

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

Featured Interviewee #12: Esther Amina Sagawa

Mayor of Lilongwe City, Malawi



Profile

Councilor Esther Amina Salim Sagawa, 31, is the Mayor of Lilongwe, a vibrant city of nearly one million residents. A dedicated public servant and mother of two, she is also

a passionate youth leader committed to inclusive governance and sustainable urban growth.

With qualifications in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), entrepreneurship, leadership, and professional marketing, Mayor Sagawa brings a strong skills base to her role. Her vision for Lilongwe is to create a modern, people-centered city where residents, especially young people, are actively engaged in shaping its future.

Her priorities include improving city administration and infrastructure, promoting education and skills development, supporting youth empowerment initiatives, and advancing environmental stewardship through cleanliness drives and tree-planting campaigns.

Mayor Sagawa's leadership reflects her belief that empowered citizens, particularly young people, are key to building a resilient, inclusive, and thriving Lilongwe.

Esther Amina Sagawa

Mayor of Lilongwe City, Malawi

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 three decades, we've shifted from being rare tokens to essential voices. More women are now elected and appointed, moving beyond "soft" portfolios to finance, infrastructure, and leadership. This presence alone isn't enough. To accelerate equality, women in office must be deliberate mentors and sponsors for other women. We must champion policies that address systemic barriers—like affordable childcare and safe public transport—freeing more women to participate in public life. Our advocacy must be loud, united, and uncompromising, ensuring gender equality is not an afterthought but a central metric of good governance.



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

I was inspired by a simple yet powerful desire: to see public services work for everyone, especially women and girls who bear the brunt of urban challenges like poor sanitation and inaccessible markets. My journey advanced gender equality by demonstrating that a woman can effectively lead a major city. I consciously appointed women to key council committees and championed participatory budgeting, which gave women's groups a direct say in resource allocation. My presence in the highest office normalised women's leadership, inspiring a generation to see local government as their space.

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 was launching a city-wide public toilet and washroom initiative designed with women's safety and hygiene needs in mind. This directly addressed a critical gap, making the city more inclusive. Furthermore, seeing young girls point at me during public events and say, "I want to be Mayor too," was profoundly moving. It demonstrated that my leadership was actively dismantling stereotypes and expanding the realm of possibility for women, proving that leadership has no gender.

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?

I faced significant cultural bias and the constant need to prove my capability in a male-dominated arena. My authority was sometimes questioned in ways my male counterparts never was. I overcame this through unwavering competence, building a coalition of allies—both men and women—who valued merit over gender, and by developing a thick skin. I focused relentlessly on delivering tangible results for my constituents, which became my most powerful tool to silence detractors and earn public trust.

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

Start where you are. Engage with your local council on issues you are passionate about - this builds your credibility and network. Do not wait for an invitation; step forward. Find mentors but also be a mentor to others. Once in office, use your position intentionally: mainstream gender in all policies, from public works to budgeting. Your lived experience as a woman is a unique asset, not a weakness. Be bold, be prepared, and remember that every decision you make can be a step toward a more equal community.

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?

We must demystify local government through targeted mentorship, internships, and "shadow-a-leader" programs for young women in schools and universities. Governments and parties must enact and enforce quotas or targets for women candidates. Critically, we must create inclusive environments by implementing strict codes of conduct against harassment, offering flexible meeting times, and providing leadership training that builds confidence and skills. We must show young women that their voices are not just welcome, but essential for a thriving democracy.



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?

Local government is where policy touches people's lives most directly. When women are absent, the specific needs of women, girls, and families—from street lighting to maternal health clinics—are often overlooked. Increasing women's numbers and influence is urgent because it leads to more holistic, equitable, and effective governance. It ensures public resources are allocated fairly, building more resilient communities. Simply put, we cannot achieve sustainable development with half our population excluded from the decision-making table.

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 is a game-changer. Social media allows women to build a platform and engage constituents directly, bypassing traditional gatekeepers. E-governance platforms enable women, especially those with domestic responsibilities, to participate in public consultations from home. To make it more accessible, we must invest in digital literacy programs for women and ensure affordable internet access. We should also leverage technology for online reporting of gender-based harassment and violence in politics, creating safer spaces for women's participation.

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

We pioneered "Community Action Planning" sessions held in the evenings and in local communities, making it easier for women to attend. We also established a Women's Advisory Board to the council, ensuring a formal channel for women's collective voices on all major projects. Furthermore, I used my platform to publicly celebrate and mentor the next generation of female leaders, creating a visible pipeline of talent and normalizing women's ambition in the political sphere.

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?

The next 30 years must focus on moving from representation to transformation. We must institutionalize gender equality by mandating gender-responsive budgeting at all local levels. We need robust, enforceable laws against violence and harassment in politics. Leadership must be cultivated early through global mentorship networks linking established and emerging female leaders. Finally, we must champion a "50/50 by design" goal, where gender parity in local councils is not an aspiration but a fundamental design principle of local democracy worldwide.

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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Esther Amina Sagawa (Malawi)