



School girls in Nyakach, Kenya and their new toilets.
Photo courtesy of Renata Rokuskva

No Place **TO GO**

November 19 is World Toilet Day. How will you celebrate it?

by Esther Barnes

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Once, during renovations of my bathroom, I had to live without a toilet for a week. During the day I had a key to my neighbour's apartment, plus access to public toilets at the church half a block to the east and the cafe half a block to the west. Every evening I retreated to the comforts and conveniences of my mother-in-law's home.

When my bowels were bursting, I did not have to venture outdoors with a plastic bag and pick up after myself as I would pick up after a dog. I did not have to wait for the cover of darkness, sneak out to the nearest woods, hope no men were watching me with rape on their minds, and squat behind a shrub. And I did not have to do this week after week, year after year.

But millions of women and girls in the developing world have little or no alternative. According to the United Nations, about 2.5 billion people—nearly 40 percent of the world's population—live without proper sanitation (defined as “the provision of facilities and services for the safe disposal of human urine and feces”). One billion have no toilets at all—no squat toilets, no pit latrines, no outhouses, no convenient public toilets, and definitely no toilets that flush into

well-maintained sewers. These people must defecate in fields, forests, rivers and other open spaces.

One woman in three risks shame, disease, harassment and attack because she has no private place to relieve herself, *We Can't Wait* reported in 2014. Worse yet, over five million have no choice but to defecate out in the open. Worldwide, women and girls living without a toilet spend 97 billion hours each year finding a place to go. In many countries, it is not acceptable for a woman to relieve herself during the day, water.org tells us. She must wait until nightfall, just to have privacy. This impacts her health as well as her safety.

Access to a safe, private toilet becomes crucial for girls after they enter puberty. "Girls need clean water to wash themselves or their menstrual cloths and a place to dispose of their menstrual pads if they are using them," *We Can't Wait* explained. "Availability of these facilities in schools will make a big difference to whether or not girls come to school during their monthly periods."

Over the years, the World Health Organization and NGOs have tried to introduce healthy toilets to developing countries. In the 1970s, for example, Canadian Baptist Ministries' public health ambassador Muriel Bent delivered 150 locally-made sealed-trap latrines to homes in the Odisha (Orissa) area of India and sparked a successful sanitation revolution among the Sora people. In the early 2000s, women of the Africa Brotherhood Church, a Canadian Baptist Ministries partner in Kenya, proudly introduced a composting toilet to their community in Machakos. But many other charitable initiatives failed to persuade people to change their ways.

Then Jack Sim, a wealthy businessman in Singapore, decided that the only way to improve the world's sanitation facilities was to get everyone talking about a taboo subject—human feces (he uses the s-word). On November 19, 2001, he founded the World Toilet Organization and hosted the first World Toilet Summit. The 130 delegates from ten countries declared that November 19 would henceforth be World Toilet Day—a day to celebrate toilets and draw global attention to the sanitation crisis.

"World Toilet Day!" At first people scoffed. But the United Nations recognized the seriousness of the issue. Its Millennium Development Goals included a target of halving, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to basic sanitation. And in 2013, the General Assembly adopted November 19 as United Nations World Toilet Day.

"We must break the silence and the taboos on sanitation and open defecation," UN Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson told the European Parliament last November 19. "Since my very first days of working for the United Nations, in refugee camps and in countries where open defecation is practised, I have seen children die from diseases that could have been prevented with adequate sanitation. This is unacceptable and must come to an end."

The Sanitation Crisis

"This morning, 1.8 billion people woke up with no choice but to drink water contaminated by human waste."

Jan Eliasson, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, 2014

Human waste contaminates the world's soil and water when it is dumped from buckets or latrines onto fields, streams, or rivers, and when it seeps from pit latrines and faulty sewage pipes.

In the developing world, roughly 90 per cent of sewage is discharged untreated into rivers, lakes and coastal areas, with a widespread negative impact on health. Each year, an estimated 2.5 billion cases of diarrhea occur among children under age five. Water and sanitation interventions can reduce diarrhea child deaths by 88 per cent.

The sanitation crisis is particularly severe in high-density informal settlements across the globe. Around a billion slum dwellers must resort to "flying toilets" (plastic bags that are used then thrown away), and to dumping human waste in public spaces.

*Adapted from The Sanitation Drive to 2015
Fact Sheet 5*

I stumbled upon World Toilet Day last fall, while exploring “Days of the Year” to use as themes for the advanced English classes I offer as an outreach of the Baptist Church in Litomerice, Czech Republic. I plunged into the United Nations and World Trade Organization websites, grabbed information, graphics and videos, and threw them at my students for our first-ever celebration of toilets.

They were keen to talk about the worst toilets they had experienced; the mere mention of “Turkish toilets” drew groans around the table. No one seemed surprised to read that more people worldwide have mobile phones than access to toilets. The teens chose to watch actor Matt Damon tell baffled journalists why he was going on a “toilet strike” until everyone has access to clean sanitation. The women applauded the young Indian women who are demanding indoor toilets and telling their grooms-to-be, “No loo, no ‘I do.’” And all of us learned why improved sanitation is so crucial to the safety of the world’s women and the health of its children.

But we only talked about it. One student, my Baptist friend Renata Rokuskova, has actually done something to make the world a more sanitary place. She could have told us a lot about the need for toilets in girls’ schools, but she had to miss class that night. She was too busy running ShineBean, a small charity that connects resources in the Litomerice area with needs in rural Kenya, partly by fostering partnerships between Czech and Kenyan schools. Renata later sent me a photo of the happy outcome of one such partnership: money given by children in a Litomerice primary school had built seven safe, clean toilets for the 270 girls in a Kenyan village school.

This November 19, I’ll be celebrating World Toilet Day in Toronto. And I wonder: will I be content to celebrate by talking about toilets, and maybe posting something on Facebook? Will I join Matt Damon’s toilet strike? Or will I thank God for my flush toilet, and express my gratitude by funding a few toilets for women and girls who desperately need a clean, safe place to go?

Learn More

Google *World Toilet Day* and you will find a wealth of facts and figures, infographics, videos, suggested actions and other resources produced by the United Nations and other partners in the sanitation movement.

- The WTO (worldtoilet.org) suggests 10 things you can do for World Toilet Day.
- A PDF of the *We Can’t Wait* report is available online.
- A recent Christian summary is posted at www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2015/july/truth-about-clean-water-toilets-sanitation-campaigns.html. 🌱



*Model composting toilet in Machakos, Kenya.
Photo courtesy of Esther Barnes*