

It's Ableism - Toilets

Cerys Bradley 00:00

Hello and welcome to It's Ableism, a brand new podcast about disability and ableism.

Miggy Barker 00:05

We're here to prove that everything bad in your life is because of ableism, and therefore you, dear listener, are perfect

Cerys Bradley 00:11

Unless you're the person doing the ableism, in which case we're going to teach you how to stop doing the ableism so that you can also be perfect.

Cerys Bradley 00:18

My name is Cerys Bradley. I'm a comedian and a level maths teacher also, and a writer and podcaster, and as the kids say, I have the tism, even though I don't really like expressing autism in that way, because it makes me feel really old.

Miggy Barker 00:32

And my name is Miggy. I am a performer, a writer and I'm a wheelchair user,

Cerys Bradley 00:37

And together, we're making this podcast It's Ableism, to talk about our experiences of being disabled and the ableism we experience, but in like, a fun, cool, sexy way, not like in a let's dump out our trauma for half an hour, kind of way that's important. We're gonna have a nice time.

Miggy Barker 00:50

In our first ever episode, we will be talking about toilets.

Cerys Bradley 00:54

Okay, we're gonna start with ableism of the week. This is where we both share a thing that has happened to us, which we think is ableist. And because I'm a very competitive person, one of us is going to win this conversation. So Miggy, what ableism have you experienced this week?

Miggy Barker 01:08

So today, actually, I've had to report a repair for my house because it's falling apart, and because I am disabled, it is listed in my council that I have to be an emergency basically every time there's something wrong, which is great, ideally, it means that I get seen to faster. But the way emergencies work is you just have to wait for someone to appear within, like, 24 to 48 hours. So they just expect disabled people to just be at home all the time, and then when they don't show up, it's fine, because you were there

anyway, and they keep putting it off, and it's very annoying. I actually had someone come up to my door as we were about to start recording this. It's great.

Cerys Bradley 02:00

And then you've had to say, I'm sorry. You have to go away. I'm recording a podcast, and so I can't let you fix my door right now.

Cerys Bradley 02:09

I mean, I think, I think that that does suck, and it is ableist, but also, ultimately, you are complaining about being a priority in terms of getting things fixed. So I don't know how many ableist points you actually get for that.

Miggy Barker 02:09

Yeah, pretty much. And then they look confused because you're busy, and it's like, yeah, I do things too. It's a Friday, it's a it's a weekday. During work hours, like not all disabled people work. I don't work. But like, come on.

Miggy Barker 02:38

This is, this is true, however, however, in my defense, again, ideally they come within 24 to 48 hours. The fact that he showed up today is so unusual. Normally, I call up, like, days later, go. Wasn't someone supposed to come fix something, like, important, like, I don't have water, or whatever the issue is when it's an actual emergency as well, and they're like, Oh, yeah. So we, like, reported it, but we didn't, like put it on the list. So we know there's a problem, but we forgot to tell anyone to come fix it. Sorry. Let's do it now. And it's like, great.

Cerys Bradley 03:11

So you just waited for 48 hours for nothing to happen.

Miggy Barker 03:14

Yeah, happens a lot, actually.

Cerys Bradley 03:17

My ableism of the week is, and it's, it's a self own. It's a self ableism, which was the thing happened to me last week where I had an argument with someone, and I worried that the reason why we had this argument was because of ableism, because the argument was about this person sort of saying one thing to me, but then actually meaning another thing. And I was supposed to know that the thing that they said originally was this other thing, which lots of people were like, yeah, obviously, when they say this, they mean this other thing. But I'm like, but they said that thing in the first place. And so then I was, I was like, Maybe I'm getting yelled at because this person doesn't really understand how autism works. And then I worried that by thinking that what was happening was ableism, it meant that if I had been a bad person, that I would be excusing my bad behavior. And so I talked myself out of looking at this situation from like a disability perspective, until I was talking to you about it, and then I was like, this thing happened. And then you were like, that sounds quite ableist. And I was like, isn't it, though? And then I felt bad, because I needed someone else's permission to tell me that it was ableist in order for

me to recognize that it's ableist. So this is quite like, it's quite a niche one this week, because this entire thing happened in my head. But that is my ableism of the week.

Miggy Barker 04:42

You say that's niche though, I feel like, I feel like that happensto lots of people like, I feel, I mean, I feel like, generally, we play down like disabilities and impairments and everything, because it's like, well, everyone else is fine, actually so I'm the problem, but that's not the case, and that's absolutely not the point of what we're talking about. So no, it's not niche.

Miggy Barker 05:07

Wow, that's nice, I was totally gonna say that you could win.

Miggy Barker 05:07

Okay, so this next bit is a segment called, is it ableism? And given that the name of this show is It's Ableist. The answer will always be yes.

Cerys Bradley 05:07

But it is still worth having the conversation, right?

Miggy Barker 05:07

Because it's about the journey, the journey which often has multiple access barriers to overcome on the way to the destination. This is the segment in which we explore the structural ableism that we encounter in our everyday lives. From very obvious to the is it even ableist?

Cerys Bradley 05:07

As this is our first episode, we thought we would start with something obvious.

Cerys Bradley 05:07

I feel like the diagnosed as autistic as an adult journey is you spend most of your life with people telling you that you are an asshole and worrying that you're an asshole, and then you get your diagnosis, and then you're like, Finally, I'm not an asshole, I'm autistic. And then you have this excuse where you get to run around being like, I can't be an asshole, I'm just autistic. And then you reach a wall there where you realize that you're gonna have to spend the rest of your life trying to work out in which situations you are actually the asshole in which situations like it is a miscommunication because of autism, and I don't think that, like, I didn't sign up for that level of stress. So that's, that's what I feel like I'm looking at now. And basically every time I have a disagreement with someone, I sort of go through the motions of, is what's happened here, that there's been a miscommunication, because we're both thinking about the situation differently because we're sort of operating different software. Or was I just being a prick, which, like it does, you can't discount that. That could still be the reason... So what we have on the table is the council expecting you to wait 48 hours in your flat in order for them to fix something that you need, in order to live safely in your flat, and just expecting you to drop everything and then, of course, turning up at the least helpful time, if at all, versus me worrying that I might be a bad person and talking myself out of thinking about like how autism affects my way of communicating with other people, just in terms of the impact that those two things have on our individual lives, I guess on this particular

occasion, your ableism of the week is worse than my ableism of the week. And I will, I will, I will give you the point this time. That's what I personally think.

Cerys Bradley 05:12

Is it ableist that I can't pee in public?

Cerys Bradley 05:13

Yes, if you're talking about a lack of access to public toilets, no, if you're asking why you can't just drop your trousers and piss in the streets, I think that's a different, different conversation, although there is the new BBC series, which does have someone changing a catheter in an alleyway, so which was because of ableism. So we are going to talk about accessible toilets, public toilets, disabled toilets, and also having a wee in the street. Miggy. Why is it ableist that you can't pee in public? Do you have any good stories about not being able to use the toilet in public?

Miggy Barker 08:23

I well, it mostly is just, every time I try and go to any sort of event, I have to chase down someone to find where the accessible toilet is, and it's usually full of like, storage stuff, or it's broken or closed and it's not been looked at for ages, or they're like, Oh, you go next door. Or there just isn't one, but you can use this one. It's only so many steps in. And I just think it's really funny that especially for like events like night venues, like clubs and pubs and spaces where, like, cabaret stuff happens, like what I do with my life, basically, that the places that want you to drink a lot of alcohol so that they can meet their bar spends don't have a place where I can pee. I'm not going to drink if I can't, you know, it's a process. We know how the human body works a little bit. And the amount of times I'll ask, and people will be confused that that is a thing I need, is weird, if not just upsetting.

Cerys Bradley 09:31

The idea that there would be, like an accessible toilet, where the toilet itself is accessible, but it is up some steps, I find, personally, hilarious, because someone built that toilet, yeah, someone had to carry all of their equipment up those steps in order to build that toilet.

Miggy Barker 09:47

I think that what happens is they do that going and we can, like, add a ramp in, and then they forget that they have to actually get the ramp. It's like, we'll get to that. That'll happen.

Cerys Bradley 09:58

You don't bring your own ramp on your wheelchair?

Miggy Barker 10:01

No, I have considered it though, genuinely, they're a bit heavy, though, when they're good.

Cerys Bradley 10:05

I've seen, I've seen those ones where, like, there's wheelchairs that have their own ramp, like that comes out of them, or the the wheelchairs that turn into the like robot legs so that you can walk up stairs.

Miggy Barker 10:17

They scare the hell out of me.

Cerys Bradley 10:18

Why don't you have one of those?

Miggy Barker 10:22

That is on me. I should just have more technologically advanced wheelchairs, clearly.

Cerys Bradley 10:29

The like accessible toilet which exists, but because it's being used for something else, is something that I definitely have had a lot of experiences with. So whether or not that it's a toilet which is just being used as a store cupboard, or it's out of order, or whatever is... I work in a school which it doesn't have enough toilets anyway, it doesn't have enough toilets, and because I'm non binary, I don't like using toilets specifically for men, toilets specifically for women. And we have gender neutral toilets in the school, but they're like, every - there's one every other floor, and then I also have IBS. And so whilst I don't need the like space of an accessible toilet, I do need the convenience of an accessible toilet. Because if I've got a busy day teaching and I'm having some stomach problems, like, I basically just need to be able to go when I need to go. But because we don't have very much space in the school that I work in, both toilet wise, but also like, spaces for kids to exist when they're in between classes, like, a lot of children tend to just just camp out in the toilet, which I'm not judging them for, because I was definitely like a kid who wanted to hide in the toilets. And I think toilets are like a really good like, if you're in a public space, and it's very if I'm finding it very like, sensorially overwhelming knowing that there's a toilet cubicle I can basically just go sit in that is one space where you can get a little bit of privacy and quiet. So I don't judge the kids for having their lunches on the floor of disabled toilets or just kind of like nesting in there, but it means that if it's a break time, or like a lunchtime, I cannot use the bathroom. So on days where I'm teaching every single period, like it's just well I can't I can't eat, I can't drink. But sometimes if I don't eat, that causes stomach issues. So I have to, what I actually have to do is eat the exact amount that my body wants on that day. And it's really bad at telling me what that is. And that is quite, quite stressful, because we already have a shortage of accessible toilets, and then the ones that we do have you can't even access anyway.

Miggy Barker 12:46

I completely get the like, only eating like, that balance of like, enough that you have been fed, but not so much that you're creating a problem. Because, again, like, if I go to spaces without accessible toilets, I just don't drink enough water, like I just don't drink because I'm like, well, if I need to go and I can't go, then what? So I guess I just won't need to go then. And that's not good. That's not good for your body. And, like, in the same way that holding it when you need to go isn't good for your body, which I think people forget, like, it's not a good idea. Don't do it. Yeah. So, like, I'll spend evenings just like, not drinking enough, which is bad and we should stop it. But it kind of sounds like your school. I mean, like you say, just needs more toilets, but also just needs more space for these kids to hang out, and also possibly, like quiet spaces for them to hang out, this kind of sounds like a sensory issue, maybe?

Cerys Bradley 13:48

I think it's so we there's been a massive decline in all types of public toilets, but that includes accessible and disabled loos of all kinds in general over the last decade or so due to austerity measures. But this is like situated in a wider problem of the fact that there are less public spaces where you don't have to pay to be there, and you're allowed to stay for a long time. So like one of the main arguments that people often give to justify why they're not making more accessible toilets, public toilets is because of the amount of time and energy and effort that goes into stopping them from being misused or vandalized. So disabled loos are more likely to be used, like for people who are houseless, or maybe like rough sleeping, they might sleep there, or people are more likely to kind of like shelter there, or do drugs there, or any of the other kinds of activities where you want privacy, but you don't have, like a private space in order to do that. And that's that's not the toilets fault. That is the fact that we don't have enough spaces in society for those people to be doing that. So to deny people who need access to those toilets in order to be in public spaces, those toilets because as a society, we are failing like vulnerable people who need other kinds of shelter, seems like, quite like, an unfair kind of passing of that burden. Because, as you say, like, if you don't have, there are some people who, if you don't have access to a toilet, you just don't get to go outside.

Miggy Barker 15:32

Yeah, and you're completely right. Like the idea of, oh, well, this, this facility that we have is being used incorrectly because there aren't proper facilities for other people and what they need. And then, so let's just get rid of them. Let's just have less things. Yeah, let's just keep minimizing what's possible. And then, yeah, and people wonder why you don't see more wheelchair users outside or going to events or being out past 5pm because even when there are accessible toilets that are public, they get closed, they get locked up at like five most of the time, which is, like,

Cerys Bradley 16:13

past your bedtime?

Miggy Barker 16:13

Ridiculous. The idea that like - past my bedtime, clearly, I, yeah, that's, that's when I go to sleep. Definitely, I live in a tiny village in coastal England, that is when I go home. Like, the idea of, like, on trains as well. Like, you get a train home, you get off the train the station, everything shut down, except for, like, a couple shops, but the trains are still running. So you're still, you know, people are still around, but those people can't do anything, and I feel like it's that, but, like, just in life.

Cerys Bradley 16:50

Yeah, I've been, I've been reading quite a lot for this episode about sort of the history of toilets and the history of publicly available toilets, and they do have, like quite a long legacy of being used as a tool, whether purposefully or not purposely, to decide who gets to be in what spaces and when. So the first kind of public toilets were built for men in kind of Victorian England, and they were very specifically, men's toilets and women did not have public, publicly available loos, which was a way of like this was both used to prevent women from, you know, like meeting in spaces, but also, like, then a justification for why they couldn't go out and about, so the same things that you're talking about now for like, if I want to go to that bar, I'm not going to be able to drink, I have to come home by a certain time. This is a

repetitive cycle of groups of people in society, and one of the first people to kind of like organize around it were, were women in that time period who demanded public toilets. But we see the same conversation then happening when you have segregated toilets where you can decide like this is a white only space. You don't have to necessarily say that it's a white only space. But if you don't have any toilets that people who aren't white can't use then it becomes that, or like lack of access to gender neutral or safe bathrooms. You don't have to ban trans people from being in public spaces. If you make a space difficult for you to pee, then people self select out of those spaces, so toilets become like a really, really useful tool in terms of saying, these are the kind of people that we want to be in this space. And I think what's really interesting about the current movement to get more public accessible toilets is is that a lot of the people who are spearheading that campaign are parents of disabled children, which means that you mostly get those toilets in kind of like family spaces. So what that says about disabled people is that we are dependents. Like it just becomes a really effective way of saying like, this is what we expect of disabled people in society. For you to be home, tucked up in bed at 5pm waiting for the council to come around and fix the door, and that we don't expect you to be like sexual beings or people who are out in the night life.

Miggy Barker 19:35

I never would have thought that public toilets came out of like, like, they started as a segregated thing anyway. Like, that's but like, it makes perfect sense. And of course, like you were saying about the like, racially segregation of toilets, the same with like, water fountains and all of that that we should know about very well. Like, it makes, it makes sense that that is where, like, this came from, and it just hasn't gone away. It just hasn't stopped. But, like, I never would have put those two things together.

Cerys Bradley 20:10

So I read a really interesting study, which was by an academic running a Transgender Politics and Community Activism course at the University of Michigan who basically, like, did a project to get undergraduate students to kind of think about designing an accessible toilet, and then, like, thinking about all the all the decisions that you have to make when you're making an accessible toilet. So how far away are you going to put the toilet roll so that people can reach it, and what, is the appropriate length there? Because for some people, being able to lean and reach is like that's a different calculation for other people, depending on your strength and your balance and the length of your arms and all of these things. So when you're building not just an accessible toilet, but any toilet, like, where you put that toilet roll, basically is saying this is the length that we expect people to be able to lean. And so, like, public toilets as a space where they are tells you where you where society expects disabled people to be. But then when you're actually in the toilet, is also saying, like, this is the kind of body that we are building this for.

Miggy Barker 21:20

Right, and an extension of that is within like wheelchair accessible toilets, the idea that there are certain kinds of wheelchair that won't fit into most accessible toilets. I was in the hospital last week, and I couldn't get into the accessible toilet and out again without breaking a bin. That is in hospital. I was in a hospital. I was in the spinal unit of that hospital, like it was specific for people who are more likely to be wheelchair users. There are wheelchairs everywhere, and I could not use the bathroom and and that, again, is like, the idea of like, the size of the chair would indicate the size of the person, but also the

size of the chair indicates like, how much support you need. Like, the bigger your chair means it's probably an electric one, means that you probably have less mobility. But that, to me, indicates that you would need more space, because you're more likely to have someone in the toilet with you, to support you. And it's like, it's just nothing matches up. The amount of times like the idea of thinking so specifically around, like where the the toilet paper hanger goes, or where the hand dryer is in relation to people reaching is like, amazing, and should be done. The amount of times I use bathrooms that the hand dryer is basically as close to the ceiling as you can get. Like someone standing would have to raise their arms to use it. And it's like, on one hand, you have different disabled people have different needs, have different abilities within that. And you don't want to make it possible for one person and make it not possible for another, because that's against the point. But then there's just nonsense like that, of like, yeah, well, we'll put the armrest over the dispenser so that you have to, like, grapple with this thing that's bolted into the wall to actually get what you need. Yeah, it's just, yeah, it's silly.

Miggy Barker 21:44

I think it's, it's a lot of evidence that, like, disabled people, aren't in the room when these things are being designed,

Miggy Barker 23:26

oh, 100%

Cerys Bradley 23:28

or at the very least, that there's not a wide variety, like enough of a variety. So one of the things I've been reading about is, you know, having having hooks on the wall for colostomy(?)

Miggy Barker 23:40

Oh, you've said it like that now so I don't know how you say it [laughing]

Cerys Bradley 23:43

yeah, yeah, that's my bad, I think I went in too confident on the word and yeah. So like having and having hoists and things like that, which do enable independence, which people are asking for but they're not like, they're not allowed in this in the kind of design room, or they they have not got access to the design room to make these spaces more accessible. And I think it's really interesting, because I'm not, you know, making the argument that people are doing this consciously, like people aren't sitting down and, well, I do genuinely think that some people are sitting down and saying, we need to ban gender neutral bathrooms in certain spaces so that trans people won't go there. But I think in general, people aren't having the conversation of like, if we don't provide this, then we won't have to look at disabled people in certain spaces. But I think that there is it's really interesting how toilets reflect societal views on certain groups of people. So this idea that, like, there are urinals that pop out of the street around pubs in the nighttime for men to or like, well, I was gonna, I was gonna be, like, politically correct about it, and say, like, people have penises, but actually it's, it's men, that's what they're designed for.

Miggy Barker 24:56

It's cis men.

Cerys Bradley 25:02

Yeah, exactly. Men coming out of pubs late at night who're pissing in the street. And the solution to that was, well, let's just provide them toilets that they can pee in, because, you know, boys will be boys. We can't stop them. Whereas, when people are asking for more access, then there's, you know, this very long list of things that we need to like, hoops we have to jump through, and, you know, we don't have the resources to do that right now. And what if people use it as, like a place to sleep overnight and things like that? And I think that, yeah, toilets like, reflect back who we prioritize and what behavior we enable and don't think is justified.

Miggy Barker 25:41

I wonder if, I mean, maybe we all just start pissing in the street.

Cerys Bradley 25:48

I have been reading about some really great dirty protests. If you would like to hear about the dirty protests?

Miggy Barker 25:53

please, yes!

Cerys Bradley 25:53

So, because I was looking at like, you know, we can't talk about how the situation is terrible with toilets and then not be like, here are things that you can do, and there are lots of really great campaigns to get involved in. So there's the Changing Places like Toilets Campaign, which is basically just an organized campaign where if collectively people ask for a particular kind of disabled toilet called a changing places toilet, we can create a demand for those and then Public Toilets UK also is just like we need more public toilets generally. So that's another way of getting involved. But I read about two Paralympians. One is Annie Wafula Strike who she in 2017 she she pissed herself in her seat on a cross country train, because there was no accessible toilets, and she, like, didn't set out to get on a train and then wet herself, but in the choice between, like, holding it and possibly hurting herself and making a mess, she prioritized her body, which I think is great. And then Susi Rogers-Hartley, who's another Paralympian, in 2015 she was 3am in the morning, she was denied access to the disabled toilet at a petrol station. Had this argument with the member of staff who wouldn't let her use the toilet, and so she went onto the forecourt, made eye contact with a CCTV camera and pissed on the forecourt of the petrol station because, like, she knew that she was entitled to use that toilet. And I think people very rarely get confronted with the reality of not providing for people's bodies. And so that's two examples of people being like, you know, I'm going to prioritize my body over this organization, which I think is good.

Miggy Barker 27:46

That's amazing. That's so cool. I mean, it's also absolutely heartbreaking that it had to come to that, right? The idea that you're sitting on a train what on your way home?

Cerys Bradley 27:56

or, like, on your way to the thing!

Miggy Barker 27:58

yeah, worse, actually, and just like, Yeah, I have to piss myself. So as to not, you know, damage myself internally, yeah? And then, so this is the best course of action I have. I mean, it's great that that happened in a way, that there is traction around it, and it's being seen as a protest and being used to talk about this stuff

Cerys Bradley 28:17

yeah, as opposed to a disabled person not being in control of their body, like, it's just such a it's such a frustrating situation. So yeah, I think the conclusion of that is you can either write to your MP or piss yourself in a public place,

Miggy Barker 28:32

both?

Cerys Bradley 28:32

or both - piss on your MP, maybe that...

Miggy Barker 28:36

or find your MP and piss in front of them on the street.

Cerys Bradley 28:40

I was thinking about this today and like, whether or not I would be prepared to but I have a very shy bladder. Like, the idea that I really worry that if I went to do a dirty protest, I would just have to be like, can everyone give me a minute please? Can someone just turn on the sound of a tap so that I can make this happen? That's why, I worry.

Miggy Barker 29:00

God, I love that. See when I need to go, I do need to go, so I'd have to time it right and I'd have to drink a lot of water. And again, me because of my disability, me doing that is actually still bad for my body, so maybe I just shouldn't do it at all. Maybe I should just be nice to myself, but pissing myself is better than not pissing myself in that instance. So...

Cerys Bradley 29:24

A very interesting thing that I read about autism recently is so like so for context, I was diagnosed in the got my diagnosis in the pandemic in 2020 but I, you know, had been on a waiting list for four years, and so it's a thing that I've been thinking about for the majority of my adult life, but I feel like since I started talking about it publicly, probably just my algorithms have changed, and so now I get a lot more autism based info on like Instagram and things. And I was reading the other day about how there's a theory that autistic people have different like, notifications from the body. So if you are autistic, maybe your experience is that you don't realize that you need the toilet until you need the toilet and and it's, it's like, very much like a binary thing, like, either I am desperate for the toilet or I don't need it at all. Whereas other people are like, oh, you know, I reckon my bladder is like 70% full. Maybe I'll, I'll have a wee now.

Which, looking back makes me realize how I always found the the question of, like, when you're a kid, when your parents are like, do you need the toilet? Or like, You should go now, just in case, such a bizarre I like, if I need the toilet, I will need the I've only ever, I've basically only ever been desperate for the loo. I've never had, like, any kind of in between feeling. And I don't know whether or not that's an autism thing or not, because I'm quite skeptical of 90% of the bizarre symptoms that Instagram tells me about. But that was a thing that I was reading about.

Miggy Barker 31:02

I mean, it would make sense in the in the idea of, like, the there are other things that the list of priorities, right? Like, yeah, that's lower down on the list.

Cerys Bradley 37:29

You've been listening to It's Ableism. I've been Cerys

Miggy Barker 37:32

and I've been Miggy...

Cerys Bradley 37:33

This is a podcast produced by Little Wander.

Reading list

If you enjoyed this podcast, here is a list of sources and further reading that you might also enjoy.

Bathrooms and Beyond: Expanding a Pedagogy of Access in Trans/Disability Studies

Casius Adair's [Bathrooms and Beyond: Expanding a Pedagogy of Access in Trans/Disability Studies](#) (An account of running a project on making toilets more accessible as part of a Transgender Politics and Community Activism course at University of Michigan.)

Jones, Slater, Cleasby, Kemp, Lisney, and Rennie: [PISSED OFF! Disability activists fighting for toilet access in the UK](#) (a book chapter about the significance of toilets in disabled people's lives) and Slater, Jones and Proctor: [Why public toilets just aren't good enough | Sheffield Hallam University](#). Also this blog [So Bad Ass](#) by Sam Cleasby.

An [article](#) about the history of toilets and women's rights by Grace Phiri.