

Learning Brief

Research as Transformation: Creating Space for Conversations about Gender in Operational Policing

Evidence, Participation,
and Institutional Change: Lessons
from the Women in Policing Project
in South Africa

About DCAF

Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance is dedicated to improving the security of states and their people within a framework of democratic governance, the rule of law, respect for human rights, and gender equality. Since its founding in 2000, DCAF has contributed to making peace and development more sustainable by assisting partner states, and international actors supporting these states, to improve the governance of their security sector through inclusive and participatory reforms.

About ISS

The Institute for Security Studies is an independent African organisation established in 1991 to build the knowledge and capacity needed for sustainable peace, development and prosperity across the region. Combining research, policy analysis, technical assistance and training, the ISS works across a range of fields, including conflict and governance, peacekeeping, migration and criminal justice. Gender is a cross-cutting feature of the ISS' work, which examines the gendered dimensions of insecurity, advocates for gender equality, and collaborates with organisations and networks committed to advancing gender equity.

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The Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations, a multi-stakeholder initiative led by Global Affairs Canada, aims to increase women's meaningful participation in UN Peace Operations.

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About this Brief



This Learning Brief is a key deliverable of DCAF's Elsie Program – a part of the Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations. A key component of the Elsie Initiative has been investment in action research. The final evaluation of the Program highlighted that action research alongside technical assistance, access and trust are most consistently associated with deeper change.

This brief captures a component of the Program. The insights and reflections of the team behind the Women in Policing Project (WIPP) in South Africa, a multi-year study conducted by the South African Police Service (SAPS) and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) on gender dynamics in operational policing environments, with a particular focus on women.

Our central argument is that research, when designed with the care and dignity of participants at its centre, can do more than produce findings. It can change how people see themselves and become an act of organisational change. These qualities make the research process itself a dynamic and strategic resource for gender transformation inside security sector institutions.

Written for practitioners involved in designing, funding, or implementing gender work in security sector institutions, our hope is that this brief shows how research can be used to create safe spaces for the kind of honest and often difficult conversations around gender and identity that institutional settings rarely allow.

Introduction:

Why transformative research matters

When it comes to equity in the security sector, it is risky to assume that gender representation is the end goal, rather than the starting point.

The goal beyond representation is transformation: examining the conditions, norms and values that women and men are expected to comply with and understanding their impact. That requires asking questions that representation alone cannot force an institution to confront. Those questions are not only about the impact women have on operational effectiveness, unit cohesion, and institutional legitimacy, but also on the communities they serve, the victims they assist, and the people they lead.

These questions are important due to the tendency of institutions to think that equity work is complete once positions for women have been created and targets have been met. Women enter, the numbers shift, and the assumption that follows is that gender equity has been achieved because representation targets have been met.

However, when women are expected to perform their duties in the manner prescribed, without question, and comply with existing norms, regardless of their impact, that is not transformation; that is an influx of women. What often follows – including resistance from their male colleagues, the inequitable conditions they work in, and the gender dynamics they navigate – is treated as their own problem to solve or no problem at all, with

the prevailing attitude being “If they don’t like it, they can leave.”

When questions are never asked, assumptions about operational women’s lack of competence and their right to lead, presumptions about men’s response to their presence and authority, and contested narratives about what equity initiatives have and have not delivered, go unchallenged and proliferate over time. Left unexamined, those assumptions turn into narratives that erode relationships, threaten team cohesion, limit career trajectories, negatively impact service delivery, and justify conduct that harms the institution and the people working inside it, threatening the very transformation that representation intended to deliver. So, even when the evidence gap is not deliberate, its consequences are severe.

Our study was designed to address that gap by asking the critical questions, not only of women in operational environments, but also of the men who work alongside them. In doing so, it created safe spaces for honest conversations about gender dynamics and equity initiatives in the South African Police Service that had not previously existed. The issues discussed were not new; they had shaped the working relations and livelihoods of men and women in the police for years yet had never been explored.

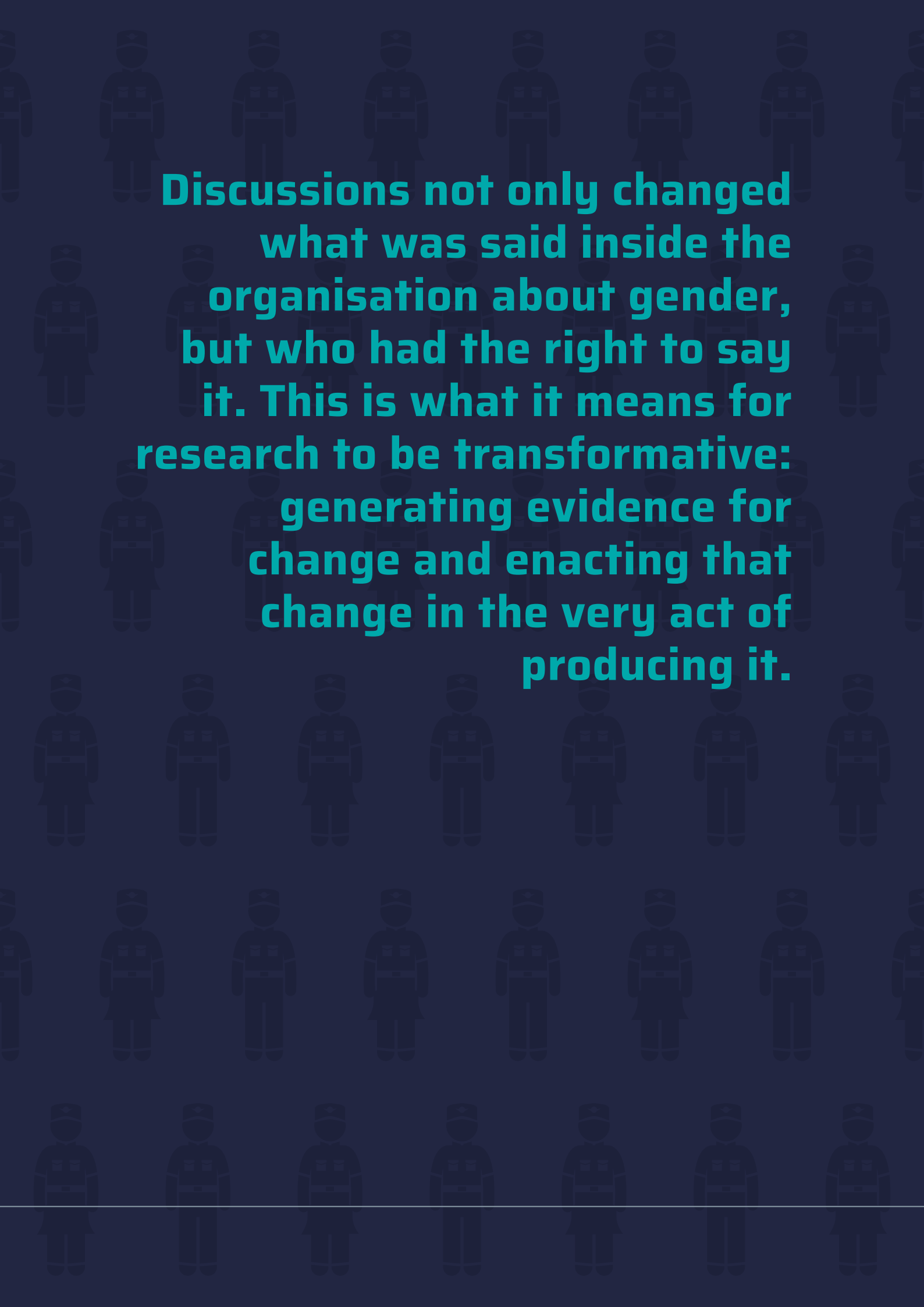
The research process was the catalyst that changed that, and in changing that, it

changed something else too. Discussions not only changed what was said inside the organisation about gender, but who had the right to say it. This is what it means for research to be transformative: generating evidence for change and enacting that change in the very act of producing it. It is that process, not the findings the research produced, that this brief sets out to examine.

The five principles that follow form the organising frame for the brief. They are not sequential steps to treat as a checklist, but a set of overlapping approaches we practiced creating transformative change through research, including:

- 1.** the strategy for entry and finding an internal champion;
- 2.** the understanding that trust is not a condition you secure at the outset, but something practiced daily with participants, with the institution, and within the team;
- 3.** the design of gender research as a tool for transformation;
- 4.** the acknowledgement of stakeholders’ interests and investing your energy wisely; and
- 5.** the understanding that the composition of the team shapes what the research can do.

They emerged from reflections with our research team at the conclusion of the project and are presented here as a resource for practitioners facing similar conditions elsewhere.



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Background

Why South Africa?

The ultimate aim of the Elsie Initiative is to increase women’s meaningful participation in peace and security apparatuses, with the challenge in most institutions being representation. Women make up approximately 14% of all sworn police officers in the United States, 23% in Canada, 29% in Australia, and 34% in the United Kingdom. Africa is even more uneven, with Ghana at about 28%, Uganda at 19%, Nigeria at around 10%, and Kenya just below 7%, with that figure declining.¹

¹ These figures reflect the most recently available data at the time of writing. United States: Data USA (2024); Canada: Statistics Canada (2023); Australia: Job and Skills Australia (2024); United Kingdom: UK Home Office (2025); Ghana: Ghana Police Service, cited in Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (2022); Uganda: Elsie Initiative Fund (2023); Nigeria: Nigeria Police Force (2025); Kenya: UN Women/National Police Service (2023), a figure that has been declining since 2018.

South Africa is an African and global outlier. According to the SAPS 2024/2025 Annual Report women constitute 35% of all operational members. This figure is largely driven by its post-apartheid constitutional framework, international commitments under Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and SAPS's legislative obligations to meet annual gender targets under the Employment Equity Act.

These figures exceed the Elsie Initiatives own benchmark of 30%, as set out in the UN Uniformed Gender Parity Strategy 2018–2028. Therefore, when it comes to South Africa, the number of women in policing is not the problem.

The WIPP's central question, therefore, was about the story behind those numbers. *If the South African Police Service excels in gender representation, why are operational members' experiences not really understood, and why are gender relations so difficult to talk about inside the organisation?* The answer, as our research found, is that representation does not automatically translate into equity.

Thousands of women entered the police in a relatively short period of time, driven by post-Apartheid transformation policies and agendas, rather than internal organic change driven by the institution itself. The organisational culture, hierarchies, and gendered dynamics have shifted far more slowly, and in some operational environments, not at all. Numbers can change, but if conditions, norms and practices, do not, gender representation cannot deliver the transformation that it promises.

Across the Elsie network, meeting gender representation targets is important and necessary. But what we found in South Africa is that a singular focus on representation leaves the hardest work undone.

Transforming the conditions, dynamics and relationships that determine whether women's presence in the institution is meaningful – for women, for men and for the communities they serve – requires the same deliberate intention as the numbers. This is what our study was designed to examine, and what we discovered is relevant to any country where the work continues.

What our research set out to do

The research was the first systematic national study on gender dynamics in operational environments across the South African Police Service. It used a mixed-methods approach including one-on-one interviews with 102 women and focus group discussions with 92 men across four provinces, as well as two national surveys that drew on responses from 382 women and 272 men across all nine provinces.

Participants were drawn from operational policing environments inclusive of frontline police officers appointed in visible policing, investigative, intelligence, and tactical units in both urban and rural contexts, across the ranks of Constable to Major General, and reflected the diversity of the SAPS more broadly, in terms of race, age, language and culture.

The provincial level interviews and focus groups invited participants to reflect on issues they had never been asked to discuss openly. For women, this included their background and motivations for joining the police, education and training, mentoring and career trajectories, work-life balance, mental and physical wellbeing, working relationships with

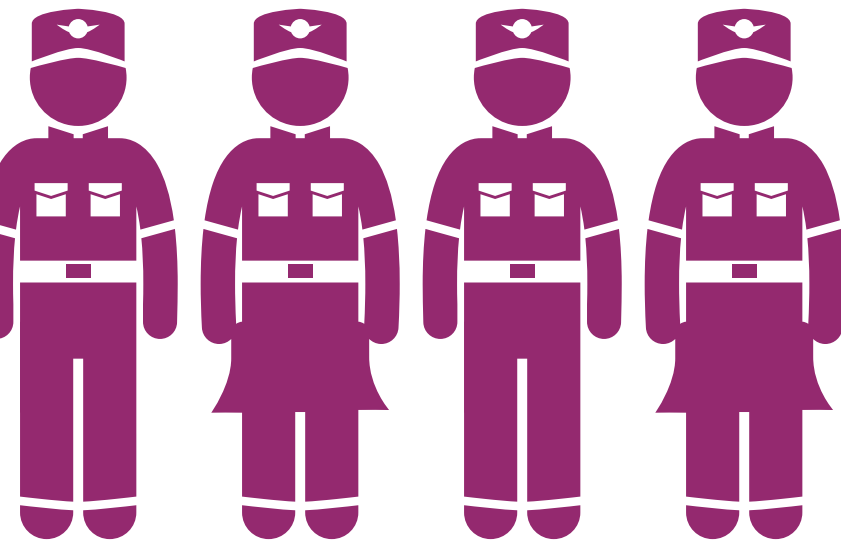
men and women, experiences as leaders and commanders, and encounters with bullying and sexual harassment. For men, the questions were equally direct: whether they considered women operationally ready and physically/mentally competent, how they perceived women's promotional prospects and leadership styles, their views on equity initiatives and the impact of those initiatives on operational effectiveness and team cohesion, and their observations on the prevalence of bullying and sexual harassment in the organisation. The act of asking – carefully, respectfully, and without judgment, backed by the requisite permissions and ethical safeguards – was simultaneously an act of organisational respect and institutional disruption.

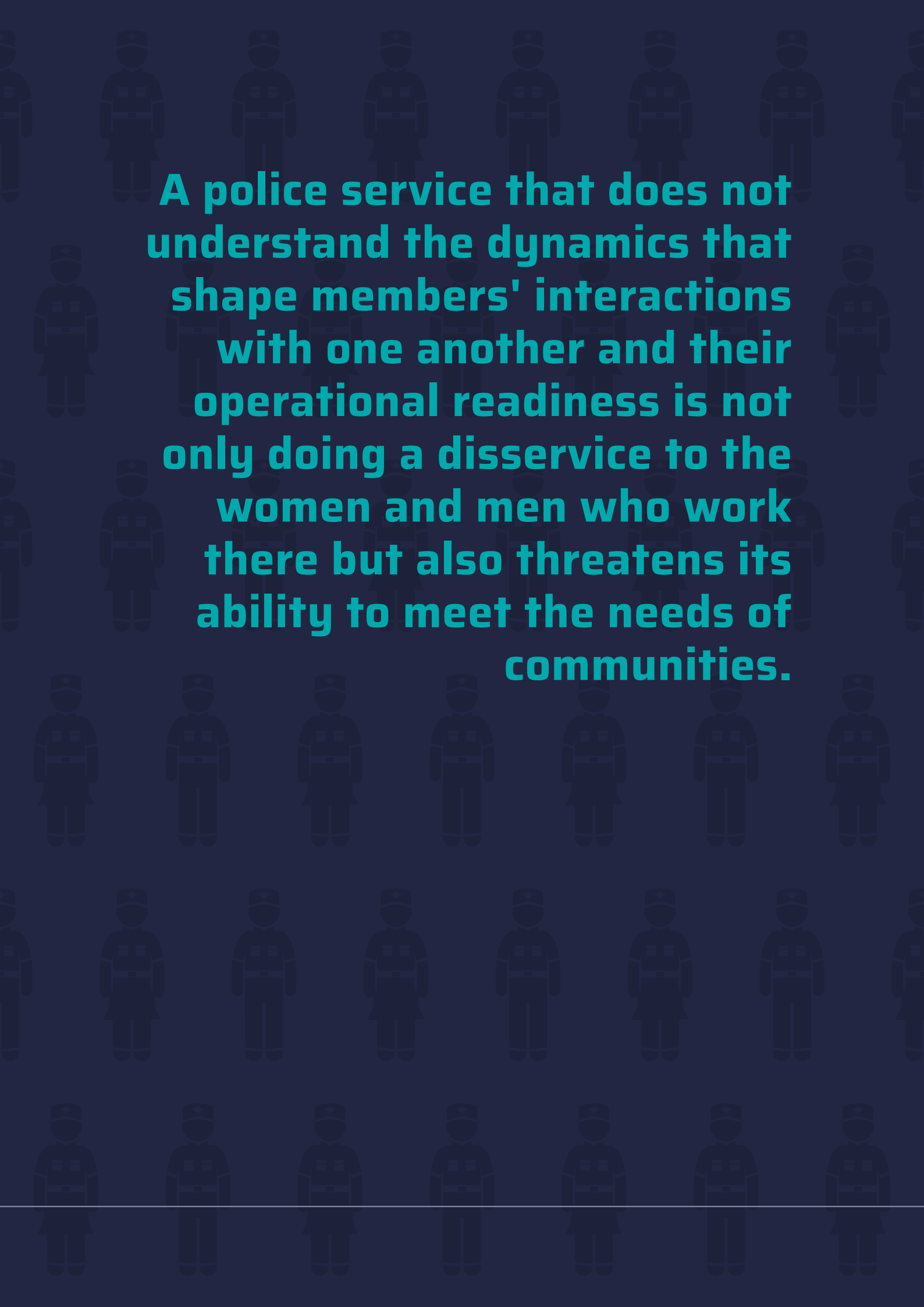
In doing so, the study was designed to achieve two distinct but interconnected objectives. **The first objective was to produce a body of knowledge that did not exist:** the gender dynamics shaping team cohesion and operational effectiveness in frontline, investigative and tactical units, the conditions determining whether women's presence was meaningful or merely symbolic, the formal and informal hierarchies they had to navigate, and the toll all of this took on the health and wellbeing of the women and men working across operational environments. Equity targets, in terms of both race and gender, have been pursued by the SAPS for decades without any attempt to understand the impact on the frontlines. Our research was designed to address that gap.

The second objective of the study was equally deliberate. The research process was designed to create

spaces for honest disclosure and dynamic dialogue where none had previously existed; to surface gender as a factor in operational performance and leadership; to identify and empower internal change catalysts; and to make the institutional cost of continued ignorance about gender dynamics visible and impossible to ignore.

A police service that does not understand the dynamics that shape members' interactions with one another and their operational readiness is not only doing a disservice to the women and men who work there but also threatens its ability to meet the needs of communities. Our research was designed to make that argument with evidence, not with aspiration. These were not separate objectives running in parallel. The way the research was conducted was itself an expression of the very change it was trying to produce.





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What we learned

Five principles for designing transformative research

Each principle is examined through the lens of our team's own experience: how it contributed to our ability to use participatory research as a vehicle for personal testimony, gender dialogue, and institutional reflection. Together they describe what it looks like when gender research serves as a form of institutional transformation.

PRINCIPLE 1

Argue gender as an operational and leadership factor, not as a moral or a compliance issue, and find someone inside the organisation who already agrees

Gender work, whether in the form of research, training, or technical support, is not always seen as legitimate inside security sector institutions despite having direct implications on operational performance and the quality of its leadership. When gender initiatives are positioned as compliance or moral issues rather than performance ones, they are often treated superficially, thereby minimising their operational value and relevance. Finding someone inside the organisation who agrees and is committed to securing the requisite permissions to ask the hard questions and create spaces for honest dialogue is paramount to getting the work done.

Why institutions often resist gender work, and how to counter it

Resistance to gender work is not always visible at the outset. Inside security sector institutions, it often begins at the institutional level: gender work is not seen as legitimate, which bars entry before research has even begun. That resistance is structural, and it is addressed here. Once inside, a different challenge emerges, one that is individual rather than institutional, and that requires its own response.

Institutional resistance may not necessarily arise from indifference alone but may provoke fear among leadership about what honest dialogue is going to reveal. The enormity of what surfaces may feel overwhelming or threatening, and not something the institution is capable or willing to take on or to see as a challenge within its control. Further, when gender transformation is pushed by compliance requirements or international norms, it positions the institution as the subject of scrutiny, rather than the driver of its own change. Once requirements are met, the need for going further is often dismissed, and the harder work of transformation remains undone.

This resistance is not specific to gender-related change. Security sector institutions, particularly those with paramilitary foundations, are built on values of obedience and discipline rather than questioning and reflection. Anyone who asks the institution to examine itself, to imagine a different way of being runs counter to the institution's logic and will be met with resistance. Therefore, gender work is often experienced not as an opportunity for reflection, but as a disruption to be contained.

The way to counter that is to reframe the argument entirely: gender work not as a compliance requirement or a moral one, but as an operational question about team cohesion, operational effectiveness, and the quality of its leadership.

In our study, this meant asking women and men about the range of conditions shaping their working lives, from career trajectories and training to harassment and retention, and the gender dynamics running through all of it. Framed as a desire to understand rather than an audit of institutional shortcomings, the research opened up conversations that a compliance-driven approach never would have made possible.

Find a champion who believes in the work and doesn't just accommodate it

Gender champions are not always visible within security sector institutions. It often does come down to timing and to luck. But they do exist, and the task is to recognise them when they appear and move quickly.

The project leader inside the SAPS was a senior manager who had the authority to command people, resources, and production: her academic credentials gave the study trust and legitimacy; and her four decades as a uniformed member meant she had lived the very dynamics the research set out to explore, which meant that she knew what questions to ask, how far to push, and what the organisation would and would not allow.

She drove the work without being possessive of it. She saw it as being bigger than herself, as something that needed to belong to women across the SAPS. Tying the study to her personal mission and professional legacy was a deliberate strategic decision which secured institutional ownership of a project that was proposed from the “outside” in order for it to take root within the police. She opened doors, made introductions, pioneered for the research efforts, and pushed past what others thought would be possible, not for personal recognition, but because she believed the work mattered.

She wasn't a gatekeeper; she was a champion, not just for the research, but for women across the institution. The measure of that was not only what she did for the project, but how she made other people feel about it: this was their story, their own work, worth claiming, fighting for, and being proud of.

"In the midst of resource constraints, time constraints, and being tired and all that, we participated fully. Whoever was roped in, they gave it their all to make sure that the project was successful, and the fact that it also had a leader that advocated for it that much - it was always talked about: 'this week, she's “whipping” you all.' We all knew there was this project. There was so much passion behind it."

- SAPS Team Member

Her commitment was not a contributing factor to the project. It was what secured the institutional buy-in on which everything else depended.

Secure authorisation and understand how to leverage it

Securing authorisation from top leadership is necessary for gender work but should not be taken as sufficient. Approval from senior management does not always cascade to provincial commissioners, unit commanders, and the operational members the project depends on, particularly when those people have not been briefed and do not yet trust the initiative. To leverage authorisation is to convert the permission granted at the top into access on the ground.

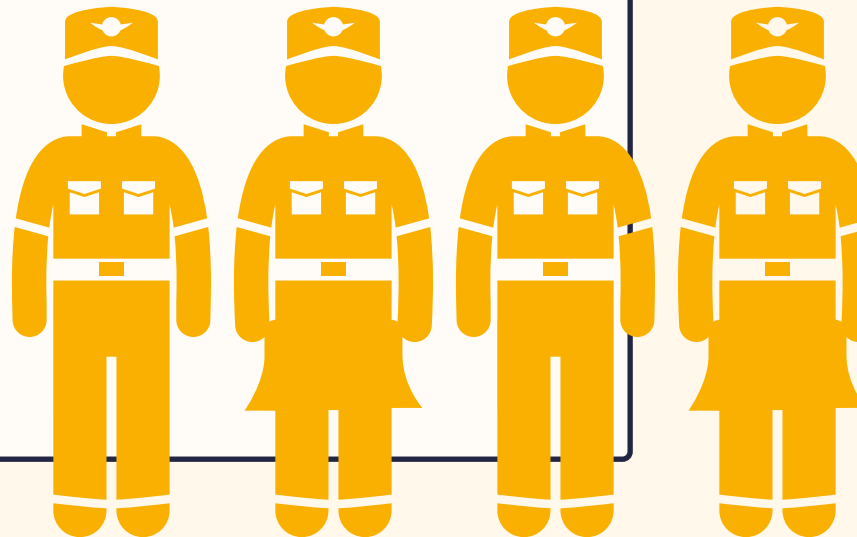
During the research, that work fell largely to researchers inside the SAPS. They communicated the National Commissioner's authorisation into every encounter rather than assuming it had travelled on its own. Every interview, focus group and sensitisation session opened with a statement that the study had been approved at the highest level, which converted the National Commissioner's endorsement into a participant's confidence that speaking honestly was both safe and legitimate, and they invoked that same authority to negotiate directly with commanders to release members where provincial support was uneven. Authorisation creates institutional cover. Leverage is what makes that cover meaningful, and it has to be exercised intentionally and incrementally, at every level of engagement.

PRINCIPLE 2

Trust is not a threshold to cross. It is a practice, sustained daily, at every level, for the life of the project

Trust is commonly described as something built or earned, as though it were a structure that stands once complete, or a status conferred once the work is done. That language is misleading. Trust is not a structure, a destination, or a status. It is a behaviour, demonstrated every day, in every interaction. You do not earn it once and hold it. You practice it continuously, through the act of being trustworthy, and it lasts only as long as that practice does. The moment the behaviour stops, the trust begins to erode.

Inside a security sector institution, that principle operates under particular strain. Trust, where it exists at all, is often provisional, extended cautiously and held open against the expectation that it will be betrayed. Distrust of outsiders is not only a matter of personal experience but an organisational value, one the institution actively cultivates. Members are guarded, and they withhold until the team has shown, repeatedly, that it can be trusted. Authorisation can be granted by a National Commissioner. Trust of that kind cannot. It has to be practised with every single person, at every level, and rebuilt the moment it is tested.



Build trust with the institution through pre-emptive disclosure

Security sector institutions tend to be suspicious of outside researchers, and that suspicion is not irrational. Research has too often been extractive, taking sensitive information and using it to expose the institution rather than improve it. Countering that suspicion takes more than transparency. It takes pre-emptive disclosure: volunteering information before it is requested, responding fully and quickly to every request that does come, and ensuring the institution is never caught unaware by its own research.

In practice this meant positioning the work under the custodianship of the SAPS, so that the institution understood the research was being done with it, not to it. We complied fully with every request for documentation and authorisation and did the institution's due diligence rather than treating it as an obstacle. We invited the SAPS into everything, copied them on everything, and checked with them before decisions were made. Above all, we never abused access to sensitive information to score points in public. An organisation that trusts you not to expose it will open doors that no authorisation alone can open.

Build trust within the team because it is what holds the work together

Trust within the team meant putting the work before ourselves. It looked different for different members, and it had to be built in both directions. For the ISS to trust the SAPS researchers, we needed to see follow-through, and we saw it: they fought for the project and delivered it through people, resources, priorities, and accountability. For the SAPS researchers, trust came more slowly. It was initially held through their commanders rather than extended to us directly. One member said plainly that had his commanders not been leading from the front, he would not have trusted the team the way he eventually did.

What converted that mediated trust into direct trust was not argument but conduct. The SAPS researchers watched the team become emotionally invested in the work, commit to understanding what was really happening rather than pushing a predetermined position, and remain open to the possibility of getting something wrong. That openness mattered most to the

men, who needed to know the research was not designed to indict them. At an individual level, trust was built by having each other's backs and by working through tense moments rather than around them, so that the team could rise together rather than fracture under the weight of what the work surfaced.

Build trust with participants because it is the condition under which people speak honestly

What participants were asked to risk was considerable, and it was two-fold. The first risk was institutional: to speak honestly about what was happening inside the organisation, to people perceived as outsiders, meant risking exposure. Participants feared that what they said would be leaked, that it would reflect badly on the institution and fall back on them, and that honesty would be met with retaliation. In a culture of secrecy, speaking at all is an act of exposure. The second risk was personal: participants were asked to speak about matters that were intimate and painful, and in many cases never spoken aloud before, from substance abuse and sexual harassment to discrimination and the toll the work took on their health and families. To disclose any of it, in front of colleagues, was to make themselves vulnerable in an environment built to reward composure.

Research offered a form of protection against both. Because the work was bound by formal research ethics, participants were given guarantees that did not depend on goodwill alone. Participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any point. No one was obliged to answer a question they found too difficult. Participants were told in advance how their accounts would be stored, anonymised, coded, and redacted of anything that could identify them. These were not procedural formalities. They were the architecture of safety, and that architecture is one of the things that distinguishes research from other forms of gender work. People do not reveal themselves because they are asked to. They reveal themselves because they trust that the risk they are taking will be honoured, and the next principle describes how we designed that process to be worthy of that trust.

PRINCIPLE 3

Design the research process as a tool for transformation

Research, by design, is inherently extractive. It draws on knowledge that people on the inside already hold, but that the institution has probably not allowed to surface. Accepting that reality is the starting point, but what matters more is what comes next. In the WIPP, the methodological choices – from how sensitisation sessions were framed, to how interviews and focus groups were conducted, to how validation was carried out – were presented as invitations for personal and collective reflection.

The transformation the study produced was not only a set of findings; it was the act of reflection itself, of naming realities that had never been named, saying them out loud, and having them witnessed and documented.

That kind of personal disclosure requires a safe space designed not merely as the site of data collection, but as the place where institutional transformation begins. That approach is what distinguishes transformative research from extractive research: not in what it produces, but in what it does while producing it. That process unfolded across three distinct phases in our research, each producing its own form of transformation: sensitisation as an invitation for reflection; data collection as an opportunity for personal and collective revelation; and validation as an act of trust-building and dignity.

Treat sensitisation as an entry point, not a formality

Sensitisation sessions marked the beginning of the research relationship with provincial leadership and prospective participants. At a provincial level, these sessions introduced participants to the WIPP team and informed them that the National Commissioner had approved the project and endorsed the collaboration with the research partner (ISS), signalling that participation was both safe and legitimate. The team provided background on the study, the rationale for its importance, ethical and procedural safeguards to ensure participant anonymity, and the types of questions they would be asked. In doing so, participants were prepared for the level of personal disclosure the interviews would entail, and ensured their consent was meaningful, rather than procedural.

For women, these sensitisation sessions not only addressed some of their most pressing questions but also gave them the opportunity to influence how the research would take place in their province and include the issues they considered most important. Their inputs were incorporated into the provincial implementation of the project, positioning operational women as co-creators in the research design rather than just subjects of the study, which helped to establish trust before a single interview was conducted. Not every woman interviewed attended a sensitisation session; some came through referrals. But the confidence those sessions cultivated extended beyond the room, enabling most women to arrive as informed participants who had already decided to trust the process. For many women, it was the first time they had been asked to tell their story, and that alone mattered.

View data collection as an opportunity to bear witness

The role of the researcher is not to judge or adjudicate, but to bear witness. To hear what is being said, to name it clearly, and to reflect it back accurately; that is what transforms data collection into an opportunity for personal and collective reflection. People who feel judged do not reveal themselves. People who feel seen and understood, do.

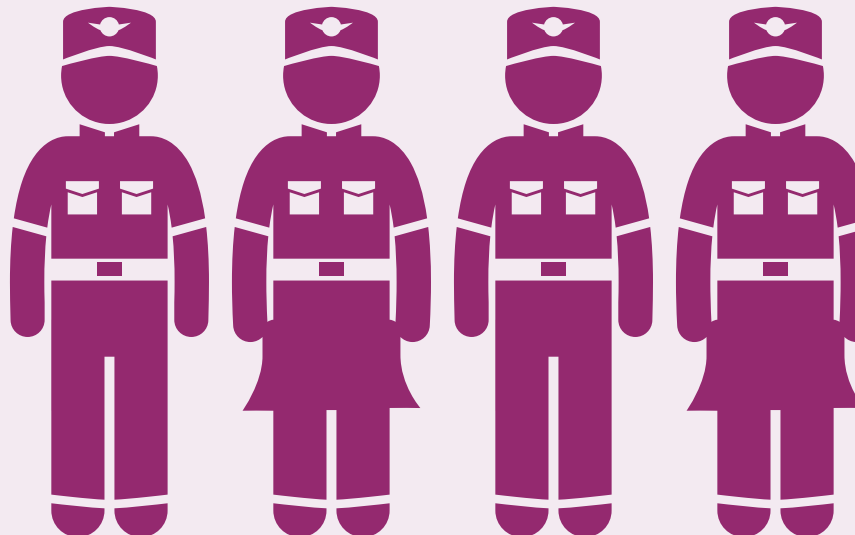
In the WIPP, positioning the researcher as a witness was built into the design, beginning with the conditions under which participants were asked to share their stories. Women's interviews were conducted in neutral locations because asking someone to speak freely about their worklife in the place where those conditions play out introduces risks that no procedural safeguard can fully guarantee to mitigate. Before interviews started, participants were informed how their information would be handled and anonymised and that they were not obligated to respond to questions they found too difficult or uncomfortable to answer. Researchers also gave participants language for refusal that did not deny their own experience. Participants were encouraged to decline questions by saying 'I'd rather not discuss that' instead of 'that's never happened to me' to avoid the production of misleading data.

The same logic applied to men's focus groups. When male team members flagged that a female presence would limit participants' willingness to speak honestly, the team listened, and female researchers did not enter the room. At the outset of each focus group, male participants were told explicitly that this was not sensitivity training, and they should voice their thoughts – the good, the bad and the ugly. For many men, it was the first time they had been invited to speak about gender in the workplace without being managed or judged for what they said. That invitation for unfiltered disclosure produced collective revelations that are rarely, if ever, documented, but that shape the working lives of men and women in the SAPS every day.

Approach validation as an act of dignity, not merely a check for accuracy

Validation sessions across provinces returned findings to participants before publication, both as an act of trust and of recognition. Participants were asked whether they could see themselves reflected in the data to confirm that the interpretation of their experience was accurate and to correct what was not. To be asked whether the meaning made of their stories was fair, and to have it refined if it was not, was to be recognised and treated as the authority on their experiences. That is what made validation an act of dignity.

For the research team, validation was not just about accuracy. It was about the responsibility of interpretation: ensuring that the complexity and nuance of what participants had shared had not been lost in the analysis. Further, findings confirmed with participants before being presented to leadership would be harder to dismiss. When participants recognised that their accounts had been handled with care and without distortion, the findings became theirs as much as ours, not as a side-effect of the process, but as its purpose. For many participants, it was the first time their stories had been presented back to them. That return is where the reflection on gender dynamics became whole: individual, collective and institutional. That is what gender transformation looks like in practice: not a single moment of change, but something returned to and remade.



PRINCIPLE 4

Know your stakeholders' interests and invest your energy strategically

Not every individual within the institution will be willing to engage, regardless of what has been authorised from above. The question is not how to convert them, but where to invest the energy you have. Understanding who the relevant stakeholders are, what they need, and where genuine openness exists is the foundation of that strategic choice. The WIPP's approach was to leverage the support we did not have to fight for: the open provinces, the willing commanders, the participants who had already decided to trust the process. Knowing where and in whom to invest limited resources required a clear sense of purpose and the agility to adapt when conditions demanded it.

Identify and name stakeholder interests and design the project to meet them

Institutional change does not happen by persuading people to care about the work. People are persuaded by whether the work serves their interests. Our strategy was underpinned by a clear understanding of what each stakeholder needed and the scope of their responsibility, at the level of SAPS and ISS leadership, funders, researchers, and participants; their Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), career interests, organisational pressures, and the terms in which they measured success. This is not a compromise; this is how research creates demand inside an institution that did not ask for it.

Who needs to see what, framed in which way, findings delivered by whom, are not task-based questions; they are strategic ones, and answering them deliberately is what separates research that gets used from research that gets archived.

This logic shaped our project from the start. For example, the sensitisation sessions were designed to serve the interests of the stakeholders whose cooperation the research needed. A provincial commander was positioned as a keynote speaker, which helped her meet her own performance targets, and the provincial head of the Women's Network was invited to take part, which helped that body meet its targets for stakeholder engagement. The sessions did the work of the research and served the interests of the people hosting them at the same time.

Follow the “green lights” and let the record speak for itself

Some sceptics will only be convinced by data and experience, not argument, moral appeals or empty promises, and others never will be. The WIPP's approach was to focus on the work and let the results speak for themselves. Each interview that inspired honest disclosure, each focus group that produced genuine reflection, each validation session where participants felt recognised and dignified, built the evidence that the research was safe, reliable, and worth continuing. That credibility travelled in ways the research team could not have produced through advocacy alone. Participants who trusted the process and witnessed its value became its advocates for the research inside the SAPS, carrying the work into conversations with colleagues and commanders who the team could never reach. Word of mouth is what converts a track record into institutional momentum, and what makes this approach compound over time.

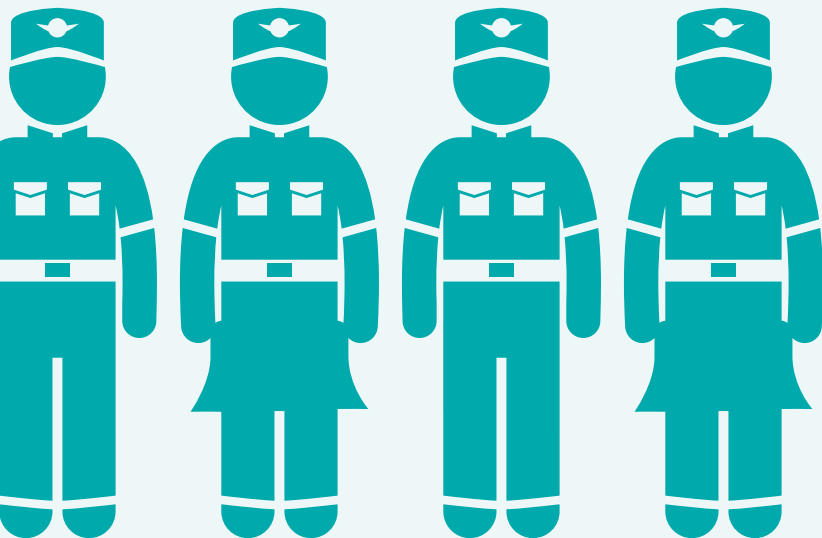
We described this practice as “following the green lights”: moving towards willing commanders, returning to resistant ones later with a stronger case or track record, and accepting that some doors would stay closed and some lights would stay red.

That acceptance was harder than it sounds. Researchers who are trained to identify problems and advocate for change may find strategic withdrawal counter intuitive. But in guarded institutions, restraint is not defeat; it is patience as practice, and what allows the work to survive long enough to

matter. The lesson for other Elsie countries is this: do not waste time pressing people who resist. Believe in the work, do it well, share the findings, and watch what they set in motion.

Hold purpose steady and stay agile through disruption

In command-and-control institutions, operational demands shift, crises emerge, and priorities change without notice, and research is rarely prioritised when they do. The WIPP's agility was a core value, not an emergency response. The purpose of the project – creating the conditions for conversations about gender – was the fixed point that held steady throughout disruption. How that purpose was pursued, and when it took place, was negotiable. That combination allowed the work to survive within an institution that was not designed to accommodate it.



PRINCIPLE 5

The composition of the research team is just as important as its design

Gender research, at its core, is about identity, and how that identity intersects with the systems and institutions that shape, constrain, and define it. Doing that research well requires deep vulnerability from participants – not just about who they are, but about how they see themselves, how they see others, how they believe others see them, and the meaning they make of it. That level of disclosure requires safety; the safety of feeling seen and understood by the person sitting across from you. Research, in this context, has to be approached as a sacred human encounter: personal disclosure becomes possible when a participant recognises something of themselves in the researcher, when they sense that this person understands them because they know something of what it is like to be them. Diverse teams have the potential to produce richer research by creating safe spaces and facilitating human connection with a wider range of participants.

That said, personal proximity does not always create safety. A researcher who shares aspects of a participant's world may also carry their judgements, and sometimes it takes an outsider with greater distance to see that reality more clearly. Mixed teams, not only in terms of gender but also race, culture, age, rank, and institutional affiliation, are a methodological asset in gender research, not only a representational one. The WIPP team was composed of people from different backgrounds who worked together to make meaning of what participants revealed, reflecting it back to one another, and generating a far richer analysis than would have been possible if it were composed of a homogenous group of researchers.

Gender dynamics cannot be fully understood if the research team only involves women

There is a tendency in gender work to limit its scope by focusing exclusively on women. That approach is short-sighted because it undersells the complexity of gender and isolates women's experience from the world that produces it. Gender is fundamentally relational. It exists in the interactions between people, shaped by identity, power, and institutional position in ways that cut across


and within gender lines, not only between them. A study that captures only one position within those relations presents an incomplete picture. If the work is to be gender-focused, it needs to involve men and women.

In the WIPP, that logic drove the decision to include operational men as participants and male researchers as facilitators because who is in the room shapes what gets said, and the same safe spaces that had been created for women had to be created for men. That moment in the project was pivotal: men in the SAPS had been observing a study that did not include them, so their subsequent involvement signaled that this was not an exercise aimed at finding fault with men, but in understanding the dynamics that all operational members were navigating.

That inclusion, however, came with a demand the team had not anticipated, one directed not at participants but at the researchers themselves. The assumptions each person held about gender, competence, and institutional life were challenged not by argument or by principle, but by the enormity and consistency of what participants had revealed. Making meaning of those revelations responsibly required the team to examine their own position in relation to what they were hearing, and that examination was its own form of the very transformation the research was trying to produce. It did not stay within the SAPS; it took root within the WIPP team itself. The lesson for others is this: if the work is going to be genuinely transformative, you have to be part of that transformation too.

Identify what each team member carries into the room and create space to process what the work surfaces

A diverse team is necessary for rich interpretation, but it is not sufficient in itself. Diversity of insight only becomes possible when each researcher understands what they bring to the work. Every researcher enters the field carrying beliefs, values and experiences that influence what they notice, what they ask, and what they are able to hear without judgement, whether or not they are aware of it. Positionality – the sum of what each researcher brings to the work – has a practical application: it needs to be named, individually and collectively, at each stage of the work. That means building structured




opportunities for the team to discuss their own responses to what the data reveals and surfaces inside them as individuals and in relation to one another.

The WIPP built dedicated practices into the research design for exactly this purpose. Other practitioners do not need to replicate those methods but should have an equivalent framework that facilitates this for the team. A team that has no space to process and honestly discuss what the work surfaces will carry those unexamined beliefs, values and experiences into every phase of the work. A team that creates the space to do this, will find that different positionalities produce different interpretations of the same stories, and that difference is what will give the research its analytical depth.

Where to Start

Questions for Practitioners



The principles guiding our approach are transferable, but the question itself is not. Those principles were developed through a research project, but what they demand of practitioners are not research specific.

They apply to any form of gender work inside a security sector institution. What follows is not a methodology to replicate, but a set of questions to consider before the work starts, and to return to when things get difficult.

1. On positioning the work to secure access and an institutional champion

- Has gender been framed as an operational requirement and leadership factor and does it involve both women and men?
- Is there someone who agrees and has the rank and motivation to champion the work within the institution?
- Have approvals been secured to ensure the work is both safe and legitimate?

2. On trust as a daily practice

- Is trust with the institution being practiced daily through pre-emptive disclosure, rather than assumed once authorisation is secured?
- Is trust within the team being maintained through honest dialogue, rather than taken for granted?
- Is trust with participants being demonstrated in every interaction, rather than assumed from consent?

3. On designing the work as a tool of transformation

- Is the work designed to be a safe space for personal disclosure and honest conversations, not simply to extract knowledge?
- Are phases of the work (e.g. sensitisation, collection, and validation) treated as invitations for reflection?
- Are team members mentally prepared and emotionally equipped to bear witness to what participants share, rather than to judge or adjudicate it?

4. On directing energy strategically toward open doors and green lights

- Who are the relevant internal stakeholders and how important are they to the work?
- Are their mandates and interests in the work (personal and professional) understood, as well as what they need to see in order to support it?
- Where and who in the institution is open to the work? Has the strategy been built around following the green lights and avoiding the red ones?
- When disruptions hit, what are the contingency plans? How is agility exercised?

5. On building a diverse team and leveraging positionality

- Does the team reflect the range of identities participants represent? Are men included in the team?
- Does each member of the team understand their positionality and how they bring values, beliefs, and the impact of prior experiences into the work?
- Have structured mechanisms been built for the team to process what the work brings up for people, and have those responses been used to deepen analysis?

We have learned that these questions do not always have easy answers, and that they are also not meant to. Sit with them, return to them often, and stay honest about what your context will and will not allow. The work will be better for it, and so will you.

Conclusion



Doing gender work inside security sector institutions is difficult because they are built to resist it. Getting in, asking the hard questions, and creating space for honest dialogue is an achievement in itself. But how that work is done determines whether it transforms anything. Our research in South Africa changed who had the right to speak about gender and in doing so produced evidence that makes the need for action hard to ignore. The same can be true wherever the work is done.



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