THE SOUTHERN AFRICA GENDER PROTOCOL ALLIANCE

TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY AND PUBLIC SUPPORT

#PushForward4Equality

March 2026

Southern Africa Gender Protocol Alliance meets in the wings of the SADC Heads of State Summit in Madagascar, August 2025.
Photo: Gender Links

The Southern African Gender Protocol Alliance (the Alliance) is a regional coalition of civil society organisations working collectively to advance gender equality and women's rights across the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Established in 2005 and coordinated by Gender Links, the Alliance emerged from a recognition that fragmented national advocacy efforts were insufficient to influence regional policy processes. Civil society organisations across the region therefore came together to advocate for a binding regional framework that would consolidate gender equality commitments and strengthen accountability among SADC Member States.

This collective advocacy culminated in the adoption of the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development in 2008, a landmark regional instrument that brings together commitments on gender equality across areas such as governance, gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health and rights, economic justice, and media representation.

This unique sub-regional instrument brings together all existing commitments to gender equality and sets specific targets, indicators and timeframes for achieving these. The rights-based instrument sets a deadline of 2030 for its provisions with non-negotiables such as ending gender-based violence, ending HIV and AIDS and ending maternal mortality.

Since its adoption, the Alliance has evolved from a campaign coalition into a long-term accountability and movement building platform that works to monitor the implementation of these commitments and mobilise public support for gender equality across the region.

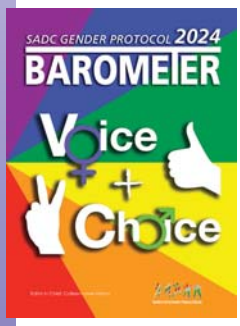
In addition to coordinating the Alliance, GL has cascaded the Gender Protocol work to the community (local) level through the 430 Councils in ten countries that have signed up to become Centres of Excellence for Gender Mainstreaming in Local Government. These Councils integrate the provisions of the Gender Protocol into their gender action plans. This has enhanced public support, transparency and accountability, with the Gender Protocol acknowledged as one of the best known and utilised SADC instruments.

Context and theory of change

Women and girls in Southern Africa constitute the majority of the poor, the dispossessed, the unemployed, those living with HIV and AIDS, and experiencing gender violence. Despite progressive Constitutions and laws in many countries, customary law relegates women to being second class citizens, under their fathers, husbands, and male relatives. Women lack voice in their homes, communities and in the public sphere. This is reflected in the persistent absence of women's views and voices in media content and in all areas of decision-making.

GL's Theory of Change: Reinforced in formal and informal ways, gender inequality begins in the home; is perpetuated by the family; schools; work place; community, custom, culture, religion and tradition as well as structures within society more broadly - the media, new media, popular culture, advertising, laws, law enforcement agencies, the judiciary and others. While society generally identifies other forms of inequality, gender inequality is so normalised that it often goes unnoticed, including by women who have been socialised to accept their inferior status. Gender inequality follows the life cycle of most women from cradle to grave. GL's Theory of Change posits that while individual, family, community and societal factors often become a vicious negative cycle that militates against change each one of these layers can be reversed into a virtuous positive cycle that results in change. GL led the campaign for a SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, updated in 2015 to align with the Sustainable Development Goals.

Approaches, methods and tools



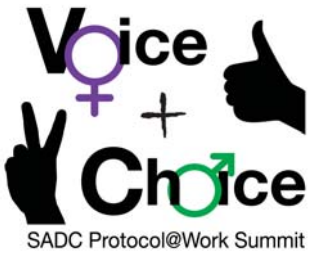
Tracking implementation of the Protocol: A central pillar of the Alliance's work is evidence based accountability. The Alliance contributes to the production of the SADC Gender Protocol Barometer, a regional monitoring tool that tracks progress against gender equality commitments through empirical indicators and citizen perception surveys. The Barometer aggregates national data and analysis to provide a clear regional picture of progress and gaps in gender equality. This evidence strengthens civil society advocacy and provides governments, policy-makers, and citizens with a credible tool for tracking implementation of the Protocol. By translating regional commitments into measurable indicators and public reporting, the Barometer helps to promote transparency and accountability for gender equality across Southern Africa.

The Gender Protocol implementation is tracked through the annual Southern Africa Gender Protocol Barometer consisting of all ten areas of the Protocol. The Alliance networks, GL country offices and sometimes government officials contribute content and data of the Barometer. The annual country and regional barometers tracking progress in the implementation of the Protocol provide a key focus for the networks. In 2019, GL reviewed the Barometer methodology in consultation with researchers and Alliance members to focus more on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). The **#VoiceandChoice** campaign covers 100 Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) indicators. GL and the Alliance are producing a series of thematic Barometers including Economic Justice, Governance, Media and Climate change.

Marching for equality: Alliance veterans campaigning for the Protocol in 2008.
Photo: Gender Links

Coalition building: As the SADC Gender Protocol campaign shifted from signing and ratification to lobbying for implementation, the need for the network to reorganise became apparent. Rather than operating as a single organisation, the Alliance is structured as a network of networks, bringing together national focal networks of women's rights organisations (see *Annex A*) as well as thematic clusters focusing on priority areas such as women's political participation, sexual and reproductive health and rights, economic justice, climate justice, and gender and media. This structure enables diverse organisations across the region to collaborate, share knowledge, and coordinate advocacy strategies while maintaining strong national ownership. At the same time, the Alliance functions as a platform for feminist movement building.

In recent years, the Alliance has entered a phase of institutional strengthening and revitalisation aimed at reinforcing its role as a regional movement platform. This includes the introduction of thematic cluster leadership structures to support decentralised leadership and stronger collaboration among members, as well as a regional mapping of Alliance organisations and partners to strengthen movement connectivity across countries and thematic areas. The Alliance is also investing in intergenerational leadership, including through initiatives such as the Women of the South Speak Out (WOSSO) fellowships, which support emerging feminist leaders to engage in regional advocacy and policy processes.



Mobilising at community level: The Alliance and GL offices have popularised the Gender Protocol at community level initially through village level workshops and community dramas underthe **Voice and Choice** banner led by youth. Using digital medial showcasing podcasts and videos from gender activists across the region has been one of the methodologies to mobilise communities on the Protocol.

Sharing best practices - nothing succeeds like success: The Alliance also provides spaces for collective learning and visibility, including regional summits, research initiatives, and knowledge sharing platforms that highlight successful strategies and innovations from across the region. These spaces strengthen collaboration among civil society actors and amplify the voices of women and marginalised groups whose experiences are often excluded from formal policy debates.GL has gathered over 3000 case studies highlighting the use of the Gender Protocol in different sectors. Participants of summits include local authorities, civil society, media and government.

Strengthening the women's movement and civil society: The Alliance compiled a booklet and DVD, "*Roadmap to Equality*", documenting the strategies used to get the Protocol adopted and implemented, including evidence-based lobbying, use of the media, drafting, and understanding the workings of inter-regional organisations. The annual Barometer has become a model for an evidence-based approach to demanding government accountability. The Alliance, which represents the gender sector in the Southern African Council of NGOs, has become a model within the NGO community for effective organisation and results.

"Gender Links and partnerships are also crucial because until we start working together, we remain individuals with a pull her down (PHD) syndrome. Together women can succeed. As a collective of women founders, women need baseline to set up baseline information, record women's history in the gender movement to know who is available for a particular type of work."[1]

Embracing digital technologies: GL explored use of mobile technologies and the Community of Practice platform to communicate Gender Protocol campaigns and results. The need to advance gender equality in and through the media and information and communications technology (ICT) has been at the core of gender and media advocacy work. The Community of Practice is a platform allowing dialogue and sharing of information on the Gender Protocol from across the region.

[1] P 56 International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology Vol. 5(2), pp. 50-58, March, 2013

Southern Africa Gender Protocol Alliance Chair, Emma Kaliya, speaking at the civil society forum parallel to the SADC Heads of State Summit in Madagascar, August 2025.
Photo: Colleen Lowe Morna

Political will: Civil society led advocacy has spurred governments to sign the Protocol as well as implement its provisions. Botswana, finally signed the Gender Protocol in 2017 due to pressure from the Alliance network in Botswana led by BOCONGO amongst other factors. Alliance partner, Mozambique National non-governmental organisation (NGO), Forum Mulher, has integrated the Gender Protocol into all its programmes.

The Southern African Gender Protocol@Work in Mozambique

The experience of Forum Mulher in Mozambique, the Alliance's national focal network in the country, illustrates how the Alliance's approach to accountability and movement building translates into national advocacy and grassroots mobilisation. Forum Mulher is a national feminist movement established in 1993 in the aftermath of Mozambique's civil war. Today the organisation represents a broad coalition of approximately 80 women's organisations across the country, working collectively to advance women's rights and gender equality. The network plays a key role in coordinating advocacy among civil society organisations and ensuring that the voices of grassroots women inform national decision making processes.

Over the years, Forum Mulher has contributed to several significant legal and policy reforms in Mozambique[2]. These include advocacy efforts that helped strengthen family law provisions recognising the rights of women in de facto unions, ensuring that women who separate from long term partnerships have legal rights to shared property. Civil society mobilisation also contributed to raising the minimum legal age of marriage to 18 years in 2019, strengthening protections for girls against child marriage. In the same year, advocacy efforts led to reforms in the criminal code that strengthened legal responses to domestic violence, while broader reforms in the penal code addressed issues related to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

2 https://forumulher.org.mz/publicacoes/ (Pubilcations by Forum Mulher)

Forum Mulher also plays an important role in movement building and grassroots mobilisation. The network has helped establish provincial platforms for women's rights across Mozambique, providing spaces for women's organisations to coordinate advocacy strategies and strengthen collective action at local level. These platforms support collaboration among grassroots organisations and ensure that local priorities are reflected in national advocacy processes.

More recently, Forum Mulher has been actively engaged in responding to the political tensions that followed Mozambique's 2024 elections, which were marked by protests and episodes of violence. As part of efforts to promote democratic dialogue and social cohesion, the organisation mobilised women across the country to ensure that women's voices were represented in national political discussions. In early 2025, Forum Mulher convened a national consultation of more than 1,000 women from diverse sectors to gather women's perspectives and proposals on democratic reform, governance, and peacebuilding. The outcomes of this process were compiled into a position document that was submitted to the national political dialogue mechanism established by the President of Mozambique.

Participation in the Southern African Gender Protocol Alliance has strengthened Forum Mulher's advocacy work by linking national mobilisation to regional accountability frameworks. Tools such as the SADC Gender Protocol Barometer provide evidence that civil society organisations can use to engage governments on commitments that have already been agreed at regional level. By demonstrating progress and gaps in gender equality across SADC countries, the Barometer strengthens both public accountability and civil society mobilisation.

Through its leadership in Mozambique and its participation in regional advocacy platforms, Forum Mulher demonstrates how national feminist networks can translate regional commitments into grassroots mobilisation, policy influence, and collective action for gender equality.

Ripple effects - East Africa produces a Gender Barometer: East African Community adopted a Gender Equality Act modelled on the SADC Gender Protocol. The Eastern African Sub-regional Support Initiative (EASSI) engaged GL to assist with developing an East African Community Barometer, which was launched in 2018. The yardsticks used to measure gender progress in the EAC region are similar to those used for the SADC Gender Protocol.

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Why EAC needs a gender barometer

East Africa Barometer team.

For more information go to:
https://www.genderlinks.org.za/alliance/

ANNEX A: Alliance focal networks

Country focal networks

Angola
Platform da Mulheres Accao
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Botswana
BONELA
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Democratic Republic of Congo
Union Congolaise des Femmes des Medias (UCOFEM - GEMSA)
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Eswatini Young Women's Alliance
Alice Mavuso

Lesotho
She-Hive Association
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Seychelles
GEM Plus
Sharon Ernesta

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Zimbabwe
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Cluster leads

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Gender Violence

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Diversity and Inclusion

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Human Trafficking
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Safe Abortion
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Safe Abortion Alliance of Southern Africa

Economic Justice
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Gender and Climate Justice
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Mercy Jaravani director@wcoz.org

Women's Political Participation
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Gender and the Media
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