Basic services can protect and empower women

“We want to live in a society where women feel safe and are safe”, President Ramaphosa said in his Women’s Day address this month. This statement stands in stark contrast to the experience of women in informal settlements where poor service delivery exposes them to many vulnerabilities and risks. One resident told us: “It’s not safe, anyone can attack me or my child ... females can be raped as well. People do more crime in the dark because we can hardly identify them.”

Asivikelane #20 shows that for women access to basic services in informal settlements is closely tied to safety. In metropolitan municipalities, 74% of female residents reported feeling unsafe using municipal toilets at night and 24% feel unsafe doing so during the day. They face physical risk because toilets often don't have doors, are poorly located and dangerous to access in the dark. 84% of residents also told us that there is not enough public lighting in their settlement. What’s more, women face health hazards because toilets are dirty or are cleaned with dangerous chemicals.

In almost 60% of cases women are responsible for collecting water from communal sources such as taps, water tanks and water trucks. For 35% of residents, it takes more than 20 minutes to collect water because communal taps are too far and too few. But for many it is much worse. Often residents must wait in line and “it can take up to 3 hours when the line is very long”. Many women also collect water more than once a day due to other chores like cooking, cleaning and laundry.

Water and sanitation budget and policy documents make no reference to gender. The result is gender-blind service delivery and that women have unequal access to basic services. Asivikelane now covers 255 informal settlements in all the big cities and 63% of participants are women. We therefore invite government to talk to us so that we can jointly find ways to provide gender-responsive services. Every tap and every toilet represents an opportunity to protect and empower women.