

POLICY ANALYSIS

‘Context is Everything’: Permutations of Gender Mainstreaming in the Public Service

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Introduction

The term ‘gender mainstreaming’ is widely used and can have different meanings depending on the context and the individuals involved. For example, it will vary in meaning even among public servants and within government departments, entities, and municipalities. To promote clarity and understanding, it is beneficial to provide clear definitions that apply in various contexts. The Handbook on Gender Mainstreaming for Gender Equality Results defines ‘gender mainstreaming’ as

the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality (United Nations Women 2022: 11).

The definition is meant to be comprehensive, but it is important to tailor definitions to specific contexts to avoid ambiguity. Gender mainstreaming should not be considered in isolation from other aspects of identity. It is ‘intersectional’, shaped by factors such as age, disability, ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, marital status, sexual orientation, and expression (United Nations Women 2022: 63).

These factors significantly influence how one experiences service delivery, and should inform public policy. Intersectional identities can experience multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion due to the interplay of different aspects of an individual’s identity.

The experience of intersectional discrimination is greater than the sum of each of the multiple forms of discrimination (Crenshaw 1989: 140).

For example, a Black transgender person may face discrimination based on their gender and race identity in such a way that the two forms of discrimination overlap with or amplify each other, while a homosexual woman living with a disability may be vulnerable to discrimination based on her sexual orientation, disability, and gender. These additional layers of identity, as noted, significantly influence how one experiences service delivery and, some might argue, should inform how public policy is conceptualised.

When incorporating gender mainstreaming in public policy, broadly understood, it is crucial to recognise and take into account the diverse contexts of public service provision. For human resources (HR) managers in government departments, gender mainstreaming often means promoting gender equality through policy-making and management, and encouraging behaviour that supports equality in the workplace.

In addition, HR managers need to ensure equal protection for employees with minority gender identities in the LGBTQIA+ spectrum. At times, these public servants may need to develop new employee policies, update outdated ones, and organise behavioural interventions such as workshops and information sessions. It can be argued that a workplace that is welcoming to all employees may lead to positive impacts on service delivery, especially for employees whose roles involve interacting with the public.

However, when government officials are asked about how they are applying a gender lens to their workplace, their responses often focus on these HR initiatives rather than the substantive content of their work and how it relates to service-delivery provision to the public.

As a public servant involved in developing and interpreting housing and infrastructure policies, my experience is that the concept of gender mainstreaming carries nuanced meanings for my colleagues and me, meanings which hinge upon the varying contexts in which we discharge our duties. Similarly, the interpretation of gender mainstreaming may be different for technically adept public officials in the housing sector, who are influenced by the specific contexts and objectives of their respective areas of expertise. For technical specialists such as engineers and architects, gender considerations centre on the design and functionality of spaces, which are shaped by spatial and physical dimensions.

As a public policy expert with a background in the social sciences, my responsibilities include contributing theoretical frameworks that underline the necessity of integrating accessibility and inclusivity in infrastructure design. Policy-makers in this realm strive to incorporate user experiences and advocate for technical experts to take into account the physical differences and requirements of various users within spatial dimensions. Therefore, the achievement of gender mainstreaming demands a thorough exploration that encompasses diverse perspectives and layers, as elaborated below.

Gender mainstreaming in housing macro public policy

Section 26 of the Constitution of South Africa guarantees everyone the right to adequate housing. It requires the state to take reasonable legislative and other measures, within its resources, to make this right a reality. The Constitutional Court has interpreted this right to include access to land as well as basic engineering services, and a place to live (a dwelling), rather than just bricks and mortar (see the Grootboom case).

Housing is not solely the responsibility of a single sphere of government but is a concurrent function shared between national and provincial levels. National and provincial governments delegate certain functions to municipalities to facilitate housing provision. The national government sets broad policies, while provinces establish their own policies and perform key tasks, such as disbursing grants and approving subsidies.

Housing responsibilities cover multiple areas listed in Parts A and B of Schedules 4 and 5 of the Constitution, including water, sanitation, and waste management,

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which fall under the jurisdictions of all three spheres of government. In the Western Cape, municipalities play a significant role in delivering completed houses to beneficiaries, including services like water and

sanitation, and in some cases, the construction of homes. However, this level of municipal involvement is not consistent across the country. These are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Housing subsidy qualification criteria

Legal requirements (all must apply)	A South African citizen or permanent resident
	18 years or older
	Competent to contract
Housing requirements (all must apply)	Not previously benefitted from a government housing subsidy
	Not have previously owned residential property
Personal requirements (at least one must apply)	Married or living with a partner – with or without dependents
	Single or divorced – with dependents
	A military veteran listed on the Department of Military Veterans (DMV) database
	Household member living with a permanent disability
Household income (low vs affordable housing income)	A combined household income of up to R3,500 per month
	A combined household income from R3,501 to R22,000 per month

In subsidised housing and other housing opportunities, women as spouses and cohabitating partners are granted equal property rights. When a title deed is issued for a government-subsidised property, it is issued to both parties, and their details are registered on the property. This serves to protect women’s property rights and mitigate economic inequality by ensuring that women have rights to financial assets in relationships. These rights may also be enforced through the country’s courts.

If we were to focus solely on housing macro policy, it could be argued that policy implementation empowers women and that the policy is impartial to gender. When examining gender mainstreaming in specific contexts, such as informal settlement upgrading led by municipalities through competitive bidding, a different perspective arises beyond macro housing allocation policy.

Gender mainstreaming in upgrading informal settlements

Informal settlements have different origins and histories. They vary in size, demographics, and organisation. Some are well-located and organised, with residents actively shaping the community. However, most informal settlements in the Western Cape province and the country at large suffer from inadequate living conditions. These areas are also at risk due to climate change, higher crime rates, unhygienic conditions, and strained social relations due to crime and a lack of private spaces.

Although access to basic services such as electricity, water, sanitation, and waste removal has improved marginally according to the 2022 Census (Stats SA

2023), conditions remain severe for many individuals living in informal settlements. Moreover, households in informal settlements often face higher levels of personal violence than those in formal settlements, with some groups being disproportionately affected.

High unemployment and low economic growth mean that many people cannot afford to acquire housing without government support. As a result, they are forced to live in informal settlements, in inadequate, overcrowded housing in formal areas, including in backyards. The increase in the number of informal settlements puts significant strain on existing infrastructure and places pressure on the government to provide adequate services. However, this is constrained by continual decline in housing capital grants and municipal revenue.

The Western Cape is experiencing remarkable population growth, becoming the fastest-growing province in the country. This rapid expansion is placing substantial demand on resources. The strain on service resources is compounded by increased in-migration, urbanisation, natural population growth, and household fragmentation due to splitting. Over the years, the average household size in the province declined from 3.6 people per household in 2001 to 3.3 in 2022. These demographic shifts are placing significant demands on the province's resources.

Gender differences also impact on access to services, as women and men have different requirements for using toilets.

In informal settlements, women, children, and people living with disabilities have limited access to safe, basic services due to the fact that infrastructural design does not address their specific needs. Gender differences also impact on access to services, as women and men have different requirements for using toilets. For instance, for sanitary-wear disposal, women may

need washing facilities and running water, which are often not available in communal toilets. Additionally, communal services are usually designed for able-bodied individuals, overlooking the needs of differing populations in informal settlements.

This lack of consideration puts women and other groups at risk of danger and indignity. Improving safety in neighbourhoods could have a significant impact on women, as a substantial portion of violence at a community level is gendered. It is distressing to note that women and children are often assaulted on their way to or from communal toilets, particularly if these facilities are located in dark and unsupervised areas in their settlements.

Gender mainstreaming in the context of policy instruments

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the built-environment sector across South Africa have been conducting social audits in informal settlements to assess if service provision and maintenance standards match up to the intent of the Upgrading of Informal Settlements Programme (UISP). The UISP, introduced in 2004, is a government-funded housing subsidy programme to provide a process and procedure for the in situ upgrading of informal settlements. The programme provides access to basic services to informal settlement dwellers, formalised serviced plots, and tenure security.

The UISP adopts a four-stage approach to upgrading settlements:

1. Stage 1 (Application): This involves authorities' conducting assessments, community consultations, geotechnical investigations, land acquisition, pre-planning, and the provision of temporary municipal services.

2. Stage 2 (Initiation): This stage includes surveys, feasibility studies, planning, and finalising social compacts with the community through consultation. The provision of temporary municipal services can also occur at this stage.

3. Stage 3 (Implementation): This stage involves the installation of permanent municipal services, the construction of individually serviced sites, and the issuance of tenure certificates.

4. Stage 4 (Consolidation): In this final stage, ownership registration is finalised, housing construction for qualifying beneficiaries takes place, and any outstanding social amenities are addressed (National Department of Human Settlements 2009).

Each upgrading project considers several, often unique, characteristics that determine whether the UISP's standards can be met in full or partially when upgrading a settlement. In the process of providing services, residents of informal settlements may need to be moved within the site or to other suitable sites, sometimes temporarily, while a final site is prepared.

However, temporary solutions have become more long-term fixtures in some informal settlements. In Knysna, more than 35 per cent of informal settlement residents rely on temporary chemical toilets as shared sanitary services (Jooste 2023). The provision of permanent services, such as municipal service connections to individual residential plots delivered in stages 3 and 4, involves committing to permanent spatial layouts for the settlement, as well as to the infrastructural network which is needed to support these layouts.

Viewing these findings through a gender lens may provide valuable insights into the experiences of women.

NGOs have been using data gathered from community members at the grassroots level to report service quality deficiencies to municipalities in order to hold officials accountable for meeting the prescribed standards. This data, collected through interviews with men and women living in informal settlements, has shown that women in particular face challenges in accessing interim municipal services provided in stages 1 and 2 of the UISP. Viewing these findings

through a gender lens may provide valuable insights into the experiences of women.

For instance, research conducted by Asivikelane Western Cape (2021) revealed that women in informal settlements are afraid to use communal toilets after dark, with 64.87 per cent feeling unsafe at night and 40.8 per cent feeling unsafe by day. Asivikelane, initiated in 2020, is a network of NGOs working in metropolitan areas across the country to gather information from informal settlement residents about water, sanitation, and waste removal services. Its goal is to use this information to enhance municipal accountability and improve cooperation between municipalities and informal settlements.

Additionally, a 2020 survey of seven informal settlements found that women in these areas struggle to access quality services, face higher health risks due to unsanitary conditions and overcrowding, and are disproportionately affected by crime and gender-based violence (Asivikelane Western Cape 2020).

Informed by valuable insights and the dedicated advocacy of NGOs, particularly Asivikelane, the Western Cape Department of Infrastructure, which is responsible for human settlements service delivery, proactively identified an opportunity to formulate Policy Guidelines for gender mainstreaming within the existing UISP framework.

The Department's Policy Guidelines (2024) offer a forward-looking perspective on gender mainstreaming as an essential framework for approaching service-delivery planning and provision in informal settlements in the Western Cape. The document examines in detail how individuals of different genders – influenced by their social, biological, and physical differences – access and utilise temporary municipal services such as communal water and sanitation services provided during stages 1 and 2 of the UISP. In response to these varied needs, the Guidelines provide invaluable guidance for municipalities and service providers in devising, implementing, and sustaining temporary municipal services.

The Guidelines have been crafted for municipalities to use specifically in UISP projects, but they can also

be beneficial for technical service providers involved in settlement development, as well as for NGOs, community leadership forums, and all those engaged in the improvement of informal settlements beyond the UISP. The Policy Guidelines are meant as a starting-point for enabling municipal and departmental technical specialists – such as engineers, architects as implementers, and town planners – to recognise the importance of gender mainstreaming and develop processes that can easily be integrated into the provision of interim municipal services.

Though the changes required may present challenges due to the unique nature of each project, the essential aspect of any intervention in informal settlements is genuine engagement with the affected community, particularly women, and forming partnerships with organisations equipped to facilitate such engagements and build trust over time. While the guidelines mark the Department's initial steps in exploring gender mainstreaming in service delivery at the service level, they should be seen as a work in progress, with further efforts and strategies envisaged to enhance service delivery across various aspects of infrastructure provision.

Gender mainstreaming: How is it done?

The current approach of providing interim services at a local level through the UISP requires a thorough re-evaluation. While municipalities may emphasise the importance of providing services at settlement level and meeting predefined targets, there is a notable absence of focus on the actual end-user experience. The Department's guidelines, summarised below, suggest specific approaches. While some aspects of the process may already be addressed or implied in the UISP stages, the documented experiences of women living in informal settlements highlight a significant deficiency. There is a lack of consideration of gender-specific needs in service delivery, especially when assessing temporary municipal services provided in stages 1 and 2 of the UISP.

- **Project planning**

To effectively plan UISP projects, municipalities should aim to build strong partnerships with NGOs

and local communities to incorporate the needs of women into the planning process. By collecting comprehensive data on demographics and household sizes, valuable insights can be gained into the perspectives and requirements of the target users. Additionally, setting realistic timeframes for service utilisation and carefully considering the long-term impact of addressing the specific needs of women within the community will contribute to the success of the projects.

- **Product and service procurement**

It is crucial to prioritise the implementation of procurement under the Preferential Procurement Framework and to actively consider women and women-owned businesses for technical services, maintenance, and cleaning in informal settlements. Calculating the necessary ratio of toilets and taps based on the number of residents and households is essential for providing adequate sanitation.

Additionally, including gender-separated toilet facilities and specifying larger, gender-designated toilet cubicles with necessary features can significantly improve the overall living conditions. Accessibility for people living with disabilities must be ensured to promote inclusivity. Using national minimum norms for services as the minimum requirement and adjusting as needed will ensure efficient and effective service delivery.

Finally, establishing a reporting mechanism for residents to monitor and report service quality anonymously is vital for maintaining accountability and improving community well-being.

- **Community consultation**

The process of community consultation is vital and should be conducted before drafting bid specifications for UISP projects. This ensures that end-users have the opportunity to provide their input timeously. The consultations should engage key stakeholders and strive to achieve equitable gender representation, with specific mechanisms in place to encourage and sustain the participation of women. Additionally, it is important to establish monitoring and evaluation systems that provide regular project progress updates to the community as the end-users.

- **Health norms and standards policy**

Ensuring access to water facilities is fundamental as a basic human right. In settlements, it is recommended to provide one standpipe for every 20 households within a 100-metre radius as a minimum standard for basic water provision. However, this standard should be adjusted based on the average household size for a more tailored approach. Placing water sources near toilet cubicles can improve access and cleanliness, particularly for women during menstruation and pregnancy, as well as for older women and those living with disabilities. Municipalities should collaborate with community and private institutions to raise awareness about health and hygiene. In addition, service providers should prioritise displaying repair and maintenance schedules and ensure that reporting channels are easily accessible and cost-effective.

- **Safety norms and standards**

During community engagements, it is crucial to engage in in-depth discussions about the optimal placement of temporary municipal amenities such as street lighting, toilet cubicles, and water taps. It is vital to take into account specific technical requirements, ongoing maintenance needs, cleaning protocols, accessibility considerations, and safety measures so as to identify the most suitable locations for these facilities. Moreover, allocating gender-specific cubicles for community caretakers designated for cleaning and maintenance purposes can contribute significantly to the efficient upkeep of these amenities. When delving into the topic of public lighting, careful consideration of the appropriate quantity and strategic placement is paramount to enhancing overall safety and security within the community.

Conclusion

As argued earlier, gender mainstreaming can be interpreted differently depending on the applicable contexts. For instance, when evaluating how well human settlement policy safeguards the socio-economic rights of women in the country three decades after democracy, the answers may vary depending on context. In the broader policy context, such as housing policies, programmes, and allocation of housing opportunities, gender equality and mainstreaming are

guaranteed as women have equal rights to men.

However, when we focus on the provision of interim municipal services at an informal settlement level, particularly in stages 1 and 2 of the UISP, the answers might not be so straightforward. It becomes evident that the context within which gender mainstreaming is applied or interrogated plays a crucial role in understanding its effectiveness. Indeed, 'context is everything'.

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