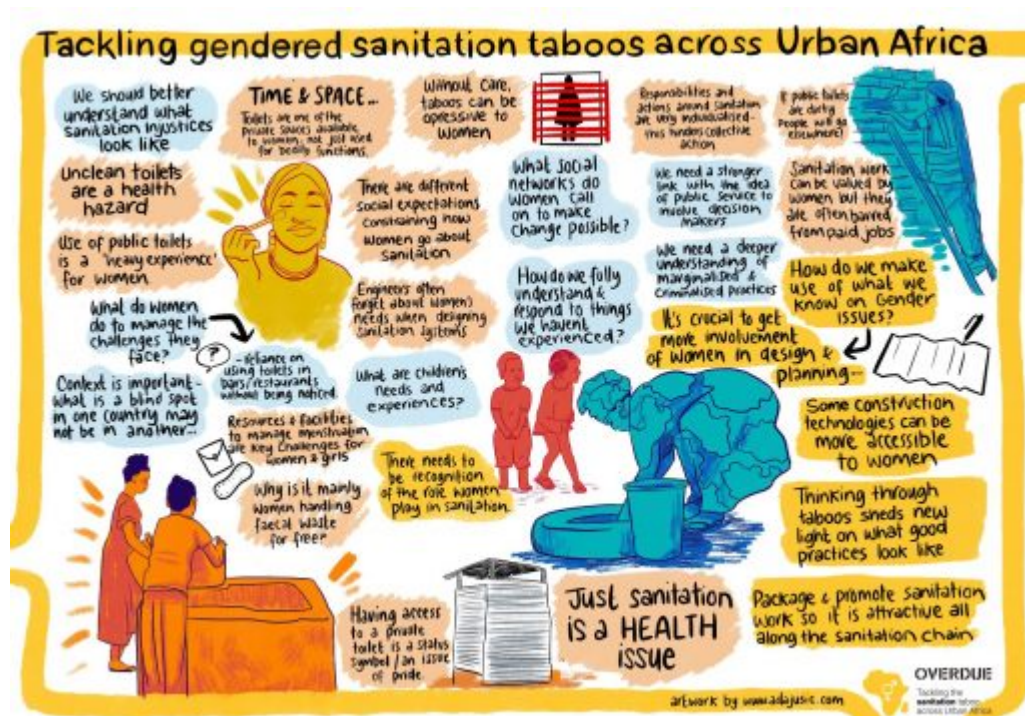


Figure 2: Visual minutes from OVERDUE workshop (Ada Jusic, 2021)

### 2. No one should know that a woman is menstruating

From the first to the last, [menstruation should remain hidden](#), explains Emilie Tapé, a sex blogger in Abidjan. You shouldn't stain yourself; you shouldn't leave dirty towels lying around. **Everything that revolves around menstrual blood is considered shameful**, even for the many women and girls who have internalized these injunctions. And yet, changing in public toilets, especially, is a challenge, a feat and a risk! Inadequate facilities turn menstruation into a cyclical dread.

While toilet paper is considered a basic element of the toilet, sanitary napkins and bins for disposing of them are forgotten. As a result, women are singled out when pads clog septic tanks.

To stimulate engagement around this taboo, the OGDS in St Louis, Senegal, is

countering with a short play illustrating [what a caring and non-stigmatising handling of girls' first periods in school might look like.](#)



Figure 3 : Women and girls are key sanitation providers yet their needs, including menstrual, are sidelined (OGDS, 2021)

### **3. Sanitation work is too dirty and difficult for women**

This prejudice is quickly invalidated by the fact that women overwhelmingly take charge of the maintenance of the sanitary facilities of the house, manually evacuating the family's wastewater and excrement on a daily basis when the infrastructure is lacking or failing. This work is **invisible** and, of course, **unpaid**.

Prejudice also obscures the [key roles of women in neighbourhoods](#) as described by Mariam Bakayoko, a community leader in the Treichville neighbourhood of Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

Nadia Ramanantsara, in charge of public sanitation in the Urban Municipality of Antananarivo, also tells [how women are involved as agents but also through associations that pool funds to remove waste and wastewater](#). Although, she also describes a very standard division of sanitation work within the community: women in communication, men in the field.





Figure 4: In Antananarivo, women are well represented in RF2 associations (Rafitra Fikojàna ny Rano sy Fidiovana, or “Water and Sanitation Management Structures”) and look after the daily sanitation of neighborhoods (SiMIRALENTA, 2021)

#### **4. Women’s sanitation practices contribute to the insalubrity of cities and neighbourhoods**

Abdoulaye “Pelé” observes that [women “carelessly” dump their wastewater in the street in his neighbourhood](#) in Saint-Louis, Senegal. In response, Awa ba, a resident of Diamaguene in Saint Louis, explains that [families do not have sewer connections, private toilets, or the means to access them](#). In fact, they manage as best they can when the infrastructure is insufficient, especially when they have little money.

Whereas women are often blamed for their “irresponsible” management of wastewater and family excrement, the [fact that men use public space to relieve themselves is little questioned in the discussion on unhealthy urban environments](#), according to Félicité Naweza, Provincial Deputy Mayor for South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo.



Figure 5 : Women should be celebrated for their sanitation work not blamed for deficient infrastructure and services (OGDS, 2021)

#### **5. Sanitation jobs are not for women**

This cliché perpetuates the idea that women have no place in the paid sanitation sector as employees of companies or communities, or as company managers. This view is contradicted by the [testimony of Véronique Randriaranison, manager of a waste disposal company in Antananarivo](#) which deals in particular with mobile

urinals.

Defying the stigma, Prisca tells why she accepted the [job of “pee lady”](#) at one of **these mobile urinals** and now wishes that her work would never stop. Solange Tiémélé, deputy mayor in the commune of Treichville in Abidjan, also advocates [opening up sanitation jobs to women](#) and calls for private-public partnerships to achieve this.



Figure 6 : The sanitation sector contains job opportunities for women (SiMIRALENTA, 2021)

## **6. It is better to hold back than to risk infection or aggression in unsanitary and unsafe public toilets**

Lack of hygiene and safety has given rise to this prohibition, a sort of “protective” taboo. In Abidjan, for example, the poor maintenance of public facilities in working-class neighbourhoods and their mixed accessibility generate [a widespread fear of urinary infections](#), as noted by Emilie Tapé, a sex blogger; but also a fear of [sexual harassment and assault](#), according to Brigitte Taho, president of a feminist NGO.

This “**retention**“, which women and girls have internalised “for their own good“, **puts their health at risk**. The fear of sexual harassment and assault weighs heavily on women’s peace of mind and well-being in public spaces, **and therefore on their citizenship and rights**.





Figure 7: A shower in Abidjan (GEPALEF, 2021)

## 7. Toilets at any cost

Access to toilets is a right, not a luxury. However, **this right continues to come at a price**, especially for women. Lanto, a cleaner and tenant in the Malagasy capital, tells [how landlords turn the improvement of toilets on their property into power and profit](#). By threatening to raise the rent, they easily put an end to the demands of poor tenants, especially women who are alone with their families.

Having a “proper” toilet in the home becomes a symbol of social success. The **lack of social and economic power keeps women and families in degrading situations** and increases their dependence on paid public toilets, which are often non-existent or inadequate. It also increases dependence on toilets and bathrooms at workplaces, which then become a real bonus.

Félicité Nawaza, deputy mayor of a commune in Kivu (DRC), points out that in public spaces, [women spend more than men to use the toilets](#) because, unlike men, they do not undress to pee behind a pole! Paradoxically, due to a **lack of options**, they are forced to contribute to the **profitability** of companies or communities that are **reluctant to employ them** because they are women.







Figure 8: The lack of accessible facilities near markets particularly affects women (Source: GEPALEF Abidjan, 2021)

### 8. The toilet is for “relieving oneself”

Of course, but that’s not all it is! It is also a place that is often used for **washing** or **changing** (especially during **menstruation**). This multi-purpose use remains unthought of, as does the mixing of spaces.

Nathalie Musau, deputy spokesperson for the students of the Institut supérieur d’études commerciales et financières (ISECOF) in Bukavu (DRC) explains how, [at the university, mixed sex toilets generate discomfort](#). Female students want to use the university toilets to change clothes or put on make-up, but they come across their (male) professors or fellow students.

Mixed toilets also encourage sexual assault. Women are encouraged to go to school and to attain higher education degrees, but the **infrastructure and buildings are not adapting to their bodily needs**. In schools, says Anjara Maharavo from the urban commune of Antananarivo, the [issue of mixed toilets is starting to be taken into account](#).



Figure 9: Relieving oneself, changing, washing, checking one’s outfit ... toilets are used for multiple purposes (OGDS, 2021)

### 9. You don’t fight over a toilet: well, yes you do!

[Women and their associations play a decisive, but invisibilised role in the](#)

[collaboration between communities and municipalities](#). The problem is that they receive little recognition and support for the work they do on a daily basis, sometimes with shame and without any social or economic reward, to make up for the lack of infrastructure and the deficiencies of states and communities.

Collective demands on sanitation issues revolve more around the issue of access to water. **Toilets**, symbols of (still taboo) bodily needs and intimacy, are **struggling to find their place in community advocacy**, with an impact that weighs even more heavily on women and girls. However, [women are mobilised in the struggle](#), as in Saint-Louis, but everything remains to be done!



Figure 10: Women speaking up to make toilets seats of gender equality!

## 10. Toilets, a political taboo?

The reluctance of decision-makers to talk publicly about excreta, latrines and bodily needs [keeps sanitation low on the agenda](#), according to Astrid Mujinga of the NGO CFCEM/GA. **A double gender discrimination is in place:**

On the one hand, **limited investment** in neighbourhood facilities to serve residents, as well as poor infrastructure in public space or educational venues, **mainly affects girls and women**. Why are they affected? Because they **do not use the street as a urinal**, they need privacy, security and appropriate spaces; and because they use toilets more than men for **physiological, but also social, reasons** (they are mainly the ones who accompany small children to the toilet, for example). **This calls for gender-sensitive budgeting for sanitation.**

On the other hand, when infrastructure is in place, **employment opportunities** in the private and public sectors **are reserved for men**, whereas women have sanitation skills (acquired at home), or can develop them. A political will to act in favour of [professional equality and gender diversity in the workplace](#) would enable women who so wish to enter this promising field of employment. This is what

Fatoumata Djiré Ouattara, deputy mayor of the municipality of Koumassi (Abidjan), would like to see.

In cities, taboos and prejudices linked to gender are constantly being re-created. They feed political and technical blind spots and legitimise the unequal distribution of rights, benefits, advantages and disadvantages between women and men in the field of sanitation. By highlighting and deconstructing these gender issues, the feminist organisations of the OVERDUE project are lobbying for real gender equality around the toilet seat and throughout the sanitation chain.

Join them by sharing your experience and adding your voice to the [Voicing Just Sanitation campaign](#).

[Discover the films](#) produced in Antananarivo, Bukavu, Saint Louis and Abidjan, presented during a webinar on 12 November 2021 titled “Toilets, seats of gender equality?” and discussed by OVERDUE researchers and guests.