

# The Path to Women's Political Leadership in Kenya



# Women Getting Their Voices Heard

Supporting women's political participation and leadership is an essential part of the women's rights work undertaken by ActionAid International Kenya (AAIK) in partnership with social movements and other civil society organisations. From working with women's groups in grassroots communities on a broad range of issues, from livelihoods to gender-based violence, it has become a necessary step to facilitating the empowerment of women from the poorest communities to make their voices heard in the decisions that affect them most. To achieve this, women need effective representation, by women themselves, and support is necessary to achieve this in a context that strongly discriminates against women's participation.

In the period preceding the 2017 General Elections, ActionAid International Kenya worked extensively to prioritise women's engagement in the electoral processes, from voter registration to standing for office. Together with the National Women's Steering Committee and grassroots women's organisations, a national women's political convention "Ni Mama" was held for 5000 women, including candidates, from different political parties across the country to support the election of women – 'The Largest Political Gathering of Women in Kenyan History'.



Following the convention, County Women Political Leadership forums and regional forums were also held.

Violence and intimidation, especially during campaign periods, has been an enduring problem and so security was an important element to address in supporting women to stand. As well as lobbying law enforcement agencies to provide protection, ActionAid, in partnership with women's movements and other likeminded organisations including the National Women Steering Committee, set up a Situation Room to facilitate real time information sharing. An SMS platform was launched to facilitate tracking, monitoring and reporting incidents affecting women during the election period. These actions resulted in the largest number of women candidates running for political office, particularly at the local level.

## Determination to Overcome All Barriers

This case study examines in depth how one woman, Feddis Mbura, was supported extensively over a number of years to gain the experience, skills and confidence to successfully stand and win a seat in 2017 as a Member of the Mombasa County Assembly (MCA) for Mwakirunge Ward.

Mwakirunge is a rural area around 14km inland from the city of Mombasa on the Kenyan coast, within the ActionAid Bamburi Local Rights Programme. Feddis Mbura, a food vendor and small-scale farmer first had contact with ActionAid in 2010, when she was approached while running her food kiosk to participate in training. Feddis was the first girl in her family to attend secondary school but had to drop out of school in Form 3, due to her family's poverty.



Feddis Mbura addresses a women's group meeting

Feddis was invited to join with 30 other women in community leadership training. She had never previously considered getting involved: *"I was operating a small food kiosk in Colorado area of Mwakirunge to provide for my family. I was a very private person; I never liked public gatherings"*. However, that initial contact rapidly led to Feddis becoming increasingly involved in the life of her community. In 2011 she became a community facilitator of the Unpaid Care Work (UCW) Programme designed to highlight the unfair distribution of care work undertaken by women and advocate for changes to reduce the burden and provide for women's needs. She also joined the Mwakirunge Chapter of the Kenyan women's movement Sauti Ya Wanawake (SYW) and within a year had become its chairperson. SYW's Executive Director, Violet Muthiga reports that Feddis' leadership potential was evident from the start. Feddis became deeply involved in many other community organisations including her children's Parent Teacher Association. She also trained as a Social Auditor and joined the DANIDA sponsored County Engagements Program, both of which involved directly lobbying the County Government.


Through the DANIDA Basic Rights Programme with funding from the Danish Television Collection, Feddis took up the case of the Mwakirunge waste dumpsite, where garbage from Mombasa city is dumped with serious environmental, social and security implications.

This campaign not only produced results, including reduction in the number of children scavenging on the site, banning of some dangerous waste and a cleaning up of the site, but also enhanced their determination to continue until all their demands are met.

With the rapid acquisition of confidence and leadership skills and with the solid support of AAIK and SYW, Feddis decided to contest the Mwakirunge seat for the Mombasa County Assembly (MCA) in 2013, only to discover that she was disqualified due to her lack of formal qualifications. Undeterred, she set about the laborious process.

*"I was locked out because I did not meet the academic requirements as required in law. I had to enroll as a private candidate to sit for examination and obtain O-level certificate to be able to contest in subsequent elections. It took me 2 years to complete. At this point, I was not young, I already had one grandchild. I also sat the examination with my own child"*.

Having missed out on the 2013 election round she started planning for the next scheduled elections in 2017. It was a tough process for someone with extremely limited means despite the support base she had. Feddis had to raise membership and nomination fees to join and seek nomination on a political party ticket. However, she discovered that politics, even at local level, can be a dirty business. It became apparent that a different, male, candidate had already been pre-selected for this 'safe seat' and that there would be no fair contest.



*“The process was shambolic, laced with strong undertones of nepotism, favouritism, discrimination and corruption. There were also high levels of bribery, intimidation, lack of co-ordination at the tallying centers; it worked against me”. It was a bitter blow. “I was so discouraged after being rigged out by my party during the party primaries, I almost gave up. I did not have money or the energy to file a petition against the process. I knew, even if I filed a petition, chances were that I couldn’t get justice”.*

This was not just a setback for Feddis but for all the women of the community and SYW who had hoped for a better outcome. Despite the squandering of her time and resources, they managed to persuade Feddis to resign her party membership and stand as an independent candidate. Violet Muthiga, the Executive Director of SYW explains, *“Our being there for her, the moral support we extended to her and advice to proceed with the journey as an independent candidate played a key role in sustaining her in the political journey. She also had the backing of SYW movement throughout the process”.* Even with this support the way ahead was not straightforward.

The issue of resources is a barrier for all candidates from poorer backgrounds. Apart from the formal fees, which are rarely met by political parties, money plays a big role in Kenya’s electioneering landscape. Campaigning requires travelling to engage with potential voters and those with resources may offer inducements ranging from financial to other material vote buying. In Feddis’ case, without money, she mostly had to walk across the ward to address community meetings. She was also on the receiving end of gender discrimination: *“I was confronted with all negative perceptions about women’s political leadership, but I stood my ground. I was a victim of morality-based attacks mainly from my competitors and other male leaders who do not believe in women’s abilities to lead”.* It takes a huge amount of courage for women to stand up to the personal attacks intended to discredit them in the eyes of their communities and families.

Despite all these barriers Feddis overturned the expected result to win the seat. Feddis puts this down to the training she had received and the solid grassroots support she built: *“Through County Engagements, I created a big network with different leaders and initiated projects in the community. This played a key role in profiling me in the community. I also received constant trainings from AAIK on political agenda setting, manifesto development, grassroots organization and mobilization; skills that my competitors lacked”.* Feddis’ success demonstrated the importance of grass roots support and an issues-based campaign in overcoming the personalised and monetised campaigns that are the usual form.

This is an inspirational journey over seven years that led from the food kiosk in Mwakirunge to Feddis sitting in the County Assembly. Agnes Kola, National Coordinator, Women’s Rights, AAIK reports, *“Our journey with Feddis is long but exhilarating. It is AAIK who mobilized her to join the Sauti Ya Wanawake movement – Mwakirunge Chapter. We started by developing her skills through capacity building. She played a key role in advocating for community issues, including relocation of Mwakirunge dumpsite that helped her endear herself to the voters. Our approach of building social movements (SYW) enabled Mwakirunge women to coalesce around the same issues and Feddis’ candidature. Her being a member of SYW meant she easily got an audience, especially the movement members and their collaborators, who she could address and sell her candidature to at no cost. Her exemplary abilities in community advocacy and issue-based campaigns also made her stand out of the crowd”.*

## How was it Achieved?

It is valuable to examine the specific approaches and tools that were used:

- 1. Social movement building** – this entailed organising the women in Mwakirunge, through SYW, to coalesce around issues of common interests. Representatives from the social movement demanded to be included in critical spaces where important decisions that affect them are made. The social movement provided Feddis with a political constituency that she could address and sell her candidature to at no cost. Members also played an important role throughout her campaign as volunteers and vote protection agents on the polling day. The outcome could be uncertain without a party agent to oversee the count and recording of the vote.



- 2. Capacity building** – this targeted women leaders within SYW, including Feddis, towards elections. The capacity building approach prepared her for the elections and to occupy the leadership spaces. For instance, AAIK facilitated Feddis to attend local and international seminars on political organization, manifesto development and campaigning skills that were instrumental in her winning – basic political skills, ensuring that her campaign was issues-based, an element that could be omitted by over-confident male contestants.
- 3. Advocacy** – this sought to challenge decision making structures at the community level to make them more democratic and inclusive to women and other marginalized groups. The approach also sought to empower women under the SYW movement to have the confidence and skills to participate effectively in decision making, and to claim their right to do so. In the process, AAIK identified key opinion leaders and influencers who were instrumental in promoting change in the community, giving women like Feddis an opportunity to take part in leadership.
- 4. Media campaign** - highlighting the essence of giving women an opportunity. AAIK established partnerships with local media houses, e.g. Baraka FM, which gave Feddis a platform to articulate her agenda. She was also trained on media engagement. SYW members who got the opportunity to do live interviews in the media houses also spoke about women leadership and Feddis' candidature.
- 5. Situation room** – this is AAIK's innovative approach that facilitates real-time information sharing to protect women and help keep the peace before and after voting day. Electoral violence is a major challenge in Kenya. AAIK used this approach to monitor and report any issues that could impede women's political participation in the country.
- 6. SMS Platform** – alongside the situation room, AAIK has established an SMS platform to facilitate tracking, monitoring and reporting incidences during elections affecting women.

It is also vital for civil society to remain non-partisan in dealing with electoral issues. Lucy Ojiambo, National Coordinator, Policy, Governance and Youth Empowerment, AAIK explains: "In all our support initiatives, especially around the electoral cycle, we endeavour to be inclusive. For instance, when we are conducting capacity building initiatives we target audiences drawn from across all parties. Thus, we do not leave room for being considered to be partisan since beneficiaries are drawn from across all.

"For instance, when we were conducting trainings for aspirants on election preparedness, public speaking and manifesto development (which was also attended by Feddis in late 2016), we drew participants from Kanu, ODM, Jubilee and other parties - and most of these participants were elected in 2017. It has never been considered that we promote a particular party or its candidate because even when we bring the women or young people together our position is that the overriding need is to promote and gain women and young people's ascension to elective positions. And thus, issues of the different parties are to be at the back of the aspiration and the ultimate is about being a woman or being a young person. This enabled us to hold a national women's political convention dubbed "Ni Mama" that brought together 5000 women from across the country belonging to different political parties, to push for joint efforts towards support for election of women in the 2017 elections".

## Lessons Learned

There are lessons that have been learned from this journey that are also extremely relevant to supporting women's participation in different contexts.

- Background, education, economic class should not determine the outcome; so long as one is determined and focused it is possible to make it. Women who may want to venture into politics should therefore remain determined, focused and know what they want.
- While elections can be expensive, there are alternative approaches to overcome the hurdles. For instance, the strategy of movement building provides a voting block that can support leadership at low costs. Additionally, networking is vital to wade through election financing as it provides avenue to obtain support from one's networks.



- Early planning and consistency is key in political pursuit. Women and young people must start early, prepare their plans, engage in community demands for representation in decision making processes and holding the state to account on delivery of its mandate and service provision, undertake targeted outreach and address any capacity gaps they may have well ahead of elections.
- Community sensitization, awareness creation and engagement of male members of society when dealing with issues that touch on negative perceptions towards women is also of great importance.

Feddis concludes: *"It is possible for a woman to come from nowhere and occupy a position of leadership. Nothing is impossible. There is no need to fear trying; women need to create or join a support structure within the community that can work for them. Above all, more women need to enter critical spaces where decisions are made and demand their fair share. They will not be invited, they must storm those spaces and demand what is legitimately theirs".*