

## WOMEN IN PUBLIC SERVICE, SHARING EXPERIENCES OF ACCOUNTABLE SERVICE TO COMMUNITIES THROUGH EFFECTIVE POLITICAL LEADERSHIP AT LOCAL GOVERNMENT LEVEL.

I am Eunice David, first and foremost an activist, a community leader, a former City Councillor. I have a wealth of experience working in the community, understanding community issues and their needs. While I have championed many campaigns highlighting community issues and fighting for a better life, (what is now being called service delivery) I found myself being deployed as a councillor at the Ethekewini Municipality. And therein arose my challenge from activist, leader to paid public servant who had the power to deliver. However to a great extent this was not to be, as one is constrained by a myriad of issues.

So let me take you on my journey to share my experiences with you as a woman, activist, leader and public servant. We are talking about 36 years of service to the community and the challenges to an extent still remains.

I cut my teeth as it were in community work whilst still at school, at a crucial time in our history in 1976. So my first involvement was the awakening to the injustices we experienced through apartheid. I remember I was one of about ten or twelve pupils who heeded the call to boycott classes and off course we had to persuade our fellow classmates to join in. So that was the start of my awareness of the injustices we faced as black people in our country.

We then had to move homes in the middle of my matric year to Phoenix some thirty kilometres away from school in Springfield. We were forced to move due to governments slums clearance act and this placed a lot of hardship on myself with regards to travel to school and back which was like three hours a day spent travelling to and from Phoenix and this impacted on my studies. Notwithstanding the travel we were moved into a township that had no proper infrastructure and amenities. Thus began our struggle for better living conditions. This gave rise to the emergence of community leaders who fought long and hard and whilst some have passed on, people like me still serve the community.

As women who were largely then our mums and grand mums had to make sure the family was taken care of with regards to purchasing food and other necessities and to do that they would have to travel into the city centre to the stores and markets as none was available in this newly formed township. Transport which was a limited bus service was available but not adequate to cater to the needs of the community. Workplaces were also 25 to 50kms away from home and a substantial number of hours were spent travelling, as the cost of living arose, for people who had to now pay rent and utilities which was exorbitant and unaffordable. Sometimes the mother who was a housewife had to seek employment to meet the rising cost of living. It was around all these difficulties that ordinary community people with the help of political activists began to address the issues facing them and challenge government for better living conditions.

Women played an important role in organising themselves into organisations, women's groups, advocacy groups etc. They began to develop programmes to empower themselves. These groups of women who came together explored possibilities of teaching and imparting skills, i.e. sewing, knitting, craft making, cookery, etc. While others looked at setting up early learning centres and

crèches for working mums to assist in caring for their children, organisations like Child Welfare, Domestic Violence Helpline, Advice Desk for Women were established. All these advocacy groups gave rise to women leaders who championed the respective issues and to this day they continue with the good work in the community. I am a product of this struggle for better living conditions in my area but more so for the emancipation of women in a largely patriarchal society.

Initially in the organisations that were set up, i.e. the civic structures, sports organisations etc were largely male dominated with a few women participating in them. So it was a struggle to get our male counterparts to take us seriously and to listen to what we had to say. I clearly remember being challenged by one very conservative male member of the civic organisation who thought it was taboo for us young women to participate in the civic structure and do the door to door visits engaging with our communities and getting actively involved in the mini campaigns. Eventually he gave in and accepted the fact we were going nowhere and began to emerge as community leaders in our late teens and early twenties.

Being women who were strong-minded, we worked hard to entrench the issue of equality of women and we served on the executive structures of the various organisations we belonged to. The example we set encouraged the more conservative women who thought they could not do it to come out as it were. As a result we had older women take on the role of being the figureheads and leaders who had the public profile and who always put the needs of the community first.

Slowly but surely, we as young women grew into leadership roles, where we chaired and served as secretaries and treasurers of these organisations. This showed our capacity as women who were capable of leading. Serving our communities meant being readily available to assist and to be ahead of the problems they faced, leading many campaigns i.e. rent campaigns, autonomy campaigns, water fines campaigns to name but a few serious campaigns that we undertook and won reprieve for our people and community.

After 1994, with the major changes happening and a new democratic government coming into being the landscape changed and we were faced with the challenge of transition but in a much easier terrain without any restrictive security measures.

Ushering in the new era also welcomed changes in how equity had to be implemented in the public and private sector. The ruling party led with the issue as what is now known as 50/50 and consciously started to implement this within the party and government.

Coming back to my involvement in 2003 I was employed as a Community Mobiliser in a brand new unit at Ethekwini Municipality called Community Participation and Action Support Unit. Once again I worked closely with communities on government based projects i.e. the IDP's, ID Campaigns and Information Sharing Projects. Once again it was important for leadership to ensure that communities were kept abreast of policies and programmes that impacted the lives of people. This also helps in the consultative process of determining the budget etc.

In 2004, I was asked to resign by the political leadership and I was deployed to serve as PR Councillor. This was a great honour as I had come full circle from being an activist, leader of community organisation, then as an official of government, to being a leader representing my community at the local government level.

Being a Councillor had a brand new meaning to my life as a public person and leader. It meant that people had their own expectation of you as a paid public servant and they expect a whole lot more from you. Off course Councillors are supposed to be in a position to assist and bring relief to the constituency they serve. Councillors are expected to be on call 24/7. Basically you are not your own person. You are owned by the community you represent, and accountable leadership means just that.

I spent two terms as a councillor and being paid with tax payers money I made sure I took my job seriously even during recess I was available to my constituents. I never switched off my phone. My office was open 5 days a week and I consulted over the weekends via appointments. Whenever my community needed me I was available. I was always on hand to address whatever their issues were and to lead from the front. I took the time and had the patience to listen to people and their problems and did all that was necessary to make representation on their behalf.

Accountable leadership means listening to the people you represent and doing your best to ensure that service delivery happens. It's no easy task but one has to persevere as a community leader and a paid official.

As women it is no mean feat being exposed to the dangers and threats on the ground. But nothing would compare to the chauvinism that would come from the more conservative male colleagues who would challenge you simply because you are a women and personally I've had to deal with that from some of my colleagues. Women In local government still face challenges such as crime, lack of support and respect amongst women councillors, and lack of understanding of the roles and responsibilities of councillors by communities which creates an unsafe environment.

Women councillors and managers within their municipalities face different challenges as some are new to the Local Government arena and thus need continuous empowerment. The goal of these conferences set up by COGTA is to also help facilitate sharing of experiences from different workplaces thereby promoting information sharing and best practices.

With regards to how government is dealing with gender mainstreaming and equity, as well as empowerment a number of programmes have been put in place to assist. These were informed by conferences that were set up by the Department of Corporative Governance and Traditional Affairs, and that was to deal with the formation of a structure to co-ordinate the programmes of the Women in Provincial and Local Government Programme.

The 2009 Conference resolved the following:

- To review the progress made in the mainstreaming of gender issues in local government and plot a way forward;
- To guide local government in develop appropriate policies and programmes;
- To share information on the SADC Gender Protocol and Centre of Excellence for Gender in Local Government as tools and methods for enhancing gender mainstreaming in local government;
- To explore ways in which government, civil society and private sector can work in an integrated manner in the implementation of the National Development Plan;
- To articulate local government's response to advancing sector-specific women formations'

- To contribute to the development of municipal management performance systems by introducing gender sensitive indicators and
- To progressively advance gender representation in the succession of traditional leadership positions.

#### The August 2013 Conference Resolutions

The conference resolved to:

- Support the implementation of the National Development Plan in realising its 2030 Vision.
- Support the implementation of SADC Gender Protocol in reaching its 2015 target.
- Continue support to the development of youth, women and disabled within our communities.
- Progressively advance gender representation in the succession of traditional leadership positions.
- Intensify the support to municipalities in areas of gender transformation.
- Strengthens capacity building of councillors moving towards the local government elections in 2016.
- Ensure that local government provides resources to gender mainstreaming in order to change or transform the development agenda that adequately responds to the needs of women.

While I'm no longer a paid public servant leaving public office after the last local government elections, I continue to serve my community. I serve on active community organisations advancing the cause for a better life for all. Presently I serve as a management member of the Domestic Violence Helpline, a member of the Phoenix Child Welfare Society, Chairperson of the Friends of the Stonebridge Library committee, An elected member of the Ward Committee of Ward 48 Phoenix, this is a legislated committee of the municipality, an Executive Committee Member of the Jesus Club, and an executive member of the ANC Ward 48 Branch.

I place a lot of emphasis on being accountable to the people I serve and therefore I would go about my tasks with much diligence.

The challenge remains for not only leaders to be accountable but officials as well in order for service delivery to be realised. In my experience policies adopted by municipalities are very good but it fails because of poor implementation. What I found is the lack of will on the part of officials to go the extra mile to implement but also to assist people who would go to their offices for service. .eg...my own experience going incognito at some of the service centres in Durban...cite example. Also customer care and being polite and helpful is something that one can only dream of. This is virtually non-existent and that is because of the lack of accountability.