

Kenya Caucus for Women Leadership

Eulogising our Leader: Mama Phoebe Asiyo

Mama, you have transcended, but Mothers don't die. They are eternal beings!

Mama (as we fondly referred to her) was born to be a leader, from the word go- and long before Kenya was aware of women's rights issues, she had already made her mark. By 1958, she was elected the Chair of *Maendeleo Ya Wanawake*, where, she advocated for African women's economic empowerment and increased women's participation in government. In 1963, on the eve of independence, she ascended to the distinguished position of the first African Woman Senior Superintendent of Women's Prisons.

From 1988 to 1992, she held the prestigious position of UNIFEM ambassador, characterized by her steadfast commitment and tireless advocacy for the empowerment of women on a global scale. Through her dedication and leadership, she inspired countless individuals to join the fight for gender equality. By leveraging her platform and influence, she amplified the voices of marginalized women and ensured their concerns were heard at the highest levels of decision-making. Her commitment to advancing gender equality left a lasting impact on the work of UNIFEM (Now UN-Women) and paved the way for future initiatives to promote women's rights.

Mama ventured into the realm of competitive politics and was elected to the Kenyan Parliament representing the Karachuonyo Constituency in 1980, a position she held until 1983. She was subsequently re-elected in 1992, following the establishment of a multi-party system, and served until 1997. At that juncture, she held the distinction of being one of the longest-serving women in parliament in Kenya. According to Hon Charity Ngilu, '*Hon. Phoebe Asiyo set the political leadership bar too high and fearlessly so. She paved the way for the rest of us to follow.*'

In April 1997, during the 7th Parliament session, the Honorable Phoebe Asiyo made a significant impact by introducing a pivotal motion, that called for affirmative action to enhance women's representation in leadership and decision-making positions within Parliament and local authorities, with a specific target of achieving a minimum of 33 percent.

The women's movement galvanized individuals from diverse backgrounds—ranging from grassroots activists to national leaders—and, for the first time, the halls of parliament were besieged by women, both within the building and gathered outside. It was a momentous day. The affirmative motion marked a crucial step towards gender equality and empowerment of women in leadership positions, aiming to address the longstanding issue of under-representation of women in key decision-making roles; as well as the significance of diversity and inclusivity within these bodies. The impact of this motion have profoundly influenced the contemporary landscape, leading to a marked increase in female representation in governance and leadership in Kenya.

The Affirmative Action Motion gave birth to Kenya Women Political Caucus from which the Women's Movement rallied around to continue advocating for women's agenda. Hon Asiyo retired from elective politics, but remained as the champion of women's rights at all levels. She served until her death as chair of the Caucus for Women's Leadership, formerly called the Kenya Women's Political Caucus, where she mentored young women and advocated for women in leadership roles.

In 2001, Asiyo was appointed as a Commissioner of the Review of the Constitution, which proved to a

blessing for the women's movement, and the subsequent entrenchment of affirmative action within the Kenya Constitution, which stipulates that “not more than two-thirds of the members of elective or appointive bodies shall be of the same gender.”

According to Professor Wanjiku Kabira,

‘We had many joyous moments when Hon. Asiyu led us through the constitutional review process at various places, including the meeting at Silver Springs in an underground hall when the lights were switched off. At Safari Park, is where she led a decisive women’s movement that negotiated the affirmative action provisions and women’s role in the appointment of women commissioners.’

This affirmative provision has resulted in a significant increase in the representation of women within the county assembly, the county executive, the national assembly, the senate, and the national executive, as well as in appointive bodies such as commissions, the Judiciary, and land boards, among others. However, the challenge of fully implementing the two-thirds gender rule persists. In her final moments, Hon. Asiyu implored the Women’s Movement to persist in the struggle, ensuring that we do not forfeit the progress made thus far, but rather strive to attain even greater achievements.

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The Kenya Women's Political Caucus, under the astute leadership of Mama Phoebi, instituted structures at the district level, namely, Women’s Assemblies. Mama Phoebi's guidance and support were instrumental in sustaining the momentum of these Assemblies by mobilizing women and elevating their voices from the grassroots to the national agenda, encompassing the processes that culminated in Constitutional Reforms. The Assemblies also served as a beacon of empowerment for women at the grassroots level, where they found solidarity, strength, and a platform to air their views. The legacy of these assemblies continues to inspire women from grassroots to national levels, encouraging them to actively engage in political processes and aspire towards a more inclusive society.

Under the Caucus, the Gender and Good Governance Programme was the driving force in promoting gender equality and empowering women to take on leadership roles. Through a meticulous process of identification, recruitment, and training, the programme sought out potential women leaders and equipped them with essential skills such as public speaking, lobbying, and leadership. Mama Asiyu's coaching and mentorship have been instrumental in shaping these women into strong, capable leaders and her legacy lives on through the impactful work of many women leaders in this country today.

Mama was a selfless leader, and every woman flourished under her nurturing embrace, irrespective of their ethnicity or faith. She harbored no biases. She stood as a paragon of wisdom, exuding kindness, and was perpetually ready with counsel, direction, and unwavering support for everything, and anything that could further the advancement of women's rights.

For the Caucus Board of Directors, Mama has just transcended, for mothers are immortal. To us, Mama, you are eternal. We shall persist with the women's agenda you initiated—carrying you in our hearts and minds for all eternity.