KNYSNA COMMUNITIES PAVE THE WAY FOR FEMALE-FRIENDLY SANITATION

ASIVIKELANE WESTERN CAPE is laying the foundation for female-friendly sanitation in Knysna’s informal settlements. Asivikelane Community Facilitators Siphosethu Mamayo and Martina (Martie) Tietties have carried out an initiative for separate toilets for males and females across three informal settlements – Nkandla, Soccer Valley, and Uitsig. Their efforts are helping to make sanitation safer for women and children.

WHY SEPARATE TOILETS ARE SAFER

More than 35% of Knysna’s informal settlement residents rely on portable chemical toilets. Chemical toilets are meant to be a temporary solution, but often become permanent fixtures in informal settlements. A single toilet is usually shared amongst several households, with no separation of facilities by gender.

Many women have voiced concerns that shared sanitation is unsanitary and unsafe. “Toilets are not cleaned regularly, and men often leave toilets dirty after using them,” explained Martie. She knows of several women who have contracted infections because toilets are unhygienic. As a result, women visit local clinics more frequently for treatment. This places an extra health burden on women and a resource burden on clinics.

Women and girls also worry about the risk of violent crimes like assault and robbery when using toilets, particularly at night. Communal toilets are hotspots for crime, especially when they are clustered and placed in isolated locations with no surveillance. Poor public lighting and the lack of lights in and around toilets is a major concern, especially at night. Load shedding makes the situation worse. Residents believe that gender-separated toilets, located closer to where they live, will make it safer for them.

The experiences of the women in Knysna informal settlements are not unique. 75% of females who participate in Asivikelane National (which covers 292 informal settlements across South Africa’s eight metros) say they feel unsafe using communal toilets at night, and 25% feel unsafe during the day. 62% of residents say that separate toilets would improve safety in their community.
GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT DRIVES CHANGE

Asivikelane Community Facilitators Martie and Siphosethu receive regular advocacy training from Development Action Group, the lead partner organisation for Asivikelane Western Cape. They applied their skills to improve conditions in their communities. “I noticed there were ten families sharing one toilet and I know the municipality’s policy is a maximum of five families sharing a toilet. So I asked the ward councillor for more toilets,” Martie shared. The ward councillor Hilton Stroebel made a formal request to the municipality’s Director of Integrated Human Settlements and, within a few weeks, two chemical toilets were delivered. “When the new toilets arrived, I saw the opportunity to make it safer by having separate toilets for men and women,” Martie explained.

In the past, the municipality installed toilets with little or no community consultation, resulting in toilets being placed in dark, unsafe areas. This time around, residents decided. “We chose a visible area, a safe spot for the women’s toilet to be located,” said Martie.

Siphosethu added that Asivikelane Western Cape’s monthly survey, which asks questions about sanitation, brought attention to safety concerns around shared toilets. In early 2023, she met with local ward councillor Pindile Petros to advocate for separate toilets. With his support, the Nkandla community now has clearly marked, gender-separated toilets. “Community members were involved throughout the initiative,” she explained, noting that the good relationship with the ward councillor helped move things forward. She hopes that all informal settlements in Knysna will implement this approach.
FEMALE-FRIENDLY SERVICES CAN HELP TO PROTECT WOMEN

A few weeks in, this female-friendly solution was already making a difference for all. “The residents were very happy and excited about this initiative, especially women because they feel safer, and children use the toilets without being monitored,” said Siphosethu.

Several women have also said they no longer get infections. Having separate toilets has given them more privacy and improved their well-being.

This community-led initiative is a small step in the right direction. It lays a foundation for further solutions to make sanitation in informal settlements safe and sustainable. Residents are best placed to advise on solutions, and they ask government to talk to them. Some of their ideas include increasing the number of toilets provided, improving the quality of sanitation, ensuring that there is sufficient lighting and sanitary waste disposal, as well as more water access to facilitate better hygiene.

Asivikelane will continue to advocate for female-friendly services across Knysna and the rest of South Africa, to protect women and girls. Many services in informal settlements are delivered through a procurement process. The specifications for these contracts should be based on a needs assessment, but this step is often undertaken without consulting residents. We are working with government and communities to prioritise women’s needs throughout the procurement process – because when women are included in decisions about services, it leads to safer and healthier outcomes for all.

Training and advocacy material used to promote female-friendly services and the prioritization of women in procurement. Find it on our website here: asivikelane.org/publications/guides