



SADC HEADS OF STATE SUMMIT 2025

POLICY BRIEF

18 – 22 August 2025, Antananarivo, Madagascar



Executive summary

2025 is significant for several reasons. It is the 30th Anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action served as the global blueprint for achieving gender equality, guiding many countries toward more equitable and just societies. It is also just five years to the deadline for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Sustainable Development Goals 2024 Report paints a bleak picture, with the latest data showing that progress has either stopped or regressed across various areas despite renewed commitments.

The struggle for women's and LGBTQI rights has witnessed significant advancements over the last thirty years, challenging deeply entrenched societal norms and contributing to equality and justice across various realms. However, this progress has also provoked a strong resistance from conservative governments and movements.

These entities have engaged in a counter-response that seeks to challenge, undermine, and ultimately reverse the achievements that have been hard-won by these marginalised groups. This backlash often manifests through legislation aimed at restricting rights, public campaigns that promote discriminatory views, and various forms of societal pushback that intend to roll back the protections and freedoms that have been established. As a result, the struggle for equality has become increasingly fraught, as advocates must confront not only the ongoing fight for rights but also the efforts to dismantle the progress that has already been made.

According to the 2025 *Women's Rights in Review - 30 Years After Beijing Report*, almost one-quarter of countries reported that backlash against gender equality is hampering the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action.

While they have diverse roots and contexts, it is clear that backlash and resistance stem, above all, from the defence of the privileges enjoyed by dominant groups. Backlash has been growing in coordination and intensity, with well-resourced conservative forces organising in more coordinated ways to roll back rights in the very places that were set up to advance women's and human rights.

Backlash doesn't just slow progress—it puts women's freedom, safety and autonomy at risk. Recognising and countering it is one of the most urgent challenges facing gender justice movements today.

This moment necessitates a critical reflection by women's and feminist movements on the lessons learned from the last twenty years of organising and lobbying for the implementation of the Gender Protocol. In line with the CSF theme '*Revitalising the SADC We Want*', Gender Links will utilise the HOS to revitalise and galvanise the SADC Gender Protocol Alliance, thereby strengthening regional advocacy and fostering movement-building synergies.

Introduction

The Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) is a Regional Economic Community (REC), an intergovernmental organisation that promotes economic development, peace, security, and cooperation among member states in Southern Africa. Every year in August, the Heads of State and Government, SADC's highest decision-making body, meet annually to

discuss and decide on key regional issues. The 2025 Summit is the 45th Ordinary Heads of State and Government Summit and will take place in Antananarivo, Madagascar.

In parallel, the **Civil Society Forum (CSF)**, convened annually, under the aegis of the Southern African Regional Apex Alliance, an influential coalition comprising the Fellowship of Christian Councils in Southern Africa (FOCCISA), the Southern Africa Trade Unions Coordinating Council (SATUCC), and the Southern African Council of Non-Governmental Organizations (SAf-CNGO, formerly the SADC-CNGO), alongside allied sectoral organizations. The CSF is a space for SADC actors to reflect on, engage with, and influence the regional agenda for integration, development, and governance. This year, the forum's theme is *Revitalising the SADC We Want*.

Over the last 25 years, **Gender Links (GL)** has been at the forefront of advancing gender justice in Southern Africa, pioneering evidence-based advocacy, feminist movement-building, and public accountability. A cornerstone of this work is the **Southern Africa Gender Protocol Alliance**, a dynamic coalition of national and regional women's rights networks which GL coordinates across the 16 Southern African Development Community (SADC) member states. The Alliance has been instrumental in shaping regional gender policy, including the adoption in 2008 of the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, the only subregional instrument in the world that brings together global and continental commitments to gender equality and sets concrete targets for their achievement. In this project, GL and the Alliance will leverage their comparative advantage in tracking over 100 indicators on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Women's Political Participation (WPP), as well as climate justice in the **Southern Africa Gender Barometer**.

The 2024 SRHR Barometer, which will be launched at the CSF, reveals that, although progress has been made across the region, many countries are still far from achieving the goals outlined in the SADC Gender Protocol and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It also shows that progress is uneven in countries across the region.

The Barometer underscores the importance of the continued policy and advocacy work of the Southern Africa Gender Protocol Alliance on SRHR issues, in particular access to safe abortion, adolescent SRHR, teenage pregnancy and child marriage.

These findings demonstrate that the women's movement in SADC must intensify its efforts to safeguard the hard-won rights of women and counter regressive forces seeking to erode their fundamental human rights. Gender Links and Alliance partners will use the opportunity of the SADC HOS to strategise and recommit to vigorous advocacy, monitoring and holding our governments accountable for the commitments they have made.

Gender in SADC

The SADC Treaty, signed in 1992, includes a commitment to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment as core principles of the organisation.

Following the seminal Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action became the global blueprint for achieving gender equality. As signatories to the Platform for Action and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (CEDAW), states in the SADC are committed to having national gender policies and, in 1997, adopted the SADC Declaration on Gender and Development and its Addendum

on the Prevention and Eradication of Violence against Women in 1998. At the time, the SADC Secretariat established the Gender Unit to promote gender equality and women's empowerment within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region.

SADC Protocol on Gender and Development (SPGD)

In 2005, women's rights organisations (WROs) worked closely with the SADC Gender Unit and the SADC Parliamentary Forum to conduct an audit of how far member states had come in realising the objectives of the Declaration on Gender and Development. 2005 was a significant moment for several reasons: 1) It was the 25th Anniversary of SADC; 2) the 10th Anniversary of the Beijing Conference; 3) The year of reviewing progress towards the Millenium Development Goals (MDGs); and the deadline set in the Gender Declaration for the achievement of 30% women in all areas of decision-making.



The audit found gaps and challenges both in the existing gender policy framework and in the implementation and monitoring of the provisions in these instruments. The main recommendation from the audit was that the Heads of State elevate the non-binding Declaration to a Protocol. Lobbying started for this in 2005 at the Heads of State Summit in Gaborone, Botswana.

After three years and nine drafts, the Protocol on Gender and Development was adopted in 2008. While some gaps remained in language and contentious or taboo issues that were not included in the Protocol, it broke new ground in several areas. Most importantly, it included 28 time-bound targets against which progress could be measured.

Much has changed in the world since the Protocol was drafted in 2008, with new and urgent issues arising, such as climate justice. The world was also shifting from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, 2000-2015) to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, 2015-2030).

In 2013, the Southern African Gender Protocol Alliance mounted a concerted campaign for the region to stay abreast of global trends by reviewing the Protocol and aligning it to the SDGs. At their annual meeting in Lilongwe in 2014, gender ministers agreed to review the Protocol. A year later, in 2015, the ministers agreed that the Protocol should be aligned with the Post-2015 SDGs, the Beijing Plus Twenty Review, and the Africa Agenda 2063.

In June 2016, SADC Gender Ministers adopted the Updated SADC Gender Protocol and agreed that a strong Monitoring, Evaluation and Results Framework should accompany it.

SADC Gender frameworks and instruments to monitor implementation

Since the SADC Protocol was adopted in 2008, the SADC Secretariat Gender Unit has developed several strategies, frameworks and tools to guide member states in developing gender policies and programmes to give effect to the targets set out in the Gender Protocol and RISDP. These include:

Gender-related Strategies and Frameworks

[SADC Framework For Achieving Gender Parity in **Political and Decision-Making** Positions](#) by 2015

Revised SADC Strategic Plan of Action on **Combating Trafficking in Persons**, especially Women and Children (2016– 2023)

SADC Strategy and Framework of Action for Addressing **Gender-Based Violence** (2018-2030)

SADC Regional Strategy on **Women, Peace and Security** (2018– 2022)

Tools

SRHR Scorecard to accelerate the attainment of sexual and reproductive health and rights for the people of the SADC Region

Handbook to Promote Effective Gender-Based Violence Prevention Initiatives in the SADC Region (2022)

SADC Gender and Development **Monitor** - Women in Politics and Decision-making Positions (2022)

A draft **model law** on Gender-based violence (not final)

Draft GBV Indicators and the **GBV Scorecard** (not final)

Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP)

The [RISDP](#) is SADC's key strategic framework, outlining the organisation's objectives and priorities for promoting development and integration in the region. The SADC RISDP was first introduced in 2003 as the strategic framework to guide the development and integration efforts of the SADC region. The RISDP has since been revised and updated to align with changing priorities and challenges facing the SADC region.

The RISDP 2020–2030 has three core pillars and cross-cutting issues that cascade down to 24 strategic objectives and 48 key outcomes, with the shared ambition of contributing to the SADC Vision 2050. The three core pillars are: (1) Industrial Development and Market Integration, (2) Infrastructure Development in Support of Regional Integration, and (3) Social and Human Capital Development, anchored in a firm foundation of Peace, Security, and Good Governance. Gender is cross-cutting.



Cross-cutting Strategic Objective 1: Enhanced gender equality, as well as women's empowerment and development, and elimination of gender-based violence

Outcome 1: Increased participation of women in regional development and enhanced equal access to opportunities and gender parity

Key Interventions

1. Implementation of prioritised areas of the Protocol on Gender and Development accelerated.
2. Policies on equal access to benefits from development resources, services, and opportunities are implemented.
3. Strengthening the leadership skills of young women and creating a cadre of transformative young women leaders.
4. Women in leadership in politics and decision-making are promoted to achieve gender parity.

Outcome 2: Strengthened gender mainstreaming at both national and regional levels

Key Interventions

1. The SADC Protocol on Gender and Development is domesticated as a measure to ensure the promotion of women's empowerment.
2. A monitoring, evaluation, and reporting system to ensure effective gender mainstreaming is fully integrated into the SADC Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting System.

Outcome 3: Enhanced elimination of gender-based violence

Key Interventions

1. Implementation of the SADC Regional Gender-Based Violence Strategy and Framework for Action intensified.
2. A monitoring, evaluation, and reporting system for the Regional Gender-Based Violence Strategy and Framework for Action is fully integrated into the SADC Monitoring, Evaluation, and Reporting System.

According to the RISDP, "Progress has been achieved in the development of national gender policies, structures, guidelines, action plans, and programmes to address gender inequities and raise awareness of gender equality, gender analysis, and mainstreaming at national and regional levels. Most Member States undertook comprehensive constitutional reviews of their domestic laws to align and/or harmonise them with the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development, and all States have constitutions and statutes that outlaw discrimination based on sex. Good progress is being made towards the representation of women in political and decision-making positions at various levels of governance, though some are regressing. Most Member States have been capacitated in gender mainstreaming, and the Regional Gender Responsive Budgeting Guidelines are in use. The Protocol on Gender and Development is monitored every two years through the SADC Gender and Development Monitor. The region's commitment to gender equality needs to be translated into a sustainable and tangible reality by addressing gaps to ensure the realisation of its transformative effect on institutions, practices, and politics on the ground."

Youth at SADC HOS

Southern African Youth Forum (SAYoF)

The Southern Africa Youth Forum (SAYoF) was founded in 1994 in Harare, Zimbabwe, during the Africa Regional Conference on Population and Development.



SAYoF is a regional development platform for youth in the SADC region (16 member countries), and works with the SADC Secretariat, SADC-PF, SADC-CNGO, African Union Youth Division, national governments, and SAT, among other regional organisations, to empower young people and ensure sustainable inclusion in developmental processes. It is the official convener of the SADC Youth Forum, the largest youth gathering in Southern Africa, convened before the SADC Heads of State and Government Summit to co-create solutions for youth and ensure regional and national development that is youth-centred.

This year's youth forum, themed "**Pan-Africanism in Action: Mobilising Youth for Sustainable Development and Civic Engagement,**" will highlight the critical role of youth in shaping a sustainable future for the continent. The Forum will be hosted in Madagascar before the SADC Heads of State and Government Meeting from 15-17 August 2025.

Being organised under the Pan-Africanism, Sports, Arts, Culture, and Heritage Cluster, the Forum will emphasise the importance of cultural identity and collaboration in addressing common challenges faced by African nations. Participants will engage in discussions and workshops aimed at fostering civic engagement, promoting sustainable development practices, and encouraging active participation in governance processes.

The 7th Southern Africa Youth Forum stands as a pivotal moment for young people to actively engage with the pressing issues that shape their communities and the continent as a whole. By rallying youth around the core principles of Pan-Africanism, this forum aspires to ignite a new wave of leaders dedicated to driving sustainable development and fostering a deep sense of civic responsibility.

Non-State Actors' engagement

Since 2021, a group of regional civil society organisations has been jointly organising regional dialogues to monitor and discuss the implementation of the RISDP. At the 4th Regional Dialogue for Non-State Actors on the Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP) 2020-2030 on 14-15 August 2024 in Harare, Zimbabwe, **GL and the Alliance** co-facilitated a session on accountability and reporting for impact, emphasising feminist monitoring and evaluation. As part of the NSA Consortium, the Alliance is shaping the RISDP action plan especially Pillar Five (Cross-Cutting Issues: Gender, Youth; Climate Change and the NSA engagement mechanism), focusing on the domestication of the GBV Model Law, advocacy for the SRHR Scorecard, and the development of feminist monitoring frameworks to track gender budgets in five countries.

The NSA consortium has created an **RISDP Action Plan for NSAs** to track progress in implementing the RISDP. The extract below, from the aforementioned action plan, illustrates the work being done by the NSA consortium actors to track the progress towards achieving the objectives laid out in the RISDP.

PRIORITY ISSUE	ACTION/ACTIVITIES TO BE TAKEN
Gender/Women's Rights/GBV	
Alignment of Gender Key Performance Indicators in the RISDP	SADC Secretariat and NSAs to discuss the Revised Gender KPIs
Analysing the domestication of the Model Law on GBV in SADC countries	NSAs working with SADC to build effective implementation tools for the measures proposed in the GBV Model Law. The GBV Model Law endeavours to deal with both substantive issues and subsidiary matters to guide SADC MS on the extent of the law to be enacted by National Legislatures.
Regional Strategy for Addressing Gender-Based Violence to ensure compliance	Tracking of SADC GBV scorecards
SRHR / Health	
Monitor implementation and reporting on the SRHR Strategy and Scorecard and Regional SRHR commitments	Participate in regional and national reporting processes on the scorecard and share findings from the regional report. Generate national policy briefs (Zambia and Zimbabwe)
Youth empowerment	
Quota system for youth representation in key decision-making and governance platforms adopted and implemented	NSA engagement with the SADC Secretariat in the development and adoption of this quota
SADC Protocol on Youth was developed, and ratified with monitoring mechanisms in place	MS that have ratified and domesticated the SADC Youth Protocol by 2030
Gender to be cross cutting	
Climate Change	
Anticipation of climate-related risks, planning and preparedness for disasters – Revision of Climate Change Strategy by 2027	NSAs to establish the status of climate change strategy NSAs to engage the SADC Secretariat and MS on disaster and risk reduction (DRR) (in particular, development-humanitarian peace nexus, resilience and traditional knowledge)
Monitoring of enforcement of climate-related laws	Advocacy for the establishment of special courts and tribunals for climate-related laws.
Development of a SADC PF Model Law on Climate Change	Alignment of Climate Laws in the region Development of an ML on Climate Change

PRIORITY ISSUE	ACTION/ACTIVITIES TO BE TAKEN
	Policy Brief on energy inclusive of transition mineral extraction and renewable energy technologies transfer
SADC NSA Engagement	
Operationalisation of the SADC NSA Engagement Mechanism	Publication of the Mechanism on the SADC website; NSAs to assess how they are organised at national levels and consider how to strengthen coordination; draft self-regulation parameters.
Establishment/ strengthening of SNCs	NSAs to advocate for the establishment/strengthening/inclusivity of SNCs. GIZ-SNRL to provide learning opportunities and support to encourage establishment/strengthening of SNCs. MS to adopt the SNC blueprint
Regional Poverty Observatory	Follow up with the SADC Secretariat on the learnings from the Regional Poverty Observatory
Development of a Regional Barometer on Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights implemented	NSAs to input into the development of barometer – (period 2022-24)

This provides an existing framework and creates an opportunity for all actors and stakeholders to work together to achieve the RISDP objectives.



#PushForward4Equality - Policy and campaign priorities

Since 2019, the Gender Protocol Barometer has focused on Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). The Barometer measures 100 indicators covering menstrual health, maternal health, family planning, adolescent sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), HIV and AIDS, GBV, harmful practices and sexual diversity.

The 2024 SRHR Barometer reveals that, although progress has been made across the region, many countries are still far from achieving the goals outlined in the SADC Gender Protocol and related SADC Frameworks and plans, as well as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It also shows that progress is uneven in countries across the region. It highlights the importance of the continued policy and advocacy work of the Southern Africa Gender Protocol Alliance on SRHR issues, in particular access to safe abortion, adolescent SRHR, teenage pregnancy, child marriage and LGBTQI rights.

This Barometer shows that the women's movement in SADC must redouble its efforts to protect the hard-won rights of women and resist regressive forces attempting to restrict their fundamental human rights.

Gender Day at the SADC CSF 2025

The 2025 CSF at the SADC Heads of State Summit in Madagascar presents a significant platform for the Alliance to initiate the RISDP, Beijing +30, and Sustainable Development Goal Five awareness, with a commitment to ongoing advocacy through 2026, including at the Women 20 and G20 summits to be held in South Africa in October and November 2025.

Under the banner #PushForward4Equality Gender Links, the protocol Alliance and partners will convene a **Gender Day at the CSF 2025**.

The Alliance and partners will use the opportunity to engage and strategise on advancing women's rights across six areas:

1. Women's Political Participation
2. GBVF and Harmful Practices
3. Sexual and reproductive rights
4. Economic justice
5. WASH and climate justice
6. Gender and inclusion
7. Gender, media and ICTs

Objectives

1. **Create a platform for open dialogue** between women's rights organisations, civil society, state actors, and other stakeholders to share perspectives, challenges, and solutions related to gender equality and women's empowerment.
2. **Strengthen partnerships** and build relationships to support the implementation of regional and national gender strategies, in particular the RISDP.
3. **Review and assess progress** toward implementing the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
4. **Identify current and emerging challenges** that hinder the achievement of gender equality and women's empowerment in the region.
5. **Identify key gender gaps and priority intervention areas** for regional action, ensuring alignment with existing frameworks and strategies.

Partners



SADC Gender Protocol Alliance is a coalition of civil society groups across all 16 SADC states, a regional "network of networks" that has been instrumental in advocating for policy reforms aligned with the SADC Protocol on Gender and Development. Their efforts have led to tangible legal advancements in gender equality, including the enactment of domestic violence laws and the establishment of quotas for women's political representation in multiple countries. Since 2009 the Alliance has been actively engaged in policy reform and monitoring progress in achieving the targets through research and advocacy.

Women of the South Speak Out is a five-year project funded by the **Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO)**. Through fellowships, WOSSO's backbone of nearly 200 fellows, aged 18 to 35, from diverse countries, regions, and backgrounds, offers unique world views and amplifies the voices of women and girls from the Global South. Through the #PushForward4Equality, WOSSO Fellows will raise awareness and document the experiences and stories of resistance strategies and collaboration that drive progressive change.



AFRICAN
WOMEN'S
DEVELOPMENT
FUND

African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) is funding GL to enhance its advocacy initiatives across Southern Africa through the **#PushForward4Equality** campaign, which aligns with the global movement for gender equality. This project is designed to strengthen regional advocacy, enhance digital and foster movement-building synergies.

The **Marang Fund** (Marang means "rays of light" in Setswana) is a new **EU-funded** initiative to strengthen LBTIQ organisations and their work in Botswana, Lesotho, Madagascar, Mauritius, and Namibia, with advocacy initiatives stretching across Southern Africa. Through small grants, capacity building, and storytelling, the Fund supports bold advocacy, safe spaces, and legal reforms that advance equality and justice.



The United Nations' electoral assistance project, implemented by the **UNDP** through the Renforcement des processus électoral et démocratique à Madagascar (RPEDEM), supports efforts to strengthen Madagascar's electoral ecosystem by working with national institutions, civil society, and local actors involved in the country's democratic processes. Guided by a commitment to national ownership and localisation, RPEDEM applies a multidimensional and adaptive approach that spans the entire electoral cycle. The project aims to foster trust among stakeholders, expand the inclusive participation of women, youth, and persons with disabilities, and strengthen democratic governance. It contributes to the advancement of key Sustainable Development Goals, including gender equality (SDG 5), partnerships for the goals (SDG 17), and peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16).

Ipas Francophone Africa works globally to advance reproductive justice by expanding access to legal abortion and contraception. In collaboration with national, international and community-based partners, Ipas's Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa regional program is working with eight Francophone nations—Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Madagascar, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo—to overcome political and cultural barriers and significantly expand programs providing safe abortion. Ipas also works with diverse partners to train and educate legal professionals, youth activists and leaders in sexual and reproductive health and rights to build a network of committed champions for safe, legal abortion.





Southern African Council of Non-Governmental Organisations (SAf-CNGO), formerly the Southern African Development Community of Non-Governmental Organisations (SADC-CNGO), is a regional umbrella body of national associations of NGOs operating in all the 16 Member States of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC). Under the aegis of the Southern

African Regional Apex Alliance, an influential coalition comprising the Fellowship of Christian Councils in Southern Africa (FOCCISA), the Southern Africa Trade Unions Coordinating Council (SATUCC), and the Southern African Council of Non-Governmental Organizations SAf-CNGO, alongside allied sectoral organizations, the Civil Society Forum (CSF) is organised annually to promote discourse, solutions, and capacity building for civil society in the SADC region.

Participation

- Alliance members
- WOSSO Fellows
- Marang Fund grantees
- National and regional WROs
- National and regional CSOs
- Faith-based and community-based organisations
- Development partners and donor agencies
- Media organisations
- SADC institutions and political leadership

Outputs

1. Policy and campaign priorities and action plans for the six thematic areas
2. Strategy for the Alliances' engagement on the RISDP and NSA engagement mechanism.

Intended Outcomes

1. A **stronger, more unified women's rights and feminist movement** across the region. Alliance membership expands the participation of youth, LGBTQI individuals, rural women, informal workers, and sex workers, ensuring the Alliance reflects the diversity of the movement.
2. Marginalised voices are amplified through the **#PushForward4Equality** campaign, which tackles barriers to equality and challenges gendered disinformation through targeted advocacy and movement-building, spotlighting survivor stories and countering backlash and online harassment through partnerships with feminist influencers and media.
3. **Enhanced advocacy and policy reform** through demanding stronger implementation of the SADC Gender Protocol at high-level forums, to push for concrete commitments on women's political quotas, GBV laws, and economic rights. Grassroots mobilisation will pressure governments to adopt policies like paid parental leave and access to credit for women entrepreneurs.
4. A **permanent platform for storytelling and knowledge-sharing**, joint strategising, and collective action, significantly enhancing the effectiveness of women's rights organisations in holding governments accountable.

References material/Further Reading