

MAYOR SUNKARIE KABBA KAMARA (WEST AFRICA)



Councillor Sunkarie Kabba Kamara is the Mayor of Makeni City Council in Sierra Leone, West Africa

What made you decide to enter local government?

I dealt with the public and community stakeholders in education, agriculture, health, and gender issues while working for UNICEF on the DFID Community Reintegration Programme after the ten years of the Rebel War. I worked with community people and conducted extensive interviews, listened to what they said, and observed the essential services they yearned for. I was motivated to use governance and my experience as a platform to assist my people in overcoming some of these difficulties.

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

As a Mayor in local government, as part of my post-Ebola response, I organised community women. I offered them support through my local economic development (LED) project, reactivating their small businesses essential to their

families' livelihoods.

I organised women into sustainable small and medium enterprises in the Gara tie and dye and soap-making industries to revive the local economy in Makeni after the Ebola pandemic in 2015.

Also fulfilling was encouraging women and school-aged children, through various capacity-building initiatives, to become highly aware of societal demands and role models for engaging in politics and other leadership activities while competing with men for jobs.

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

I would advise any woman considering municipal office to understand that gender equality and women's empowerment go beyond simple human rights. These are crucial safeguards for sustainable and fair growth. Therefore, it is crucial to promote and increase the involvement of women in society as well as their political participation. There are no female Paramount Chiefs in the north of Sierra Leone, in contrast to the south and east of the country. Since I ran for Mayor in a patriarchal culture, where women are not allowed to seek a leadership post at the traditional level. I had difficulty convincing people—especially men—that I was the right person for the position. Thus, I successfully launched an extraordinary campaign highlighting my qualifications and accomplishments.

Another piece of advice is to encourage women to participate in leadership positions in bodies that make decisions that can impact modifications to laws, policies, the provision of services, cultural perceptions, and social norms as they will eventually improve and promote women's agency.

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

The effectiveness of elected women politicians depends on their awareness of the topics that matter to their people. Locally elected women will be able to hear the perspectives of frequently ignored people if open forums that allow conversation with community women about their needs and goals are available. These forums may be crucial venues for elected women to network with one another. These open forums can effectively allow women to speak with one voice.

As Mayor, I held monthly Community Meetings with women in my three wards. And through this dialogue and engagement, we could draw up tangible activities and action plans that promoted the welfare of women economically, socially, and politically. The result has increased women's participation in community leadership activities, improved skills and knowledge, and enthusiasm for confidently speaking up.

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

The "bring her down" mentality among male competitors was my most formidable obstacle as a woman and in my regular public life. The gender counterpart will criticize you and give a wrong impression of you, in front of the electorate.

Because of the patriarchal nature of the community I served, women's participation in politics was discouraged and limited by discriminatory practices, social norms, and cultural conceptions that women are unsuited for leadership and decision-making roles, as well as by obligations related to family and child care. It was another substantial hurdle.

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

My role as Mayor was shaped by my ongoing capacity growth, networking with international organisations like CLGF; high self-esteem, and a skilled support staff that worked well together. Moreover, radio community contacts and concentrated group conversations helped me tremendously.

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

Political activism can benefit from the use of digital technologies. Digital technology holds great promise for political and social empowerment, particularly for marginalised groups, as it will increase women's access to and ability to use technology, expand opportunities to seek out information, facilitate communications among diverse groups of people, and enable the organisation of coalitions around specific issues through various mediums.

Although digital technology can broaden and enhance democratic processes, it can also exclude important people if their requirements and access hurdles are not considered when developing programming and technology.

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

Research, radio appearances, community meetings, and focus group discussions are examples of new methods that I have found beneficial.