

30 Women in Local Government: Celebrating CLGF's 30th Anniversary

Featured Interviewee #20: Hon. Sih Marie Zenobia

Deputy Mayor, Wum Council, Cameroon



Profile

Hon. Sih Marie Zenobia is the Deputy Mayor of Wum Council in Cameroon, a role she has held since 2020, following over a decade of service as a councillor. With more than 30 years of experience in political and community leadership, she has played a key role in

representing community interests, shaping local policy, and promoting inclusive development.

Alongside her political leadership, she serves as Divisional Delegate of Arts and Culture, where she champions cultural heritage, community engagement, and local development initiatives. Her earlier career as a government teacher reflects her strong foundation in education and community service.

Hon. Zenobia holds a Bachelor of Education from the University of Buea and has built her career on a commitment to public service, grassroots engagement, and empowering communities, particularly women, to participate in governance and development.

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Deputy Mayor
Wum Council
Cameroon

Interview Highlights

1. How has the role of women in local government evolved over the past three decades, and how do you think women can accelerate action for gender equality today?

Over the past decades, women in local government in the Northwest region have largely remained in the background. Cultural traditions, financial limitations, and social expectations have often kept women away from leadership positions. However, we are beginning to see gradual improvement. More women are stepping forward, and there is growing awareness that women can lead and contribute meaningfully to governance.

Despite this progress, the pace is still slow. Many women are still hesitant to take up leadership roles, and support from male counterparts is not always guaranteed. To accelerate gender equality, we must continue encouraging women, building their confidence, and providing them with opportunities to participate. Mentorship, regular engagement, and exposure are key.

We are moving forward, but we still have a long way to go to achieve full equality in leadership.



2. What inspired you to enter local government, and how has your journey advanced gender equality in your community or country?

My journey into local government was not something I planned. I came to vote during the elections, and the councillors and members of the community insisted that I should become Deputy Mayor. I was elected by acclamation without campaigning. That showed me the level of trust and confidence people had in me.

I started politics at the age of 19 when I got married. My late husband introduced me to political life, and I have been involved for over 30 years. Through my role today, I continue to encourage women to participate in governance. By simply being visible and active in leadership, I show other women that it is possible. I also make sure women's voices are heard in community discussions and development processes.

3. What has been your most rewarding experience as a woman leader in local government, and how did it contribute to promoting gender equality?

My most rewarding experience has been the trust and confidence the community has in me. People constantly seek me out, and women especially come to me in large numbers. Recently, I received over 100 women from different meeting groups who came to engage with me.

This level of connection has allowed me to speak openly about women's empowerment, financial independence, and participation in leadership. Seeing women become more confident and willing to speak in public is very fulfilling. Even during difficult times, including when I was kidnapped and later released, the community's strong support showed the impact of my work. For me, the most rewarding part is seeing women believe in themselves and step forward because they see someone like them in leadership.

4. What challenges did you face as a woman entering local government, and how did you overcome them? What can be done to accelerate overcoming these barriers for future women leaders?

One of my biggest challenges came after my husband passed away. I lost a strong source of political support, and I had to continue on my own. Financial constraints have also been a major challenge, as politics requires resources that many women do not have.

In our context, men are often better positioned financially to support political activities, attend events, and mobilize people. Cultural expectations also discourage women from stepping forward. I overcame these challenges by staying focused, building strong relationships, and maintaining respect in my interactions with others. My approach has helped me maintain good working relationships, especially with male leaders.

To support future women leaders, we must address financial barriers, provide mentorship, and create more supportive environments that allow women to participate fully.



5. What advice would you give to other women considering a career in local government to help them accelerate gender equality in their communities?

My advice to women is to remain polite, but stand tall. Do not see leadership as a fight against men. Instead, focus on showing your competence through your actions.

Women should not accept being treated as second-class citizens. That idea belongs to the past. Today, women must believe in themselves and step forward with confidence. It is also important to build relationships, even across political differences. I have good relationships with members of the opposition because I present my ideas respectfully.

Women can succeed through strength, patience, and diplomacy. When you show what you can do, people will begin to respect and support you.

6. How can we encourage more women, particularly young women, to enter leadership roles in local government, and what actions can governments take to create more inclusive environments for women?

We must start with early exposure. Mothers should bring their daughters to political meetings, campaigns, and community discussions. This is how young girls learn and develop interest in leadership. I started learning politics at a young age, and this early exposure helped shape my journey.

Government also has a role to play by creating enabling environments and supporting women through policies and programmes. Training, mentorship, and awareness initiatives are important in helping women understand governance and build confidence. We must also ensure that younger women are prepared to take over leadership roles, as the current generation cannot remain in these positions forever.

7. Why is it urgent to increase the number and influence of women in local government, and how will this contribute to positive change in governance?

Women are nation builders. When women are in leadership positions, they do not only uplift themselves, they uplift everyone around them.

In the Northwest region, there are still very few women in leadership, and this limits progress. When women are given opportunities and support, they contribute to development across all sectors. Government leaders have already recognised the importance of working with women and youth, and this is creating new opportunities. Through meetings, seminars, and continuous engagement, we are seeing more women step forward. Increasing women's participation is not just about equality, it is about improving communities and ensuring that development benefits everyone.

8. How has digital technology helped or can help accelerate women's political inclusion in local government, and what steps should we take to make it more accessible to women in leadership?

Digital technology has helped women connect, communicate, and participate more actively. WhatsApp in particular has been very useful for women's groups. Almost all our meeting groups have WhatsApp platforms where they share information and stay connected. For women who cannot read, voice



messages make it possible for them to participate and stay informed. This has made technology more inclusive.

However, there are still challenges, especially for older women who are not familiar with digital tools. To improve access, we need more training and support so that women of all ages can benefit from technology. Digital tools are helping to bridge communication gaps and make participation easier. **9. What innovative practices or strategies have you used to accelerate women's participation and leadership in local government in your region or country?**

One key strategy has been encouraging women to form and join Common Initiative Groups. These are certified groups that work together on agricultural projects such as cassava, cocoa, and palm plantations. Through these groups, women can access loans, fertilizers, and farming tools provided by government partners. They also meet regularly, support each other, and build financial independence.

Financial empowerment is very important because when women have their own income, they gain respect at home and receive more support to participate in politics. I also organise regular meetings with women and work closely with them to build confidence and encourage leadership. These collective efforts are helping more women step forward and participate in governance.

10. As CLGF celebrates 30 years, what actions must be taken in the next 30 years to ensure the continued empowerment of women in local government?

We need stronger support from the state, not only financially but also through trust and meaningful inclusion of women in leadership positions. Women should be given more appointments and opportunities to lead.

Cultural mindsets must also change. Many people still believe that men should always lead, and even some women have accepted this. We must work to change these beliefs and show that women are equally capable. We also need more regular meetings, training, and empowerment programmes to continue building women's capacity. The next 30 years should focus on ensuring that women are not just included, but fully empowered to lead and make decisions at all levels of government.

CLGF 30th Anniversary Commemoration

In celebration of CLGF's 30th Anniversary, we are honoured to spotlight the inspiring stories of 30 trailblazing women in local government from across the Commonwealth, all members of the Commonwealth Women in Local Government Network. These interviews celebrate their groundbreaking contributions to gender equality and their transformative impact on building inclusive, empowered communities.

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