

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

### Featured Interviewee #11: Kanungwe Chota Mayor of Kanchibiya, Zambia



#### Profile

**Kanungwe Chota** is the Mayor of Kanchibiya, Zambia, and the first woman to hold this office. A passionate advocate for inclusive governance, she also serves as Vice-President of the Local Government

Association of Zambia (LGAZ) and Chairperson of the African Women's Climate Action Network, where she champions women's leadership in climate action across the continent.

She is an Amujae Fellow under the Ellen Johnson Sirleaf Presidential Center, a former member of Zambia's Gender Equality Committee, and a Steering Committee Member of the Commonwealth Youth for Sustainable Urbanisation (CYSU). Throughout her career, Kanungwe has advanced gender equality by pioneering policies such as the "Balanced Inclusion" approach in local decision-making and expanding women's access to business and development funding in Kanchibiya.

Her leadership reflects her belief in grassroots-driven development and the power of women and youth to drive transformation in communities across Africa.

**Kanungwe Chota**  
Mayor of Kanchibiya, Zambia

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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?

We are here today because of the women who came before us. In the early years of local governance, women were hardly at the table. In Zambia, we had almost no female councillors, but things have slowly changed. Today, women are not only present, but they are determined to be part of the solution. I am proud to be the first female mayor in my district, and the youngest female mayor in my country. This shows that communities are starting to accept that women belong in leadership. Of course, 30 years later, we are still not where we want to be—the numbers remain too low, and the challenges are many. But there is hope. I believe those numbers will only grow, and that each of us can double or triple the progress already made. Women can accelerate equality by continuing to claim space, by proving through service that leadership is not about gender but about vision, integrity, and results.



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

I grew up in a political home. My father was a politician who stood many times for office in Kanchibiya. From as young as four, I joined him on campaigns—dancing, singing, and urging people to vote for him. Eventually he won but sadly passed away less than two years later. I was still in school when I made a promise to carry his mantle. Leadership became my purpose in life. At the University of Zambia, I immersed myself in student politics, and I have never been afraid to speak for what is right, even at home. For me, leadership is about service, not titles. I chose to begin at the grassroots, where people live the problems and hold the solutions. Running for mayor was a deliberate choice to serve my community before aspiring to national office. It has been fulfilling - through campaigns, community work, and now in office, I have made people smile, created opportunities for women and youth, and shown that leadership is not inherited, but earned through vision and service.

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

One of my proudest moments has been transforming access to the Constituency Development Fund (CDF). This fund had two parts - a grant and a loan - but in practice, women and youth rarely benefitted because access was too complicated. Few had registered companies or clubs, especially in rural Kanchibiya. I saw this as an opportunity to create change. I wrote to our national company registration agency, a local bank, and even USAID, asking them to partner with us. Together, we brought services to all 54 zones and registered over 450 companies, 181 of them owned by women. Today, these women are not only applying for funds but becoming financially independent. Beyond that, I introduced a “Balanced Inclusion” approach - ensuring every consultation or meeting has equal representation from women, men, youth, and elders. Their submissions are prioritised in decision-making, and we are working to make this practice law. Seeing women’s voices heard, businesses created, and opportunities unlocked for my community has been deeply rewarding and has proven that leadership can directly advance gender equality.

**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?**

Like many women, I faced doubt, ridicule, and even rejection when I sought leadership. When I first ran for Vice President of the Association of Zambian Local Authorities, I lost badly - only voting for myself. People laughed at me, even female colleagues. But I did not give up. I stood again, despite discouragement from family and colleagues, and this time, I won. What I learned is that resilience is everything. Leadership means pushing through humiliation, standing again, and proving that women belong. Overcoming these barriers requires determination, but also structural change. We must move beyond token representation to real inclusion. Political parties should not just nominate women to “losing” constituencies for show. They must place women where they can win. Governments and associations should implement policies like gender quotas, mentorship, and financial support for women candidates. Most importantly, women leaders must leave doors open for others. We must turn our individual victories into systemic change, so the next generation doesn’t face the same battles.

**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 first advice is simple: start. Don’t wait until you feel fully ready, because leadership is about growth and learning along the way. But be clear about your purpose. If your goal is to get rich, politics is not the right path. There is no money in service. But if you are tired of injustice in your community, if you want to make a real difference, then your time is now. Too many wrong people

Kanungwe Chota (Zambia)



are making decisions that affect us all. The only way to change that is to step up and lead. When I began, only my family believed in me, but along the way, I found mentorship, opportunities, and platforms - even being selected at a Commonwealth conference as part of the youth steering committee. Support exists, but you must take the first step. Lead from the heart, speak for others before yourself, and never be afraid to challenge injustice. Change begins when women like us step forward.

**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?**

My own experience shows the importance of resilience and creating space for others. When I became the first female Vice President representing my province in our Association, I immediately insisted that this seat should not end with me. Together with our executive director, we developed a Gender Equality and Social Inclusion strategy and successfully amended our constitution to guarantee 30% female representation on the board. Beyond policies, governments must ensure that women are not just nominated to meet quotas but placed in winnable positions. We are working with political parties and international partners to train and support over 2,000 female aspirants for upcoming elections, ensuring they can campaign effectively and win trust. We are also running radio programmes to close the information gap, helping communities see that women can lead and lead well. Governments can further support by funding women-led projects, ensuring equal access to resources, and normalising women's presence in leadership. Change is not about competition with men - it is about justice, representation, and unlocking solutions together.

**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?**

It is unfair that women still need to justify their place at the leadership table when we make up the majority of the population. This should not be about gender but about credibility, vision, and service. Are all the men in office today truly competent? If so, why are we still struggling with development? Excluding women is not just unjust, it is holding us back. Women bring empathy, care, and accountability. We are leaders who often serve with integrity, because we understand what it means to carry families and communities. Development cannot happen when half the population is excluded from decision-making. We need our male allies to stop seeing this as competition and instead recognise that real progress requires both men and women. This is about building nations that work for everyone. For me, increasing women's numbers and influence is not negotiable - it is the only way forward for fair, inclusive, and effective governance.

**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, especially social media, has been a lifeline in my leadership journey. I use Facebook actively, and many opportunities - including invitations to conferences - have come simply because someone discovered my page. Social media allows us to share our work, connect with people across distances, and tell our own stories. It is a powerful tool for visibility and inclusion. But it is also a space of risk. Women leaders are often bullied or targeted with lies and propaganda online. In Zambia, a new cybersecurity law has been passed to regulate this, and while it limits some freedoms, it also helps protect us. My advice is to use social media wisely - share substance, not just social content. And don't be afraid to defend your reputation, because in politics, credibility is everything. To make technology more accessible, governments and partners must invest in digital literacy for women, expand affordable internet access, and create safe spaces online where women can lead without fear of harassment.

Kanungwe Chota (Zambia)



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

Innovation for me has meant finding practical ways to include women where they were previously excluded. Beyond the CDF initiative, where I simplified access to funds and directly supported women to register businesses, I also pioneered the “Balanced Inclusion Law.” This ensures that every consultation includes equal voices from women, men, youth, and elders—and we are working to make it a legal requirement. At the association level, I pushed for a constitutional amendment to guarantee 30% female representation on our executive board, ensuring systemic space for women. We have also launched radio programmes and partnerships with donors to support women politicians and aspirants, not just financially but with visibility and mentorship. The key has been persistence - losing, standing again, and proving that change is possible. By combining grassroots action with institutional reforms, I have tried to create lasting systems that make women's participation not optional, but automatic.

## **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 be about implementation and accountability. Too many governments sign agreements but never follow through. CLGF and partners must continue to lobby for institutionalisation of policies, with clear plans and real monitoring. Equally important is mentorship. The women who came before us paved the way, and we stand on their shoulders. But the next generation should not have to fight the same battles. We must open doors so wide that young women simply walk through, not struggle to climb. That means investing in capacity building, exposure, and networking. Numbers are not enough - we need quality. Women leaders must come prepared, mentored, and supported to deliver. Finally, we must tell our stories loudly. Representation inspires. I grew up in a rural area, reading about women leaders in books, and I said, “I want to be like her.” If my story can inspire someone else, then I know we are moving forward. With mentorship, accountability, and collective effort, the next 30 years can truly belong to women in leadership.

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### **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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