



Women Empowerment and Pet Projects of Wives of Heads of State in Nigeria: An Assessment

Abdullahi Abdulkadir; & AbdulRauf Aliyu Yusuf

Department of Social Sciences, the Federal Polytechnic Bida, Niger State

Abstract

The paper discussed the impact of Pet Projects of wives of Military and civilian Heads of State through the review of existing literature and covers the period from the time of Maryam Babangida to Patience Jonathan. It begins by introducing the challenges of gender disparities, then proceed the briefly discuss the concepts First Lady and Pet Project; adopted the Gender and development and Women Empowerment theory as the framework of explaining the impact of Pet Projects of wives of Heads of states; analyse the impact of their Pet Projects which the paper identifies as very important but recommends certain measures to improve their operation.

Key words- First lady, Pet Project, Non-Governmental Organization, Women Empowerment, Head of State

Introduction

It is a fact of history that women in most parts of the world are disadvantaged, dispossessed and depowered in the society compared to the male counterpart. Of recent, the position of women in societal affairs has attracted research, advocacy and policy. According to Iheanacho (2016) the seeming and underlying rationale of the global concern

is the conception of women as occupying important but vulnerable status in life. Across the world, women are undervalued and considered the weaker gender. They live their lives in conditions of marked inequality, in comparison with their male counterparts. Despite the huge population representation of women compared to men, the position of women

in relation to political power, economic resources and social access and penetration is abysmal. According to Ajayi (2010), gender inequality has a universal application, as it is not limited to the developing world alone. The difference is in relation to the degree of relegation. Women, like all other minority and marginalized groups, who feel cheated, are desperately seeking equality in ways through reverse gender discrimination. The statistics of access of women to education and employment; sex specific physiological needed health care; narrations and presentation in literature and history; religious positioning and structuring; political power; and law separately and all combined, put the women folk at the disadvantage. In the words of Young (2006) as cited by Ajayi (2010) women are exposed to ‘the five faces of oppression’, which he listed as exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. Economic disadvantage, Godfatherism and absence of mentorship for women, unfriendly culture and environment for female participation in public affairs are factors that hinder women access to political, social and economic uplifting platforms (Ajayi, 2010). This lies behind the continuous call for the mainstreaming of gender issues in the development discourse. According to Iheanacho (2016)

The emergence of women advocates and activists has a relative long history with a variety of approach and strategies, in different parts of the world. Coordinated efforts toward women advancement, as an issue on the front burner of global concern for quality life dates back to the 1923 League of Nations. Sequel to the outcome of the League was the systematic articulation and enumeration of global Covenants and Treaties as stated in the founding documents of the United Nations (UN). Since then women issues have become ever topical in national planning, across the regions of the world.

In Nigeria, Pet projects by wives of Heads of States have become a response to the global rising call for the participation of women in politics, governance and economy. This is coupled with the innate nature of women, to care for the vulnerable and disadvantaged and support their office-holding spouses in governance, starting from the era of General Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida (IBB) through the instrument of office of the First Lady (FL). Although not backed by any law or the constitution, wives of executive heads of the federal, state and local governments over the years have increasing participated in governance using the “unofficial” office of the FL in Nigeria. Nigerian women have so embraced the office of FL as a veritable avenue for them to make-up for what they fail to achieve in the male dominated political space of the nation (Iheanacho, 2016).

Thus, the arrival of each government is accompanied by the establishment of a Non-Governmental-Organization (NGO) through which the wives of Heads of States/Governments pursue and engage in programmes and projects to improve the lives of the vulnerable, especially women and children in their choice area of interest. Their activities differ in name, but the emphasis is on women empowerment and is centred on the upliftment of women in the political, economic and social sphere. Thus, Pet projects as instrument for providing the needs of citizenry especially women and children have increasingly become a channel for women development. According to Iheanacho (2016) the various pet-projects are rallying points for women interaction and resource mobilization for economic fortunes and participation in politics and governance.

To finance their Pet projects, FLs find their way through state connections to attract public funds to finance their projects. In the frame of NGO based projects, FLs bring individuals and organizations doing business in the nation to make donations. The donations run into very huge sums of money at the discretionary disposal of the particular FL (Iheanacho, 2016). Pet projects of wives of Heads of State and Civilian Presidents has become part of the office First Lady over the years.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The paper relied on secondary sources for data. Conference articles, published journals and monograph materials were reviewed to extract relevant information. The use of content analysis was employed as the method of research. Three wives of military Heads of state and three wives of civilian Presidents were analysed in this study.

DISCOURSE OF CONCEPTS

What does the First Lady entail?

The First Lady according to Ajayi (2010) refers to the woman who is foremost in position, rank and importance among other women. The person so designated has precedence over her female counterparts. She is *primus inter pares*. More specifically, according to Simpson and Weiner (1989) as cited in Ajayi (2010), the First Lady is the most important woman and particularly the wife of a President or Head of State. The office of the First Lady, in the opinion of Kolawole (1992), has recently become a means of negotiating the corridors of power by women globally (Ajayi, 2010).

According to Festus, Margret and Bassey (2015) citing Watson (2000) identified eleven key duties that first ladies in the United States of America must undertake: act as a wife, social advocate, public figure and celebrity, social hostess, diplomat, symbol of American women, White House Manager and preservationist, campaigner,

presidential and political party booster, presidential spokesperson and political and presidential partner. Akanbi and Jekayinka (2011) maintained that the above roles are not the exclusive preserve of American First Ladies but applicable to all responsible wives of leaders, especially political office holders. Akanbi and Jekayinka agreed that first ladies occupy an important political space and must be used to benefit the society (Festus, Margret and Bassey 2015).

As the wife of the head of a political executive office, the FL leverages to pursue and finance her pet projects. Before IBB, office of FL was moribund. In Nigeria, the FL was unheard of. Wives of Heads of State only performed certain ceremonial functions like hosting guest at the residence of the Head of state. It all took a new beginning and turn when Maryam Babangida launched the Better Life Programme for Rural Women (BLPRW) in 1987 as a pet project. The BLPRW focused on transformation, empowerment and development of the vulnerable women in the country, especially those in the rural areas.

Mama (1995) as cited by Idowu (2018) traced the historical evolution and the level of prominence the practice has gotten over the years. According to her, “The first lady phenomenon...has reached new levels of dominance... The first lady syndrome was conspicuous in the early days of Kenya’s independence, and following Siyad Barre’s seizure of power in Somalia. The wives of both Heads of State wielded a great deal of public influence and amassed vast fortunes for themselves.” (Mama, 1999). Yunus (2015) traced the concept of the title First Lady to the United State (US).

In Nigeria, wife of Presidents and Heads of State (first ladies) have therefore, capitalized on this privilege to be involved, one-way or the other, in governance during the periods their spouses are presidents. The role of FLs in such governance opportunities is often directed towards the empowerment, development and betterment of their women counterparts through their Pet Projects.

Defining Pet Project

Pet project is a phrase of two words. The word Pet is both a noun and a verb. As a noun, it means an animal kept and nurtured affectionately as a companion. As a verb, it means nurturing and affectionately caring for someone or and something. Project on the other hand is any purposive and specific activity meant to achieve a defined goal. The online dictionaries, yourdictionary.com and definitions.net defines Pet project as a project, activity or goal pursued as a personal favourite rather than because it is generally accepted as necessary or important. It is defined as a project or venture, especially pursued out of personal interest. In essence, pet project is a personal interest driven activity, nurtured towards attaining defined objectives. In other words, a more

comprehensive definition denotes the design, execution and engagement in heart-felt defined organize activities that are driven towards achievable goal.

Pet Projects of FLs are planned and executed activities of programmes meant to uplift the lots women and children through empowerment, advocacy and infrastructural development. As a measure meant to improve the welfare of women in Nigeria, Pet Projects of FLs have evolved as a core strategy of gender mainstreaming. Thus, from the days of Maryam Babangida as the First Lady till now with Aisha Buhari as the wife of the President pet projects have been an integral part of the life of spouses of the Head of States. This paper attempts to assess the impact of the Pet Projects of Wives of military Heads of State and civilian Presidents from the era of Maryam Babangida to Aisha Buhari.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For easy understanding of the impact of Pet Projects of wives of Military Heads of State and wives of civilian Presidents, the paper adopts the women empowerment theory of Kabeer (1999) and the theory of Gender and Development (GAD) as the framework for explanation. As an approach according to Idowu (2018) citing (Ntiwunka, 2013) GAD deals with “social, economic, political and cultural forces that determine how men and women participate in, benefit from, and control project resources and activities differently”. It focuses on socially determined relations between men and women, to ensure that decisions which has to do with development, be an equal contribution from both men and women in the development process (Williams, Seed & Mwau, 1994). The approach encourages women’s participation on equal basis with the men in all ramifications (Tasli, 2007). GAD therefore strays from the Women in Development (WID) approach which focuses attention only on women in development. The GAD approach is chosen for this paper because, the Pet Projects of wives of Heads of State and Presidents is a function of the male presidents/Heads of State in Nigeria. This theory will therefore be useful to explain the place of women in enhancing development.

On the other hand, Kabeer (1999) propounded the theory of women empowerment. For him, there are three basic dimensions of empowerment through which women empowerment occurs. These include; resources (preconditions), agency (process) and achievements (outcomes). with respect to resources, Kabeer averred that they are in the form of material, human and social forms, and they increase the ability to exercise choice and make decisions. Agency could either be active or passive (Kabeer, 1999). Passive agency refers to a situation where actions are taken with only few options available. On the other hand, active agency refers to ‘purposeful behaviour’ (Kabeer,

1999). The theory further differentiates between effective agency and transformative agency. Accordingly, while effective agency provides women with greater efficiency in carrying out their roles, transformative agency gives women the ability and vigour to challenge the restrictive nature of their roles. Lastly, achievements, also referred to as 'outcomes', depicts the extent to which one's capabilities, in terms of resources and agency, are realized (Kabeer, 1999).

DISSECTING THE PET PROJECTS

Wives of Military Heads of States

Pet projects by wives of Heads of State/Presidents owe its beginning to the military era. The period discussed here is from Maryam Babangida, Maryam Abacha and Fati Abubakar.

The Era Maryam Babangida: It was the era, that herald, the beginning of repositioning the place of the wife of the Head of State in the sphere of governance. In 1987, Nigerians witnessed the launch of Better Life Programme for Rural Women (BLPRW). For the purpose of BLPRW unprecedented mobilization of human and material resources was undertaken. The aims and objectives of the programme were broad in scope and the target was unmistakably rural women. Ajayi (2010) outlined the aims of the programme as:

a. Enhancing and stimulating rural women in particular, and the rural populace in general, to improve their standard of living and their environment; b. Cultivating the spirit of self-development in rural women through the promotion of rural education, business and recreation; c. Creating greater awareness among the populace about the plight of women.

The objectives, of BLPRW, are further designed to a. raise the social consciousness of women about their rights, as well as their social, political and economic responsibilities; b. bring women together and closer for better understanding and resolution of their problems through collective action; c. mobilize women for concrete activities towards achieving specific objectives, including seeking leadership roles in all spheres of national life; d. stimulate and motivate women in rural areas towards achieving a better and higher standard of living as well as to inform the general populace of the plight of the rural women; e. educate women on simple hygiene, family planning and on the importance of childcare; f. enlighten women in rural areas on opportunities and facilities available to them at their local government areas; g. Improve and enrich family life; and h. encourage and institutionalize re-creation (*African Guardian* 1990) cited in (Ajayi, 2010).

Its *modus operandi* was also broad. The First Lady, Mrs Babangida, was the National Chairperson. The wives of State Governors were Chairpersons at the state level, while wives of local government chairmen throughout the federation were chairs at the grassroot level of government. Each constituency also had a co-ordinator. Perhaps, the most novel gain of the BLPRW was the creation of societal awareness about the plight of the grassroots women. In this regard, symposia, seminars, public rallies, lectures, etc., all meant to draw the attention of government, agencies and the general public to the problems of rural women, were held at various levels. The material productivity of women was assisted by the formation of women's co-operatives and associations to provide better access to the utilization of production resources and credit facilities. Cottage and small-scale industries such as *gari* processing, soap making, weaving and dyeing, dress making and fashion designing, baking, etc., were established across the country, which were meant to improve the income-generating capabilities of rural women.

Female farming productivity was boosted with the supply of fertilizer to all the units in the Better Life Programme (Faseke 1990) as cited in Ajayi (2010). In the field of educational development, at least one day-care centre was established in most local government areas for the education of children. Admission was open to all children and was free. A vocational school was also founded in each local government area for school drop-outs and women adults who had not had the opportunity of going to school. Students of the school were taught vocations such as dyeing, weaving, motherhood skills and childcare, home economics and fashion design. The adult education aspect of the BLPRW taught adults how to read and write. Other areas of achievement included primary health care, social welfare, cultivation of agricultural plantations and financial grants and credits to rural women to boost their economic activities.

In summary, by November 1993, when the administration of President Babangida came to an end, the BLPRW had succeeded in establishing 9,492 Co-operative Societies for women to have access to finance, and sundry resources; 1,435 cottage industries; 1,784 farms and gardens; 495 shops and markets; 1,094 multipurpose women centres for skills acquisition; and 135 fish and livestock farms (Iheanacho, 2016); establish the National Commission for Women in 1990 and directed state governors to establish similar commissions; (Ajayi, 2010). The regime also made it a policy of appointing at least a woman to the position of commissioner in each state's cabinet.

However, Ajayi (2010) submits in spite of these modest accomplishments, the programme suffered some drawbacks. Empirical evidence contradicts BLPRW's

claim of improving rural women's standard of living. It is beyond debate that their living conditions have depreciated in the face of the government's Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) and hyper-inflation, the effects of which even high-income earners across sexes are not immune to, not to mention the rural poor. Besides, social welfare amenities such as pipe-borne water, electricity, basic health care, recreation facilities and accessible roads are either non-existent or grossly in short supply. In summary, critical field evaluation revealed that the BLPRW failed in genuinely liberating the rural women significantly from the shackles of age-long deprivation, marginalization, neglect and abject poverty.

The Era Maryam Abacha: After General Sani Abacha assumed power, his wife launched the Family Support Programme (FSP) in 1994 as a Pet Project in support of women's cause and out of concern for the improvement of Nigerian families' quality of life. She advocated the promotion and protection of family values as the key to solving societal problems (*Sunday Sketch* 1994) as cited in Ajayi (2010). Concretely, the main goal of the FSP was to promote a better quality of life for all members of the family while promoting practices which strengthen stability and reduce conflict and divorce.

In addition, it was to enlighten and support women who wanted to start their own businesses through improved access to credit facilities for commercial and other ventures. Women, according to the programme, could also start small-scale business such as farming, fishing, palm oil processing and rearing of livestock (Binuyo 1995) as cited in Ajayi (2010).

The FSP, in attaining its aims, had a wide range of line-up projects bordering on health, agricultural and vocational activities. The FSP and later Family Advancement and Empowerment Programme (FAEP) pioneered a comprehensive programme in the health sector. Through the effort of FSP and FAEP medical centres in states with high level of Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF), as in Ebonyi, Sokoto, Zamfara etc were established. In addition, the National Programme on Immunization (NPI) scheme was established in this period. The NPI has continued to exist after her leave of office. Another enduring legacy of FEAP is the building of the National Women and Children Hospital, at Abuja. The project was commissioned on 22 May, 1999 by the succeeding Head of State, General Abdulsalam Abubakar, and renamed National Hospital in the year 2000. Thus, what is today known and, serves as National Hospital is a gain from the Pet Project of Maryam Abacha (Iheanacho, 2016).

Equally, in the area of health, in collaboration with the federal government, the United Nations, donor organisations and international agencies, the FSP was to assist health schemes such as the Expanded Programme on Immunization (EPI), Oral Re-hydration

Therapy (ORT), Control of Diarrhoea Diseases, River Blindness Control, Guinea Worm Control, Maternal Child Care, as well as community-based Primary Health Care through the implementation of the nationwide Bamako Initiative (*Sunday Sketch*1995). The FSP also planned to assist the government in supplying clean and safe drinking water to every community. Its Food and Nutrition Programme was meant to promote nutrition education and the development of a nutrition policy as well as enhancing the eradication of Iodine Deficiency Disorder (IDD). In addition, the FSP's health programme included the support for the treatment of Vaso Vaginal Fistula (VVF) disease, drug abuse, abortion, Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), other Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), and mental illnesses. It also aimed at extensive mobilization for greater awareness against harmful cultural practices such as female circumcision, child pregnancy, and the formation of health clubs.

The FSP, in the field of education, was to address all issues relating to education through Parents-Teachers Associations (PTAs), community-based guidance and counselling and the establishment of literacy and vocational centres. The programme was to ensure, in the agricultural sector, adequate food production for the citizenry through the establishment of agro-processing and packaging industries, livestock production, homestead fish production, and vegetable production as well as the establishment of a baby food industry through, the use of locally-sourced raw materials. Also, disabled people and the destitute would receive the attention of the FSP (*Sunday Sketch*1995). Overall, FSP was designed to act as a catalyst for the achievement of a more fulfilling and meaningful existence for all Nigerians; providing men, women, children, the underprivileged, widows and orphans with both the opportunity and means to survive despite the persisting socio-economic complexities and turmoil of present-day Nigeria.

The operating organisational chart of FSP was similar to the BLP, with Maryam Abacha as the National Chairperson and wives of administrators and local government chairmen as coordinators at state and local government levels. However, the operational effectiveness lags behind the BLP, as the FSP did not make any significant impact on any of its targets beyond government-sponsored propaganda on officially-owned mass media (Ajayi, 2010). With the sudden death of General Sani Abacha and the assumption to power of General Abdulsalam Abubakar in June 1998, the FSP and FAEP came to a halt. It was during the era of Maryam Abacha that the National Women Commission established during Maryam Babangida's era was upgraded to Ministry of Women Affairs (Ajayi, 2010).

The Era of Fati Abubakar: In keeping with the First Lady tradition, at the twilight of her husband's tenure in office, she founded the Woman Rights Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA) in 1999 as a Pet Project. This nongovernmental organisation provided her with an advocacy opportunity to articulate and propagate women's concerns relating to the advancement and protection of their rights. WRAPA was centred on a. education, enlightenment and advocacy on women rights; b. legal aid and counselling to women on civil rights, inheritance, assault, rape, divorce/separation, custody of children and legal instruments; c. free vocational skills training to increase women's income and self-reliance; d. free reconciliation and social counselling for families; e. Free adult literacy and civic education for women (WRAPA 2003) in (Ajayi, 2010).

In general, the promotion of social justice and mobilization, empowerment and sensitization of women about their plights form the core objectives of WRAPA. The emphasis on social justice, judicial and legislative advocacy is understandable as the founder, Mrs Abubakar, is a high court judge. This is a position that has given her a privileged knowledge of women's plights in terms of seeking justice. WRAPA was more of a non-governmental organisation (NGO) than a programme that can be compared to either BLP or FSP. WRAPA, as a First Lady's agenda, was very short-lived as the regime handed over power to a democratic administration, soon after it was founded, in 1999. WRAPA was a project of advocacy, sensitization and protection of the rights of women, toward challenging and eliminating all forms of humiliating and dehumanizing practices and violence against women. The FL's career background, as a judge of the High Court boosted the operations of the crusade. This first effort toward the social justice perspective of women advancement also found way into the schedule of some of the state FLs.

Wives of Civilian Presidents

The Era of Stella Obasanjo: By May 1999 Olusegun Obasanjo became the President of Nigeria and by 2000, Child Care Trust (CCT) was launched by Stella Obasanjo as a Pet Project. The Trust is a non-profit NGO. CCT particularly targets challenged children and women with disabilities. It has as its motto 'Sowing the Seeds of Hope' and it specifically aims to provide quality health care and other social services for children and women in Nigeria (Child Care Trust, 2000) as cited by Ajayi (2010). The broad objectives of the Trust include: a. supporting existing institutions through human and organisation capacity-building and providing training, counselling services and information on the prevention and management of disabilities for parents; b. as a centre for learning and development, providing an enabling environment for training of sector

practitioners (stakeholders) at the CCT's computer centre; c. providing medical, social and mental development services for all children, especially the handicapped; d. maintaining a data bank, which will serve as an information resource on handicaps and also providing materials for social researchers into problems associated with disabled children in the country; e. conducting research in all areas of disability and its management and serving as a networking centre and clearing house for information on early childhood issues, policies, programmes and organisations, and as a lead agency for an early childhood education strategy; f. providing academic and vocational skills that will empower the handicapped for a sustainable livelihood; g. championing the development of regulatory guidelines for comprehensive special education programmes for use by related institutions in Nigeria; h. encouraging governments to integrate early childhood and family education programmes in their long-term social economic planning (Ajayi, 2010).

Therefore, the programme was established to tackle the problems of poverty, unemployment, nutrition, health and education, mostly as they affect children who are the only hope of women. The programme witnessed some giant strides through the provision of succour to many disadvantaged children, by offering them scholarships, medical services and accommodation (Arum, 2010) as cited in Idowu (2018). The establishment of Women Fund for Economic Empowerment (WOFEE), and the Business Development Fund for Women (BUDFOW) (Idike, 2014) as cited Idowu (2014) all happened during her era.

The pet project of Stella Obasanjo later metamorphosed into the Special for Children with Special Needs, (Iheanacho, 2016) which led to the establishment of the Special Children's Model Centre in Bwari Area District, Abuja and the Stella Obasanjo Hospital in Benin City (Idowu, 2018).

However, Ajayi (2010) noted it is very clear from these objectives that the units of analysis of CCT do not cover all children, but only the physically disabled and handicapped. Women also do not occupy a frontline concern in the Trust's agenda; only women and families with disabilities and special needs have a place in its services. The founder of the CCT, Stella Obasanjo, however, died in December 2005. Despite the constitution of a board and appointing Muyiwa Obasanjo as the Chairman of the trust waned and died as its predecessors.

The Era of Turai Yar'Adua: Umaru Musa Yar'Adua was elected as the President of Nigeria and sworn in 2007. His wife Turai Yar'Adua become the First Lady and like her predecessors launched her own Pet Project Women and Youth Empowerment Foundation (WAYEF). On assumption to office as the first lady of Nigeria in 2007, Turai Yar'Adua initiated several programmes mostly directed at women

empowerment and betterment. Prominent among these programmes was her pet project; the Women and Youth Empowerment Foundation (WAYEF). The project had the primary objective to enhance and promote the living conditions of Nigerian women and children (Vanguard 17th, February, 2009) as cited in Idowu (2018). According to Iheanacho (2016) the WAYEF made impacts in at least five different aspects of need and services to the vulnerable which are identified as a. provision of eye services for cataract and child blindness; b. health improvement for maternal and new born; c. screening programme for breast and cervical cancer; d. HIV/AIDS and STD intervention programmes; e. and diabetes awareness and education programmes. The project also saw the refurbishment of the Suleja Prison Workshop and equipped it with tools to empower inmates for self-reliance and economic viability after serving their jail terms (Iheanacho, 2016). The effectiveness and prominence of the WAYEF pet project had earned the first lady, Turai Yar'Adua an honorary award of National Goodwill Ambassador for Maternal, New-born and Child Health (MNCH).

Furthermore, in order to improve the welfare of the less privileged and disadvantaged, especially with respect to the health of women, the first lady according to Arum, (2010) signed a Memorandum of Understanding with MD Anderson Cancer Centre in Houston Texas (Idowu, 2018). The Centre helped women suffering from cancer. In addition, through Turai Yar'Adua's efforts, Arum (2010) averred that the Federal Government developed an Integrated Maternal, New-born and Child Health (IMNCH). This was directed towards women and new born babies.

By 2010 the chronic illness of Umar Musa Yar'Adua had consumed him and vice Goodluck Ebele Jonathan was sworn in as the President of Nigeria.

The Era of Dame Patience Jonathan: With assumption of office in 2010, the wife of President Goodluck Jonathan, Dame Patience Jonathan initiated the Women for Change Initiative (WCI) as a Pet Project (Idowu, 2018). Like its predecessors, the programme was primarily targeted at women's empowerment/development. The project empowered women mostly through the distribution of items such as sewing machines, cash, outboard marine engine boats, hairdressing and catering equipment, barbing kits, computers, grinding machines and motorcycles (Iheanacho, 2016). The programme functioned in collaboration with and supported by the Office of the Special Adviser to the President on Millennium Development Goals. The programme also strived to push for the repositioning of Nigerian women and lift them from the low esteem of low level of political involvement and representation, to increased level of participation and representation. This feat recorded significant achievement.

Through the WCI Patience Jonathan victoriously led Nigerian women to wrestle down 35% of political offices, into the hands of women (Iheanacho, 2016). According to

Calebs, (2014) under the first ladyship of Dame Patience Jonathan Nigeria has witnessed an increase in women's representation in government from 10 percent in 2011 to over 33 percent in 2013; with 13 female ministers out of 42, representing 31 percent, and 4 female Special Advisers out of 18, representing 23 percent (Idowu, 2018).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Pet Projects and the First Lady office might be popular among some sections of the women population of Nigeria, however, Mama (1995) has rightly observed, that the operational reality has been hijacked for the benefit of a few in Nigeria; hugely politicized, and used mostly for electioneering campaigns, rather than for genuine empowerment, development and betterment of women. Although politicized, the Pet Projects, to a large extent, still contribute immensely to women empowerment and development.

The activities of FLs and their Pet Projects face some criticisms such as excesses in the use of state connections, abuse of power, meddlesomeness in their husband's administration, lack of checks and control mechanism in their operations which makes them powerful and dictatorial (Iheanacho, 2016). Accusation of illegal fund raising, abuse of privilege, lack of transparency in handling their finance, lack of audit and accountability on the Pet Projects are numerous. Equally Pet Projects go into moribund immediately the initiator is out of office.

However, the projects have given many people succour and new hope in life. Above all, the phenomenon of Pet Projects is a veritable instrument for improving women's consciousness and participation in politics and public affairs, toward their advancement. As pointed out by Iheanacho (2016) Nigerian women have so embraced the office of FL as a veritable avenue for them to make-up for what they fail to achieve in the male dominated political space of the nation. Women across the states of the nation, would rise vehemently to resist any attempt to scrap the office and status. The only legislation that is seemingly welcome is that which will legalize and reform the operations of the office, to the advantage of women's power holding and exercise.

It will therefore achieve greater heights and reach out to larger population of women in the country when it is taken out of the realms of politics and given more Federal Government, NGOs and international support. Therefore, the need to completely depoliticize the practice of Pet Projects in Nigeria to enhance better women empowerment in the country. It is also recommended that the design and operation of Pet Projects should ensure there is programme continuity after the expiration of the tenure of the First Lady; empowerment programmes should be left in the hands of

professionals to ensure that implementation is based on adequate planning; appropriate programme findings are required to further ensure its continuity; First Ladies empowerment programmes should be constitutionally linked to the Ministry of Women Affairs; and an independent evaluation of the problem should be conducted that will provide information helpful to Policy makers and programme developments.

REFERENCES

- Ajayi, K (2010) The Concept of First Lady and Politics in Nigeria. CODESRIA
- Aremu, Fatai Ayinde, Bakare, Adebola Rafiu, Bello, Muhammed Lawan and Abubakar, Abdulrahman (2019) First Ladies as Instantaneous Philanthropists: How Public office Holders' wives (un)do Philanthropism for Sustainable Development in Nigeria Journal of Sustainable Development vol 21 no 4 pub Clarion University of Pennsylvania, Clarion, Pennsylvania
- Festus Nkpoyen, Margaret D. Mbat Bassey, Glory Eteng (2015) Empowerment Programmes and Socio Economic Wellbeing of Rural Women: A Study of "First Ladies" Projects in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria in Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) Vol 20, Issue 7, Ver. V, PP 35-44
- Idowu Harrison Adewale (2018) Femocracy and the Quest for Women Empowerment and Development in Nigeria Under the Fourth Republic, Afro Asian Journal of social Sciences, Vol. ix, no iv quarter iv
- Iheanacho, N. N. (2016) First Ladies in Nigeria: The Rise of Amazon Crusaders for Better Life of the Vulnerable. *Advances in Applied Sociology*, 6, p.134-146.
- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment, *Journal of Development and Change*, 30, p.435-464. Blackwell Publishers Ltd.: Oxford, UK.
- Sunday Sketch (1995) Sunday Sketch Newspaper, Ibadan January 29
- Yunus Ustaz Usman (2015) The Office of the First Lady: an Important in Governance or an Additional Cost of Governance Being a paper delivered at the Breakout session of the 2015 NBA Annual general Conference, Abuja