

IMPROVING THE LIVES OF WOMEN IN INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS STARTS WITH FIXING BASIC SERVICES

by Tracy Jooste and Nonhlanhla Mathibela, October 2020

Exposure to social, economic and health risks is common when living in informal settlements, but gender inequalities result in a lack of basic services disproportionately affecting the lives of women and girls.

Research shows that women are worse off than their male counterparts in terms of access to employment, health care, housing, and educational completion.¹ They also face a high risk of gender-based violence due to the insecure environment in which they live.² Furthermore, women regularly experience barriers to accessing sexual and reproductive health services, which increases their risk of HIV and other infections. These gender disparities have long existed, and the coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated the outcomes.³

The South African government has made numerous pledges to protect women and girls against gender-based violence and to promote gender equality on all fronts. Yet women continue to struggle for equitable and safe access to services and socioeconomic opportunities. This is because current policy and implementation does not adequately consider their rights and needs, especially as it relates to informal settlements.

This brief draws on data from our Asivikelane initiative, as well as other research, to show the impact of poor service delivery on the health and safety of women and argues that improving the quality of life of women starts with getting the basics right – clean and safe access to services.



¹UN Women (2020), accessible at: <https://data.unwomen.org/features/covid-19-exposes-harsh-realities-gender-inequality-slums>

²UNAIDS (2019), accessible at: https://www.unaids.org/en/resources/presscentre/featurestories/2019/march/20190318_riseclub

³UN Women (2020), accessible at: <https://data.unwomen.org/features/covid-19-exposes-harsh-realities-gender-inequality-slums>

BETTER WATER AND SANITATION ACCESS WILL IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE FOR ALL – BUT ESPECIALLY WOMEN

Through the Asivikelane findings, we gain insight into the role and experiences of women in informal settlements, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. **The results gathered over the last six months show that across the metros there is significant room to improve access to water and sanitation.** In the latest results, an average of 63% of residents across seven metro municipalities indicated that there is sufficient water for everyone in their settlement. Even more concerning is the fact that only 60% of residents said that the municipality has cleaned their toilets in the last seven days.⁴

The lack of both sufficient water and communal toilet access places residents at significant risk of infection. Broken taps and dirty toilets are recurring problems in many informal settlements. The fact that a single toilet and tap is usually shared by dozens of households increases that risk, making it unsurprising that informal settlements quickly emerged as hotspots for infection across South African cities. Government’s preventative measures, such as staying at home, handwashing, good hygiene maintenance and practicing social distancing, are exceedingly difficult to implement in these densely populated and poverty-stricken areas.⁵

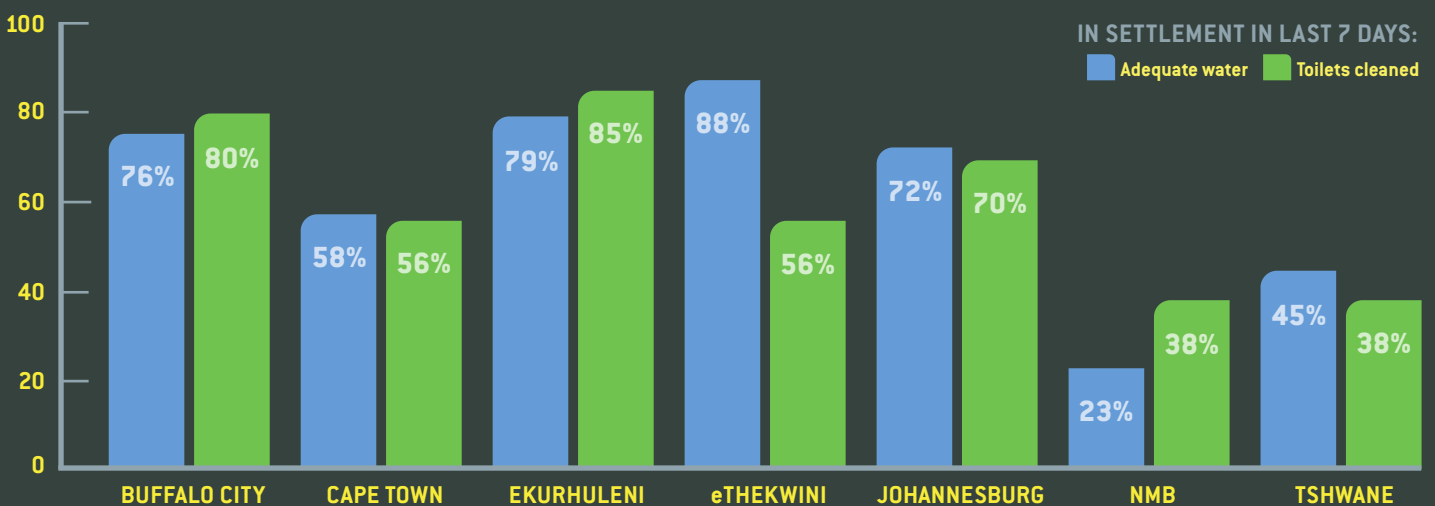


No water for two weeks in Mountain View (City of Johannesburg), July 2020

“We have to walk long distances to access the working taps.”

Female resident from Philippi East, Cape Town

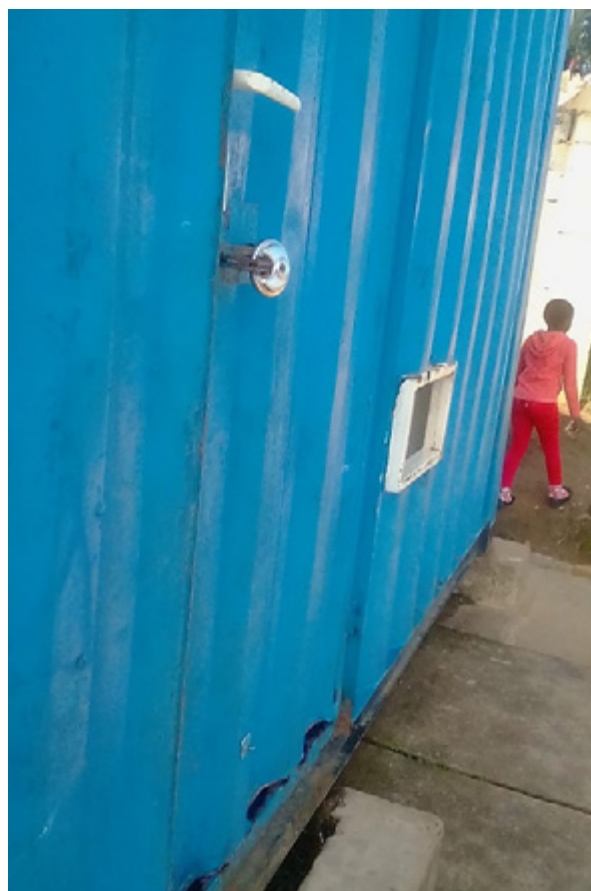
Access to water and clean toilets as at 23 September 2020



⁴ The latest round of Asivikelane data covered 683 residents from 217 informal settlements across seven metros. For more visit: <https://www.internationalbudget.org/covid-monitoring/>
⁵ UN Women (2020), accessible at: <https://data.unwomen.org/features/covid-19-exposes-harsh-realities-gender-inequality-slums>

“It is not safe for women and children as there are no toilets.”

Female resident from Plastic View, Tshwane



Duffs Road (eThekweni)



Indluyomlilo (eThekweni)



Block 6, Browns Farm (City of Tshwane)



Block 6, Browns Farm (City of Tshwane)



Cape Town

Locked and unused, doorless, dirty and unhygienic: examples of poor sanitary conditions in informal settlements, April to August 2020

Everyone living in an informal settlement will feel the benefits of improved water and sanitation access. However, because of the role women play in their household and community, they will experience the greatest gains. A study of informal settlements in South Africa showed that it is typically women who perform service delivery duties, such as collecting water and managing the use of water for a range of purposes, including cooking, cleaning and washing.⁶ This is not unique to the local context, as research from 45 developing countries showed that women shoulder the burden for water collection in almost two thirds of households.⁷

A lack of water and sanitation disadvantages women and girls in particular, in part because of personal hygiene needs related to maintaining female reproductive health.⁸ A significant improvement in the provision of water and sanitation in informal settlements is likely to have important health benefits for women and girls.

Moreover, women are also usually the ones caring for children, the aged and sickly relatives.⁹ The multitude of responsibilities placed on women, and the amount of time needed to carry out these tasks, limits the time and energy available for pursuing paid work.¹⁰ In the long run, this constrains their socioeconomic mobility.

Providing more and easier water and toilet access is a critical step towards protecting the rights of women and girls and will impact their overall quality of life and access to opportunities.

⁶ Dixon, J. [2013], accessible at: https://www.mistraurbanfutures.org/sites/mistraurbanfutures.org/files/moving_through_the_gender_and_floods_at_play.pdf

⁷ WHO [2010], accessible at: https://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/publications/9789241563956/en/

⁸ UNFPA [2020], accessible at: <https://esaro.unfpa.org/en/news/how-girls-informal-settlements-are-coping-menstrual-health-during-south-africas-covid-19>

⁹ South African Department of Women, Youth and Persons with disabilities [2019], accessible at: <http://www.women.gov.za/images/Final-National-Beijing-25-Report-2014-2019--Abridged.pdf>

¹⁰ Dixon, J. [2013], accessible at: https://www.mistraurbanfutures.org/sites/mistraurbanfutures.org/files/moving_through_the_gender_and_floods_at_play.pdf



PROVIDING MORE AND BETTER PUBLIC LIGHTING WILL ALLEVIATE SAFETY RISKS FACED BY WOMEN

Recent research on informal settlements in Cape Town showed that women's main concern was that of safety.¹¹ Results from various social audits undertaken in South Africa show that the insecure environment of many informal settlements heightens their concern because they rely on external communal toilets and taps which were not installed with their security in mind.

The spatial layout of South Africa's informal settlements, as well as the design of this informal housing itself, contributes to the occurrences of crime and violence in these areas. Public lighting has a significant bearing on safety in informal settlements, and women face a particular risk of physical and sexual assault. This risk increases in areas where the location of toilets is at a distance and where crime rates are higher.¹² In a 2016 interview, the Social Justice Coalition's Axolile Notywala explained that "using the toilet in informal settlements is one of the most dangerous activities for residents, and women and children have the biggest problems."¹³ Unsurprisingly, evidence shows that security risks of this nature raise levels of stress and anxiety among women and girls.¹⁴

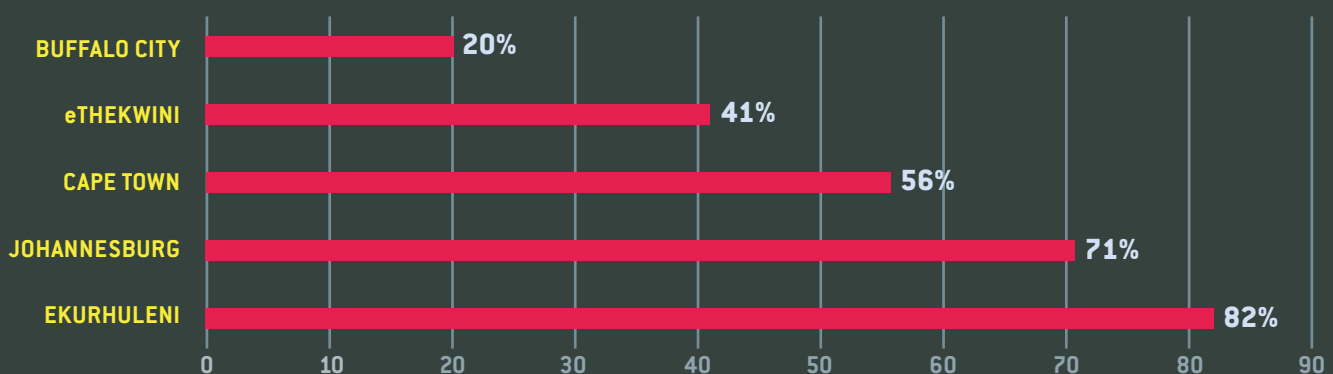
An in-depth case study of an informal settlement in eThekweni showed that the inconvenient and unsafe location of communal ablution blocks aggravates inequalities where vulnerable groups are disproportionately impacted. Poor lighting around the facilities is a major safety risk for women and children at night. The perception of risk shapes how women use these shared facilities.¹⁵ In some cases, women and girls restrict their consumption of food and beverages to limit the need to use the toilet, which leads to other health impacts, such as poor nutrition.¹⁶

Asivikelane data highlights the inconsistent provision of adequate lighting to informal settlements across the metros.¹⁷

A much higher percentage of residents in the City of Ekurhuleni (82%) and City of Johannesburg (71%) indicated a lack of lighting, followed by Cape Town where 56% of residents interviewed said they do not have adequate lighting in their settlement. The risk that this exposes residents to cannot go unnoticed by government.

The provision of more public lighting will have a significant impact on the safety and security of women and children and should be prioritised.

Percentage who responded 'no' to the question: is there adequate lighting in your settlement?



"Streetlights are faulty. No lighting at ablution blocks. It gets dark and dangerous."

Female residents from Kwamashu, eThekweni

¹¹ Weimann, A. *et al* (2020), accessible at: <https://authors.elsevier.com/sd/article/S0197397519309427>

¹² Meth, P. (2017), accessible at: <https://www.urbanet.info/gender-informal-urban-context/>

¹³ Thomas Reuters Foundation (2016), accessible at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-safrica-slums-sanitation-idUSKCN12C1WA>

¹⁴ Sinharoy, S. *et al* (2019), accessible at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0957178719300864>

¹⁵ Parikh, P. *et al* (2020), accessible at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590252020300222>

¹⁶ Jacobs, B. (2017), accessible at: <https://readingroom.law.gsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1009&context=jculp>

¹⁷ Based on Asivikelane data gathered on 26 June 2020.



ECONOMIC DECLINE DISPROPORTIONATELY AFFECTS WOMEN AND THEY MUST BE AT THE HEART OF RECOVERY EFFORTS

South Africa's urban poor has suffered greatly since the closing of the economy in March 2020. Just two weeks into lockdown, 55% of informal settlement residents had no money for food.¹⁸

The effects of lockdown on those working in the informal economy, such as domestic workers, have been especially harsh and many people lost their main source of livelihood over this period. In general, the hardest hit group has been women, since they are overrepresented in the informal economy.¹⁹

Asivikelane's latest results showed 40% of informal settlement households across the five metros indicated that they have lost paid employment since the start of lockdown measures in South Africa. Women were disproportionately affected by this – 57% of those who reported job losses are women.

Women often have more than one job in the informal sector to sustain the livelihood of their families.²⁰ Women's loss of income has a significant impact on the well-being of everyone in the household. One of the harshest consequences of unemployment is food insecurity which soared at the start of the pandemic and continues to plague the urban poor.

Covid-19 is more than a health crisis; it has resulted in social and economic trauma for many and is likely to have a lasting impact. Reviving the informal economy is as important as supporting the formal businesses. For the urban poor and women, it is a matter of survival and they should be at the centre of efforts to stimulate the local economy.

“I run a preschool. During Covid-19 it became very difficult financially. Even now I only have 4 kids attending.”

Female respondent, Nkandla, Buffalo City

WOMEN ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE ENGAGED IN ADVOCACY AND SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES

Beyond their contribution to the household, women in informal settlements often play a significant role in their communities, including engaging in advocacy.²¹

A consistent finding by Asivikelane, across the metros, is that women are significantly more likely to participate in the campaign. On average, 65% of Asivikelane respondents are female. Taken as a proxy for engagement, the findings suggest that women are more likely to play a role in community initiatives and advocacy in informal settlements than their male counterparts.

Playing a leading role in data collection empowers women to advocate for their specific needs and priorities. This also increases their sense of ownership of the data and the engagement process.²²

To address existing inequalities, public policy and budget processes need to be inclusive of women's voices and focused on improving their quality of life, ensuring that resources are available to meet their needs.²³ Women are ready and willing to engage – government just needs to create space for them to do so.

¹⁸ HSRC (2020), accessible at: <http://www.hsrc.ac.za/en/media-briefs/general/lockdown>

¹⁹ UN Women (2020), accessible at: <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Voices%20of%20gender%20equality%20mechanisms%20on%20COVID-19.pdf>

²⁰ Avis, W. (2016), accessible at: <https://gsdrc.org/topic-guides/urban-governance/key-policy-challenges/informal-settlements/>

²¹ Dixon, J. (2013), accessible at: https://www.mistraurbanfutures.org/sites/mistraurbanfutures.org/files/moving_through_the_gender_and_floods_at_play.pdf

²² Cities alliance (2017), accessible at: <https://www.citiesalliance.org/newsroom/news/spotlight/how-data-empowers-women-drive-change-informal-urban-settlements>

²³ UN Women (2020), accessible at: <https://www.endvavnow.org/en/articles/1989-gender-responsive-public-services.html?next=1980>



CONCLUSION

A lack of adequate basic services disproportionately affects women and girls living in informal settlements. Improving the quality and safe access to water and sanitation will have a profound impact on their physical, emotional, and mental well-being. If government is serious about addressing gender inequalities and protecting women – particularly the urban poor – basic services is an essential place to start.



ASIVIKELANE | LET'S PROTECT ONE ANOTHER

Asivikelane is an initiative of several grassroots organisations and CSOs that seeks to give voice to informal settlement residents in South Africa's major cities who face severe basic service shortages during the Covid-19 pandemic. By responding to Asivikelane's questions about their access to water, clean toilets and waste removal, individual residents offer us a window into their daily experiences. Using information gathered through Asivikelane, better engagement with government is possible, as well as advocacy for improved services to informal settlements.



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