



# TOILET

## Urban Infrastructure Investments On Spaces Of The Urban Poor: From The Perspective Of Children – Thematic Papers: Toilets

### Background

Cities need to be spaces that cater to the varied needs and aspirations of the diverse categories and groups of people living in them – men, women, children, disabled and high and low income groups among others. While cities provide many opportunities like increased access and proximity to health and educational facilities, in reality, cities also double-up as spaces of exclusion - especially for the urban poor and particularly women and children. In the case of children their vulnerability is compounded by virtue of their age.

Children living in cities are exposed to different spaces in their childhood - home, playground, streets, bye-lanes, schools, ICDS centres, parks, bus and railway stations, markets, residential homes and many more. The quality and environment of spaces play a crucial role as it determines the level of participation in and interaction with the space. Children often feel excluded in public spaces, due to non-inclusive architectural design, absence of safety standards, and general fear of abuse or crime. Adults too perceive these conditions of lack of safety and often restrict children from those perceived unsafe spaces, as it is easier than trying to make those spaces safe. Restricting children from entering spaces not only harms their physical development and social skills but also limits their participation in the community.

Children require safe access to education, secure and decent housing and living conditions around the house, accessible and affordable services, freedom from violence, and freedom to move safely. Over the period, the Government has come up with a number of schemes in the context of urban development, which reflect its priorities. Some of include JNNURM, North Eastern Region Urban Development Programme (NERUDP),

Rajiv Awas Yojana and Integrated Low Cost Sanitation Scheme (ILCS). Despite various policy provisions, children from poor households in urban areas are not only denied a protective environment but also subjected to different forms of abuse, violence and exploitation<sup>1</sup>.

Set against such a background, there is a need felt to ensure safe and healthy living conditions to young children living in urban poverty, by making public urban infrastructure child friendly. In order to inform this process, the most logical step was to use a “child” lens to relook at such infrastructure as most issues with infrastructure are cross-cutting – including factors that cause exclusion like age, gender, poverty, disability, caste and religion among others.

A series of interactions with urban poor young children, their families, architects, Government representatives, civil society actors and other related stakeholders have been organised across multiple states in India and findings from these have been collated in the form of eight thematic papers. These include air, housing, power, public space, sanitation, soil and water.

This paper focuses on toilets.

Lack of adequate sanitation systems pose a threat to children’s health and well-being. Children risk shame, disease and harassment due to lack of access to toilets. Poor sanitation affects all children but girls are most vulnerable.

### What comprises inappropriate or poor toilet facility?

On interactions with children living in urban slums and resettlement colonies across several states in India, the children narrated issues with regards to household-level toilets, common toilets, public toilets and toilets in schools. The following were indicated as reasons for poor sanitation conditions:

#### Household-level toilets:

**Absence of toilets:** Most slums visited did not have individual toilets inside the house. Common facilities had to be used and in almost all locations, children defecated in the open (as in the image) – by the drains, rivers, sea shore, open spaces and also faced the risk of falling into the large drains, snakebites. The children



also reported cases of death of children as a result of falling into the large drains and drowning in the sea. Girls most often reported feeling embarrassed defecating in the open and also experienced the threat of harassment from boys and men.

In some locations the parents mentioned that the absence of a sewage system meant that community members could not construct their own toilets. They would have to construct open pit latrines which produce immense odour and getting the pits emptied would mean added cost, an option they did not want.

**Absence of bathing spaces:** Almost all slums visited did not have bathing spaces in their houses and makeshift bathing spaces (as in the image) were used to bathe. Girls most often reported the fear of being watched by men and boys and feeling embarrassed bathing in the open. The girls also mentioned that they had to



carry water everytime to bathe and that there were no drains for the water to flow into and this led to stagnant water that bred mosquitoes and posed a danger for community members especially children who slipped and fell when running or playing around.

#### Community toilets:

**Absence of community toilets:** Some children mentioned that there were no community toilets in their area and this meant children having to relieve themselves in the open due to absence of household level toilets.

**Inaccessible toilets:** Some toilets were far from homes of children and especially the girls mentioned that accessing toilets after sun down was difficult. The girls

<sup>1</sup> Women’s Agency and Child Rights, Twelfth Five Year Plan Document (2012-2017), Volume III, Planning Commission, 2013. [http://planningcommission.gov.in/plans/planrel/12thplan/pdf/12fyp\\_vol3.pdf](http://planningcommission.gov.in/plans/planrel/12thplan/pdf/12fyp_vol3.pdf)

also mentioned that, most often, the path leading to the toilets were not well lit and this increased the threat of abuse and harassment by boys and men. The girls usually accessed the toilets accompanied by family members or friends but there



were times when they had to go alone.

Further the children also mentioned that the facilities were not open all-day and that they closed in the night and re-opened in the mornings. The children had to defecate in the small drains outside their houses during the night.

**Unclean facilities:** The community toilet facilities were almost always mentioned as being filthy. There were also instances where children stated that due to non-maintenance or poor maintenance, the facilities remained unused, as in the image alongside. These unused facilities were also areas that children identified as unsafe since people taking drugs occupied these facilities and the girls felt the danger of being abused if found alone close to these facilities.

**Lack/ Inadequate water facility:** There was complete absence of provision for water in some community toilets as mentioned by children. Most community toilets did have water facility but these facilities had one tap or hand pump outside and individual toilets had no taps. The children had to queue up first to fill water and then to use the toilet. Children very often got late for school due to the long queues.

**Inadequate number of toilet seats:** Most facilities did not have adequate number of toilet seats for the area in which they were. The children mentioned that toilet seats were most often not sufficient for the entire basti. That's why most men and boys did not use the facilities and preferred defecating in the open. The girls stated that they did not have a choice and so had to use the facility.

**Damaged doors:** The children mentioned that most doors were damaged – either rusted from bottom or broken – invading people's privacy. The children also mentioned that most often the doors did not have bolts or latches or either of them were broken. The girls said that they had to always take a female member along and ask them to watch over outside the toilets.

**Cost of using the facility:** The children

mentioned there was a fixed amount to be paid by regular users such as Rs. 15 per month per person but others had to pay Rs. 2 per use. The community members were also charged for using bathing facility, if that was available. The children expressed annoyance at being charged to use a facility that was unclean, had no provision for water, and with broken doors.

**Lack of separate toilets for males and females:**

While most community toilet facilities had separate toilets for men and women, this was not always the case. In one of the locations the children mentioned that men and women used the same toilets and bathing facility and that the women and girls experienced discomfort in doing so.

**Absence of special provisions for the disabled and old:**

The children also mentioned that there were no special provisions for people with disabilities or old people and that they are unable to use community toilets since all community toilets have only the Indian style toilets - squatting seats.

**Lack of adequate space:** The children also mentioned that the toilets were really small and it sometimes gets difficult to enter and close the door.

**Spaces of abuse:** The children from one of the locations also mentioned how a man abused and molested girls by taking them to a community toilet facility that was still in use.

**Non-operational Toilets** - There was also a case where the community toilet was built but was not being used as lack of proper maintenance and cleaning had created blockage.

**Public toilets:**

**Dirty toilets:** The children mentioned that the public toilets (*sulabhs*) were not maintained and were dirty most of the times.

**Inadequate toilet seats:** The children also mentioned that these public toilets were most often crowded and that they had to wait in queues to use them.

**Cost of using the facility:** The children, just as above, mentioned that they did not like paying to use unclean toilets. They also said that public toilet facilities should not charge a fee.

**Spaces of harassment:** The girls mentioned that boys visiting the facility meant that the girls were teased when entering or exiting the girls' section.

**Issues with toilets and bathing space provided under government schemes**

**Small space:** Some houses constructed under government schemes such as JNNURM that were visited, did have toilets, but given the shortage of space in the house and the absence of bathing space, the toilet holes had been covered up and used for other purposes such as bathing and washing clothes, as seen in the image alongside.



**Ideal toilets**

This section details the perspectives of children on what they feel comprise ideal toilet and bathing space.

**For household-level toilets:**

Houses with toilets and bathrooms. The children also opined, "But there is no space!"

- Water connection in the toilets and bathrooms
- Separate bathroom with big shower and water heater

**For community toilets:**

- Community toilets in locations where people do not have household-level toilets
- Toilets to be clean
- Sufficient water facility
- No user charges
- Adequate number of toilet seats
- Streetlights on the way to the toilet
- Brightly lit toilets
- Good quality doors in all toilets
- Separate toilet and bathing facilities for males and females
- Special provisions for disabled and old such as western style toilets
- Adequate space
- Separate entrances for males and females
- Maintenance of toilets
- Provision of soap for hand wash

**For public toilets:**

- Maintenance of toilets
- Toilets to be clean
- No user charges
- Adequate number of toilet seats
- The *sulabh* in-charge should be approachable and available to receive complaints from people
- Police should also be stationed around *sulabhs* to report any misbehaviour

**For provisions under government housing schemes:**

- Houses with toilets and bathrooms
- Adequate space
- Water connection in the toilets and bathrooms