



Study on women in hostels

A summary of the findings



Before 1986, I was staying in the hostels with my father. It was very difficult for me to stay there and for my mom to come visit. It was strictly men. If you have a woman or a child to come visit, there would be raids early in the morning. About 1 o'clock in the morning for passes and so on, rent cards and all those things. If you don't have a rent card then they would arrest you. After 1986, influx control was scrapped, then these people started staying in the hostels with their families... In the hostel where I was staying they used to have house meetings, and those meetings were only for men... In 1988, things started to change, women were allowed to be part of the house meetings. And they were also allowed to be elected as part of the committees. Mostly as secretaries.

(Interview with Council official)

Introduction

This booklet tells about research that looked at the situation of women and men living in three hostels in Langa, Cape Town.* Two of the hostels, Zone 20 and New Flats, were converted from single bed accommodation into family units several years ago. In the third hostel, Welcome Zenzile, people were still living in unconverted hostels when the research was done. But they were planning to move into the converted hostels in late 2004.

Before and during apartheid, African men were meant to come to the cities without their wives and children to work in white-owned businesses. Even in those years when it was illegal, many women and children lived with the men in the hostels. Since the ending of the pass laws and apartheid, more women and children have come to the cities. This research looks at what has happened to the men, women and children living in the hostels.

This research was done in partnership with Rooftops Canada, the international development programme of cooperative and social housing organisations in Canada. Rooftops Canada has been working with the Cape Town City Council's Dibanisa Iintsapho 'Hostels to Home' Project for several years. This project is creating family housing out of the former single-sex hostels. It is also testing different forms of 'tenure'. So, in Welcome Zenzile, the new units are organised into a cooperative owned by all its members. This is the first time this form of ownership is being tried in South Africa. In Zone 20 and New Flats, people are renting the converted units from the City Council.

Welcome Zenzile is also different from the other hostels in another way. Welcome Zenzile used to be owned by the construction company, LTA. Like other companies, LTA stopped taking an interest in the hostel in the 1980s. Welcome Zenzile then became Council property. Zone 20 and New Flats always belonged to the City Council.

**The full research study is available from Rooftops Canada. The Government of Canada provided financial support for the study through the Canadian International Development Agency and Rooftops Canada – Abri International. The opinions in this report are those of the authors.*

What we did in the research

The research had three main steps:

1. Three discussion groups with residents of converted hostels. Two of the groups were with women (one in Zone 20 and one in New Flats). One group was with men (in Zone 20). We asked these groups what are the main issues for people living in hostels.
2. Interviews with 78 women and 22 men living in the converted and unconverted hostels to find out more about life in the hostels. 55 interviews were done in Welcome Zenzile, 18 in New Flats and 27 in Zone 20.
3. A second interview with 5 women and 1 man to find out more about different types of people living in the hostels. The interviewees included young and old, employed and unemployed, registered tenants and other members of the household.

Before the research started, the researchers discussed their plans with the hostel committees. The committee members helped to choose the three hostels for the study. They also suggested that young unemployed people from the township be employed as fieldworkers for the survey. This was done. The names of the fieldworkers are listed at the end of this booklet.

The findings

Living conditions

Most of the people living in the converted hostels also lived in the hostel before it was converted. The women were more satisfied with the changes than the men. 23 of the 32 women said that the converted hostel was better than before conversion. But only 4 of the 10 men said it was better.

When we asked people in Welcome Zenzile whether life was better in the unconverted hostel than where they had previously lived, most said no. They said that in their previous homes in the Eastern Cape there was more space and privacy and no sharing of facilities. But most of the women in the converted hostels said that life was better now than it was in the Eastern Cape. They said, for example, that they did not have electricity and clean water in the rural areas. But some of the men said their previous homes were better even than the converted hostels.

In the hostels it was much better because we were seen as foreigners and we accepted that. But now things are worse as we feel that we have been given false hopes.

On average, households living in the converted hostels are bigger than households living in Welcome Zenzile. The average household size in Welcome Zenzile was 4,7 people, compared to 7,9 people in the converted hostels. This difference in size happens because the converted units have more space, so people can bring other family members to live with them. In particular, there are more women and children in the converted hostels than in Welcome Zenzile. This

means that the conversion has achieved one of its aims because it has made it easier for families to live together.

But people living in the converted hostels say that the space is still not big enough. The space is already crowded, but often there are more family members they would still like to join them.

All the people living in Welcome Zenzile shared a kitchen, toilet and bathroom with other households. Two-thirds of the people in the converted hostels had their own kitchen and bathroom. The others shared the kitchen and bathroom with other households. All who shared a kitchen and bathroom had only one room beside the shared space. Even in the converted hostels, there is often not enough space to have a bed for every person. A man living in Zone 20 said: *'I have to share my bed with my children, just like a pig with its piglets.'*

15 of the women in Welcome Zenzile and 14 women in the converted hostels said that some members of their family slept in the kitchen. Only 2 of the Welcome Zenzile men and no men from converted hostels reported this.

So, overall conversion has not solved problems of overcrowding. There is more space in the new units, but there are also more people. A 60-year old woman from New Flats said: *'basically it is a different name for the same condition as before the conversion.'*

We asked people how it was decided who got bigger and who got smaller units. Most people felt that the decision was based on financial circumstances more than on the size of the family.

Sharing of space and facilities was one of the main complaints of the people we talked to. (Since the research, the 'Hostels to Homes' programme has stopped providing shared facilities in converted hostels.) All the women in Welcome Zenzile and one of the men complained that sharing space created noise problems. Four of the women in the converted hostel also complained about noise. A New Flats woman said: *'People make a lot of noise without considering the fact that they are sharing the unit with three other families.'*

More than half of the Welcome Zenzile women complained about problems caused by sharing household duties. There were similar complaints from some women in converted hostels. One woman from New Flats said: *'It is not nice to clean while other people do not want to clean, so I fight with people who mess all the cleaning that I do.'*

There were also complaints about safety of property from both men and women. All the complaints about personal safety came from women.

Some people said there were some good things about sharing a unit or room. Eleven of the women in Welcome Zenzile said that others who shared with them helped with childcare. Five Welcome Zenzile women said others helped by sharing food and cooking.

Besides rooms and units, in both Welcome Zenzile and the converted hostels many households shared facilities such as washing lines and a place to wash clothes and dishes. People complained that sharing washing facilities created problems of cleanliness and stealing. They also complained that there were not

enough washing facilities and lines to meet all the needs. A woman from Zone 20 said:

Sometimes you put up a string as a laundry drying line. Then somebody else comes and uses it, which is when I come and throw their clothes from my line. As a result we end up fighting.

A man from Zone 20 said that when they put up washing lines, 'the taxi drivers put them down saying that we are blocking their driveway.'

People living on the second floor of converted hostels complained about sharing a door with the unit below them. A Zone 20 woman said: 'Some people leave the door open which then puts in danger the person upstairs.' A New Flats woman said if the door is left open this 'allows people to come in and commit crime, either steal or rob people.'

Money matters

Nearly two out of three men but only one out of five women we interviewed were working for a wage or salary. There were also 13 women doing casual work. Women in Welcome Zenzile were more likely than women in converted hostels to be working. Perhaps this is because there are more children in the converted hostels and the childcare tasks leave less time to work for money.

People said that many people ran small businesses from the hostel. For example, they sold alcohol, umqombothi, sheeps' heads, chickens, sour milk, cooldrinks, vetkoek, vegetables and fruit. It is mainly women who do this selling work. People said that government should provide a building or shelter to make it easier for them to run businesses.

Less than half of the people said they were not paying rent. The most common reason for not paying rent was that people did not have enough money. A Welcome Zenzile man said that in the past their employer paid for the hostel so they were not used to paying rent. A few people said that they did not pay rent because things were broken and it was not nice living in the hostels. One of the women we interviewed had the following message for the City Council:

Please give more attention and a full response to us because we pay your rent and services and charges.

Before conversion rent was R20 per month for a bed. After conversion it is about R250 for a unit. Two women in Welcome Zenzile said their households could not move into the converted hostels because they did not have enough money to pay the higher rent. They did not know that the Council has an indigents grant for people who cannot afford the full amount.

All three focus groups complained about the increase in rent compared to before conversion. They said the Council should consider the circumstances of each family when asking for rent. Some of the men said that the Council had told them that they would not have to pay rent after conversion because government was giving R17 000 for each household. They were unhappy that four years later they were still being asked for rent despite living in poor conditions.

Many people were getting their electricity through prepaid cards. A woman in

New Flats said sharing of electricity does not work well: *'When people do not want to contribute in the communal payments of electricity, they argue that "it's not my house".'* As with rent, many people thought that they should be charged for services according to their income.

Who is the registered tenant?

When the research was done the City of Cape Town's 'Application for Transfer to Another Dwelling' forms assumed that the person applying was a man. It asked for "Wife's name" and "Do you or your wife own a dwelling?"

16 of the 22 men in our survey but only 14 of the 78 women were the registered tenants. Women tenants were more common in Welcome Zenzile than in the converted hostels. 30 of the women but none of the men were the partner of the registered tenant. These patterns come from the history of the hostels as single-sex male residences.

We asked what happens to a boyfriend or girlfriend if the registered tenant dies or leaves. More than half of the women in the converted hostels said that the girlfriend or boyfriend must move somewhere else. In the interviews, women from the converted hostels said that girlfriends could not participate in meetings. The women in Welcome Zenzile were more likely to say that the boyfriend or girlfriend can apply to stay in the hostel. Most of the Welcome Zenzile women said that the hostel committee would make the decision about what happened to the girlfriend or boyfriend. Most of the women in the converted hostels said that household members would decide.

Children

Women were more likely than men to have children. They also usually had more children than men. But often women in Welcome Zenzile did not have their young children living with them.

Most of the children who were not living with their parents were in the Eastern Cape. The main reason for the children not living in the hostels was lack of space. The next most important reason was that the child was schooling somewhere else. 4 women and 2 men said that their children were living with the other parent. 3 women – all in Welcome Zenzile – said their children were living with the grandparent. All the people with children living elsewhere said they wanted their children to live with them.

Nearly half of the people we interviewed said that there was sometimes conflict between children wanting to do their homework at night and other people wanting to sleep or watch TV. Most people found a solution to the problem but it sometimes resulted in arguments.

There were many complaints about the lack of safe space for children to play. This was a problem both at Welcome Zenzile and in the converted hostels. A woman in New Flats said: *'It is not safe in the new units. Our children go missing as they go out playing anytime without the notice of anyone.'* In Welcome Zenzile children are a little safer because there are more people close by who can notice what a child is doing.

The lack of space inside the hostels also causes problems for youth. An 18-year old woman from New Flats said: *'As young people we cannot talk about anything in the company of our parents. As a result we have to be outside.'* She said that because there is no hall for youth activities, *'we just sit outside without anything to do.'*

Crime

People said that theft, assault and drugs were the most common crimes in the hostels. Most women and men in the converted hostels felt less safe than they had been before conversion. Some complained that there were no burglar bars and no separate yards to give protection. One Council official said that it was safer before conversion because people *'know each other, they are aware of who is in and out, not like in the location. And they notice who is not from around.'* But women in Welcome Zenzile complained about dangers from broken windows, doors which did not lock, and having to use outside toilets.

What is good and what can be improved?

We asked people what made them stay in the hostel. Access to transport was one of the most important reasons for all groups. Women in Welcome Zenzile felt that having opportunities to find jobs was even more important than transport.

We asked people what might make them leave the hostel. Lack of privacy was one of the most important problems, especially in Welcome Zenzile. Women in the converted hostels were very unhappy about the lack of job opportunities.

We asked which hostel facilities needed to be improved most urgently. More toilets was the first choice for women in Welcome Zenzile and the converted hostels. The men in Welcome Zenzile chose security gates and fences as their first choice. The men in the converted hostels chose improved drains first.

We also asked which neighbourhood facilities needed urgent improvement. A safe play area for children took first place except among Welcome Zenzile men.

Most people said that the improvements done during the conversion were of poor quality. Many people in the converted hostels complained that the walls were painted, but not plastered. As a result, the units leaked and were cold.

Many people said that the conversion was good for health. But men in particular complained that the lack of plastering and the poor drainage caused flu and colds. People said that after conversion it was easier to give a sick person a bed to themselves. This helped reduce the chance of infection.

One woman from Zone 20 said that the conditions in the converted units were much worse than in the hostels: *'These new units are rotten dirty. If health workers could see this place, they would just take the entire community to hospital.'*

Participation

17 of the 22 men and 53 of the 78 women said they participated in meetings

about the conversion. Most attended six or more meetings. Men were more likely than women to attend meetings.

10 of the people we interviewed were members of their hostel committee. 11 people had family members who were committee members. Men were more likely than women to be committee members.

Most of the women in Welcome Zenzile were very happy with the work of the committee. The women in the converted hostels and the men in Welcome Zenzile were also usually happy with the committees' work. But only half of the men in the converted hostels were satisfied with their committees.

In the focus group we asked about the participation of women in committees. A woman from New Flats said: *'Men tend to dominate women in the committee as well as in the community general meetings'*. She suggested that women should meet separately to share their views. She said that in general meetings:

It would be difficult for women to argue with men, as in our society women who argue with men, more especially in public, are called names as they are believed to be disrespectful.

In contrast, a man from Zone 20 said:

Women become committee members because we nominate them... People are nominated based on the skills that they possess.

Only five out of 100 people said they attended training related to the conversion. There were 2 men and 3 women who attended training. 3 of the 6 people we interviewed a second time said that they did not know that training had happened.

What next?

After the research was completed, the City Council's Public Hostels Team discussed how to use the research to make things better for women and men living in the hostels. The Team realised that there are five important points to remember when planning the conversion of hostels to homes:

Firstly, the number of people per household will increase after the hostels are converted because residents will want extra family members to stay with them. Having enough space is especially important for women as they usually want their children to live with them.

Secondly, there need to be community spaces where the women, men, youth and children who live in the hostels can play, study, have meetings and other activities, and come together at times such as weddings and funerals.

Thirdly, there need to be spaces where people can earn income, for example by selling things and producing crafts and other goods. This is especially important for women because they cannot find other jobs as easily as men.

Fourth, households must not have to share bathrooms, toilets or any other rooms. This is especially important to make things safe for women and girls.

Fifth, the Council must explain clearly to residents what type and quality of housing and facilities they will get when the hostels are converted. The Council must also ensure that the converted hostels meet these standards.

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