



Empowering women through financially viable public toilets

This paper provides three key practical insights from experienced entrepreneurs who run public toilet businesses that are not only financially successful but also help drive gender equity.

Why gender equity depends on all women having access to a toilet.

Access to a toilet is a basic human right, yet it is one that too many women are denied. Globally, more than one in ten women (13%) don't have access to a private toilet.

Women and girls' physiology and reproductive health processes mean they largely have different sanitation needs to men. As a result, this lack of toilets creates a disproportionately negative impact on women and girls. It's a very common form of gender discrimination, with many adverse effects.

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Anxiety around access to public toilets stops millions of women around the world leaving their homes, hampering their prospects in terms of education and work. It also compounds taboos and perceived shame surrounding menstruation, meaning that women to stay home when they have their period.

A lack of decent public toilets creates health problems too. For example, in areas where toilets are unsafe, unhygienic or unavailable, women often deliberately reduce their fluid intake and end up with recurrent urinary tract infections.

It also puts far too many women and girls in physical danger. If they are obliged to seek out isolated urban areas or dark and dingy facilities for privacy, they rightly fear sexual violence. Indeed, [research](#) shows that the construction of toilets reduces the number of sexual assaults made against women.

Fundamentally, a lack of toilets tells women that public spaces are not for them. Faced with such a significant barrier to their full participation in public life, they end up with fewer opportunities and lower social mobility than men.



Why public toilets are low in both public and private sector priorities.

In too many countries around the world, public toilets are neglected or non-existent. State, regional and municipal governments don't prioritise the funding of their construction and when they do this investment is wasted because no funding is available for upkeep. They tend to view public toilets as a charitable service, not an essential public utility.

Meanwhile, businesspeople don't view the setting up and running of a public toilet as an exciting or financially worthwhile opportunity. They don't understand how it can turn a profit.

How a new generation of women disrupters are busting these myths.

The reality is that building and running public toilets can be a viable business: one that also happens to facilitate women's participation in public life. A new generation of entrepreneurs are leading the way in innovating new business models that make money and empower women. Financially and socially, they're a win-win.



How do you do this in practice? Here are three practical insights from two sanitation business pioneers:



Farhana Rashid is co-founder of Bhumijo, a business dedicated to providing safe and hygienic public toilets in Bangladesh. In 2017, she started with one women-only facility in Dhaka. She currently operates 34.



Ulka Sadalkar is co-founder of toilet manufacturer Saraplast, based in the city of Pune, western India. It has created a unique range of female-friendly public toilets from old buses. Called Ti Buses, they're aimed at low and middle-income women – like saleswomen going door-to-door, road sweepers, security personnel, traffic police and college students.

INSIGHT 1: Create multiple revenue streams.

To create a robust and viable public toilet business model, you need to have money coming from several different sources.

In the beginning, both Bhumijo and Saraplast just offered public toilets. As is the custom in both Bangladesh and India, they charged each user a small fee. It was their sole source of income and required a continuously high footfall of customers.

However, both companies later diversified their income streams to make their businesses more financially sustainable. Their experience has been that it's essential to choose the right additional income stream for each location. There's no one-size-fits-all solution.

For example, while Bhumijo generates extra income by offering showers and drinking water in most of its facilities, its other revenue streams depend on each facility's location.

Farhana says: "It's very context specific. In some places, we offer tea, coffee or light snacks – although that required overcoming people's negative perceptions of public toilets. In other places, we sell advertising space and offer laundry services. We're also branching out by running the public toilets of some local public institutions, like government offices."

Ulka says: "In the beginning, we just charged a fee for the use of our toilets, then we started collecting a lot of data, via surveys, and that's when we fully realised how people perceived our toilets. We also found out what women are really looking for in a toilet space. Location is key. Once we have the footfall, then we can decide on extra income streams.

"Some of our buses have cafés that sell drinks and snacks. Others sell cosmetic or even stationery items. For example, our Ti Bus near Pune's courthouse offers photocopying services. In our new toilet in Mumbai, we've had requests for plants, so we're going to start a nursery there. And in our toilets near the beach, we sell hats, bags and sunscreen. The buses also generate advertising revenue. But the basis is always the right location and a basic footfall of customers."





INSIGHT 2: Keep asking "Why?"

Starting a business is challenging. Inevitably, there will be ups and downs. Against your expectations, sometimes certain products and services don't prove popular. No-one has ever grown a company without facing such problems. The key is to view them as vital learning experiences and work out how to overcome them.

Find out why your customers didn't use the product or service. Speak to them about it, as well as your team on-the-ground. When you work out what the problem is, you can fix it. Information is everything.

Sometimes new offerings might initially not work but can be tweaked according to customer feedback and made successful. Slow uptake isn't necessarily because something's a bad idea. Sometimes other issues are hindering it.

For example, when Bhumijo first offered laundry services, they were not well-received. But after the company added an ironing service uptake significantly improved. People now had everything they needed in one place: a one-stop laundry shop.

Apply this thinking to your overall strategy too. Keep asking "Why?" When setting up a public toilet business for women it's key to understand the nature of their challenges when using traditional public toilets in a particular location. Talk to them about their experiences and problems. Are the local toilets dirty, dangerous or simply non-existent? Then start building a bespoke business model based on their needs. Keep striving to give them what they're missing.

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INSIGHT 3: Collaborate to build a more successful business.

Being an entrepreneur takes single-minded dedication, determination and passion. But that doesn't mean you must do it alone. You can grow your business more quickly and successfully by seeking helpful partners. Find an organisation that can benefit from your insights and audience access, just as you can benefit from theirs. The right partnerships will save you money and allow you to scale much more rapidly.

The reality is that the very nature of public sanitation provision requires collaboration.

Farhana: 'We can't solve the problem of a lack of public toilets by ourselves. We must work with local government, private businesses and NGOs. Each has a different role to play.

"The local government allows us to operate a toilet facility in a specific area, on its land. Private businesses support us with funding. Alternatively, they might sell their products at our facilities or buy advertising space from us. NGOs can also help with funding, as well as working with us on community engagement and the social impacts of our operations."

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As a case in point, Bhumijo works closely with Water Aid to influence the Bangladeshi government to improve public sanitation and, consequently, raise living standards, especially for women. As a specialist, independent and non-commercial voice, the global NGO has proven to be an effective partner in this regard.

In terms of private partnerships, Bhumijo sells the advertising space on its toilet cubicle doors and facility walls to Unilever Bangladesh, so it can on advertise its cosmetic and household products.



This partnership came out of TRANSFORM, an impact accelerator that unites corporates, donors, investors and academics to support socially and environmentally responsible enterprises. Indeed, this relationship fast-tracked the setup of the business in a more fundamental way.

A qualified architect, Farhana had numerous ideas for the design and fabrication of her public toilets, but not the financial capacity to trial them.

She says, "Thanks to TRANSFORM, I received the funding I needed to test different construction techniques. I tried a brick version but ended up devising a modular system that could be built quickly in different locations and contexts. I also received great financial and management advice, which helped me rapidly scale my business."

Like Bhumijo, Saraplast not only works closely with city governments to map out public toilet locations, surmount infrastructure challenges and link to utilities, it too partners with TRANSFORM.

Ulka says: Our biggest collaboration has been with TRANSFORM. Without its support, we'd have spent another ten years learning how to organise our business. When scaling our Ti Bus business model, the team helped us with everything from the colour of the buses to branding, revenue strategies, service models and training for our female toilet attendants. Without their help, we wouldn't have been able to take the risk of rolling out the Ti Buses across the city, which, in turn, proved the model worked and opened the door to other investors."

For too long, too many women have been held back by a lack of clean and safe public toilets. But we don't need to wait for governments and local authorities to upgrade existing facilities and install better ones alone. Visionary entrepreneurs can work with governments and local authorities to prioritise, and run public toilets as commercially successful businesses.

The key is to choose the right locations and then have multiple income streams, focused on the provision of convenience for local women. To grow such a business, it's essential to collaborate with the right partners and understand the reasons behind unsuccessful initiatives. The value these new businesses create is both financial and social.

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To find out more about partnering with TRANSFORM, learn about other successful collaborations here:

www.TRANSFORM.global

For investors interested in working with the enterprises featured in this paper, please contact them as follows:

Bhumijo: www.bhumijo.com

Saraplast: www.3sindia.com/



TRANSFORM is an impact accelerator that unites corporates, donors, investors and academics to support visionary enterprises across Africa, Asia and beyond. Together, we test and scale new solutions that tackle environmental challenges, improve health and wellbeing, and build inclusive economies.

Combining grant funding, business insight and research, TRANSFORM is advancing the development of innovative business models to help solve global challenges. It was established in 2015 and is led by Unilever, the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and EY.