

The Barrows Hall All Gender Restroom in Context:

Q&A for the re-designated 6th floor Barrows restroom

All gender restroom (noun):

a room containing one or more toilet stalls in a public building

Why “all gender”?

Single-gender designated restrooms such as “men’s restrooms” and “women’s restrooms” exclude or cannot accommodate people who do not fit (or align themselves with, or exist in excess of) these binary categories. Re-designating a restroom as “all gender” makes restroom use safer for those who are transgender, gender non-conforming, and those who often face harassment in single gender bathrooms; for people with disabilities who employ a personal assistant of a different gender; and for student parents who may need to accompany their children.

What is “gender”?

Gender is assigned at birth by doctors according to historically, socially and geographically specific criteria; that is to say, it is the result of the hegemonic common sense of our time that assumes a link between genital characteristics that, when out of alignment with the prevailing norms, may be manipulated to fit those norms. You might like to imagine that sex comes before and determines gender when in fact, in the words of Susan Stryker (2009), “the sex of the body does not bear any *necessary* or *deterministic* relationship to the social category in which that body lives” (11).

Binary gender identification is compulsory. Children receive subliminal and explicit messages that train them to think of “girl” and “boy” as fixed and as the only existing gender categories. Expectations from adults, authority figures and other children shape one’s alignment with these categories. When children deviate from these expectations, they may be coercively re-aligned with their assigned gender through psychological, social or physical force. Failing to align with accepted gender roles may result in the foreclosure of educational and employment opportunities, social and familial isolation, as well as psychological and physical violence.

Many of the institutions that shape our adult lives perpetuate myths of biological gender fixity and in so doing, continue to dictate the manner in which we organize our lives. In continuing to conflate terms like sex and gender, and insisting on their overdetermination, we are not only no better than our forebears who insisted that gender unfits women for intellectual labor, for example, but we also contribute to the ongoing mess we have today in which archaic and harmful notions of gender result in what activists are calling an epidemic of murders of trans women, particularly black trans women, in 2015. Ask yourself, in all seriousness, do some bodies matter more than others?

Why here?

The 6th floor of Barrows Hall is shared by African American Studies, Gender and Women’s Studies, LGBT Studies, the Center for Race and Gender, the Center for the Study of Sexual Culture, and the Beatrice Bain Research Group. Although we may lend out our rooms for

meetings, the floor is predominantly used by members of these departments, centers and groups, and the events that they host. As such, our floor disproportionately requires access to a restroom that is designated “all gender” because the majority of the occupants of the 6th floor do not identify as men and because the departments of African American Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies have historically fought for greater, not less, inclusion.

What does this means for me?

Previously, if you had to go to the 5th floor or 7th floor to use a restroom designated for “women,” you will now be able to use the bathroom on the floor that you work on.

Previously, if you used the 6th floor bathroom clandestinely “after-hours” out of fear or inconvenience at having to travel to a different floor at night and were afraid of getting caught, you will instead be able to use the 6th floor restroom with peace of mind.

Previously, if you used the 6th floor bathroom because it was designated for “men” you can continue using the 6th floor bathroom with no change whatsoever.

Why now?

Although the struggle for an all gender restroom on the 6th floor has a long history, over the last year and a half the campaign for all gender restroom access has accelerated because:

- the UAW secured historic contract language mandating all gender restroom access for academic student employees in Summer 2014;
- in September 2014 UC President Janet Napolitano has called for the conversion of single-stall restrooms across the UC system to “all gender” designations as a first step toward making restrooms on UC campuses safer and more accessible for everyone;
- student activism has underscored the need for all gender restrooms now through direct actions, emphasizing that the proposed changes at the system-wide-level have gotten mired in bureaucracy;
- a graduate student of the 6th floor who filed grievances with UC Labor Relations was told by a representative of UCLR and by the dean of graduate division that they would rather see all gender restroom grievances resolved at the departmental level.

Logistics

The placard designated the 6th floor restroom as for men-only has been replaced with a permanent sign that designates the restroom as “all gender,” -- a white triangle inside a blue circle (the Berkeley campus newly designated standard symbol for an all gender restroom) accompanied by the word “restroom.” The sign also contains embossed brail for blind restroom users. The urinal will be covered with plastic so that only the stalls remain in operation.

What are the legal dimensions of this?

In the summer of 2014 the UC Student Workers Union (UAW 2865) agreed to new contract language with the University that guarantees GSIs access to all gender restrooms within a reasonable distance from their workplaces. The relevant contract language can be found here, under section F: http://ucnet.universityofcalifornia.edu/labor/bargaining-units/bx/docs/bx_2010-2013_20_non-discrimination.pdf

Infrastructurally, our building code states that buildings must have a certain number of restrooms available to men and to women. If marked as “all gender” this restroom will continue to satisfy these quantities because neither men-identified or women-identified people will be excluded from a restroom designated as “all gender,” yet single-gender restrooms do exclude people based on gender identification.

What about the locks?

Locks on restrooms on campus are in direct violation of the California state building codes that require a certain number of available stalls per building user. The UC Berkeley administration has ordered that all such locks be removed in order to comply with state regulations, and facilities on campus are in the process of complying with this order. This process is ongoing and is separate from the all gender bathroom issue, although they are of course linked by their similar concern with the right of all on campus to have safe and convenient access to restrooms as a matter of basic right.

Do other universities have “all gender restrooms”? Are there other all gender restrooms on our campus?

According to UMass Amherst’s The Stonewall Center, by 2014 over 150 schools already implemented all gender restrooms. At UC Berkeley, many of the dorms feature all gender restrooms, including showers. The Tang Health Center’s restrooms are totally all gender. It is the campus itself, as a site of work and instruction, that is lagging behind. Until the implementation of the temporary 8th floor all gender restrooms, the nearest all gender restroom to Barrows Hall was in Stephens Hall (or Anthony Hall, during their very limited hours of operation).

What about the need for single-gender restroom access for religious modesty and practices like those involved in ablution?

With the change of the 6th floor men’s restroom to an all gender restroom, the 5th and 7th floor restrooms remained assigned to women. The 4th floor remains assigned to men and the 8th floor has one designated for women and one for men. In addition the first floor, the floor with the greatest traffic, continues to have two multi-stall single-gender restrooms.

Won’t it be awkward?

Perhaps far less awkward than the ways in which you already mix company in restrooms with your advisors who write recommendations for you, your bosses who control your time, administrators who control your budgets, your elders who know more than you, or your students who admire you or aspire to replace you. If you are concerned that mixing genders in a restroom introduces an element of sexual desire or tension into the space, consider for a moment that restrooms are not segregated by sexual or romantic orientation but by gender, which bears no deterministic relationship to that body’s pleasures.

I don’t want to share a restroom with people who do not share my individual gender identity. What should I do?

If you do not wish to use a bathroom open to all genders, you can continue traveling to the 5th floor or 7th floor restrooms designated for women-only or you can travel to the 4th floor to use a

restroom designated for men-only. If you think that traveling two floors is too much of a burden, please imagine for a moment that most buildings on this campus have *no* all gender restrooms and workers who need such bathrooms must travel across campus to those few and far between restrooms marked for “all gender.” Adding an all gender restroom in Barrows Hall on a floor accessible by all elevators is simply a step toward equity.

I am primarily concerned with safety. What is the safest option here?

The safest course of action is to make sure that anyone can access a restroom within a reasonable distance to their worksite at all times. The unreasonable distance that folks requiring all gender restroom access must travel has been known to result in adverse health affects such as kidney infections, dehydration and psychological duress.

Single-gender restrooms are highly policed spaces where restroom users that do not fit or abide by the logic of binary gender identity (attached to things like dress codes, hair cuts, body shape, etc.) are subject to harassment and threat or actual violence.

The myth that men will take advantage of women in all gender restrooms has been widely circulated by right-wing media and trans exclusionary radical feminists. According to a 2014 survey by *MediaMatters.org* collecting information from 12 states that have passed non-discrimination laws in public accommodations, there have been no instances of the above-mentioned problem.

On the other hand, violence against transgender and gender non-conforming people is all too common. According to UCLA School of Law’s William Institute’s recently published study, “Gendered Restrooms and Minority Stress: The Public Regulation of Gender and its Impact on Transgender People’s Lives”:

- “Eighteen percent of respondents have been denied access to at least one gender-segregated public restroom in Washington, DC,” with African Americans experiencing this slightly more often than their counterparts. (71)
- “Sixty-eight percent of respondents reported experiencing at least one instance of verbal harassment in gender-segregated public restrooms,” with black respondents at the second highest rate (87%). (72)
- “Eight respondents (9 percent) reported experiencing at least one instance of physical assault in gender-segregated public restrooms” (73).

For more information on either of the above citations, please visit:

<http://mediamatters.org/research/2014/03/20/15-experts-debunk-right-wing-transgender-bathro/198533>

<http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Herman-Gendered-Restrooms-and-Minority-Stress-June-2013.pdf>

I don’t want to make a political statement. Isn’t leaving the restroom “as-is” the most neutral option?

If we are to take seriously African American freedom struggle activist Fannie Lou Hamer’s historic words “Nobody’s free until everybody’s free” then it is incumbent upon us take action

now to re-designate the 6th floor restroom as “all gender” in light of the ongoing movement on campus and across the UC system to make this basic human function, safer and *unremarkable* for all of our students, faculty, workers, and invited guests and event participants. To refuse to take action on this issue is not a neutral action: it is the explicit re-entrenchment of exclusionary practices that put particular bodies at risk and refuse sanctuary to people in one of their most vulnerable positions: using the restroom.

For more Q&A options, check out: <http://amplifyyourvoice.org/youthresource/youthresource-genderneutralfaq/>