



 **GENDER LINKS**  
FOR EQUALITY AND JUSTICE



# *LEARNING JOURNEY*

2021



*Learning  
in the time  
of Covid*

## GL Learning Journey 2021

### *Learning in the time of Covid*

What would a learning organisation look like if the people inside the organisation did not learn? This is the question that GL asked itself when we began this annual reflection exercise.

Like any form of writing, the Learning Journey often meets - at least initially - with the resistance of another task, another deliverable. Yet, after the writing is done, many staff attest to the power of reflection as part of growth.

One staff member remarked that as GL we have invented and honed the art of “I” Stories - first hand accounts of difficult experiences - and popularised the concept of “*healing through writing*.” The Learning Journey is GL's own “*healing through writing*.” Once a year we relive the high points and the low points. We ask what these have taught us. We build these into organisational learning. Each year, the journey probes a little deeper into our experiences. This year we deliberately sought to share our mistakes and probe what these have taught us. We make the point that to *err is human*, but to fail to learn is costly and stifling to personal development.

From stories submitted online during the Covid-19 lockdown period

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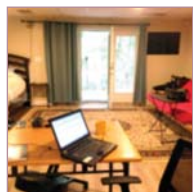
## Love & light in the time of Corona

*Colleen Lowe Morna, Special Advisor*

Johannesburg, 20 January: As the saying goes, “life is what happens while you are planning the next move.” 2020 proved this in the most dramatic way possible as the COVID-19 pandemic changed every plan; thrust us into lock down, confusion and moments of despair.

At the start of the year I would turn sixty, I had my plans laid out in immaculate detail. After nearly twenty years' service, I would step down from Gender Links. Ten years earlier when I turned fifty I undertook a one hundred mile walk across the south of England. At sixty I planned to do the Coast to Coast walk - from one end of Northern England to the next; a 200 mile walk.

But by the end of March, a once-in-a-century pandemic struck. Virtually every country grounded flights. My husband, whom I would not see for almost a year, found himself stuck in Ghana. I celebrated my sixtieth birthday on 15 May virtually - my only present to myself a breaking of lock down rules to take a 16 mile hike in Muldersdrift; a small reminder of what I had planned to do.



Yet 2020 would also be the year I learned to exercise the agency we preach at GL as well as stop; reflect; smell the roses; and prioritise the important over the urgent.

A little more personal detail: on 2 June, my second grand-daughter, Safia, bounced into our shattered world in North Carolina, where my daughter and Somali-American son-in-law fled just before the suspension of flights. Nothing pained me more than being absent for this most joyous of occasions. I sat looking at the photos of this bundle of joy and my heart ached. I put out SOS to anyone I knew who could help

me get to her. Then I went to the (now demised) South African Airways website and saw an advert for a repatriation flight on 13 June.

My heart leapt. I had to catch it! In the days that followed I wrote a letter to the Ministry of Home Affairs explaining why going to help my daughter constituted an urgent family priority (grand-parenting did not qualify according to the rules). What a feeling of victory when third time around I got the clearance to travel! I boarded the special flight at the desolate airport along with a host of mostly Afrikaner farmers who apparently go to the US each summer to work on farms (who would have known?) My ten year visitor's visa did not qualify for the flight. But I whipped out my (expired) B1 sabbatical visa from the previous year and managed my escape, feeling another pang of triumph for circumventing the red tape.

Next hurdle: the hospital had decreed that no one other than parents could touch our new baby infant for a month. For seventeen days I self-isolated in an Air B and B "Forest Studio". At first my hosts Liza and Justin kept a comfortable distance; I not wanting to reveal my COVID refugee status; they being polite.

One day I saw Liza walking in the garden. Lonely and sorrowful, I walked out and we started chatting. At some point we both ripped off our masks. Ironically, she turned out to be a public health expert. Thus began our long conversations about the heart of the American COVID crisis; a dearth of leadership, for sure; but also poor nutrition, underlying health and a weak public health system.



Liza loaned me her spare bicycle that I would ride to my heart's content for the five months I stayed in the US. Even after that glorious day when I reunited with my family, I rode my bicycle everywhere, cherishing the idea of hardly ever driving a car in the US, and making my little contribution to averting our next big catastrophe - climate change.

But how would I manage my work, a succession plan, furious fund raising, and so many donor deliverables from North Carolina? IT threw me a life line. I had escaped with just my laptop and a suitcase. I moved to a slightly larger forest apartment with super internet near my now dear friends Liza and Justin. I rearranged my schedule

to start at 6 am each day overlapping with Southern Africa for at least six hours. That gave me quiet desk time every afternoon, as well as time to help baby sit.

Connecting with my grandchildren reminded me of the most important life lesson: we are social beings. From the start I objected to the term “social distancing”. I vowed to call it “physical distancing” (belatedly, I see, the World Health Organisation has reached the same conclusion). I felt tears in my eyes when my four year old grand-daughter Layla asked whom she would invite to her birthday on 24 July. Layla's parents and I enrolled Layla at the farm school that Liza's son two-year-old son attended. What a joy when the school threw a party for Layla on her birthday! Grandma organised a forest apartment party in the afternoon. As Layla tells it, her fourth birthday turned out to be her best party ever!



Of course, Layla missed the rest of the extended family. One day she asked why Grandpa did not also write a letter so that he could “dodge” the corona and come and see her! (I think I may have told her that it is a gender issue!) Anyway, we made a little video and sent it to Grandpa. That must have really tugged his heart strings out there in Ghana. By November, he found a way to “dodge” the corona and come to North Carolina.

As I grew closer to my family and found balance in my life, playing in the park, giving Layla rides on my borrowed bicycle, taking Fifi (Safia) on walks, watching kiddies movies and going for ice cream, I also learned to let go of my other baby - Gender Links.

While the pandemic rages on, I start 2021 full of hope. I know my late Dad, a naturalist, would have said this is the balance of nature: stop and listen to what the planet is saying. I vow to travel less, love more. As I transition to lead GL's Sustainability Hub, I know that there is so much more to this word than money. If we are to succeed in the next decade, we must not only raise funds, but also sustain the vision, the ideas, the people and most important, our planet.



## Take challenges as learning opportunities

Fanuel Hadzizi, Results for Change Manager

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*It doesn't matter what other people think of you. What really matters is what you think of yourself.*

*~ Avis J Williams*

”

2019 brought with it difficult moments, new experiences, opportunities, frustrations, fears and great lessons. I have been very fortunate to be a part of Gender Links, an organisation which remains to be fast growing despite the prevailing difficult funding environment challenges and global COVID-19 crisis. The past year was a test of my resolve and pushed my performance to my limits more than any other year of my working experience. Mistakes were made but



now I understand that you might not get something on your first try but all that matters is to learn and emerge a better professional. New tools were introduced and as the central M&E person I had to engage with them more than any other officers.

Within a short period of time I was stuck in and made the most out of it. I am proud to say the deadlines were met donor targets were met. If I had to share what I learnt through it all it's that; how you react to these situations is a lot more telling of the person you are. If you take challenges as learning opportunities and as a way to better yourself, you will benefit immensely from them. The support from my immediate supervisors made my work easier because they always clarify what needs to be done. Sometimes I worked during weekends just to complete urgent tasks.

One thing I have learnt is never to shy away from challenges even if they are not of your own making.

At Gender Links, It is easy to get caught up in daily routine and forget about the bigger picture goals that you have. It is crucial that I remind myself of the stones in my life to help me put things into perspective. In other words we are all responsible for our happiness and should not jump to blame others for our own shortcomings. I managed to get some much needed rest towards the end of the year and I look forward to learning new things and fulfilling 2020.



## The power of second chances

*Shamiso F V Chigorimbo, Policy and Movement Building Manager*

Johannesburg, 1 February: Richard Yates words, “if you don't try anything, you can't fail,” resonate as I look back at the last 24 months as a PhD candidate, then part-time consultant, now returning to GL tail between my legs. As I reflect, I cringe at the number of mistakes I made. No regrets: just lessons and experience.



I left GL in 2019 to pursue a PHD at the University of KwaZulu Natal, juggling school with being a single mother. 2020 was an unprecedented year, a global health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic that catapulted organisations and individuals into survival mode. Things did not work for me in KZN. I moved to Cape Town and re-joined GL in late 2020.

My four-year-old son Kizito and I made the move from Cape Town to Johannesburg at the end of the year only to get sick on arrival. We both tested positive for COVID-19. The virus bowled me over, replacing the energetic, bouncy and ever-active self with a splitting headache and feverish hot sweats. I constantly passed out as exhaustion took over my body and mind. I am so glad to have recovered from that experience, and grateful to be alive having taken all the concoctions that are prescribed, lemon, ginger, garlic, vitamin c, zumbani and zinc.



As I write this piece I am mourning with my 94 year old grandmother “Mbuya Rachel Gaihai Chigorimbo” who lost her sister “Mbuya Susan Muvavarirwa”, to natural causes in the time of COVID-19. My grandmother heartbroken that she cannot go and bury her only sister.



I count my blessings for this second chance to raise my son. As one who lost my mom at a tender age in 1989, living to see my son grow up and become his own man is dear to me.

GL has become a home and family in ways that I cannot fully describe. The organisation's core work, gender equality, is at the very heart beat of my life. The organisational cross cutting themes: Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) women's equal and effective political participation; economic and climate justice, are key pillars in achieving gender justice.

I come from “Gen Y”, those born between 1980 and 1994., the generation of the “technological explosion and the Internet”. We are the bridge to the “21st century millennials” whom Beijing+25 envisioned would live in a gender just and equal world. But patriarchy continued and COVID- 19 happened.

Professionally in 2021, I am super excited and looking forward to being part of the Action Coalition feminist movement and leadership thematic group. The group is drafting key actions that will guide the “reinvigoration and energising of feminist movements globally, while also amplifying feminist voices based on global solidarity.”

GL founder and outgoing CEO Colleen Lowe Morna, has been instrumental in my growth and learning. In 2020 I wrote a Chapter in the esteemed regional SADC Gender Protocol Barometer, a bucket list tick and fear conquered. Thank you so much for the opportunity and looking forward to improved writing in 2021. After the writing workshop in January 2021, my sentences are shorter, catchy and bringing the vital news at the very start.

My current direct manager, Kubi Rama, the Executive Director of GL has also been a pillar of strength and encouragement through her constant refrain: “stop, think, process and then engage”. This new season at GL continues to be one where many skills and lessons will be learnt and actioned. Each project and proposal is an opportunity to grow in my career and advance the work of the organisation.

GL Marketing and Compliance Manager Debbie Mukuku and WVL Grants Assistant Fikile Maviya guide this young soul. WVL Grants Coordinator Nomthandazo Mankazana is my loud and sensitive “partner in crime”. Media Manager Tarisai Nyamweda and Systems Administrator Fanuel Hadzidzi always have things in check. They are a great sounding board when I am lost. The Corporate Services team help me through payments and reconciliations, currency conversions and pre-payment approvals. Thank you!

I look forward to 2021 with gratitude and appreciation, for having made it in a year in which so many lost loved ones, homes, jobs and their lives. The drive from Durban to Cape Town with my son Kizito in his seat taught me that life is up to us. As the little Daihatsu Sirion weaved through the mountains and lovely landscape through the provinces, I remembered Nelson Mandela's famous quote, *“Do not judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again.”*



## Where there's a (political) will, there's a way

*Susan Tolmay, Governance and Justice Manager*



When I heard about the study trip to Zimbabwe, I had mixed feelings. On the one hand I love and have a connection to the beautiful country, as the birthplace of my mother, but on the other, uncertainty about what to expect because of the tremendous hardships the country has faced over the past decades.

What I found was a beautiful place with remarkable and resilient people doing incredible work, making a real difference in people's lives.

The gender mainstreaming work we try to do with local councils in SADC is often met with resistance, because of 'lack of resources'. What I learnt is that it is not so much lack of resources than political will to put in place measures to advance women's rights and gender equality. Here are my five key learnings from our study trip to Zimbabwe:

**Where there's political will, there's a way** - When there is buy in at the highest-level gender issues are taken seriously. This was illustrated on the first day of the stakeholders meeting, when the Chief Director in the Ministry of Local Government and Public Works, Erica Jones who gave the keynote address. She told us how directives have been issued out by the Ministry compelling local authorities to mainstream gender, through including gender key performance indicators in various officials' performance agreements. This shows that the Ministry takes gender seriously because as we know, if it is not counted it does not count.

During the fieldtrip to Murehwa Council I was really impressed by the commitment to gender issues and buy in from both the Council Chairperson and the Chief Executive Officer who, with the gender focal person, have established a standalone gender committee, developed a gender policy and are ensuring that all council policies are gender sensitive.

**Gender mainstreaming is everyone's responsibility** - While it is important for one person to lead the work to achieve gender equality in local councils, it is really important to bring everyone along. Gender mainstreaming cannot just be one person's job, which is why the political will I spoke about is so important. In Murehwa, there are two very strong women - Vice Chairperson of Council, Councillor Resta Dzvinyangoma, also a gender champion, and gender focal person Winnet Tamba - who currently lead the gender work in the council. But it cannot end with them, because if or when they leave it needs to continue in their absence.

Sustainability is key in this regard, which is why it is important to get all departments involved at the local level and ensure that gender principles are entrenched in council policy and practise.

**A little competition can be a good thing** - what really struck me went when we visited Murehwa council was how proud they were of their accomplishments at the SADC Protocol @ Work Summit, displaying all of their certificates from the national and regional Summits in their boardroom. I got the impression from the visit there is a fair amount of competition amongst the local councils for the awards.



A little competition is good for progress when one tries to outdo the other, constantly raising the bar, this is evidenced in the high number of entries to the national Summit.

**Learning from one another is the best way** - One of the best ways of learning is by doing; but seeing how others have done it is also a pretty good way to learn. The new Hub and Spoke model, which was showcased during the study visit, is grounded in peer learning and mentorship and is a good example of how star councils can bring their counterparts along in the gender equality journey. Learning how one council has mainstreamed gender and overcome the obstacles, can provide a clear path for councils who may be starting or struggling to achieve this. Having councils mentor one another is also a key sustainability strategy, as councils will continue to mentor other councils long after Gender Links is gone.

**Young women are our future** - I'm not saying that young men aren't, but here I want to acknowledge how impressed I was by the young women I met on the study visit. The Junior councilors from Harare and Murehwa made me hopeful for the future. They were so passionate, confident and committed to gender equality. In both councils the junior councilors raised menstrual health as a key issue to be addressed because of expense and access to menstrual products. They spoke unashamedly about menstruation and pads, which would have been taboo in a room half full of men a couple years ago. It was awesome to see such confident young women breaking down menstrual stigma and speaking proudly about it. They also highlight key issues such as climate change and are exploring reusable pad production.

We have a lot to learn from young women who are smart and savvy and bring new and different perspectives to issues. I'll be happy if they are the leaders of our future world.

I learned about the governance work at Gender Links and how it has evolved over the years and I saw first-hand the work in practice, the people who make it all come to life. As I come back to Gender Links after ten years, the study trip was really rich and fruitful learning experience for me.

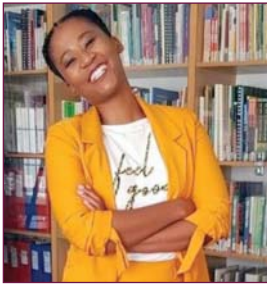
## Expanding our safe space

Thato Phakela, GL Media and Communications Officer

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*Success is no accident. It is hard work, perseverance, learning, studying, sacrifice and most of all, love of what you are doing or learning to do. ~ Pele*

”



Coming back to Gender links has been a great opportunity for me. I came back to the place where my career all started, where my professional journey began. You can imagine my excitement when I got a call from the CEO Mme Colleen telling me there is a space for me at GL, an opportunity for me to be part of this amazing team. I did not even have to sit and contemplate about it because I knew without a doubt that this is where I wanted to be.

Two weeks later I left Lesotho coming to a place I now call home. I was however filled with a lot of mixed emotions, anxious and excited at the same time about the journey I was about to embark on. I should say it has been a learning one. 2019 was a year of growth for me, growing both personally and professionally. Upon my arrival I was introduced to a lot of technical systems in communications which I was not familiar with, this was a bit overwhelming at the beginning, but I had to dive in and learn.

Every day has been and still is a learning journey.

Even though I felt overwhelmed at times I did not allow these feeling to drown me but I persevered to learn and stay on top of the game, trying hard to swim through it all. Not having an IT background was a huge challenge for me as my work demanded the use of IT. I should thank my two good friends Thando and Albert who were patient enough with me to teach me the basics I needed to know to get the job done.

I have learned that communications work and audio visual production go hand in hand and audio visual production is one of the skills I need to obtain to improve my work portfolio. I have learned and started taking videos however the final production of video skill is still lacking and I need to sharpen it to be fully equipped in doing my work.

Time management is another competency I have had to develop at Gender Links, as everything at GL is time based. I learned that our work at GL is in some way interconnected and not managing your work and doing it on time does not end with you but affects other people in the organisation as well, therefore time management is an essential instrument one needs in order to get things moving.

Doing my work from start to finish is one of the many skills I have gained in the process of my learning journey. To achieve this I had to learn to prioritise my work. Tarisai who is my immediate supervisor taught me among many other things the importance of prioritising my work and ensuring that I pay attention to detail in order to get best results in everything I do. I should say she has played a huge role in helping me improving my personal and professional growth.

I am grateful to have a manager like her who priorities my growth as much as she does her own. She has been very patient with me always pushing me to do my best. Thank you Tari for believing in me even when I did not believe so much in myself and always reminding me the importance of self-improvement.

Writing this learning journey during the lockdown has made me realise that at Gender Links we are more of a family than just colleagues, it has taught me to appreciate each and every one of you and never to take time spend together at the office for granted. As a communications officer my work cross cuts through the whole organisation and I am in one way or another connected to everyone, thank you all for different roles you play in my life and the knowledge you impart daily, I appreciate you all.

## I continued to walk this gender and media journey

*Tarisai Nyamweda, Communications for Social Change Manager*

2019 was a very eventful year for my personal growth as well as my career growth. I continued to walk this gender and media journey with so much resilience and motivation derived from what is happening around me and the person I wish to become.

With the funding crunch that my programme has faced for a while I at times found it difficult to stay motivated in the face of these challenges. We continued to innovate and rejuvenate in so many ways we managed to land on dry ground. The programme has indeed morphed itself into a more support role for other programmes. However it has not completely cut off its roots in research and media advocacy and training an area which first drew me to the organisation.

I learn new things every day from the diverse assignments, engagements, and the talented people in the GL team. The media team is a very small team and constant support is needed to share the load. Happy to have had Thato Phakela on board in 2019.

Some of the key highlights in my journey over the year was attending the International Conference on Population and Development. The conversations were enriching and

I came out of the ICPD+25 more knowledgeable and ever ready to take on the fight and be part of the drive to finish the unfinished business of realising SRHR for all.

I drew inspiration from the world leaders who addressed the conference and realised the importance of having them as key partners in fighting for women's SRHR.

Also conducting research on GBV in





the media was very enlightening, confirming that we still have a long way to go but that the media is one of the strongest allies informing and educating people on GBV and they need to get it right.

I love that my job still manages to play on the same curiosity that drew me to the field in the first place. But above all, I love seeing the positive impact our work has on the daily lives of the people we work with across board. The many stories we get to hear, document curate and share via our various platforms reminds us of the many women in our countries and regions who will benefit even from the smallest portion of help we may give.

I'm really excited and motivated for 2020 by the upcoming Gender and Media Progress Study (GMPS). This will be the third GMPS that I have been a major part of having had been part of the GMPS in 2010 as a media police and research intern to 2015 as a media coordinator and now being the media and communications lead in 2020. It is a mammoth task ahead but together with the GMPS country teams we have created this is going to be an ezisting ride once again.

I still have so much to learn from this movement and at the same time, I have so much more to give back. So *Aluta continua*.



## Hope, family & surviving COVID-19

*Kubi Rama, Executive Director of Gender Links*



Johannesburg, 18 February: I am writing this piece as part of the GL series “lessons learnt during lockdown.” The deadline is past. I struggled to write this piece. My 12-year old son, Keshav, and I tested positive for COVID-19 on the 7 January 2021.

My momentary response was blind panic. I know the science says that children are not as badly affected as adults. In that instant the science did not matter. My child had tested positive for a potentially fatal virus. My own diagnosis did not quite register.

Before the fear could overwhelm me I kicked into planning and organising mode. COVID reality set in. As Colleen (Lowe Morna) says the devil is in the detail. Keshav used barrier tape to divide our house! We could not touch any light switches or door handles. No entry into the kitchen or any other non-designated areas.

Dependence was a new feeling. We had to ask for everything we needed. A real challenge for me not so much for Keshav. The order of the day became temperature checks, measuring oxygen levels and managing tiredness.

After the initial flurry of activity, the mind began reeling again. The dominant feeling was fear. Fear for my child. Fear that my daughter, husband and family especially my 79-year old mum will be infected as well. And then perhaps the most difficult of all, facing my own mortality. There was so much left for me to do and experience.

My nephew and his wife were expecting our family's first great grandchild in mid-January. The first in the next generation of my family. More fear that I would not meet our baby girl and that if the worst happened her birth would be marred.

I have never been more conscious of breathing as a source of life. Sleep was elusive as I constantly checked my oxygen levels. One part of me was so grateful that my symptoms were mild the other so fearful that could change in heartbeat.

As a good activist I came up with a strategy. In this time of COVID I would try to be as normal as possible. Everyday became a goal, counting down to day ten when I could come out of isolation. I continued working as best as I could. It helped me to focus on other things. The fear can be so all-consuming.

Two of us contracted COVID in a family of four who spent the all their time together in days leading up to our diagnosis. Keshav's symptoms were more severe than mine. COVID-19 is unpredictable. But then so is life. This too came into sharp focus.

During this time Gender Links announced my appointment as Executive Director. I received so much love and affirmation from my GL family, friends and other family. This was a reminder of how life despite all its challenges has to go on.



I gave myself a woman-to-woman talk and started thinking about all the wonderful parts of my life.

I was so excited about the impending birth of our girl. She was our hope in these tough times. She was born on 17 January and goes by the name, Sovika Yi Kiu Rama. She is truly amazing!

Every morning I would receive a call at 6h00 (the first of many during the course of the day) from my mum to see if I was well. I would laughingly say to her, “Mummy I am supposed to be ill why are you waking me up so early?” I cannot express how much that 6am call meant. Just to add she was ready to get on plane and come to Johannesburg to look after us. Needless to say this decision was vetoed. I am so grateful for her and everything that she is.

I come from a very close family. Of course my two siblings were ever present, teasing me and laughing with and at me! As usual. Through it all I felt their fear and more importantly their unwavering love.

My brother-in-law, a neurosurgeon, would call me every day, and have long conversations. Partly a medical consultation. Later he told me he would be monitoring

my breathing to ensure I was not struggling. A humble, wonderful soul who shows us how much he cares through his actions.

My nephews and nieces would send messages everyday requiring updates. I mandated Keshav with this responsibility. They received a daily update at 8h00 every morning. My niece, Jiara, based in the UK asked to video call because she just wanted to see us and be assured we were well.

My daughter, Inika, moved in with a friend at my request albeit reluctantly after testing negative. Keshav and I had to commit to multiple daily video calls. She struggled being away from us. She would pop in every day with various goods for the household.

Her constant refrain was that she just wanted to hug us. In fact, one day she covered herself with a black bin bag so she could hug us. Needless to say she was prevented from doing so.

Vernon, the husband and father, literally did everything for Keshav and I. Every meal, anything else we needed. He had an alarm set every two hours when he came to look at us to see if all was well. As my family says we had the best possible nursing care!

Some clichéd observations. Life is about who you have not what you have. The trappings do not matter. Throughout the pandemic I said to my kids if you have somewhere to live, food to eat and enough to survive on, be grateful.

I will now add you are alive and you have family.

I am not a hero because I had COVID-19 and survived. I do not need a T-shirt. My heart breaks for everyone who has lost someone to COVID-19. I know it is very difficult to hold on to hope and count our blessings.

I carry the picture of Keshav hugging Vernon on day eleven. He hugged him so hard, Vernon could barely breathe. Neither let go. Hope and family got me through. I know I will never take either for granted again. This is my greatest lesson in lockdown.



## Persevering through it all

Onneetse K. Makhumalo, Country Manager, Botswana

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*Success is no accident. It is hard work, perseverance, learning, studying, sacrifice and most of all, love of what you are doing or learning to do. ~ Pele*

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I started work on the 1st August 2019 at Gender Links Botswana as the Country Manager. I had only ever interacted with the organisation from a distance so, I did not fully understand the internal operations of the organisation. I was however, familiar with the work the organisation does and that is what had attracted me to the organisation. The work that Gender Links does, aligned with my personal and professional career development hence the reason why I applied for the position.



The day I reported for duty I taken aback when I got to the office and was met by an interim Country Manager (CM) who had been brought in to hold the fort during the transition period between the previous CM and myself. What surprised me is that I had expected to find officers at the office and so learning that the CM, who is the head of the office was the only program staff member at the office and the other officer was the Finance and Country Officer came as a shock to me. The Finance and Country Officer was on a long medical leave when I reported for duty.

I had previously worked in a NGO environment and so, I had expected that there would be resource constraints especially human resource constraints in the organisation; what I had not expected however was to learn that the Country Manager is the only one responsible for the implementation of all the programmes.

That came as a shock to me especially given the amount of work being done at the organisation. I quickly had to get over the culture shock and to move towards moving forward the work of the organisation.

My orientation to the organisation happened towards the end of August at the Gender Links Headquarters. I met with different Program Managers and Section Managers who all briefed me about their programs and their sections and what is expected from country offices in their areas. There was a lot of information that I had to process during that week. What kept me going was the excitement of getting to do work that I like and so, I focused on noting who I would need to go to for support on an area for I knew that there was no way I could get everything in that week.

Botswana was about to go its general elections in October 2019 and most work at the country level was focused on the elections. Through the 50-50 EU project, Gender Links had trained potential women candidates and the focus for the country work was on assisting the country to increase women's representation in political leadership positions. My focus was thus on elections after the orientation.

GL Botswana had gotten support from the British High Commission to implement actions aimed at advocating for the election of women to national assembly and local government positions including the development of a policy brief which will collate information on how women were supported and how they performed in the elections.

What I quickly learnt during that period is that there was need for me to prioritise my time; balancing between the office work and attending external meetings (which served as source of information which was necessary for the reports needed by Headquarters). Not having a Program Officer to delegate to attend the meetings I could not attend impacted negatively on the organisation's representation and presence at these meetings. To address this, I shared invitation of meetings with the BOCONGO Alliance member who attended some of the meetings and shared information from these meetings.

In January 2020, we hosted a meeting with the female politicians and other stakeholders to reflect on the performance of female politicians in the elections. The meeting was a culmination of a process that had been started some years back and it also served as a start to the process of preparing for the 2024 elections. It was a profound moment for me to meet in person the female politicians who reflected on their journeys in politics and what they experienced during the campaigning period. Despite the hurdles they had gone through they were all resolute that they were going to continue with politics and use lessons they had learnt in the past to better prepare for 2024. That for me was inspiring because despite all the challenges they face, these women were persevering and were not about to give up on their political goals. They were also very grateful for the support that Gender Links and other women's organisation had given to them during the build up towards the general elections.

This was a humbling moment for me as the impact of the work that the organisation was doing was expressed by those that benefited from it. And so, this is what keeps me going, the difference we make in the lives of these women and many others.

What I have come to appreciate is the support that I have gained from Keletso, the Finance and Country Officer who has been a reservoir of knowledge on what has happened in the organisation and what else needed to happen. She has helped me with the different GL systems. I have also benefited from the guidance from my supervisor Sifiso Dube; her motivational guidance has helped me adjust to the organisation and understand its operations.

As I head towards my first year anniversary with the organisation, I feel a bit more settled. I am not as overwhelmed by the work of the organisation as much as when I first started, this is despite the lots of work that is there. It is not as daunting as it used to be.

Understanding the organisational culture and the different personalities within the organisation have contributed to my current state of mind. I therefore, look forward to a future with Gender Links in a different mindset.

## Change is the end result of all true learning

Keletso Serole, Botswana Finance and Admin officer

“

*Life is about accepting the challenges along the way, choosing to keep moving forward, and savoring the journey. ~ Roy T. Bennett, The Light in the Heart*

”



I work as a Finance and Monitoring and Evaluation (M and E) officer for the Gender Links (GL) Botswana Office. As a finance officer, my main role entails budgeting, processing payments, monthly reconciliations and give support during audits. For the M and E role, I am tasked with collecting and capturing of GL M and E data, capturing events and monitoring GL on the news. I have been with Gender Links for 6 years now.

The most important learning experience that I have learnt with Gender links is learning to plan for everything that I do. I have learnt to plan my day accordingly and that

makes my work easier and more enjoyable. Every day when I start my day, I list down everything that I want to do on the given day, and then I arrange them according to their priority. I have realised that I enjoy working early in the morning when I get to work. I spend most of my mornings working on things that need most of my attention.

2018 was a blessing and joyful year for me. This is the year that I got married. Preparations and planning of my wedding day were just flowing as I have learnt a lot from my work. The budgeting and financial skills I learnt at GL helped me to distribute the small monies that we had. When it came to planning and financials my husband knew that, everything will run smoothly when I am under control. The décor, tent, catering, venue were all planned and paid for well on time. Once again, I would like to Thank GL for all the skills I have learnt during my stay here. I have really learnt a lot. I am grateful to GL for polishing my skills.

Of the six summits that I have organised with GL Botswana I must say that the 2019 summit was the most successful one because we adapted to working under pressure and finding solutions to all issues as they emerged. This time we had new interesting categories SRHR and youth, where different organisations, individuals, or government departments displayed the work they do on issues of Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights.

My experience as part of the observer team for Botswana 2019 Elections was an eye opener. Previously I was not that into politics but last year gave me an opportunity to get involved through training women in politics. I was happy that most women we trained were successful at the elections and some have been appointed ministers.

I have learnt a lot from every single one of my colleagues especially Gomolemo Rasesigo, not only was she my supervisor but a big sister to me. Whenever I had a challenge or when my moral was low she would pick it up. She believed in my capabilities and she always encouraged me to work hard even on the difficult times. I was very nervous when Gomolemo left the organisation I thought changing managers would be challenging but instead it brought growth in my career.



Onneetse Makhumalo joined the GL Botswana office and she is a great manager. We are still getting to know each other's ways of working. Looking forward to working and getting to know her.

Bhekiwe, What a manager! He has taught me to be professional at all times. In accounting, we always learn new things and he is the best mentor to share this knowledge with us. I have come to conclude that life lessons are drawn from the everyday interactions and situations whether good or bad. I will forever be grateful for the amazing team officers from all countries for being very helpful during difficult times especially Ricardo and Ntolo. Our WhatsApp chats are very helpful are very helpful during hard times.

For year 2020 we will be working with Men and boys For Gender Equality, We are expanding the sunrise campaign to include men care program. This means training both men and women to end gender based violence. We will be working with councils on their action plans to include the men care program. This will be an interesting learning journey as I will be interacting with men and hearing life challenges. We have already created a good working relation with Men and Boys.

## Seeing Rosaria Memorial Trust reignited my dream

Ncane Maziya, Eswatini Country Coordinator

“

*It's never too late to have a life you love. Don't ever feel like you've missed the boat, don't have what it takes or can't achieve your dreams. Instead of removing your dreams, remove the doubts and fears keeping you from them. It's never, ever too late.*

”

My first study visit to Zimbabwe turned to be a learning journey. This journey started at the airport, the warm welcome by Gender Links Zimbabwe Monitoring and Evaluation (M and E) officer, Tapiwa.

Let alone the treatment I received from my sister, colleague (Priscilla) and her family it was so impressive. It was my first trip to Zimbabwe and I was the first one to arrive what a coincidence. I am

really grateful and thankful to the Almighty who connected me with Priscilla. Our relationship is not just work related but it has grown in such a way that I find her more than my sister she is an inspiration to me. This trip has made me to learn the truth of love and care from a sister and I will never forget this in my whole life. It was like a dream and yet it was real. I was treated like a queen.



The programme was packed and well organised, but it was worth it. I learnt a lot from the different presentations made by stakeholders during the study visit. There were different presentations all on Local Government but what really caught my eye were the Junior Councilor's presentations. These young politicians were so confident and well versed on their UBUNTU presentation the humanity and the environmental sustainability and their confidentiality.

Women in Local Government Forum (WLGF) strategy meeting has also helped me a lot especially because Eswatini is implementing a similar project. This meeting assisted and made me understand better on what is happening on the ground. I learnt the importance of establishing own committees as a smooth and easy way to run networks. As an implementing partner I discovered that it is important and useful so I took this with me to introduce it to Eswatini's WLGF meetings.

*“It's never too late to have a life you love. Don't ever feel like you've missed the boat, don't have what it takes or can't achieve your dreams, Instead of removing your dreams, remove the doubts and fears keeping you from them. It's never too late”.*

I love this quote, it gives me strength and confidence that if I want to achieve my dreams I should remove my doubts and fears as it is never too late. That is what I learnt and achieved during our field trip to Murehwa Rural District Council and Rosaria Memorial Trust (RMT). These two trips were commendable and I learnt a lot. But the most important dream that I will never forget is the dream of the RMT. It touches lives of vulnerable groups of people especially survivors of GBV. This a self-development project that I thought I won't be able to do or achieve as my retirement period is closer. This quote has given me strength and confidence. I found RMT Trust as a good self-development project that one can initiate in her country. As a woman and single parent I managed to get a piece of land at community level (chiefdom area) 70\_60 acres. I went through all cultural processes required like men. What I liked most about RMT is the design of the project is that all the facilities needed by survivors and public are available such as the education block, library room, computer room, training room where they are trained on entrepreneurship skills. There is also a room where they come together and share their experiences of GBV.

There is also a four bedroomed shelter for survivors of GBV. They receive comprehensive counselling and also referral. What I learnt from this project is that for one to have a sustainable shelter is to involve partners like Government Social Welfare Department and other relevant stakeholders.

So instead of removing my dreams, I should remove the doubts and fears keeping from them. It is never, ever too late I can still fulfill my dreams from what I learnt from Rosaria Memorial Trust. This project touches and saves the lives of survivors

of GBV, poverty and also brought closer services for the community so that they don't travel long distances especially women and girls as they are the vulnerable group when it comes to issues of GBV and other social needs. That is my self-development project I will be focusing on from now on.

I have seen and learnt on the importance of Hub and Spoke councils. Though Eswatini's focus is on urban councils, it is high time that the country establish such than working individually. This will assist the town boards especially Lavumisa because the population is large and the rate of GBV and sex work is very high.

Thank you Mme Colleen, Priscilla and Zimbabwe Gender Links team for this learning journey you took us through really I will never forget. I really loved the unity, love and respect from all the places we visited during our field trip. I achieved tremendously and I really appreciate your assistance in taking good care of us.



## The work done is but in the ground...

Thandokuhle Dlamini, Eswatini Programme Officer

“

*Success is always the outcome of walking the talk.”*

*~ Edmond Mbiaka*

”



This past December the Kingdom of Eswatini experienced very high temperatures and my home area being in an arid area, we were literally sweating in our sleep. I developed rash and burns from the heat to an extent of requiring health care.

I was to take the family car to town and get medical services via my medical aid service, but something in me thought otherwise. The whole time I am advocating for better and friendly health care facilities especially regards SRHR, thus a thought came to me that I should #WalkInHerShoes experience and learn first-hand how it is to access health care in our rural areas.

For me it was just heat burns so I was fortunate to still be able to walk, others not so fortunate would require the assistance of a wheelbarrow or taxi that most cannot afford given the impoverished lifestyle our fellow brothers and sisters live on a daily basis.

Under extreme heat of about 45 degrees Celsius I started my journey to the clinic documenting on social media my experience.

Under this extreme heat I walked an hour to get to the clinic, though halfway I now had a second thought of calling home and get a car to fetch me but the thought of the young girls we encourage to use these health facilities do not have anyone to call thus my #WalkingInHerShoes mentality encouraged my soldiering on. At least I had my Mahewu to quench my thirst along the way, many in my area hardly afford



even the R10 hospital fee thus the luxury of getting a drink for the way is a non-starter.

Along the journey I had to walk in the bushes for almost half the journey with no visible human being, but cows grazing along the way. I began to think about my security because if I were attacked, not the loudest scream would be heard by the nearest person (I was in the wilderness all by my own). I began to think about a young pregnant woman walking this same distance under this extreme heat, security risk and under this new world order that has women abuse and killings which the media reports on daily.

Yes, the media has nothing to say about my rural home area except when one more child or woman is killed, mostly at the hands of men. The media never reports on the distances and security risks our young and old go through in order to access health care. Should a rape or killing happen, it is then that our media reports. I took this journey, under these extreme conditions to make it a point that I know what I am talking about as an activist and have understanding and knowledge of what happens on the ground in order to roll out the programmes we do with though knowledge.

It is disturbing to learn that many of our comrades in the war against GBV would Total 0% in an examination with one question “What is Gender?” nonetheless their effort goes not unnoticed. The fight for equality is far wherein the drivers do not know the destination!.

Being away from the Kingdom a few years and learning how things are done outside the tiny kingdom, this past year has been a journey to reconcile my experience with knowledge of things as they happen on the ground. Though relearning the idiom “There is no hurry in Swaziland” still frustrates me to the soul (all meetings or gatherings never start in time in my beloved tiny kingdom).

When I came back I fully concentrated on perfecting my knowledge in all programmes and learnt a lot while assisting councils prepare for and roll out their SRHR campaigns. All in all it has been an interesting year for me, with its own challenges, professional growth and above all a learning year.

## **Life is a journey filled with lessons**

*Ncane Maziya, Eswatini Local Action for Gender Justice facilitator*

Mbabane, 5 February: Over the past year I experienced rough and tough lessons through my journey. Facing so many challenges both at work and my life has taught me a lot. As the saying goes, “the road will not be always smooth, in fact throughout our travels we encounter many challenges some of these challenges will test our courage, strengths, and faith.”

The challenges did not stop me from implementing the most important activities. I have learnt that stress should not be a deterrent. Talking about your problems to someone helps you to relieve stress. Some of the challenges tested my courage, strength and faith. I am overcoming all challenges as I walk through the journey of my life. I took all the challenges I have faced so far as a test that I am determined to pass.

I have also learnt to be cautious about trusting unconditionally. My experience in trusting someone led me to stress and suffering. This affected my work and crushed all plans.

The COVID 19 pandemic crushed all programme implementation plans until September 2020 when we went into partial lockdown. I learned how difficult it is to strategise and plan for the “next move” to achieve one's goal. Despite the challenges, we managed to implement a few programmes including the national summit and the launch of Women in Local Economic development (WLED) network.

We held an encouraging and fruitful Listen and Learn workshop with Gender Focal Persons (GFPs). They gave me encouraging advice on sustaining the Eswatini Centres of Excellence (COE) for Gender in Local Government programme. One could see that the programme has opened their eyes. Instead of focusing on one programme, the GFP have integrated these into one action plan. That has made their work easier. The COE programme has also expanded to include Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) and entrepreneurship.

My journey has given me strength to keep pushing. As the saying goes: “Life is a journey filled with lessons, hardships, heartaches, joys, celebrations and special moments that will ultimately lead us to our destination, our purpose in life”.



## Travelling to the land of resilience

Manteboheleng Mabetha, Lesotho Country Manager

“

*Resilience is accepting your new reality, even if it's less good than the one you had before. You can fight it, you can do nothing but scream about what you have lost, or you can accept that and try to put together something that's good. ~ Elizabeth Edwards*

”



It is not unusual to hear from the news that Zimbabwe is experiencing major problems in recent years. It is never surprising to hear statements such as “Zimbabwe is in humanitarian meltdown. Food is in such short supply, that some people have stopped taking their HIV medicine because they cannot afford to pay for their meals that must accompany tablets. In what was once the breadbasket of the

Southern Africa, many people are down to one meal a day or less. The price of almost everything has ballooned. A loaf of bread can gobble up a few week's pension. Even the civil servant the nominal middle class in what was once a relatively prosperous country are paid the equivalent of \$1.80 a day, below the international poverty line.”

These kinds of statements are enough to discourage anyone to visit Zimbabwe as they are enough to make anyone run for their lives. When I first heard about the study visit to Zimbabwe the first thoughts that were playing in my mind were coming to a country that is totally destroyed. Where life seems to be extremely difficult and where people can hardly cope or even survive. Arriving at Zimbabwe I came to a different reality. I could see people who were full of life and love. I could see that despite all the challenges that they are facing they have chosen to accept their reality and do not want it to control their destiny.

During the first day of the meeting I was blown away by the great presentations made by the councils. For the first time ever I could see the dots connecting with the local government Centres of Excellence (COE) work. In all the SADC countries

in which Gender Links operates the model has worked perfectly well. There is high level support from the Ministry of Local Government and the relationships that has been established between the Ministry and Gender Links has stood the test of time. The fact that the Chief Director of the Ministry of Local Government was at the meeting and stayed for the entire morning is proof that there is a good working relationship.

The Zimbabwe councils have been able to successfully implement the Hub and Spoke model and the councils have taken so much ownership of the model. The three hub councils that made presentations displayed high level of commitment and ownership of the process and have used their resourcefulness to make it successful. The most amazing presentation was the one made by a rural council as this proves that where there is a will there is always a way. Despite being rural and being faced with many challenges, the council has been able to use the little resources to ensure that the gender agenda becomes a priority. The study visits to Murehwa Rural District Council gave me an insight of the presentations that were made, as everything that was presented was shown live. The stories of change that were presented made me believe that change is possible.

The work done by the Junior Councilors is the most exciting as it gives hope for a bright future. The presentation that was made by the young women was mind blowing and to me it was like a breath of fresh air. Having young people involved in the issues that affect them means tomorrow adults are going to be more aware of what usually goes wrong, so that they can change it for the betterment of their country. Their SRHR campaign has taken a great momentum throughout the country and demonstrates their resilience, and not allowing the difficult situations define them. The young women displayed a very high level of leadership skills and I was very impressed with their level of confidence and public speaking skills.



The study visit to Zimbabwe has given me a very important lesson about life. I have learned that in life you do not have to let the circumstances that you find yourself in determine your



destination. Zimbabwe might be at its lowest right now, but the citizens are showing determination to bring change in their lives. This is a true story of resilience as Elizabeth Edwards has rightly said; “resilience is accepting your new reality, even if it's less good than the one you had before. You can fight it, you can do nothing but scream about what you have lost, or you can accept that and try to put together something that is good.” The Zimbabweans have accepted that reality and they have put together something that is very good and beautiful. They have shown that despite the tough times they are going through they will continue letting their light shine.

My expectations about the country have been proved wrong. I found myself in the land of resilience where people refuse to perish. I am going to use the lessons learned from Zimbabwe to improve the way the councils work in my country. The Hub and Spoke is a very good model that can be used to advance gender equality within the councils.



## Soaring beyond my wildest dreams

*Manteboheleng Mabetha, Local Action for Gender Justice Lesotho Manager*

Maseru, January 2021: At the beginning of 2020 I had a strong feeling that I would achieve great things. I felt that this would be the year of double blessings for me. Everything was going well in the first two months. My team and I had raised sufficient funds for the whole year, compared to the previous year when we could not see our way to the end of the year. That gave me time to focus on implementation.

In March 2020 the Corona virus hit Southern Africa. Everything came to a standstill with lockdowns announced in many countries. Lesotho joined despite there being no reported cases of COVID-19 at that time. We all went into hiding and we had to work from home. I panicked whether all the donor deliverables would be met, and if not the implications of this for future funding. I started feeling scared and I wondered how my family would survive if I lost my job. Every day became so heavy as some donors demanded that we demonstrate delivery to get paid.

I was also not coping with the demands of working from home which included cooking and cleaning for my family as I had to release my helper. I found the working spot in my bedroom; the only place I could work in peace away from the children. To avoid stress I focused on what makes me happy like dancing while I prepared a meal in the kitchen for my family. At one point I even took a video and shared it with my colleagues on the WhatsApp group and that eventually made the whole group want to do a virtual dance on the birthday of one of our colleagues with me being a DJ and lead dancer. During this time we valued the laughter and being kind to one another. I looked forward to the morning check-ins with my manager. This helped me to share my frustrations so that I could be strong for my children.

I learned that “It is during our darkest moments that we must focus to see the light,” (Aristotle). After two weeks of despair and hopelessness I focused on seeing the light. I found new ways of ensuring that all the donor deliverables are met. Gender based violence (GBV) cases were on the rise as a result of the lockdown. Women could not move because of the restrictions. I ventured into finding out how I could assist the women to report cases without having to travel. With the support from

UNFPA, I worked on establishing the toll-free number. The toll-free number has been one of the missing links in the reporting of GBV cases in Lesotho. I felt happy to have contributed in making that change.

I also worked to create awareness on COVID-19 amongst the rural communities who do not usually get the chance to watch televisions or even listen to radios. I fought the fear of leaving the house to go to the communities by thinking of all those front line workers who leave their houses every day to save our lives. I put myself in their shoes and prayed to God to protect me and my children. A lot of people instilled fear in me by pointing out all the risks associated with going out to the villages. I remember when I got to Quthing, one of the districts where illegal border crossing was rampant, I could literally smell the COVID-19 in the air!

Ironically in all my 20 years of working I got to know my country best in the time of corona.

The awareness campaigns reached the furthest, “left behind” places.

Sometimes we could get out of our vehicles and walk on foot or on horseback for hours. For once in my life I felt I was really making a difference to people who needed it the most. The people living in these villages had not information whatsoever about COVID-19. They carried on as usual, welcoming home family e returning from South Africa, the SADC country worst affected by the pandemic. As we moved around we distributed much-needed face masks to make sure that people protect themselves. We also introduced them to the toll-free number to report GBV.



As I reflect I am so happy that I took a leap of faith and went out to help others and possibly save lives. By the time the government lifted lockdown restrictions I knew how to work during the pandemic, including all the safety protocols. At the end of every month when I looked at the monthly reports I felt happy because Lesotho office met all its 2020 targets and surpassed 2019 figures for number of events and people reached.

In 2020 I found inner peace. I learned to love unconditionally and live each day as if it were my last. In life you can never receive what you do not give. I learned the joy of giving. As a result of giving love I received love unconditionally from God and my fellow human beings. I soared beyond my wildest dreams both at work and in my personal life. Indeed, I achieved the double blessing that I had envisioned at the start of the year.

I may even have contracted COVID- 19 at some point during that year as I had flu and was never tested. I am grateful that I recovered and face 2021 with hope and fortitude.



## Living each day like it is your last day

Ntolo Lekau, Local Action for Gender Justice Lesotho  
Senior Finance and Programmes Officer

Maseru, 22 January: I was looking forward to 2020 and people named it twenty plenty, year of good things and year of new possibilities not knowing those good things would turn to masking up our faces and physical distancing. *“Many are the plans in the man's heart, but it is the Lords' purpose that prevails”* - Proverbs 19:21. The quoted bible verse means we can plan as much as we want but the Lord is only our approver. It was a year new and there was so much to be happy about and looking forward to.



On 18 March early hours of the morning I received a called from my mom telling me that our niece Mokonyana Lekau was very sick and she was talking him to the hospital, I was hurt, devastated and asked God why was that happening to such a young and beautiful soul. I woke up and got ready for work as usually and planned that I will go and see him at the hospital later that day.

It was a busy time at work as we were doing final preparations for the summit. At around 11:00 AM we left to the hospital with my sister as we were supposed to see them at 12 noon, but unfortunately when we were on the way my mom called us and told us that he had just passed away. I just could not believe, my sister and I cried and asked God so many questions, on the other hand the person who was driving us felt helpless and did not know what do, it was so painful. He had just turned three the previous day on 17 March and had so much to live for, I was torn apart and very hurt. On that day life was all ruined but life has to go on.

Meanwhile, at work we had planned that we would have our summit from 30-31 March 2020. All the preparations including paying the deposit at the hotels were done. I was looking forward to meeting and engaging with our participants since we last had our summit in 2017. Everyone was happy and those at the districts could not wait to be in Maseru. The excitement and emotions were high but all those came



to a disappointment when the Prime Minister announced a total lockdown for three weeks. I became very disappointed and could not understand why this was happening to us after putting so much work into summit preparations.

We were asked to stay at home and I was working from home under the “*new normal*”. It was so hard to be home alone all the time. Sometimes it would get so lonely and I would be miserable but I had so much to do as there was an audit going on and had to do preparations for my nephew's funeral during lockdown which made it very difficult because of many restrictions.

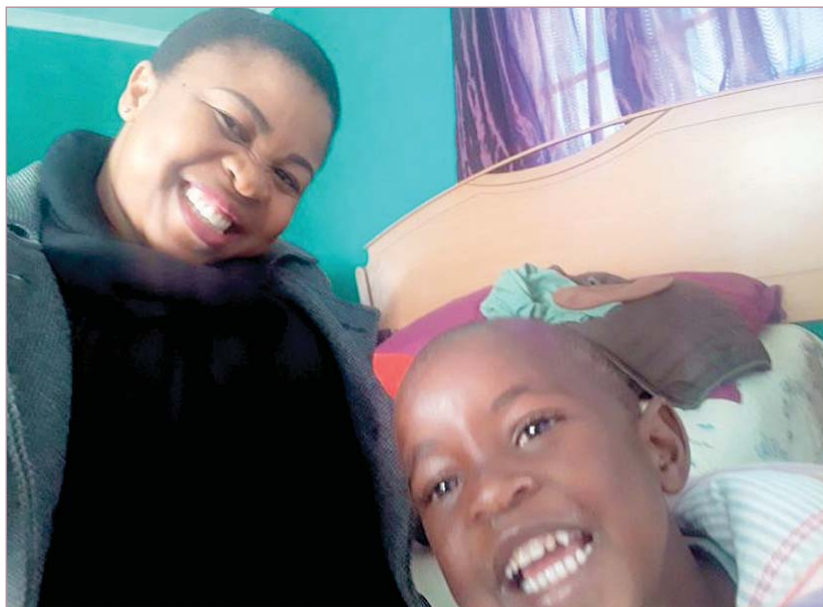
We had our first ever virtual audit and everything went well. Although it was very hectic and tiring with back to back meetings and misplaced documents we managed to pull it off and we had successful audit.

It was getting busy as the date for the funeral was too close and there was so much to be done but all went perfectly well and we were able to bury him. It was good to be home with family even under the circumstances but we had to get things off our mind and just be there for each other. People at my village did not take lockdown restrictions nor COVID serious at all. For them it was life as usual and somehow took our mind off things because in town it was so serious and it would get so hectic sometimes. They did not even want to use sanitizer and some were even say we were the ones bringing COVID in their village with our sanitizers, it was nice in a way to be home.

Sadly it was time to come back to Maseru where I would be all by myself and my computer from 8:00 AM to 17.00 PM. It was so difficult sometimes as I would feel like just sleeping when seeing my bed but it was an important time for me to be able to discipline myself, self-manage as well as manage my time. Having so much to do made it easy to overcome many challenges. Working from home made it possible for me to learn more about myself, introspect and be able to see that connecting with people around me was so important. We had to rely on people that we are working with to make sure that our work keeps moving because there was no movement and since we as the Gender Links (GL) Lesotho office have a very good working relationship with our people it was not that challenging and we achieved so much, thanks to our people who always got our back.

However, our 2020 ended on high note as we were able to hold our three summits and participants were very happy to be able to connect with us yet again. We had three summits because we were trying not to bring more than 50 people in one place, people were happy to see each other and to learn from one another. If there is one thing that we do best at GL is to connect with our people and allow them to learn from each other.

As I reflect today and write this learning journey I am sitting at my place yet again as our country has gone to two weeks lockdown and we are working from home again. Who would have thought in 2021 we would still be talking about COVID 19? But, here we are yet again. As they say “experience is the best teacher” I now know how to plan my everyday tasks and be able to function very well on my own. I also know how to manage my time and be able to deliver on time. I pray and hope as this year goes on it will be better and restore our lost hope. We have lost so many people who are dear to us. I also hope it brings us more positive energy and attitude towards life's challenges and everything that is thrown back at us as we take care and stay safe.



## It does not matter how slowly you go as long as you do not stop

Ntolo Lekau, Lesotho Programme Officer

“

*The only impossible journey is the one  
you never begin. ~ Tony Robbins*

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With Gender Links (GL) University it is always about learning new things, trying, failing and wiping off the dust off and shine, 2019 was not the exception as I have grown not only on personal but professional. It has been another year of so amazing things and of course disappointment but isn't what the life is all about.

I work as a programme and finance officer in Lesotho office, a very small office of two people but do their job exceptionally well in terms of delivering. My important and core deliverables are Monitoring and evaluation, which entails data being correctly entered into the system for all the events including participant info, event info, and evaluation forms. Interviewing and writing drivers of change which is a tool that shows the change in people who worked with GL. It so fulfilling to go back to people we have worked with and see how our different programmes have impacted their lives. It also makes them very happy when they see their stories published on website and being able to share with other people. My other deliverable which I am very amazed every day when I remember where I am coming from and not having any financial background is routine finance where I have to make sure that the office comply and pay our Pay as You Earn every month, use the procurement modules on pastel to do our payments. After all that has been done I make sure that I do the reconciliations as to balance all the account per month and nothing makes me more prouder than seeing my accounts balancing.

Even though I try all my best do my work very well sometimes I still make mistakes which I believe are the ones that make me grow and push to do better. As a person I believe as long as you accept when made mistakes and try to rectify them is the best thing that makes a person to grow. Mistakes are there are pave our paths and even make us better people. Last year during our interim audit one of my accounts

was not balancing which is one of the most important aspect in the audit, I was so stressed and blamed myself for not doing my job properly but having such a strong team all was sorted and thanks to Ricardo who is always willing to help me at any time, he would go extra mile and make sure that he takes me every step and make sure that I understand. “Thanks *abuti oaka* your everyday assistance is not going unnoticed” Also Keletso from Botswana has been super amazing to me since I have been doing finance and she would go to the extent of leaving her work and literally doing mine as to make sure that I am on the right path. All in all I do not think I would have done all these or even be able to deliver if it was not because of my super hero Manager Me' Mantebheleng. She makes sure that I do my job exceptionally well and gives all the support she could, I do not think I will ever thank her enough, and I guess it is true when they say “teamwork is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results”.

Since working at GL I have learnt so much and every time I look back to how I was when I first joined GL and now I get so emotional and amazed at the same time. The experience and knowledge I have is beyond this world and believe my life will never be the same again. I try my best to share the knowledge I have gained with people especially the ones that I interact with during our workshops and have seen that through our changing lives stories. Last year we got money from UNFPA Lesotho and we had to work with men which was something very new at GL as we only used to be working with women or both women and men, but with that project we had to work with only men and it such was an amazing experience. We were able to interact more at personal level and got to understand their behaviour and how and why they do certain things. Such moments helped my learning and be less judgmental.

One particular exercise made me feel so proud; we asked them to tell us what is the really man according to them as individuals and the responses we got helped me to see that our works touches so many lives and changes the way people think or have been thinking all these time. ” For me a real man is a man that takes responsibility in his family and be able to learn new things and embrace change when it happens.”

One of the husband school participant's Ntate Limpho Mosola said. Nothing makes me happy than seeing people that we have been working with change for better and being able to see things differently. And I was very happy to have completed all

the four sessions with our husband school participants, we even had the graduation ceremonies as to appreciate their participation and they were super happy.

This year we had planned to visit them once again to do the impact assessment as to see how their different lives have been changed and get to know from their families how they are doing. But now I am sitting here all by self and asking myself if that time will ever come and will we be able to see them again. We had the 2020 well planned and were so looking forward to kick start a year with our #voiceandchoice national summit that was supposed be on the 24th and 25th March 2020. All the preparations were done and participants well informed just waiting for the day when the government announced the lockdown due to this global pandemic COVID 19 and everything had to be cancelled.

It was so difficult for us as the office to accept the news and be able to inform the people who were so looking forward to the summit. But we had to accept because everything was done for our own safety and that is when I realized how serious is the pandemic. We had to work from home which means self-pushing but doesn't take away the fear I have developed. Everyday I am scared for myself and wonder if I will be able to see the next day, I am scared for my country because Lesotho doesn't have all these medical facilities for the corona virus even now the suspects swabs are taken to South Africa and they take such a long time which frustrates so much and how do we even say we do not have any reported cases yet we do not have facilities? I am really scared and wonder if it comes to our country what will it do. I am very scared!



## We always learn in life!

*Ialfine PAPISY, Director of Francophone office*

“

*Inspiration is like water, when it flows,  
you have to consume it. ~ Borrin Kamguia*

”

I have been working at Gender Links for ten years this year. I started as a “field officer”, and evolved into a “country manager” and I am now the “Director of Francophone office”. During these ten years I have had the privilege of implementing all the GL programs, including, the governance, media, justice, and all the programs of the Alliance for the SADC protocol on gender and development.



The Centers of Excellence (COE) concept constitutes the basis of the governance program. The process consists of mainstreaming gender in both structures and services that local councils provide to communities. I had the advantage of participating in the conception and implementing it within 67 councils of Madagascar. These councils have all completed the ten-stage COE process.

In response to a call for proposals from the European Union, Gender Links Chief Executive Officer, Colleen Lowe Morna, presented the “hub and spoke” concept in 2018, she suggested that we submit this new concept within the concerned proposal as this new model was being piloted in Zimbabwe. I approached Priscilla to ask her for all documents related to this new concept of “Hub and Spoke”. The proposal was eventually not selected but did reach the final stage of the selection.

During meetings in Johannesburg, Priscilla shared with us this new concept of “Hub and Spoke” and I was really looking forward to the study visit, scheduled for January 27 to 30, 2020 in Zimbabwe, to find out more.

The stay was very rich in content and conviviality.

In terms of contents: the first day, I noticed the good appropriation and internalization of the Gender Links programs through the technical and financial partners as well as the beneficiary councils. Apart from their presence at the meeting, the speeches and presentations demonstrated their willingness, their commitments and their achievements in terms of promoting women's rights in general and the collaboration with Gender Links Zimbabwe in particular. I learned at the end of this day the importance of the relationship management with partners and especially the appropriation of our program by partners.



On the second day, the visit at Murehwa council highly impressed me. I wondered how council, its staff, the junior Councillors and the councils' partners work to mainstream gender. I was particularly fascinated by how GLZ's work could change people's lives, demonstrated during the presentation of the council's gender champion who is also the Vice Chairperson of Council, Councillor Resta Dzvinyangoma. She illustrated how the council was before and how it changed after the accompaniment of GLZ.

I cannot find the words to describe the commitment of the Junior Councillors in implementing the SRHR campaign. Young people are involved and determined to move forward in order to bring about change in their community. My thoughts were focused on how I could develop the same structure in Madagascar even though we do not have junior Councillors. I am also aware that structure is one thing but having the same committed young people is another dilemma. I must therefore accompany and train young people so that they can develop self-confidence and take an interest in the cause.

During this study visit, I saw the willingness, the commitment and the satisfaction of everyone working with GLZ for the empowerment of women and young people. GLZ has succeeded in transmitting to partners their convictions, especially the fight for women's empowerment.

Conviviality: during the stay, I saw my colleagues differently. The team was united,

relaxed and happy. We had a lot of beneficial exchanges without frustration. I did not hear anyone complain. Our host, GLZ, Priscilla Maposa and her colleague Tapiwa paid the greatest attention to the smallest details. I have known Priscilla for almost ten years now, a professional and very conscientious woman. I have a good relationship with her. Once more, I discovered another side of her that I can sum up as a woman of heart!!!

Throughout this visit, I was inspired and ready to go further in my work!!!



## Planting a seed on our island

Anushka Virahsawmy, GL Mauritius Country Manager

“

*Persistence and resilience only come from having been given the chance to work through difficult problems.*

*~ Gever Tulley*

”



I can't believe this my seventh year with Gender Links. 2019 has been yet again very important and decisive year for (Gender Links GL) in Mauritius. Money is still high on the agenda and finding ways and means to get it is a challenge. After many SWOT analyses, meetings, strategy meetings with funders, we had to go back to the drawing board. This was a very good exercise. It helped me get out of comfort zone,

analysing GL as an NGO in the national context where Mauritius is known as a middle-income economy and where money is getting scarce.

After a few sleepless nights to sustain the organisation and the amazing work we are doing with Safe Haven Halfway Home (SHHH), I have organised meetings with funders to understand in which field they were willing to sponsor us. From the main work of GL Mauritius they were unanimous that the work of Safe Haven should be high on the agenda. They wanted to put their money where they could find actual change and where they felt their money would go towards changing people's lives.

Early last year, I had a very long meeting with the National Corporate Social Responsibility Foundation to explain Gender Links role on the island and going in full width and length to get the full support of the foundation to get a grant from them annually. The meeting went very well and I planted a seed in their mind so that they could change their way of thinking and also use the CEDAW report that I presented to the committee in Geneva to prove my point. Our strength in Gender Links is that we innovate and never copy. Safe Haven Halfway Home is the only halfway home

on the island. We are here to educate, to empower, to counsel and ensure that residents once leaving SHHH we have all the adequate tools to be economically independent and required acumen to live a decent life, free from violence, with their children.

In June 2019 I met yet again with all the funders and explained the plan to move SHHH from Melrose to St Pierre due to very large demand of gender-based violence cases and also of youth coming out of the Rehabilitation Youth Centre and the Correctional Youth Centre for girls.

Holdem foundation helped us tremendously with the refurbishment of the place we saw in St Pierre. They offered in-kind support and had an electrician, plumber and a brick layer in the centre for one month and all that free of charge. In August we opened our new centre to the amazement of the existing residence as they now had more space in the house and St Pierre is much more central and easier for them to get jobs. After a lot of hard work and minimal money, we can now accommodate 25 people.

SHHH has also enabled us to look at training differently. As an approved Mauritius Qualification Authority trainer with 15 years experience in leadership, professional and personal development, I approached the private sector to offer my services as a trainer and explaining how using my services is a win-win situation where the money will go straight to SHHH. Even though those discussions were hard as those private sectors already have their service providers, they liked the idea of helping to change people's lives and most of them were willing to give it a try for the following financial year. So I am keeping my fingers crossed so that we have at least three private companies we can work with in delivering leadership courses and also soft skill courses.

Advocacy has also been high on the agenda with the Children's Bill. GL together with other organisations have put proposals on various issues pertaining to the children to the Government. Child marriage is one of them as unfortunately in Mauritius a child of 16 can get married with the consent of their parents, guardian or judge. We are now hoping the SADC protocol will be signed as marriage will be legal only for people 18 and above. Gender Links has been approached extensively by the media



to comment on the children's Bill also the opportunity was taken to do media training on sexual reproductive health and rights where we had a large pool of journalists willing to learn and ask more pertinent questions.

2019 was yet another beautiful learning journey with challenges which became strength and so blessed that I have amazing team members who believe in changing lives and making Mauritius a better place to live. I would like to thank the staff and the board member for believing in me and giving me strength to keep going higher and higher.



## Expanding our safe space

Sheistah Bundhoo, Mauritius Programme Officer

“

*To be kind to all, to like many and love a few, to be needed and wanted by those we love, is certainly the nearest we can come to happiness. ~ Mary Stuart*

”

In 2019, I completed five years of service at Gender Links (GL). It is amazing how time flies as I unfolded this journey to allow for self-growth, development, discipline to reign my being. As philosophical as it might sound, GL has allowed me to be what I am today in the best possible way.



I remember, back in May 2019 during a conversation with Anushka, we were questioning our shelter's location, accessibility and accommodation factors and it all connected in helping us make sense that we need to start looking up for a bigger space. The expansion of our area of work through the incorporation of our halfway home project has been the talk of the town. But, why not? After all, we are the first halfway home for young adults in Mauritius and we take pride of calling this project our own. Finding a bigger space to accommodate 25 people at one time was edgy. It was exhausting to negotiate rental prices, understand building design concepts and measurement, permits challenges, registration papers, fire and emergency plans and other technicalities. But amidst of all this, we were about to expand our safe space allowing people to breath, to live, to grow, to have a support and this was all that mattered.

The moving out experience with the relocation of our office and halfway home was a massive step forward for all of us. I have been able to reinforce relationships with several local donors. I had to boost up efforts in reaching out for donors to help with the renovation work for the new location in St Pierre. Like all other team members, we geared up to make it happen. We had to be patient, to take it step by step but

without letting the passion loose. August 2019, the new location was ready and we move in with such a pride along with all our residents. That moment was what mattered the most. It is gratifying to come to office each day welcomed by happy children living their lives to the fullest.

Year 2019 also reminded me of the tough time I had with my health. I suffered from menorrhagia and the struggle to be back on my feet was real! From mood swings, to anxiety attacks, fatigue and shortness of breath, I could literally feel everything drain out of my body. This experience taught me the importance of taking care of myself and my mental health. It was the first time I actually took my whole sick leave days to recover. The support I got from the team helped me arise and resume back to work healthily.





## Making life happen

*Sheistah Bundhoo, Senior Finance and Programme Officer, Mauritius*

Port Louis, 1 March: 2020 was been a challenging year. The COVID-19 pandemic brought incessant news of new cases and deaths locally and internationally. The lockdown announced by the Prime Minister of Mauritius took effect from the 19 March 2020. We all had to adapt to the new normal. I started working from home.



Prior to the lockdown, I would wake up at 6 a.m., do my morning routine and drive for approximately an hour to the office. After work as from 17.30 till 20.30, I would attend my Masters class during the week and drive back. I have always been on the move. Finding myself confined at home for almost three months was hard. Each morning, we use to have our daily zoom meeting for Gender Links Mauritius staff prior to the virtual call with all country offices staff. We had to ensure that the residents of our shelter, Safe Haven Halfway Home, are well-equipped, safe and are following the sanitary regulations set in place.

Fortunately, we bought enough groceries for three months prior to the lockdown. In mid-February when people were speculating about potential COVID-19 cases in Mauritius, Anushka (my manager) initiated a working strategy for the shelter in case the pandemic should hit us locally. The first thing we did was to ensure that the residents had enough food and daily-use household items. We struggled to find sanitisers and face masks due to shortages. Our donors gave us gallons of hand sanitisers, packs of face masks and gloves: such a relief for us because these sanitary items would have cost a lot.

On the 24 March, the Prime Minister announced the introduction of Work Access Permits (WAP). to allow workers to travel to their workplace. I felt a sense of relief

that I would finally be able to move out from home to go to work. At the same time, I was scared of the virus. I would get mixed feelings most of the time. The situation was uncertain. Unfortunately, the system put in place for the application of the WAP did not work. We finally got the WAP after the lockdown.

At some point I thought that “the end is near”. Mauritius is such a small island and I had this constant fear because it would take very little for us all to be infected due to our small population. When I read the daily news, the rising death toll made me more worried.

We made it a must at Safe Haven to communicate all creditable information regarding the pandemic to the residents of the shelter to counter the speculations and rumors going around on social media. We needed to educate our residents about hygiene protocols and give them creditable information.

During the same period, we rolled out training on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) funded by the National Social Inclusion Foundation (NSIF). We had to request an extension to the project time frame. Other pre-set training programmes had to be postponed. The SADC Protocol@Work regional summit had to be postponed as well. We had to ensure that we give clear and concise information to our partners regarding our activities.

We did a website audit, cleaned up website pages and worked on the photo gallery. These exercises allowed me to reflect on the importance of having all our data up-to-date. We spend the year collection data which I believe we need to curate and make full use of for our project's visibility and credibility.

Lockdown was tough: I can say it over and over again. But it taught me a new routine. It allowed me time to reflect on myself. I started a roof top garden. I attended lectures online and did not miss out on any sessions. I noticed that my peers and relatives showed more compassion towards each other. We checked on each other more regularly than usual. As Idowu Koyenikan wrote: “You can't let life happen to you; you have to make life happen.”



## I never gave up

Fabian Simpaya, Gender Links Namibia Country Coordinator

“

*Most of the important things in the world have been accomplished by people who have kept on trying when there seemed to be no hope at all. ~ Dale Carnegie*

”

Windhoek, 7 February: I used to consider myself as a socially motivated person who understands other people's problems without valuing myself more. I sometimes feel like I could carry other people's problems on my shoulders, like how Jesus decided to carry our burdens so that happiness can be restored to less privileged people. The reason being that I turn to be too sympathetic towards those who are most affected.



My family was worried and criticized me for leaving my former organisation to join Gender Links (GL), they did not understand my decision. I was however able to convince them and made them understand the circumstances around the move. This affected me so much that I could not sleep well for almost two months after being appointed by Gender Links. I should thank Mme Colleen for giving me hope through her kind words of encouragement on this big step I was taking. Had it not been of her encouragement this journey could not have been possible. I was very frustrated and my frustration affected my health as well, I was as a result of this frustration diagnosed with high blood pressure.

This frustration and my health issue was caused by thinking too hard of whether I had made a good decision by taking up such a challenging move. I decided to stop worrying about everything and put my worries in God's hands praying that I gain

enough strength to manage my work and do it to the best of ability. With time I adopted to the work environment and gained enough strength to cope with my work.

Thanks to Sifisosami Dube who was my immediate supervisor for guiding me and empowering me to the point where I was able to excel in managing GL systems accurately to the desired maximum. At the beginning, the work load was too much to handle because I only had one intern who happened to be working for another institution at the same time. This situation turned me into a headless chicken, I was forced to run around on my own without any assistance, managing the country office and doing office work all by myself.

This also affected my planning efforts especially when I had to report to GL head quarters on national activities. It was critical for me reduce some burdens on myself in order to carry out my tasks to satisfy my new employer. I decided to hire a second intern and this option worked perfectly for me to manage Namibia office to where it is now.

However, HQ did not approve of this decision I made, I was asked where I got authorization to hire another intern and who will be paying this newly hired intern. I was lost for words but knowing how much I needed help at the office to reduce the work load I told Debra and Sifiso I will pay the intern from my own salary since I do not have another option.

Sifiso played a major role to make me understand GL systems and if it wasn't for her, I would have left because I was overwhelmed by the amount of work I had to do. I should not forget Bheki Ncube who encouraged me a lot as well when things were tough on my side. He would always say; Fabian get empowered, get empowered brother. This was really an encouragement he pushed me to do better and improve my work ethic. I felt empowered and told myself that I will give up but continue to do my best level. I should say that Gender Links Headquarters was very supportive to me and it wasn't a good move to give up while the support is availed.

Lately I realised that I did not come to GL for work only but this was another way of advancing my work experience and today I feel that I can manage even major tasks

on my own without any supervision rendered because I am highly empowered. It wasn't easy for me to take up such a huge challenging task of reviving Gender Links office in Namibia because it required someone with bigger capacity than I had to manage the whole office.

I first learned about Gender Links in 2013, this helped me lot in terms of programming and planning and I have learned that these are crucial elements one needs not to ignore. My first evaluation wasn't too bad at all but I was encouraged to work harder and try meet the required standard.

In this journey I have learned never to give up in life because what comes easily on your way does not produce fruits but one need to face challenges to experience success. I think my second year with Gender Links will be better and it will be a historical year for me. Planning and fundraising will be my areas of focus in 2020. Even before I joined Gender Links fully, my life changed both socially and economically during my consultancy contracts and I can see more developments coming my way.



## A Small Shelter in a time of storm

Albert Ngosa, Zambia co-ordinator

“

*Sometimes, the best way to help someone  
is just to be near them. ~ Veronica Roth*

”



2019 was a year of hope, inspiration, blessings and sorrow. Gender Links Zambia had just resumed full operation, I was ready to get in the field, ready to reunite with my old council colleagues. This was a blessing that came through a phone call from GL CEO on the eve of my cyber forensics exam. “Albert I have good news for you”. She said. “We got a little bit of funding that has enabled us to reopen the Zambia office, and I was wondering if you would like to come on board”. To cut the long story short, I am writing my Learning Journey today.

I have always believed in counting my blessings, this blessing opened more doors for me in my professional life. My new work with GL meant that I had to be a leader, a decision maker and a better multi tasker. Coming from two years of closure, meant I had to make new contacts in our area of operations and dig up the old contacts to help me run the process smoothly. Luckily, I had so much support my local partners LGAZ, my colleague, friend Isaac Zulu was always on standby to assist with the transition.

I learnt to be a country manager in a shortest possible time, the rush, the deadlines, the quick decisions to be made, and all just contributed to me being a better leader and a person. I learnt the art of patience and tolerance. I am not much of a talker, but this position required that I become more or less a talker. (Apparently talking is a survival skill). A phone call blessing with lessons indeed.

Then came the sorrows. You must know that, over the years, I have spent much time praying for those who are afflicted. Keep them safe I have prayed, heal the broken hearted I prayed, and also praying for the moms and dads, the spouses, and the many family members, all those that must face these real-life situations with one another. At times I was at a loss for words on their behalf... their storms of life were great indeed!.

You see, I have encountered storms in my life but nothing like the storm encountered on January 26th 2019. On this day I lost a dear friend, my second God, My father. He had died of a heart attack an hour right after I spoke to him. I had a choice, either to break down or be a man that he had raised me to be. I choose the latter, this meant I had to become a husband to my mom, her friend and a father to all my sisters. Talk about a three hour status change.

What was frightening was that I had become everyone's hero, but I found a shelter and comfort in my colleagues at GL. You see having a group of friends at work definitely makes life easier. Investing in colleagues at GL has helped me a great deal in developing my leadership skills, I have developed these skills through the support and development of others.

I recently discovered that the higher a person's social identification at work, the better their health and well-being. In other words, the more we feel aligned with the organisation and the stronger our relationships are with colleagues, the better off we are.

In times like this when the world is facing a greater storm of COVID19, we need more than ever to seek comfort and shelter in our colleagues. The morning checkups, the comforting zoom conversations, in short, the GL community we have formed, will surely be the best place to be, home and dry. I don't know about you, but GL has indeed been a small shelter in my time of storm.

## Navigating the learning expedition

Priscilla Maposa, Gender Links Zimbabwe Country Manager

“

*Competing is exciting and winning is exhilarating, but the true prize will always be the self-knowledge and understanding that you gained along the way.”*

~ Sebastian Coe

”

The year 2019 made me introspect into my life and my mind was seized by several achievements that justified a decade long journey with Gender Links (GL). My mind effortlessly combined big and small lessons gathered throughout the journey and made me view the 10-year voyage with satisfaction. I can



rightfully say that great lessons that shaped who I am today were not picked from a silver platter but they came through resolute attention to detail, commitment, resilience, hard work and application of lessons learnt. The 10 years of navigating the journey of gender equality with GL and other partners is worth celebrating.

I joined GL in 2009 and during that time I was working from my home office. Through guidance and good leadership skills from the Chief Executive Officer of GL, Colleen Lowe Morna, I managed to establish a fully-fledged office that grew with time to become a driver of gender mainstreaming in local authorities in Zimbabwe. Many thanks to the Embassy of Sweden in Zimbabwe for making this dream a success.

I converted some mistakes I made during the initial stages of the journey into lessons that saw GL programmes winning buy-in from key stakeholders that include the



Ministry of Local Government, Public Works and National Housing, Ministry of Women Affairs, Community, Small and Medium Enterprises Development and the Zimbabwe Local Government Association.

2010 is the year that GL started working with 10 local authorities through the Centres of Excellence (COE) programme on gender mainstreaming in local government. 2019 set a platform for multiple celebrations, that is, a decade of hard work, commitment, intense learning, implementation and rolling out of the gender mainstreaming programme to all 92 councils in Zimbabwe. Consequently, the evaluation of the COE programme in Zimbabwe resulted in the implementation of the hub and spoke programme dubbed the Dura/Isiphala programme that saw councils taking ownership of the gender mainstreaming initiative.

A handbook with my name on it was developed to guide the implementation of the hub and spoke programme. This is the second publication I have co-authored during my journey with GL. I successfully managed the hub and spoke programme and it became a flare that drew regional attention. The result was a study visit that saw GL country offices from across the SADC region coming to Zimbabwe to learn and replicate the hub and spoke programme. I derived a great lesson that direct or indirect beneficiaries must take ownership of the programme to ensure sustainability. Many thanks to the Ministry of Local Government and Public Works for making the COE programme the 'programme of choice' on gender mainstreaming at the local level.

All the achievements appearing on my profile were derived from resolute fundraising, partner management, strategic planning, teamwork and human resources management skills. The journey was not all rosy but it witnessed intermittent mistakes which I successfully turned into lessons. 2019 bears testimony to the application of fundraising and donor management skills that enabled Zimbabwe office to self-fund programme work with complementary help from head office.

As the Zimbabwe Country Manager, I continue to nature existing partnerships and establish new ones. These partnerships with funding partners, government departments, civil society organisations and local authorities have immensely contributed to my learning. They have also exposed me to further management and

strategic planning skills that strengthened coordination arrangements. The partnership with the Women in Local Government Forum and the Ministry of Local Government and Public Works helped us to accomplish the most challenging task of uniting women with differing political views for a common goal.

The greatest lesson that came out of working with women in local government is conflict management. I intend to continue applying this skill in my work until all women are united for a common goal regardless of their religious or political affiliation. The partnerships with International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) and Common Wealth Local Government Forum (CLGF) further strengthened the local government work. My coordination skills were sharpened.

Professionally I managed to achieve a lot in 2019 but that cannot be translated to mean that there were no mistakes. At a personal level, I have made a fair share of mistakes, although I no longer call them mistakes because I accepted them as lessons that anchored my success in 2019. Lastly, I no longer fear mistakes because they are the greatest obstacle to success.

Through working with GL I perfected an array of skills ranging from fundraising, partner management, strategic planning (developing annual plans and budgets), human resources management, and programme management. I feel indebted to GL because my 10 years with the organisation drastically changed my professional and personal life. I will continue using the professional and personal skills I acquired for the benefit of the organisation and society at large.

I want to thank the CEO of Gender Links Mme Colleen Lowe Morna for her unwavering support and guidance to me and to the Zimbabwe office. I have always worked directly with her since I joined Gender Links and I have learnt a lot from her. I also want to thank her for believing in me and giving me the opportunity to write publications about our local government work. I am now a co-author of two publications.

I also want to thank all Head Office managers including Sifiso Dube my former manager for the support they have given me throughout my journey with GL. To my

manager Susan Tolmay, thank you for giving me the opportunity to embark on this journey with GL and for tolerating my shortcomings back then. It feels great taking you through the fruits of the foundation you laid on gender mainstreaming work in Zimbabwe.

To all the partners, thank you for your continued support to the Zimbabwe office. Lastly to the Zimbabwe Office team (the winning team), I owe you a lot. I could not have witnessed all the success stories without your support. You remain a pillar of strength and may we continue holding on to the team spirit. Together we stand, divided we fall.



## Still learning and growing

*Tapiwa Alvin Zvaraya, Zimbabwe Monitoring and Evaluation Officer*

“

*Education without application is just entertainment. ~ Tim Sanders*

”

One day at a time, one step at a time is how I take my life (as if I was going to eat an elephant if I had to). Each day is one in which I learn something new. Whether it is about me, a friend colleague or just something new it is all learning. Looking back to 2019, well it was a year in which I found myself “doing it again for the second time”. We shall talk about that later in this text. Basically, in 2019 I discovered myself.



2019 began with the Gender Links office embarking on a new programme (the Hub and Spoke programme for gender mainstreaming) to advance our work with the 92 local authorities in Zimbabwe. I must confess that at this point and time I was not sure if it was going to work or not. That fear of the unknown always lingers in one's mind when venturing into uncharted territory. And so we found ourselves having to develop a handbook (again) for the hub and spoke programme in Zimbabwe. While it was a hands-on approach where one had to apply their knowledge and learning for eight or so years in this field, I must confess that conceptual writing is not an easy feat. However, reading through the finished product I marvel that I have another publication with my name on it. Not only will it benefit my generation but will prove to be a learning tool for future generations. As it would be the Zimbabwe office launched the Hub and Spoke programme with 16 highly motivated local authorities as Hub councils and the rest being spoke or mentee councils. I loved working with this bunch as they lightened the work we had as an office.

In 2019 the office upped the ante on the 50-50 strategy. Zimbabwe has very few women in political decision-making at the local level with only 14% of all councillors

being women. The office hosted a group of experts in elections from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) to explain to Zimbabwe how temporary special measures for women in politics would help increase the participation and representation of women in Zimbabwean politics. Personally, the presentations made got me to do a bit of reading around the topic as I am no expert in this field yet it is directly linked to my work.

2019 also saw me having to deeply engage more with the local donors. The partnership with Diakonia led to yet another partnership with the Department for International Development (DFID) with the same organization. I found myself having to apply the knowledge of the Centres of Excellence programme and fusing the work deliverables strategically so that targets could be met. Though cumbersome the experience was worthwhile. Reporting for all these donors at times was a bit confusing but as I practised more with the mentorship of my manager Priscilla Maposa (whom I owe most of my professional accomplishments to), I became better. I was ready to think outside the box. Monitoring and Evaluation became more than just data capturing. It became a tool, a go-to when in need of data. Another aspect of growth.

Apart from work, I am always looking to upgrade myself academically. In 2019 I had hopes of pursuing full-time studies in International Relations. I spent most of the later part of 2018 and early 2019 trying to get a scholarship for studies. Perhaps the one moment that I felt a little disheartened was my failure to get any of the scholarships that I had applied for. It affected me for a bit but then I thought well “I still have my career going”. My focus turned on trying to make my career work for me. I told myself that though I had failed to get the scholarship, I was going to try again because as Aaliyah once sang “If at first, you don't succeed, dust yourself off, and try again”. Wiser and more thoughtful to my being, I think now going for online studies would do me good. My focus really will be to study something gender-related. I realize I cannot let eight years of gender programming go to waste. That is a whole inventory of knowledge stored in one skull and not put to good use.

Another downward moment for me was losing my position of Secretary-General (SG) for the Harare Basketball Association (HBA). My love for basketball is second to none. Working as the SG voluntarily for the biggest province in Zimbabwe was a great achievement and honour. However, I woke up one day to a set of minutes



telling me that the clubs had decided I was not the man for the job. Well, I took it with a pinch of salt. I knew the reasons had nothing to do with the work but personal. However, I look back at some of my achievements while in that office and I am grateful for the opportunity. I learnt that in life sometimes you are your friend and it's best to walk away with honour and grace. I did that. Accepted and moved on. Now I am back to coaching (as an assistant) and I am loving every moment of it.

I would also like to thank Priscilla Maposa for her unwavering support. Besides being my manager she treats me as her brother. In her, I discovered my other family away from home. In 2019 I realized that all she does is to try and make the next person look good. Some of her positive qualities are rubbing off on me. I keep learning and walking. There's never an easy walk, or way of learning but I can assure you that giving up is the worst decision one can ever make.





## A quarter-mile at a time

*Tapiwa Zvaraya, Local Action for Gender Justice Zimbabwe Coordinator*

Harare, 5 February: Movie star Vin Diesel once famously declared that he lived his life “a quarter mile at a time.” 2020 felt like that for me.

In the first quarter of 2020 I lost two beloved family members, my grandfather (we called him Zambu after his totem) and my brother Tawanda whom we called T1.



Those were the two toughest moments for me in 2020 (other than the virus). Days before Zambu's passing on I visited him and we shared fond memories. I told him that I was visiting Chimanimani on a small assignment and I would see him on my return, a few days after New Year's Day.

Little did I know that it would be the last conversation we would have. I would see him again for the last time as we bade him farewell. The Lord had called him whilst I was on my way from Chimanimani. Ten weeks later, in March the Lord called T1, another painful loss. Life had to go on, comforted by the knowledge that time heals. I think I am getting there.

Around March COVID19 struck the nation, with Zimbabwe recording its first death. Before then the news was awash with the devastating impact of the pandemic globally, especially in the global North and in South Africa which is closer to home.

We heard many myths about how COVID-19 would have less of an impact in this hemisphere. I heard it all “good temperatures, better immune systems”. In my heart, I knew that it was going to be a tough time. As the cases rose Zimbabwe quickly went into lockdown on 30 March 2020. Lockdown would prove to be a test of mental strength and character. Luckily, I had a friend now-turned brother to stay with during that time. I also had my manager Priscilla, who would check in daily. I would not have made it if but for these people.

People had to learn and unlearn some habits. I had to learn to drink a lot more water and wash my hands more often. Sometimes during the lockdown, I missed my family and friends but we kept in touch via the phone. One of my deepest fears during lockdown concerned how work would be done. The pandemic had cut all prospects of meeting with communities and other stakeholders. Work had to be done and in “smarter” ways.

Fortunately GL transitioned quickly to working virtually because of our good information technology system. We put in many hours of qualitative work, updating the country website pages. We reflected on the work done with our local authorities since 2016. This culminated in a learning paper. I am proud to have contributed to this document.

I found myself yearning to do something new. In my free time, I looked for opportunities to further my studies, a process that I am still undergoing. I read on various areas of interest from development studies to public administration and political science, all the while thinking of how this would fit into my work should an opportunity arise. This would keep me from thinking about the pandemic.

The opportunity to go back to some kind of normalcy came in September when the government of Zimbabwe relaxed some regulations. With numerous donor deliverables, we had to come up with an execution strategy second to none. Together, with my colleagues Priscilla and Juliet we strategically thought about how we could achieve all this work in a short space of time.

It dawned on us that our best hope of meeting deliverables, which would also lead to a greater devolution of ownership in our work, would be to build the capacity of gender focal persons in local authorities. We worked with our partners to conduct local-level activities, while we worked nationally. That proved to be the best decision ever.

As a unit, we scored some big milestones including hosting the annual SADCProtocol@Work summit. As a result of our decade-long lobbying and advocacy efforts for temporary special measures at the local level the President supported a quota for women following a meeting with the Women in Local Government Forum

(WLGf). I am proud to be a part of this history. I never thought that we would achieve such a feat. This victory taught me that we must never give up, no matter the circumstances.

I had kept an eye on the COVID-19 statistics. It dawned on me that sooner rather than later the statistics would cease to become just numbers but be faces and names of people we knew. I was right. I kept telling myself that I had to be more cautious and vigilant. I told my family and friends that I loved them and because I loved them, they were not welcome at my house. We would have many more occasions to meet once this virus subsided. I hope that the vaccine comes soon. I can only look forward to a better year. I have learnt that you have to maximise the little time you have.

Work hard, play hard and love like a baby. Tomorrow is not guaranteed.



## Set your mark high

Juliet Rusawu, Zimbabwe Finance and Administration Officer

“

*Remember that you will never reach a higher standard than you yourself set. Then set your mark high, and step by step, even though it be by painful effort, by self-denial and sacrifice, ascend the whole length of the ladder of progress. ~ Ellen G White*

”



Learning is an essential habit, one that helped me swim through the various streams of life. Nobody is infallible; we all tend to make mistakes in our lives. The good thing about it is that I get to learn from all such experiences and thus end up developing.

Quite often I have to face uphill circumstances, when persistence and determination is the need of the hour. Even though I might not always end up on the brighter side of things. However, the learning that I get stays with me throughout my life. Such lifetime lessons can be termed as a 'lifelong learning'. Lifelong learning is rare yet crucial in shaping one's outlook towards life. Every event in my life has a lesson attached to it.

“Following the interviews for Finance and Administration Officer, I would like to notify you that you have been successfully selected for the post.” This was the statement that marked my journey with Gender Links in July 2018. I work as a Finance officer in Zimbabwe office. As a finance person my responsibilities are to handle all the country office finances, donor report, budgets formulations, donor budget track, processing payments and capture in pastel system among other duties.

Picking up from my predecessor was not an easy task as a great pace had been set. My main task was either to maintain or to exceed the mark that had been set. My first GL donor audit was not that pleasing as I had made a mistake of spending

EU funds in advance creating a shortfall in GLZ bank account. With this lifelong learning in my journey, I set a higher standard and made it upon myself to learn with patience all the organizational tools and systems.

The trainings that I went through with Gender Links assisted me in this journey and improved my financial skills and abilities. Gender Links helped me discover myself, my abilities and most excitingly some that I did not even know about myself. As each day passes by, this motivates me and make me look forward to my desk day in day out. I feel like there is no other place I need to be than the office. My gratitude goes to Zimbabwe office team in particular our country manager Priscilla Maposa for the patience and mentoring skills despite having her own demanding deliverables as a manager. Through her encouragement I am getting into my second year in University. I also owe thanks to GL Director of Operations, Bhekiwe Ncube, for taking me through the organisational systems and for giving me some 'difficult' tasks, he would often say “explore the task Juliet.”





## Making every day count

*Juliet Rusawu, Senior Finance Officer, Zimbabwe*

Harare, 2 March: Setting goals is the first step in turning the invisible into the visible. As in every other year I set my own goals and resolutions for 2020. When Covid-19 struck I thought it was just another pandemic that would come to pass within a short space of time.

Reality struck me when Zimbabwe recorded its first case on 20 March 2020 immediately followed by the first death in the same month as well as first lockdown. Events occurred so rapidly that I could not comprehend the situation.

I had to make arrangements for Ryan my son to come back home from university and my daughter Grace from boarding school. At the same time I was preparing to work from home and organise for best internet service provider.

As the lockdown continued the virus also became sneaky and unpredictable. We learned as we went along. I had many reservations about working from home. The “what if” syndrome dominated: what if the Internet failed; what if load shedding hit hard? At that moment we were going through an institutional audit. My biggest fear was how this was going to be remotely coordinated. Slowly things started to take shape and I learnt that the best way out is always to go through.



“Discipline is the bridge between goals and accomplishment” (Jim Rohn). Working from home taught me a high level of discipline. I learnt how to separate personal time and work time. During my first days of working from home I used to find it difficult to ignore a dirty corner of the house. I would end up in that corner.



Having one or two teams missed calls made me realise that I had a major responsibility at work and needed to diligently prioritise my duties. It reminded me of Steven Covey when he once wrote that “the key is not to prioritise what is on your schedule but to schedule your priorities”

As the lockdown continued my fears and uncertainties eased. I stopped counting the days. I made the days count. Gender Links HR wellness sessions helped me to cope. I lived, adjusted and worked in the new normal. The worries; the 'what if' questions fell away as I embraced the new environment.

The Institutional audit proceeded well and was successfully concluded. I had one major activity to look forward to at work and that was the so much talked about Summit. All my time at Gender Links colleagues always shared their amazing summit experiences which made me look forward to it.

In 2020 I attended my first ever COE summit. During the summit I got a greater appreciation and understanding of Gender Links' work. Councils shared best practices with judges hammering, encouraging and giving recommendations to local authorities.

In 2020 I reached some serious understandings in life. I grew and I matured as a person. I made new conclusions about love and humanity and the purpose that we're put here on earth.

I'm thankful to God for taking me through 2020 and bringing me out on the other side, whole and still intact. God picked me up while discipline helped pave the way forward. As I look back to the lockdown period, I now realise that it was part of my journey.

To every season, there is a reason. This too has its reason. I appreciate my colleagues Priscilla and Tapiwa for all the morning check calls and the encouragement to sail through. Now I can face any situation with courage.

## Count your blessings

When upon life's billows you are tempest-tossed,  
When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost,  
Count your many blessings, name them one by one,  
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.

Count your blessings, name them one by one,  
Count your blessings, see what God hath done!  
Count your blessings, name them one by one,  
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.

Are you ever burdened with a load of care?  
Does the cross seem heavy you are called to bear?  
Count your many blessings, every doubt will fly,  
And you will keep singing as the days go by.

Count your blessings, name them one by one,  
Count your blessings, see what God hath done!  
Count your blessings, name them one by one,  
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.

When you look at others with their lands and gold,  
Think that Christ has promised you His wealth untold;  
Count your many blessings wealth can never buy  
Your reward in heaven, nor your home on high.

Count your blessings, name them one by one,  
Count your blessings, see what God hath done!  
Count your blessings, name them one by one,  
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.

So, amid the conflict whether great or small,  
Do not be discouraged, God is over all;  
Count your many blessings, angels will attend,  
Help and comfort give you to your journey's end.

Count your blessings, name them one by one,  
Count your blessings, see what God hath done!  
Count your blessings, name them one by one,  
And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.

