

# Policy Briefing

## Women, Power & Policymaking

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# A Gender Lens on Informal Settlement Upgrading: Strengthening Women's Participation

REBECCA MATSIE

## Executive summary

In the context of persisting gender inequality, women's participation in informal settlement upgrading in South Africa needs special attention. Disparities in access to resources are coupled with gender relations that are biased towards male power and marginalise the voice, agency and influence of women. This limits the contributions of women in upgrading projects and the potential for upgrading projects to contribute to gender equality. Informal settlement upgrading practitioners observe this in community participation processes. This issue highlights the need for a human settlement policy that acknowledges the effect of gender relations on informal settlement upgrading and creates an enabling environment for women to participate equally in transforming their living conditions.

# Introduction

Informal settlement upgrading in South Africa is a targeted process aimed at transforming precarious, vulnerable and undignified living conditions into integrated, sustainable and dignified neighbourhoods. The participation of communities in the process is instrumental in ensuring that upgrading interventions address residents' needs and priorities. This is a principle that is emphasised in the 2009 Upgrading Informal Settlements Programme (UISP) – the policy instrument for upgrading in South Africa.

Gender relations influence the extent to which an informal settlement resident can participate in an upgrading project. It structures the gendered interactions between residents – determining who participates in decision-making, what they contribute and how decisions affect them.<sup>1</sup> This constitutes a power that effectively regulates community participation in informal settlement upgrading. The effect of this is seen in who does what: ie, who has access to and control over resources, who sets the agenda, and whose contribution is valued/undervalued.

Persistent gender disparities in the division of labour and access to other streams of income, resources, land and social services, such as education, disadvantage women.<sup>2</sup> This consequently limits women's participation in decisions that influence the upgrading of their settlements.

## The gender gap in policy review

The UISP is a national programme instituted to respond to the specific development requirements of informal settlements. It supports the aims of local government to fast-track the provision of security of tenure, municipal services, and social and economic amenities, to empower residents to take part in housing development.<sup>3</sup> The programme takes a wide view of informal settlements as integrated living conditions and not solely housing. It is in this vein that policymakers should consider the effect of gender relations on the sustainability of human settlement development.

The South African Department for Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation and the National Department of Human Settlements (NDHS) undertook an evaluation of the UISP from 2009 to 2016 that aimed to inform a policy rethink process as articulated in the National Development Plan. While the evaluation made important findings about the relevance,

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1 Haug F, 'Gender relations', *Historical Materialism*, 13, 2, 2005, pp. 279–302.

2 South African Human Rights Commission, 'Research Brief on Gender and Equality in South Africa 2013–2017', 2017, <https://www.sahrc.org.za/home/21/files/RESEARCH%20BRIEF%20ON%20GENDER%20AND%20EQUALITY%20IN%20SOUTH%20AFRICA%202013%20to%202017.pdf>, accessed 23 July 2019.

3 South Africa, Department of Human Settlements, 'National Housing Code, Part 3: Upgrading Informal Settlements Programme'. Pretoria: Government Printer, 2009.

effectiveness, value for money and efficiency of the UISP, it made insufficient reference to the role of gender in upgrading projects.

The findings emphasised the need to strengthen sustained community participation in projects, as well as the potential of well-designed infrastructural services to help reduce gender-based violence.<sup>4</sup> However, there was little acknowledgement of the fact that the gender roles that play out in informal settlements influence the capacity for meaningful participation. Likewise, the recognition that infrastructural services can curb gender-based violence neglects to determine how women's voices should influence settlement design in an upgrading project.

To improve the impact of the UISP and strengthen its implementation, there needs to be recognition of the role of gender in informal settlement upgrading projects. If the upgrading project does not respond to the needs, vulnerabilities and aspirations of men, women and minority gender identities, then its success is limited and the policy interpretation is a drawback for inclusive city development.

## The gendered experience of informal settlement upgrading

The UISP aims to ensure that developments and interventions respond to people's needs and aspirations by promoting the active participation of settlement residents. It is important to recognise that the community, as a beneficiary of the process, is not a passive recipient of state services. Overlapping identities of age, gender, language and physical ability form considerable layers of complexity within a community. Acknowledging this refutes the assumption that informal settlement upgrading is a gender-neutral process.

The dynamics of gender relations are complex and fragmented. Nonetheless, applying a gender perspective to informal settlement upgrading is imperative, if the process truly aims to transform precarious, undignified and vulnerable living conditions into well-established, dignified and socio-economically enabling conditions. This holistic aim is not only concerned with the materiality of settlements but also embraces a socio-technical approach that recognises the voice, agency and influence of the marginalised urban population represented in informal settlements.

The effect of gender relations can devalue the contributions of women and maintain the power bias towards men in communities.<sup>5</sup> This ultimately creates upgrading projects that

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4 Harrison K, Harrison S & T Bila, *Synthesis Report on the Alignment of the Human Settlements Sector with South Africa's Public-Sector Reform Agenda*, Department of Human Settlements & Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation. Somerset West: Indego Consulting, 2017.

5 Agarwal B, "Bargaining" and gender relations: Within and beyond the household', *Feminist Economics*, 3, 1, 1997, pp. 1-51.

respond to the needs of the male-dominant group and perpetuates the vulnerabilities of women and their exclusion from development processes.

Limitations on women's participation mean that community participation processes are not necessarily representative. To mitigate this, policy should avoid describing or referring to the community as a monolith. This erases the complexities that may reveal how informal settlement upgrading interventions may disproportionately affect women.

## Observations by upgrading practitioners: using gender-disaggregated data

A number of civil society organisations in Cape Town partner with local government on informal settlement upgrading projects. Many of these organisations fulfil an intermediary function between the informal settlement community and the municipality, and facilitate community participation processes. These include enumerations and surveys, settlement profiling, and community-based planning. Participatory processes ensure that the provision of services and development of infrastructure are context-specific, responsive to various vulnerabilities (social, economic and environmental) and representative of diverse needs and aspirations. The processes draw on residents' localised knowledge of the settlement and their lived experience in the community.

Disaggregating data according to gender has enabled practitioners to note distinctions in the ways that men and women participate, and subsequently improve planning and implementation processes. The findings from gender-disaggregated data about an informal settlement reveal the needs and priorities of different gender groups. Leveraging this data as an evidence base for planning and designing an upgraded settlement strengthens the responsiveness of an upgrading project and mitigates against further marginalising one social group of residents.

Reportedly, in many instances of community participation men tend to dominate in leadership roles whereas engagement around specific issues, such as the location of toilets or standpipes, features strong female voices.<sup>6</sup> While male leadership does not intrinsically marginalise the participation of women, the power bias of leadership roles in the cultural context of patriarchal relations<sup>7</sup> is notable.<sup>8</sup>

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6 Isandla Institute, 'Transforming Gender Relations through Informal Settlement Upgrading', Practice Brief, 2018, <http://isandla.org.za/en/resources>, accessed 23 July 2019.

7 Patriarchy can be described as a set of ideas, beliefs and values that ascribe to male dominance in society. Patriarchal relations refer to the way that patriarchy mediates how men and women (and other minority gender identities) interact to the advantage of men and the disadvantage of women.

8 Akala BM, 'Challenging gender equality in South African transformation policies – a case of the White Paper: A programme for the transformation of higher education', *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 8, 32, 2018, pp. 226–248.

Another observation showed a distinction in the settlement design priorities identified by men and women. Women tend to raise more technical and vulnerability-related issues, such as safety concerns about the location of toilets or play parks. Women in informal settlements often fulfil the role of the primary child-carer, and so they are more attuned to the location of play parks in relation to harmful threats.

Conversely, practitioners observed that the issues raised by men related more to political concerns, such as partisan representation on leadership structures.<sup>9</sup> Participation by male residents appeared to be politicised with less engagement on substantive decisions regarding the upgrading project. While it is important to avoid using these observations to reinforce stereotypes or reduce people to their gender identities, it is appropriate to draw attention to these distinctions for the purposes of redress.

Such observations are useful for understanding the gender relations that play out in informal settlement upgrading projects. They recognise how men and women relate to one another and illustrate the lived realities that may limit women's participation. This hinges on reliable data disaggregated according to gender.

## Gender inequality limits women's participation

One objective of the UISP is to address social and economic exclusion by focusing on community empowerment and promoting socio-economic integration. The programme also aims to build social capital through participative processes and address the broader social needs of communities.<sup>10</sup> Persistent systemic inequalities in the division of labour, and limited access to mainstream sources of finance/income, land and education are substantive hindrances to women's participation. These inequalities exist in both access to and control over resources, and while they are widespread, women living in urban poverty are more vulnerable to them.

Compared to men, women in South Africa are more likely to be denied access to finance and to participate in unpaid care work, thus constituting a lower percentage of the formally employed labour force.<sup>11</sup> Resources give residents the capacity to act, and so a lack of access limits agency and participation in upgrading.<sup>12</sup>

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9 Isandla Institute, *op. cit.*

10 South Africa, Department of Human Settlements, *op. cit.*

11 Levendale C, 'Towards Women's Economic Empowerment: An Overview of Challenges, Achievements, Legislative Mechanisms and Programmes', Paper presented at International Women's Conference, Cape Town, 29-30 August 2017.

12 Moser C, 'Gender, Asset Building and Just Cities', Briefing Paper, WUF7 Networking Event, 2014, [http://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/schools/seed/gurc/working\\_papers/briefingpapers/GURC\\_BP6.pdf](http://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/schools/seed/gurc/working_papers/briefingpapers/GURC_BP6.pdf), accessed 23 July 2019.

Some civil society organisations have responded to this lived reality of women with initiatives aimed at addressing these inequalities and enabling women to participate more fully in community initiatives. For example, the South African Shack Dwellers International Alliance emphasises the role of women leaders, women's savings groups and collaboration to promote gender-sensitive upgrading.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, there is a widespread need for local government policies to address these inequalities in the context of marginalised urban habitats more deliberately.

The NDHS has the ability to set clear rules, norms, regulations and support structures that allow women to identify and take advantage of opportunities to accumulate assets and overcome inequalities and barriers to meaningful community participation. Empowering women not only supports their agency by addressing gender-related deprivations but also designs integrated settlements that respond to the everyday experiences of women as residents.

One way for policy to consider these inequalities is to mandate a gender-based analysis (GBA) to determine the relationship between men and women, their access to resources, their activities and the constraints they face relative to each other in the context of an informal settlement.<sup>14</sup> A GBA provides key planning information to ensure that a project supports gender equality based on evidence and analysis rather than assumptions.

A gender-neutral approach to informal settlement upgrading implies that all the residents have equal access to resources and equal status/voice. This negates gendered disparities in access to resources, and may perpetuate women's disempowerment at a local level.

As such, an upgrading project in which community participation only appears to be in effect may unknowingly reinforce gender inequality.

## Conclusion

Presently, there seems to be a gap in human settlement policy in terms of an explicit consideration of the participation of men and women in informal settlement upgrading. A gendered lens on the practice of informal settlement upgrading illuminates important dynamics: ie, that gender relations structure interactions in community participation processes; that gender roles determine what services and types of development are considered a priority; and that gender inequalities affect women's capacity to participate in upgrading. A gender-neutral assessment of the UISP has overlooked these complexities and risks reinforcing inequality and gendered deprivations in communities.

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13 Denoon-Stevens S, 'Community-driven informal settlement upgrading: The SDI approach', UrbanAfrica.Net, 2016, <https://www.urbanafrica.net/urban-voices/15392/>, accessed 4 September 2018.

14 Vainio-Mattila A, 'Navigating Gender: A Framework and Tool for Participatory Development', Finland, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Department for International Development Cooperation, 2001, [http://www.gdrc.org/gender/framework/gender\\_01.pdf](http://www.gdrc.org/gender/framework/gender_01.pdf), accessed 18 June 2019.

Taking all of this into account, this policy briefing argues that human settlement policy aimed at addressing social inequalities should make explicit reference to women's participation. It draws on observations from gender-sensitive informal settlement upgrading practice and motivates for an integrated view of human settlements in line with the NDHS vision. This argument is particularly timely for the purposes of enhancing the impact of the UISP and strengthening its implementation.

## Policy recommendations

- Recognise and incorporate the role of gender in the UISP to support the development of integrated, sustainable and well-established human settlements. This requires specific reference to the position of women in relation to men in decision-making, planning and implementation of upgrading interventions.
- Support the use of reliable gender-disaggregated data as an evidence base for informal settlement upgrading projects.
- Promote the use of gender-based analysis as a mechanism to determine the extent to which participatory processes in informal settlement upgrading promote equal participation.

# Author

## Rebecca Matsie

is the Urban Land Project Officer at Isandla Institute. Her work brings together her commitment to social justice and broader research interests in urban citizenship and development. She holds a BA Hons in Sociology (cum laude) from Stellenbosch University and an MA in Sociology (with distinction) from the University of Cape Town.

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## Cover image

A South African woman cooks in her home in Crossroads Township (Peter Turnley/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images)

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