

# MARANG NEWSLETTER

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## Movement Building

### Marang Fund's Debut at the Regional Voice and Choice Summit

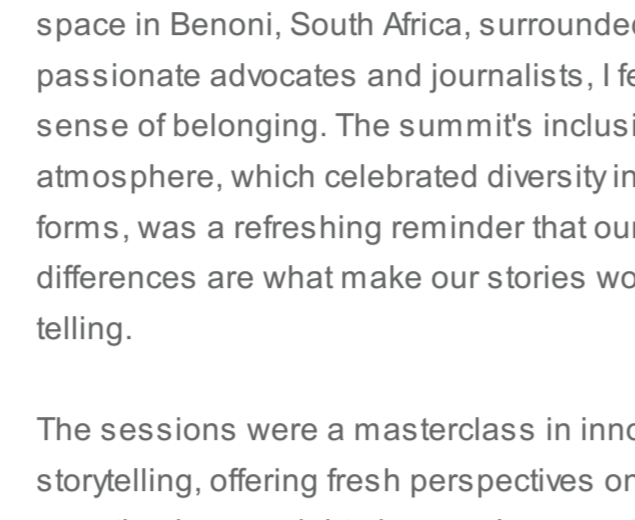
The 2026 Regional Voice and Choice Summit opened not with formality, but with feeling. Participants were first invited into a deeply emotional and grounding somatic healing session led by Houses of Dibs, creating space to arrive not just intellectually, but fully in body, memory and spirit. This set the tone for a gathering rooted in care, truth, and collective presence.

The opening night marked the official launch of the **Marang Fund iStories**, a powerful archive of lived experiences from across the region. In a moving virtual solidarity address, Deputy Minister in the Presidency for Women, Youth, and Persons with Disabilities to the Republic of South Africa, Nona Steve Letsika, reminded participants that "many LGBTQI persons today still wake every day to negotiate whether they will be safe, whether their bodies will be respected, and whether their identities will be affirmed." She urged the room to confront these realities honestly, noting that "we don't name it, we risk performing progress, rather than building it." Framing the Summit as both a political and moral intervention, she affirmed that LGBTQI lives are not marginal to democracy and that the iStories stand as "a political archive of courage," a testament to survival, resistance, and the insistence on dignity. As she powerfully stated, "lived experiences are not a footnote to policy."

These words were brought to life through live readings of the i-Stories by grantee partners, whose voices carried the weight, vulnerability and strength of their communities.

The evening closed in powerful celebration and unity. Arousing debut of the **Marang Fund** theme song, performed by Toshi, had the room singing in unison, "Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu," a reminder of our shared humanity. The energy was further lifted by We Njini, whose electrifying performance brought ancestral rhythm, joy and movement into the space.

Together, these moments wove an opening that was not only ceremonial but deeply intentional, grounding the Summit in truth, memory, resistance, and collective hope.



### Inaugural Marang Fund Media Awards honour bold LGBTQI journalism

The inaugural Marang Fund Media Awards honoured outstanding journalism advancing LGBTQI rights and inclusion across Southern Africa, marking a significant milestone in amplifying diverse voices through the media. Presented for the first time as part of the long-running Voice & Choice

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### A Transformative Experience: Reflecting on the Voice and Choice Summit

*Rehabile Mkhono, Leadho (Marang Fund Media Partner)*

The Voice and Choice Summit was more than just a gathering of like-minded individuals. It was a catalyst for change. As I sat in the welcoming space in Beroni, South Africa, surrounded by passionate advocates and journalists, I felt a sense of belonging. The summit's inclusive atmosphere, which celebrated diversity in all its forms, was a refreshing reminder that our differences are what make our stories worth telling.

The sessions were a masterclass in innovative storytelling, offering fresh perspectives on reporting human rights issues. I was particularly inspired by the "tales" personal narratives that conveyed the raw emotions and experiences of those affected by human rights abuses. These stories underscored the importance of amplifying marginalised voices and allowing them to tell their own stories without sensationalism or distortion.

**"Being recognised as one of the winners at the summit was an honour, but it's the experience itself that has had the most profound impact."**

One of the most significant takeaways for me was the emphasis on solution journalism. Too often, we're bombarded with negative news that leaves us feeling helpless. The summit showed me that by highlighting positive change and solutions, we can inspire hope and drive meaningful action. I'm now committed to incorporating this approach into my reporting, focusing on stories that showcase resilience and triumph.

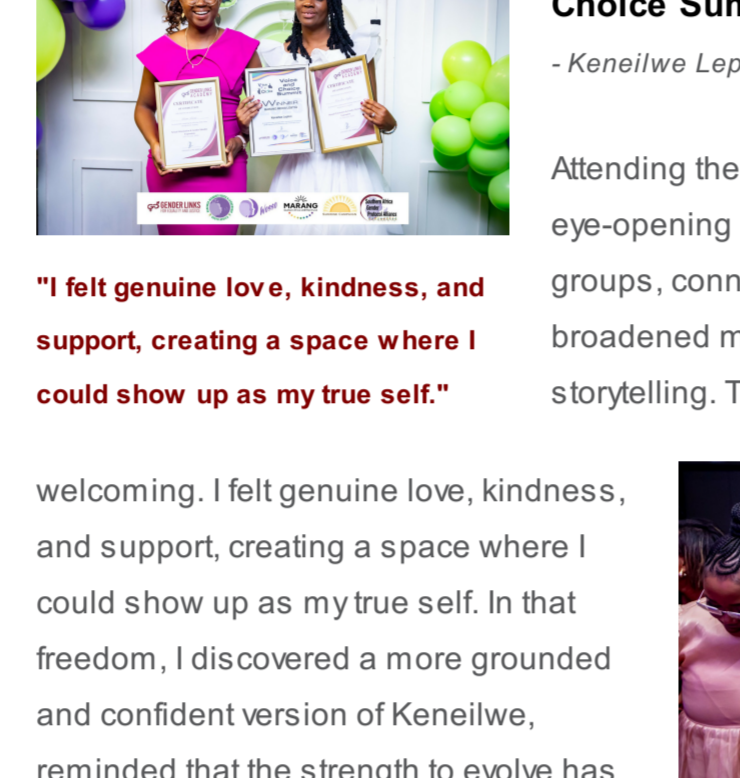
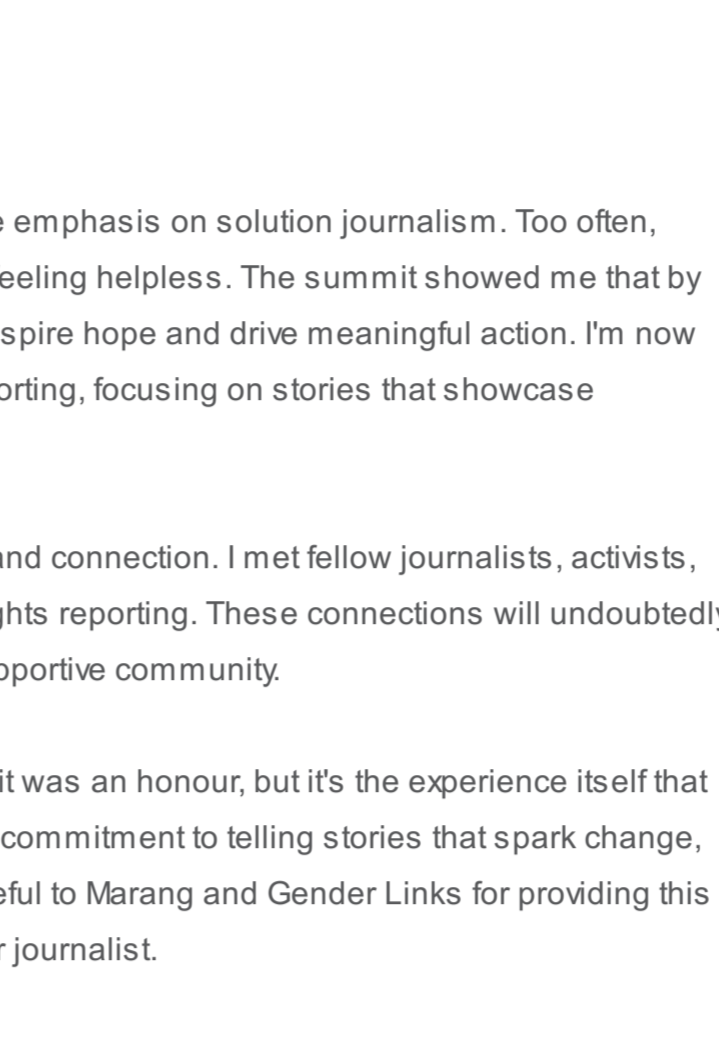
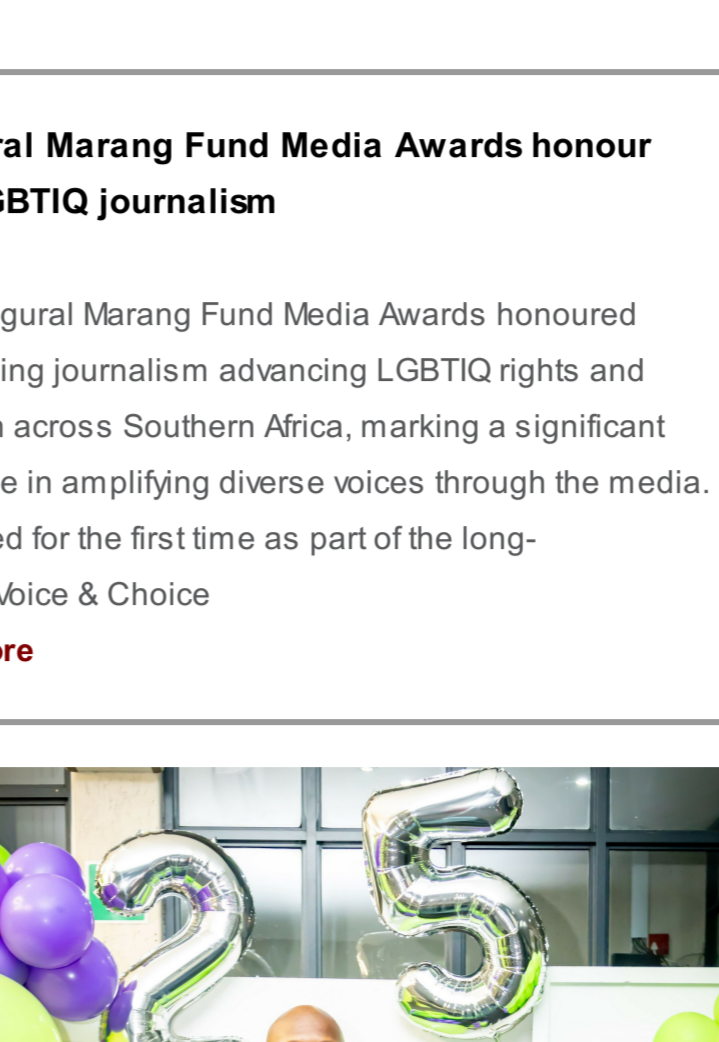
The summit also provided a platform for networking and connection. I met fellow journalists, activists, and advocates who shared my passion for human rights reporting. These connections will undoubtedly lead to future collaborations and a stronger, more supportive community.

Being recognised as one of the winners at the summit was an honour, but it's the experience itself that has had the most profound impact. It's reinforced my commitment to telling stories that spark change, rather than simply reporting for the sake of it. I'm grateful to Marang and Gender Links for providing this opportunity, which has undoubtedly made me a better journalist.

As I reflect on the summit, I'm reminded that every story has the power to change the world. It's our responsibility as journalists to tell these stories authentically, with empathy and nuance. The Voice and Choice Summit showed me that by doing so, we can create a ripple effect of positive change that resonates far beyond our immediate circle.

The summit's focus on gender-based violence was particularly impactful for me. I've developed a new niche, reporting on these issues weekly and I'm excited to explore the complexities of this critical topic. I'm committed to using my platform to amplify the voices of those affected and to drive meaningful change.

In the end, the Voice and Choice Summit was a testament to the power of community and connection. It reminded me that we're not alone in this fight – we're part of a global movement working towards a more just and equitable world. I'm proud to be a part of it, and I look forward to seeing the impact we'll create together.



### Showing Up as My True Self: Lessons from the Voice and Choice Summit

*Kenelwe Lepho, Botswana (Marang Fund Media Partner)*

Attending the Voice and Choice Summit for the first time was both eye-opening and deeply empowering. I engaged with diverse groups, connected meaningfully and exchanged ideas that broadened my understanding of advocacy, community and storytelling. The atmosphere was warm and

welcoming. I felt genuine love, kindness, and support, creating a space where I could show up as my true self. In that freedom, I discovered a more grounded and confident version of Kenelwe, reminded that the strength to evolve has always been within me.

The summit offered a rich platform for learning, unlearning, introspection and

networking. It challenged us to reflect on our behaviours, embrace acceptance, and appreciate the unique paths that shape each participant's story. A defining moment was presenting my story before a panel of judges. Living with anxiety and experiencing panic attacks can make public speaking difficult, yet on that day, I found remarkable courage. I unpacked the story I worked on with clarity and confidence. The constructive feedback from judges and fellow journalists strengthened my belief in my abilities and affirmed my place as a meaningful voice in the media landscape.

The Cultural Night was a highlight, being vibrant, expressive, and liberating. Watching participants dance, laugh, and celebrate their identities created a refreshing sense of unity and joy. I was also inspired by the demonstration of the Zudi app by one of the WOSSD fellows. Seeing technology designed to assist individuals facing GBV or mental health challenges reinforced the vital role digital tools play in promoting safety, dignity and well-being. Also, knowing that help can be accessed instantly is truly transformative.

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The Voice and Choice Summit was more than an event; it was healing, growth, empowerment, and community. I leave renewed, inspired, and committed to using my voice to champion human rights and drive meaningful change in Botswana and beyond.

## Governance

### Grounded in Community, Energised for Change

*Ashley Okavale, Co-lead of the-CHOICE, Abuluti (Marang Fund Grantee Partner)*

The Regional Voice and Choice Summit 2026 was, for me, more than just an event. It was a deeply affirming and grounding experience. In a context where our work can often feel isolating, being surrounded by queer siblings from across the African continent reminded me that we are not alone. We are many, we are resilient, and we are moving forward together, even in the face of increasingly challenging environments. The conversations, the laughter, and the shared struggles and stories created a space that felt both powerful and healing. It was also incredibly meaningful to connect with fellow grantees to exchange stories, strategies, and hopes for the future.

I also had the honour of attending the **25 year celebration of Gender Links**, which was a moment of reflection and recognition. Celebrating such a milestone reminded me of the importance of longevity in this work—the courage it takes to keep going, to keep pushing boundaries, and to continue building pathways for justice and equality. It was both inspiring and humbling to witness the impact of sustained advocacy over time.

Another highlight was learning from the different programs and initiatives present. Hearing about the achievements, the challenges, and the innovative approaches being implemented across the region was incredibly inspiring. It reaffirmed the importance of shared knowledge and collective growth in strengthening our movements.

Being selected to participate in the PSC meeting was equally meaningful. It was a space of deep reflection and alignment, where I began to notice how closely our strategies and visions intersect, particularly around advocacy and the potential of class actions. There was something powerful in realising that, across different contexts, we are thinking along similar lines, driven by a shared commitment to justice. This felt like an important starting point for stronger movement-building, one rooted in collaboration, mutual understanding, and a collective vision for change.

Overall, this experience left me feeling energised, connected, and hopeful. It reminded me that even in difficult times, there is strength in community and that together, we are shaping something much bigger than ourselves.



### From Strategy to Solidarity: Representing Botswana's LGBTQI+ Movement on a Regional Stage

*Ashley-Leeve van Vuren, Ledibabo, Botswana (Marang Fund Grantee Partner)*

Attending the Voice and Choice Summit was both an affirming and deeply challenging experience, one that pushed me to reflect not only on the work we do as LGBTQI+ but also on what it means to represent a broader movement in spaces of accountability and recognition.

**"To be recognised among such impactful initiatives across the region felt like an acknowledgment not only of the strategy itself, but of the persistence and adaptability that underpins it."**

In the lead-up to the Summit, much of my focus was on preparing for the Project Steering Committee (PSC), where I had the responsibility of representing Botswana sub-grantees under the Marang Southern Africa LGBTQI Fund. This was, without exaggeration, a nerve-wracking experience. Carrying the collective voice of four subgrantees meant that I had to move beyond individual organisational achievements and think carefully about how to frame our shared progress,

challenges and lessons. The preparation process required considerable consultation, synthesising reports and ensuring that what I presented was both accurate and reflective of the diversity within our work. I found myself constantly asking, whose voices are centred, and whose might be missing? How can I best represent the country team without too much but while also visually representing all sub-grantees?

Despite the anxiety, the PSC experience was incredibly grounding. It reaffirmed the importance of documentation, collaboration, and intentional storytelling in advocacy work. Representing a collective effort reminded me that impact is rarely individual but is built through networks of organisations, communities, and activists working, often quietly, toward systemic change.

Alongside the PSC, the Voice and Choice Summit itself offered a powerful platform for learning, exchange, and visibility. Presenting LEGABBO's Incremental Gains Strategy was a personal highlight for me. This advocacy approach centers on engaging diverse stakeholders across different levels of society to shape public discourse, strengthen community support, and advance strategic, step-by-step legal and social reforms. It is grounded in the realities of working within complex and at times resistant environments. Sharing this work with peers across the region and hearing back from them about how it resonated with others navigating diverse contexts in various sectors was incredibly validating.

Being named Runner-Up in our category (Change Strategies: Strategic Litigation and Policy Change) was both surprising and affirming. To be recognised among such impactful initiatives across the region felt like an acknowledgment not only of the strategy itself but also of the persistence and adaptability that underpins it. It also sparked a moment of reflection: what does it mean to be a finalist in spaces like this? For me, it underscored the importance of visibility not as an end in itself but as a way to amplify strategies that are working, to inspire adaptation, and to build solidarity across movements.

At the same time, the recognition came with a renewed sense of responsibility. Awards are not endpoints; they are reminders of the work that remains. The conversations at the Summit highlighted both progress and persistent gaps, particularly in ensuring that LGBTQI+ voices are meaningfully included in broader gender justice and governance spaces. In Botswana, this moment

is especially significant. Ongoing developments such as the Constitution (Amendment) Bill No. 14 of 2025, passed by Parliament to establish a Constitutional Court, as well as the same-sex marriage case currently before the courts, signal important shifts in the legal landscape, yet they also underscore how contested the terrain of human rights continues to be. These processes present both opportunity and risk for LGBTQI+ inclusion, demanding sustained, strategic engagement from civil society.

In the same breath, we are operating within a broader regional context marked by the rise of well-funded and highly coordinated anti-gender and anti-rights movements. These actors are increasingly organised, shaping public discourse and policy in ways that threaten hard-won gains across the continent. As human rights defenders, this reality calls on us to be more deliberate, more collaborative, and more resilient in our advocacy. It reinforces the importance of strategies, like incremental gains, that are adaptive, grounded in lived experiences, community and context, and capable of responding to both progress and backlash.

Overall, the experience left me with a deeper appreciation for the power of collective advocacy, the importance of strategic incrementalism, and the courage it takes to represent not just your organisation, but a wider movement. It was a moment of both celebration and reflection, one that I carry forward as we continue to push for meaningful, lasting change.

## Programmes

### Strategic Litigation Training in Madagascar and Voice and Choice Summit Reflections

*Suzanna Makaya, Programmes Officer, BONEA*

March has been the most memorable and impactful month for movement building and change strategies for the Marang Fund family for me so far in 2026. As coordinators, advocates, allies, and members of the community, our vision, goals, and hopes are to strengthen organisations, create safe spaces, and build strong movements. Through this, we aim to challenge harmful and resistant attitudes and norms and to champion legislative and policy advocacy and reforms that promote, protect, and fulfil LGBTQI rights in the Southern African region. I have no doubts that the stakeholder engagements and strategic litigation training in Madagascar, and the Voice and Choice Summit in Johannesburg, contributed significantly to these objectives.

**Madagascar: human rights literacy unlocks real pathways**

Madagascar taught me that localised human rights literacy explaining existing legal frameworks and systems, unlocks pathways to justice that were rarely used or unknown. Awareness raising and capacity building, thus, become imperative to facilitating access to justice. Not only for the LGBTQI communities we serve but also the implementers that support delivery and referral to redress.

**"The realities that LGBTQI communities and advocates face due to criminalisation, hate speech, fear of retaliation, exclusion, displacement, and inconsistent legal, health, and socioeconomic responses directly affect implementation, well-being, and the ability to use legal protections. Especially in contexts where laws, policies, and practice do not always align."**

The training affirmed that in considering current operational environments and contextualised LGBTQI rights issues, safeguarding and safety-led movement building, advocacy and strategic litigation are paramount to enabling LGBTQI persons and advocates to safely document violations, report and pursue redress through existing mechanisms, and advocate for the creation of more enabling and protective frameworks. The realities that LGBTQI communities and advocates face due to criminalisation, hate speech, fear of retaliation, exclusion, displacement, and inconsistent legal, health, and socioeconomic responses directly affect implementation, well-being, and the ability to use legal protections. Especially in contexts where laws, policies, and practice do not always align.

Therefore, in looking ahead, regional coordination can add real value by strengthening resource mapping and sharing, supporting resource mobilisation, building credible alliances, promoting safeguarding through safe spaces and referral networks, and ensuring access to legal and psychosocial support. Cross-learning and well-timed stakeholder engagement can also help partners move with more confidence and less isolation.

**Johannesburg: the power of cross-learning and alliance**

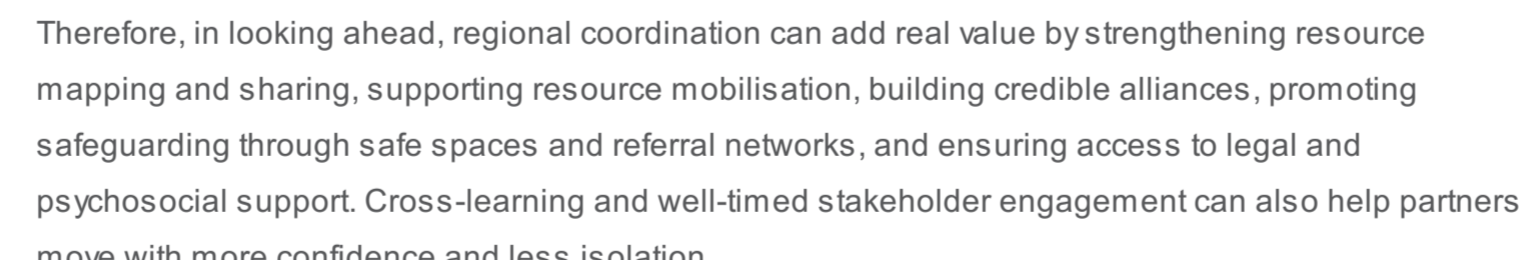
The Voice and Choice Summit was a clear representation of the power of cross-learning and alliance strengthening. Bringing Southern Africa under one roof to share experiences and lessons, strengthened stories of change, change strategies, leadership, media, organisational development, movement building, communications and outreach, fundraising and sustainability and financial management. The space inspired ideas, tools, and connections that will surely advance the human rights advocacy and health service in the region. Beyond the sessions, the most valuable part was the relationships, the shared language, and the reminder that our struggles are different, but deeply connected. Every moment sparked the desire to learn more and speak to different individuals, with the only regret being the limited time we had.

Regardless, I left with renewed energy and a stronger desire to harness the synergies that are already present across the region. If we carry the Summit spirit into deliberate collaboration across countries, the impact of our national work will multiply. As the Summit itself reminded us, *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*.

### Caps, Crowns & Change-Makers: GL Academy Graduates Took the Stage

A moment of celebration and joy at the Regional Voice and Choice Summit was the graduation of GL Academy students, marking a powerful milestone in learning, growth, and movement-building across the region. This was more than a graduation; it was a recognition of commitment, curiosity, and the courage to deepen one's practice in advancing gender justice.

Participants from across the ecosystem, Gender Links staff, Marang Fund grantee partners, members of allied organisations, and friends of the network came together to complete a series of dynamic courses designed to strengthen both theory and practice. These included Mainstreaming SOGIE: Changing Discourse & Shifting Narratives; Fundraising and Sustainability; Gender and Climate Justice; Gender, Inclusion, and Development; and Results and Communications for Change.



Through these courses, participants engaged critically with how gender intersects with climate, development, and power; explored practical tools for building sustainable organisations; strengthened their ability to communicate impact; and deepened their understanding of inclusive, rights-based approaches, particularly in shifting narratives around SOGIE and advancing dignity for all. The Academy's approach blends knowledge, reflection, and real-world application, equipping participants not just to learn but to lead.

What made this cohort especially powerful was its diversity, bringing together practitioners, activists, and community organisers who are already embedded in communities and movements. Their storytelling signals a ripple effect: strengthened organisations, sharper advocacy, more intentional strategising, and more resilient movements across Southern Africa.

The graduation ceremony itself was filled with joy, pride, and a palpable sense of achievement. It was a moment to pause and honour the work that often happens quietly late nights of study, reflection, and balancing learning with ongoing responsibilities. It was also a moment to recognise that capacity building is not separate from movement building; it's central to it.

As these graduates step forward, they do so not just with certificates but with a strengthened voice, clarity of purpose, and a renewed commitment to shaping more just, inclusive, and sustainable futures. Here's to learning, unlearning, and leading together!