



WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION
AND LEADERSHIP: STORIES &
INSIGHTS FROM WESTERN AFRICA &
CAMEROON

LOCAL WOMEN *LEADERS*



In December 2024, an event for *local women leaders* in Lomé, Togo, brought together nearly 100 delegates from 15 Western Africa countries and Cameroon for over two days.

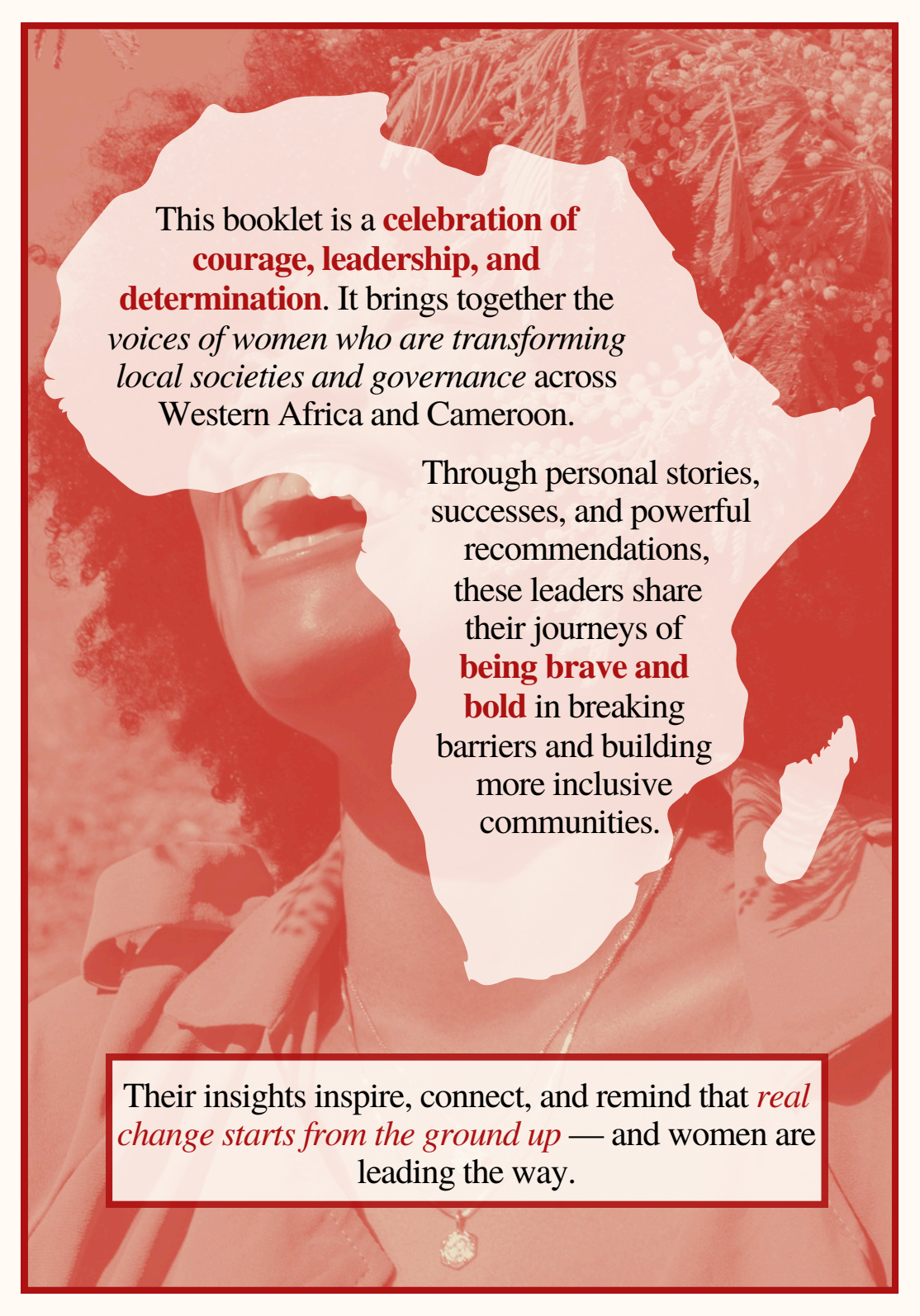
Key topics discussed included enhancing leadership skills, showcasing success stories, combatting violence against women politicians, and engaging young women. They also explored ways to **create more inclusive political environments by challenging entrenched social norms** and involving men as allies.

LET WOMEN LEAD

“Women are not mere beneficiaries of development cooperation; they are *pivotal agents* in promoting gender equality and driving societal transformation for *a better future for all.*”

-Opening words at the
Lomé conference by
Lord Mayor the
President Rohey Malik



A woman with curly hair is laughing joyfully, her mouth wide open. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent map of Africa. The background is a warm, reddish-orange color. The text is placed within the white map area.

This booklet is a **celebration of courage, leadership, and determination**. It brings together the *voices of women who are transforming local societies and governance* across Western Africa and Cameroon.

Through personal stories, successes, and powerful recommendations, these leaders share their journeys of **being brave and bold** in breaking barriers and building more inclusive communities.

Their insights inspire, connect, and remind that *real change starts from the ground up* — and women are leading the way.

THANK YOU FOR BEING PART OF THIS IMPORTANT PROJECT.



Inspire and serve as role models for other especially for women in local communities who want to make a difference in their societies and strive for gender equality.

Together, we can inspire more women to engage in local politics and make their voices heard.



In the bustling town of **Koudougou**, **Bacye Zoungrana Odette** serves as a vice president of the local commune. Her journey into local politics was prompted by a visit in Burkina Faso, motivating her to make a difference in her community.

Her experience reflects **resilience and determination** in navigating the political landscape. Odette's political career, characterised by both challenges and successes, showcases her resilience and determination in the field.

She wants more women to step forward and assert their influence:

“I encourage women to believe in themselves and move forward courageously, as politics needs women’s voices”



Odette is particularly proud of establishing a thriving agro-silvo-pastoral enterprise. This venture not only **showcases her entrepreneurial spirit but also provides employment opportunities for women and young people** in the area. She managed to achieve this success while juggling numerous responsibilities both at work and home.

In the Tonkpi region of Côte d'Ivoire, **Vaï Valerie Yene David epse Bih** is leading a transformation that challenges entrenched cultural norms. As a regional councilor and the rapporteur of the Youth, Women, and Community Life Commission, her journey signifies a shift in the political landscape for women.

Valerie faced significant obstacles, including opposition from older women who disparaged her efforts and boycotted her activities. She also encountered verbal and physical violence from some men, targeting her because she was both young and female. Despite these challenges, Valerie has remained steadfast in her mission to dismantle the saying that "the tree felled by a woman cannot help to cross the water," which suggests women's efforts are futile.



Valerie advocates for a new generation of female political leaders:

"In politics, women are winning lionesses, while men are cats magnified by stereotypes to appear as lions."



Her leadership was instrumental in the local elections, where women played key roles in her candidate's campaign. The increase in female voter turnout, from 2018 to 2023, highlights the impact of her involvement and led to recognition by the HeForShe movement.

She encourages women to get an education, engage in community actions, register to vote, fulfill candidacy requirements, and critically, to **act with courage.**

In Togo's Savanes Region, **Didjingou T. Fekandine** carved her path as Mayor of Naki-Est, Kpendjal-Ouest with determination and a focus on education, especially for young girls. Originally a teacher, Fekandine's commitment led her to become actively involved with local women's groups, setting the stage for her entry into the 2019 municipal elections. However, this did not come without challenges.



"Our paths may often be filled with obstacles, but that doesn't prevent us from taking them," she reflects, having faced controversy during her candidacy. After the elections, where she was briefly nominated as deputy mayor, her name was unexpectedly replaced by a man's. Yet, when new elections were held after her predecessor's sudden death, with the support of a local female deputy, Fekandine was elected Mayor in October 2024.

Fekandine has championed gender equality, acknowledging the progress made by the Togolese government in this area. Despite the current challenges, where women often face marginalisation and men are considered more capable, she remains resolute. As she looks toward the next municipal elections, she ponders the future of her political journey but stands firm in her commitment to making a difference. Proud of advancements like new school buildings and improved community infrastructure, she advises:

"Don't fear leadership roles. Dare to step forward and register on the candidates' lists."

Gertrude Nadia Sena Dossa, the leader of Porto-Novo's second district in **Benin**, immersed herself in local politics to take an active role in shaping her community. With a passion for urban planning, education, and economic development, Dossa views politics as the perfect avenue to implement her ideas and contribute to a brighter future for everyone.

Furthermore, women encounter sexist comments, inappropriate jokes, and patronizing attitudes. Gaining respect and being heard become more challenging when constantly undermined. Compounding these issues is the scarcity of support; unlike their male counterparts, women in politics often lack mentors and supporters, making it harder to ascend to positions of power and have their voices heard.



Her journey has not been without challenges. Balancing a professional and personal life presents constant pressure, especially as society often expects women to seamlessly juggle roles as perfect mothers, wives, and competent politicians. This burden can be difficult to manage and often invites negative judgment.

“Despite these challenges, I am determined to make my voice heard and fight for the causes that matter to me.”

Dossa has successfully organised training sessions for young people, provided scholarships, distributed school supplies to underprivileged children, and promoted health initiatives like endometriosis awareness and screenings for hypertension and diabetes. These efforts bring her immense fulfillment, knowing that she has helped youth thrive, accessed better education, and improved health outcomes in her community.

Dossa offers the following *advice to those aspiring to enter politics*:

- **Be yourselves**; do not change to please everyone. Speak about what matters to you and use your experiences to inspire others.
- **Surround yourself with supportive people**. Build a strong network of women who offer good advice and encouragement. Don't hesitate to ask for help; we are stronger together!
- **Don't get discouraged**. Politics isn't always easy, but believe in yourself and your abilities. You are capable of succeeding!



“Never forget that your voices count; you can make the difference”

- **Inform yourself well before you start**. Understand the political landscape, different ideologies, and how the system works.
- **Be active in your communities**. Engage in causes that you're passionate about, participate in local events, and voice your opinions. This is how you gain experience and visibility.

Samsonne Kafui Ayité, the Responsable Maison de la Femme, is dedicated to supporting and empowering women and girls in Aneho, within the Commune des Lacs 1 in the maritime region of **Togo**. Her work centers on helping those who have experienced physical and verbal violence by providing them with essential support and training.



Ayité, though not yet involved in politics, is **laying the groundwork for future engagement**.

Her journey has been marked by challenges, particularly the intimidation often faced by women.

Despite these obstacles, she takes pride in successfully gathering over 500 women at various meetings, a testament to her impact and leadership within the community.

Through her initiatives, she continues to champion resilience and empowerment for the women and girls of Aneho.



Mamounata Ouedraogo Kientore stands as a pioneering leader in Ouagadougou, **Burkina Faso**. Serving as the 3rd Vice President of the Special Delegation of the Commune of Ouagadougou and Provincial Director of Youth and Employment for Kadiogo.

Motivated by a commitment to contribute to her community's development, Mamounata entered local politics with the belief that, "**Everything done for you, without you, is against you.**" As a young female leader, she recognised the importance of having a voice in the city's governance and sought to create meaningful change, particularly for the youth.



Mamounata faced significant obstacles, including **age and gender biases**. Breaking through **sociocultural barriers that confined women to secondary roles was a challenge**. Yet, her outspoken nature—voicing her opinions and defending her ideas with solid arguments—set her apart, even in a society where such traits in women might be less appreciated. Her love for challenges further fueled her determination.

A crowning achievement in Mamounata's career is her successful challenge for a leadership position in the city's governing body, a rare feat for women in the history of Ouagadougou "*Breaking the norm to secure third place in the capital's leadership fills me with immense pride*" she says, establishing herself as a powerful influence on the future of Ouagadougou and beyond.

Mariame Lankouande, the regional coordinator of women's associations in Manga, plays a pivotal role in fostering community development in the Centre-Sud region of **Burkina Faso**. Though not yet directly involved in local politics, Mariame envisions a future where she can contribute to significant change once her country attains peace. Her aspiration is to engage in politics to empower women and youth, creating opportunities for their growth and success.

Mariame acknowledges the hurdles faced by women in politics, including marginalization, lack of financial resources and leadership opportunities, self-doubt, and discrimination. Her journey, however, is marked by an inspiring success: the women in her community nominated her to lead the regional women's associations. This recognition came as a testament to her dynamism, wisdom, expertise, and relentless advocacy for the wellbeing of women and youth. "*My pride lies in their trust and collective decision to elevate me to the presidency,*" she reflects.



To women keen on entering local politics, Mariame offers the following:



- She stresses the importance of deepening one's understanding of the political landscape and setting well-defined goals.
- She encourages women to build trust within their communities by showcasing their integrity, wisdom, and energy, and to ensure they possess the necessary resources and skills to realise their political ambitions.

Massan Dzifa Kodjo-Bakpe serves as the mayor of Nyamassila, within the EST-MONO 3 commune in the Région des Plateaux, Togo.

Her entry into local politics was inspired by influential female leaders and the government's initiative to enhance women's political participation. **She is driven by a desire to combat social inequalities**, such as the educational disparities faced by girls due to domestic responsibilities and societal expectations.

She highlights the pervasive issue of educational disparities, where girls often face unequal opportunities compared to their male counterparts. Burdened with household chores and limited by societal expectations, girls are often deprived of the time needed for academic success. Massan sees this struggle mirrored in cultural attitudes where girls are discouraged from pursuing education, echoing the words of writer Sembene Ousmane: "A girl in school will amount to nothing." She recognises the need to challenge these beliefs and advocate for educational equity.

Despite her accomplishments, **Kodjo-Bakpe has faced numerous obstacles on her journey**. She speaks candidly about the social humiliation she endured, and the scepticism she encountered from both women and men. Women ridiculed her for stepping into spaces traditionally dominated by men, while the men themselves erected barriers, initially seeking to exclude her from their circles.



In the URR region of Basse, The Gambia, **Fatoumata Fatty** stands as an inspiring role model for women and beyond.



As the first woman with a disability in her local government, she is proud of her achievement. Her commitment to advocating for persons with disabilities and contributing to her community's development led her to become a local government representative.

Aware that people with disabilities are often excluded from political and decision-making arenas, Fatoumata is determined to ensure their voices are not just heard but empowered.

Fatoumata was a recipient of the prestigious **HEROES AWARD** from the Fatu Network, a milestone in her journey.

As a woman with disabilities, she encounters challenges both as a public figure and in her private life. She highlights societal misconceptions, such as the belief that their children will also have disabilities, which makes it difficult for women in her position to find a partner and get married.

“Disability does not mean inability, do what you can at your own ability!”



Honorable **Philomina Opoku Asare**, elected councillor for **Kwashiebu Electoral Area, in Accra, Ghana**, began her political journey when she engaged together with her father in tackling a flooding in our community. Determined to find a solution, they reached out to a local MP for help. After the MP committed to fix the problem, she was invited to join the campaign team. This experience inspired her to believe that *“If I could effect change locally, I could also make a difference on a broader scale”*.

During this time, she endured severe harassment and discrimination from the favored male candidate and his team. They provoked her with derogatory remarks, spread misleading information about her and her family without consent, and vandalized her campaign posters.



These actions were aimed at undermining her credibility and disrupting her connection with voters, testing her resilience and determination to advocate for her community. And yet, despite experiencing a hostile environment, she endured and built resilience.



“I faced betrayal from my friends and committee members, who chose to support the male candidate instead”.

In the heart of the Mefou and Afamba department, within **Cameroon's Center Region**, Madame **Meyanga Epse Noah Ngah Marie Angele** serves as the Mayor of Afanloun. Her involvement in local politics is driven by a desire to contribute to the realisation of the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** in Cameroon, with a particular focus on her local community. Madame Meyanga is passionately committed to promoting gender equality and empowering Cameroonian women. She strives to strengthen the political capacity of women aged 40-50 and encourages the education of young girls to ensure these objectives are met.



She highlights the challenges for women in Cameroon in the political arena include male dominance, where patriarchy gives men more advantages. This leads to a reluctance among women, who view politics as a male-dominated and ruthless field.

Additionally, **cultural barriers are a significant obstacle** to their empowerment and active participation in this area.

When she ran for mayor, she discovered her colleagues had already chosen their preferred male candidate, **actively undermining her campaign**. Reports of polling station executives being bribed against her underscored the unfair and undemocratic nature of the process. Despite the odds, she refused to back down and **ran as an independent candidate**. Her persistence paid off, as she emerged victorious in the election.

“Nevertheless, I refused to surrender. I chose to run as an independent candidate and won the election, The journey was challenging, and I found myself without support. God was indeed on my side, I won the elections. It wasn’t just a victory for me; it was a victory for every woman, every underdog, and everyone who had ever been told they weren't enough”.

She emphasizes that **African women should believe in themselves**, as they have an important role in politics, where diversity is crucial. Women are well-suited to address issues like education, health, and empowerment. **She advises young girls to focus on their studies** and resist temptations, as they are the future of women in African politics and a source of hope for the continent.

- *Don't let anyone tell you what you can and what you can't achieve. I faced a lot of opposition, but refused to give up.*
- *Be prepared to fight for your place, the political landscape can be tough, especially for women.*
- *Be ready to stand up for yourself and your belief even if it means going against the grain.*

Madame Meyanga takes immense pride in her roles as **Vice-President of REFELA Africa, President of REFELA Central Africa, and of the Cameroon section (REFELACAM)**. These positions enable her to unite local elected women and civil society around shared ideals of gender equality and women's empowerment. Through various activities and initiatives, she works collaboratively to improve the status of women and girls across African societies.

Never underestimate your voice. I spoke against injustice and won. My story is a powerful reminder that women's voices matter, and they can change the world.

Madame **Rohey Malick Lowe** is the Lord Mayor of **Banjul** and President of the Network of Local Elected Women in Africa (REFELA), known for her advocacy in gender equality and initiatives like the *Women for Water Initiative*, which empowers women through improved access to water and agricultural opportunities. Her father served as the mayor, and she learned early on the impact local governance can have on everyday life—from education and healthcare to infrastructure.



Yet, she noticed that in many pivotal discussions, **women's voices were often marginalised**. Driven by a commitment to amplify these voices, especially from marginalised communities, Madame Lowe entered the political arena to ensure women's concerns were prioritized.

Her political career is marked by transformative policies, including enhanced girls' education in rural areas and the **"Women for Water Initiative."** Through collaboration with local governments, Madame Lowe led community education programs, boosting girls' enrollment and empowering families. Her water initiative improved access, empowering women economically via better agricultural yields.

Don't let anyone tell you what you can and what you can't achieve. I faced a lot of opposition, but refused to give up. Be prepared to fight for your place, the political landscape can be tough, especially for women. Be ready to stand up for yourself and your belief even if it means going against the grain. Never underestimate your voice. I spoke against injustice and won.

Despite her successes, Madame Lowe's journey was not without challenges. As the first elected female mayor in The Gambia, she faced deeply entrenched societal expectations and patriarchy that questioned her leadership abilities. Overcoming these obstacles required **resilience, strategic alliances, and proving her capabilities** through actions that positively impacted the community. She drew strength from supportive networks of other women leaders who shared her vision.

Pendorah C W Zaizay serves as the City Mayor of **Voinjama City**, located in **Lofa County, Liberia**. Her journey into local politics is driven by a commitment to serve her community, particularly focusing on fostering female leadership and advocating for gender equality.



Pendorah faced numerous challenges in a male-dominated political environment, where her voice often went unheard among her male colleagues. Despite experiencing traditional humiliation and lack of respect from male political actors, she persevered and achieved significant milestones in her political career.

Pendorah notes with pride her ascension through various positions, including serving as the **youth chair lady of Voinjama District** and as the graduating class president of Lofa County University. Her current role as City Mayor marks a notable achievement in her leadership journey. Offering advice to other women aspiring to engage in local politics, Pendorah emphasizes the importance of courage:

"My advice to every woman is to take the courage and involve in said venture. Because you will not do a lot unless you are brave enough to try."

In **Pagouda**, in Togo's Kara region, **ABALODO Tomkounawè Salomé** serves as a municipal councillor and president of the commission in charge of land affairs, environment, technical works and heritage. An entrepreneur in agriculture and catering, she leads both an agricultural company and a restaurant business while representing the commune of Binah1.

Her decision to enter local politics stems from a **deep desire to improve the living conditions of women “without a voice”** in decision-making bodies who suffer injustice and to affirm herself as a woman leader who proves through her work that women can perform as well as men. Despite this determination, she faces significant resistance: male colleagues often ignore her opinions, appropriate her initiatives, and act collectively to silence her and limit her visibility.



“The desire to get involved in order to improve the living conditions of women who have no voice...”

One of her key achievements has been negotiating the establishment of a **microfinance institution** in her prefecture and organising women so they can access loans for their activities, even if she feels this is still far from sufficient to lift them out of poverty.

Her message to other women is clear: build financial stability, pursue education even where it is not formally required, and remain cautious in the face of those who abuse their power. She urges women to be discreet and strategic when entering politics, so that “on ne prépare pas des armes contre elles”, and to resist compromising situations, even when these are presented as the only way forward.

In **Bamako's Commune VI** in Mali, **Aminata KANE** is a young politician serving as Deputy Administrative Secretary of the Youth Executive Committee of the party *Yelega, le changement*. She chose to engage in local politics, she explains, "because I know that I can change many things in a positive way."



Her path has not been easy. Aminata points to "lack of experience, often, and financial problems" as persistent obstacles for young women in politics.

Despite these barriers, she has become a **key interlocutor** between political actors and citizens in her community.

"Do not be discouraged by words meant to push you back."

What makes her most proud is "**my ability to influence those interested or not in politics** and make people who have not understood the political sphere understand, especially the contexts and management." By making political processes more accessible, she helps people see how governance affects their daily lives and why their participation matters.

To other women, Aminata's message is one of confidence and perseverance. She urges them to **trust themselves**, take ownership of their choices and "tell that they can do more than men and that those who have succeeded are not magicians but have worked with their heads held high to get there." She calls on women not to be discouraged by words meant to push them back, and to keep fighting "because we want a world mainly governed by women, so we must take responsibility and work."

In the commune of **Golfe 6**, at the Baguida town hall in Togo, **Dédé Akpedje MESSAN** is a municipal councillor and signatory delegate.

She chose to get involved in local politics, she explains, “because after working for several years with the women of my community, listening to their difficulties, needs and hopes, **I felt the desire to go further** and to participate directly in the decisions that affect their lives.” Her commitment stems both from the trust these women place in her and from her own determination to act where decisions are made.



Her path has not been without obstacles. As a woman, she has had to fight against persistent prejudices that still consider politics to be a man’s business. “I had to work twice as hard to be heard or taken seriously,” she recalls. In her community, patriarchy remains strong and many people still doubt the legitimacy of women’s leadership. There are few places for women in decision-making bodies, and, at times, a lack of resources makes engagement even more difficult.

Yet, she insists, **these challenges have made her stronger**. They have taught her to persevere, to keep learning, to surround herself with other committed women and, above all, to believe deeply that women’s presence changes things. For two municipal terms, she has remained the only woman to lead a list in local elections.

Among the achievements she is most proud of is the project “*Dans la peau d’une conseillère municipale*” (“In the shoes of a municipal councillor”), an initiative aimed at promoting women’s leadership and inspiring young women to take an interest in local governance.

She has also helped to establish fruitful partnerships for the municipality, including providing several schools with computer equipment and signing a twinning agreement with the city of Taverny. These actions, she explains, reflect her commitment to education, local modernisation and the promotion of women’s role in decision-making.

To other women who wish to engage in local politics, Dédé’s advice is to **remain authentic and close to the community**. “Local politics is, above all, about listening and action.” She reminds them that the path is not always easy but that every small victory counts. She urges women to believe in their vision, not to be discouraged by obstacles and to learn to work together, beyond their differences. Her message is firm: “To women, I would say, 'Dare.' Don’t wait for someone to make room for you – take it, with courage and confidence.”

*“Don’t wait for someone to make room
for you, take it, with courage and
confidence.”*

A woman with curly hair, wearing a red dress and a necklace with a diamond pendant, is shown from the chest up. A large, white, irregular cutout is placed over her face and upper chest. Inside this cutout, the text "Throw gender bias out the window." is written in a dark red, serif font. To the right of the cutout, the text "Defy limits and break free." is written in a dark red, italicized serif font. The background is a soft-focus image of a woman in a red dress, with palm fronds and other foliage visible in the upper right corner.

Throw *gender*
bias out the
window.

Defy
limits
and
break
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