

**Journal of Political Studies**

*Vol. 31, No. 1, January–June, Summer 2024, pp. 31–44*

## **Women, Political Corruption and First Ladyship in Nigeria**

**Ayo Awopeju (Ph.D.)**

*Senior Lecturer, Department of Political Science,  
Joseph Ayo Babalola University, Ikeji-Arakeji, Osun State*

**Correspondence:** [aawopeju@jabu.edu.ng](mailto:aawopeju@jabu.edu.ng)

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Despite the international campaigns and conferences held on the need to enhance gender equality in every facet of human endeavor, there is still a wide gap between the level of women's and men's participations in politics and decision-making positions in Nigeria. One of the ways women participate in politics is by playing the role of first ladies. This paper, therefore, examines women's participation in politics, political corruption vis-à-vis first ladies' roles in Nigeria. Anchored on feminist theory as its theoretical framework, the paper made use of secondary sources of data, such as textbooks, journals, reports on international conferences, conventions and agencies, internet sources, magazines and newspapers. Findings revealed that the first ladies initiate pet projects to showcase themselves in public, use the office for personal aggrandizement and promote the agenda of their husbands in power. These projects serve as means of looting the state treasury, thus having negative implications on the socio-political development of Nigeria. This paper concluded that, although the pet projects are aimed at achieving developmental objectives, they are means of official looting of the state treasury, thereby having debilitating implications on national development of the Nigerian state. It is therefore recommended among others that the culture of good governance be practiced to check the malfeasance of the first ladies in governance in Nigeria.*

**Received:**  
March 03,  
2024

**Revised:**  
March 17,  
2024 &  
March 26,  
2024

**Published:**  
June 10, 2024

**Keywords:** *Women, Women Participation, Politics, First Lady, Pet Projects*

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### **Introduction**

The level at which women participate in politics has been a concern to scholars of gender issues in recent times. This is because despite the international campaigns and conferences held on the need to enhance gender equality in every facet of human endeavour, there is still a wide gap between the level at which women and men participate in politics and decision-making positions, not only in Nigeria but also in the world at large.

Campaigns and conferences held to enhance women participation in politics are the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Conference of 1995. These convention and conference are significantly concerned with women's involvement in societal developments

## *Women, Political Corruption and First Ladyship in Nigeria*

such as governance with a view to reducing the rate at which they are being oppressed (Aluko and Ajani, 2006). For instance, it was in 1995 Beijing Conference that the discussion regarding first ladies initially attracted international attention (Jibrin, 2004).

Despite these efforts, the UNDP Report (2005) still reveals little participation of women in politics. The report revealed that thirty-three percent of women have the opportunity of occupying parliamentary seats in only twelve (12) countries out of the countries in the world. Aluko and Ajani (2006) further corroborate that the global representation of women in national politics is 5%. Although women constitute 49.8% of the population in Nigeria, they are poorly represented at the gladiatorial level” (Ako-Nai & Iwabunor, 2013: 243). The figure has hardly ever been more than 5% since the country’s fourth republic (Eni, 2010).

For the past 24 years (1999 to 2023) of democratic regime in Nigeria, women have been able to occupy only 157 seats out of the 469-member seats in both the National Assembly and the Senate (Okafor & Ileyemi, 2023). Also, the failure to be engaged in agreements ensuring women’s full participation in politics reflected in the 25 February 2023 Presidential and National Assembly elections’ results. While only three out of the ninety-two (92) women who campaigned for elections into the Senate in February won, only fifteen out of the 268 women won in the House of Representatives (Okafor & Ileyemi, 2023).

Although women in Nigeria have been involved in politics at various levels from the pre-colonial to colonial and post-colonial times, it has been observed that there are sets of limiting factors besetting equal gender participation. Some of the limitations are considerably tied to the political development of the country (WARD, 2003). Nevertheless, an increasing number of people have been acclaiming that virtuous women politicians should be endorsed in political office. It is stated that if women occupy some of the political offices currently occupied by men, the quality of political practices will improve in Nigeria. What this implies is that political corruption will be minimized if women occupy political positions in Nigeria. In other words, politics will certainly become less filthy because men seem to be more corrupt than women.

One of the ways in which women participate in politics is through political activism of the office of the first lady. This is seen as a response for integrating women into politics or into national development plans. The first lady initiative can be traced to the 1992 World Summit for the Advancement of Rural Women which took place at Geneva. Out of the six first ladies who raised the issues, three were Africans--Maryam Babangida, Elizabeth Diop and Suzanne Mubarak (Sage, 1998). This development gave the first ladies the opportunity, to independently support their spouses in international politics (Jubrin, 2004). Although the first lady’s roles over the years have been very significant in managing empires, tribes and nations, especially during the African traditional governance structures (Bawa, 2019; Bawa, 2022), no recognition has been given to the office of the first lady in the Constitutions of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

While contemporary scholars such as Ako-Nai & Iwabunor (2013), Ake et. al (2019), Orokpo (2017), Suleiman et al (2019), Tama & Maiwuya (2022), Quadri (2015), Awopeju (2011), have examined gender imbalance in the socio-economic spheres and political participation in society, there is paucity of the investigation

on women, political corruption vis-à-vis the First Lady role in Nigeria. This is the gap this paper seeks to fill. The thesis of this paper is that women display extreme dexterity and great success in their official assignment when they occupy political office.

This paper, therefore, examines women's participation in politics, political corruption and the roles of first lady in Nigeria in the light of the following questions: Why is it that first ladies initiate programmes or pet projects despite the unconstitutionality of the office? What is the relationship of these programmes *cum* political corruption? What are the implications of these programmes on socio-economic and political development in Nigeria? Secondary data such as textbooks, journals, print media, internet sources, government publications, etc., were relied upon in providing answers to the raised questions above.

The various sections of the paper are as follows: Section one introduces the paper, section two examines conceptual clarification, section three presents the theoretical framework, section four examines implications of the first ladyship on socio-economic and political development of Nigeria, women, corruption and the office of the first lady, while section five presents the conclusion and recommendations for the study.

### **Conceptual Clarification**

#### **Political Corruption**

It is a form of corruption involving the political decision-makers. These are government officials or their network contacts who use powers for illegitimate private gain or to benefit a particular group ([www.lsd.law](http://www.lsd.law)).

#### **First Ladyship**

This is referred to the president's wife or the state governor's wife assisting the husband and ensuring women participation in politics.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The adopted theoretical framework is feminist theory which is an extension of feminism in the field of philosophy. Feminism is a form of development which focuses on ensuring that women, as their male counterparts, enjoy equal political, economic, and social right (Parkash, 2022). Feminism as a concept is closely connected to the theory of feminist, which focuses on the origins of inequality and, societal views of sex and gender, in different disciplines. The objective of Feminist theory is to have deep insight into the operations of gender inequality through the lenses of gender politics, power relations, and sexuality. Feminist theory has been to explore various themes such as, stereotyping, discrimination, objection (especially sexual objectification), oppression and patriarchy.

Though feminist theory has diverse dimensions to understanding women's views regarding their social, economic and political positions in society, the basic goal of all feminisms is the demand for equality between men and women (Lorber, 2010). Feminism can be categorised into liberal, radical, and socialist feminism. While liberal feminism aims at integrating women into the already established organisations operating in society in order to ensure that women also experience the same legal, political and social rights being enjoyed by men, the radical feminism

## *Women, Political Corruption and First Ladyship in Nigeria*

argues that if gender equality is to be realised in a male-dominated world system, the adopted approach should be revolutionary. In addition, the socialist feminism strongly believed that gender equality is not about achieving only equal legal and political status but it also has to do with societal inquiry into how the movement for women's freedom can be properly linked to the transformation of capitalism (Stivers, 2002). Hence, in order to confront the concept of neutrality as viewed in the social sciences, feminist approach can be adopted.

Feminism is relevant to this study because it is a theory that canvasses for gender equality and discrimination in society. Therefore, the office of the first lady is a way of ensuring that women participate in politics so as to organize women groups to mobilize one another for the advancement of women's issue.

### **Women, Corruption and the First Ladyship in Nigeria**

Nigeria, contrary to many African countries, has no electoral gender quota system. The electoral gender is significant because gender quota system and proportional representation policies seem as effective strategies for increasing women political participation. This has effect on the women's participation in politics. Ako-Nai & Iwabunor (2013: 242) vividly examined the effect and posited that:

For instance, from 1960 to 2003, there was no Woman Senate President or Speaker of the House of Assembly. By 2005, all administrators of the National Assembly and Heads of departments were men. However, this does not rule out the fact that in the past, some women held important positions and rule their communities along with men.

Scholars such as Sofola (1998), Mba (1987) and Awe (1991) have established that women had ruled their communities. For instance, Sofola (1998) is of the opinion that women in the past held important positions in their communities, and have played significant roles in shaping the history and destiny of the country. Besides, Mba (1987) and Awe (1991) recorded the accounts of women prior to colonization of Nigeria. They posited that position such as Iyalode (a high chief and women leader) was used to be part of Oba-in-Council. The position happened to be the spokesperson for the womenfolk. In spite of this position, colonialism brought about marginalization of women and the situation has continued in the post-colonial Nigeria.

After Nigeria's independence the First Lady role was unrecognized in the Nigerian constitution. Despite the absence of official quota policies, there are various initiatives being put up by the first ladies in Nigeria. They registered their projects through the states as Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) using public resources.

Before 1999, the office of the First Lady was practiced by the wives of the military heads of state. Some of these wives of erstwhile military heads of state and the civilian president were not usually public figures as their husbands (Bawa, 2022). For example, the spouses of former presidents such as Tafawa Balewa, Yakubu Gowon, General Olusegun Obasanjo (during his military regime), Alhaji Shehu Shagari and General Muhammadu Buhari (also during his military regime) were practically unknown.

When General Babangida became the military head of state, the customary roles of spouses of presidents and governors were improved by Mrs Maryam Babangida. Part of the improvement was the inauguration of the Better Life for Rural Women Programme (BLRWP) in 1987, a Non-Governmental Organisation, aiming at improving the lives of vulnerable women, especially in the rural area. (Iheanacho, 2016). This act paved way for successive First Ladies to become key influencers in the advancement of women issues during their spouses' tenures.

Having registered their voices among the women folds, the first ladies initiated various pet projects in Nigeria. The intention of these projects is to ensure women's participation in politics and to give strong backings to women occupying leadership positions. The projects of the first ladies before 1999 are revealed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1:** First Lady Pet Projects Before 1999

S/N	First Lady	Pet Project	Year
1	Mrs. Maryam Babangida	Better Life for Rural Women Programme	1987-1993
2	Mrs. Mariam Abacha	Family Support Programme	1993-1998
3	Mrs. Fatima Abdulsalami Abubakar	Women's Right Advancement and Protection Alternative	1998-1999

**Source:** Author's Compilation (2024)

Gradually, the idea of initiating projects by the office of the First Lady became a norm in Nigeria. The table below reveals a number of pet projects embarked upon by the first ladies in the fourth republic.

**Table 2:** First Lady Pet Projects in Nigeria's Fourth Republic

S/N	First Lady	Pet Project	Year
1	Mrs. Stella Obasanjo	Child Care Trust	1999-2007
2	Hajia Turai Yar'Adua	Women and Youth Empowerment Foundation (WAYEF)	2007-2010
3	Dame Patience Jonathan	Women for Change Initiative	2010-2015
4	Hajia Aisha Buhari	Futured Assured	2015-2023
5	Mrs. Oluremi Tinubu	Renewed Hope Initiative	2023-Till Date

**Source:** Author's Compilation (2024)

After the swearing in of Olusegun Obasanjo as Nigeria President in May 29, 1999, his wife, Mrs. Stella Obasanjo, became the first lady and supported the democratic governance through her pet project titled "Child Care Trust." The pet project was launched in 2000 with the intention of providing succour for physically challenged children (Sanni, 2010).

*Women, Political Corruption and First Ladyship in Nigeria*

The Child Care Trust was being administered unilaterally at the federal level only by a Board of Trustees with the president's wife as the Chairperson and funder. Because of her political exposure and dedication, she decided to focus on the role of women in politics. Consequently, she was able to advance both women's rights and their strong political involvement in a conference with the People's Democratic Party (PDP) women's wing at the International Conference Centre, at Abuja in 1999 (Bawa, 2022). This led to the improvement of women's participation in politics as they were being given appointment and elected into political positions in 2003 (Bawa, 2003). The table below shows the comparative analysis of the number of women elected in the 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019 and 2023 Nigerian Elections.

**Table 3:** Number of Women Elected in 1999-2023 Nigerian Election

<b>Office</b>	<b>Position Available</b>	<b>No. of Women in 1999</b>	<b>No. of Women in 2003</b>	<b>No. of Women in 2007</b>	<b>No. of Women in 2011</b>	<b>No. of Women in 2015</b>	<b>No. of Women in 2019</b>	<b>No. of Women in 2023</b>
President	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Vice- President	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Senate	109	3	4	9	7	7	7	3
House of Representatives	360	12	21	21	18	22	13	17
Governors	36	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Deputy Governors	36	1	2	6	1	4	4	6
State House of Assembly Members	990	12	23	53	55	51	40	48
Cabinet Ministers	34	4	6	7	13	6	7	7

**Source:** Author's Compilation (2024)

The table above indicates that with the initiation of Child Care Trust and its activities, the number of women elected into various positions increased slightly. This is corroborated by Jibrin (2004). According to him, in 1999, out of 360 members, the number of women in the House of Representatives increased from 12 to 21 in 2003 elections. Also, State House of Assembly had 23 members in 2003 relative to 12 in 1999 and the Cabinet Ministers increased from 4 to 6. Besides, information from Table 3 above suggests that women need to be given more opportunity for active participation in politics considering the avalanche of political positions in Nigeria.

The Child Care Trust had significant impact such as providing succour to underprivileged children through medical services, accommodation and grants (Arum, 2010), though the initiator of the Child Care Trust died in December, 2005. The demise of Stella Obasanjo gave way to another pet project tagged “Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation” by Titi Abubakar, the Vice-President’s wife. The project was adopted in creating awareness in Nigeria regarding the influence of human trafficking so as to seriously control any related activities by the sponsors. Consequently, the campaign led to the launching of the National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in Persons and Other Related Matters (NAPTIP) in 2003 (Jubrin, 2004).

On July, 2009, Turai Yar’Adua, the late President Umaru Yar’Adua’s widow, who was then the first lady, raised N10 billion from government and friends of government for her project at Abuja. Among those who significantly contributed were Mangal Dahiru, a friend of her late husband who donated N2 billion, Aminu Dantata, N 500 million, Isiaku Rabiu, N 260 million and Rochas Okorochoa who also gave N 120 million. Besides these donations, the Governors’ Forum donated N 720 million while former governors donated N40 million (Eni, 2010). Unfortunately, the demise of her husband led to the end of, the initiated project.

The emergence of Goodluck Jonathan as the President, Federal Republic of Nigeria after Yar’Adua’s death, led to the launching of another pet project by Jonathan’s wife, Patience Jonathan. The launched project was called “Women for Change Initiative.” The intention of the project was to give strong backings to women in leadership positions and opportunities to be appointed and elected into political positions. This initiative made all ministries of women affairs, both at the federal and state levels, to pool up their resources for campaign in their respective states, while the local government chairmen’s spouses were involved in mobilizing women participation at the grassroots.

With the conduct of presidential election in Nigeria, the then incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan, was defeated and Mummadu Buhari became the President. The wife of the newly elected president, Aisha Buhari followed the trend of her predecessors. She was the longest serving first lady under democratically elected government (2015-2023). She started as Aisha Buhari Foundation and later initiated the Futured Assured Programme as her pet project. The project was meant for ameliorating poverty among women and the youth, in particular. Bawa (2022: 497) posited that not less than 2,200 women were trained in various vocational skills with a view to empowering them and were also given materials useful for safety reproductive and maternal health.



It is important to note that some of these pet projects not only enabled the women to participate in politics but also helped to empower women. For instance, the Girl-Child Education Project (GEP) of Hajjiya Aisha Isa Yagudu of Bauchi State and Women Education and Empowerment Initiative in Nigeria (WEEIN) are examples of educational empowerment programme.

Aisha Buhari's pet project came to an end as a result of the emergence of President Bola Ahmed Tinubu (PBAT) as the 6th civilian president of Nigeria in May 29th 2023. As usual, his wife also launched her project which she culled from her husband's slogan during the campaign, "Renewed Mandate." She therefore tagged her project "Renewed Hope Initiative" (RHI). Although the administration of PBAT is still new, it is a project meant to provide humanitarian services to the elderly, women communities and girl-child (Tinubu, in Vanguard, March, 2024). As the wife of the former governor of Lagos State and the wife of the president, Mrs. Oluremi Tinubu is the most experienced of all the wives of the presidents in Nigeria because she had served as the first lady of Lagos State and now the first lady, Federal Republic of Nigeria. The RHI has been making impact on the citizens of Nigerians. For example, the RHI has reached out to displaced people of Plateau State in terms of scholarship, Information Communication Technology and empowerment to women within Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, among others (Latest News, 2023).

In the same manner, practically all governors' and the local government chairmen's spouses initiate diverse projects. In other words, the act of replicating all programmes initiated by the first lady in Abuja has become the usual practice for all the 36 states and 774 local government areas. Since the introduction of the Better Life Programme for Rural Women, launched in September 18, 1987, Nigeria has produced 9 first ladies at the federal level, 398 state first ladies and almost 8,000 first ladies at the local government levels. Since the inauguration of the fourth republic in 1999, five federal first ladies and 225 state first ladies have been produced in Nigeria (Abdullahi-Owolabi, 2023).

These first ladies after using their positions to initiate projects, they organise elaborate fundraising ceremonies to raise funds from renowned businessmen, government contractors, agencies, state and local governments. Despite the huge donations from the public, the projects usually stop at the end of the tenure of the husbands of these first ladies who initiate them. As a result of this, their successors always abandon these projects and initiate their own projects with public resources.

**Table 4:** Some First Ladies and their Pet Projects (State Governors' Wives) in South West, Nigeria

<b>Name</b>	<b>State</b>	<b>Current First Ladies' Projects</b>	<b>Former First Ladies' Pet Projects</b>
Mrs. Betty Akeredolu	Ondo	BEMORE Initiative	Breast and Cervical Programme
Mrs. Titilola Adeleke	Osun	Women in Agriculture	IleriOluwa Development Initiative
Dr. Ibijoko Sanwo-Olu	Lagos	Lagos Boy Child Initiative	Hope for Women in Nigeria Initiative
Mrs. Bamidele Abiodun	Ogun	Ajose Foundation	Understanding People's Limiting and Inhabiting Factor Today
Dr. (Mrs.) Oyebanji	Ekiti	Widow and Orphans Hope Project	Ekiti Development Foundation
Mrs. Tamunominini Olufunke Makinde	Oyo	Women Empowerment	Ajumose Food Basket

*Source: Author's Compilation (2024)*

Because they are not answerable to anybody, the raised fund is neither audited nor is the project execution subjected to any form of scrutiny. In order to substantiate this, the former National President of the Concerned Deltan United in Defense of Integrity, Justice and Democracy (CDUDIJD), Emmanuel Arawore declared that the source of funding most of the initiated governors' wives project is shrouded in controversy, thus making it unconstitutional (Eni, 2010: 47). The idea of first ladyship is manipulative. Therefore, in relation to political corruption, finding revealed that the office of the first lady is a conduit pipe for drawing away the resources of the public and the private sectors in the Nigerian state. Then, the question that comes to mind is this: why are they initiating these pet projects when they know that the idea of the first lady is unconstitutional? Findings revealed that they showcase themselves in public through the projects, use the office for personal aggrandizement, and promote the agenda of their husbands in power. The findings, therefore, negate the thesis of the paper that women display dexterity and great success in their official assignment when they occupy political office. Also, findings do not agree with the Feminist theory whose propositions highlight the understanding of how gender inequality operates in gender politics, power relations, and sexuality. This is because the theory does not canvass for personal aggrandizement but seeks for significant participation of women vis-a-vis men in the society.

## **Implications of First Ladyship On Socio-Economic and Political Development in Nigeria**

Having established the fact that the office of the first lady is unconstitutional, and that they use the office to perpetrate political corruption, then, what are the implications of the office on the socio-economic and political development of the Nigerian state? The followings implications are vividly and carefully examined.

First, it breeds corruption in high places. The office of the first lady does not account for money it generates at the launching. These first ladies use the money the way they like and acquire wealth without any questioning. In other words, they take advantage of their positions for making money and having access to resources which they can later convert into political capital for continuity in power. What worsens the situation is that, by the time the first lady leaves the office, that will be the end of the pet project she initiated. Funds that are supposed to be appropriated for the country's social and economic development are habitually embezzled, thus preventing easy access to basic necessities like food, shelter, good health and education.

Two, it distorts governance. This distortion comes in the form of change of policies because the first ladies wield so much power and influence in policy formulation of their husbands to the extent that some elected officials fear them. As a result of that, they move close to them. For instance, during a visit of Patience Jonathan to Rivers State, when she was launching her pet project, she had a confrontation with Governor Rotimi Amaechi over some of the government policies she did not concur with. She, therefore, seized the microphone from the governor and ordered him to change the policy (Eni, 2010).

Three, First Ladyship constitutes a severe threat to democracy because it encourages "femocracy," a form of office that provides independent instruments for the creation of specific state and non-state structures Mama (1987: 81) stated that femocracy contradicts democracy because it gives power to few women because of their marital relation to influential men in power.

The basic assumption of femocracy is all about possessing power by women as a result of their husbands' powerful positions in society, and the established mode of operation is usually through the office of the first lady. The truism is that femocracy encourages autocratic practices which negate the principle of democracy.

Four, it breeds mediocrity in a democratic rule. Some of the appointments of the first ladies are made because those persons involved are close to the first lady even though these persons are not qualified to hold the positions. In the words of Jubrin (2004), the major state appointments are made by the whims and caprices of the first ladies.

Five, it further leads to self-aggrandizement which may heat up the democratic polity. First lady has a range of practices which could assist women to be highly competitive with men regarding the struggles to have access to powerful positions. In Nigeria, many male politicians market their candidate through the use of praise singers who are image-makers and through the use of public offices to provide goods, services and money to their local communities, which thus become a source of loyal voters during the elections (Ibrahim, 2007).

### **Conclusion**

The paper has analysed the participation of women in politics (first ladies) as regards the initiations of their pet projects which are meant to be independent of or parallel to their husbands' government and the implications of these on national development in Nigeria. The paper has concluded that though these projects are aimed at achieving developmental objectives, they are means of official looting of the state treasury, thus having debilitating implications on national development of the Nigerian state. Based on the findings and the conclusion, the following recommendations are made.

First, the office of the first lady should be abolished since it is unconstitutional. The office encourages the first ladies to run their own parallel government with public funds. In other words, it leads to wasting of resources of the state. Two, anti-corruption agencies that are insulated from political interference should be set up to make these first ladies give account of their activities while their husbands have left office. The culture of not rendering accounts to the public as regards the amount they made during the fundraising of their projects and the manner they spent the resources should be discouraged. Therefore, the non-partisan anti-corruption agencies should investigate the activities of these first ladies and when they are culpable for corrupt act(s), they should be exposed and prosecuted. Three, the government should encourage women to participate in politics by mobilizing and orientating them through the Ministry of Women Affairs and National Orientation Agency (NOA). The fact is that women do not participate because they are not motivated and encouraged to do so. With the orientation of the ministry and NOA, it will increase the participation of women in politics in Nigeria. Four, the culture of good governance should be promoted in the Nigerian state. The term governance is characterized by major indicators which assure that corruption is minimized, the view of citizens is taken into account, and the voices of the most vulnerable in society is heard. In other words, the parameters of good governance such as accountability, transparency, participation, education, responsiveness and rule of law should be encouraged by the Nigerian state. Five, media should be allowed to be actively independent in covering the activities of these first ladies while they are running their own parallel government, so as to keep them on their toes as regards their activities.

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*Women, Political Corruption and First Ladyship in Nigeria*

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