



30 Women in Local Government: Celebrating CLGF's 30th Anniversary

Featured Interviewee #18: Her Excellency Gladys Wanga

Governor of Homa Bay County, Kenya



Profile

Gladys Wanga is the Governor of Homa Bay County, Kenya, and a trailblazing leader known for breaking barriers in national and county politics. Born and raised in Kisumu County, she rose from humble beginnings to become one of Kenya's most influential

women leaders. She holds a BSc and MSc in Health Management from Kenyatta University and has over a decade of experience in development and health project management.

Gladys made history in 2013 as the first Woman Representative for Homa Bay County and was re-elected unopposed in 2017. She has since held several national leadership roles, including Chair of the Finance and National Planning Committee of the National Assembly - the first woman to do so. In 2022, she became the first woman elected Governor of Homa Bay County.

Currently serving as National Chairperson of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), Governor Wanga is a strong advocate for inclusive governance, women's empowerment, and public service leadership.

Gladys Wanga

Governor, Homa Bay County,
Kenya

Interview Highlights

1. How has the role of women in local government evolved over the past three decades, and how do you think women can accelerate action for gender equality today?

Under the previous constitution, local government operated as a ministerial department of the national government. Although civic wards were designated as electoral units, local governments in the form of councils, from rural areas to municipalities and cities, were granted little autonomy. The structure was heavily patriarchal, with only a few women serving as councillors. Aside from Grace Onyango and Margaret Kenyatta, Kenya has had no other women rise to the position of mayor.



The introduction of devolution completely transformed the local government structure. Now, we have county governments that manage their own local affairs. This change has provided women with more opportunities for participation and leadership roles, including positions as Members of the County Assembly, Members of the County Executive, and governors. More women need to step forward and challenge the male-dominated landscape of local leadership. I am proud that my county, Homa Bay, has achieved the two-thirds gender law requirement in both the assembly and the executive.

2. What inspired you to enter local government, and how has your journey advanced gender equality in your community or country?

First and foremost, there was a significant leadership gap. Homa Bay County needed someone to guide them forward, and I felt ready to step up and take action. I was driven by a passion to be a changemaker, and I believed that starting at the local level was the best way to make an impact. I was also inspired by the trailblazers who came before me, such as the late Phoebe Asiyo and other women leaders who broke barriers and made their mark in history.

I am the first and only woman governor from my ethnic background in all of western Kenya. I work with 18 women in the 54-member county assembly, six of whom were elected just like me. Additionally, I work alongside three women in the county executive team of ten. Many other women have also taken the initiative to compete for leadership roles.

3. What has been your most rewarding experience as a woman leader in local government, and how did it contribute to promoting gender equality?

My most rewarding experience has been witnessing how my decision to run for office and ultimately win has inspired younger women to pursue their dreams. Along with fulfilling my promises to the community, I believe my greatest legacy will be the positive impact I have made on lives and the inspiration I have provided to a new generation. My advocacy for gender equality has produced significant results. The Singand Nyinam Women Convention has encouraged women to become mentors for girls. Additionally, we have worked to enhance the economic empowerment of women, addressing the economic gap between men and women.

4. What challenges did you face as a woman entering local government, and how did you overcome them? What can be done to accelerate overcoming these barriers for future women leaders?

In politics, women often find themselves in a challenging position, having to exert twice the effort to achieve even half the outcomes that their male counterparts can secure with relative ease. This disparity is further compounded by deep-rooted cultural barriers, financial hurdles, and societal perceptions that collectively hinder women from pursuing leadership roles. I, too, encountered these challenges within my own community, which is steeped in patriarchal traditions. Convincing the electorate to choose a woman for any leadership position is a daunting task, let alone pursuing the esteemed role of governor. However, through unwavering persistence and steadfast consistency, I ultimately triumphed.



I assembled a dynamic team and established a grassroots network dedicated to advocating for my vision and ideals, successfully positioning me as the most qualified candidate, regardless of my gender. This journey underscored a crucial truth: often, the only real solution lies in changing the mindset. Women must begin to recognize and project themselves as equally capable leaders, possessing the skills and vision necessary to lead effectively. Additionally, we must advocate for and implement progressive laws that create a more equitable landscape, empowering women to compete on equal footing in the political arena.

5. What advice would you give to other women considering a career in local government to help them accelerate gender equality in their communities?

My advice to women considering a career in leadership in Homa Bay is simple: believe in your voice, invest in your skills, and never underestimate your influence. Leadership begins with the courage to step forward and serve.

Women must actively seek education, mentorship, and leadership opportunities, while also building strong support networks. In our communities, change happens when women engage consistently - in governance forums, development committees, school boards, and community organizations.

It is also important for women to understand that leadership is not about perfection but about presence, persistence, and purpose. Every woman who stands up to lead becomes a role model for many others, especially young girls who are watching closely. By leading with integrity, compassion, and competence, women can accelerate gender equality and shape more inclusive communities.

6. How can we encourage more women, particularly young women, to enter leadership roles in local government, and what actions can governments take to create more inclusive environments for women?

Encouraging young women into leadership starts with early mentorship, education, and exposure. Girls need to see women in leadership positions and hear their stories, challenges, and successes. School mentorship programs, leadership clubs, scholarships, and internship opportunities within government institutions are powerful entry points.

Governments can create inclusive environments by enforcing gender-responsive policies, supporting women candidates, funding leadership training programs, strengthening gender desks, and ensuring women-friendly workplaces. This includes providing childcare support, flexible working arrangements, and safe working environments free from harassment and discrimination. Additionally, intentional investment in adolescent girls through education, health, digital skills, and economic empowerment, builds a strong pipeline of future women leaders.



7. Why is it urgent to increase the number and influence of women in local government, and how will this contribute to positive change in governance?

Increasing women's participation in local government is urgent because women experience development challenges differently and bring unique solutions. Women leaders prioritize inclusive service delivery, social protection, healthcare, education, water access, and protection for vulnerable groups.

When women are at the decision-making table, governance becomes more responsive, accountable, transparent, and people-centered. Studies consistently show that women's leadership leads to better development outcomes, improved social cohesion, and stronger community trust.

In Homa Bay, increasing women's influence in governance has directly strengthened our efforts to combat challenges such as early teen pregnancy, gender-based violence, poverty, and health disparities.

8. How has digital technology helped or can help accelerate women's political inclusion in local government, and what steps should we take to make it more accessible to women in leadership?

Digital technology has become a powerful equalizer for women's political inclusion in Homa Bay. Social media platforms, digital communication tools, and mobile technology allow women leaders to engage communities, mobilize support, advocate policies, and share information quickly and affordably.

Technology has also expanded access to leadership training, governance information, and networking opportunities beyond geographical barriers. To make technology more accessible, local governments must invest in digital literacy training for women, affordable internet connectivity, access to smart devices, and community digital hubs. Creating women-centered digital platforms for civic engagement, stakeholder engagement, and leadership development will further strengthen women's voices in governance.

9. What innovative practices or strategies have you used to accelerate women's participation and leadership in local government in your region or country?

In Homa Bay, we have prioritized mentorship, economic empowerment, education support, and community engagement as key strategies to accelerate women's leadership. We have supported women's economic groups through group financing, training, and market access, recognizing that economic independence strengthens leadership confidence. We have also invested heavily in girls' education, scholarships, and sanitary towel programs to reduce school dropouts.

Through community dialogues, mentorship programs, leadership training workshops, and targeted policy reforms, we have created platforms that amplify women's voices and nurture emerging leaders across political, administrative, and grassroots levels.



10. As CLGF celebrates 30 years, what actions must be taken in the next 30 years to ensure the continued empowerment of women in local government?

Over the next 30 years, we must institutionalize gender equality in governance systems. This includes strengthening affirmative action policies, expanding leadership development programs, investing in girls' education, and scaling up women's economic empowerment initiatives. We must also prioritize digital inclusion, climate leadership training for women, youth mentorship pipelines, and stronger accountability mechanisms to ensure sustained progress. Most importantly, we must shift societal mindsets by normalizing women's leadership, celebrating female role models, and building intergenerational mentorship structures that nurture future women leaders.

If we remain intentional, bold, and collaborative, the next 30 years can deliver transformational leadership by women across the Commonwealth and in Homa Bay County.

CLGF 30th Anniversary Commemoration

In celebration of CLGF's 30th Anniversary, we are honoured to spotlight the inspiring stories of 30 trailblazing women in local government from across the Commonwealth, all members of the Commonwealth Women in Local Government Network. These interviews celebrate their groundbreaking contributions to gender equality and their transformative impact on building inclusive, empowered communities.

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