

Changing the shy world of adolescent girls

Lessons from installing a girls' toilet facility

SYED SAAD ANDALEEB *and* ADNAN ZILLUR MORSHED

BACK in 2017, we had an opportunity to build a small and experimental toilet in Jhalokati, with the simple intention of helping adolescent girls in a rural school who had no real toilet to avail. We designed a cost-efficient, environment-friendly, safe, and sanitary toilet for them to access easily and to improve their menstrual hygiene. We also wanted to help them change their common perception of a toilet from a dark, dingy, and stigmatised space to a positive, light-filled, ventilated, and gender-friendly facility.

The toilet project soon evolved into a research topic, an opportunity to look at some of the typical social and hygiene-related problems that rural girls encounter at their schools.

Inadequate access to a comfortable, convenient, and secure toilet at schools is one of the most common forms of gender discrimination, experienced regularly by girls across rural Bangladesh.

Our hope was that this prototype toilet project would change the attitudes of school teachers, parents, local community leaders, and even adolescent boys regarding specific health needs of girls. Furthermore, a gender-friendly toilet would improve



The toilet after construction.

COURTESY: AUTHORS

the self-esteem of girls, enabling them to become more conscious and productive citizens.

It was a significant learning experience. We gained insight into how hygiene, adolescence, and social conditions intersect, while encountering a host of surprising repercussions in project management. In Bangladesh, 40 percent of adolescent girls do not attend school during the first three days of their period. Only 11 percent of schools have separate toilets for girls with water facilities, 3 percent have the facility to dispose of sanitary products, and 69 percent of school girls never change sanitary napkins during school time. About 45 percent of girls complain about the unavailability of water in school toilets. According to the Bangladesh National Hygiene Baseline Survey-2014, only 10 percent of students use disposable pads and only 12 percent schools have improved toilets for girls. Most of the time school girls use rags instead of sanitary napkins, resulting in urinary infections. This situation leads to a pervasive culture of school absenteeism among adolescent girls, eventually creating unfortunate conditions for many to drop out from school. Subsequently,

the evil of underage marriage rushes in.

During the course of our toilet design, we realised that research on girls' hygiene management as well as its influence on their education and well-being is scarce. Moreover, very little has been done to improve design guidelines and placement of toilets within a given school premise that specifically supports adolescent girls' special needs. Often times young girls never receive accurate information, guidance, and access to affordable sanitary options.

We came to the realisation that inadequate access to a comfortable, convenient, and secure toilet at schools is one of the most common forms of gender discrimination, experienced regularly by girls across rural Bangladesh. The most troubling part of this discrimination is that it occurs due to the community's pervasive apathy and unwillingness to address the issue. Menstruation is a taboo subject and everybody wants to avoid having to discuss it. Although considerable effort has been undertaken by NGOs and community groups to ameliorate the situation, there is still silence both at school and home. Neither parents nor teachers take necessary steps to educate girls on the subject. This form

of silence, further complicated by societal ignorance of and indifference to menstrual hygiene, breeds a fertile ground for discrimination and denigration.

We recently completed the construction of the toilet that we proposed back in 2017. A core concept of our toilet design was "no girl alone." Often times girls feel reluctant to go to the solitary toilet facility at school because they are afraid that they would be harassed on the way to or once inside the toilet. Our solution for this particular problem was to provide three functions—toilets, ablution space, and handwashing—so that multiple girls can be inside the facility at the same time as mutual protection. The toilet includes a low-cost, key-based sanitary pad dispenser. Furthermore, our design proposes to use waste water for the adjacent community vegetable garden that the girls will be responsible for maintaining. This way they will take ownership of the toilet, thereby feeling inspired to sustain it as best as they can. Maintenance of the facility in small teams is their responsibility.

Just because one has a good, philanthropic intention doesn't mean that people at the receiving end will accept something with open arms: in fact, there were serious obstacles. The toilet project required a monumental effort to get it approved by the omnipotent school committee. We first suggested a precondition that the local community would pay 10 percent of the total construction cost; a partial community ownership would mean better monitoring and maintenance of the facility. But the suggestion was met with dead silence!

The divisiveness of the school committee was forbidding. Not everyone agreed that a toilet for girls was even necessary. So much attention devoted to girls was perhaps unacceptable. Eventually, the committee agreed on the necessity of a gender-friendly toilet on the school premise and approved it. However, in the meeting minutes, the clause for the 10-percent community contribution

toward the construction cost was surreptitiously deleted.

Once the construction of the toilet began, local goons arrived to demand money from the contractor, who couldn't oblige because it was a small project with very little room for profit. His plea didn't soften the goons; they returned at night and destroyed the under-construction toilet. We were shattered. How could people be so insensitive and heartless? We approached the local political power-wielders and appealed for intervention. After multiple telephone calls and police visits to the school, things were under control, thanks to our "connection." The toilet finally came to reality after much consternation and high drama. This is only the first part of the story.

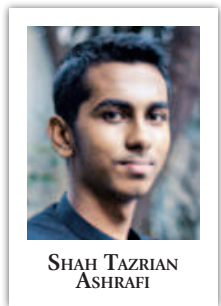
We recognise that the toilet may change neither the misogynist culture of a rural school nor the shy world of adolescent girls. The toilet may even fall into disrepair and become a putrid place as elsewhere. To stop that from happening, we thought it would be important to tie the idea of toilet hygiene with curricular reform in such subjects as civic responsibility, environmental sustainability, gender studies, and conscientious use of water. These ideas, even if they are executed at a micro-scale, are intimately related to the nation's broader interests because school girls will emerge as better human beings and, as mothers, also enlighten their progeny. We also believe that our small project can spur local initiatives for not just public health and wellbeing, but also social justice. We will continue to study the girls' response to the toilet facility as an everyday frontier to change society, one step at a time.

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Architects S.M. Shafaiet Mahmud, Tahseen Reza Anika, Faizal Bin-Alfzal Ash-Shafi, and Aarjah Rashid participated in the design of the toilet.

Coronavirus and the politics of xenophobia



SHAH TAZRIAN ASHRAFI

AIRPORTS beef up security, a ship full of passengers remains quarantined and docked at Yokohama, while racism takes root and flourishes under the shadow of an outbreak.

A novel virus, which has affected around 60,000 individuals, killed over 1,350 people globally, and reached 24 countries till now, has laid bare how it takes only a nudge to unleash xenophobic—intentional, subconscious, or institutional—values against a certain community.

Questionable memes attacking the Chinese as a whole are flooding the Internet. These justify the racial attack against the Chinese by basing it on their "food habits". The scientific journal, Nature, has mentioned the coronavirus's probable ties to pangolins—animals used for making "Traditional Chinese Medicine"—although the declaration is yet to be made formally.

Once I saw a comment that stated that even though being xenophobic against the backdrop of the coronavirus's outbreak was not and should not be justified, the Chinese needed to "be called out for their food habits". An

entire community, viewed as a single body, was inculpated, just like that. A blanket generalisation shunning the diversity and multiplicity of a community was evident in that comment.

That comment, unfortunately, does not echo an isolated view. It echoes a view shared by many who, knowingly or unknowingly, fall into the traps of hasty generalisation. It also echoes subtle xenophobia.

I can only imagine what their (those who propagate xenophobia) responses would be had the communities they belong to been on the receiving end of a global xenophobia. Among others, those who share the Muslim identity can understand it well—for example, how it feels to be accused of being an Al-Qaeda fan due to the havoc wreaked by extremist terrorist groups.

In Leicestershire, two students were pelted with eggs, upon mistakenly deemed to be Chinese. In Los Angeles, a woman was verbally abused on public transport because of her Chinese descent after the virus's outbreak. A half-Chinese boy was "chased" and "cornered" in his school. The internet is filled with such stories of xenophobic behaviour against the backdrop of the global outbreak. #IAmNotAVirus, a vivid window into the high-spirited surge in racism, is now trending on Twitter.

The current scenario makes one reach some unsettling conclusions:



PHOTO: MARK RALSTON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Passengers wear masks to protect against the spread of the coronavirus as they arrive on a flight from Asia at Los Angeles International Airport.

that xenophobia has always been there and the outbreak of a virus is only the pathway that allows and sustains its channelling; that racism probably stays at a distance until a moment comes when only the tag of a certain community is related to a certain thing or event causing global concerns; that no one is safe from the talons of hasty generalisation—even though you are totally a different, autonomous being, the communal tag drilled into your identity will perhaps always incriminate you for things you have no control over; that regrettably, a community is often

singularised, and utmost panic, at times subconsciously, at times consciously, drives its multiplicities into the wasteland.

It is absurd to think that earlier we had to derive these observations from terror attacks and now other mediums are gaining the limelight. In the future, we will probably be exposed to newer mediums uncovering xenophobia, bigotry, and other forms of toxic biases.

In the age of social media, memes seem to be the front-runners for blatant expression of racism, as they gain attention of the masses by making

derogatory puns and reigniting old biases against the Chinese culture in a new light. This is no new, divine finding; but the heavy normalisation of using a certain culture as fodder for racist, prejudicial, biased entertainment only reaffirms the fact that the perception generated by these racist means gives rise to the proliferation of this sick process. It also shapes the thinking of impressionable groups that find themselves on common platforms for directing their inner racism and, in the process, singularising a community on the grounds of stereotypes based on race and culture.

Old stories, new windows.

The invisible trap of generalisation catches its victims in the atmosphere of trepidation and fear surrounding public emergencies. Even though it sets out to catch its victims, it gives one the opportunity to choose between sides—a blatantly xenophobic one that capitalises on individual safety and views and warrants prejudices in a moral light, and a thoughtful one that allows oneself to believe that a certain community is not a solitary build-up of the same bones.

It is, perhaps, one of the many tests of the current time to see how people all over the globe can avoid the trap or fall into it.

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ON THIS DAY IN HISTORY

(14 February, 2008)

Registration of YouTube

Founders Steve Chen, Chad Hurley and Jawed Karim registered YouTube, a website for sharing videos, on this day in 2008. It became popular with more than one billion unique users visiting the site every month.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Dance moves

5 Blue state

11 Plot unit

12 Iroquois League member

13 Bank offering

14 Customs

15 Deserving

17 Rival

18 Namely

22 Tire in the trunk

24 Disparaging

25 Maximum amount

26 Negating word

27 Swallows

30 Soup server

32 Useful ability

33 North Pole worker

34 Middle East tree

38 Party nibble

41 Lotion additive

42 Coral isles

43 Artery problem

44 Past and present

DOWN

1 Secluded valley

2 File stand-in

3 Slapstick stunts

4 Grad-to-be

5 Music category

6 Beginnings

7 Turn the page, say

8 Outfit

9 Poem of praise

10 Used to be

16 Casual top

19 Sources of sudden wealth

20 Pop star

21 Henri's head

22 Sweeping story

23 Not to mention

28 Bike pair

29 Basic need

30 Gettysburg loser

31 Liama's cousin

35 Hardy heroine

36 "Behold!"

37 Citi Field team

38 Manx, for one

39 Consumed

40 Dijon denial

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

J O S H Q U A L M S
B R O W U N R E A L
S E W A R T E R Y
D I A L S S O B
A T O L L T A H O E
Y O W L D O Z E
E R N S T F E W E R
S O S U P E N D
C O Z I E R S W A N
O V E R D O K N I T
D A N S O N I S L E

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott