

**Brief accompanying Evidence Report 73**

# AGENCY AND CITIZENSHIP IN A CONTEXT OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

**Addressing and Mitigating Violence**

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The IDS programme on Strengthening Evidence-based Policy works across six key themes. Each theme works with partner institutions to co-construct policy-relevant knowledge and engage in policy-influencing processes. This material has been developed under the Addressing and Mitigating Violence theme.

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This pilot evaluation explores how citizenship and agency among social activists can be fostered in contexts of urban violence at the local level. Many initiatives and approaches to addressing violence, particularly urban violence, tend to focus on security sector reform and policing, infrastructure and livelihoods. The role of citizens living in slums, informal settlements and housing estates in acting to stop violence and promoting peaceful relations is less understood and supported. In the urban context, violence is often a means of getting access to scarce resources (such as employment), political power, as well as enforcing discriminatory social norms such as those surrounding gender, age, race, religion and ethnicity. The focus of this pilot is to understand how a sense of democratic citizenship and the ability to act on that citizenship at the local level can contribute to reducing different types of urban violence and promote security, and how becoming an activist against violence can contribute to constructing a sense of citizenship. The case study for this analysis is based in the informal settlement of Khayelitsha, Cape Town, and focuses on community activism against gender-based violence.

This pilot evaluation focused on the life trajectories of community activists in Khayelitsha who are actively involved in intervening and preventing gender-based violence. Their activism is connected to a community-based programme called Prevention in Action (PIA). PIA was a programme that aimed to promote action against gender violence at the local level, in part by identifying, training and supporting community engagers and influencers to make direct interventions in situations of gender-based violence.

Through oral testimonies with community activists we evaluate what enables, inhibits and sustains this activism, and what can be done to support and extend it. We also draw out the implications of this activism for improving security and strengthening citizenship and democracy in the city.

## **Methodology**

This evaluation piloted an oral testimony approach, which is a structured dialogue that gives research participants significant control over their own testimony, and provides in-depth insights into their life histories. We used visual methods to facilitate the oral testimonies, including spatial maps, rivers of life, and key moment maps. These factors are critical in terms of respecting the sensitivity of the subject of violence and giving narrators the courage to address complex social and political issues at a very personal level. This is important for the participants in this evaluation, many of whom have experienced gender-based violence themselves, and have direct experience of it affecting others. Activists, government officials, civil society representatives and academic researchers generated further key insights on the recommendations for policy and practice through a multi-stakeholder dialogue event.

## **Evaluation framework: agency, citizen action and violence**

The purpose of this evaluation is to assess the role of community activists by understanding them as individuals, with relationships, aspirations and histories. We can understand more about how and why violence has become a part of their lives by situating their life histories in relation to the influences and contexts in which they live and work. Although gender-based violence is the entry point for discussing people's activism, their life histories demonstrate the linkages between how different forms of violence are interconnected (including intimate, criminal, public, political and state-sponsored). Their stories illustrate how, in the context of urban violence, different forms of violence are interconnected and cannot be considered in isolation.

An in-depth understanding of the life choices and life chances of community activists means that we are able to understand more about what enables people to take action against violence, within their homes, communities and cities. This requires seeing those living in

contexts of violence as potential active citizens, who are able to claim their rights to security and demand greater accountability, as well as act directly to mitigate violence.

Agency within this evaluation is taken to mean that people play an active role in shaping their own lives and the relationships that they have with others. Agency reflects how people recognise the power that they hold, their capacity to use this power in order to make their own decisions, and take their own actions within their complex social and political environment.

In this context, citizenship is both a legal standing in respect to the state, but also the capacity to act in relation to public authority in ways beyond the legal framing of rights and duties. This capacity to act involves both a horizontal relationship with and within the family and community, as well as a vertical relationship with the state. In a context of very high levels of violence, questions of citizenship become more acute, as the lack of security can erode the relationship between citizens and the state, as well as the relationship between citizens and their communities. The focus of the pilot is on micro-level and community-based interventions and as such, we aim to address how a sense of citizenship is connected to active participation at the local level, including within the intimate sphere.

Where agency increases confidence and knowledge, people can begin to see themselves as citizens with rights, even if those rights are not being realised. Increased civic and political knowledge and a greater sense of awareness of rights can empower citizens to express their agency in the form of citizen action, and hold governments to account. Citizen action in this context means people participating in democratic life, holding governance actors and processes to account, and exercising their rights and responsibilities for the transformation of society. Where agency is enabled in this way, it is often supported through networks based on solidarity and mutual support. The complex social dynamics that lie within and between families, communities and institutions affect these networks.

## **What enables, inhibits and sustains activism against violence?**

Within the context of regularised high levels of violence and gender-based discrimination, this evaluation has provided insight into the factors that enable agency to reduce this violence and how this relates to the wider issues of citizenship, governance and security in the township context of Khayelitsha, Cape Town.

### **Enabling factors**

#### **Empathy**

In an everyday context of very high levels of violence, the loss of empathy through the banalisation of violent acts becomes a significant barrier to a sense of political community and citizenship. The revival and fostering of empathy for the circumstances of violence in which people live was a key factor for enabling personal strength and collective action against violence. This has clear implications for policy and practice in that fostering empathy is not usually within the purview of state-sponsored security reforms, and yet this evaluation found empathy at the centre of the shift towards activism to halt violence.

#### **Interpersonal relationships**

Secondly, this empathy was necessary for interpersonal relationships that could further enable activism against violence. While Prevention in Action provided financial incentives for direct action against violence, the courage and personal resilience required to take a public stance against violence and persuade others to do so relied on strength of interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal relationships often break down in contexts of violence, and this evaluation shows how central they are to inspiring agency in those living with violence, and enabling activism that is effective at addressing gender-based violence and other forms of

violence. The importance of these relationships also speaks to the significance of horizontal associations. Recognition by peers is an important catalyst in building citizenship identity. This hidden aspect of the conditions required to enable agency is not explicitly addressed in many social programmes aimed at reducing violence, or considered in many interventions to improve governance.

### **Claiming individual and collective rights**

Finally, in some cases agency was directed towards claiming individual and collective rights. The evidence demonstrates that agency can contribute towards greater citizenship when actions are framed and considered as demands for accountability and the fulfilment of rights. It is not the case that all the examples of agency identified led to citizenship action, but it is clear that underlying empathy and interpersonal relationships were major contributors to the evolution of citizenship agency, where the claims made on the state and local governance structures directly related to the reduction of violence. Through taking action against violence, the activists in this pilot gained a sense of how the wider political system is failing them and what their role could be as citizens to address it.

## **Inhibiting factors**

### **Discriminatory norms**

This evaluation demonstrates how discriminatory norms, especially those related to gender, are constraining agency that can contribute to citizenship. Sustaining agency that addresses the underlying causes of violence within the urban context in South Africa is closely linked to addressing these norms. The activists involved in the pilot described how these norms are pervasive and persistent, and their testimonies demonstrate the ways this constrains their individual agency as well as the prospects for collective agency.

### **Personal risk**

Discriminatory norms, including those related to gender, are pervasive and this heightens the negative repercussions that activists face in challenging them. This becomes a countervailing influence to the positive horizontal associations built through activism, where backlash has the potential to isolate and marginalise those taking action. This points to the importance of understanding the extent of the risk involved for individual activists in addressing violence. Many activists experienced acute personal risk over the long term as a result of their work. Policies and programmes designed to encourage citizen action against violence must consider carefully the ways that this action exposes activists to risks and how these can be addressed.

### **The systemic relationship between violence, poverty and inequality**

The systemic nature of the relationship between violence, poverty and inequality within the township of Khayelitsha means that prospects for transformative social change are not straightforward. In the testimonies of activists, these three features of life in Khayelitsha become almost inextricably linked, making the role of the activists very difficult. Activists are searching for openings within this complex web in order to challenge violence, but can be undermined by the wider dynamics. It is this complexity that is also related to the risks that activists experience, and the difficulty in sustaining their work in the medium to long term.

### **Lack of institutional accountability and responsiveness**

Finally, poor institutional accountability and responsiveness can also inhibit and undermine activism. Where people see the state as perpetuating violence through the reinforcement of discriminatory norms and as ineffective in acting to prevent and reduce violence, then the vertical relationships necessary for democratic citizenship are damaged. In Khayelitsha, the breakdown between community leadership and the police is tied up in the wider struggle for political power at the provincial and national levels. Failures of accountability are therefore

part of the overall dynamics of violence, poverty and inequality, and these affect the prospects for activism very directly.

## **Sustaining factors**

This evaluation shows some of the factors that can contribute to sustained agency to reduce violence. For activists, the personal costs and risks can be balanced to a certain extent through ongoing support and attention to emotional wellbeing, and recognition of their contributions. If this relational aspect is addressed alongside the means for dignified livelihoods, activists can make sustained contributions to social development that contribute to violence reduction. While all these aspects are not within the purview of one particular programme or policy, if there are significant gaps it is likely to undermine the potential for agency that builds citizenship and responsive governance.

The testimonies of activists show how they accumulate relational power through networks for action that connect them to other committed individuals within and outside their township. The importance of these wider networks for sustaining activism is well researched in other contexts of urban violence. Sustained activism connected to wider networks can in turn support a process of constructing citizen action that is grounded in local identity. That is, citizen action against violence that is informed by the local context and its constraints and possibilities, is more sustainable and will have greater impact when combined with external interventions that address wider systemic issues. Shifts in the responsiveness and accountability of institutions responsible for addressing violence and its underlying causes require locally relevant and sustained citizen action. The testimonies of the activists in this pilot provide insight into how this can happen.

## **Conclusions**

The testimonies collected through this pilot point to the importance of understanding activism as a journey for which there is not a proscribed path or set of steps. The lives of individual activists are as complex as the situations in which they live and work. And yet, this pilot has identified some important trends and patterns within these life trajectories. Policy and programme interventions aimed at reducing violence, and particularly gender-based violence, need to give greater attention to what enables, sustains, and inhibits activism outside of the boundaries of particular projects. In the long term, the contributions that these activists can make to greater security can be substantial.

Based on this pilot, there are recommendations on how policy and programming can strengthen the role of the community as citizens in violence prevention and the potential for democratic outcomes:

- At the national and international level, there are policy development gaps on the role of the community in violence prevention. The current role assigned to the community in violence prevention and mitigation is as populations to be educated, sources of information, or individuals who should take more responsibility for themselves. This should be reframed as citizens as potential partners who can contribute independently to the common project of building safer communities.

## **Recommendations for locally relevant and responsive policy and practice**

- It is important that policies addressing violence prevention and mitigation link between local, provincial and national levels. Learning needs to take place between each level to ensure that policies are responsive to the grass roots reality of how positive change happens in contexts of urban violence, and that national policy supports this.
- Diverse stakeholders need to be engaged in networks working to prevent and reduce gender-based violence, including residents, state partners, informal institutions and civil society, in order to support system-wide shifts. This process involves opening up both informal and formal opportunities for dialogue to support different actors to work together for change.
- Working with citizens' own understanding of their context through community engagement strategies will help ensure that interventions to address violence engage with and challenge the sociocultural, and power dynamics that may impede their uptake. This is important for restoring inclusive relationships within communities where violent realities have eroded trust and isolated individuals, restricting opportunities for citizenship. Working with men and boys as well as women as part of the solution to gender-based violence will significantly contribute to transformative social change.
- Engage within the community to implement services that respond to the context of violence where it happens; this involves increasing visibility of services and understanding the social and cultural dimensions. The importance of working with local infrastructure and organisations is key; where these actors are able to have ownership over the implementation of the programme there is greater potential for democratic structures and longer term change. This is also relevant to the way research on violence mitigation is approached.

## **Recommendations for enabling and sustaining citizen agency and action**

- Enabling space and time for relationships is critical. Interpersonal relationships are integral to building personal strength to take action, and the mobilisation of activist networks can help build alliances for change within the wider community.
- Interventions need to include learning and skills building with official recognition, in order to enhance sustainable livelihoods and employment opportunities. This includes formal recognition of the experiences and skills of activists, and the work they are doing.
- Recognise emotion as a critical influence in the process of social change, in the context of gender-based violence. Personal connections and empathy provide an important catalyst for action, and emotional support and consideration of personal, social and material wellbeing can help ensure that action, and activism is sustained.

These recommendations are of particular relevance to the role of the police as a state institution. Police responsiveness and accountability on issues of violence within intimate, community and institutional spaces are critical for rebuilding trusting relationships with citizens and in catalysing wider citizen action. Activists emphasised the importance of full cooperation from the police including more transparency on the status of particular cases of violence, and increased responsiveness of the police to gender-based violence.