

# **A Gendered Approach to Public-Private Partnerships in University Student Housing Provision – The Case of South Africa**

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## **Abstract**

Student housing is a booming business in many African countries as evidenced by the growing rental property market for students in neighbourhoods surrounding campuses of tertiary institutions. This paper casts a light on the need to rethink gender-fair public-private partnerships (PPPs) in the context of student housing, which has in some cases proven to be a site of violence against female students given its profit-driven motive. Using a feminist lens, we seek to answer the question: in what ways can PPPs strike a balance between providing much-needed student housing and addressing gendered imbalances in current student housing provision models? We relied on an analysis of published and unpublished literature on student housing provision and the role of PPPs in the higher education sector. The discussion demonstrates ways in which PPP arrangements can have gendered implications, impacting students differently based on their racial and gender identities and sexuality. It also argues for a framework that guides norms and standards of student housing to make it inclusive of marginalised students and to mitigate potential harm to tertiary students.

**Keywords:** Student housing, South Africa, PPPs, gender-fair, feminist lens

## Introduction

Disadvantaged students in South African tertiary institutions face a myriad of challenges which affect their successful transition into and completion of further studies. These challenges reflect the legacies of the apartheid era and the ongoing impact of neoliberal economic restructuring (Masutha 2020). One of the critical challenges to disadvantaged students is finding safe and quality accommodation given that such students generally live in distant townships or rural areas far from campuses. Tertiary institutions are currently facing a backlog of student accommodation provision due to increased demand since 1994. The gap in student accommodation in South African schools is a microcosm of the housing challenges on the continent. A 2016 news article predicted the rising demand for new purpose-built student accommodation in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) which was estimated to eventually exceed 500,000 beds over a period of five years (Biz Community 2018). In the South African context, the problem sheds light on existing racial and gender disparities and how students from disadvantaged backgrounds can be negatively affected. Disadvantaged students need secure spaces to facilitate their mobility and access to educational resources. The location of the accommodation and its safety are essential in their lecture attendance, use of library and institutional services, access to a conducive place for homework and safety from criminal activity and sexual and gender-based violence. Women and members of the LGBTQIA+ community have special needs emanating from how society treats them and therefore require safe spaces for their academic activities. While the accommodation problems persist, the Government's budgetary allocations and grants are insufficient to build and effectively operate residences. Policy decision-making and financial pressures on student accommodation PPPs have increased over the years to address the constraints (Kutama 2017).

This article explores the intersection of gender, PPPs, and student housing provision. It applies a feminist lens to highlight the gendered inequalities and vulnerabilities faced by female and LGBTQIA+ students in accessing safe and affordable housing in the context of tertiary education in South Africa. The article addresses the question: in what ways can PPPs strike a balance between providing much-needed student housing and addressing gendered imbalances in current

student housing provision models? This question stems from the observations in the literature about the challenges that confront student housing provision in many parts of the world, including South Africa. Challenges range from inadequate supply to structural issues related to safety, the lack of purpose-built housing that promotes inclusivity for students from diverse backgrounds and orientations (Mudau 2017; Calitz et al. 2020; Makhaye et al. 2023). As tertiary institutions and the Government explore opportunities for expanding student housing through PPPs, it is important to examine the potential implications for gender equality and student well-being and to question the prevailing narrative about their benefits.

Demand for student accommodation has grown tremendously because of the massification of higher education globally and within the continent over the last few decades. Tertiary student numbers have increased exponentially as more students enrol at technical and vocational (TVET) colleges, universities, and other specialised tertiary training institutions. At the same time, publicly funded tertiary institutions have experienced dwindling capital expenditure budgets that cannot cater for the expansion of facilities to meet the growing demand, hence the pressure to outsource services such as student housing (Blair and Williams 2017).

Off-campus housing has become quite popular as neighbours of such institutions have filled the gap in the supply of much-needed housing. In countries such as South Africa, the role of the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) in funding accommodation for tertiary students has incentivised the expansion of off-campus student accommodation. In addition, the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) is implementing the Student Housing Infrastructure Programme (SHIP) which aims to provide 200,000 beds at universities and 100,000 beds at TVET colleges by 2030 (Daniel 2021). At the same time, however, some tertiary institutions have seen the financial benefits of retaining a stake in the outsourcing of student housing and have therefore embarked on PPPs – a key focus of this article.

In the South African context, studies reveal the hardships that students face with both on-campus and off-campus housing (Mzileni and Mkhize 2019; Gordon and Collins 2013; Mugume and Luescher 2015). There are challenges regarding access, as there are relatively fewer beds available to meet the demand.

In some cases, cheaper, unsafe living arrangements can also be found off-site. Off-site student accommodation tends to be unaffordable for many students, which then consigns them to much cheaper, but unsafe living arrangements. There is a divide between formal PPP accommodation (developed in contracts with universities and government institutions) and more informal, fully private accommodation that has even less chance of being governed for the benefit of students. These distinctions have implications for students living in such spaces. It also shows how students can be affected differently depending on the university housing in which they find themselves.

Apart from being victims of other crimes, female and LGBTQIA+ students are at risk of being victims of sexual violence. As observed by Macleod et al. (2018), sexual violence in the university context “is an abidingly serious problem, seemingly related to the particularities of university life as a specific social context, but also as a result of the intersection of the circumstances within the university context and those of [the] broader society.” A Survey by Mutinta (2022) in selected universities in South Africa shows a high prevalence of gender-based violence.

This paper casts a light on the need to rethink gender-fair student housing PPPs given that in some cases housing has proven to be a site of violence against female students. It has also been a site of exclusion for LGBTQIA+ students since gender is denoted in binary forms in the allocation of student housing. The methodology of this article encompassed desk review and content analysis of published and unpublished literature, grey literature and policy documents related to student housing provision and the role of PPPs in the South African higher education sector.

## **How PPPs in Higher Education are Configured and Why they Matter**

A PPP is a contract between a public agency or non-profit and a private sector entity, in which parties can share skills, technology and responsibility when delivering a product or service (Lundy and Ladd 2021). In the context of higher education student accommodation, it is usually a contract between a university and a private sector entity.

Generally, in the traditional procurement of services or infrastructure, the roles of universities and developers are clear-cut. For instance, the university pays for capital and operating costs and carries the risks associated with cost overruns and late delivery. Once the private sector has designed, constructed and delivered the asset, the services of the private companies are no longer required, and the university is then responsible for staffing, maintenance, and operation.

However, in PPP procurement arrangements, the university usually buys from the private sector a full set of services, including infrastructural development and provision of a variety of maintenance and operation services (IFC 2020). It pays for these over the term of the PPP agreement, based on successful delivery. Internationally, PPPs have taken a wide range of forms and tend to vary with the level of involvement and risk of the private entity in the arrangement with the educational institution (IFC 2020). PPPs are assumed to benefit universities in a variety of ways, including (i) front-office, student-facing functions (e.g., enrolment management, student affairs, education delivery); (ii) back-office functions (e.g., finance, human resources, technology); and (iii) facilities (e.g., student housing, labs, food service, parking, transportation). The dominant assumption is that the private sector typically puts its own capital at risk, funding its investment in the project with debt and shareholder equity. Considering its financial risk, the private sector is motivated to provide a high level of service, which is needed to generate good returns on equity.

South African universities face significant capacity challenges in meeting the increasing demand for affordable and quality student accommodation. Due to great strides made to increase access to both basic and higher education since 1994, there has been more than a twofold rise in student enrolments. Public funding is insufficient. PPPs are seen to offer a viable solution by leveraging the financial and operational capabilities of private sector partners to meet the educational and social objectives of universities. The narrative is that PPPs will enable universities to expand their accommodation capacity without incurring excessive debt or diverting resources from core educational activities. Private sector partners bring design, construction, and property management expertise, ensuring the provision of modern and well-maintained facilities. Moreover, PPPs can attract private-sector investment and stimulate economic growth in the surrounding areas.

While there are barriers to the successful implementation of student housing PPPs, some literature argues that such partnerships do play a significant role in addressing students' accommodation needs in South Africa. In a country marked by acute inequalities and diverse socio-economic challenges, including a housing deficit, inadequate infrastructure and privately owned land, PPPs have provided an effective mechanism for leveraging private sector resources and expertise to tackle the issues of housing delivery. For example, Schalekamp and Fourie (2021) argue that PPPs have been instrumental in delivering affordable housing units in South Africa. For Henjewe et al. (2013), such partnerships have helped bridge the gap between housing demand and supply, leading to increased access to affordable and adequate housing options through drawing resources from public funding with private sector resources and expertise.

## **Bed Capacity, Typologies and Challenges of Student Housing in South Africa**

Student housing in South Africa has enormous potential for growth stemming from the increased demand and the increased outsourcing of university accommodation services to private contractors. The net effect is that private sector players have become more involved in tapping into this lucrative market. As of the year 2020, close to 2.5 million students were enrolled across all tertiary institutions, including universities and TVET colleges (Daniel 2021). The 2022 University Student Housing Survey found that universities around the country had a total of 287,507 beds, out of which 184,973 were occupied by students funded by the NSFAS (Cloete 2022). According to the DHET, the dedicated bed capacity can only accommodate 11% of all enrolled students, most of whom rely on living allowances provided by the NSFAS (Daniel 2021).

Given increased studentification – a term referring to “the process of social, cultural, economic and physical changes that occur resulting from the influx of students, usually within privately rented accommodation in neighbourhoods close to higher education institutions” (Smith 2002 cited by Gregory 2022, 369)— there is a growing vested interest by the private sector in providing this highly demanded service. In many parts of cities, some of the vacant buildings left behind when headquarters of companies relocated or closed down have been

remodelled for student accommodation. It is not only in urban areas of big cities like Johannesburg, Cape Town or Durban that such developments are occurring, but also near campuses located in rural areas across the country.

The student housing market is diverse and comprises many typologies – from high-rise, state-of-the-art purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) complexes, to backyard dwellings and shacks. Additionally, there is an important distinction between public (provided by higher education institutions) and private (provided by private sector developers and operators) student accommodation (IFC 2020). Table 1 below presents the distribution of student housing in tertiary education inclusive of ownership type and shows those sponsored by the NSFAS.

**Table 1: Distribution of student accommodation by bed capacity**

<b>287,507 Total bed capacity</b>	<b>184,973 NSFAS Students</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 121 312 University-owned beds</li> <li>• 64 817 University-leased beds</li> <li>• 70 043 University-accredited beds</li> <li>• 33 335 Privately-leased beds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 52 813 University-owned accommodation</li> <li>• 46 391 University-leased accommodation</li> <li>• 52 434 University-accredited accommodation</li> <li>• 33 335 Privately-leased accommodation</li> </ul>

*Source:* DHET (2020)

Estimates show that the current shortfall exceeds 500,000 beds and will grow by 40% by 2025 owing to increased enrolments and the slow rollout of SHIP.

While the biggest challenge affecting the student housing sector is the failure of supply to meet demand, there are other problems that have been identified. Early in 2022, site visits conducted by the NSFAS Board, university and TVET college management across the country identified the following key challenges in both private and institution-owned accommodation: (i) there are insufficient beds to accommodate students, and some institutions do not have their own accommodation; (ii) there are instances where the state of both private and institution-owned accommodation is not conducive for student living and

learning; (iii) there is no uniformity in the cost structure of university-owned accommodation, and Private Accommodation Providers (PAPs) are not properly regulated; (iv) there are instances where allowances paid by the NSFAS for student accommodation are used for purposes other than what was intended and authorised (Mail and Guardian 2022).

Another structural problem in the current offerings for student housing is related to the dominance of private providers and their pricing models. Since the last decade, when the development of private accommodation spurred growth in the PBSA sector, private developers have mainly been catering to the mid- (ZAR3,000 – ZAR4,500 per month) and high-end market (ZAR5,000 – ZAR8,000 per month). This has created a wide gap between affordable and mid-level student accommodation (IFC 2020). It is students from low-income households who are particularly affected by this shortage.

Some studies have shown that because of studentification, crime targeting students has increased, as reflected in the following quote from Gregory (2022):

These unregulated suppliers of student accommodation do not necessarily conform to the [Department of Higher Education and Training] DHET’s policy on the minimum norms and standards for student accommodation or adhere to the standards set out by university policies. Therefore, students that are channelled into such properties face a greater security risk, are more susceptible to the impact of crime and this affects their wellbeing and academic performance. Overall, students are both the victims of increased crime and perceived to be the reason for the attraction or increase in crime in studentified neighbourhoods (377).

The study further highlights how students are often easy targets of criminals who brazenly attack their residences and rob them of laptops, cell phones, cash, and other valuables at gunpoint. Ross and Rasool (2019) concluded in their study of safety in university student housing, that “university campuses are generally perceived to be relatively secure places; however, results from this research show that they are not immune to crime” (18).

Meeting bed capacity needs for tertiary institutions will require massive investment by the South African government. However, considering reductions in budgetary allocations from the national fiscus and capacity constraints for rolling out massive infrastructure projects, PPPs for student accommodation provision



are being explored by the NSFAS as well as DHET. Most of the discussions have revolved around the need to implement PPPs while adhering to the Public Finance Management Amendment Act (PFMA) when working with the private sector as partners in student housing provision (Mail and Guardian 2022).

## **A Feminist Critique of PPPs**

The debates on PPPs in infrastructure development have long focused on their neoliberal and privatisation logic which include profit maximisation principles. Feminist scholars and activists have critiqued PPPs on several grounds, highlighting potential gendered implications and consequences of PPP arrangements. While it is important to note that feminist perspectives can be diverse and multifaceted, we provide a general overview of some key criticisms raised by feminist scholars in relation to PPPs.

One of the feminist critiques of PPPs has centred on the perpetuation and reinforcement of existing gender inequalities. Given that PPPs often prioritise economic and efficiency goals, they can potentially overlook the gendered dimensions of their services. This can result in limited attention to issues such as gender-based violence, reproductive healthcare, and childcare, which disproportionately affect women (Razavi and Pearson 2003). In a neoliberal environment where the drive for profit takes prime importance, existing inequalities can be further exacerbated by a lack of reflection, especially given that gender mainstreaming programmes are time-consuming and expensive. It is therefore not an accident that both public and private university accommodations have prioritised “efficiency” and profit over the well-being of students, especially women and members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Given the profit motive of private accommodation, the conditions can be worsened since they will be less inclined to address gender-related issues.

A second feminist critique relates to the impact of privatising public services through PPPs. Bakker and Gill (2003) argue that privatising essential services such as healthcare, education, or water provision can lead to increased costs, reduced accessibility, and limited accountability, potentially marginalising women, particularly those from underprivileged communities. The privatisation and commodification of basic services and the consequences, especially for

poor households (Naidoo 2007) and women in the informal economy (Samson 2009), are widely documented in South Africa. The #Feesmustfall protests that racked South Africa's public institutions between 2015 and 2017 fell on fertile ground because prior to the actual shutdown, students at the University of the Witwatersrand were protesting the destruction of university accommodation in favour of private accommodation (Ndlovu 2017). Sadly, most universities in South Africa have followed this privatisation of student accommodation route. Two comprehensive reports from the Nelson Mandela University and the University of the Witwatersrand show how privatisation of student accommodation has become a norm. Privatised accommodation often comes with exorbitant prices, which end up excluding the poor, especially women. Women students, in particular, may have to search for cheaper but riskier accommodation around the city or choose to commute from their township homes to the university. Employing a capabilities approach framework, Walker et al. (2023) have shown how disadvantaged students' experience of poverty is largely linked to the legacies of colonialism and apartheid, especially the historical imposition of rural "Bantustans" or "homelands." Consequently, the privatisation of university accommodation through PPPs has severe impacts on students from segregated townships and rural areas who end up being excluded because they cannot afford to pay. This is mainly because PPPs often involve private companies that aim to generate profits, resulting in increased accommodation cost, potentially making it less affordable for students from marginalised backgrounds, particularly those funded by the NSFAS.

Thirdly, PPPs often overlook gender mainstreaming, which is the integration of gender perspectives into all aspects of policy and programme design. Drawing from the experiences of urban planning in Egypt, Abdelmoaty et al. (2021) note that women and men have different basic needs in urban public spaces. These practical and strategic gender needs must be taken into consideration when planning urban infrastructure and facilities. Ignoring them can result in gender-blind policies and projects that fail to address the specific realities of women and marginalised groups. In a study on the experiences of trans university students in Ontario, Laidlaw (2020) identifies washrooms, gym changing rooms, and residence rooms as sites of violence, discrimination, and humiliation for trans students. In a survey of 880 heterosexual students, Arndt

and De Bruin (2006) have shown how despite the South African government's unprecedented commitment to acknowledging and upholding the human rights of the LGBTQIA+ community, negative attitudes towards the community still persist in university spaces. Following the introduction of unisex bathrooms at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2017, Kiguwa (2018) reflects on "the critical use of language in constructing gender binaries, notions of safety, and security in the pathologizing of non-heterosexual gender expressions and identities". For Kiguwa (2018), there is an urgent need to engage with the intricate ways in which gender and sexuality remain understood within narrowly defined and oppressive structures and the implications of such understanding for transformation. Without gender-sensitive planning and implementation, PPPs may inadvertently perpetuate gender inequalities by not catering for students' specific needs, given their one-size-fits-all approach to providing facilities. Consequently, LGBTQIA+ students continue to experience discrimination, othering and humiliation as homophobic sentiments continue to thrive in South African communities and university spaces. Abdelmoaty et al. (2021) argue that it is the responsibility of decision-makers to develop legislation and laws that address gender-sensitive needs and rights. Urban legislation, therefore, needs to be introduced through a gender perspective that considers all social groups of women, despite their age, educational level, social background and abilities, among others.

Fourthly, there is limited participation by women and other vulnerable groups during PPP development. Miraftab (2004) problematises PPP arrangements in neoliberal development and argues that much energy has focused on the technicalities of the partnerships, including the fine print of contracts and agreements. This is done at the expense of the social, economic, cultural, and political environments where such partnership arrangements take place. For PPPs to achieve the intended goals beyond maximising profits, grassroots organisations and disadvantaged communities must become active players and full partners to exert and sustain their interests throughout PPP processes. Drawing from the experiences of women in India and China, Rai (2013) emphasises the intersection of gender and other forms of inequality in development and development programmes. She argues that PPP arrangements tend to sideline women's voices and participation in decision-making processes. This in turn often leads to underrepresentation of women's voices and perspectives

in the design, implementation, and evaluation of PPPs. As noted earlier in the paper, PPPs are usually a negotiation between public institutions of higher learning and private service providers. Students are not consulted and are often absent in decision-making processes; this results in services and facilities that do not adequately address the needs and priorities of women and LGBTQIA+ persons, leading to ineffective outcomes that perpetuate gendered inequalities and exclusion.

In a critical analysis of PPPs, Rwelamila et al. (2015) trace historical and contemporary public protests against PPPs, which are perceived as a top-down approach to rolling out development projects. Using a principal-agent model as a lens, the authors provide a detailed understanding of what constitutes the first “P” (the public) in a PPP construct and show how many PPP project arrangements have failed to embrace the real public. In the South African context, the private sector continues to enjoy minimal regulation, following the pattern across many developing countries as the state seeks to give the market more power (Miraftab 2004). As a result, public institutions of higher learning do not have much control in PPP arrangements. While universities have arrangements with service providers conforming to the NSFAS allowance cap, other private residences charge a top-up fee to make up for the shortfall. This means that students who cannot afford to top-up, the majority of whom are women and LGBTQIA+ students who seek safer accommodations with better user-friendly facilities, will remain excluded. Consequently, power dynamics within PPP arrangements at university accommodations are biased against women and non-binary students.

## **Gendered Implications of PPPs**

Although some of the literature points to successful PPP implementation, there are rising concerns about the negative impacts on disadvantaged students. In this section, we turn to some of the specific direct gendered implications of university accommodation PPP arrangements that can impact students differently based on their gender identities and sexuality. As noted earlier, Laidlaw (2020) identified structural issues such as washrooms, gym changing rooms, and residence rooms as sites of violence, discrimination, and humiliation for trans students. This situation is exacerbated for women and LGBTQIA+ students

when accommodation arrangements such as single-gender residence halls or gender-inclusive housing are limited or absent at universities – which is often the case in PPP arrangements. Given that South African public institutions of higher learning are increasingly outsourcing the provision of student accommodation through PPPs, university housing is increasingly becoming a site of violence for the LGBTQIA+ community, reversing the constitutional gains made thus far.

While universities are progressive spaces in the fight against discrimination, the disregard for different forms of discrimination, perpetuated through the lack of provision of inclusive facilities, fosters the continued marginalisation of women and non-binary persons. There is added risk in private accommodation given the outsourcing of security – as noted in the discussion of the #Feesmustfall demonstrations. Also, due to its profit motive, costly private accommodation is only accessible to wealthy and middle-class students. There is also less or minimal governance of private accommodation, so accountability is missing. While there are risks within all residences (public or private), to ensure safety and security, especially for women and the LGBTQIA+ community, it is necessary to address many concerns relating to structural issues, cost, location and security, among others.

Safety and security measures remain key challenges, especially within PPP-operated accommodation. Calitz et al. (2020) have identified safety and security as playing a deciding role in both local and international students' choice of university in South Africa. Mudau (2017) highlights challenges faced by students who live off-campus, including high rentals, unhygienic surroundings, long distances from the university, inability to access library services, and lack of security both in the hostels and during their commute to university as they risk being attacked by criminals. Mkhize et al. (2022) have identified assaults and housebreaking to steal laptops, cell phones, clothes, and other accessories as some of the insecurity challenges faced by students at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal (UKZN). In particular, the authors highlighted rape as one of the major challenges faced by female students at this university, worsened because female students are reluctant to report sexual victimisation to the authorities. The World Population Review's statistics show that South Africa comes sixth in the world with a femicide rate of 9.1 in 2023, after El Salvador (13.8), Antigua and Barbuda (12.2), Jamaica (10.9), Venezuela (10.7) and Central African Republic (10.6). With South Africa being one of the countries with high femicide crimes (Brodie

et al. 2023), coupled with outsourced security services at private accommodations, gendered experiences of crime from PPP-serviced accommodations cannot be ruled out. During #Feesmustfall protests in South Africa, sexual harassment from private security became one of the major concerns for women and non-binary students and lecturers on campus (Ndlovu 2017). Although the university has limited or no influence at all in private accommodation, cases of sexual harassment and rape cannot be ignored.

Challenges related to safety concerns for women and gender non-conforming individuals in university accommodation can include the very presence of security personnel and surveillance systems. It is very important for PPPs to ensure that what they consider to be security measures for all students do not become (in)security concerns for some. In most cases, housing policies and provision arrangements assume that students are male or female, thereby failing to cater for transgender students, especially those who are in the process of transitioning from one gender to another or who do not identify as either dominant gender (Beemyn et al. 2005).

Van den Brink et al. (2017) have emphasised issues of gender pay gaps and economic disparities and how these exacerbate gender challenges of access while also affecting women and non-binary individuals who are already facing financial challenges. If PPPs are to serve as effective alternative arrangements for providing student accommodation, they should take into consideration the socioeconomic and spatial histories of exclusion in South Africa. That is to say, histories of segregation and exclusionary apartheid policies cannot be ignored in the understanding and analysis of the socioeconomic conditions of students (Walker et al. 2022).

The differences in private accommodation are significant. Some private housing options are tailored to wealthy or middle-class students, and can therefore be quite expensive. In certain regions, there is an unfortunate de facto racial segregation. Meanwhile, there is a less formal category of private accommodation in which economically disadvantaged students, often from racialized backgrounds, as well as women and LGBTQI+ individuals, are compelled to seek housing. These intricacies in student housing disparities and the diverse backgrounds of students must be taken into account in a PPP arrangement.

Miraftab (2004) and others argue that PPPs should pay attention to and be responsive to socioeconomic conditions and social environments; however, PPPs' main objective is profit maximisation. How can these two co-exist, given the high levels of poverty and inequity in South Africa? It is only likely if there is further government financing to subsidise the cost of accommodation. This then raises the question of whether public money could be better spent to build and operate university-owned residences. As argued by Miraftab (2004), successful partnerships should pay attention to the socioeconomic conditions and the environment where interventions are taking place. The programmes should prioritise recipients over technicalities in contracts. Most students who tend to use private accommodation in Johannesburg are those who come from underprivileged backgrounds, profiled through their matric results as university accommodation prioritises higher grades from high school. Consequently, students from poor townships and rural areas are mostly serviced by public schools with limited resources, leaving them at the mercy of private accommodation arrangements. Women and non-binary students tend to be the most disadvantaged given the economic disparities and how they exacerbate gender challenges of access.

University accommodation PPPs can vary depending on the contractual arrangements, policies, and practices implemented by the involved parties. It is therefore crucial for public and private partners to pay attention to and address the gendered needs of their student populace to ensure equitable access, safety, and inclusivity in accommodation options for all students. For any PPP arrangement to successfully address these issues, there is a need to take seriously the historical, socioeconomic and environmental landscape in which the interventions take place. PPP arrangements cannot ignore the gendered nature of poverty and inequality, and the identity politics which continue to affect women from marginalised backgrounds, and gender non-conforming persons the most. It can be argued that addressing the highlighted challenges through inclusive partnerships that take students seriously as important stakeholders, and aligning developmental needs with those of women and the LGBTQIA+ community, will enhance the quality of university accommodation and the lives of the marginalised groups. The key obstacle will be to reconcile these priorities with the drive to maximise profits.

## Conclusion

This article has highlighted the gaps in PPP student housing and how they can be addressed. We emphasised the need for increasing access to education through the provision of cheaper and safer housing for students. There remain many issues for critical reflection in pursuit of the model that will account for the racial and gender-based inequalities, as has been highlighted in the South African context. The historical injustices in South Africa during the apartheid era and the continuous economic disparities existing in the country are a starting point for reflection. As a point of emphasis, racial segregation in its contemporary form shows the inequalities in access to economic opportunities. PPPs can reproduce these spatial discriminatory practices subtly. There remains a need for deeper reflection on the role that the Government plays to ensure gender-fair partnerships in the provision of student housing. The World Bank's PPP Legal Resources Centre suggests several ways in which adopting a gender perspective in PPP frameworks helps "to ensure that projects are designed that grant women equal access to transport, electricity, and water and sanitation services" (World Bank 2022). First, there is a need to include the gender equality conversation during the procurement and tendering processes of such projects, such as including women-led businesses or businesses with gender parity as contractual partners. Secondly, the infrastructure needs specific to women should be considered in the design and execution of PPPs. Thirdly, there is a need for PPPs that are specifically targeted towards women. Including women in the economy has not only the previously mentioned positive effect on the global economy but it also a possible tangible effect on local communities (World Bank 2022). When public partners try to encourage PPPs to implement these gender mainstreaming strategies, however, they need to be aware of the weaknesses that can result in further exclusion of vulnerable and disadvantaged community members, including women and LGBTQIA+ members.

South Africa already has put in place policies and guidelines to inform PPPs. Among them are guidelines and manuals from the National Treasury and several pieces of legislation that require targets for the employment of black women; stipulations for black women as supervisors, as junior and skilled employees, and in top management positions, as well as preferential procurement



of specific SMEs owned by black women. Institutions of higher learning can lead by example in following some of these critical policy mandates when appointing partners to provide student housing. The policy should work in tandem with an affirmative action intervention that ensures that the State provides for poor and marginalised students in terms of subsidies and allocation of units.

We have emphasised that certain measures are needed to ensure the “successful” implementation of housing PPPs that respond to the socioeconomic environment in the South African context. We ask: since PPPs are driven by the private sector and prioritise profit maximisation, who bears the cost required to respond to the socioeconomic environment? This is an essential question because, if it is the students who must bear the cost, the majority will be excluded since they cannot pay the fees. The inability of students to pay high accommodation fees will affect their access to education. The wider consequences include the violation of their rights to education. If it is the state that subsidises the accommodation, then there is a question of whether the funds could be better spent in directly providing publicly owned accommodation.

## Endnotes

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