

Examination of Gender Mainstreaming Policies in Mbhashe and Port St John's Local Municipalities, OR Tambo District, Eastern Cape, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study utilised a qualitative research approach to comprehensively assess gender mainstreaming policies in Mbhashe and Port St John's local municipalities within the O.R. Tambo District of the Eastern Cape in South Africa. Through focus group discussions with government officials, community leaders, and civil society representatives, diverse perspectives on gender issues and policy challenges were explored. Document analysis of relevant reports and policy documents provided additional context. Thematic analysis of the data identified recurring themes and related to gender mainstreaming policies, ensuring a clear understanding of their effectiveness and implementation gaps. The findings revealed Mbhashe's proactive measures to empower women in leadership roles contrasted with Port St John's concerns about biases and unintended consequences in policy execution, highlighting the complexity of achieving comprehensive gender equality. Recommendations include enhancing educational programmes, awareness campaigns, fostering community involvement, and leveraging partnerships with religious, traditional and community leaders to promote inclusive practices and address structural inequalities, thus advancing sustainable gender equality and social justice agendas.

KEYWORDS

Gender mainstreaming; policies; LGBTQIA+; implementations and gender equality.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa has made significant strides in promoting gender mainstreaming since the advent of democracy in 1994, enshrined in its Constitution that guarantees equal rights and protections for all citizens regardless of gender (Republic of South Africa, 2020). Despite these constitutional guarantees and international commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), gender disparities persist, particularly at the local government level. South Africa's National Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality as a policy that says: The basic vision of this Policy Framework is derived from the 1996 Constitution which includes in its founding provisions the values of human dignity, the achievement of equality, advancement of human rights and freedoms as well as non-racialism and non-sexism. Equality of all persons, women and men, and the principles of non-sexism are the two values enshrined in the Constitution which are most central to the vision of this document. The Department of Provincial Local Government, now known as Corporative Governance and Traditional Affairs (CoGTA), further developed the Local Government framework for municipalities on gender mainstreaming in 2007. Local municipalities play a crucial role in service delivery and community development but often face challenges in implementing gender mainstreaming policies effectively. Women's representation in leadership positions within local government remains inadequate, limiting their influence in decision making processes and policy formulation (Govender, 2013).

Gender mainstreaming is the process of identifying gaps among the genders and making the particular concerns of women, men, boys and girls a vital part of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes for the achievement of equality (UNDP, 2014). Gender mainstreaming is a crucial approach aimed at integrating gender perspectives into all policies and actions, ensuring that the needs and experiences of both men and women are equitably considered. Even the gender Barometer report from the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE 2016), attest to this that gender mainstreaming remains a challenge. Assessing community leaders' understanding of gender mainstreaming is pivotal as it directly influences the implementation and effectiveness of gender equality policies within Mbashe and Port St John's municipalities.

South African's Government actions on gender mainstreaming encompass a range of initiatives, including policy frameworks, institutional mechanisms, and budget allocations aimed at advancing gender equality goals (UN Women, 2020). Examining these actions provides critical insights into the political commitment and institutional support dedicated to gender mainstreaming efforts. Identifying opportunities and gaps in current policies is equally essential, as it allows for strategic refinements that can better address gender disparities and enhance overall gender equality outcomes (World Bank, 2019). Understanding community leaders' perceptions of policy implementation further enriches this analysis, shedding light on the challenges and successes encountered in translating gender mainstreaming policies into tangible benefits for the community (OECD, 2019).

Cultural norms significantly influence the implementation of gender policies and the inclusion of Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer Asexual LGBTQIA (SADC, 2008). Investigating these cultural aspects provides insights into both barriers and opportunities for promoting inclusive gender policies that respect diverse identities and perspectives. Assessing the perceived urgency for gender mainstreaming underscores community priorities and the demand for transformative action (UN Women, 2021). This assessment reflects the readiness of local stakeholders to prioritize gender equality and address persistent inequalities effectively.

Finally, religious bodies play varied roles in shaping community attitudes towards gender issues, from advocacy and support to potential barriers stemming from religious doctrines. Understanding these roles informs strategies to engage religious leaders as allies in advancing gender equality agendas, leveraging their influence within communities to promote inclusive practices and challenge discriminatory norms. Efforts to mainstream gender mainstreaming in local governance and development agendas are essential for achieving sustainable development goals and ensuring inclusive growth. However, the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming policies at the local level varies, influenced by institutional capacities, political will, and community engagement (Mudaly & Louw-Potgieter, 2017).

Despite legislative frameworks promoting gender parity, women remain underrepresented in local government leadership roles, impacting the inclusivity of policy decisions and service delivery (Govender, 2013). Economic empowerment programmes aimed at women often face challenges such as limited access to finance, skills development, and support networks, hindering their socio-economic advancement (Statistics South Africa, 2020). Ensuring that municipal services are responsive to the diverse needs of women and men is crucial for promoting equitable access to basic services and fostering inclusive development (Ngcobo, 2018). Engaging with stakeholders including government officials, community leaders, and civil society organizations provides critical insights into the implementation gaps and opportunities for enhancing gender mainstreaming efforts in local governance. Their perspectives inform policy recommendations aimed at strengthening institutional capacities and promoting gender-responsive development practices (Mudaly & Louw-Potgieter, 2017).

South Africa has developed tools and instruments that will contribute to women's advancement like the: The Women's Charter for Effective Equality (1993). The First Reconstruction and Development White Paper of 1994), The National Policy for Women's Empowerment of 1995), Batho Pele: The White Paper on Transformation of Public Service Delivery. While significant research exists on gender mainstreaming at the national level in South Africa, localized studies focusing on specific municipalities such as Mbhashe and Port St John's are limited. This study seeks to navigate the complexities of gender mainstreaming within Mbhashe and Port St John's municipalities through a comprehensive analysis of policy understanding, community attitudes, governmental actions, policy gaps, cultural influences, urgency for change, and the roles of religious institutions. By addressing these dimensions, the study aims to identify pathways for enhancing the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming

policies and initiatives in local governance contexts, ultimately fostering greater gender equality and social justice.

According to Statista (2024), in 2023, South Africa had an overall gender gap index score of 0.79, placing it 20th out of 146 countries. During the period under review, gender disparity diminished slightly. The index measures the discrepancy between genders in four different areas: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. In 2022, the country reached gender parity in educational attainment, while it scored 0.98 points in health and survival. In absolute numbers, the count of men studying in schools was almost 6.8 million, which was higher than the 6.6 million women enrolled in ordinary schools. However, for individuals up to the age of 19, there were more boys than girls. In 2021, 18.6 percent of the total population was young men compared to 18.1 percent of young women. Moreover, life expectancy for women was higher than that of men by almost seven years. Gender disparity in South Africa is highest in political empowerment, followed by economic participation and opportunity. Although women in the country secured around 46 percent of the seats in the National Assembly, they were still under-represented in decision-making occupations. For example, men had higher chances of becoming an employer or landing a job as a manager. In the second quarter of 2022, men occupied over 67 percent of the total managerial roles in the country. Similarly, of 806,000 employers, almost 650,000 were men. Furthermore, some 45.2 percent of South African men worked in 2021 compared to only 34.6 percent of women.

Mbhashe Municipality is situated in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, forming part of the Amathole District. It is bordered by the municipalities of King Sabata Dalindyebo to the east, Mbashe River to the south, and Mnquma to the west. The municipality encompasses a largely rural area with rolling hills, valleys, and rivers, contributing to its scenic beauty. The landscape is characterized by a mix of coastal and inland features. The local economy is primarily based on agriculture, livestock farming, and fishing. Subsistence farming is common, with maize, beans, and vegetables being the main crops. The area also has potential for eco-tourism given its natural beauty and cultural heritage. The population is predominantly Xhosa-speaking, with a high percentage of residents living in traditional rural homesteads. There is a mix of younger and older demographics, with many families depending on social grants. The municipality faces challenges such as poverty, unemployment, limited infrastructure, and access to basic services like healthcare, education, and sanitation.

Port St John's Municipality is located on the Wild Coast of the Eastern Cape Province, within the O.R. Tambo District. It is known for its coastal beauty and natural attractions. This municipality features a diverse landscape that includes rugged coastlines, sandy beaches, and forested areas. The Umzimvubu River, which flows through the town of Port St John's, is a significant geographical feature. The local economy is driven by tourism, agriculture, and fishing. Port St John's is a popular tourist destination, attracting visitors with its natural scenery, cultural sites, and outdoor activities like hiking, fishing, and surfing. The population is diverse, with a mix

of IsiXhosa-speaking residents and a significant number of people involved in the tourism sector. The town of Port St John's serves as a hub for commerce and services for the surrounding rural areas. Similar to Mbhashe, Port St John's faces socio-economic challenges including high levels of poverty, unemployment, and infrastructural deficits. Additionally, environmental management is crucial due to the area's reliance on natural resources and tourism.

In rural areas like Mbhashe and Port St John's municipalities in the O.R. Tambo District, gender inequalities are exacerbated by socioeconomic factors, cultural norms, and limited access to resources. Women and man, but mostly women in these communities often encounter barriers to accessing economic opportunities, educational resources, and healthcare services that are essential for their empowerment (Statistics South Africa, 2020).

Statement of the Problem

Despite constitutional guarantees and national policy commitments to gender mainstreaming, persistent disparities seem to exist, especially at the local government level such as in Mbhashe and Port St John's municipalities within the O.R. Tambo District of the Eastern Cape. Challenges in implementing gender mainstreaming policies was observed to lead to inadequate representation of women in leadership, limited economic opportunities for women due to barriers in finance and skills development, and deficiencies in gender-sensitive service delivery. Women's influence in decision-making processes is hampered, hindering effective policy formulation and implementation. Municipal services often fail to meet the diverse needs of women and men, reflecting gaps in gender sensitive planning. Assessment of gender mainstreaming policy effectiveness at the local level is insufficient, influenced by factors like institutional capacities and community engagement. Despite extensive national research on gender mainstreaming, there is a significant lack of localised studies focused on rural and semi-rural municipalities, underscoring the need for empirical research to guide targeted interventions and strengthen gender mainstreaming in local governance.

Research Questions

1. What is the level of understanding of gender mainstreaming and gender issues by community leaders within Mbhashe and Port St John's municipalities?
2. What is the attitude and perception of community leaders towards Addressing Gender Issues and the Need for Urgent Change Addressing Gender-Based Violence?
3. What is the action taken by the government on gender mainstreaming policies???
4. What are the opportunities and gaps in gender mainstreaming policies?
5. What are the cultural aspects and LGBTQIA+ Issues in gender mainstreaming policies?
6. What is the urgency for change and implementation of gender mainstreaming policies?
7. What are the roles and contributions of religious bodies in gender mainstreaming?

Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by the theory of intersectionality.

Intersectionality is a critical theoretical framework that examines how various social identities, such as gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and others, intersect and

interact to shape individuals' experiences of privilege and discrimination. Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality highlights that these identities are not separate or additive but rather interconnected and mutually constitutive, influencing individuals' access to power, resources, and opportunities (Crenshaw, 1989).

Key Assumptions of Intersectionality

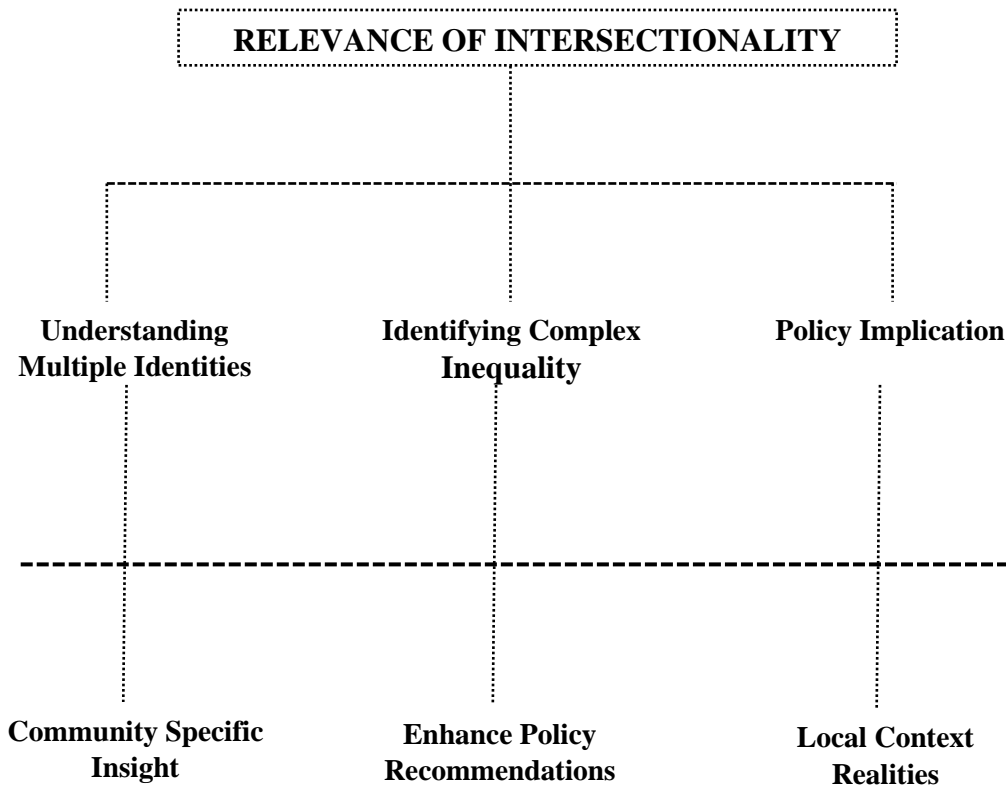
1. Intersectionality emphasizes that individuals' experiences are shaped by the intersection of multiple identities, such as race and gender, resulting in unique forms of discrimination not attributable to any single identity alone.
2. Intersectionality highlights how systems of oppression and privilege, like sexism and classism, interact to shape individuals' experiences.
3. The framework of intersectionality underscores how societal structures and institutions perpetuate inequalities differently based on intersecting identities, recognizing the influence of structural and social contexts such as legal systems and workplaces on shaping individual experiences (Crenshaw, 1989).

Relevance of the Intersectionality Framework to this Study

1. **Understanding Multiple Identities:** It allows for a clear analysis of how gender intersects with other identities such as race, class, and socio-economic status in shaping experiences of discrimination and access to resources. This is crucial in contexts like Mbhashe and Port St John's, where diverse populations with varying socio-economic backgrounds exist.
2. **Identifying Complex Inequalities:** Intersectionality helps in identifying and addressing complex inequalities that cannot be fully understood through a single lens. For instance, it can illuminate how women from different racial or economic backgrounds may experience different barriers in accessing economic opportunities or participating in decision-making processes.
3. **Policy Implications:** By considering intersecting identities, the study can better evaluate the inclusivity and effectiveness of gender mainstreaming policies. It can highlight gaps where policies may inadvertently exclude certain groups or fail to address specific challenges faced by women with intersecting identities.
4. **Community Specific Insights:** In local governance contexts like Mbhashe and Port St John's, where cultural norms and socio-economic disparities play significant roles, intersectionality helps in capturing community-specific insights into how gender mainstreaming policies are perceived, implemented, and experienced

Figure 1.

Framework of the relevance of intersectionality Framework (Authors' Design)



METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a qualitative research design to comprehensively assess gender mainstreaming policies in Mbashe and Port St John's municipalities. Qualitative methods were selected to gather in-depth, contextual data and diverse perspectives from stakeholders. Data collection included focus group discussion with government officials, community leaders, and civil society representatives to explore their views on gender mainstreaming policies. Port St John's Municipality had a total of 11 representatives, consisting of 6 females and 5 males. The stakeholders from this municipality included a diverse range of community leaders and organizations, reflecting a broad spectrum of interests and perspectives. Mbashe Municipality had around 12 representatives. Although the exact gender breakdown is not specified. The representation was designed to include a comprehensive mix of stakeholders, similar to those in Port St John's Municipality. The following stakeholders were present in both Port St John's and Mbashe municipalities: Youth leaders, who provided insights into the younger population's perspectives and needs, highlighting issues pertinent to youth development and engagement; Pastors, who contributed viewpoints on moral, ethical, and community cohesion aspects, reflecting the influence of faith-based organisations, Women Organisations, with representatives focused on gender issues, advocating for women's rights and participation in community and policy matters; Politicians, who discussed policy implementation, governance

challenges, and potential solutions from a legislative and administrative standpoint; Social Workers, who addressed social welfare issues, providing expertise on social services, community support mechanisms, and interventions for vulnerable populations; and Union Leaders, who brought attention to workers' rights, employment conditions, and economic issues affecting the local workforce. Additionally, focus groups were conducted to facilitate collective discussions on gender issues and policy challenges. The document analysis in this study was carried out by systematically reviewing policy documents, reports, and strategic plans, the analysis identified key themes, gaps, and the inclusion of diverse gender perspectives. This process was enhanced by incorporating information from focus group discussions with various stakeholders, offering a comprehensive view of the strengths and weaknesses of current gender mainstreaming initiatives.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis of collected data identified recurring themes and contradictions related to gender mainstreaming policies. This method involved systematically coding and organising data to uncover significant patterns and themes, providing detailed insights into the nuances of policy implementation and effectiveness. By using focus groups where small groups of participants engage in guided discussions facilitated by a moderator, we were able to gather rich and in-depth information about community leaders' perspectives. These interactive discussions allowed participants to share and debate their views, leading to the emergence of new ideas and perspectives. The use of a qualitative research design was essential for this study. It enabled us to explore complex issues in-depth and gain a holistic understanding of participants' experiences and the contexts in which they occur. The flexibility of qualitative research allowed us to adapt our data collection and analysis methods to the specific dynamics and nuances of the research field, ensuring that we captured the subjective experiences and interpretations of our participants. Triangulation of data sources ensured the reliability and validity of our findings. By comparing perspectives from focus group discussions with document analysis, we integrated multiple qualitative data sources. This approach provided a comprehensive understanding of policy effectiveness and implementation gaps, as it allowed us to cross-verify information and uncover contradictions and consistencies within the data. This method enhanced the robustness of our study, offering a well-rounded and reliable analysis of gender mainstreaming policies.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Understanding Gender Mainstreaming and Gender Issues

This section explores the perspectives of community leaders, highlighting the challenges and opportunities in promoting gender equality and addressing gender-related concerns in Mbashe and Port St John's municipalities.

Mbhashe Municipality is denoted by M.

M1: *"I am familiar with the term but there is still a misunderstanding because it only favours a certain gender. Women seem to fight back since they have been discriminated against. If the municipality hires only men in certain positions, women will always have a problem with that, but they do not have a problem when it is the other way around. Women think gender issues should only be considered when they are about them."*

M3: *"I am familiar with the term gender mainstreaming and understand it as policies addressing patriarchal issues in communities. I am against the narrative that Gender Based Violence (GBV) is only considered GBV when it affects women. Both genders can be victims of GBV."*

Port St John's Municipality is denoted by P.

P2: *"Gender mainstreaming seems more lenient to women. Women in our community have become untouchables, and everything that speaks to gender is all about them. When it comes to GBV, the last offender always gets punished, while the person who provokes the last offender is protected because the justice system favors them."*

P3: *"To me, gender mainstreaming means understanding and supporting all genders, including females, males, and the LGBTQIA+ group."*

In Mbhashe, M1 perceives gender mainstreaming as biased towards women, noting that women appear reactionary due to historical discrimination and are more concerned with gender issues when they pertain to them. Conversely, M3 views gender mainstreaming as a policy addressing patriarchal issues, stressing that both men and women can be victims of GBV, rejecting the idea that GBV only affects women.

In Port St John's, P2 also sees gender mainstreaming as biased, describing women as "untouchables" who dominate gender discourse and benefit from a justice system that unfairly favors them. On the other hand, P3 offers a more inclusive perspective, advocating for the support and understanding of all genders, including LGBTQIA+ individuals. These responses highlight a spectrum of views, from perceiving gender mainstreaming as biased to advocating for broader inclusivity and equality.

These findings reveal a spectrum of perspectives ranging from skepticism and perceived bias towards women in gender mainstreaming (M1, P2) to a more inclusive and egalitarian stance that acknowledges the complexities and intersectionalities of gender issues (M3, P3). These contrasting viewpoints revealed the ongoing debate and varied understandings within communities regarding gender equality and the implementation of gender mainstreaming policies.

Attitude towards Addressing Gender Issues and the Need for Urgent Change in Addressing Gender-Based Violence

This section examines the prevailing attitudes toward gender issues and provides the urgent need for change in addressing gender-based violence. It highlights the societal perceptions that influence responses to gender-based violence and the critical importance of immediate and comprehensive interventions to protect and empower vulnerable populations.

Mbhashe Municipality

M1: *"My attitude towards addressing gender-based violence is that it shouldn't be treated lightly, especially when it involves mothers and fathers because it deeply affects individuals who are mothers. Men who perpetrate such acts need to be held accountable, especially considering the rise in violence."*

M2: *"It's disheartening to see a mother being abused, and when she seeks help at the police station, she's ridiculed. Such incidents affect children's upbringing."*

Port St John's Municipality

P1: *"We should also focus our energy on fathers, as they play a crucial role in curbing gender-based violence. If we don't address this issue collectively, it will continue to escalate."*

P2: *We have been insulted by people who think gender is only about them and those who assume that equity should only be considered when it comes to them.*

In Mbhashe Municipality, there is a strong emphasis on the severity of gender-based violence (GBV) and the need for accountability, particularly for men who perpetrate violence. The responses highlight the significant impact on mothers and the rising trend of violence, underscoring the emotional and psychological effects on mothers and children. They point out the failure of institutions like the police to provide adequate support and protection, emphasizing the need for stringent measures and better institutional support to address GBV effectively. There is a clear call for accountability and a systemic change in how GBV cases are handled.

In contrast, Port St John's Municipality focuses on collective responsibility in addressing GBV, with specific mention of the critical role fathers play in curbing such violence. One response reflects frustration with the current gender discourse, criticizing the perception that gender issues and equity are skewed towards certain groups and expressing a sense of being misunderstood and marginalized.

The responses highlight the importance of involving men and addressing perceived biases in gender discourse, calling for a more inclusive and balanced approach to tackling GBV, ensuring that all voices are heard and addressed.

Government Action on Gender Mainstreaming

This section explores the role of government in promoting gender mainstreaming, focusing on policies, initiatives, and strategies implemented to ensure gender equality. It examines the effectiveness of these actions in addressing gender disparities and fostering an inclusive environment where the rights and needs of all genders are prioritized.

Mbhashe Municipality

M3: *"In the rural areas where I come from, gender inequality is a major issue, and I don't know what the government is doing about it. Women in leadership positions are not respected."*

Port St John's Municipality

The responses from Mbhashe Municipality's M3 and Port St John's Municipality's P3 highlight contrasting perspectives on government action regarding gender mainstreaming and gender

issues. M3 from Mbhashe expresses frustration with the perceived lack of government action in addressing gender inequality, particularly in rural areas. They lament the lack of respect for women in leadership roles and question the efficacy of government initiatives in tackling these issues.

On the other hand, P3 from Port St John's presents a critical view of government policies on gender mainstreaming. They argue that these policies favour certain individuals, particularly women, suggesting that the justice system tends to protect women even when they might provoke conflict or violence. This perspective implies distrust in the fairness and equity of government interventions aimed at addressing (GBV) and promoting gender equality.

These findings reflect varied perceptions within different municipalities regarding the effectiveness and fairness of government actions on gender mainstreaming. While M3's concern highlights a need for more proactive measures and respect for women's leadership roles in rural settings, P3's critique raises questions about the unintended consequences and perceived biases in current policy implementations. These contrasting viewpoints reveal the complexity and challenges faced in achieving comprehensive gender equality through government interventions at the local level.

Opportunities and Gaps in Gender Mainstreaming

This section identifies the key opportunities and gaps in gender mainstreaming efforts. It highlights areas where progress has been made in promoting gender equality and inclusivity, as well as the persistent challenges that hinder full integration of gender perspectives into policies and practices. The analysis focuses on both the successes and shortcomings in achieving comprehensive gender mainstreaming.

Mbhashe Municipality

M15: *"In the LED sector, there is a huge gender gap. In our cooperatives, we encourage young people to apply for positions. Here in the rural areas, we are often asked whether a person is a male or a female when I go to register them for my program."*

Port St John's Municipality

P5: *"Gender is just a name; it does not mean anything because people choose to be who they want to be. Women can perform duties known to be performed by men. It becomes difficult when a man is not working, leading to high GBV statistics because men turn to drugs and become violent. Women are still undermined by men in our community. We need policy engagements to see the effect and outcomes of implementing these gender mainstreaming policies."*

From the responses, M15 highlights a significant gender gap within the (LED) sector, underscoring the need for more inclusive practices and opportunities for women. They also mention encountering gender-based inquiries when registering individuals for cooperative programs, indicating recognition of gender disparities in access to economic opportunities.

In contrast, P5 from Port St John's offers a critical perspective, asserting that gender is merely a label and advocating for the capability of individuals to perform roles irrespective of traditional gender norms. They highlight societal challenges such as high rates of e (GBV)

stemming from unemployment among men and ongoing gender inequalities where women face marginalisation by men.

The findings suggest that Mbhashe Municipality acknowledges the existence of gender gaps within economic sectors and administrative practices, emphasizing a need for targeted interventions to promote gender equality and inclusivity. Conversely, Port St John's Municipality critiques the broader societal attitudes and structural inequalities that perpetuate gender-based disparities and violence. Both perspectives show the complexities and varied challenges in effectively mainstreaming gender equality within local governance and community.

Perceptions on Implementation of Gender Mainstreaming

This section explores various perceptions surrounding the implementation of gender mainstreaming. It delves into the views of different stakeholders, including community leaders and policymakers, on the effectiveness, challenges, and impact of gender mainstreaming initiatives. The discussion highlights the diverse attitudes and beliefs that influence how gender mainstreaming is understood and practiced in different contexts.

Mbhashe Municipality

M4: *"God created woman from man, but we were all created to be living energy of God. Why is it a problem when someone changes to be an LGBTQIA+ member? Women in workplaces abuse power. Both genders can be victims of sexual exploitation."*

Port St John's Municipality

P4: *There are no specific instructions saying women must not form part of circumcision, but uncircumcised individuals cannot go to the mountain. Gender mainstreaming appears unimplemented because it does not meet the satisfaction of women. In royal families, women cannot be permanent traditional leaders because they are expected to marry and start their own families."*

In exploring perceptions on the implementation of gender mainstreaming, Mbhashe Municipality's M4 and Port St John's Municipality's P4 offer contrasting viewpoints. M4 from Mbhashe discusses broad issues, including gender identity within the LGBTQIA+ spectrum, highlighting concerns about power dynamics in workplaces where women may abuse their authority. They also recognize that both genders can be victims of sexual exploitation, suggesting a nuanced understanding of gender dynamics and challenges.

On the other hand, P4 from Port St John's focuses more narrowly on cultural and traditional barriers affecting gender roles. They critique the perceived lack of implementation of gender mainstreaming, particularly in contexts like circumcision practices and traditional leadership in royal families, where women are excluded from permanent leadership roles due to cultural expectations of marriage and family roles.

The findings indicate that Mbhashe Municipality's concerns extend to broader societal and workplace dynamics affecting gender equality and inclusivity, while Port St John's Municipality highlights specific traditional norms like a women's cannot conduct funerals and institutional barriers like, *ulwaluko* meaning circumcision, a traditional rite of passage for young

men into adulthood that hinder effective implementation of gender mainstreaming policies. Both viewpoints reflect the multifaceted challenges in achieving comprehensive gender equality within local governance and cultural contexts. We need to give concrete examples.

Cultural Aspects and LGBTQIA+ Issues in Gender Mainstreaming

This section examines the intersection of cultural aspects and LGBTQIA+ issues within the framework of gender mainstreaming. It discusses how cultural norms and values influence the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals in gender equality efforts, highlighting both the barriers and opportunities for fostering a more inclusive approach. The analysis focuses on the challenges of integrating LGBTQIA+ concerns into gender mainstreaming initiatives, particularly in contexts where cultural resistance and traditional views persist.

Mbhashe Municipality

M7: *Speaking about LGBTQIA+ issues still remain taboo in some communities, hindering our municipality from advancing programmes related to awareness and LGBTQIA+ issues. However, regarding gender issues, I can say that women are at least somewhat ahead due to their participation in programmes, despite the significant issue of GBV in the Mbhashe municipality.*

M8: *"Rural areas are still governed by chiefs, despite having councilors as representatives of the municipality. There are significant stereotypes, and topics like bisexual individuals are not accepted."*

Port St John's Municipality

P7: *Regarding the community, our people generally accept all services provided by the government. The only hindrance is the issue of LGBTQIA+, with awareness programmes often occurring in urban centres rather than rural areas due to stigma and stereotypes."*

P8: *"In rural areas, when someone is gay, it becomes a problem. When they come to townships, we welcome them, but when they arrive in the villages, we don't welcome them because we don't understand why they have changed. In rural areas, some people are guided by the Bible, and we don't know about homosexuality in our culture. But when someone in the rural area starts being gay, there is a lot of confusion."*

From the response on cultural aspects and LGBTQIA+ issues within gender mainstreaming, Mbhashe Municipality and Port St John's Municipality present contrasting perspectives and challenges. Mbhashe Municipality's M7 acknowledges that discussing LGBTQIA+ issues remain taboo in some communities, which hinders the advancement of programmes related to awareness and LGBTQIA+ issues. Despite this, there is recognition that women have made some strides through participation in programmes, although (GBV) remains a significant concern. M8 from Mbhashe highlights the influence of traditional governance structures in rural areas, where stereotypes and lack of acceptance towards bisexual individuals persist, reflecting broader cultural norms and challenges within the municipality.

In contrast, Port St John's Municipality's P7 notes general acceptance of government services but points out that LGBTQIA+ awareness programmes predominantly occur in urban

centers due to stigma and stereotypes prevalent in rural areas. P8 further underscores the cultural challenges in rural areas, where societal acceptance of LGBTQIA+ individuals is limited, often due to religious beliefs and cultural norms that do not accommodate homosexuality.

These illustrate the complex relationship between cultural norms, religious beliefs, and institutional efforts in implementing gender mainstreaming, particularly concerning LGBTQIA+ issues. While urban areas may be more receptive to diversity and inclusion initiatives, rural areas face deeper-rooted challenges stemming from cultural conservatism and limited awareness, posing significant barriers to achieving comprehensive gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights.

Roles and Contributions of Religious Body in Gender Mainstreaming

This section explores the significant roles and contributions of religious bodies in gender mainstreaming efforts. It examines how religious institutions influence gender norms, advocate for equality, and participate in promoting or hindering gender-related initiatives. The discussion highlights the potential of religious bodies to drive positive change in gender dynamics, as well as the challenges posed by traditional beliefs that may conflict with gender equality objectives.

Mbhashe Municipality

M9: *"The truth is that there are services that are needed, and a mother should lead the church. They want only fathers to lead because according to our culture, we as Xhosa people believe that a woman should not be above a man, even though a woman can do what a man does. Worse, according to our religion, we are not favored by women."*

Port St John's Municipality

P17: *"My experience is that when I go to the traditional healer's place, I am not respected by a male. A male sees me as someone who should lead, but I see it as my right to lead."*

From Mbhashe Municipality's M9 reflects a traditional Xhosa belief that is why it is important to have a description of the study site, so that the reader knows that Mbhashe and Port St John are predominantly IsiXhosa speaking nation, where cultural norms dictate that men typically hold leadership roles in religious settings. This belief system perpetuates the notion that women should not be in positions of authority over men, despite acknowledging women's capability to perform the same tasks as men. The religious context further reinforces these gendered roles, contributing to a societal framework that may hinder gender mainstreaming efforts by limiting women's leadership opportunities within religious institutions.

On the other hand, Port St John's Municipality's P17 challenges traditional gender roles within the context of visiting a traditional healer. P17 expresses a desire for gender equality in leadership roles, asserting the right to lead irrespective of gender. This perspective highlights an evolving discourse within some religious and cultural practices, where individuals advocate for gender equity and challenge traditional patriarchal structures that limit women's participation and leadership.

These findings reveal the significant influence of cultural and religious beliefs on gender mainstreaming initiatives. While some communities uphold traditional gender norms and roles, others within the same cultural context are beginning to question and challenge these norms,

advocating for more inclusive practices that recognize and support gender equality in religious settings. Religious bodies thus play a crucial role in either perpetuating gender disparities or promoting more equitable and inclusive approaches to gender mainstreaming.

Urgency for Change and Implementation of Gender Mainstreaming

This section underscores the pressing need for swift and effective implementation of gender mainstreaming. It emphasizes the critical importance of addressing gender disparities and promoting equality across all sectors. The discussion highlights the urgency of adopting comprehensive strategies and policies to accelerate progress and ensure that gender mainstreaming becomes an integral part of societal development.

Mbhashe Municipality

M5: *"We are involved in an education project, so what we do in this sector is that we mainstream gender roles. We work with schools and municipalities on the Special Programmes Unit (SPU) programme. When we go to schools, we conduct awareness campaigns and target remote areas to ensure that services reach them. It is difficult for services to reach these areas, and that is why it is difficult to report statistics on GBV because even though Amathole has one of the highest rates of GBV, some cases go unreported. We work in these areas to provide services, and it is difficult to reach them. We were impressed by the SPU because, apart from empowering the girl child, they also empower the boy child. Our organisation started in 2013, and it's called INSPIRAXION."*

Port St John's Municipality

P6: *"There is still a lack of understanding of gender in the community, especially among parents. There must be trainings to share information with community leaders and parents to avoid misunderstandings about gender issues. This would help control high levels of discrimination against the LGBTQIA+ group."*

In Mbhashe Municipality, M5 emphasizes the urgent need for implementing gender mainstreaming through educational initiatives. Their organization, INSPIRAXION, focuses on mainstreaming gender roles in education, particularly targeting remote areas where accessing services and reporting gender-based-violence (GBV) statistics are challenging. They highlight the importance of empowering both girls and boys through their programmes like the SPU to promote, facilitate, coordinate and monitor the realization of the rights of women, men, youth, children, senior citizens and people with disabilities. Aiming at addressing not only GBV but also broader gender inequalities prevalent in their community.

Conversely, in Port St John's Municipality, P6 underscores a different urgency related to gender mainstreaming: the need for communitywide understanding and training. They point out a lack of comprehension about gender among community members, particularly parents and leaders, which contributes to discrimination against LGBTQIA+ individuals. P6 advocates for educational efforts aimed at these groups to foster better understanding and reduce prejudice, thereby promoting a more inclusive approach to gender issues in their municipality.

Both views show critical areas for immediate action in gender mainstreaming. Mbhashe emphasizes direct service provision and empowerment through education in underserved areas, while Port St John's stresses the importance of community-wide education to combat discrimination and promote inclusivity. These approaches are essential for bridging gaps in gender equality and ensuring that all community members, regardless of gender identity, can access equal opportunities and rights.

Cultural and Social Challenges in Gender Mainstreaming

This section addresses the cultural and social challenges that hinder effective gender mainstreaming. It explores how deeply rooted cultural beliefs, social norms, and traditional practices can create barriers to achieving gender equality. The discussion focuses on the complexities of navigating these challenges and the need for culturally sensitive approaches to promote inclusivity and overcome resistance to change.

Mbhashe Municipality

M9: *"There is a challenge of miscommunication among genders. Workshops should explain why there are things that women should not be part of, while men can, to avoid conflicts and misunderstanding. For instance, women are not allowed to bury a person who died from an accident because they might be on their periods, and traditional medicines used to protect the dead person would harm them."*

M10: *"Women do not go straight to management positions; they must prove themselves. Political organizations also play a role, especially in the municipality during deployment. Men are empowered through programs like Men for Change, which focuses on males from the mountain."*

Port St John's Municipality

P8: *"There is a Xhosa connotation that 'intonga yendoda ayitsitywa' because of the things used by men. It is part of our culture. Women are believed to be oppressed. As the youth, we wonder why we should be empowered while there are no programs to empower men. Who said men were born empowered? Men tend to abuse power in management positions to fulfill their sexual desires. Women should hold 60% of positions, with 30% of that being youth."*

The term "intonga yendoda ayitsitywa" broadly refers to power relations, that as a woman you cannot skip a man's stick. It's considered as a show of disrespect by the women. The belief is that the woman will weaken the stick as it was used for stick fighting and protection against any adversary.

P9: *"The most oppressed are those who are seen as oppressors. Men are also empowered in workshops, but the programmes are not specific to them."*

In Mbhashe Municipality, cultural and social challenges in gender mainstreaming are highlighted by M9 and M10. M9 points out miscommunication and misunderstandings between genders, particularly regarding cultural practices that restrict women's participation in certain rituals due to menstruation. This cultural belief not only perpetuates gender inequality but also poses practical barriers to women's involvement in community practices. M10 underscores the

systemic barriers women face in advancing to management positions, requiring them to prove themselves more than men. Political organizations further exacerbate these challenges by deploying men more readily and empowering them through programmes like Men for Change, which M10 suggests are not equally matched with equivalent programmes for women.

Port St John's Municipality faces similar challenges, as indicated by P8 and P9. P8 discusses cultural beliefs that enforce male dominance and restrict women's empowerment, portraying cultural practices as inherently favoring men's roles and abilities. There is a perception among youth that men are inherently empowered, which contrasts with the lack of specific empowerment programmes tailored for men compared to women. P9 adds that men, despite their perceived empowerment, also face challenges and oppressions that are overlooked in discussions about gender mainstreaming.

These responses from both municipalities reveal deep-seated cultural norms and structural inequalities that pose significant challenges to effective gender mainstreaming. Addressing these challenges requires not only policy interventions but also cultural sensitization and educational efforts to dismantle stereotypes, promote gender equality, and ensure inclusive opportunities for all community members.

DISCUSSION

The finding of the study reveals that there is a spectrum of views within Mbhashe and Port St John's municipalities regarding gender mainstreaming. Some express skepticism and perceive bias towards women in these initiatives, highlighting concerns about fairness and inclusivity in policy implementation. This finding aligns with broader literature on gender mainstreaming and policy implementation challenges. Gender mainstreaming, as a strategy to achieve gender equality, aims to integrate gender perspectives into all policies and actions, ensuring that the needs, priorities, and experiences of both men and women are considered. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives can be hindered by various factors, including perceptions of bias and fairness. Research by Kabeer (2005) highlights that gender mainstreaming often faces resistance and skepticism, particularly from those who perceive it as prioritizing women's interests at the expense of men or failing to address deeper structural inequalities effectively. This perception can be exacerbated in contexts where traditional gender roles are deeply entrenched or where there is a lack of understanding about the broader societal benefits of gender equality initiatives (UN Women, 2018).

The finding of the study reveals that the responses reveal the importance of involving men in gender equality efforts and addressing perceived biases in gender discourse. There is a call for a more inclusive approach to tackling (GBV), ensuring that all voices and perspectives are considered. Gender equality efforts have traditionally focused on empowering women and addressing disparities that disadvantage them. However, recent studies and advocacy highlight the crucial role of involving men in these efforts to achieve more sustainable and inclusive outcomes. The findings from Mbhashe and Port St John's municipalities underscore a shift

towards recognizing that gender issues affect everyone, and that inclusivity is essential in addressing them effectively. This inclusive approach not only acknowledges men as potential allies but also challenges societal norms and biases that perpetuate gender inequalities. As discussed by Kimmel (2019), engaging men in gender equality initiatives is critical because it shifts the focus from viewing gender issues as solely women's issues to understanding them as societal issues that require collective action. Furthermore, UN Women (2020) emphasizes that tackling GBV requires addressing deep-seated gender norms and stereotypes that perpetuate violence, necessitating a comprehensive approach that involves all stakeholders. Therefore, the call for inclusivity in tackling GBV reflects a broader understanding that diverse perspectives and experiences are essential in developing policies and interventions that effectively address gender inequalities.

The finding reflects varied perceptions on government actions. Mbashe Municipality stresses the need for more proactive measures and respect for women's leadership roles, while Port St John's critiques unintended consequences and perceived biases in policy implementations, highlighting challenges in achieving comprehensive gender equality. The finding reflects a nuanced understanding of government actions on gender mainstreaming within Mbashe and Port St John's municipalities. Mbashe Municipality's emphasis on the need for proactive measures and respect for women's leadership roles underscores a demand for more robust policy interventions that directly address gender inequalities at the local level. This aligns with broader calls in literature for governments to implement policies that actively promote women's participation and leadership across sectors (UN Women, 2020). In contrast, Port St John's critique of unintended consequences and perceived biases in policy implementation suggests skepticism towards current approaches and highlights challenges in achieving comprehensive gender equality. Such critiques resonate with studies emphasizing the importance of policy coherence and sensitivity to local contexts to effectively address gender disparities (OECD, 2019). These varied perceptions show the complexity of implementing gender mainstreaming policies and the diverse challenges faced by municipalities in advancing gender equality agendas.

The finding of the study reveals that Mbashe Municipality acknowledges gender gaps within economic sectors and administrative practices, advocating for targeted interventions to promote equality. Port St John's critiques broader societal attitudes and structural inequalities perpetuating disparities and violence, showcasing the complex challenges in gender mainstreaming. This aligns with literature advocating for specific policy measures to address structural barriers and promote gender parity in various sectors (World Bank, 2019). In contrast, Port St John's critiques broader societal attitudes and entrenched structural inequalities that perpetuate gender disparities and violence. This critique shows the complex socio-cultural dynamics that hinder effective gender mainstreaming efforts, highlighting the importance of addressing deep-rooted inequalities alongside policy interventions (UN Women, 2021).

Together, these perspectives underscore the multifaceted challenges municipalities face in advancing comprehensive gender mainstreaming agendas.

The finding of the study reveals that respondents from both Mbhashe Municipality and Port St John's Municipality articulate multifaceted challenges in achieving gender equality within local governance and cultural aspects. Mbhashe Municipality highlights specific challenges such as gender gaps in economic sectors and administrative practices, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions and policy measures to promote equality (World Bank, 2019). On the other hand, Port St John's Municipality critiques broader societal attitudes and entrenched structural inequalities that perpetuate gender disparities and hinder effective gender mainstreaming efforts (UN Women, 2021). Perhaps we get different articles other than the UN? These contrasting viewpoints show the complex interplay of local governance, cultural norms, and structural barriers in advancing comprehensive gender equality agendas at the municipal level.

The findings illustrate the complex relationship between cultural norms, religious beliefs, and gender mainstreaming, particularly concerning LGBTQIA+ issues. Urban areas show more receptivity to diversity, while rural areas face deeper-rooted challenges due to cultural conservatism and limited awareness (United Nations, 2019). This disparity underscores the need for targeted educational campaigns and policy interventions that account for local cultural contexts to effectively promote gender equality and LGBTQIA+ rights across diverse settings.

The finding of the study reveals that cultural and religious beliefs significantly influence gender mainstreaming initiatives. While some communities uphold traditional gender norms, others advocate for more inclusive practices within religious settings, highlighting the role of religious bodies in promoting gender equality or perpetuating disparities. Understanding the impact of cultural and religious beliefs on gender mainstreaming initiatives is crucial for comprehending the complexities surrounding gender equality efforts globally. Cultural norms and religious beliefs often dictate societal expectations and behaviours, influencing how gender roles are perceived and practiced within communities. For instance, traditional gender norms may restrict women's participation in leadership roles or economic activities, reinforcing gender disparities (Koenig, et al, 2003). Conversely, some religious communities have begun advocating for more inclusive practices that recognize and support gender equality within their faith frameworks (Khalaf-Elledge, 2021). This dichotomy underscores the dual role of religious bodies: either perpetuating existing disparities or serving as catalysts for progressive change in gender norms and practices. The role of religious bodies in promoting gender equality extends beyond theological interpretations to practical engagement in social and political spheres. For instance, religious organizations often provide platforms for community education and advocacy on gender issues, influencing public perceptions and policies (Pit, 2018). Moreover, partnerships between secular gender equality advocates and religious leaders have been instrumental in advancing inclusive practices and policies that bridge cultural divides (Khalaf-Elledge, 2021).

The findings of the study reveal that both Mbhashe and Port St John's identify critical areas for action in gender mainstreaming. Mbhashe emphasizes direct service provision and educational empowerment in underserved areas, while Port St John's stresses community-wide education to combat discrimination and promote inclusivity. This approach aligns with broader efforts to address gender disparities through targeted interventions that enhance access to education and support services, aiming to empower marginalized groups and promote gender equality (UN Women, 2020). Conversely, Port St John's Municipality emphasizes community-wide education initiatives aimed at combating discrimination and promoting inclusivity (P6). This strategy reflects a proactive stance in addressing societal attitudes and behaviours that perpetuate gender based disparities and discrimination, thereby fostering a more supportive environment for gender equality initiatives (Kabeer, 2005). By prioritizing education and awareness campaigns, Port St John's seeks to challenge stereotypes and promote understanding across diverse community demographics, crucial steps towards achieving comprehensive gender mainstreaming goals.

The finding of the study reveals that there are deep-seated cultural norms and structural inequalities pose significant challenges to gender mainstreaming. These norms and inequalities create formidable barriers that impede progress towards achieving gender equality and inclusivity across various societies. Cultural norms often dictate traditional roles and expectations based on gender, reinforcing unequal power dynamics and limiting opportunities for women and marginalized genders (Kabeer, 2005). Structural inequalities, such as unequal access to education, healthcare, and economic resources, further entrench these disparities, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and exclusion (UNESCO, 2019). Addressing these challenges requires not only policy interventions but also concerted efforts to challenge and transform cultural norms that perpetuate gender-based discrimination and inequality.

For instance, in Port St Johns the challenge of this community consists of gender discrimination due to patriarchal systems which is deeply entrenched. The right of women was linked to traditional settings which most men in the focus group had a problem with.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, Mbhashe and Port St John's municipalities reveal varied perspectives on gender mainstreaming. Both municipalities are aware of the policies on gender mainstreaming enshrined in the constitution of South Africa. However, there were differing views on the word gender especially in Port St Johns. The perception was that its meaning was tailored for women a bias they did not even realize. This was especially coming from men. This study revealed that men's entrenched beliefs in custom and traditions that have been passed on from generation to generation.

Mbhashe focuses on proactive measures to empower women in leadership, while Port St John's highlights concerns about biases and unintended consequences in policy implementation, complicating efforts for comprehensive gender equality. These differing views underscore the importance of tailored approaches that respect local dynamics and perceptions,

ensuring fairness and inclusivity in gender mainstreaming initiatives. Recommendations include strengthening educational programmes and community involvement to foster broader support for gender equality across diverse cultural contexts. Additionally, partnerships with religious and community leaders can play a crucial role in promoting inclusive practices and challenging discriminatory norms, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming efforts. Addressing entrenched cultural norms and structural inequalities through targeted policies and collaborative strategies is essential for advancing sustainable gender equality and social justice agendas.

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