

MANDISA MTHIMKHULU – ESWATINI (SOUTHERN AFRICA)



Mandisa Mthimkhulu is an HR Practitioner with Mbabane Municipal Council, Eswatini and the local government representative (technical) on the Commonwealth Youth for Sustainable Urbanisation Steering Committee.

Why did you join local government?

Initially, I joined local government because I was intrigued by the job specifications. As I got to learn more about local government, I realised that there is so much that goes into the effective running of a city and the role that different people play in its development. I was interested in playing an active role in ensuring that there is sustainable development in my city.

What has been your most rewarding experience as a councillor/leader/local government practitioner?

In my specialty as a Human Resources practitioner, I have enjoyed finding the right people for the right job. Selecting candidates that fit with the values and culture of the organisation whilst coming up with new efficient and innovative ways to work and having the willingness & desire to serve has been the most rewarding experience. Being chosen as a steering committee member for the Commonwealth Youth Sustainable Urbanization representing CLGF has motivated me even more to want to ensure that local government finds ways to attract and retain youth in decision making positions in local government.

What advice would you give to other women considering entering local government?

One of my favorite quotes by Maya Angeluo says: “*Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women*”. I would say they should learn more about local government before jumping in. This ensures that they consciously make a decision to be responsible for playing a part in an evolving space. A space that you will have to defend, protect and manoeuvre. Since there are fewer women, entering this space automatically requires one to take the responsibility of changing stereotypes and representing women well, as we are a previously disadvantaged group. Be intentional and unapologetic about the change you want to see and, by doing so, this will pave a way for future women leaders.

Why do you think it is important to increase the number and voice of women in local government?

For generations, women have been seen making contributions in communities, why not give them a seat at the decision-making tables? Having more women in leadership positions gives hope to a little girl who is looking for a role model. It says, if given a chance, we are able to effectively perform and run cities, which breaks the stereotype and gender roles that were created in the past. Sustainable development in cities cannot be achieved if there are groups left behind, therefore, it is important to ensure that the number of women in decision-making positions is increased.

As a woman, what has been your biggest hurdle in becoming a councillor – and in your daily public life?

Local government was previously seen as a space reserved for men, without putting it in black and white. Coming in as a woman, and as a young woman, I've had to work twice as hard just to prove my ability to effectively carry out my duties; or even proving that I'm worthy to be in the space regardless of the fact that I have the required qualifications and experience. This motivated me even more to prove that performance is not based on gender or age.

What has helped you the most to continue in your role?

The Municipal Council of Mbabane (my employer) has been intentional in gender equity issues and, that alone, has proven the positive direction that the organisation is taking. One of the issues that the policy emphasizes is ensuring that women are given preference in leadership positions. This has helped in paving a way for women who have the required qualities to be given level playing ground.

CLGF also had a mentorship programme, where senior managers, CEOs, mayors and councilors mentored young women in local government. This programme assisted in discussing practical ways of dealing with the day-to-day issues we are faced with as women in local government as well as finding ways in how we can improve as leaders of tomorrow.

On a personal level, having supportive friends and a church community has helped me deal with some of the challenges I am faced with at work.

As a councillor/leader in your community, how can digital technology be used to increase women's political inclusion?

Most women still have limited access to information about local government, some just have the perception that such is for a certain age group or for people in certain geographic locations only. Digital technology has revolutionised how work is done. It can be used to package information that can be easily accessed and understood by various groups of people at community level.

What innovative practices have you found useful in encouraging more women to become more involved in local government in your country?

At national level, a certain percentage was reserved for female Members of Parliament. This provision has influenced local government elections provisions. The Ministry of Housing & Urban Development was intentional about ensuring the inclusion of more women as interim Council.