

We know squat about female urinals

Recently, *Plumbing Connection* surveyed the women of Australia to find out their thoughts on introducing a female urinal to the world of public restrooms. Dimi Kyriakou and Jonathan Jackson discuss the results and what they will mean for the plumbing sector.

Whether you're supporting your team at a sports arena, dining in a fancy restaurant or waiting to board your flight at the airport, there always seems to be a queue of impatient women standing outside the ladies toilets.

Of course, there is more to the issue of female restrooms than lengthy queues at public venues. Most women doubt the cleanliness of the public loo. Many cringe if their skin touches the toilet seat. Others choose instead to 'hold on' until they reach the comfort of their own bathroom: unfortunately waiting too long has proven to result in health problems.

Global attempts to conquer these issues have either failed or fallen on deaf ears.

In the late 1990s, German researchers developed prototypes for a female urinal. They were not widely accepted; however some can still be found in gyms and bars. Research found that women didn't really take to the idea of standing up to pee. In fact, the word 'urinal' was found to be offensive and their prototypes were soon forgotten.



In 1997, the Dutch followed suit and created a urinal known as the Lady Pee, which of all things uses a funnel to aid in aim. Suffice to say, Europeans are still looking for an answer.

It is still common to see women queuing for the toilet in public venues.

So as part of our research on female use of public toilets, *Plumbing Connection* created an online survey to ask women about the current state of their public restrooms.

The results are in

In particular, our *Ladies, stand up and be counted* survey was designed to gauge if female urinals were the answer that Australian women were looking for to reduce waiting times and minimise health risks in public toilets. As with every survey, it did come with its fair share of surprising results.

We had many respondents who answered our questions and while

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the majority lived in Australia, there were also 23% who listed New Zealand, the United States, Canada or the United Kingdom as their country of residence, such was the interest.

Almost 45% of respondents admitted that their behaviour for toilets located outside the home was significantly different; noting that a fear of skin contact with the seat and reduced hygiene/cleanliness in public restrooms were two of the main contributing factors for this. Petrol stations, sports stadiums, restaurants, nightclubs and music festivals were also blacklisted as the places that feature the most offensive public toilets.

Interestingly, almost half of the respondents said they chose to sit down on a public toilet, despite the common issues that plague these facilities. Others preferred to ‘float’ or ‘hover’ above the seat or spread toilet paper over the seat before sitting down.

When you combine these factors, it’s easy to see why there are still long queues outside the ladies toilets – especially as 85% of respondents said that they spend between two and five minutes at any one time in a public toilet facility. The phrase, “as little time as possible” was also a popular comment for this particular question. (Men spend less than a minute and no mirror time.)

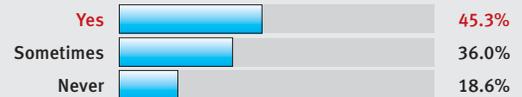
If a female urinal were to be made available in a public restroom, 52% of respondents said they would consider using it with the preference being a squat-style urinal over a wall-mounted fixture. Once again, a clear majority insisted that these urinals be enclosed for privacy, rather than out in the open man style for all to see.

Although the global plumbing sector has, at times, attempted to solve these issues, almost 80% of women believed that architects and building designers did not fully consider the issues surrounding female public restrooms.

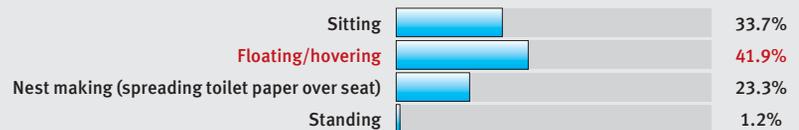
“I think that female toilets are not thought out at all. There hardly ever seems to be enough of them in the building,” one typical respondent wrote.

Female urinal survey

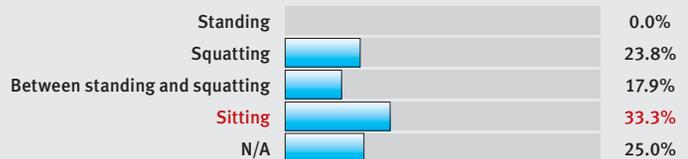
Do you sit down on a public toilet?



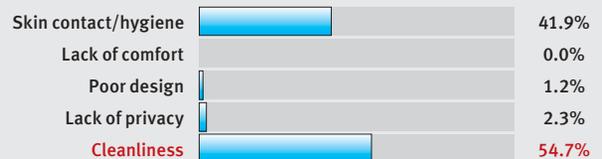
What is your normal method during female urination in a public restroom?



If different, what is your preferred female user position to urinate in toilets located outside the home?



What do you feel most uncomfortable about when using a public toilet?



Would you consider using a female urinal in a public restroom, if such a fixture was available?



If given the choice, which is your preferred design alternative for a female urinal?



For all the survey results and to read this story online go to www.worldplumbinginfo.com.

Another said, "Most architects/ building designers are men and never have to stand in a toilet queue."

Needless to say, this information provides a significant amount of food for thought for members of the plumbing industry, researchers and suppliers alike.

Experts are divided

There are many individuals who have dedicated their time to researching and analysing the merit of female urinals, such as Professor Mete Demiriz from Germany's Fachhochschule Gelsenkirchen University of Applied Sciences.

In a recent paper on female urinals, Professor Demiriz says that two new prototypes were developed, constructed and tested in Europe following a series of interviews and surveys of users of public restrooms.

"The call for female urinals is old," he says. "The laboratory of sanitary technology started a project developing practically suitable urinals for women."

The respective models were a squat urinal and a wall-mounted urinal.

"The dimensions were chosen in a way that the urinals can be exchanged for a toilet bowl: suspension and sewage connection are placed at the same height as for a wall-mounted toilet bowl," he says.



The wall-mounted (left) and squat-style (right) urinals for women under user-test at Gelsenkirchen University (Germany). User response to date has been favourable with women impressed by the comfortable contact-free use and the automatic flush. Compared to conventional WCs these urinals reduce the time women spend in the toilet and water savings of near 70% have been achieved.

The squat urinal can be installed in existing cubicles by means of a two-step pedestal. For both models, a pre-wall element with an integrated concealed flush valve was developed. He says the wall-mounted version, which is

approached backwards, appeared to meet the requests of females in the German market.

"The new urinals allow women to urinate in a quick, hygienic way without any skin contact in public, semi- ➤

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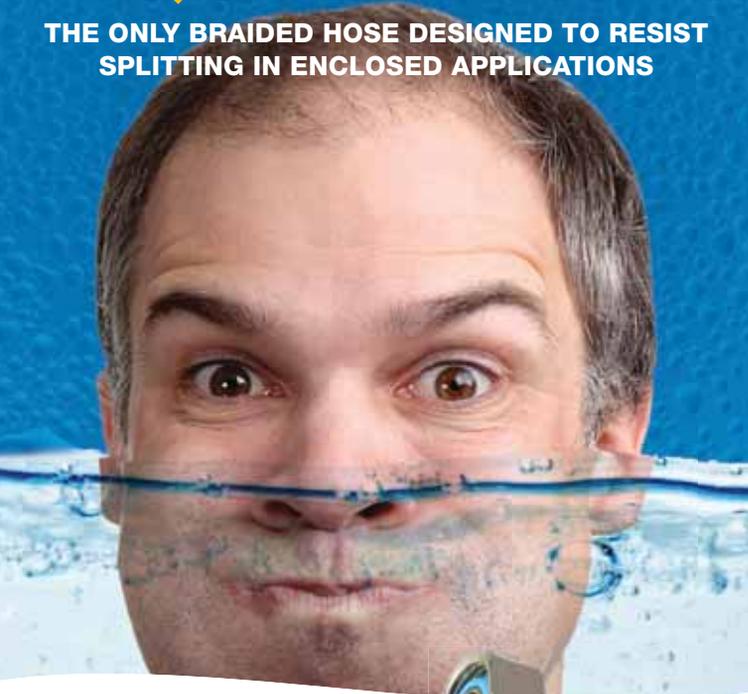
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cover story

public and industrial sanitary facilities. They do not only solve the problems many women are facing at public restrooms but also offer the operator economic advantages," Professor Demiriz says.

However, there are some who don't believe urinals are the answer to the issues in female public restrooms. Michelle Barkley was chairman of the British Standard Committee for sanitary installations and says they are a "useless" option.

"As a woman, I appreciate the attempts to help resolve the problems that women have with WCs. However, I do not feel that urinals are the right way forward," she says.

"The main reason for this is one that appears to have been overlooked: to urinate in a standing position, women have to stand with their legs apart to avoid getting wet. This is impossible if you are wearing pants or trousers."

Research data included in the Standards also showed that men take about 30 seconds to use a urinal while women averaged a minimum of 60 seconds to use a WC, which doesn't achieve much in the way of saving time.

"Women should not have fewer facilities (WCs) in total than men (WCs and urinals). It should be remembered that WCs are women's urinals and 90% away from home toilet usage is for urination," says former chairman of the British Standard Committee for sanitary installations Michelle Barkley.

"I do not think that female urinals will save time. Unlike men, women always have to remove clothing to go to the loo and also need to use paper to dry themselves, and this is what takes up most of the time. Women also need to use the WC for changing menstrual sanitary protection, which men do not."

In her opinion, too few WCs is the main problem, as well as small cubicles without adequate room for the sanitary bin. Rather than focus on female urinals, Michelle believes the best way to approach the issues is to carry out research to determine an adequate number of facilities for both men and women.

"Until this is done, women should not have fewer facilities (WCs) in total than men (WCs and urinals). It should be remembered that WCs are women's urinals and 90% away from home toilet usage is for urination."

So, what does this all mean for the plumbing industry as a whole?

The final word

While many attempts have been made to introduce female urinals into public restrooms, there seems to be a clear discrepancy of their value in the target market. One thing is certain: the current market needs are not being met, with or without a urinal in the restrooms.

While there are women who are willing to try a female urinal and find out if it is a more comfortable alternative to the standard WC, there is a strong belief that they alone will not be enough to solve the issues surrounding female public restrooms.

In the meantime, it may be more worthwhile for the plumbing industry to focus their creative design efforts on other factors that are of concern to

women – such as cleanliness and the number of toilets available.

It is clear that the ladies section of the loo is often underestimated by building designers, so the pure ability to offer women more ‘places to pee’ could significantly lessen the queue outside the door. This, and ensuring the facilities are up to scratch in terms of hygiene, could go a long way in solving the problems.

Until then, we can only wait and see what the plumbing industry will come up with next to tackle this issue. ■

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