

Impact of the Loss of Single-Sex Spaces On Girls - Public and School Toilets and Changing Rooms

Schools

Some small primary schools have unisex single-stall toilets but larger schools will have boys and girls toilets and wash areas. For girls expected to accept a male peer into their private space it can be very embarrassing if a boy in their class is standing outside the door of their toilet cubicle. Girls of primary age are embarrassed if boys 'see their knickers;' there is a general awareness of 'private parts' at this age. Even though children may experiment and want to see each other's genitals, if it happens accidentally or with someone un-chosen it can cause great discomfort and shame.

(Boys may experience the same discomfort if a girl comes into their toilet and catches them with genitals exposed at the urinals).

Girls may become afraid of going to the toilet if they don't know whether a boy will be in there or not, they may hold in their urine and wait until they get home; they may not drink so much water so that they don't need to go to the toilet so often; they may even become unwilling to go to school. Some girls may not feel able to tell anyone the reason why, because they feel it is shameful and embarrassing to feel that way - everyone else accepts it, so a girl may blame herself for being 'wrong,' particularly if there has been an assembly for a transgender child, and the other children are made to feel as if they are bad people if they make a fuss.

Girls in particular are socialised to be 'nice' and to think about others' feelings above their own, so many would not feel able to complain. If a girl did complain or express discomfort, in reality what could the teacher say to her? It would likely be a talk on the importance of respecting difference and accepting people for who they are. The girls' discomfort would therefore be framed as an expression of ignorance at best and bigotry at worst. Girls would be taught to push down and ignore their own discomfort, gut feelings and intuition that something is not right.

This would be a very harmful message to give to girls at an age when they are the most impressionable. They will understand that they have no right to express bodily integrity, to have dignity and privacy whilst using the toilet, to be true to their own feelings of discomfort at a male's presence in a private situation, or to establish bodily and personal boundaries with male-bodied peers. To take away the right to assert physical boundaries is not healthy for any children, but for girls it is a form of grooming into acceptance of male rights over female bodies. If a girl learns from the most important adults in her life (her parents and teachers) that this is acceptable, she is conditioned to accept the infringement of her boundaries by men without fuss.

By Year 6, some girls will have started their periods/begun puberty. These girls will then be aware of and embarrassed by developing breasts, 'smells,' and menstrual blood. If a male has been allowed into the girls' toilets from a younger age, it would be impossible for a school to change policy once girls and boys begin sexual development. This would put girls into what would be for some a psychologically devastating and upsetting situation. The same would of course apply to girls at secondary school, when privacy becomes of the utmost importance for more clearly defined sex-related reasons. Changing for sports in front of a teenage male - no matter how he 'identified'- would be so excruciating for some girls that the outcome may be that they give up sport. When the rights of a transgender male are placed above the rights of a female to dignity and privacy, and that this is framed as 'inclusion,' girls of this age would be afraid to complain and be seen as 'transphobic.' The social pressure to be seen as inclusive and non-prejudiced would silence girls through fear of being ostracised from the group - the worst possible scenario for a teenager.

If we are to teach both girls and boys the importance of consent, and for girls in particular the right not to be pressured into any situation with a male which makes them feel personally uncomfortable, that message is destroyed by allowing males to use girls' toilets and changing rooms. If this becomes legislation, then society is telling girls that they must allow males into their most private spaces and they have no right to insist on their privacy.

We are also teaching girls more generally that there are circumstances where she must allow a male to do as he chooses, as long as he has a personal reason for doing so which is important to him, and in this case it is OK for him to ignore her wishes. The demand to believe every man who says he's a woman (or otherwise be accused of transphobia) robs girls of the right to use their own intuition, sense and knowledge. Girls already put themselves in risky situations by looking after the feelings of men first; they need permission to assess risk and act accordingly from their own feelings - girls need to protect themselves as a sex first, even if it risks hurting the feelings of others.

When a girl grows up learning that males in some cases have the right to cross her personal boundaries, we as a society are failing in our duty to protect her. When it comes to private spaces such as toilets and changing rooms, girls' protection as a protected sex class under the Equality Act 2010 has to be given priority . We cannot take away the rights of girls in order to give those rights to another protected group, and especially not in an area which causes so much potential harm to girls. Such a policy contradicts and negates everything we teach teenagers about the importance of consent.

Public Facilities

Outside of school, young girls and teenagers visiting public facilities such as toilets or swimming pool changing rooms can potentially find themselves in a confined space with older males. If girls are no longer allowed to describe someone with a penis as a man, she is unable to complain to the service provider because the change in the distinction between men and women to 'gender identity' leaves her with nothing to complain about. This leaves girls and young women in a more vulnerable position in society than they already are, with no point of redress or means of protecting themselves. Abuse or harassment become un-nameable and invisible.

Any male acting within the law will still be able to listen to a girl on the toilet, watch her secretly as she gets undressed, or expose himself to her as he is getting changed. These behaviours may cause discomfort, embarrassment, distress or fear for a girl but they are impossible to challenge. Girls will also be more at risk from predators using the cover of legislation to act unlawfully, by recording or videoing her, or even sexual assault. A girl has no means of knowing the difference between a "transwoman" and a predator dressed in women's clothes. Parents no longer have the confidence that service providers would prioritise the safety of their daughters above the feelings of any man entering women's toilets or changing rooms; the Government Guidelines for Service Providers clearly make it impossible for any security guard or staff to challenge anyone who rouses their suspicions.