

FROM MARGINS TO MOVEMENT

GL's APPROACH TO INCLUSION

#NothingAboutUsWithoutUs

March 2026



Marang Fund partners during the regional onboarding convening in August 2025.
Photo: Gender Links

In 2025, GL took a bold move to realise the aspirations of its vision: *an inclusive, equal and just society for women and girls in all their diversity*. With support from the European Union, GL launched the Euro 3 million [Marang LGBTIQ fund](#) in five Southern African countries: Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho, Madagascar and Mauritius.

Marang means “rays of light” in Setswana. This Fund is a collaboration between Gender Links (GL) and the Botswana Network on Ethics, Law

and HIV/AIDS (BONELA). While implementation, including strategic litigation, is in the five countries, the fund has a bold vision: to champion diversity and inclusion from within the women’s movement, notably the [Southern Africa Gender Protocol Alliance](#). In its first year, the fund has been elected to lead this drive in the Alliance with four voluntary champions. As Gender Links turns 25, the Marang Fund is also championing institutional change within the organisation - its monitoring, evaluation, policies and practices.

Context and Theory of Change

Women remain most of the poor, the dispossessed, the landless and the unemployed. HIV and AIDS have reversed many of the fragile gains made. Customary practices undermine Constitutions

and laws, sometimes condoning gender violence, one of the most telling indicators of gender inequality.

Several other forms of exclusion intersect with gender to compound the misogyny associated with patriarchal norms. These include race, class, the rural/urban divide, age, disability, occupation (especially sex work), sexual orientation and gender identity. These multiple burdens of exclusion result in even higher levels of violence for certain categories of women.

Women from marginalised groups, for example women with disabilities, indigenous women and LGBTI persons, experience multiple and intersecting layers of discrimination, violence, stigma and exclusion. Social gender norms that see SGBV as acceptable persist. Women and girls with disabilities form a critical category of women facing multiple forms of discrimination based on their multiple identities. While there are targeted policies and programmes for persons with disabilities, challenges related to access to basic services, buildings, housing, and transport remain a challenge.

Laws and policies toward LGBTQI+ people vary dramatically across the 16 SADC countries, ranging from very progressive to highly repressive. Five countries - Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Seychelles, and South Africa - have removed or struck down laws criminalising consensual same-sex acts. Southern Africa includes both the first country in the world to ban sexual orientation discrimination constitutionally (South Africa in 1996) and to legalise same-sex marriage (South Africa in 2006), and countries where consensual same-sex activity is still criminalised with harsh penalties (for example, up to life imprisonment in Tanzania and Zambia). Many of these punitive laws are remnants of colonial-era penal codes that outlaw “unnatural acts”.

The tide of global backlash has had devastating effects in our region. Foreign aid for women and LGBTQI organisations and programs has been drastically cut or frozen, forcing many organisations to shut down. Programs supporting sexual and reproductive health, gender equity, and LGBTQI rights in developing countries face severe funding gaps. This has resulted in reduced access to healthcare, increased unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and worsened human rights conditions for women and LGBTQI people globally. Other governments have been emboldened to adopt similar rollback policies, amplifying the global backlash against these rights. According to the 2025 *Women's Rights in Review - 30 Years After Beijing Report*, almost one-quarter of

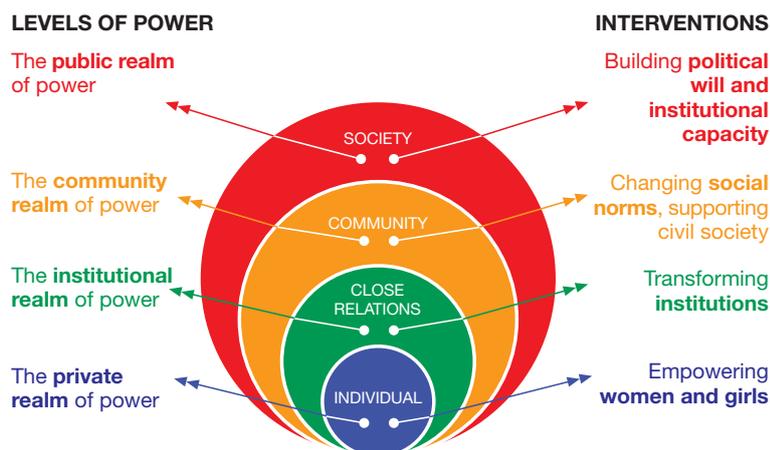
countries reported that backlash against gender equality is hampering the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

2025 marked the 30th Anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action served as the global blueprint for achieving gender equality, guiding many countries toward more equitable and just societies. We are in count down to 2030, the deadline for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the SADC Gender Protocol targets. The Sustainable Development Goals 2024 Report paints a bleak picture, with the latest data showing that progress has either stopped or regressed across various areas despite renewed commitments.

The broader international context is shaped by heightened militarisation, as countries increase defence spending due to ongoing conflicts and a perceived need to protect their territorial sovereignty. These factors collectively mean that resources are diverted away from social programs into military budgets, placing additional pressure on rights-based initiatives.

Resistance and backlash occur at four intersecting levels - government, institutions, community and personal. GL believes that addressing gender inequality at the root - in communities and homes - will drive long-term sustainable change.

Gender Links' Theory of Change recognises that inequality is produced through interlocking circles of power: the private, institutional, community and public realms. Social change unfolds through a complex network of interlocking circles, where advancements and setbacks often occur simultaneously. The GL Theory of Change recognises that social change is seldom linear but instead weaves together multiple influences and developments that shape society over time.



Gender Links' TOC recognises that combating gender inequality requires a multifaceted approach, targeting not only policy and systemic barriers at the government and institutional level, but also challenging deeply entrenched societal norms within communities and individual households. By focusing on these foundational settings - where values and behaviours are shaped - GL believes that meaningful, long-lasting change towards gender equality can be achieved.

1. **Individual level (the private realm of power):** interventions which focus on influencing an individual's self-confidence, knowledge or self-awareness.
2. **Institutional level (the workplace realm of power):** interventions which target the workplace, internally, but crucially the services that this work place delivers.
3. **Community level (the community realm of power):** interventions which aim to change social and cultural norms, values and practices which condone or reinforce gender inequality at the community level.
4. **Societal level (the public realm of power):** interventions which seek to influence laws, policies, and practices and to support and

promote women's rights and empowerment as well as strengthening institutional capacity and accountability.

At the **individual level**, Marang strengthens leadership, confidence and knowledge through learning platforms and storytelling. At the **institutional level**, it improves governance, safeguarding, monitoring and evaluation systems and inclusive organisational practice. At the **community level**, it works to shift social norms through media engagement, dialogue and visibility. At the **public level**, it supports legal research, policy engagement and regional advocacy. In doing so, Marang operationalises Gender Links' **systemic approach** to gender justice and inclusion.



Key allies: Veteran feminist leader and GL Association Member Sarah Longwe. Photo: Colleen Lowe Morna

Impact	Five Southern African countries make significant progress towards recognising the human rights and inclusion in LGBTIQ persons in all spheres of public and private life.		
Result areas	1) Strong organisations and movements	2) Legal and policy groundwork	3) Changes in attitudes and behaviour
Outcomes	LGBTIQ organisations in five Southern African countries strengthened to conduct advocacy, provide services to their constituents and engage regionally	Significant progress towards legal and policy changes for LGBTIQ rights in five Southern African countries	Changes in attitude and behaviour towards LGBTIQ persons in five Southern African countries
Outputs	1.1 20 grants x Euro 50,000 each to LGBTIQ organisations in five countries 1.2 Drop-in Centres (DICES) (confidential and non-discriminatory safe spaces) established in all the five implementing countries 1.3 Capacity building in finance; Monitoring and Evaluation; fund raising; advocacy 1.4 LGBTIQ cluster in the Alliance	2.1 Legal and policy briefs produced 2.2 Actions taken towards lifting the ban on LGBTIQ organisations 2.3 Actions taken towards decriminalisation of same sex activity 2.4 Actions taken towards legalisation of same sex unions 2.5 Actions taken towards inclusion of LGBTIQ persons in SRHR services	3.1 Diversity and inclusion survey administered in five Southern African countries 3.2 100 "I" Stories or first-hand accounts 3.3 50 journalists (ten in each country) trained on sexual diversity and inclusion 3.4 500 media articles/ productions (ten per journalist) on LGBTIQ rights 3.5 50 case studies on leadership; change and organisational growth shared at annual SADC Gender Protocol@Work summits

Approaches, methods and tools

The Marang Fund combines grantmaking, movement accompaniment, research and institutional reform. Following an open regional call for proposals, twenty LGBTIQ-led organisations across the five participating countries were selected and supported through a structured onboarding process that emphasised safeguarding, accountability and movement legitimacy.

Strong organisations and movements: Each organisation receives financial support alongside technical accompaniment. Gender Links established grant management systems, multilingual resources, reporting tools and governance mechanisms to support this work. A rotational Project Steering Committee ensures that grantee partners, allied organisations and regional stakeholders participate in programme oversight and strategic direction.

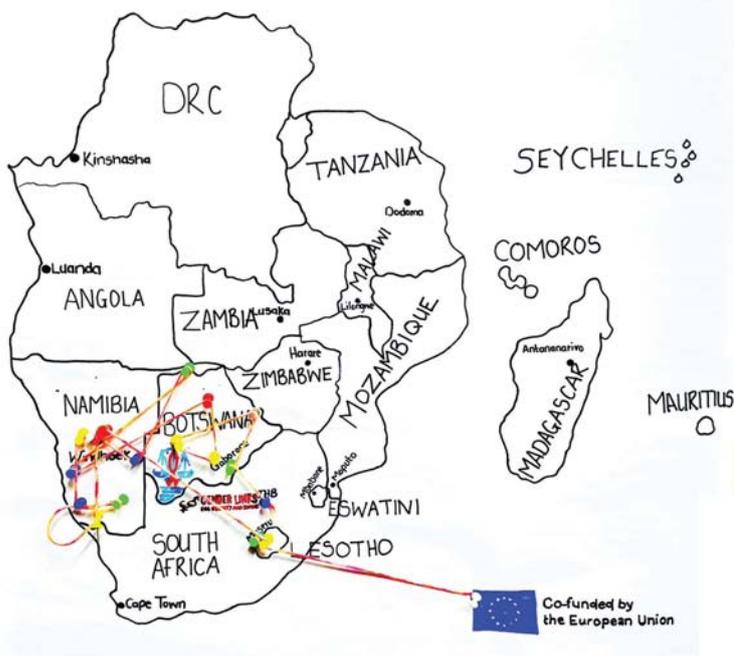
Capacity strengthening is a central pillar of the model. Organisational Development Scorecard assessments conducted with partner organisations revealed strong community legitimacy and activist leadership, but also highlighted areas requiring support, including financial sustainability, security protocols, digital infrastructure and institutional learning systems. These findings inform tailored accompaniment rather than one-size-fits-all training.

Gender Links' **learning platforms** play a critical role in this process. The GL Academy has supported partners through courses including Fundraising and Sustainability and Mainstreaming SOGIE: Changing Discourse and Shifting Narratives, equipping activists and organisations with tools to strengthen governance, advocacy and institutional resilience. Technical support provided through country-level coaching on monitoring and evaluation, communications and financial systems reinforces this learning in practice.

The Marang Fund demonstrates how Gender Links connects **local advocacy efforts with regional movement building**. Partner organisations in Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Madagascar and Mauritius pursue advocacy strategies tailored to their national contexts, including legal reform initiatives, policy dialogue and community mobilisation. These national efforts are strengthened through regional platforms that allow organisations to exchange strategies, share evidence and coordinate advocacy efforts.

A key institutional vehicle for this regional alignment is the **Inclusion and Diversity Cluster within the Southern African Gender Protocol Alliance**, which Gender Links convenes as part of its broader movement ecosystem. Through this platform, Marang grantee partners work alongside feminist, governance and human rights organisations to ensure that LGBTIQ inclusion is integrated into wider gender justice advocacy across the region.

Members of the Alliance designated as **Champions of Marang** play a particularly important role in advancing this agenda, helping to connect LGBTIQ priorities with broader campaigns on democracy, SRHR, accountability and social justice. This intersectional approach has been reflected in several regional advocacy processes supported by Gender Links and its partners, including civil society inputs to the SADC Heads of State Summit, engagement with the SADC Parliamentary Forum, and the adoption of civil society declarations that frame LGBTIQ inclusion as inseparable from broader struggles for democratic governance and human rights. A central theme across these platforms is the need to address the enduring impact of colonial-era penal codes across much of the African continent.





Francophone onboarding in Madagascar, August 2025.
Photo: Colleen Lowe Morna

Legal and policy work: By situating decriminalisation within a Pan-African conversation about colonial legal legacies, bodily autonomy and equal citizenship, Gender Links and its partners are helping to build a broader coalition for reform that recognises how these inherited legal systems continue to shape exclusion across multiple identities and communities. In this way, the Marang Fund contributes not only to strengthening LGBTIQ organisations, but also to advancing a more intersectional and decolonial vision of justice within regional gender and governance movements. These spaces reinforce solidarity across borders and situate LGBTIQ inclusion within broader struggles for gender justice, democratic participation and human rights.

Through this model, Gender Links helps ensure that LGBTIQ advocacy is not isolated but integrated into wider regional movements working to advance equality.

Changing attitudes: A distinctive feature of the Marang approach is the combination of research, storytelling and media engagement to shift public narratives. Across the five countries, Gender Links conducted a Diversity and Inclusion Survey that reached 1,762 respondents. The findings revealed an important paradox: while many individuals expressed personal support for equality, social norms and public discourse often remain constrained by stigma and silence.

GL also works with media practitioners to strengthen responsible reporting on sexual diversity and gender identity. Training initiatives equip journalists with the knowledge and language needed to report ethically and accurately on LGBTIQ issues. Together, these strategies help shift public discourse from silence and stigma toward recognition and dignity.

“Visibility and acceptance matter. I am here. I exist.”
- Angie, Botswana

“I have learned to embrace my sexuality with pride and confidence, regardless of the stigma and discrimination that still exist in some spaces.”
- Bisexual Lawyer, Lesotho

The fund is collecting a data base of **I-Stories** or personal accounts. Through this initiative community members share lived experiences of resilience, identity and belonging. These stories humanise issues that are often discussed only in abstract policy terms and contribute to a growing body of narrative evidence that supports advocacy efforts. These are not treated as isolated testimonials, but as programme learning and accountability tools. A preliminary thematic analysis has been undertaken, identifying recurring patterns related to discrimination in health, education, family and faith spaces, as well as pathways of resilience, collective care and leadership emergence. These insights are being used to inform advocacy priorities, strategic litigation sequencing and public communication, ensuring that qualitative evidence meaningfully complements quantitative indicators in the Logical Framework.

Dissemination has been carefully paced and curated. During the 16 Days of Activism, Gender Links published one **I-Story** per day on the GL Events website, using a thematic approach that sustained visibility while respecting contributor safety.

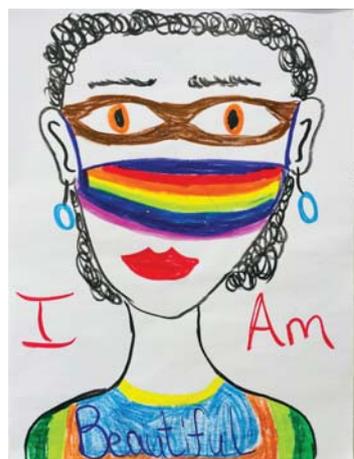
“I dream of a world where no one will be afraid to love.”
- Salohy, I Stories Madagascar

Identity and affirmation: Several narrators describe the relief of finding the “right words” for who they are, pansexual, bisexual, lesbian, gay, trans man, or intersex, followed by ambivalence about disclosure. Angie (Botswana) frames pansexual identity as both liberating and scary; visibility begins with trusted friends. In Mauritius, an anonymous trans man charts an embodied journey, transitioning and self-recognition, rooted in dignity despite social risks. In Lesotho, an intersex activist reframes difference as power, claiming space in public narratives long dominated by binaries.

Discrimination, institutional and interpersonal: Harm appears in multiple systems. In Botswana, a clinician refuses treatment after moralising about

same-sex intimacy - an explicit denial of care with public health implications. In Madagascar, school and church spaces normalise harassment; teachers fail to intervene as Joh is repeatedly slurred. Family rejection in Madagascar expels Salohy from home, catalysing homelessness and trauma. In Mauritius, health staff's comments when ID and appearance do not match exemplify systemic misgendering and gatekeeping that deter service use.

Mental health impacts and coping



Fear, isolation, and depressive symptoms recur as whispers instead of speaking openly, weeks of social withdrawal, and the exhaustion of performing a “mask” of normative femininity. Coping emerges through micro-safety nets: a friendly nurse who refers without

judgement, lecturers who validate a trans student, partners who embolden truth-telling to family, and online queer communities that replace silence with language and solidarity.

From survival to leadership

A striking pattern is the pivot from personal struggle to public advocacy. The Lesotho intersex storyteller finds voice through activism and calls for bodily autonomy protections and respectful health care. The “Not Flamboyant Enough” bisexual lawyer reframes intra-community policing of expression and credits social behavior change training with shifting peers from ignorance to rights-based attitudes. In Mauritius, Chef Yu leverages workplace training platforms to diffuse inclusion norms across a large hotel workforce, aiming for snowball effects in everyday interactions. In Madagascar, Joh mentors younger peers through coming-out journeys, turning earlier victimisation into collective confidence.

Change levers and policy signals

The story's name concrete system fixes: competency-based training for public sector, health staff and monitoring of provider behaviour in Botswana; legal recognition and anti-discrimination safeguards for intersex and trans people, including constitutional acknowledgement in Mauritius; and public education that normalises diversity beyond stereotypes. These recommendations are experience-proximate and therefore actionable within programme design, provider training, advocacy roadmaps and MEL learning questions.

Institutional transformation within Gender Links

Beyond strengthening partner organisations, the Marang Fund has catalysed significant institutional transformation within Gender Links itself.

As the organisation expanded its work on LGBTIQ inclusion, Gender Links undertook deliberate steps to embed inclusive practice across its internal systems. Policies, training programmes and operational tools have been reviewed to ensure they reflect the diversity of communities served by the organisation.

Staff across programmes have participated in SOGIE awareness and inclusion training, strengthening the organisation's capacity to engage respectfully and confidently with diverse communities. Monitoring and evaluation systems have been updated to include more inclusive registration and data collection practices.

Safeguarding protocols have been strengthened to ensure that convenings and regional gatherings are safe and inclusive spaces for all participants. GL has strengthened participant data gathering to include various LGBTIQ categories, not just the conventional “other”. Ten percent of GL staff across various countries identify as LGBTIQ.

Next steps Cross-country takeaways

Through the Marang Fund, Gender Links is contributing to the emergence of a stronger and more connected movement for equality in Southern Africa. By embedding LGBTIQ inclusion within its programmes, policies and partnerships, the organisation is helping to cultivate leadership, solidarity and collective action toward a future in which all people can participate fully and with dignity.

For more information go to: <https://www.genderlinks.org.za/marang/>

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