

WOMEN'S POLITICAL SUCCESS IN HOMABAY COUNTY OF KENYA (1979-2024)

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ABSTRACT

This reports women's growing success in Homabay politics up to 2024. Using historical and descriptive research designs, the report employed non-probability sampling techniques, specifically purposive and snowball sampling. The findings revealed that women's political achievements can be attributed to several key factors, including pioneering leaders like Hon. Phoebe Asiyo, who paved the way for future generations. Additionally, shifting cultural norms and changing attitudes toward women's roles in leadership have created a more supportive environment for women to thrive in politics.

Keywords: Patriarchal, Gender mainstreaming, women, trailblazers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Women in Homabay have long faced formidable challenges in the political arena, but they're now shattering stereotypes and achieving remarkable success. Despite historical obstacles, they're bringing fresh perspectives and driving meaningful change. A recent study highlights the factors that have enabled this shift, including the presence of pioneering female leaders who serve as role models, supportive social structures, and evolving attitudes that foster a more inclusive environment. Furthermore, strategic party support, consistent electoral confidence, and devolution have created opportunities for women to thrive. The implementation of institutional quotas has also played a crucial role in promoting gender equality. Additionally, women's ability to deliver results, network, and participate in exchange programs has enhanced their political careers. Proximity to power and influential positions has also contributed to their success. These factors combined have empowered women in Homabay to break down barriers and excel in politics.

2. FACTORS THAT PROMOTES WOMEN'S POLITICAL SUCCESS IN HOMA BAY

2.1 Role Modeling of pioneering leaders.

The success of women in Homa Bay has been contributed to by pioneering leadership and role modeling who broke the glass ceiling. The phrase "glass ceiling" has been used to depict unseen obstacles that hinder women from top leadership and power positions (Wilskister, KII; 16/8/25). She adds that in politics, this glass ceiling is gradually being shattered as more women are increasingly contesting and securing public office, for instance, in Homabay, a record number of women were elected to parliament and county assembly in recent years, reflecting a growing momentum toward gender parity in political representation (Kapesa, KII; 22/8/25). The study establishes that Hon. Phoebe Asiyo, elected in 1979 as the first female MP from Homa Bay, shattered entrenched barriers winning her a title of a trailblazer in women politics. Her victory wasn't just symbolic, it served as a beacon, inspiring other women to seek office. She dethroned

then-powerful KANU luminary Hon. Okiki Amayo to open the doors for women from the region to take up elective positions (Okombo, KII; 18/8/2025). Odera (KII; 23/8/2025) argue that defeating Okiki Amayo who was the national chairman of KANU party during a single party state was not a mean achievement as explained below;

“Pheobe Asiyio just didn’t rise, she led. Her tireless advocacy for gender inclusivity placed her at the heart of national reforms. She wasn’t just a voice for women but a force for change. That visibility, that credibility is what gave her the strength to contest the Karachuonyo parliamentary seat in 1979 against okiki Amayo. She stood not just as a candidate, but as a symbol of what women could achieve when given the platform to lead.” (Odera, KII; 23/8/2025).

Her legacy as a mentor and cultural trailblazer, being the first Luo woman elder provided a powerful narrative enabling other women not only from Homabay but also other regions to envision themselves in leadership (Ojweke, KII; 18/8/2025). Similarly, Okombo (KII; 8/8/2025), posits that Pheobe Asiyio’s tenure as the member of parliament for Karachuonyo constituency showcased the impact of women in high-ranking positions unlike the election of Grace Onyango in 1969 in Kisumu and Grace Ogot in 1985 in Siaya whose legacies in women empowerment remains insignificant in women empowerment after them. Pheobe not only serve as a role model but also advocate for policies that promote gender equality and support for women (Amach, KII; 20/8/2025). Asiyio was more than a leader, she was a movement. Her pioneering leadership just didn’t break barriers, it built bridges for others to follow as noted by Goga (KII; 17/8/2025), below;

“Her legacy is visible in the rise of formidable women leaders from Homabay: Monica Amolo, Eve Obara, Lilian Gogo and Gladys Wanga. These women just didn’t just follow in her footsteps, they expanded the path. They are proof that when one-woman rise, she lifts others with others with her. Asiyio’s courage planted the seed and today Homa Bay is harvesting a generation of bold, visionary women in politics.” (Goga, KII; 17/8/2025)

2.2 Supportive Social and Cultural Structures that have informed attitudinal change

The paper established that Homabay women enjoy supportive cultural and social structures. The fact that Pheobe Asiyio was able to serve as the first Luo woman elder, a reserve for men broke the deep-rooted cultural structures for the current generation (KNA/352/2014). Oddly, Homa Bay’s patriarchal traditions paradoxically supported women in political roles due to their prominent involvement in community and farming (Gogo, KII; 25/8/2025). According to Dr Gogo,

“Women are mostly playing lead roles in farming and other cultural practices; these expose their leadership traits and that is why they are easily electable.” (Gogo, KII; 25/8/2025)

Additionally, the community perceives women leaders as humble, grounded and approachable, a trait that enhances their connection with rural electorates as opposed to sophisticated and complicated men (Amach; 20/8/2025). Similarly, Winga (KII; 20/8/2025), explains that women who participate in elections are no longer perceived as immoral by Homabay electorates, a factor that encourages many women who feared being branded names when they indulge in politics. It implies that a majority of Homabay county residents are changing their attitude towards gender sensitive leadership (Onyango, KII; 21/8/2025). This now places women of Homabay in a better

position to engage effectively in elective leadership without major obstacles resulting from community attitudes (Akinyi, 2018). During the study Winga (KII; 20/8/2025), explains the perception of the society on women politicians as below;

“Few men in the community where I come from still think and look at women venturing into politics as immoral. This is because most often these women are seen in the company of other men. However, as a woman leader there is nothing wrong being in the company of men during campaigns for elective leadership positions, thus venturing into politics is not immoral. It is a constitutional right. It is also good to state that this perception is also changing in my community.” (Winga, KII; 20/8/2025).

The belief that women should only be seen and not be heard where men are, is also fading away in Homabay as confirmed by Auma (KII; 29/8/2025), in the statement below;

“Women have to participate in decision making process whether with men or alone because they have issues that affect them. Women today participate in decision making right from the lowest to the highest level of the family including in others different structures. Some women also make great decisions more than men.” (Auma, KII; 29/8/2025).

In the view Okombo (18/8/2025), all these have helped to improve the status of women of Homabay and they can freely talk and communicate where men are including in political arenas. Now, when it comes to women participating in decision making, the people of Homabay have come to terms with it and as such, the community no longer bar women politicians from participating in decision making alongside their male counterparts (Akinyi, 2018). The study establishes that few voters still believe that it is a taboo for women to challenge/compete with men in elections even against the constitutional provisions making Odiembo (KII; 16/8/2025), to lament as below,

“The constitution of Kenya gives women authority to contest in elective leadership and political positions in every part including Homabay. It is only some few members in the community who still think it is a taboo for women to compete with men in elective positions, but for us we are only exercising our constitutional right.” (Odiembo, KII; 16/8/2025),

This has leveled the playing ground for women of Homabay to participate in politics without being bothered with strict taboos that weigh them down coupled with many challenges that they experience in the course of their participation (Okombo, KII; 18/8/2025). The study also learnt that the patriarchal feeling that always wanted women to be submissive is also fading away as confirmed by the discussions from the FGD1 (20/8/2025), as below;

“Today we are able to decide on the way we run our political agenda and issues, as much as few members in the community believe that we must be obedient to men’s political directives, time has changed and now we can decide what to do without depending on directives from men,” FGD1 (20/8/2025).

2.3 Performance and Delivery of the existing Women Leaders of Homabay

Similarly, performance and delivery of the elected women leaders has further cemented women's political standing (Auma, KII; 29/8/2025). In a 2023 County Trak survey, Governor Gladys Wanga tied for the highest rating among all 47 governors at 70%, acknowledging her effective approach in health, education, agriculture and infrastructure initiatives inclusive leadership style particularly emphasizing maternal health, community health programs, ECDE classrooms and agricultural support resonated with residents and elevated her credibility (Ojweke, KII;18/8/2025). Leaders like Dr. Lilian Gogo, Hon. Millie Mabona and Dr. Eve Obara continue to do tremendous works on their constituencies comparatively to earlier male leaders they took over from (Kapesa, KII; 22/8/2025). As noted by Ojala (OI; 29/9/2025), constituencies headed by women are more peaceful and enjoy a lot of development than those led by their male counterparts. This sentiment is echoed by Odiembo (KII;16/8/2025), who observes that,

“Constituents associate women with safety, inclusivity and effective governance. For instance, Kabondo under the stewardship of Dr. Eve Obara has maintained a reputation of peace and steady development while Ndhiwa constituency which often experience chaos even after elections in the hands of successive male members of parliament.” (Odiembo, KII; 16/8/2025).

2.4 Political Patronage

The study also identified the role played by the political parties and political strategy as a reason which contributes significantly to the success of women of Homabay. In the understanding of Winga, (KII; 20/8/2025), the local dominant party of the Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), along with the support of Raila Odinga, Homa Bay's influential political figure creates a favorable environment for women candidates. ODM party leader Raila Odinga's policy of supporting women in politics has synchronized with the residents of Homa Bay (Odera, KII; 23/8/2025). In the view of Odera (KII; 23/8/2025), as explained below;

“There are leaders who would not be serving in either the national government or county assembly were it not for Raila Odinga. In my view, all the women leaders in Homa bay are direct products of Raila and his ODM party.” (Odera, KII; 23/8/2025)

In the words of Onyango (KII; 21/8/2025), ODM gave direct nominations to all the women members of parliament in Homabay county including the governor seat, a move that loudly proclaims how supportive the party is to the women of Homabay.

The party also nominated more women to the county assembly, an affirmation to the party's commitment to promote women leadership in Homabay (Jowi, KII; 26/8/2025). Further the party has opened its doors for women to help in the management of the party, positions that have been perennially held by men (Olwa, KII; 18/8/2025). Had you imagined a woman being the chairperson of a party like ODM? Wanga is currently holding that position. More women have been brought on board in the party leadership within Homabay county for instance, Kochia ward is chaired by Mrs. Agan. Rangwe constituency is chaired by Mrs. Roseline Owidhi, Homabay town is chaired by Betha Owenga and finally the position of the deputy majority leader in the Homabay county assembly is held by another powerful woman called Hon. Monoflorita Ondiek (Onyango, KII; 21/8/2025).

These are testimonies that clearly confirm that the success of women in Homa Bay is not by chance as described below by Belle (OI; 30/8/2025),

“Women’s political success in Homa Bay hasn’t happened by chance, it is a result of deliberate political strategy and evolving role of political parties. These women have learnt to navigate political structures, build alliances and position themselves where decisions are made. Parties that one’s sidelined women are suddenly recognizing their value not just as voters but leaders.” (Belle, OI; 30/8/2025).

Further, grassroots movements and advocacy have played a crucial role in empowering women to enter politics. According to Ariwo (KII; 16/8/2025) organizations such as KEWOPA, KEWOSA, women groups and religious organizations work to support and elect pro-choice democratic women to office. These initiatives provide essential resources, training and support networks that help women of Homabay navigate the complexities of political campaigns (KNA/0973/1/EK/2017).

The study establishes that Gladys Wanga’s successful campaign for governor in 2022 exemplifies effective grassroot strategy by avoiding Nairobi-centric politics and instead made herself highly visible in Homa Bay financing community assets, engaging closely with women’s groups and building personal rapport across the county (Jowi, KII; 26/8/2025). She is remembered for forming Homabay County Women SACCO that encouraged women to do savings and borrowing for economic sustainability of the rural women (Kajwang, KII; 15/8/2025). He affirms that this acted as social capital as she was able to bag the votes of the majority of women who in one way or the other benefitted from the organization.

According to Abeka (KII; 20/8/2025), women of Homabay have earned consistent electoral confidence of voters from their constituents and that of the entire county. He acknowledges that voter trust has manifested through consecutive re-elections of female MPs. In 2022, three women namely Hon. Millie Odhiambo (Suba North), Dr. Lilian Gogo (Rangwe), Dr. Eve Obara (Kabondo Kasipul) and a host of female MCAs secured re-election, reflecting strong constituent approval (Odera, KII; 23/8/2025). This continuity creates a critical mass of female political representation. Out of eight constituencies, women currently hold three seats, about 40% of elective positions in the county (Ariwo, KII; 16/8/2025). Women members of the county assembly has also proven their consistency by gaining reelection in the 2022 polls (Olwa, KII; 16/8/2025).

The study has established that proximity to power significantly encourages women’s political participation by enhancing access to political networks, resources and visibility (Osongo, OI; 27/8/2025). According to Jowi (KII; 26/8/2025), women who are closely connected to influential political figures or institutions are often more likely to enter, survive and thrive in political spaces marked by patriarchal structures and economic barriers, these connections serve as strategic enablers for women’s political careers. In the words of Nzomo (2018), women who are closely linked to dominant political figures often enjoy easier entry into politics through party nominations or appointments. As rightly observed by Ogwang (KII; 27/8/2025), in the excerpt below;

“Politics isn’t just about merit it is also about networks. Women who are closely connected to dominant political figures often find the doors to leadership open more easily whether through party nominations or strategic appointments. It is a reality we must acknowledge not to diminish their achievement but to understand

the dynamics that shape political access and representation (Ogwang, KII; 27/8/2025).

Ojala (OI; 29/9/2025), argues that family ties to powerful political dynasties have historically paved the way for women to participate in politics, especially where grassroots support might be limited. Gladys Wanga having been born in a political family used the family ties to network and join politics. Winga (KII; 20/ 8/2025), believes that these networks give women access to established political networks, which are crucial for mobilizing support, funding campaigns and gaining legitimacy. Women related to or mentored by powerful male politicians often find it easier to access political opportunities. Chege (2018), notes that women with close links to power structures are more likely to be nominated or supported by dominant political parties like in the case of Millie Odhiambo whose closeness to ODM party enabled her nomination to parliament in 2007. Most women in Homabay who supported Gladys Wanga in her campaigns like Florence Auma were nominated in to the county assembly and others given county jobs just like Beatrice Akinyi Ogolla was nominated to the senate (Opon, OI; 19/9/2025).

According to Mutua (2025), women who serve in civil service or high-profile public roles often gain political capital through their association with state power. A good example is Pheobe Asiyo, who served as Commissioner of Prisons. Odera (KII; 23/8/2025), posits that Asiyo's prominence in the championing reforms for gender inclusivity elevated her national profile and gave her credibility when she later contested the Karachuonyo parliamentary seat in 1979 against Okiki Amayo. In conclusion FIDA Kenya (2018), asserts that women who hold leadership positions in public institutions often use their proximity to government to launch political careers.

2.5 Devolution and Institutional Quotas

According to Orwa (OI; 26/8/2025), the constitutional devolution and institutional quotas have also contributed immensely to the political success of women of Homabay. The 2010 Constitution, effective from 2013, introduced devolved governance structures and gender quotas (e.g. Women Representatives, two-thirds rule), opening institutional pathways for women (Adhiambo, 2023). In the words of Orwa (OI; 26/8/2025),

“We cannot talk about women's leadership without the game-changing role of the 2010 constitution. When it came to effect in 2013, it didn't just restructure governance- it restructured opportunity. Through devolved systems and gender quotas it opened doors that had long been shut. Suddenly, women had institutional pathways to power, platforms to influence policy and legal backing to demand inclusion (Orwa, KII; 26/8/2025).

Women Representative position has created 47 new positions for women in every county in Kenya. This ensures that in every given parliamentary session, women are represented without battling for the position with men (Binge OI; 28/8/2025). Hon. Gladys Wanga used this platform effectively propelling her to the gubernatorial seat in 2022 general elections (Onyango, KII; 21/8/2025). She adds that devolution expands access to local leadership and creates entry points that women could navigate more readily than national higher-stakes contests. More women have found themselves in the National Assembly, the senate and county assemblies through elections or nominations by political parties (Athiany, OI; 22/8/2025). The table below show the performance of male and female members in the 2013 and 2017 elections after the introduction of the new law that created a paradigm shift in women participation.

Table 4.3.1.5 Women and men legislators at the National Assembly (2013-2017)

National Assembly.						
YEAR	2013			2017		
	Elected	Nominated	Reserved	Elected	Nominated	Reserved
MEN	274	7	0	267	7	0
WOMEN	16	5	47	23	5	47
% OF WOMEN	5.5%	41.7%	100%	7.9%	41.7%	100%

SOURCE. IEBC (2020) and the Republic of Kenya (2013).

From the above table it is evident that the introduction of the of the constitution 2010 enabled more women to access parliament in 2013 by 5.5% and 2017 where more women gained by 7.9%, a slight increase compared to 2013, a move that continue to create more leadership positions for women. It is therefore important to note that the constitution 2010 has significantly contributed to the success of women's participation in Homabay (Ogada, KII; 15/8/2025). Leaders like Gladys Wanga won the womens seat for two terms, Joyce Osogo also nicknamed Bensouda has also rod on this platform to parliament (Osongo, OI; 27/8/2025).

Prior to Kenyan new constitution 2010, senate had the worst form of discrimination since no woman was elected, duped the house of men (Belle, OI; 30/8/2025). Table below shows the distribution of seats in the 2013 and the 2017 general elections in the senate.

Table 4.3.1.6 Women and Men Legislators at the Senate (2013-2017)

The senate						
Year	2013			2017		
	Elected	Nominated	Total	Elected	Nominated	Total
Men	47	2	49	44	2	46
Women	0	16	16	3	18	21
% of women	0	89%		6.8%	90%	

SOURCE. IEBC (2020) and the Republic of Kenya (2013).

It is evident from the above table that it is only through nomination that women were able to enter senate in 2013. The study establishes that the year 2017 saw the election of three women and the nomination of 18 women, an increase of 11% making the number rise from 16 to 21 pointing to the significance of the gender friendly constitution. Homabay benefited from the nomination into the senate in 2022 when ODM party nominated Beatrice Akinyi Ogolla (FGD1; 20/8/2025).

2.6. Networking

According to Odiembo (KII; 16/8/2025), Phoebe Asiyo played a pivotal role in advancing women's empowerment, political engagement and community development in Kenya and Homa Bay through a series of impactful networking initiatives. Ariwo (KII; 16/8/2025), posits that Asiyo's leadership was especially evident in her work with UNIFEM and Maendeleo Ya Wanawake. As

Kenya's representative to the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) from 1988 to 1992, Asiyo championed regional collaboration among African women leaders. She facilitated forums that brought grassroots women into dialogue with policymakers, emphasizing economic growth, education and inclusive governance (Adhiambo, 2023). Her involvement with Maendeleo Ya Wanawake Organization (MYWO)—one of Kenya's most prominent women's groups enabled her to organize local meetings and leadership training sessions that empowered rural women to take active roles in decision-making and development efforts (Akinyi, 2018). The study has established that Asiyo also nurtured future female leaders through mentorship programs and leadership forums, encouraging intergenerational exchange and helping young women build confidence and political acumen (Kajwang, KII; 15/8/2025). Notably, she broke cultural barriers by becoming the first woman recognized as a Luo elder, using this platform to merge traditional authority with political advocacy and open doors for women in male-dominated spaces (Abeka, KII; 20/8/2025).

It is important to note that women in Homa Bay have actively leveraged strategic conferences to strengthen their networks and promote economic empowerment. A notable example is the *Sigand Nyinam* Convention held in August 2025, which united female leaders from Homa Bay, Siaya, Kisumu and Migori counties, spearheaded by Governor Gladys Wanga and graced by President William Ruto, the convention was part of the lead-up to the Devolution Conference and centered on initiatives that support women's economic advancement (Kapesa, KII; 22/8/2025). Governor Wanga emphasized that the summit was designed to clearly outline the essential roles grassroots women leaders would play during the conference and within their communities afterward (Odongo, OI; 25/8/2025). She reaffirmed the convention's dedication to empowering women of Homa Bay economically, enabling them to unlock their full potential and contribute meaningfully to Kenya's sustainable development as affirmed by Amach (KII; 20/8/2025), in the excerpt below,

“Let us not overlook the power of engagements, the Homa Bay women have not waited for change, they have pursued it. From local forums to international forums, they've used conferences and springboards to share knowledge, build networks and unlock economic opportunities. This isn't just participation, it is leadership, it is about women standing up, speaking out and shaping futures for their communities.” (Amach, KII; 20/8/2025)

2.7 Exchange programs.

Networking and exchange programs of women of Homabay bring new knowledge and opportunities for women, for example, Goony (2008), explains educational institutions focused on women's rights serve as vital platforms for amplifying women voices and challenging male-dominated norms through advocacy and political criticism. The women of Homabay have perfected this art of networking through the late Pheobe Asiyo who went to Beijing conference in 1995 as explained in the excerpt below (Onyango, KII; 21/8/2025).

“When we talk about strength of women in Homabay, we must honor the trailblazers who paved the way. The late phoebe Asiyo was not just a leader, she was visionary. Her presence at the Beijing conference in 1995 wasn't just symbolic, it was a declaration that it was a declaration that Homa bay women were ready to take their position at the global stage, since then, we have built networks that span villages, counties and even continents. We have learnt to

mobilize, mentor and lead. Today when you see women driving development, championing peace and holding office with dignity, know that it started with women like Asiyu who dared to dream beyond borders.” (Onyango, KII; 21/8/2025).

Furthermore, Ogowang (27/8/2025), confirms that networking has helped women of Homabay strengthen solidarity and share information with peers and partners. Auma (KII; 29/8/2025), asserts that it has helped women build lasting relationships, mobilize support and sustain political campaigns. This unity is evident among the five elected women leaders. The organization of *Nyinyam* headed by Dr. Ida Odinga has also enabled them to reinforce their positions and protect their interests (Opon, OI; 19/9/2025).

3. CONCLUSION

The women of Homabay have made significant political strides despite longstanding challenges rooted in gender stereotypes and systemic barriers. Their success is driven by a combination of factors including pioneering leadership, notably by trailblazers like Hon. Phoebe Asiyu who broke cultural and political barriers, inspiring generations of female leaders. Supportive cultural shifts, changing societal attitudes and recognition of women’s roles in community leadership have created a more conducive environment for their participation. Political parties, particularly ODM, have actively backed female candidates through direct nominations and inclusion in party structures. Devolution and constitutional quotas have further opened leadership pathways, while consistent electoral confidence, strong performance in office and visible delivery of development agendas have solidified public trust in female leaders. Networking, mentorship and strategic proximity to power, including family ties and alliances with dominant political figures, have also enhanced women's visibility and access to political capital. Together, these dynamics have reshaped the political landscape of Homabay, positioning women as influential actors in governance and community development.

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KNA/0973/01EK/2017

Key informant Interview

NAME	AGE	SEX	SUBCOUNTY	DATE
Wilkister Odiembo	72	F	Rachuonyo North	16/8/2025
Joice Ariwo	68	F	Rachuonyo South	16/8/2025
Jane Goga	57	F	NGAAF Homabay	17/8/2025
Wilfrida Ojweke	67	F	Suba South	18/8/2025
Kenedy Okombo	59	M	Rachuonyo West	18/8/2025
Day Abecka	48	M	Assembly Clerk	20/8/2025
Wicliffe Amach	45	M	Ndhiwa	20/8/2025
Olwa	58	M	Rachuonyo East	16/8/2025
Mercy Kajwang	61	F	Mbita	15/8/2025
Monica Nudi	65	F	Suba Central	21/8/2025
Kapesa John	62	M	Rachuonyo West	22/8/2025
Phares Ogada	92	M	Rachuonyo West	15/8/2025
Alice Winga	57	F	Rachuonyo East	20/8/2025
Dr. Gogo	52	F	Rangwe	25/8/2025
Susan Onyango	46	F	Suba South	21/8/2025
Japheth Jowi	78	M	Ndhiwa	26/8/2025
Martin Ogowang	50	M	Rachuonyo South	27/8/2025