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Nigerian Women and Social Development: Towards a Progressivist Study of the First Ladies' Pet Initiatives

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Abstract
This paper analyses the moribund state of the humanitarian initiatives undertaken by Nigerian First Ladies (wives of presidents and vice-presidents) after leaving office. This project dysfunctionality is motivated by culture politics of the men in power. Such limits the scope of women's rewards and national glory for their efforts and ingenuity. The humanitarian initiatives need to be institutionalized. This is because the projects are localizations of the United Nations' 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child. These projects, therefore, go a long way in complementing the conventions aimed at safeguarding women and children. The social ills that the projects sought to rectify worsen as cancer still ravages the Nigerian population, with a higher incidence noticed among women. Cases of sexual and gender-based violence are on the rise. This has been responsible for the 2022-2023 Nigeria-United Nations signing of a Memorandum of Understanding and Nigeria's partnership agreement with Germany. These are aimed at improving the social conditions of Nigerian women. The major setback of the pet projects is that they relied on patriarchal will and political power for finance. The paper suggests that the government should partner with the project's initiators through regulation. These strategies can enable humanitarian projects subsist after the tenures of the initiators. This facilitates the attainment of the women's vision for national development.

Keywords: Nigerian First Ladies, Pet projects, Humanitarian initiatives, Power, Cultural politics

Introduction

After the Babangida regime left power in 1993, minimal political will and power have been devoted to First Ladies' women-oriented humanitarian initiatives. This is despite the fact that subsequent First Ladies (of the President and the VP) in Nigeria have launched many other women's affairs pet projects. The minimal attention to the projects after the exit of a given administration, especially the Better Life initiative, has accounted for the relegation of the initiatives to the background in the scheme of things. This is in spite of the huge potential of the initiatives in safeguarding women and ensuring their well-being in the country. The Nigerian women of "power" have indeed been powerless in the context of the functionality of their pet initiatives. The doldrums and the dilemma in advancing women's affairs in Nigeria through the pet projects have been on for close to four decades. Yet the

social, economic, and political conditions of Nigerian women have remained deplorable. This is why the Federal Government of Nigeria, the United Nations Women, as well as the World Bank strategized putting technical plans together in order to ensure that Nigerian women are adequately included in the new democratic administration in Nigeria. The trio also agreed to empower women, economically in order to eliminate poverty among women and children in Nigeria (Baba-Yesufu, 2022). In the same vein, the Federal Government of Nigeria has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Germany to enhance reproductive health and prevent maternal deaths (Egbo, 2023). This paper aspires to intervene in order to contribute to the sustenance of the humanitarian projects of the women in the power corridor in Nigeria, even after they have left office.

Methodology and Theoretical Guide

This work adopted a qualitative approach. By this, arguments are based on the rational evaluation of the available facts to arrive at the conclusions. In addition, some of the resources used are from the Google Digital Archive. The Google database is of value, especially because library storage of literature on the pet projects of the First Ladies is unavailable, inadequate, or incomplete. The choice of Gthe oogle platform was also informed by the platform's global reach and its vast richness in a wide-range of rare materials and resources. The accessibility of the materials on the Google platform was also considered. This is crucial because a willing reader may want to request thematerials on the pet projects being analyzed. It is also noteworthy that a textual analysis method was adopted, in which the white papers on the pet projects were reviewed with emphasis on their core tenets. The relevant texts from the projects were subsequently extracted to substantiate the crux of the arguments and positions advanced on the initiatives of the First Ladies. The study also applied Immanuel Kant's variant of the social theory of Progressivism for its emphasis on the ethical reduction of sex inequality, which aligns with the core advocacy of this study.

A Review of the Pet Initiatives of the Nigerian Women in Power Corridors

At this juncture of the study, attention is on the specific pet projects and initiatives of the women in the political power corridors, namely the wives of presidents and vice presidents. Both categories of women run humanitarian pet initiatives in the office. This has been the practice since the iconic Better Life for Rural Women by Maryam Babangida in 1985. The core concerns of these projects have been the welfare of women, youth, children, the aged, and other vulnerable groups in Nigerian society.

The Instance of Stella Obasanjo's Child Care Trust

The first of the pet initiatives to be reviewed is the Child Care Trust, which was the idea of Stella Obasanjo, the wife of the then-President, Olusegun Obasanjo. The core concern of this project is the care of children with special conditions and needs. In this category are children with cerebral palsy, Down syndrome, autism, and physical disabilities. Despite how crucial this cause is, especially in Nigeria, which is ridden with poverty and social neglect, the Child Care Trust is struggling to survive sixteen years after the death of the brain behind it, Stella Obasanjo. The continued survival of the Centre in Bwari, Abuja, was the personal contribution of the husband of the initiator, former President Olusegun Obasanjo (Ochigbo, 2021).

Reviewing the Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF)

Similarly, to complement the child care initiative of the wife of the president, Stella Obasanjo, the wife of the Vice-President, at the time, Titi Atiku Abubakar, inaugurated the Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF), whose goal was to protect young African women against forced prostitution as well as guard children against abuse. According toNzeribe (2011:1):

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> WOTCLEF is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) initiated and founded in 1999 by Her Excellency, Chief (Mrs.) Amina Titi Atiku Abubakar, wife of the Vice-President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. It is committed to building an international coalition that restores human dignity through empowerment, capacity building, and advocacy. WOTCLEF works towards the eradication of trafficking in persons, child labour, and violent abuses of the rights of women and children.

So far, from the above, it could be opined that the social rights and well-being of women, children, and the vulnerable groups were in the minds of both Stella Obasanjo and Titi Atiku Abubakar, wives of the president and vice-presidents respectively. These are definitely credible social causes. However, despite the credibility of these initiatives, the public has heard little or nothing about these humanitarian efforts since the Obasanjo presidency ended in 2007.

The Turai Initiative for Social Development

When the then-President Musa Yar'Adua was sworn in as president in 2007, his wife, Turai Yar'Adua, inaugurated the Women and Youth Empowerment Foundation, whose mission was to improve the health of Nigerian women. This could be noted in the declaration that:

> Mrs Turai Yar Adua, the First Lady of Nigeria … alsolaunched programs to empower women. The First Lady's interests are in theissues of Public Health and enhancement of the welfare of the disadvantaged as part of her efforts towards realizing this, the First Lady signed a memorandum of understanding between MD Anderson Cancer Center inHouston Texas (Daily Triumph August 28, 2008). The Center is to help Nigerian Women suffering from Cancer (Arum, 2010: 277).

It is pathetic to note that the noble vision pursued in the pet project soon degenerated after Yar'Adua died in office, and the centre became abandoned. In the words of Ibrahim (2017:1) "after being abandoned for eight years, the multi-billion naira International Cancer Centre, ICCA, an initiative of former Nigerian First Lady, Turai Yar'Adua, has been transformed into a cowpea farm". The abandonment was largely due to the attachment of the project to the husband of the initiator, who soon died.

The Dame's Women for Change Initiative and Amina's I-Care Women and Youth Initiative

Another humanitarian pet project of remarkable note was the Women for Change Initiative run by the First Lady of Nigeria, Dame Patience Jonathan, during the Goodluck Jonathan administration in 2011. The project started when she was wife of the vice-president during the Yar'Adua presidency and sustained when her husband became president. The focus of this initiative was the total restoration of the Nigerian women's dignity. The pomp and ceremony that characterized the pet project at its launch, with a message to the government for the localization of the philosophy of the initiative at the state level (Ajefu, 2010), soon disappeared after President Jonathan lost a re-election in 201,5 as nothing is heard of the project these days.

This is yet another indication that the pet projects of the First Ladies were likely politically attached to their husbands, serving as political and administrative supportsfor their husbands. This is why they existed without any instrument of sustainability. This is also true of the I-Care Women and Youth Initiative, founded by Amina Namadi Sambo, wife of the vice-president to Goodluck Jonathan, Vice-President Namadi Sambo. I-Care Women and Youth Initiative had as its core mission to care for the welfare of women, the youth, as well as the vulnerable individuals, as highlighted in the declaration that:

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> ICWYI began a decade ago as the pet project of its founder, Her Excellency (Mrs) Amina Namadi Sambo. Unlike most pet projects of First Ladies (Wives of Presidents and Governors) in Nigeria, which fizzle out of existence as soon as the founders cease to be in power, I-CARE continues to wax stronger, positively impacting on the lives of Nigerian women, children and vulnerable groups.(*AfricanNewspage*@https://www.africannewspage.net/2017/10/care-10years-caring-nigerian-women-youth vulnerable-groups)

However, despite the claims made about the I-Care initiative, more could have been achieved if it had been supported and funded as a government program rather than as a leisure-time engagement to keep women busy.

Examining the Future Assured and Project Ayodele

In the same vein, the two women in the corridors of presidential power in Nigeria during the Buhari administration, Aisha Buhari and Dolapo Osinbajo, also had their pet projects. These are Future Assured and Project Ayodele, respectively. The former seeks to propagate the philosophy of helping humanity by improving the lives of the youth in Nigeria who are from less-privileged backgrounds, particularly the youth category who have been affected by terrorism and insurgency (Ugbadaga, 2022). Indeed, the pet project is fulfilling this tenet as Okoye (2021) of Arise News reports that:

> More than 700 students and 45 teachers have benefited from the Education Empowerment Project, Future Assured. The initiative is the brainchild of Aisha Buhari, Nigeria's First Lady. It focuses on health advocacy, women and youth empowerment. As the Initiative marks its 6th anniversary, it says more women and children have received tangible healthcare among other benefits (2).

It is indeed indisputable that an initiative run by a single individual, helping about 800 people, especially women, youth, and other vulnerable individuals, has been a substantial success. However, success is attributable to the fact that the initiator's husband was still in power in Nigeria at the time.



Fig 1: Some faces of the youth who benefited from Future Assured's Initiatives. Courtesy Arise News @ https://www.arise.tv/at-the-6th-year-anniversary-of-aisha-buharis-future-assured-initiative-watch

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In the same vein, the latter, Project Ayodele, run by the wife of the Vice-President, Dolapo Osinbajo, has been established for the core purpose of advancing the cause of women in Nigeria. Like the Future Assured program for the wife of the president, Project Ayodele made significant progress in its primary mandate of championing the cause of Nigerian women. *Bellanaija News* of June 25, 2016, reported that:

> The wife of the Vice President, Dolapo Osinbajo, has called on Nigerians to establish more skills acquisition centres for the empowerment of women and young people. Osinbajo made the appeal at the graduation ceremony of 810 participants in her pet project – Project Ayodele – in Owerri on Friday. She said that the empowerment of women and youths would liberate them from economic hardship, subjugation and make them self-reliant.

The success of Project Ayodele by Dolapo Osinbajo could also be traced to the influence of her husband, the Vice President of Nigeria, at the time. Such support from the peck of power, incumbency, and patriarchal power clout is palpable in the images where the VP is seen with his wife, signifying that the Vice-President identified with the pet project.



Fig 2: Dolapo Osinbajo with Her Husband, VP Yemi Osinbajo courtesy *Bella Naija* @ https://www.bellanaija.com/2016/06/dolapo-osinbajo-calls-for-more-skill-acquisition-centres-nationwide-as-810-women-graduate-from-project-ayodele2016

However, one may wonder why the above initiative should not be supported by a statutory administrative framework. This contrasts with the current arrangement, which places the activities of First Ladies in Nigeria under the presidency. There is therefore a high likelihood that little will be heard of the pet projects of the current women in the presidential power corridor after they leave office, as has been the case with the five before the current duo. This is because the projects have significant societal value and are therefore capital-intensive. The sums of money needed to run such projects in a vast country like Nigeria may be too huge for individuals to bear. The initiatives either become moribund outright or operate nominally without any societal essence, and this has grave consequences for the general Nigerian populace. However, the possibility that the initiatives are political in their formation is a critical factor in the non-attainment of their goals through sustainable financing.

Danger of Continued Government Neglect and the Panacea Options

Marama (2022) has reported that Borno State in North East Nigeria recorded a high incidence of child abuse and gender-based abuse in 2022. This is the crux of the report:

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> The Borno State Coordinator of National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Barrister Jummai Usman Mshelia has said that 495 cases of Sexual and Gender Based Violence have been recorded in the state in 2022. Addressing the Press on Wednesday at the Mohammed Buba Marwa Hall, NUJ Centre Maiduguri as part of activities celebrating 16 Days Activism of the Commission, she said 200 cases were prosecuted in 2021 (1).

This report ascribing 495 cases of violence against women and the girl child, especially, in just one out of 36 states in Nigeria and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, creates a frightening atmosphere. This is because it indicates that the overall number of cases in the country is alarming. The situation worsens over the years. It is also noteworthy that the lamentation above comes from the government agency responsible for the welfare of Nigerians. It could be inferred from the revelation that the agency is overwhelmed in handling the enormous caseload across the vast nation. No single agency can cope with the magnitude of this menace. The approach the government has employed in response to the social menace is inappropriate. An onslaught against the vulnerable group needs a specialized approach, and not a blanket approach. There should be a body that specifically forestalls abuses or responds to abuse cases against women and children. If there is any in Nigeria, such is only nominal and not active, and one major impediment to the functionality of such a nominal body is a capacity problem. The lack of capacity is aggravated by corruption within government institutions, which hampers effective operations and service delivery. Yet women's rights, health, and socio-economic conditions degrade every day. This deplorable situation affects the Nigerian child, being part of the category of the population that the First Ladies have longed to cater for in their humanitarian advocacies. This justifies the need and necessity for the sustenance of the legacies of the First Ladies in Nigeria. There are many approaches the government can take to pursue this laudable cause. The first is that,

In addition to amending the legal framework, another step the government can take to sustain the legacies of the First Ladies is to partner with NGOS. Under this approach, the current status of each pet project would remain, but the government may support them with funds, and the NGOs would submit bids for government scrutiny and approval. The appropriate government ministry, such as the one that supervises matters of women and children, would oversee the NGOs' activities for auditing and accountability. The third strategy could be to create a separate ministry for the First Ladies' pet projects and other allied women's and child-oriented affairs. The new ministry would work in collaboration with allied ministries, such as the Ministry of Women's Affairs, Humanitarian Affairs, the Human Rights Commission, and the Ministry of Health.

There is a general corruption-induced levity in service delivery in the country, especially when it concerns the protection of the rights of women and children. This claim is noted in the fact that the most genuine sympathetic concern for the recovery of the Chibok school girls abducted by the insurgents in 2014 was demonstrated by private individuals and groups. That is the non-State stakeholders in the Nigerian project. Such genuineness and vibrant efforts are noted in the declaration that:

> This act by the insurgents raised global attention to their activities and threats they pose to the region with many peoplecalling on the Nigerian government to intensify efforts to ensure the kidnapped girls arereleased

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> and others are protected. Consequently, the demand to ensure that the kidnappedschool girls are released gave birth to different forms of protest, ranging from street matches,prayers, media campaigns, etc. Out of this, "Bring Back Our Girls" (BBOG) group emergedas the major pressure group to lead effort to pressure government to rescue the abducted school girls. (Bashir and Ahmed, 2018:216)

It is conspicuous in the above that there was the government's lethargy and it was concerned citizens that pressurized government to intensify efforts to recover the abducted school girls from the insurgents. The advocacies of the First Ladies of Nigeria center on critical aspects of Nigeria has to do with the health of the Nigerian women, their fundamental human rights, their access to economic resources and power, the rights of children to quality education, protection of children against all forms of abuse especially sexual, and, to mention a few, safeguard the female girl-child against early marriage.

Conclusion

Today, in Nigeria, women still die during childbirth. The girl-child is still being sexually abused and trafficked within sub-Saharan Africa for servitude. Also, there is high unemployment in Nigeria, and the youth suffer. This affirms that the inability of humanitarian initiatives to make significant inroads in forestalling the present deplorable social conditions of Nigerian women, the girl-child, and the youth has catastrophic consequences for the larger Nigerian society. The paper holds the view that the continued operation of the pet projects could have reduced the intensity of the worsening social conditions. The discontinuation of the pet projects, and in some instances their minimal operations, has negatively affected the vulnerable groups in the country. The situation needs to be addressed urgently because of the pains the vulnerable groups experience in the Nigerian social system. To this extent, the suggestions mooted in this study are believed to be the needed solution to the social doldrums. In addition to the suggestions, however, the Nigerian government needs to curb this ugly trend in the humanitarian interest of the vulnerable groups in the nation.

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