Biography

Gisèle Rabesahala

A celebrated Malagasy woman politician of the twentieth century, Gisèle Rabesahala (1929-2011) devoted her life to her country's independence, human rights and the freedom of peoples.

Born in Madagascar in 1929, Gisèle Rabesahala spent her childhood between France, Tunisia and what is now Mali, where her father was a non-commissioned officer in the French army. When he passed away in 1942, she returned to Madagascar with her family. The island was then a French colony.

As a child, Gisèle Rabesahala dreamed of becoming a nun. In her adolescence, she pictured herself as a "defender of the innocent", which encouraged her to continue her education at a time when few Malagasy women were able to do so. Gisèle eventually earned her Preparatory Certificate and trained as a shorthand typist.

Portrait of Gisèle Rabesahala in the 1970s. Rabesahala family archives.

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At 17, she ventured into politics for the first time, as secretary to the Democratic Movement for Malagasy Renewal (MDRM), which campaigned for the country's independence. She soon made a name for herself as a female politician of exceptional ability in a political world dominated by men. She was the first woman to be elected as a municipal councillor (1956) and political party leader (1958). She was also the first woman appointed minister in 1977.

Through her personality, her commitment and her exceptional career, Gisèle Rabesahala established herself, over the years, as a true pioneer and a major political force in Madagascar's political history. At the international level, she ranks among those historical figures that are at the forefront of development, having worked for the freedom of the peoples of Madagascar, human rights, independence and the progress of humanity.

Gisèle Rabesahala in Antalaha (North-East Madagascar) with her fellow comrades (1950). Rabesahala family archives.