



## Gender Links

Don't Get Angry, Get Smart



## Gender Links - for equality and justice

From the outside, the unassuming red-brick house in Johannesburg's southern suburbs does not look like much. From the street, it would be near impossible to guess that these are the offices of one of Southern Africa's leading women's rights organisations.

Gender Links is a small organisation with a large footprint, with over 600 partners in ten countries, all working towards the promotion of women's rights in the region.

Gender Links CEO Colleen Lowe Morna is no stranger to advocacy work. She started her career as a journalist specialising in gender and development. After South Africa's first democratic elections in 1994, she became an advisor on gender and institutional development. "We like to say we work from the grassroots all the way up to the elephant," she laughs.

This approach is necessary, says Morna. "The main challenge working in the gender space is the reality gap. There is a marked difference between constitutions, legislation, policy and the lived realities of women."

Morna says it is widely accepted that it is difficult to see the results and impact of gender justice work on paper. Gender Links, however, might be an exception to this. From work with grassroots organisations to policy change at state level, the sheer scope and breadth that Gender Links operates on is hard to comprehend. "Gender Links acts as a big sister to smaller organisations, who are in turn empowered to mentor others," she explains. "Our work is to build the capacity of our little sisters."

While the stories of individual stories of women who have benefitted through Gender Links programmes are significant, the organisation's impact is also evident in its numbers. The Gender and Governance programme, spearheaded by Gender Links, has put gender on the local government agenda. There are now 432 councils in ten countries recognised as Centres of Excellence for Gender in Local Government.

These local councils have committed to work towards 50/50 representation at local government level, while furthering gender responsive budgeting and service delivery. These councils cover a population of around 40 million people, approximately 34% of the population in the ten countries they are located in.

"We can't just start talking about representation of women in government at a national level in parliament," Morna explains. "But it's also not enough to talk about representation among local government councillors. We need to look at women's political participation as a whole. That includes the committees that deal with water and sanitation and housing and all other things."

Participation, transformation and access go hand in hand, and each has an effect on the other. While women make up the majority of voters in most countries, they are the least represented in government and in the media when political issues are being discussed. "A gender responsive local government or local council has power to implement real change," explains Morna. "Sometimes women can be protected from violence through something as simple as trimming the grass and bushes on the routes they must travel, installing street lights or enabling the creation of safe spaces."



Morna says the importance of equal representation is no longer contested. “Nobody is questioning the principle anymore,” she explains. “What is needed is known. It has been accepted. The question is not what or why anymore. The question is how.”

As to the how, Morna says it’s not necessary to look too far. “We don’t need to look to the West or to the East for solutions. We just need to look in our own region - all the answers are here.”

Monitoring tools pioneered by Gender Links and its partners include a tool to measure violence against women that has been tested in seven SADC countries, as well as a barometer to track progress made towards achieving gender equality in the SADC region. Through the use of citizen scorecards and local government self-score cards, organisations and municipalities can now better track their performance when it comes to gender responsive service delivery.

Gender Links has helped more than 1 300 survivors of sexual abuse and domestic violence to reclaim their lives through entrepreneurial training under the banner of The Sunrise Campaign - a project of new dawns and renewed hope. The campaign is also linked to local economic development and partners with local councils to provide women with support, mentorship and access to finance and infrastructure.

According to an assessment of the pilot phase of the Sunrise Campaign, 91% of participants completed a business plan and 79% followed through with that plan, leading to a US\$1 million (or 66%) increase in overall income as a result of this project. The project empowers participants. Many start businesses, expand existing businesses, open bank accounts and make use of technology like emails to drive economic activity. Of the participants, 85% reported experiencing less or much less violence, showing that sustainable solutions to tackle violence against women can change lives and deliver agency to those affected.

Since the organisation started 15 years ago, Morna says it has reached more than 120 000 direct beneficiaries. Gender Links works with 108 Centres of Excellence for Gender in Media Education, including 12 public broadcasters and 11 media training centres.

Gender Links Head of Monitoring and Evaluation, Fanuel Hadzizi, admits that the numbers are impressive, but also says the numbers do not measure the real impact. “We need to look at the stories. They show more than the data ever will.”

One such story is of a woman in Lusaka who, after attending entrepreneurial training, noticed the state of the public bathrooms at the City Hall. She approached local government with a business proposal to clean and manage their public toilets. According to Hadzizi, this is an example of success in terms of the entrepreneurial training, as well as working with local councils to implement gender responsive governance and budgeting.





This is just one of their successes. “The challenge in an NGO space is often that we feel like we’re doing too much work with too little support or resources, and that what we are doing we are doing badly,” explains Morna. “Our challenge and aim now has been to do more with less, but to do it better!”

Director of Programmes at Gender Links, Magdeline Madibela, acknowledges the enormity of the work that the organisation takes on. “Nowhere else in the world has an NGO taken on local government and local governance on this scale,” she says, shaking her head.

She admits that the scope is daunting. “The sheer breadth scares us, but breadth is not enough - now we want depth as well.” Madibela says to achieve this depth, they need to increase support to their partners, build agency and empower others to function autonomously. The programmes should have prevention as a focus.

Madibela says through the Sunrise Campaign, which focuses on building life skills and expanding entrepreneurial prowess, nearly 7 000 direct beneficiaries have been reached. Of 66% were women and girls, 43% under the age of 30, 5% were differently-abled and 1% were gender non-conforming.

Gender Links aims to continue doing the work, ‘from the grassroots to the elephant’ to bring about societal change and bridge the gap between policy and practice when it comes to women’s rights. Through their involvement with partner organisations, governments and networks, they want to ensure that the gender lens remains in place, tinting the view of the future and the road ahead.

