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Julia Schoellkopf

University of Rhode Island, [julieschoellkopf@gmail.com](mailto:julieschoellkopf@gmail.com)

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Gender-Neutral Restrooms: Creating Safe and Accessible Spaces for all Students



Julia Schoellkopf

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Is the simple task of going to the restroom uncomfortable, dangerous or inaccessible for you? If not, what if it was? This is something that many people struggle with on a daily basis. Most public restrooms are gender specific – men or women. There is no other option for people who feel uncomfortable with both options. Some populations that struggle with this are disabled people, families, and transgender people (Beltramini 2007). As a member of the LGBTQ community and aide for special needs children, I want to make a difference for transgender and disabled students. My major ambition is to support transgender students on campus who face harassment or even violence when using the gender-specific restrooms (“Gender-Neutral Restrooms n.d.). When I discovered that there is a lack of gender-neutral restrooms at the University of Rhode Island, I was determined help make the campus more inclusive for everyone who faces challenges with gender specific restrooms. It is not only problematic that there are not gender-neutral restrooms in every building on campus, but there is also no list, guide or map available to students regarding the restrooms that currently do exist on campus. My goal is to spread awareness about the need for more gender-neutral restrooms on campus and gain support from students and administration to eventually create more of them in order to have an all-inclusive campus.

While researching this issue, I discovered that the lack of gender-neutral restrooms is a widespread problem that occurs in all public places, but has been most problematic on college campuses. As a member of the LGBTQ community, I originally only thought of gender-neutral restrooms as a problem for transgender people. It wasn’t until I thoroughly researched gender-neutral restrooms that I learned gender specific restrooms are also a problem for intersex people, disabled people and families. One article explained how gender-neutral restrooms are not just beneficial to transgender people, but are an example of an environmental designs that address the

challenges of many different populations. Beltramini (2007) explains that “many are determining that single-stall restrooms are not just a transgender community issue; rather, they are an example of universal design”. This information made me realize that gender-neutral restrooms are much more beneficial to the public than I had originally gathered. It was very motivating to learn that if I initiated a change, I would be helping many different students who face specific challenges with the gender specific restrooms at URI.

Through my research, I learned that people who are disabled might have a caregiver of a different gender and need assistance when using the restrooms. Because the gender specific restrooms are not an option for these people, they have to search the URI campus for a restroom that is accessible. In other words, they need a gender-neutral or unisex restroom but because there are very few on campus and are not designated, this would be a difficult task. Some disabled people may also feel uncomfortable in restrooms with multiple stalls and would prefer more privacy in a single stall. Beltramini (2007) explains that, “single-stall restrooms also more easily meet the accessibility regulations of the Americans with Disabilities Act”. Despite gender-neutral restrooms being beneficial to disabled people with caregivers, many are still not accessible regarding certain handicaps. Many people are now proposing that all gender-neutral restrooms be disability accessible to ensure all are accommodated (“Gender-Neutral Restrooms” N.d.). To ensure everyone is accommodated at URI, the new gender-neutral restrooms would also need to be completely handicapped accessible.

According to many sources, gender-neutral restrooms will also help facilities be more accessible to families, whether it is children or adults that need assistance from a family member of a different gender. People may need to assist their elderly parents of a different gender in restrooms, and it is impossible to do so in the gender specific restrooms (Bursack N.d.). Some

parents feel uncomfortable when not accompanying their young children of a different gender in the bathroom and worry for their safety. Some parents may also find it inconvenient to bring their children of a different gender into the restroom (Fishman 2008). By having the gender-neutral restrooms available, the discomfort and a lack of safety that many families face can be easily avoided. Even though URI is a college campus, the inclusion of the gender-neutral restrooms will help parents and children given that many faculty members have children and some students do as well.

I have found that the issues of gender specific restrooms seem to mostly focus on people who are transgender. The choice to use the men's or women's restrooms is not an easy decision for many transgender people for various reasons. There have been many instances where transgender people have been harassed, assaulted or even arrested when using gender specific restrooms. This issue even extends to people who simply don't look traditionally male or female ("Gender-Neutral Restrooms" N.d.). One transgender woman, Rikki Dennis, recounts when a stranger physically assaulted her after using the women's restroom. Ms. Dennis claimed she told her attacker "I just want to use the bathroom"(Brown 2005). This information was initially very surprising to me because I couldn't imagine others harassing people at URI just for looking different. But given that it has been reported at many other college campuses, it must be something transgender students fear at URI as well. After learning that students could be in serious danger from just trying to use the restroom, my determination of this action project increased greatly.

Another problem with gender specific restrooms is that not all transgender people identify with the male or female gender. These people identify outside of the gender binary and therefore feel uncomfortable using a restroom that does not line up with their gender identity

(Englehart 2012). I found this point very important because it demonstrates that gender-neutral restrooms are necessary regardless of if binary transgender people are one day able to use the gender specific restrooms without fear of harassment. In other words, there are transgender people who will always be uncomfortable with the men and women's room because of their non-binary gender identity. Given this information, the need for gender-neutral restrooms became even more significant because they foster respect for people's identities and well-being.

Colleges and universities are among the many places where people encounter challenges with the gender-specific restrooms. Unfortunately many campuses are still lacking these gender-neutral restrooms and URI is one of them. Throughout the years, students have been challenging administration and demanding that more gender-neutral restrooms be created. Many of these demands are the result of the challenges faced by transgender students. Beemyn (N.d.) of Transgender Law & Policy states that, "gender-diverse students are often subject to harassment and violence when using male- or female-specific campus restrooms...". According to her report "Best Practices to Support Transgender and Other Gender-Nonconforming Students", every campus building should have at least one gender-neutral restroom (Beemyn N.d.). While many colleges and universities are still lagging behind in creating safe and accessible campuses for transgender students, some have made substantial progress.

At the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, students have been struggling for gender-neutral restrooms since 2001 and have not been somewhat successful. Students advocating for gender-neutral restrooms began the campaign by sending a proposal to administration. Unfortunately, despite the administration's promise to create more gender-neutral restrooms, no plans were made to establish them. The students then strengthened their efforts by sending more proposals, contacting administration regularly and raising awareness about the issue to the

student body. (Gershenson 2010). The students have fought for years but have still made little progress. Today, UMass Amherst has at least one gender-neutral restroom in most residence halls and some academic buildings. The university website also provides a list and guide regarding these restrooms available to the public (“Campus Gender-Neutral and Lockable Single-User Bathrooms” n.d.). Even though the students’ campaign has had a lot of opposition, their determination has encouraged me to do whatever I can to support the creation of more gender-neutral restrooms at URI. Their struggles showed me that this fight was not going to be easy and I would need a lot of support behind me. I realized I needed to gain support from many student organizations on campus to be taken seriously by the URI administration.

Students at Swarthmore College have also been fighting for gender-neutral restrooms, but have been more successful and well-received than the students UMass Amherst. At Swarthmore, the students advocating for gender-neutral restrooms approached the Housing Committee and Residential Life with their mission. To reach the student body, the campaigners also spoke at the residence halls to raise awareness and gain support. Fortunately, administration has agreed to create gender-neutral restrooms and implement policies in order for the college to be inclusive and safe for queer students (Englehart 2012). This wonderful success at Swarthmore College inspired me to propose my ideas to student organizations and be optimistic that I would gain support and credibility.

Gender specific restrooms have also been an issue in other parts of the world, for example, at the University of Winnipeg in Canada. The students advocating for gender-neutral restrooms have expressed concerns mainly for students who are transgender. The gender-neutral restrooms are still rare to come by at universities in Canada because “some argue that the bathrooms further stigmatize a group already striving for acceptance” (“University students push

for gender-neutral washrooms” 2011). When proposed to administration at University of Winnipeg, they were initially surprised and hesitant. However, they eventually agreed to have several signs of gender specific restrooms changed simply to “washroom”. The chair of the board of regents at the university stated that the proposal is worth considering if students are raising concern about it (“University students push for gender-neutral washrooms” 2011). This statement was very encouraging and I hoped that Student Senate and the URI Administration would respond similarly. I thought if those in charge recognized that students on campus felt excluded and unsafe, that they would consider my proposal.

To create an immediate and lasting positive change at URI, I originally decided I wanted to reach out to the URI campus as a whole. However, as I moved along with my project, I realized many more people were interested in my cause than I had anticipated. Because of this, I decided to work with other people and groups on campus to gain support and credibility. Not only is it important to me to create more gender-neutral restrooms, it is also important to raise awareness of their existence and importance. I decided I would first start off with a focus group, then speak with Student Senate and other organizations, hold an information booth and petition to reach the student body, and then finally propose a bill with the help of a student senator.

To reach students who may be interested in the cause, I decided to set up a focus group open to the public to discuss gender-neutral restrooms. I created flyers to put up around campus and distributed them to professors who may be interested in sharing it with their students. I tried to get the word out as much as possible, but it was very difficult to reach people and encourage them to participate possibly because of the campus climate regarding LGBT issues at URI. Despite this difficulty, I spent much time researching information and creating handouts to provide information on gender-neutral restrooms. I also created a basic FAQ flyer regarding



gender-neutral restrooms. Because of the general attitudes of URI students, my expectation of the outcome was not very high and I did not expect many people to come. I was hoping that the people who would come would be active in the discussion so many ideas could be generated and I could gain support.

Ten people came to the focus group to learn about gender-neutral restrooms and to support having more on campus. Considering my expectations, it was very exciting to have such a great turn out. I provided information about the specifics gender-neutral restrooms, the people who benefit from them, and why they're important on college campuses. The participants were very interested and had many comments and questions about the purpose of the restrooms and the current status of them at URI. Fortunately, all of the participants in the focus group were very positive and supportive of my cause. It appeared that everyone generally agreed that URI needs more gender-neutral restrooms in order to be an accepting campus. They all signed the petition I made to support URI in creating at least one gender-neutral restroom on campus. Many of them were interested in coming to the protest I was having the following week.

I was very happy with the turnout of the focus group because of amount of people that came and their level of participation and interest. I also feel it went very well because I got a very good idea of students' opinions and what they feel is important at URI. It was a great starting point in my project that allowed me to connect with others, share ideas, gain support and formulate plans for my further activism for gender-neutral restrooms at URI.

One of the participants in the focus group is a news reporter for the school newspaper and asked to interview me for an article regarding my action project. Surprised and very excited, I gladly accepted her request because I knew this would raise more awareness of gender-neutral restrooms and their importance. The reporter, Kimberly Delande, asked me why I thought URI

needed more gender-neutral restrooms, who benefits from them, and if I have encountered any opposition to my cause. I informed her that some students had disagreed with my opinions about gender-neutral restrooms at URI. I explained to Kimberly that dealing with opposition was difficult but I just continued to give more information to these students. At the end of the interview, Delande asked me what my current activism at URI meant to me. I told her that I have been interested in human rights and helping others for several years. Managing and implementing my own project has been a strong desire of mine and I am so glad I have finally gotten the opportunity. The interview went really well and I was excited when the article came out in the paper because it explained my cause and views very well. I was hoping that the article would raise more awareness about gender-neutral restrooms and the protest I was hosting the following week.

After the focus group, I was also invited by a student senator to speak at a student senate meeting about my cause. This request was very unexpected and far exceeded my original expectations of going through this alone. Because of the great turn out of the focus group, I had high expectations for the meeting and was very optimistic that they would support me. At the meeting, I explained gender-neutral restrooms, the need for them at URI and the current status of them on campus. As I had hoped, the student senate was very interested and supportive of my project. They asked many questions and some were interested in attending the information booth and petition. After the meeting, Adiva Checo, the head of Campus Affairs, asked to work with me to propose a bill to student senate. I was astonished to see this level of interest taken into my project and I eagerly accepted her request. I am currently drafting a proposal with Adiva to submit at the end of the year. My expectations that student senate will support my proposal are

high, but I doubt administration will fully endorse it. Either way, it's a step in the right direction and I am glad it will at least be given interest and consideration.

The most important part of my action project for me was the information booth and petition to raise awareness and gain support from students to create more gender-neutral restrooms at URI. I decided to hold the booth in the library 24-hour room instead of the quad or Memorial Union because I felt students would be more willing to stop by and learn more during study time as opposed to while walking to class. To raise awareness of the protest and petition, I created flyers and distributed them around campus. Even though I created many flyers, I was doubtful that many people would actually come by to learn and sign the petition. Despite the interest and support I received from other students and student senate, I was doubtful that many of those supporters would come sit with me at the booth. Because of this, I prepared everything for the protest myself, including creating the necessary materials, distributing flyers, coordinating with the library and much more.

In order to make an inviting and interesting protest, I created a large poster that had an FAQ pertaining to gender-neutral restrooms as well as the current status of them at URI. I also created large protest posters that stated "Support URI to be more inclusive", "Sign the petition", "URI needs more gender-neutral restrooms", "How would you feel if going to the restroom as dangerous or inaccessible?" and "URI is not accommodating: disabled people, families transgender people". These signs were meant to get the students' attention so that they would be prompted to stop by and learn more. On the booth I had several flyers that included information from websites on gender-neutral restrooms. I also provided handouts regarding other college campuses that have made progress with gender-neutral restrooms. To foster more awareness, I created a basic FAQ flyer that students could take with them and share with others.

Even though the protest and petition was the most important part of my action project for me, I didn't have very high expectations of the turn out. It was very hard to spread awareness about the protest and get feedback that people would come. It was difficult to gain interest from my supporters to sit with me at the booth, so I expected I would be the only one there. Most students were not interested and did not want to take the time out of their day to come. In addition, I was worried that my booth wouldn't interest the general public at URI enough to stop by and learn about something new and sign a petition.

Fortunately and to my surprise, the protest and petition turned out much better than I had anticipated. Within the first hour, the news reporter who interviewed me, Kimberly, showed up to the protest and sat with me at the booth for most of the day. Throughout the day, several of my other supporters came to the booth to show their support. In addition, one student, completely on their own, came to sit with me throughout the entire day to show their support for the cause. This student also discussed my action project on the school radio station to raise awareness. I was very happy to have some support to show the student body that other students care about this enough to take it upon themselves to help create change.

Throughout the whole day, about 50 people came up to my information booth. I was expecting much fewer students to come up because of my observations of information booths in the past. I am ecstatic that so many people were willing to stop in the middle of their day and learn about something new. However, most people who saw my booth just glanced at the posters and walked by. At first this was very discouraging, but quickly I realized that there were other students who could be interested. Many of the people who did stop by asked me questions about why they should sign the petition. I provided them with some quick information about the

benefits of the gender-neutral restrooms to transgender people and disabled people. After they learned this information, almost all signed the petition.

At the protest, I collected a total of 37 signatures on the petition. Overall, I have collected a total of 55 signatures over the past few weeks. Compared to other petitions on campus this is a low turn out, but I am still extremely happy with the results. I got more signatures than I ever hoped for given the campus climate at URI regarding LGBT and disability issues. I am slightly disappointed because I feel if I had done some things differently, I could have obtained more signatures and support. Ultimately, I'm glad I introduced some new ideas and terms to students who had never heard of gender-neutral restrooms before. I hope their new knowledge will foster more awareness and interest in the future.

If I had more time for this project, I would have tried to gain more support from student senate and other organizations. I didn't have much time to communicate with organizations, meet with them and propose my project. With the support of other student organizations, I could have had more credibility and ultimately a better turn out. As a lone student, it was very difficult to implement things like a protest and petition without the immediate and full support of others. I also realized how much effort and coordination activism requires. In the future I will definitely put more effort and give myself more time to work with others to plan my action.

Throughout this project, I learned that activism takes a lot of effort, which includes research, coordination, money, communication and much more. The experience also showed me that most people have low knowledge about gender and feminist issues, thus reaching them about those issues is very difficult. For many, ideas about gender and feminism are controversial and incompatible with social norms, religious views and political views. Because of this, many

are reluctant to listen and learn something new. Even though this is very disappointing at times, it has motivated me even more to be active about things I am passionate about.

Throughout my experience, I have learned that being a feminist isn't just about education, but also taking action from the education. In order to be a feminist, you have to be really passionate about these ideas and take steps to create change or at least support those that do. Prior to this, I thought that having feminist ideas was enough, but I was very wrong. As a feminist, one cannot depend on others to make the change, but rather take responsibility upon oneself to create and support change. This was a very eye-opening and exciting learning experience and gave me great ideas on how to approach feminist activism in the future. I have realized that if I feel passionately about something, it is up to me to do something instead of waiting for others to. However, it is also very important to mobilize others to gain support and credibility for your cause. I am very excited to apply what I have learned through this astonishing project in the future in order to work with others to fight oppression and create significant and lasting change.

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