

Understanding the Gendered and Intersectional Impacts of Flooding on Women Living in the Emsindweni Informal Settlement, Cape Town

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RESEARCH OVERVIEW

As climate variability increases alongside surface hardening, flood events are becoming more common in Cape Town, especially in informal settlements. These settlements frequently lack adequate infrastructure, legal land tenure, and services, increasing their vulnerability to flooding. Women in these communities confront additional vulnerabilities due to intersecting social factors such as gender, age, (dis)ability, and socioeconomic status.

This brief reviews the gendered and intersectional effects of flooding and coping strategies of the women in the Emsindweni informal settlement, Khayelitsha, Cape Town. The research is based on interviews and focus group discussions with fourteen women from the community who speak about their experiences with flood risks as informal settlement dwellers. This brief highlights how flood risks exacerbate existing vulnerabilities as a result of different social and institutional power relations, including poverty, patriarchy, apartheid, spatial planning, and ableism.



Above | Emsindweni informal settlement post flood-event

KEY FINDINGS

- Flooding severely affects women's livelihoods, particularly those running home-based businesses.
- Women face heightened health risks, including waterborne diseases, sanitary infections as well as stress-related illnesses.
- Disabled and elderly women are particularly vulnerable due to limited mobility and inadequate health services.
- There are apparent gender roles to immediate flood response, where women are expected to take on the responsibility of managing flood-related tasks, such as water removal, securing safety and hygiene for their families.
- Immediate coping strategies include seeking shelter with relatives, sandbagging and opening up water channels in the ground to divert water out of the homes.
- Long-term adaptation includes seasonal strategies such as shack levelling and solidifying in summer and migration to hometowns in the Eastern Cape during winter to escape flood conditions.
- Long term-adaptation is hindered by economic constraints and lack of institutional support, resulting in a low adaptive capacity among the women, making them more sensitive and highly vulnerable to flood risks.

UNDERSTANDING THE GENDERED AND INTERSECTIONAL IMPACTS OF FLOODING

The women detailed and grouped flood impacts into three categories. Namely, economic, health, and social impacts.

Economic Impacts

Floods significantly disrupt women's economic activities and livelihoods. As primary caregivers and often as sole breadwinners, the economic impact is profound, leading to a loss of livelihood and increased financial instability. A considerable number of women in Emsindweni engage in informal trading and own small businesses, which frequently run from their houses and serve as living and working spaces. Thus, during flooding which leads to significant destruction of homes and personal belongings, these women experience significant economic losses and disruptions to their livelihoods.

Flooding can also mean that they have to temporarily relocate due to flood damage and this temporary displacement further interrupts daily economic activities, reducing overall household income. Additionally, economic losses are profound as many women lack insurance or savings to replace lost items, compounding their financial strain. Women in the Emsindweni settlement often have limited access to formal financial services such as banks or loans, which hampers their ability to recover from economic shocks.

Health Impacts

Flooding leads to an increase in health issues, such as waterborne diseases and mental health problems, affecting women more severely who report higher incidences of these conditions. The lack of healthcare access worsens these health problems. In the Emsindweni settlement, poor toilet systems and sanitation worsen health issues during floods, causing infectious diseases. Floodwaters often overflow communal sanitation facilities, rendering them unusable. This forces women to use open defecation or makeshift facilities, increasing the risk of disease and genital infections. Contaminated sanitation facilities due to floods can spread diseases like cholera and diarrhoea, particularly impacting women and children who rely heavily on these facilities. Additionally, the stress and anxiety associated with maintaining personal and household hygiene during flood conditions can significantly affect women's psychosocial well-being.

DEFINING GENDER & INTERSECTIONALITY

Gender refers to the socially created identities, roles, responsibilities, and opportunities associated with being a man or woman. It is a social construct that changes and varies from society to society, and it assumes the roles, expectations, and values that society places on men and women in what it believes acceptable for them (West and Zimmerman, 1987).

Intersectionality refers to the idea that distinct forms of disadvantage and oppression are produced by the combination of factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, cultural and ethnic background, age, and disability which interact and overlap to produce diverse forms of social injustice and vulnerability (Crenshaw, 2017; Crenshaw, 1989).



Above | Conditions of Emsindweni toilet facilities

The risk of infections and the challenges of managing menstrual hygiene in flooded homes or toilets further contribute to the mental health burden these women face. Women also fear sexual harassment and violence when using unsafe or distant sanitation facilities during floods, adding to psychological stress.

The women in Emsindweni also reported limited access to healthcare services, further marginalizing them during and after floods. Floods make it hard for women to reach healthcare facilities because of disrupted transportation and flooded roads. This highlights the differential and intersectional vulnerabilities within groups, as women, especially those who are disabled, elderly, or pregnant, face greater physical and health challenges due to their specific health needs.

Social Impacts

The women of Emsindweni highlighted often-overlooked gendered tensions caused by flooding in informal settlements, which exacerbate their vulnerabilities and limit their ability to cope with and adapt to flood risks.

These tensions are particularly apparent in the areas of social reproduction and care labour during and after floods. Social vulnerabilities are influenced by intersecting factors such as age, disability, and socioeconomic status, with unequal institutional power dynamics worsening these vulnerabilities.

During floods, women often take on additional responsibilities, such as securing clean water and ensuring family safety, increasing their domestic burden. They reported that the tasks of maintaining household cleanliness and caring for sick family members and children often fall on them, even when men are present, indicating a form of *"women abuse"* and *"male absence."* This additional burden can lead to physical and mental exhaustion.

Overall, the impacts of flooding on women in the Emsindweni informal settlement are multifaceted and severe, with economic, health, and social dimensions that are deeply interconnected and exacerbated by systemic inequalities.



Above | Flooded homes and surrounding areas in Emsindweni (left); Blocked and flood-waterlogged access between houses and shops (right)

COPING AND ADAPTATION: CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

The women of Emsindweni employ immediate strategies to respond to floods by relocating to higher ground, using makeshift barriers to prevent water entry, and seeking assistance from neighbours and local organizations. However, these strategies are often reactive and only offer temporary relief. Long-term adaptation measures are limited due to a lack of resources, including financial means and infrastructural support. Structural issues like insecure land tenure and inadequate housing hinder effective long-term adaptation. The women expressed the need for better housing, improved drainage systems, and stronger community support systems to enhance resilience. There is a significant gap in institutional support from local government and other agencies, making collaboration between the community and local authorities essential for improving adaptive capacities. While community networks provide some support during disasters, they are often overstretched and cannot fully compensate for the lack of formal institutional support. There is a need for:

- Disaster risk management policies to incorporate considerations of gender and intersectionality to address the specific needs of women in informal settlements.
- Invest in resilient infrastructure in informal settlements to reduce physical vulnerabilities. This includes better housing, drainage systems, and access to clean water and sanitation facilities.
- Provide targeted economic support for women in informal settlements, such as microfinance programs and livelihood diversification initiatives.
- Strengthen healthcare services to address both immediate and long-term health impacts of flooding on women and improve access to these locations.
- Develop post-disaster recovery programs that prioritize women-headed households and those engaged in informal economies.
- Enhance community resilience by supporting community-based adaptation initiatives that empower women and strengthen local capacities to respond to flood risks.
- Facilitate access to education and training programs that equip women with skills to improve their economic resilience and adaptive capacity.

This research found that there is a critical need to incorporate an intersectional and gendered perspective in understanding and addressing vulnerabilities in disaster risk management and adaptation strategies. It reveals that addressing flood risk in informal settlements requires nuanced and multifaceted approaches that consider the diverse experiences and identities of the affected women. Addressing the gendered and intersectional impacts of flooding in informal settlements requires comprehensive and inclusive policies that recognize and respond to the unique vulnerabilities of women. By integrating gender-sensitive and intersectional approaches into disaster risk management, policymakers can enhance the resilience of communities and promote sustainable development in vulnerable areas.

All opinions, interpretations and conclusions expressed are entirely those of the authors and do not reflect the views of the funder, or the African Climate and Development Initiative.

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