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Soaring with WINGSPAN Leadership for Change

# Soaring with WINGSPAN *Leadership for Change*

The Government of the Republic of Mali has made great strides to consolidate a decentralization process aimed at devolving power and decision-making to rural areas. The first phase of the USAID Women in Governance (WING) project focused on increasing women's participation in decision-making process at the local level and led to the highest election participation rate of women in Mali's



history (1999-2004). The result was an increase from 22 to 41 elected women councilors in the 16 target communes. Decentralization is at the heart of the democratization process and such a new system both offers women a historic opportunity and depends upon their participation in civic and political activity for success. The Expansion of Women in Governance (WINGSPAN) project fosters women's organizations and women's participation in governance.

A central objective of WINGSPAN is to provide the knowledge, information, and skills that will enable elected women and other women leaders to participate constructively in formulating and influencing local governance. During the WING pilot, winning 16% of the elected seats in targeted communes, compared with an overall average of less than 8% in the same regions, was a great achievement for women. Now they find that becoming effective lobbyists, advocates, and diplomats for their communities may constitute an even greater challenge.

Under WINGSPAN, women gain and refine critical leadership skills including public speaking, conflict resolution and negotiation techniques. Leadership for Change workshops enable women to develop personal action plans that will contribute directly to the resolution of important issues and concerns of their female constituencies.

At a recent Leadership for Change workshop organized in Mopti, Serandou Boucoum, director of the Kanafa Primary School, Commune of Djenné, spoke poignantly about her role as a mentor to women in her commune, "I won the admiration and confidence of many women for having overcome extreme difficulties and consequently I was able to help others forge ahead and progress.

**Program Group:**  
Empowerment & Civic  
Engagement

**Country:**  
Mali

**Funding:**  
USAID/Mali

I encouraged those who hesitated and lacked confidence to speak up in public meetings to defend women's rights. I assured them that they were safe and had nothing to fear in speaking up for such a good cause. The connection between the women I helped and supported and I became as strong as that which exists between relatives and to this day we support each other in good times and bad."

Risk was a topic in the Leadership for Change workshop in Mopti. Raymonde Guindo recounted the time she went against tradition and advocated for women's rights to wear shoes. According to Dogon culture women were prohibited from wearing shoes. Guindo's perseverance and determination gave her the strength to go in the face of tradition and to convince local traditional authorities that times had changed and the reasons that may have been the basis for this cultural practice in the past were no longer valid. Her ability to argue and advocate for this change has made the women of Bandiagara happy and far more comfortable as they now don shoes along with the men in their communities. In the workshop participants discussed taking risks for the cause of making life better for other women in their communities.

Leadership for change participants were encouraged to risk change throughout the week together. One risk women were invited to take during the workshop was to wear pants on the second day of the workshop. Many of the women celebrated in the fun and novelty of this safe risk/change, motivating them to speak with great emotion of other risks they had taken along life's path. Participating in the workshop reinforced for these women the value of taking risks as they forge to change the role of women in Malian society.



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