



TURNING A WEALTH OF KNOWLEDGE INTO WEALTH

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Rising to new heights: GL Associates Kevin Chiramba and Susan Tolmay.
Photo: Colleen Lowe Morna

Social entrepreneurship is central to Gender Links' sustainability strategy. We leverage the generous support of our funders to offer quality services that enhance gender equality in our region and worldwide.

Over the past two decades, Gender Links (GL) has evolved from a pioneering regional gender justice advocate into a resilient, impact-

driven organisation with a diversified and forward-looking sustainability model. Its journey has been shaped by a rapidly evolving funding landscape, constraints on civic space, digital transformation, and increasing demand for gender-responsive solutions across Africa.

Its sustainability strategy has been shaped by a deliberate shift toward **diversifying income, building internal business units, and strengthening institutional systems**. Today, GL continues to expand its footprint locally, regionally, and globally through strategic investments in services, research, training, publications, and hospitality.

Building a Sustainable Model: 25-Year Trajectory

In its early years, Gender Links (GL) quickly established a reputation for delivering high-quality programmes, rigorous research, and bold advocacy.

In 2005, GL led the campaign for the adoption of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Gender and Development. By providing evidence-based advocacy and tracking progress across member states, GL played a pivotal role in shaping regional commitments to gender equality.

The organisation's Voice and Choice campaigns brought new energy to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) advocacy. These efforts empowered women and young people to claim their rights and influence policy debates at national and regional levels. GL's work on media and gender transformation also pushed boundaries, challenging stereotypes and improving the representation of women in newsrooms and media content.

GL's innovative municipal-level gender mainstreaming models demonstrated how local governments could integrate gender into planning, budgeting, and service delivery. Together, these groundbreaking programmes cemented GL's credibility and laid the groundwork for its long-term sustainability and growth.

This foundation of credibility built a loyal donor base and positioned GL as a trusted regional technical expert. Even as traditional bilateral support began to contract, GL's longstanding programmatic excellence ensured ongoing relevance and donor confidence.

Thanks to ongoing campaigns for funding for women's rights, an important new trend within the shrinking donor landscape is for northern donors to entrust capable southern civil society organisations with managing their funds. GLS provided the technical vision and expertise to set up the Grants and Fellowships Unit (GFU) that has now shifted to GL Programmes.

In the 2026 to 2030 strategy, GL Services comprises three related arms: income generation the Fund Raising Unit; and management of our endowment, the GL Future Fund.

Giving birth to the GFU

From 2019 to 2025, GL Services incubated the Grants and Fellowships Unit, positioning the organisation as an intermediary for larger donors. This unit grew to over 50 percent of GL's budget in 2025 to 2026. Over the last five years, GL has sub-granted \$14 million to 120 women's rights and 20 LGBTIQ organisations. These form a formidable network on the ground for taking forward GL's vision and mission. As part of GL's 2026 to 2030 strategy, the Board devolved the GFU to GL Programmes, to promote greater integration of GL's work. The rapid growth and success of the unit demonstrates GLS' nimble and innovative capabilities.

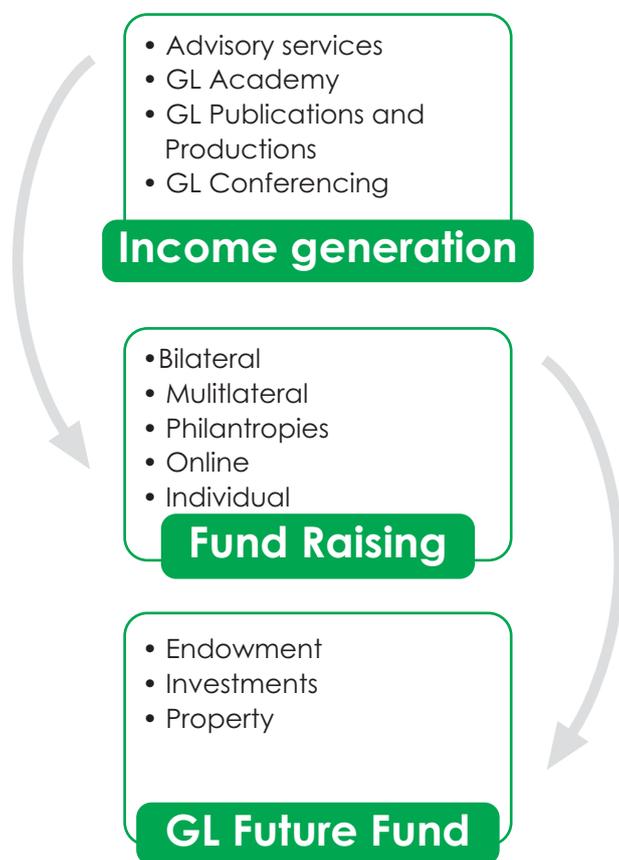
GL's **income generating units**, which in any given year account for 10 to 15 percent of the organisations' income, comprises GL Advisory Services; the GL Academy; GL Publications and Productions; GL Cottages and Conferencing.

Gender Links Advisory Services (GLAS)

Over the past two decades, GLAS has delivered nearly 100 consultancy contracts for governments, multilaterals, and NGOs - offering gender audits, research, training, evaluations, strategy and policy development. Past and present clients include the Southern African Development Community (SADC), the African Union (AU), the African Development Bank (AfDB), the Gates Foundation, Diakonia and Water Aid.

To conduct assignments such as this, GLAS maintains a data base of experts updated annually as part of our procurement processes. GL puts together teams that are "fit for purpose" and deliver high quality outputs.

Leveraging our technical expertise as a service offering enables the organisation to advance its mission with greater precision, credibility, and impact. By transforming internal knowledge, systems, and specialised competencies into high-value advisory and capacity building services, we position ourselves not only as a thought leader



These units provide flexible and cost-effective services to GL (reducing the need for permanent staff and facilities). They also leverage GL's knowledge and skills base to generate additional income.



but as a preferred technical partner across the sector. This expert knowledge has made GL the "go-to" organisation for speakers at key strategic meetings on gender issues. This approach allows us to strategically deploy our expertise to influence policy, strengthen institutions, and shape gender responsive practices, while simultaneously generating sustainable revenue.

The growing appetite for gender integration support, combined with the scalability of digital learning products such as the GL Academy, underscores the importance of investing in specialised staff, structured planning, and robust business development systems. Digital offerings amplify reach, diversify revenue, and extend GTAS' influence at a systems level-including shaping funder practices. To fully unlock this potential, GTAS must strengthen its internal capacity to meet rising demand and drive long-term, sustainable expansion.

Sustained demand from high-value clients demonstrates that long-term, relationship-based engagements create higher impact, stronger revenue continuity, and greater operational efficiency than fragmented, short-cycle grants. Clients increasingly seek integrated solutions -

GL Academy

The GL Academy replaces the Gender Training Unit and is a “Star” in the making! The unit focuses on providing training in Gender Mainstreaming, Gender Responsive Budgeting, Gender and Media Monitoring and Entrepreneurship Training Course. A unique selling point of the Academy is its ability to produce customised, client-specific training modules.

GL launched its first Academy series over six months in 2025 - 2026, which offered six courses:

- 1) Results and Communication for Change;
- 2) Gender, Inclusion and Development;
- 3) Fund-raising and sustainability;
- 4) Wellbeing and self-care;
- 5) Gender and climate justice; and
- 6) Mainstreaming SOGIE.

This is a dynamic learning hub that equips activists, leaders and partners with the tools to drive gender justice across the Global South and beyond. Through interactive, accredited short courses, the academy blends theory with practice -

bringing together diagnostics, strategy, tools, and training - which positions GTAS as a preferred partner. High-quality delivery reinforces this cycle, as client satisfaction consistently generates referrals, strengthens brand equity, and expands market reach.



empowering participants to strengthen their leadership, advocacy, and sustainability skills while connecting them with a diverse community of changemakers.

Since its launch, the academy has recorded 490 registrations from 19 countries, creating a vibrant space for peer learning, knowledge exchange and cross-regional solidarity. Whether building fundraising strategies, exploring gender and climate justice, or developing storytelling and communications skills, the GL Academy is designed to turn learning into action for lasting impact.

GL Resources: Thought Leadership and Publishing



Gender Links sits on a goldmine of intellectual property, two decades of research, practical experience, and a powerful brand reputation. GL's 200+ publications constitute one of the most authoritative repositories of gender knowledge in the region. However, the External Organisational Assessment found that the potential of our IP remains "largely unrealised and under-monetised."

GL has had an unsustainable distribution model - relying on a low-traffic bookshop and an expensive print-on-demand middleman proved financially unsustainable. The high printing and delivery costs severely reduced sales, demonstrating that GL requires a more efficient, high-visibility, and digitally optimised distribution model to monetise its publications successfully.

Security and weak digital controls, along with reliance on external distributors, exposed GL's publications to piracy and unauthorised reselling, undermining both revenue and intellectual property protection. This highlights the need for a secure, high-visibility, GL owned bookshop - integrated into the new website and supported by the GFU - to ensure stronger IP protection, improved user experience, and greater success of the Knowledge Hub.

We plan to:

- **Systematically package and commercialise GL's IP** by auditing all publications, standardising product formats, creating sector-specific bundles, and developing a market-aligned catalogue with competitive pricing.
- **Strengthen digital visibility and optimise the new bookshop**
Enhance the visibility and performance of the

GL bookshop by redesigning its layout, integrating it seamlessly into the main website, applying SEO across all publications, and implementing a targeted digital marketing strategy supported by analytics-driven user insights.

- **Protect GL's intellectual property and secure digital distribution**

Strengthen intellectual property protection and secure digital distribution by implementing DRM and watermarking, using secure e-commerce tools that prevent unauthorised sharing, establishing a clear IP and licensing policy, conducting regular piracy monitoring, and enforcing user-specific verification codes to restrict access to approved users only.

- **Transition from free to donation/purchase model**

Implement a clear transition from free access

to a donation or purchase model by communicating the value of the shift, keeping executive summaries freely available, offering flexible pricing for low-income contexts, and automating donation to download processes to streamline administration.



See our flipbooks
in the
Knowledge Hub!

 GENDER LINKS
25 YEARS OF SERVICE

GL Cottages and Conferencing

Purchased and established in 2011 GL Cottages operates as a professionally managed bed and breakfast facility located near the organisation's headquarters, serving both internal Gender Links needs (approximately 30% of utilisation) and a broader external clientele, predominantly like-minded NGOs. As a social enterprise, GL Cottages is committed to delivering service excellence while maintaining a commercially competitive offering. The facility continually adapts to evolving trends in the hospitality sector, providing innovative, client-centred solutions and flexible arrangements designed to enhance convenience, comfort, and overall guest experience.



The GL Cottages were born out of the growing need for the NGO's work to be sustainable without donor funding. GLC seeks to bridge the gap in meeting the operational costs of Gender Links that donors do not fund. GL Cottages is run as a business with the main goal of generating income and remaining profitable, while also offering competitive pricing to customers that ensures good value for money.

GLC emerged as a notable resilience success story during the COVID-19 period, demonstrating its capacity to withstand sector-wide disruption while continuing to generate the revenue required to support the Non-Profit Organisation's operational needs. Even under unprecedented pressure, GL Cottages sustained profitability and upheld its self-financing model, ensuring uninterrupted operations. This performance reinforced GLC's role as a stabilising asset within the broader sustainability ecosystem.

GL Cottages has cultivated strong, strategic partnerships with neighbouring hotels, enabling a seamless exchange of overflow bookings - an arrangement that enhances occupancy and stabilises revenue during traditionally quieter periods. Over the years, GLC has also built a highly loyal client base that consistently returns for repeat bookings. This dependable customer retention, coupled with exemplary payment reliability, has played a pivotal role in strengthening GLC's financial position and ensuring sustained stability without the need for debt write-offs.

Learning, adapting and growing

Gender Links is an organisation that champions continuous learning and strategic adaptation to drive lasting gender equality and institutional change. This is what we have learned over 15 years, and how we use this information to evolve and improve continually.

Business knowledge and experience are essential: GLC is a business, and as such, senior staff must have financial and operational experience, knowledge of business processes, and industry insight that enable GLC to listen to and understand clients' goals and the environment (competitive,

economic, and regulatory) in which they operate. We must proactively monitor shifts in the broader hospitality landscape and analyse their implications for our client base, enabling us to refine and strategically align our product offering so that we consistently meet customers where they are at their point of need.



Fierce competition is driving innovation and product diversification: In the age of economic uncertainty, businesses require a total mindset shift. Fierce competition in the hospitality industry means it is no longer business as usual. Market trends show rising demand for hybrid conferencing, upgraded facilities and curated guest

experiences. The current economic uncertainty calls for problem-solving, critical thinking, effective internal and external communication, and innovation.

Facilities and services must meet high standards: As most clients are corporate or NGO based, it is essential to provide reliable Wi Fi, professional conferencing spaces, comfortable accommodation and efficient service necessitated a shift to off-grid sustainability, which has aided in ensuring that energy and water shortages don't directly impact guest experience, and at the same time reduce operational costs.

Tailoring the guest experience: Flexibility is key across everything from pricing structure to product offerings, as customers have diverse needs. GLC believes that *we can't be everything to everyone, but we can be everything to someone - a one-stop shop.*

Improving online presence and marketing is critical: Digital visibility and online reviews significantly influence bookings. Putting in place an effective marketing and communications strategy that reaches the right audience is crucial, e.g. social media marketing, continuous website improvement, YouTube video clips, etc.

The GL Fund Raising Unit



GL's analysis of our funding over the last five years shows that we are still heavily reliant on bilateral and multilateral funding. While diversification is key, we have to keep knocking on the doors of traditional funders, while exploring and prizing open new funding streams. GL's devolution strategy since 2023, including setting up country boards outside South Africa, has played a crucial role in mobilising resources at country level (approximately 30% of the total budget). The GL Fund Raising Unit is not a substitute for all managers at GL fund raising. It does however provide the following services:

- **Gathering and disseminating information** on funding opportunities.
- **Convening the monthly GL Leadership and Opportunities** meeting to strategise on which opportunities to pursue.
- **Rationalising GL efforts** (for example ensuring that GL branches are not in competition).

GL Funding sources 2020 to 2025	%
Bilateral	45%
Pool Fund	15%
Multilateral	12%
INGO	11%
GL Cottages/ services	8%
Foundations	6%
Government	2%
Private sector	1%
Total	100%

- **Brokering partnerships** for increasingly fashionable consortium arrangements.
- **Managing an up to date portal** of key documents needed in fund raising.
- **Sourcing high level support and expertise** for the more demanding applications
- **Capacity building:** The GFU offers a course for staff and partners on fund raising through the GL Academy.

Created in 2009, the **Gender Links Future Fund (GLFF)** acts as GL's endowment, enabling investment in strategic, catalytic initiatives.

While the GLFF currently represents only a modest share of the resources required for GL's annual operations, its strategic value lies in the flexibility it provides. Unlike donor-restricted income, the fund's unrestricted nature allows GL to pursue high-risk, high-return investments that strengthen long-term resilience.

Over the years the GL Future Fund has grown to its 2026 levels of \$1.5 million, despite withdrawals to cover emergencies, and the purchase of a new office in Zimbabwe.

The GL Board has been cautious to ensure that withdrawals do not exceed the principal invested while also addressing pertinent needs. These include match financing required by some funders such as the EU, and supporting flagship programmes of GL such as the Southern African Gender Protocol Alliance, the Barometer, and the Centres of Excellence for Gender in Local

Government when these are relegated to insufficient project funding during increasingly frequent funding droughts. Realising that we have to "pay money to raise money", the GL Future Fund is also supporting the operations of the FRU.

GLFF stands as a testament to the organisation's commitment to resilience and long-term investment. GL aims to grow the Future Fund by generating unrestricted income that strengthens organisational stability, supports catalytic institutional development projects beyond donor scope, and reinforces the GL brand by demonstrating a commitment to self-sustainability.

The key guiding principles of the GLFF

- Transparency.
- Accountability.
- Enterprise
- Out-of-the-box thinking and solution-oriented.
- Dipping into savings only as a last resort.
- Value for money.
- Applying to ourselves the same standards we would apply to our grantees.
- Avoiding precedents that could jeopardise the fund's future.
- Resilience, flexibility and adaptability.

A future ready Sustainability Strategy (2026 and beyond)

GL's forward-looking sustainability approach integrates fundraising, income diversification, digital transformation, and risk-resilient planning. There are opportunities for the future:

- **Expansion of GLS as a continental brand:** GLS is uniquely positioned to emerge as a premier authority in gender consulting and research across Africa. The unit's expertise and capabilities position GLS to shape continental gender agendas, lead high-impact advisory work, and expand its footprint as the go-to regional hub for gender expertise.
- **Growth of GL Academy as a world-class training institute:** The GL Academy is poised to evolve into a world-class African gender institute, expanding its offerings beyond traditional training. It will deliver accredited in-person programmes, specialised online competency pathways, and targeted expertise in areas such as governance, media, and entrepreneurship.
- **Scaling the hospitality social enterprise (GLC):** GLC is scaling its hospitality social enterprise through targeted infrastructure and service expansion designed to increase capacity,

enhance guest experience, and strengthen its competitive positioning. This includes growing room capacity, adding new revenue-generating amenities such as a coffee shop and outdoor bar, leveraging digital platforms to boost market visibility, and attracting higher-value government and corporate clients.

- **Corporate fundraising and strategic partnerships:** GL is strengthening its corporate fundraising and partnership strategy by actively positioning itself to access high-value CSI budgets, marketing sponsorships, and collaborative fundraising platforms. At the same time, it is expanding its digital giving ecosystem through crowdfunding and other innovative online engagement channels to build a broader, more sustainable donor base.
- **Future Fund Potential:** Successful mobilisation of the Future Fund will secure GL's long-term financial independence and significantly reduce reliance on traditional donor funding. It will also unlock the organisation's capacity to invest boldly in innovation, institutional strengthening, and high-impact, mission-aligned initiatives.