



Assessing the knowledge and impact of application of Gender Mainstreaming and Women Development paradigm within the Eastern Cape

Zibongiwe Mpongwana *

Nedbank Research Chair in Sustainable Rural Development
Senior Researcher
Walter Sisulu University
zmpongwana@wsu.ac.za

Matthew Damilola Omojemite

Post Doctoral Research Fellow
Continuing Professional Teacher Development
Faculty of Education
Walter Sisulu University
South Africa.
momojemite@wsu.ac.za

Elphina Nomabandla Cishe

Nedbank Research Chair in Sustainable Rural Development
Walter Sisulu University
South Africa
ecishe@wsu.ac.za

Abstract

This study addresses the critical issue of gender equality in South Africa, focusing on the implementation of gender mainstreaming strategies in rural areas. Despite significant political commitments to gender equality in South Africa, progress toward achieving gender parity has often been slow and incremental. Deeply ingrained cultural beliefs and traditional gender roles still dictate expectations for men and women. This qualitative study assesses the understanding and impact of application of gender mainstreaming and women development paradigm for bringing about equal opportunities between woman and man. Data was collected in Amahlathi Local Municipality in the Eastern Cape through focus group discussions using a structured schedule to 20 different stakeholders, purposefully selected from diverse groups represented by NGOs, church based organisations, police officers, the justice system, workers unions, social workers, municipal officials, traditional leaders, community leaders, ward councillors, hawkers and youth. The qualitative data was analysed using Atlas.ti 9. software, the textual data was managed by identifying and creating patterns and trends, thematic analysis and created conceptual models through codes. The findings highlight the persistent barriers to achieving gender parity, including resistance from stakeholders and entrenched cultural beliefs, while also identifying potential pathways for progress through strong leadership and organisational change. By examining the challenges and impacts of these initiatives, the research provides valuable insights into the complex interplay between policy, culture, and societal norms in shaping gender dynamics. Based on these findings, the research suggests broader understanding of gender

mainstreaming effectiveness and offers practical implications for policymakers and practitioners working towards UN sustainable development goal 5, gender equality and empowerment women and girls, ultimately helping to reduce gender disparities in South Africa and similar contexts.

Keywords: Gender mainstreaming, Gender disparities, Equitable society, Gender equality

Introduction

Gender mainstreaming and women's development in the Eastern Cape of South Africa are critical strategies for promoting gender equality and addressing historical injustices rooted in colonialism and traditional governance structures (Mditshwa, 2020). The region's gender dynamics, shaped by the longstanding marginalisation of women's voices, continue to influence present day efforts to advance equality. While these initiatives align with South Africa's progressive Constitution and international commitments to women's rights, implementation remains uneven particularly in rural areas where socio-economic disparities are pronounced (Sibanda and Lues, 2021; Hudson, 2009; Chant and Pedwell, 2008).

The value of gender mainstreaming lies in its ability to transform policymaking by embedding gender perspectives into governance at all levels. This approach seeks to ensure that the needs of both men and women are addressed, promoting equitable access to resources and opportunities (Marandure, Dzama, Bennett, Makombe and Mapiye, 2020; Shenbei, Ajaz, Sarfraz and Ahmed, 2023).

Efforts led by the Commission for Gender Equality and provincial government programmes reflect a commitment to women's empowerment and participation in decision making (Donkor and Mazumder, 2021). However, a significant gap remains between legal frameworks and their practical application, particularly for marginalised women who often lack adequate support (Devkota, Pant, Hambly Odame, Rai Paudyal and Bronson, 2022).

Key debates around gender mainstreaming in the Eastern Cape centre on the effectiveness of current policies and whether they adequately reflect the lived experiences of women, especially in rural communities. Critics argue that many initiatives, while well intentioned, fall short of meaningful integration and impact, resulting in superficial implementation (Eden and Wagstaff, 2020; Anderson, Denich, Warchold, Kropp and Pradhan, 2022).

These concerns underscore the need for ongoing evaluation and adaptation of gender-focused programmes to ensure their relevance and responsiveness. Stakeholders must adopt evidence-based, participatory approaches that centre women's voices in policy development. A culture of accountability is essential to close existing gaps and build an inclusive society that empowers all citizens (Women, 2020; Eden and Wagstaff, 2020).

Eden and Wagstaff (2020) emphasise that gender mainstreaming is a pivotal strategy for addressing inequalities and advancing women's development, particularly in the Eastern Cape. Effective implementation requires integrating gender considerations at all stages of policymaking. Donkor and Mazumder (2021) note that this improves policy quality and effectiveness, avoiding the reinforcement of existing disparities.

In today's development discourse, gender equality is a central concern. Understanding the specific dimensions of gender mainstreaming in the Eastern Cape is therefore essential. This study explores how such initiatives enhance women's roles and challenge structural inequalities (Moyo, 2022). It examines both theoretical frameworks and practical applications of the Women Development Paradigm to reveal the complexities involved in implementation within a socio-economically challenged region.

This inquiry goes beyond academic interest; it carries vital implications for policy and governance in the Eastern Cape (Moyo, 2022). Gender mainstreaming is not merely about including women in development it involves critically evaluating how to create equitable opportunities and empower women across all sectors

of society. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of gender dynamics in the Eastern Cape, offering insights to inform future policy and strengthen women's status in the region's socio-economic landscape.

By bridging the gap between theory and practice, the study aims to ensure that women's voices are central to development agendas and that their needs guide sustainable growth strategies across the province.

Background

In the Eastern Cape, gender mainstreaming serves as a pivotal framework for fostering sustainable development, particularly in promoting women's empowerment. This approach requires the integration of gender perspectives across all levels of policymaking and societal engagement, ensuring that women's needs and contributions are recognised and valued. An examination of evolving policies in the province reveals that gender mainstreaming is not merely an abstract concept but a practical strategy aimed at dismantling systemic barriers that hinder women's advancement. The Women's Development Paradigm complements this effort by emphasising holistic growth and equitable access to resources for women, thereby enhancing their participation in economic, social, and political spheres. Despite notable progress, challenges remain highlighting the need for continuous evaluation and adaptation of these frameworks to foster an inclusive approach that reflects the diverse experiences of women in the region (Motala, 2020).

According to Msuya (2020), the Eastern Cape has a complex history of gender dynamics, significantly shaped by colonialism and traditional governance structures. Female leaders such as Queen Nonesi exemplify the resilience of women in the face of oppressive colonial policies. Initially recognised for her loyalty to colonial authorities, she later repositioned herself as a protector of her people, resisting attempts by the Cape government to relocate her community to make way for white settlement in Emalahleni (Mvenene, 2023).

This act of defiance not only preserved land for her people but also marked a turning point in the perception of women in leadership roles. Historically, gender roles in precolonial societies were regulated by culturally embedded hierarchies and traditional checks and balances. However, these structures weakened under colonial influence, which introduced autocratic governance systems that deprived women of their rights to participate in political matters (Mvenene, 2023; Holomisa, 2019). As traditional leadership became increasingly male-dominated, women's roles were often relegated to child-rearing and domestic responsibilities, with minimal involvement in governance (Mvenene, 2023). The legacy of this historical marginalisation is still evident today. Despite South Africa's progressive Constitution, which seeks to ensure gender equality and women's empowerment, rural communities in the Eastern Cape continue to face significant barriers in accessing healthcare and other essential services (Ntwape, 2016).

The post-apartheid policy framework, including legislation aimed at promoting equality, has yet to fully bridge the gap between political promises and practical implementation on the ground (Sayed and Ahmed, 2011; Motala, 2020). Moreover, grassroots movements have historically played a vital role in advocating for women's rights, often forming broader coalitions that contributed to international agreements such as the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which emphasises the importance of women's roles in peacebuilding and security (Luna and Whetstone, 2022).

In this context, continued research on women's contributions such as those of Princess Emma Sandile, the first Black woman to attain formal education and land ownership remains essential to understanding the complexities of gender dynamics in the Eastern Cape (Masola, 2022; Berger, 2009). As the province continues to navigate its historical legacies, efforts to promote gender equality must address both the historical context and the current socio-economic challenges facing women today.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in intersectionality theory, which highlights how various social identities such as gender, race, and class intersect to create overlapping systems of discrimination and privilege. The theory critiques one size fits all approaches in gender mainstreaming and advocates for solutions that reflect the complexities of individuals' lived experiences. It emphasises that understanding social inequality requires examining how different forms of oppression interact.

Intersectionality is defined as a framework for understanding how multiple aspects of a person's social and political identity combine to shape unique experiences of discrimination and privilege (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall, 2013). It offers a more nuanced analysis of social issues, ensuring that advocacy and policy efforts are inclusive of all affected groups. The theory calls for inclusive policies that address complex and interlocking inequalities.

It further argues that systems of oppression such as racism, sexism, ableism, and discrimination against Black women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and people with disabilities create compounded disadvantages. Individuals who belong to multiple marginalised groups often experience distinct forms of oppression that differ from those affecting individuals in only one marginalised category. For example, a workplace policy might address gender inequality in general but fail to consider the additional barriers faced by women of colour, such as racial bias.

Intersectionality underscores the need for inclusive, responsive policies that take into account overlapping social identities and structural inequalities. In this context, the research explores how gender mainstreaming and the Women's Development Paradigm are understood and implemented in Amahlathi Local Municipality, and what impact they have.

Understanding Gender Mainstreaming Efforts

The Eastern Cape has undertaken various initiatives to engage stakeholders in the promotion of gender equality. The Commission for Gender Equality (CGE) is set to conduct a virtual stakeholder engagement to present its Annual Performance Plan (APP) for the 2024/2025 financial year. This engagement aims to share the CGE's overarching programme, which is aligned with the Constitution of South Africa and seeks to lead, promote, and evaluate gender equality through initiatives such as research and public education (Luna and Whetstone, 2022).

A critical examination of gender mainstreaming reveals its potential as a transformative approach in policy-making aimed at promoting gender equity. This strategy incorporates gender considerations into all levels of decision-making, thereby challenging traditional paradigms that often marginalise women's contributions and needs. By fostering inclusive dialogue among stakeholders, gender mainstreaming creates an environment where women's voices are amplified, ensuring that interventions are both contextually relevant and effective.

Achieving meaningful gender equality through this framework requires not only the commitment of policymakers but also the active involvement of civil society to hold institutions accountable. The Eastern Cape exemplifies the complexities of implementing gender mainstreaming, where socioeconomic disparities and cultural factors frequently intersect to hinder progress. Understanding these intricacies is essential to evaluating the effectiveness of gender mainstreaming in promoting women's development and broader community transformation (Masola, 2022; Luna and Whetstone, 2022). Efforts must be directed towards raising awareness and prioritising capacity building in order to make gender mainstreaming an integral component of governance and development strategies.

The historical context of gender mainstreaming in South Africa is deeply rooted in the struggle against apartheid, a regime that institutionalised gender inequalities alongside racial oppression (Malinga, 2016). The transition to democracy in 1994 marked a pivotal shift, resulting in the adoption of a constitutional framework that emphasises gender equity and the rights of women (Mntambo, Adebayo and Ndinda, 2023). South Africa's commitment to gender mainstreaming has been reinforced through a series of policies and legislative frameworks aimed at integrating gender considerations across all areas of governance.

However, the practical implementation of these frameworks continues to face challenges, particularly in marginalised regions such as the Eastern Cape, where socioeconomic inequalities remain pervasive. To address these complexities effectively, it is crucial to engage in critical discourse that evaluates how historical inequalities shape current gender policies. The interplay between theoretical frameworks and historical context significantly influences the success of gender mainstreaming initiatives, underscoring the urgent need for innovative strategies that align policy with the lived experiences of communities in the Eastern Cape (Kalpazidou Schmidt, Palmén and Bühler, 2023).

Provincial Government Initiatives

The Eastern Cape Provincial Government is guided by several frameworks aimed at promoting women's emancipation and advancing gender equality. These include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development, the Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality Strategy (WEGE), the National Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality, the Employment Equity Act of 1998, the Community Work Programme (CWP), the Women's Parliament of the Eastern Cape Provincial Legislature, and the Commission for Gender Equality (CGE).

In addition, the provincial government has implemented targeted initiatives such as job access plans to support women and individuals with disabilities. Notable progress has been made in women's representation at senior levels: the Department of Human Settlements has achieved a 50% representation target, while the Provincial Treasury and the Department of Health each report 45% female representation (Eastern Cape Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality Strategy, 2025-2030).

Challenges and Gaps

Despite notable advancements, significant challenges remain. A clear gap exists between the presence of legal frameworks such as the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act and the Employment Equity Act and their effective implementation, particularly for marginalised women in rural areas (Albertyn, Bruintjies, Finn, Jaftha, Malaudzi, Mate and Mudimba, 2021).

In addition, socio-economic disparities persist, with women and girls in Eastern and Southern Africa continuing to lag behind their male counterparts in both education and labour force participation. For example, as of 2022, only 65% of women were employed, compared to 75% of men, highlighting ongoing systemic challenges linked to gender norms and unequal access to resources (Smith and Sinkford, 2022).

Overview of Gender Mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming is recognised as a critical strategy for achieving gender equality by integrating a gender perspective into all stages of policy making and programme design, implementation, and evaluation (Smith and Sinkford, 2022; Kalpazidou Schmidt, Palmén and Bühler, 2023). This approach ensures that the diverse needs and circumstances of both women and men are considered, thereby promoting equality and combating discrimination. The overarching goal is to enhance the quality and relevance of policies, ensuring that interventions effectively address the needs of all citizens and prevent the reinforcement of existing inequalities.

Methodology

This study, conducted in the Amahlathi Local Municipality in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, employed a qualitative approach using a phenomenological design to assess gender mainstreaming, focusing on the understanding and impact of the Gender Mainstreaming and Women Development paradigm. This included reviewing key policy documents and conducting interviews to gain insights and draw lessons.

Data was collected through a focus group discussion involving 20 stakeholders, purposefully selected from diverse groups such as NGOs, church based organisations, police officers, the justice system, workers' unions, social workers, municipal officials, traditional leaders, community leaders, ward councillors, hawkers, and youth. This diversity reflects intentional sampling across social, occupational, and age groups, reducing the risk of homogeneity and enhancing the representativeness of gender related perceptions.

The study employed convenience sampling, using the Amahlathi Local Municipality as a gatekeeper. While this model presents a risk of bias, the authors mitigated it by ensuring wide stakeholder representation and using rigorous analytical methods to verify data completeness. These steps justify the credibility of participant diversity and the achievement of data saturation. This approach was chosen due to the municipality's familiarity with the area, which facilitated access to the target population. The research team provided specific guidance on the types of groups required to align with the study's objectives. Focus group discussions, conducted mainly in IsiXhosa (the local language), were used to explore collective views and attitudes and to deepen understanding of the subject matter (Mishra, 2016). The interview schedule included 16 close ended questions focusing on participants' knowledge and the meanings behind their views on gender mainstreaming. Close ended questions helped maintain focus on the study's objectives and allowed for the collection of standardised data, facilitating easier analysis and comparison.

The discussions were audio recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically. Transcriptions were translated from IsiXhosa to English and analysed using Atlas.ti 9 software, a tool suited for analysing large qualitative datasets. It allows coding and the creation of networks to show how codes and themes interact, thus facilitating interpretation (Adelowotan, 2021). The analysis explored patterns, themes, and relationships within the dataset, incorporating elements such as coding, code families, emergent categories, and quotations (Braun and Clarke, 2006). This approach aimed to achieve data saturation by ensuring a comprehensive understanding of each stakeholder's strategy toward gender mainstreaming.

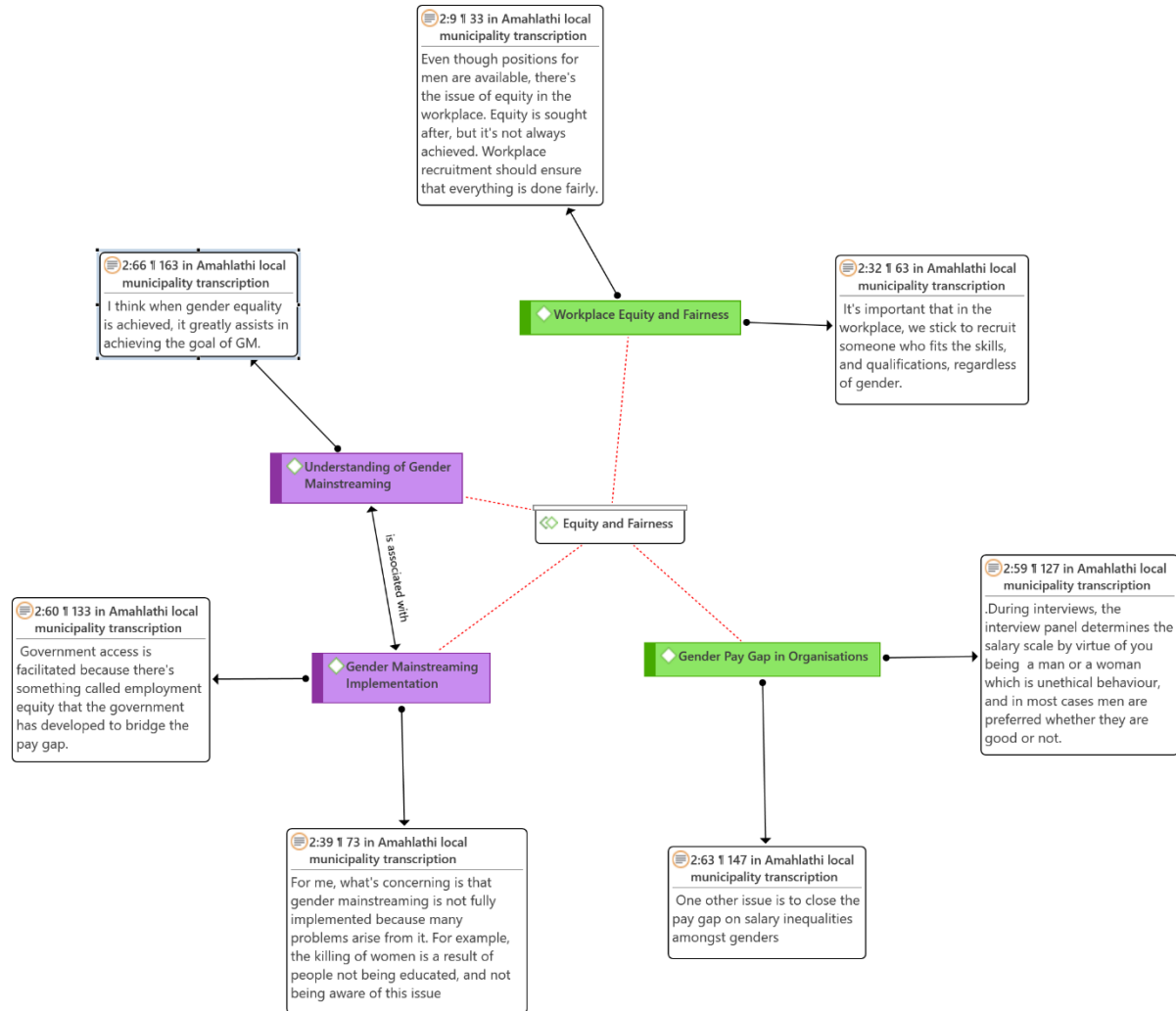
Results Data Presentation Gender Mainstreaming Practices

This section presents key findings from the focus group discussions, organised thematically to reflect stakeholder perceptions, experiences, and challenges in the implementation of gender mainstreaming in Amahlathi Local Municipality.

Understanding of Gender Main streaming

Participants demonstrated varied levels of understanding of gender mainstreaming. Some viewed it as a necessary tool for addressing inequalities and preventing gender based violence (GBV), while others highlighted the gap between policy awareness and practical application. One participant linked GBV to insufficient education and awareness, noting that cultural stereotypes still legitimise abusive behaviours in some communities.

Figure 1: Understanding of Gender Main streaming



P(4) “For me, what’s concerning is that gender mainstreaming is not fully implemented, and many problems arise from that. For example, the killing of women often results from a lack of education and awareness. We had a case in one of the villages where a man grabbed his wife by the throat, beat her, and threw her and their child out of the house. By the time we arrived, she was dead, and the husband was arrested. He claimed he had heard that his wife was cheating, which led him to start beating her. He admitted to abusing her but said it wasn’t his fault he believed it was justified because of what others had said. This shows how harmful cultural stereotypes influence people’s thinking. According to our culture, a woman is expected to behave in a certain way. If we don’t address these beliefs, it becomes difficult for people to understand what is acceptable and what isn’t. For instance, if someone is being beaten next door and the neighbours ignore it, that silence becomes part of the problem. We need to raise awareness so people understand the seriousness of the issue. Gender-based violence is a societal issue, and we all have a role to play in addressing it. So, in other words, gender mainstreaming is more relevant today than ever”.

Stakeholder Perspectives on Policy and Leadership

Participants acknowledged the government’s efforts through policies such as employment equity and gender representation targets. However, several respondents expressed frustration with implementation gaps and called for stronger enforcement, community involvement, and leadership accountability. Female leadership was particularly praised for promoting inclusive perspectives and advancing gender responsive policies.

(P5) *“Government access is now improved because of something called employment equity, which the government developed to help bridge the pay gap. It’s not like before, when only mothers received certain benefits. Now, thanks to employment equity, things are more balanced, and it also takes into account designated groups. In terms of employment equity, we have statistics showing that many women in managerial positions are being promoted. Preference is often given to women because there is a governing body that supports this, and these are the policies we follow.*

Gender Pay Gap and Workplace Discrimination

A recurring concern was unequal pay and biased hiring practices. Some participants noted that during recruitment processes, salaries were often determined based on gender rather than merit, with men reportedly receiving preference. These practices were described as unethical and indicative of the persistence of patriarchal workplace cultures.

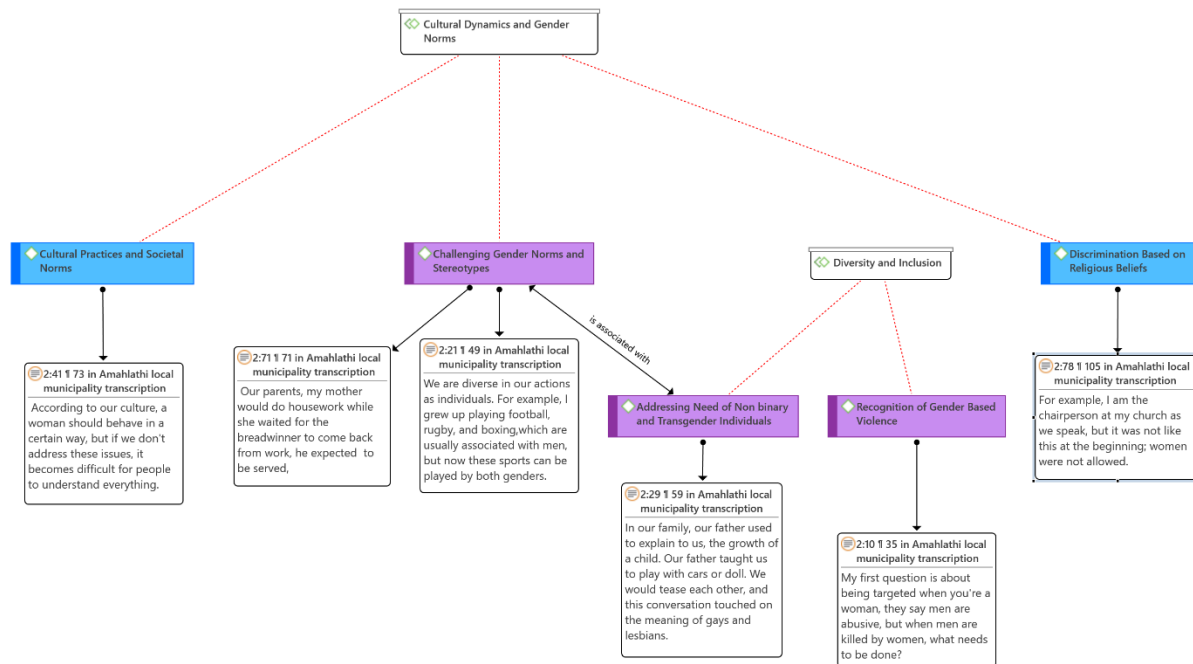
“During interviews, the panel often determines the salary scale based on whether you are a man or a woman, which is unethical. In most cases, men are preferred regardless of whether they are actually more qualified or not”.

Cultural Norms and Social Expectations

The data reveals significant reflections on cultural practices, gender norms, and societal inclusion, with respondents emphasising the need to challenge traditional gender roles. One participant highlighted the importance of fathers being present in their children's lives, advocating for active male involvement in child rearing. In terms of gender norms, there was a focus on breaking stereotypes, particularly in sports, where both genders should have equal opportunities to participate, as demonstrated by the respondent's personal experience with traditionally male dominated activities like football and boxing. Additionally, the experiences of non-binary and transgender individuals were touched upon, suggesting a growing awareness and acceptance of diverse gender identities. Gender based violence was identified as a critical issue, with participants underscoring its pervasive nature and the vulnerability of both boys and girls. Religious discrimination was also discussed, particularly the struggle for women’s rights within the Catholic Church, where participants expressed their desire for change, such as allowing women to become priests. Overall, the responses reflect a broader call for cultural transformation to foster gender equality, inclusion, and a more supportive environment for all individuals, regardless of gender or sexual identity.

The group narratives highlight persistent challenges in fostering inclusion at home and within organisations, particularly concerning cultural practices, societal norms, the needs of non-binary and transgender individuals, gender based violence, and religious based discrimination. Religious beliefs emerged as a contentious topic, with some participants viewing non-binary and transgender identities as incompatible with their faith, often labelling them as sinful.

Figure 2: Cultural Norms and Social Expectations



Non-Binary and LGBTQ+ Inclusion

The discussions included perspectives on the marginalisation of non-binary and transgender individuals. While a few participants showed openness to greater inclusion, others expressed religious and cultural reservations. Overall, there was a recognition of the need for increased awareness and acceptance to foster inclusion across gender identities.

P2:

“I wanted to add to what my colleague said, we need to allow fathers to be present in the same spaces as mothers. My first point is this: when we talk about unemployment, it’s not that there are lazy fathers who don’t want to provide. That’s not the case. Our children are coming back broken because there is no proper guidance. When a woman raises her daughter alone, the father is often absent or unreachable. Children need someone to guide them properly as they leave home”. “Imagine a child who’s already grown; the father sends him off because “he must become a man,” but at the same time, a cow ends up being valued more than that child especially when that cow is sold to buy drugs. What does that say about our priorities?”.

P7:

“For example, when I was growing up, I played football, rugby, and boxing activities that were traditionally associated with fathers or boys. But now, both boys and girls participate in sports. The important thing is that no one should be excluded from any activity because of gender stereotypes. Everyone should have the opportunity, but the reality is that not everyone is treated equally”.

P1 *“In our family, our father used to teach us about a child’s development. He taught us that we could play with either cars or dolls it didn’t matter. We would tease each other, and these conversations also touched on the meaning of being gay or lesbian”.*

Gender Based Violence and Community Safety

Gender based violence was a central theme. Participants recounted specific cases of domestic abuse and femicide, attributing these incidents to entrenched social norms and community silence. There was a call for targeted education campaigns and community based interventions to change attitudes and encourage reporting.

P2:

“Thank you very much. Let me start by expressing my gratitude. It’s very heartening to see a focus on gender based violence, which is often overlooked in national strategic planning especially in pillar number six. Some individuals are educated yet still perpetrate abuse, including abuse against children. It’s important to understand that this is not just a women’s issue. Today’s youth both boys and girls are exposed to a lot, which makes them especially vulnerable”.

P4:

“Firstly, I want to commend the person who had the idea of bringing us together here in Amahlathi so we can share and understand one another’s perspectives. Amahlathi is a marginalised area, and the environment here is somewhat neglected. Having this space to discuss these issues is important”.

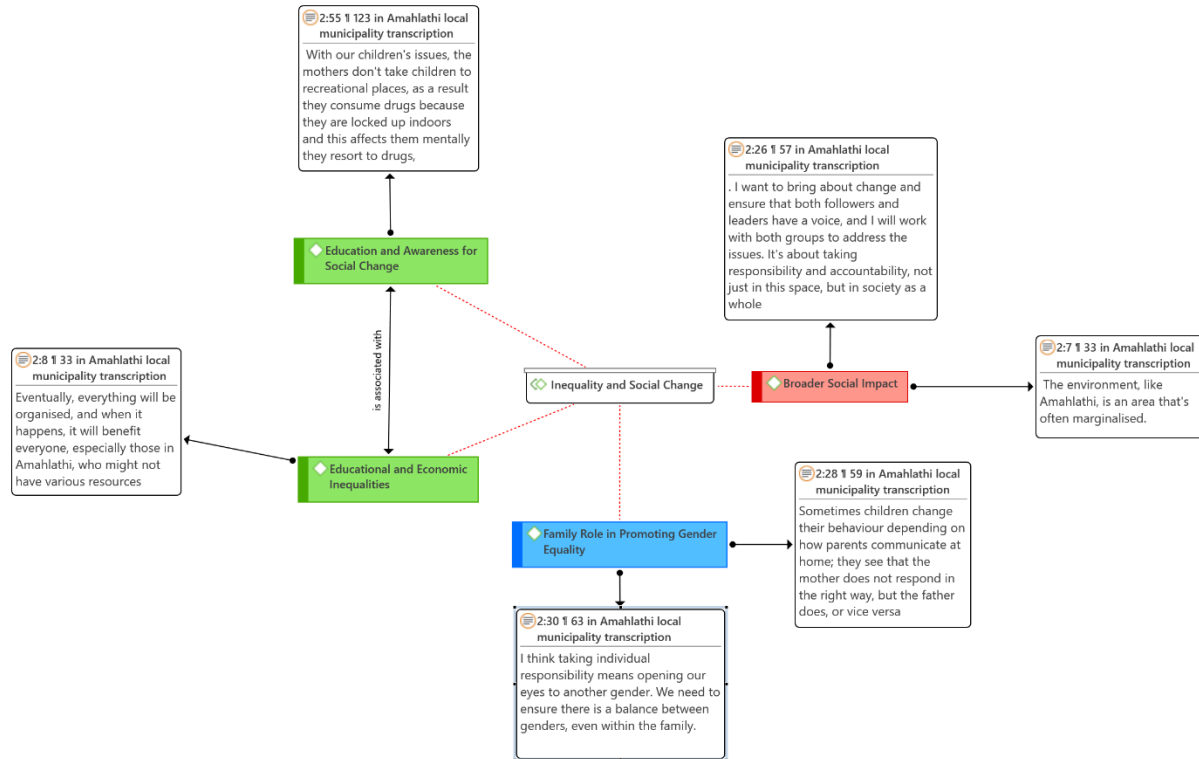
P1:

“I am a Catholic and attend the Roman Church. In our church, even if we want change, it must come from the Pope in Rome. The priests don’t question it they simply follow. I remember in 2012, I was in Rome. We were called by the Pope to discuss various matters, and we were told we could bring our concerns forward, and he would bring his. We were five women from South Africa, and during that meeting, we said we wanted women to be allowed to become priests, for priests to be allowed to marry, and for us to be able to study canon law like any other subject. We would send the agenda in the afternoon, and within twenty minutes, the Pope would respond, saying which items would be discussed in Italy. If something wasn’t going to be discussed, it would be removed from the agenda. We wanted to bring a mother’s perspective. Some things are hard to change, but over time, we see that women are ready for the challenge. For example, I am currently the chairperson of my church but it wasn’t always like this. In the beginning, women weren’t allowed to take on such roles”.

Role of Education and Family in Social Change

The participants' responses reflect deeply rooted societal challenges in achieving gender equality, highlighting the intersection of cultural norms, education, and economic disparities. Many responses emphasise the role of early socialisation in shaping gender perceptions, suggesting that family structures and parental influence play a crucial role in either reinforcing or challenging traditional gender roles. Concerns about gender based violence and discrimination against non-binary and transgender individuals reveal persistent gaps in societal awareness and intervention strategies. Economic inequalities and workplace biases remain prevalent, with some male participants expressing concerns about perceived neglect in gender equity efforts. However, there is a strong call for education as a transformative tool, with participants advocating for gender sensitive curricula and greater inclusivity in policy implementation. Overall, the responses underscore the need for a multidimensional approach to gender mainstreaming one that integrates cultural shifts, policy enforcement, and grassroots community engagement to drive meaningful social change.

Figure 3: Role of Education and Family in Social Change



P3:

Sometimes children change their behaviour depending on how parents communicate at home. They observe that the mother may not respond appropriately, while the father does or vice versa. In our family, our father used to explain to us, as children, how we grow up. One child might enjoy playing with cars, another with dolls, and we would tease each other. These conversations touched on the meaning of being gay or lesbian. For instance, the boy enjoyed cooking and always ate clean food. You understand what I mean because sometimes, the girl wants to go out, and they say she's playing football. We have issues like gender based violence (GBV) in society. It can start early and may continue into adulthood. Whether it's youth or adults, we must investigate what causes rape. Often, the perpetrators are around 30 years old. We need to intervene and understand who commits these acts. You must know who in your community is committing rape.

P1:

All genders should have the skills to express themselves emotionally and psychologically. People need the freedom to understand who they are and feel safe in their own comfort zones, without being judged based on gender. This is the essence of gender empowerment respecting differences. For example, LGBTQ+ individuals also seek progress and deserve empowerment. Education helps us understand that they are part of the broader gender spectrum. Let's educate ourselves so that we can understand and coexist respectfully with them.

P4:

I would say that in all the sectors we've discussed, gender mainstreaming needs to be reinforced. There are potential areas for impact because, wherever you are and whatever you do, success also depends on spiritual strength. Secondly, I'd like to see more focus on schools. Thirdly, in sports if people in sports start leading their own committees, we'll ensure interventions there too, because many young people are involved in sports.

P5:

There's a percentage in this research that makes sense when it comes to males. We know females are recognised, and we, as males, were also recognised by the previous government. But in the current situation, it's quiet as if we are being ignored. I'm speaking on behalf of men, who are also important. We work to support women and families, yet the government tells us to be careful. Males who were once recognised are now viewed only as individuals with rights but when we take responsibility, our contribution should also be reflected in research. I want to return to the issue of our municipality here in Amahlathi. In previous years, we submitted proposals that were promoted by Amahlathi Municipality. Walter Sisulu University is assisting us to revisit the education department to ensure that students from Stutterheim gain access to scholarships.

P4:

Eventually, everything will come together, and when it does, it will benefit everyone especially those in Amahlathi, where resources are limited. I speak in isiXhosa, so please bear with me and come back to us to address the issues properly. For example, in the workplace, even though positions are available for men, equity remains a concern. Equity is desired, but it's not always achieved. Whoever is responsible for overseeing this must ensure that everything is done fairly.

P4:

Let's begin by taking responsibility for how previous generations grandparents and great grandparents lived their lives. How did fathers lead? How did mothers? In rural areas, children are raised differently: girls are raised for domestic duties like cooking, and boys are raised for labour and other tasks. I believe we must evaluate these issues individually. The type of upbringing I observe is one I aim to change.

P10:

I want to bring about change and ensure that both followers and leaders have a voice. I will work with both groups to address the issues. It's about taking responsibility and being accountable not just in this space, but in society as a whole. Thank you, sir.

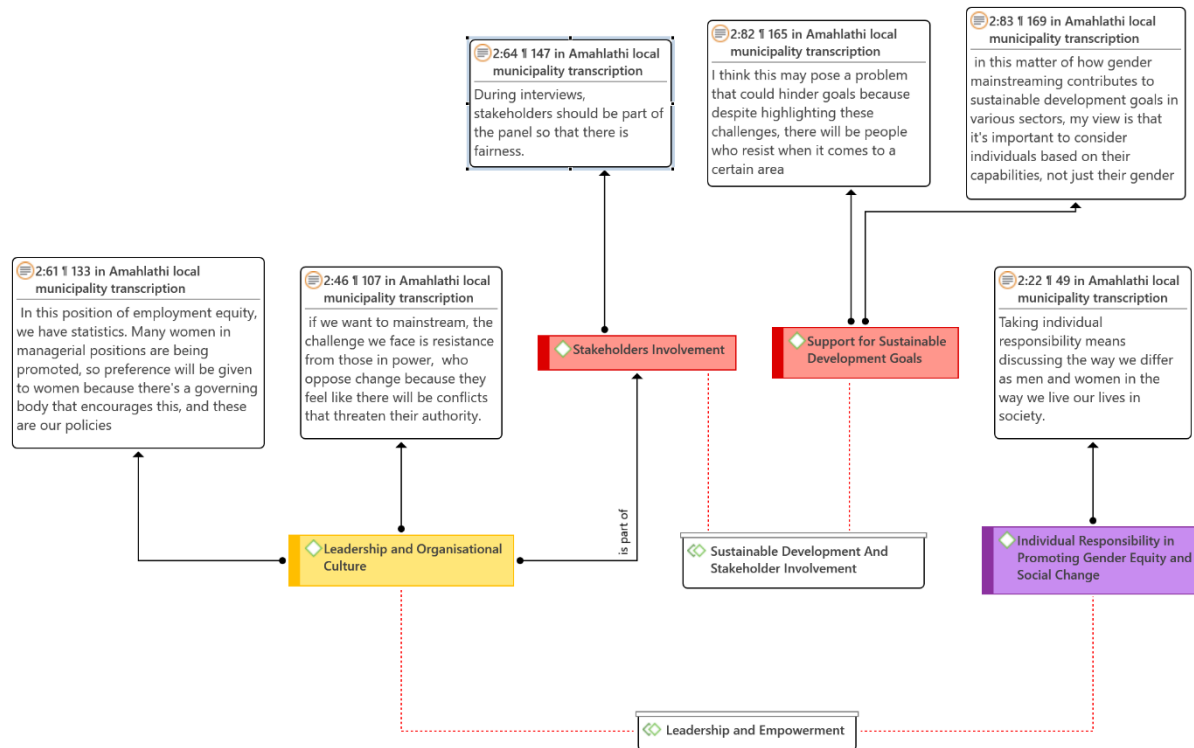
P3 (reiterated):

For me, taking individual responsibility starts within the family. It begins with the father and mother when we are children and continues as we grow into adults. At home, both parents must take responsibility. When the father speaks, how does the mother respond? We say the father is the head of the household but how does he lead? How does he communicate? Children notice these dynamics. They might see that the mother responds inappropriately and the father responds better, or the other way around. In our family, our father used to explain to us how a child grows. One may prefer to play with cars, another with dolls, and we would tease each other. These discussions included the meanings of being gay or lesbian. The boy in our family enjoyed cooking and always ate clean food. Meanwhile, the girl wanted to go out and was said to be playing football. These are just some examples.

Economic Inequalities and Empowerment

The respondents in this study highlight the significant role of gender equality and stakeholder involvement in advancing sustainable development. Participants emphasised that leadership should be based on capability rather than gender, with several advocating for the empowerment of women, especially in leadership positions. Stakeholders were seen as critical in ensuring inclusive practices, particularly in recruitment and decision making processes, to foster gender equity and address marginalised groups. Many respondents stressed the importance of individual responsibility in promoting gender equality, particularly in the context of parenting and challenging traditional gender roles. Additionally, participants linked gender equality directly to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, with a strong emphasis on empowering women to drive economic and social progress. Ultimately, the findings underscore the need for a holistic, inclusive approach to leadership, stakeholder engagement, and gender equity for sustainable development.

Figure 4: Stakeholder Involvement and Governance



Stakeholder Involvement and Governance

Finally, participants advocated for more inclusive stakeholder involvement in governance and service delivery processes. They emphasised the need for community representatives including youth, traditional leaders, and religious groups to be engaged in recruitment panels, policy discussions, and local development planning to ensure transparency and fairness.

P11:

Let’s start with the Constitution of South Africa. It shows that women have the potential to lead this country to where we want to go. Take, for example, Mrs. Thoko Didiza. I see her as a leader if given space, she can lead with the same authority. I believe she is already authoritative. Let’s not neglect women; let’s give them the best opportunities to lead. We must move away from the mindset that leadership is only for men. We should recognise the leadership potential of women even those who may not cook or sew but have the capacity to lead. On the other hand, someone who can cook but lacks leadership skills shouldn’t automatically be put forward. We must also address gender roles. It shouldn’t always be about “the father’s tradition.” In many families, the mother stands as the pillar. If we have strong women, let’s support them. Now let’s talk about the economy. We can’t ignore it, or else people will lose opportunities. Our leadership, starting from the president, must unite like minded individuals to achieve our national goals. I just wanted to add that.

P3:

One key issue is closing the gap in income based on gender. When interviews are conducted, stakeholders should be present to ensure fairness especially for disabled or disadvantaged individuals. If there’s funding

from stakeholders, they should also have an interest in the people being considered. Stakeholders must be present at interview panels.

P9:

I want to emphasise what Mrs. Salase said about involving stakeholders in shortlisting. Even though mandates are issued, you can see during shortlisting whether stakeholders are genuinely interested in the position. For example, if it's a community service post, it should involve representatives from church forums, youth forums, and gender based forums. These posts serve the community, so someone from the community like a chief or their representative should be considered. However, if only one stakeholder receives a mandate, others may be excluded. Certain mandates need to be reviewed, but what's important is that key stakeholders are present from shortlisting through to interviews.

P8:

I believe taking individual responsibility means correcting stereotypes early in a child's development. When a boy is told, "This is not for you it's for girls," we should intervene and correct that mindset. Like when a boy is scolded for playing with dolls this needs to change.

P9:

Taking individual responsibility means that when children are growing up, we shouldn't see a boy playing with dolls as a problem. Instead, we should take the time to understand why he enjoys that.

P1:

I believe taking individual responsibility starts with acknowledging other genders and ensuring there is balance, even within the family. It shouldn't be that just because you're a boy or a girl, your roles and expectations are fixed. We need to focus on balance on roles and responsibilities not gender. This also applies in the workplace. People should be given tasks based on their skills, not their gender. We need to identify which gender group is marginalised and determine what skills are needed to empower them.

P9:

Thank you, Chairperson. I believe that achieving gender equality helps us reach broader goals. For example, some jobs require a physically capable person who can think quickly and be available even after hours. The post might specify that you must be strong, reliable, and qualified. But if we simply replace one person with another who doesn't meet the requirements, we won't achieve sustainable development. Service delivery will suffer. That's why gender mainstreaming must ensure alignment between qualifications, expectations, and improved service delivery.

P4:

For me, Chairperson, in terms of how gender mainstreaming contributes to sustainable development goals across sectors, it's important to consider individuals based on their capabilities not just gender. But I must stress that in many households, especially when fathers are absent, mothers sustain the family. Empowering women means empowering the nation. Much of the ongoing poverty is linked to the lack of women's empowerment. If a mother is empowered, her children will likely grow up self sufficient. I've seen this. When I run a business, most of what I sell is bought by women they have the buying power, especially today. So, if we want economic success, we must involve women in every sector. Their participation leads to a stronger, happier nation.

P3:

Thank you very much for today. We've had meaningful discussions about the issues we live with every day. Even though not everyone was here, I thank everyone who came to Amahlathi to share their views. These discussions are important because they relate to real life challenges. As people grow up, especially in gender diverse environments, their self esteem is affected. When someone gets a position, it builds pride.

Also, I'm glad young people are here. I love the Sustainable Development Goals, and I think they're important we don't talk about them enough. So please, Walter Sisulu University, don't forget us. We want this to become a case study. With that, I thank the municipal officials, the youth, the mothers, the fathers, the unions everyone who attended.

Findings

The study critically examined the implementation of gender mainstreaming and the Women Development Paradigm in the Eastern Cape, revealing significant gaps between policy formulation and practical application. Despite the existence of gender equality policies, their implementation remains largely superficial, serving more as a procedural requirement than as a transformative approach within governance structures and community programmes.

Deeply entrenched cultural and social barriers continue to impede progress, with traditional gender roles and patriarchal norms limiting women's access to leadership and decision-making spaces. Stereotypical perceptions of women's capabilities further influence their educational and employment opportunities, reinforcing systemic inequalities. Additionally, gender based violence remains a serious concern, exacerbated by cultural acceptance and weak intervention mechanisms. Domestic violence, femicide, and workplace harassment persist as major threats. Workplace gender disparities are also evident, with pay gaps and preferential treatment for men in hiring and promotions undermining employment equity efforts.

The study also highlights the marginalisation of non-binary and transgender individuals, who continue to face discrimination rooted in rigid religious and cultural beliefs. Education and awareness were identified as critical drivers of social change, as early socialisation within families and schools plays a pivotal role in shaping gender norms either perpetuating or challenging inequality.

Women's economic empowerment emerged as a key factor for sustainable development. However, many women remain excluded from financial and entrepreneurial opportunities, limiting their participation in economic growth. Finally, the study underscores persistent challenges in stakeholder collaboration, particularly the disconnect between government policies and their effective implementation in rural areas. Greater engagement from traditional leaders, religious institutions, and civil society is essential to advancing gender equality initiatives and fostering inclusive development in the Eastern Cape.

Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. First, the geographic scope was restricted to the Amahlathi Local Municipality in the Eastern Cape, which limits the transferability of findings to other regions with different socio cultural and institutional contexts. Second, the use of convenience sampling and reliance on the municipality as a gatekeeper introduced potential selection bias, as participants were accessed through institutional networks and may not fully represent more marginalised voices. Lastly, due to the qualitative and context specific nature of the research, the findings are not generalisable beyond the study area. While the insights are valuable for understanding local dynamics, they should be interpreted as exploratory rather than broadly representative.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while significant strides have been made in advancing gender mainstreaming, the study reveals that the implementation of gender equality policies in the Eastern Cape remains superficial. Progress is hindered by deeply entrenched cultural norms, patriarchal structures, and systemic workplace disparities. Gender-based violence persists due to societal acceptance and weak intervention mechanisms, while non-binary and transgender individuals continue to face discrimination. Limited economic opportunities for women further exacerbate gender inequality, underscoring the need for targeted interventions.

To address these challenges, the study recommends strengthening policy enforcement through stricter accountability measures, fostering cultural transformation by engaging traditional and religious leaders, and implementing localised programmes to combat gender based violence. Promoting workplace gender equality through transparent hiring practices and equal pay policies, ensuring inclusive protections for marginalised gender identities, and integrating gender sensitive curricula into education systems are critical steps toward long term change. Additionally, enhancing women's access to financial resources and business development opportunities, alongside fostering multi stakeholder collaboration, will support meaningful progress in gender mainstreaming.

By bridging the gap between policy and practice, these strategies offer a pathway toward sustainable gender equality and inclusive socio-economic development in the region.

Recommendations

To enhance the impact of gender mainstreaming, several key actions are recommended. Strengthening policy implementation and accountability is essential through the enforcement of gender equality laws and the establishment of effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. Cultural transformation should be promoted via community engagement programmes that challenge gender stereotypes and support inclusive practices. Traditional and religious leaders should be actively involved in advocating for gender equality. Addressing gender based violence requires localised prevention and response initiatives tailored to rural contexts, supported by strong legal frameworks and accessible reporting mechanisms to ensure justice for survivors.

Workplace gender equality should be advanced by enforcing equal pay policies, ensuring transparency in recruitment and promotion, and providing leadership training for women in managerial roles. The rights of non-binary and transgender individuals must be protected through specific legal measures and public education campaigns that promote awareness and inclusion. Education and capacity building should be enhanced by integrating gender sensitive curricula in schools and offering skills development programmes that empower women economically. Women's economic empowerment also depends on improved access to financial resources, funding, and business development support, including initiatives that foster women-led cooperatives and entrepreneurship.

Finally, multi stakeholder collaboration must be strengthened by fostering partnerships among government, civil society, and the private sector, ensuring the meaningful participation of women and marginalised groups in decision making processes. Implementing these recommendations can transform gender equality initiatives from policy commitments into meaningful and inclusive development outcomes.

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