

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

Featured Interviewee #10: Charmaine St John

Mayor, Santa Lucija, Malta



Profile

Charmaine St John is a commercial airline captain with over 17,000 flying hours, currently flying the Airbus A320 and serving as Vice President of the Airline Pilots Association (ALPA) Malta. She holds a B. Com and a master's in governance and Corporate Management from the University of Malta.

In 2019, she was elected Mayor of Santa Lucija, where she is now serving her second term, dedicated to improving residents' quality of life and maintaining the locality's greenery and cleanliness. She also runs her family-owned pharmacy, continuing a legacy started by her late father.

Outside of work, Charmaine is an avid runner and gym enthusiast, a passionate animal lover, and above all, a proud mother of three.

Charmaine St John

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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?

Over the past three decades, women's representation in local government has increased dramatically, with Malta seeing 27% female candidates in the 2024 local elections and seven female mayors elected across 68 councils. Women in leadership roles serve as role models, helping to normalize female participation in politics, much like the gradual acceptance of women in male-dominated fields such as aviation. To accelerate gender equality, women leaders can anticipate and address barriers to participation, such as providing childcare support for councillors attending evening meetings. Initiatives like the NCPE's *Taking Gender Equality to Local Communities* project also help raise awareness through workshops and community events. Persistent cultural beliefs that women should prioritize family over career continue to create pressure, but local governments can counter this by promoting flexible work and work-life balance. Mechanisms such as *gender corrective measures*, already used in Malta's general elections, could further support women's political participation at the local level.

Charmaine St John (Malta)



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

Inspired by a national push to encourage more women to contest elections in 2019, I entered local government to bring my management and leadership experience to serve my community of Santa Lucija. My motivation was to give a voice to residents who were often unheard, address issues such as environmental sustainability and cleanliness, and foster a stronger sense of belonging among residents. Serving as mayor has helped challenge the perception that politics is a male domain, demonstrating that women can hold authority and bring valuable perspectives to local governance. Women leaders often raise issues that might otherwise be overlooked - such as community safety, education, and care for the elderly - ensuring policies are more inclusive. I am particularly proud that in our council, women now make up 69% of elected representatives, showing real progress toward gender balance and proving the value of women's participation in building stronger, more equitable communities.

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

For me, the most rewarding experiences in local government come from making a tangible difference in residents' daily lives, often through small but meaningful actions. In Santa Lucija, with its ageing population, I've focused on easing the challenges faced by the elderly. One initiative I am particularly proud of is introducing a free electric van service to help seniors attend medical appointments - something that might seem simple but has been life-changing for many who struggle with technology or transport. I also collaborate with Active Ageing Organisations to create activities that combat loneliness and strengthen community bonds. Alongside my council colleagues, I've worked to protect our locality from unsustainable development and enhance public spaces, including the regeneration of the Sculpture Garden. By serving effectively as a female mayor, I help normalise women in leadership, showing that governance is gender-free and that women can be catalysts for meaningful, inclusive change.

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?

Politics in Malta has historically been very male dominated, and so one of the challenges I faced was the perception of people that decision-making roles belonged more to 'men' than to 'women'. Another challenge was the perception of people that I had too many roles to juggle with. They assumed that it would be difficult for me to juggle with family, work, and political commitments. The way to overcome such barriers is to prove to people that it is important to have a good work-life balance, while sharing family responsibilities with your partner. Although I can fly a plane, I am not able to cook, so my husband had to assume this role, and by doing this, I have more time to focus on other things. We must understand that women should not 'do it all' without support.

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

As a first it is important that the women believe in themselves and believe that their voice matters. Our experiences and values are required for the decision-making of the community. A woman's approach to reaching a decision is usually more emphatic and residents based. The leadership role must also be used as a platform to bring women, youths and other groups into consultations which lead to the decision-making process. *Making oneself visible encourages*



women and young girls to believe that they too can take a leadership role. It is also important to mentor young women to have prospective leaders. It is important to know that equality does

not happen by change. Equality happens because some people decide to step forward and reshape leadership and the decision-making process.

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?

The government has already implemented diverse measures to create more inclusive environments for women. Amongst such measures are *child-care services* during meetings, and *meetings/ sittings being shifted to predictable hours*. However other means must be implemented to make sure female participation increases. The *gender corrective mechanism* should address particular councils where fewer than a third of councillors are females. It is also important that *digital participation* is allowed at council level. This was allowed during COVID-19 and post-COVID for a couple of months. Local Council meetings are usually held during the week, after 5pm. Allowing digital participation decreases any inconvenience which may be perceived by anyone wishing to be part of the local government. It is also very important to *review the councillors honoraria and offer special grants* which encourage a targeted audience, such as *grants on female leadership courses*. Such grants were already offered in 2018 when the Local Council Association offered a 30% refund on specific courses taken up by councillors and local council staff, such as Diploma's / Degrees in Management and Good Governance. Offering such grants would also signify better quality of decision making at a local governmental level. I took advantage of such a scheme to obtain my MSc in Governance and Management.

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?

Women make up 50% of the population, so the fact that there are less than 50% of females in any decision-making board means that females are underrepresented, and that any decision taken is not necessarily gender balanced. Women have different traits and characteristics to men and often bring a different outlook to issues such as education, health, care and safety. When females participate in leadership, any policy created is usually more likely to reflect the needs of family and vulnerable groups. It is urgent to increase the number of women in local government because locally, progress towards equality has been slower than expected. Increasing women's influence in local government is also about building a stronger, more-inclusive community.

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 helps participation of any gender by saving on time and costs. 1) It helps in the initial phase by being able to *create a lower-cost campaign*. Social platforms can create a lower-cost outreach. 2) It *saves on time* through hybrid/ online meetings and consultations. This reduces the time to location barrier. Digital technology can be made more accessible to women leaders by offering digital tech workshops specifically for women leaders, where mentors can guide them in applying technology effectively in their leadership work. New



digital systems being developed should also include women -leaders in the testing phase so that tools reflect the needs.

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

Santa Lucija does not have a uniquely tailored program, however we apply all national initiatives. However, the local council's own efforts such as creating safe, inclusive community open spaces and engaging our youth in civic identity lays a groundwork for nurturing future women leaders.

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 keep on working across policy, culture, education and technology so that women not only enter politics but also thrive in it and lead with influence. We must improve the gender parity laws and quotas and improve our work-life balance policies. In the next 30 years we need women in politics to be the norm. Empowerment will shift from 'increasing numbers' to 'transforming governance culture'.

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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