

African First Ladies, Politics and the State

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Abstract

Whereas first ladies (i.e. the wives of presidents or prime ministers) of various countries have been studied, first ladies of African states remain under-researched. Due to their proximity to the executive and other decision-makers, first ladies have considerable political influence. In some cases on the African continent, former and incumbent first ladies have expressed political ambitions and involved themselves in the official affairs of the state. A number of first ladies have also been instrumental in entrenching undemocratic rule in African states, thus affecting the fundamentals of state-society relations. The authors, therefore, aim to add to the limited scholarship on first ladies in Africa and their influence on gender and power relations in African states. For this reason, the authors present a first analysis of the data of the African First Ladies Database (AFLD) compiled by the authors. The purpose is to determine and analyse the political role and influence of the wives (and thus first ladies) of some of Africa's 10 longest-ever serving leaders on the gender, politics, policy and the state in their respective countries.

Keywords: Africa; Chad; Eritrea; First Lady; Uganda; Zimbabwe



Introduction

African first ladies (here defined as the wives of presidents of African countries), as elsewhere, wield political power due to their proximity to and membership of the inner circle of the executives in their countries. Amina Mama (1995, 41) has referred to first ladies' political influence as femocracy, which she defines as an anti-democratic woman power structure that claims to advance the position of ordinary women but fails to achieve this as it is a structure that is dominated by "a small clique of women whose authority derives from their being married to powerful men." More pertinent to this contribution is the fact that femocracy does not result in feminists working in the state; quite the opposite. As individuals, these women have become spectacularly wealthy and politically influential, often institutionalising femocracy either in the Office of the President or a separate Office of the First Lady.

The study of first ladies elsewhere, particularly in the United States (US), has received significant attention (Stookesbury and Edgemon 2003; Sulfaro 2007; Troy 2006; Watson 2000). Acknowledging that African first ladies defy generalisation, and due to little academic research done on them, except by, for example, Ibrahim (2004), Mama (1995) and Van Wyk (2017), this study analyses and assesses the linkages between first ladies, gender and the state in African states where these women's husbands have been in power for a significant period.

In analysing the African First Ladies Database (AFLD), which the authors of this article compiled, this study offers insights into presidential leadership and democratic accountability, but more importantly, also provides insights into the gender dynamics in a society. Thus, using an interpretive qualitative approach, the purpose is to determine the role and influence of first ladies in entrenching their husbands' tenures, their undemocratic rule, patronage, and low levels of national development.

Following these introductory remarks, the contribution proceeds with an overview of the methodology employed. It proceeds with four case studies—Zina Wazouna Ahmed Idriss, Hadja Halimé, Hinda Déby and Amani Musa Hilal (the wives of Chad's President Idriss Déby), Saba Haile (wife of Eritrean president, Isaias Afwerki), Janet Museveni (wife of Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni), and Sally and Grace Mugabe (wives of former Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe)—that are illustrative of the role and influence of first ladies. From these case studies the authors deduce the significance of these women vis-à-vis the state and gender in their respective societies. The case studies were selected based on the length of the tenure of the ladies' husbands, the type of marriage (polygamous or monogamous), and the public profile and political position and ambitions of the relevant First Lady. The final section of the contribution contains the authors' concluding remarks.

Methodology

As indicated, the contribution is based on the AFLD compiled by the authors. As the first phase of a longitudinal project on African first ladies, the data was collected for this contribution based on research conducted on the wives of Africa’s 10 longest-serving post-independence presidents (see Table 1) at the time of the compilation of the data (February 2017) for this contribution. Since the start of the project, two of the leaders (José Eduardo dos Santos and Robert Mugabe) have left office in 2017 due to retirement and resignation respectively. Their wives are, however, included here.

Table 1: Africa’s 10 longest-serving presidents, *ca.* 2017

<i>President</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Start of tenure</i>
José Eduardo dos Santos	Angola	1979–2017
Paul Biya	Cameroon	1982
Idriss Déby	Chad	1990
Dennis Sassou Nguesso	Congo-Brazzaville	1979–1992; 1997–
Isias Afwerki	Eritrea	1993
Obiang Nguema	Equatorial Guinea	1976
Yayha Jammeh	Gambia	1995
Omar al-Bashir	Sudan	1989
Yoweri Museveni	Uganda	1986
Robert Mugabe	Zimbabwe	1980–2017

Source: Authors’ compilation

The case studies were selected based on the following criteria, amongst others: the first ladies’ husbands’ lengthy term in office, the political experience of the relevant First Lady prior to the country’s independence and during her husband’s tenure, her political and business interests, and her gender-related role and involvement. In none of the cases any constitutional provisions regarding the role and status of the first ladies exist. Moreover, the selected case studies are illustrative of the analytical, conceptual and practical challenges that become evident when studying African first ladies. This contribution attempts to address the analytical challenge. The second challenge is conceptual, raising the following question: Who is a First Lady? President Idriss Déby of Chad has four polygamous marriages, his wives being Zina Wazouna Ahmed Idriss, Hadja Halimé, Hinda Déby and Amani Musa Hilal. President Robert Mugabe married Grace Mugabe in a traditional ceremony while his wife Sally was still alive, thus another example of polygamy (*News Day* 2014). Besides these examples of polygamous marriages, South Africa was, during Jacob Zuma’s presidential tenure (2009–2018) another example in Africa where four first ladies—Bongi Ngema, Sizakele Khumalo-Zuma, Nompumelelo Ntuli-Zuma and Tobeka Madiba-Zuma—were officially recognised. Other examples of polygamous presidents include Omar al-Bashir (Sudan), Mwai Kibaki (Kenya) and Faure Gnassingbe (Togo).

Another issue related to the definition of a first lady is the position of the so-called Mother of the Nation, often bestowed on the wives of liberation leaders who became presidents. One example is Madina, the wife of Idi Amin of Uganda, who was called the Mother of the Nation. Sally Mugabe has been referred to as *Amai* (Mother of the Nation), a title Grace Mugabe has also taken although she was only 15 years old when Zimbabwe became independent in 1980. In South Africa, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, who passed away in 2018, was also referred to as the Mother of the Nation even though she was no longer married to President Nelson Mandela.

Access to information is a practical challenge in studying first ladies. Data collected for the AFLD is based on primary and secondary sources, including official government documents, official websites, constitutions, official statements and speeches. However, access to government sources has not been satisfactory due to national legislation's classification of documents, a lack of archives and physical access. Secondary sources include media reports, the social media profiles of the respective personalities, academic articles, government-run online media houses, and independently run online media houses including some perceived opposition-funded or political opposition-sympathetic online media houses and newspapers.

The next four sections focus on the selected case studies. Each section provides the national political context of the long-term presidencies in Chad, Eritrea, Uganda and Zimbabwe, and provides background information on the wives of these countries' presidents. The next section focuses on Chad as an example of a country that has four first ladies due to the president's polygamous marriages.

The Four First Ladies of Chad

Since its independence in the 1960s, Chad has experienced political instability. Shortly after independence, President François Tombalbaye banned opposition parties, which resulted in violence and oppression. Sporadic conflicts between the Christian-run government in the south and the Muslim opposition in the north added to the country's political instability. President Tombalbaye was killed in a military coup in 1975 and was succeeded by Felix Malloum (the leader of the Christian south) as President and Prime Minister. Hissène Habré, the leader of the northern Muslim rebellion faction, was appointed Prime Minister in 1979 to stabilise Chadian politics. However, this heightened tensions and resulted in the eruption of a civil war from 1979 to 1982, spilling over into Libya and Sudan. Habré won the presidential elections in 1982 and ruled until 1990; a reign characterised by reported human rights abuses (British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) 2016).

In a coup supported by Libya and Sudan, Idriss Déby, a former military advisor to Habré, took control of Chad in 1990 (Bronner 2014). In 2016, Déby, as leader of the Patriotic Salvation Movement, won his fifth consecutive presidential election, extending his tenure to 2021. Déby's tenure has been characterised by state control over the media

and journalists, public protests, government-led human rights abuses, and little improvement in the status of women in Chad (Freedom House 2016a).

Chad accepts both polygamous and monogamous marriages, as well as divorce. President Déby has been married several times, and of his current wives (Zina Wazouna Ahmed Idriss, Hadja Halimé, Hinda Déby and Amani Musa Hilal), Hinda Déby and Amani Musa Hilal, who are regarded as politically the most influential, are discussed here. Hinda Déby (born 1980, married 2005) is the better known of the first ladies and is said to have “captivated the capital in a way unseen before in this male-dominated society” (*Washington Post* 2006). Although she is not the first or last wife of the President, Hinda Déby is considered the First Lady of Chad. She has a high public profile and engages in official public diplomatic duties. In fact, a large part of the Chadian government’s official website focuses on her activities and causes, which include women and children’s education and health (Présidence de la République du Tchad 2017). Hinda Déby’s family has a background in non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society and civil servant work. She was educated in finance and banking, and was the Head of Accounting in the Ministry of Health, during which time she continued engaging with civil society organisations (Présidence de la République du Tchad 2017).

Since 1990, President Déby and his immediate and extended family have dominated the Chadian executive government. Since Déby’s marriage to Hinda, she has been his private secretary, a position (i.e. a female private secretary) alien to patriarchal and fundamentally religious Chad (Africa Intelligence 2015). While some African first ladies only focus on social issues, Hinda Déby is privy to high-level political dialogues and trade negotiations related to the Chadian petroleum industry controlled and managed by the Déby family. Chad depends largely on oil for its revenue, and the Débys’ influence on multinational petroleum companies such as Chevron, ExxonMobil, Glencore and China National Petroleum Corporation is evident (Stratfor 2016). Hinda Déby is also in the management of Chad’s oil industry and has gained from lucrative contracts, acted as a mediator between private companies and foreign investors, and appointed relatives and members of her inner circle to strategic positions. Ahmat Khazali Acyl, for example, is Hinda Déby’s elder brother and managing director of Société des Hydrocarbures du Tchad (SHT), the national Chadian oil company. Mahamat Kasser Younous, a member of her inner circle, was also a managing director in SHT, while Ibrahim Houssein Bourma, a brother-in-law, is SHT’s marketing director. In addition, Mahamat Guihini Guet, a nephew of President Déby, is the financial director of SHT, and other family members have been included as part of the presidential entourage (Africa Intelligence 2015), strengthening Hinda Déby’s political influence on her husband’s decision-making, and her institutionalising femocracy in Chad.

By comparison, President Déby’s last wife, Amani Musa Hilal, has a different political role, especially in the diplomatic relations between Chad and Sudan. President Déby’s

connection to Sudan is his ethnic roots as a member of the Al-Zagawa tribe located in eastern Chad and western Sudan (*Sudan Tribune* 2012). President Déby married Amani Musa, the daughter of an alleged Janjaweed militia leader in Sudan, in 2012, a decision that seemingly consolidated the 2010 agreements between Chad and Sudan to end hostilities and normalise diplomatic relations between these states. President Déby has also been linked to Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir's regime, which initially supported Déby's coup against Habré. More recently, Chad-Sudan relations have strengthened by addressing the residual problems with the rebels in the room (i.e. opponents who turned into allies and vice versa). Both Chad and Sudan sent troops to protect their common border. Yet, this has not quelled the presence of instability within the common border region (*Middle East Observer* 2017). Although Amani Musa Hilal does not have the same public profile and political influence as Hinda Déby, her marriage to President Déby was thus a political and strategic decision that fostered cooperation between these states (*Sudan Tribune* 2012).

Hinda Déby and Amani Musa Hilal are examples of first ladies that are politically, diplomatically and economically very influential in affairs of the state. Their relations and influence are contributing factors to the presidential tenure of their husband, and peaceful relations with Sudan. Unlike the next case study (Saba Haile of Eritrea), Hinda Déby and Amani Musa Hilal did not have any political experience prior to their marriage to their husband and they are also not Muslim.

Saba Haile (Eritrea)

Eritrea became independent in 1947 and, with Ethiopia, formed the Federation of Ethiopia and Eritrea. By 1961, Eritrea wanted to exit the Federation, resulting in a decades-long war that ended in 1993 when Eritrea gained independence through a referendum sponsored by the United Nations (UN). In 1966, Isaias Afwerki joined the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) and, while in exile, rose in the political ranks of the ELF and eventually became president of the one-party state as leader of another political party, the People's Front for Democracy and Justice (BBC 2017).

The subsequent peaceful period that followed the 1993 peace process was short-lived as another war with Ethiopia erupted in 1998, and lasted until 2000, followed by sporadic skirmishes between these countries. In 2009, the UN imposed sanctions on Eritrea for their alleged support of terrorist organisations in Somalia. Further UN action against Eritrea followed and, in 2015, the UN accused the Eritrean government of committing crimes against humanity. Political and civil liberties, as well as media freedom, have also been compromised. There is no electoral freedom in Eritrea as only one political party exists, and democratic rules that have since been enshrined in the country's 1997 Constitution have been postponed indefinitely (Freedom House 2016b). Decision-making remains largely concentrated in the hands of the President, and secret. Public consultation rarely occurs. Government officials and military and other official security forces have been involved in repressing human rights, while human trafficking,

detention and torture, and freedoms of assembly, expression and protest are not recognised, and religious freedom is severely limited (Freedom House 2016b). Although President Afwerki has been in office for many years and his tenure has been labelled a dictatorship (*Washington Post* 2015), he insists that Eritrea is governed according to democratic values. He has stated as follows:

We do not allow the existence of supremacy of any group or family in which the people are ruled by families and corrupt individuals who place themselves above the law. (Ministry of Information 2009)

The First Lady of Eritrea and former freedom fighter in the ELF, Saba Haile, met Isaias Afwerki during their country's liberation struggle. They have been married since the early 1980s (*Madote* 2010). Due to a lack of reliable sources, information with regard to the role and activities of Saba Haile is severely limited and it is possible that she does not have a high public profile compared to other first ladies in this study. However, she may be considered to uphold more traditional Christian Orthodox and Eritrean values and practices. Her involvement in public affairs may not necessarily influence politics in Eritrea but her presence in high-profile public diplomatic events may depict that her role may be limited to performing socio-cultural activities and contributing to the credibility of the President and his government. In 2010, for example, she congratulated representatives from the Zayed Giving Initiative, a philanthropic effort of Sheikh Hamdan bin Zayed Al Nahyan, ruler-representative in the Western Region of the United Arab Emirates for their role and social aid. Saba Haile was also instrumental in a partnership agreement that would benefit the Eritrean Ministry of Health (*Adal Voice* 2010). Further evidence of her diplomatic role is her attendance in 2014 of the inauguration of a women's centre of the National Union of Eritrean Women in Keren, Ethiopia (Ministry of Information 2014). An example of her domestic ceremonial role is her attendance of the Martyrs' Day sports event held on June 20, 2017 in commemoration of the country's war of independence and the border war with Ethiopia (Ghebremedhin 2017).

Similar to the wives of President Déby, Saba Haile subscribes to a more conservative religion. Moreover, similar to Amani Musa Hilal, Saba Haile plays a diplomatically influential role but seems to be less influential in economics and other affairs of the state. Besides these commonalities and differences, both President Déby's and Afwerki's tenures followed a period of instability in their respective countries, and their tenures are characterised by undemocratic governance. Like Saba Haile, Janet Museveni of Uganda (who is the subject of the next case study), has participated in the country's liberation struggle. However, unlike the previous first ladies discussed, Janet Museveni serves in her husband's Cabinet.

Janet Kataaha (Kainembabazi) Museveni (Uganda)

Uganda gained independence from Britain in 1962, with Idi Amin as the country's leader until 1979. The current President of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni, assumed office on January 29, 1986. Born on June 24, 1948, Ugandan First Lady, Janet Kataaha Kainembabazi, married liberation fighter Yoweri Museveni in August 1973 (*Daily Monitor* 2010). Educated as a teacher at Makerere University, Janet Museveni also holds a Diploma in Early Childhood Development from an unspecified Swedish institution and a Master of Arts in Organizational Leadership and Management from the Uganda Christian University, Mukono (Janet Museveni Organization (JMO) 2017; The State House of Uganda 2018).

When Idi Amin deposed the Obote government in a coup d'état, Janet Museveni went into exile in Tanzania in 1971, only to return briefly in 1979. At the time, Yoweri Museveni was Idi Amin's Minister of Defence (*Daily Monitor* 2010; JMO 2017). Due to the political instability of the early 1980s, Janet Museveni again, in 1981, went into exile (in Kenya) with the couples' children. In 1983, she moved to Sweden where she lived until 1986 and returned to Uganda four months after her husband's National Resistance Army assumed power in Uganda (JMO 2017).

A few months into her husband's rule in late 1986, Janet Museveni established the Uganda Women's Effort to Save Orphans (UWESCO), a privately-funded NGO which, according to her, "was shaped by her experience as a refugee" (*Economist* 2010). The establishment of UWESCO attests to Janet Museveni's proximity to resources and her influence in channelling these resources. In the 1990s, she became involved in HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns and in the process forged ties with influential but controversial fundamentalist Pastor Martin Ssempe of Uganda (*Economist* 2010, 45). Since the early years of her husband's rule, Janet Museveni has been involved in social issues in and outside government. She is also involved in a number of NGOs, for example, the National Strategy for the Advancement of Rural Women and the Uganda Youth Forum (Museveni 2018).

Besides being an elected Member of Parliament, Janet Museveni joined her husband's Cabinet as Minister of Karamoja Affairs in 2009 until 2011 when she was appointed Minister of Education and Sports. Janet Museveni is known as the de facto advisor to her husband, often accompanies him on state visits, and has expressed explicit political ambitions "beyond [a] cabinet ministerial post" (*Daily Monitor* 2017).

Unlike the previously discussed first ladies, Janet Museveni has served in her husband's Cabinet in two portfolios. The Musevenis' children are also serving in influential government positions; a situation similar to Hinda Déby's children. Similar to Saba Haile, Janet Museveni was politically active during her husband's ascent to power. Besides her Cabinet responsibilities, Janet Museveni is involved in numerous NGOs

that focus on health and social issues, and in this way she has access to donor funding and resources.

Similar to Saba Haile and Janet Museveni, Sally Mugabe, the next case study, has been actively involved in her husband's rise to power. Further, similar to Janet Museveni, Sally Mugabe spent an extensive period in exile, and similar to Amani Musa Hilal, she was born a foreigner.

Sally Mugabe (June 6, 1931 to January 27, 1992) (Zimbabwe)

Sally Hayfron was born in Ghana on June 6, 1931. A qualified teacher, she met Robert Mugabe at the Takarodi Teacher Training College in Ghana where both of them were teachers (Motsi 2014; Pindula 2016). Before Zimbabwe gained independence, the Mugabes moved to Southern Rhodesia where Robert Mugabe became a founder of a nationalist political organisation, the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU). They married in April 1961 in Salisbury (now Harare, Zimbabwe) when Ghana had just attained its political independence (March 6, 1957) from Britain.

As far back as 1962, Sally Mugabe challenged the status quo in Rhodesia and later Southern Rhodesia (from 1965 following the Unilateral Declaration of Independence from Britain by the Smith regime) (Wood 2011, 9), and supported her country's liberation struggle. In 1963, Robert Mugabe established and led the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) as a breakaway party of ZAPU (Ellert 1989, 3). Nationalist resistance movements were banned by the government of the day and Robert Mugabe was incarcerated in 1964 for an eleven-year sentence, prompting his wife to leave for London in 1967. She spent the next eight years in exile and campaigned for the release of her husband and other political detainees in Rhodesia (*Herald* 2014).

Upon the release of her husband from prison in 1975, Sally Mugabe left London for Maputo, Mozambique. In 1978, she was elected as ZANU's Deputy Secretary of the Women's Congress, a position she also occupied in post-independent Zimbabwe (Motsi 2014). She was elected to hold public office in the Zimbabwe African National People's Women's Congress in 1989, a position she occupied until her death. Sally Mugabe has been influential in negotiations within the ZANU's Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) Women's League and the Mashonaland West Constituency, which is her husband's rural home in Kutama. Sally Mugabe, referred to as *Amai* (Mother of the Nation), remained a distinguished figure in post-independent Zimbabwe as the country's First Lady until her death on August 27, 1992. She was the first woman to be laid to rest at the National Heroes Acre in Harare, Zimbabwe's National Shrine dedicated to the honour and memory of liberation stalwarts (Motsi 2014); thus recognising her liberation and post-independence political credentials.

Sally Mugabe belonged to the first generation of post-independence first ladies in Africa; thus her veneration as the Mother of the Nation. Little evidence of her work with

NGOs exists. However, a distinguishing feature of her tenure as First Lady was her involvement in the ruling party led by her husband, a similarity she shared with her husband's second wife, Grace Mugabe, who is the focus of the next section.

“Dr Amai” Grace Ntombizodwa (Marufu) Mugabe (Zimbabwe)

President Robert Mugabe married South African-born Grace Ntombizodwa Marufu (born 1965) on August 17, 1996. Grace Mugabe is referred to as the Second First Lady of Zimbabwe. As she married President Mugabe only in 1996, little information about her political activities prior to her marriage to him is known, save only that she was a typist in the Office of the President. Grace Mugabe's political experience and influence relate only to Zimbabwe's post-independence dispensation as she was only 15 years old at the time of the country's independence.

By 2014, Grace Mugabe's low domestic political profile changed when she was elected to lead ZANU-PF's Women's League and increasingly attended meetings of the party's Politburo, its highest decision-making body. State-owned media companies also elevated her position, status and influence, and portrayed her in positive terms (Santos and Ndhlovu 2016). With rising factionalism within ZANU-PF, Grace Mugabe positioned herself as Robert Mugabe's successor, showed public support for her husband, and became increasingly active in national politics, ZANU-PF, presidential election campaigns, and social work through various institutions. During her time as First Lady, Grace Mugabe accumulated extensive business interests and often escorted her husband to international meetings. Unlike Sally Mugabe, Grace Mugabe has explicitly shown her ambitions for higher office beyond her leadership of the ruling party's women's league. Her public humiliation of her husband's spokesperson, George Charamba, at a campaign rally in Chinhoyi, Mashonaland West (*New Zimbabwe* 2017) raised concerns that she, rather than her husband whose health was deteriorating, was running the country. Grace Mugabe has also been implicated in the removal of Joyce Mujuru from Robert Mugabe's inner circle, and she played a leading role in the G40 faction in ZANU-PF that opposed Team Lacoste (another ZANU-PF faction) and favoured Emmerson Mnangagwa as Robert Mugabe's preferred successor. However, Team Lacoste eventually succeeded in forcing Robert Mugabe to resign in November 2017 after ruling for 37 years.

Robert Mugabe's polygamous marriages to Sally and Grace Mugabe could not have been more different. Whereas Sally Mugabe was a liberation veteran, younger Grace Mugabe represented the country's post-liberation generation. Hinda Déby and Grace Mugabe share some commonalities. Both occupied positions in their husband's office, and both accumulated extensive business interests in their countries' resource extractive sectors. Both first ladies were known as their husbands' closest confidants. However, unlike Hinda Déby, but similar to Janet Museveni, Grace Mugabe has significant political influence in the ruling parties. Whereas Janet Museveni serves in her husband's Cabinet, Grace Mugabe has harboured ambitions for higher political office. In fact, she

positioned herself as her husband's substitute and anointed successor, and in the process removed any contenders vying for the position.

The first ladies discussed share some commonalities but are also different in many ways, yet politically very influential and a factor contributing to their husbands' extended tenures. Furthermore, it is clear that the cases presented show similarities with other studies on first ladies cited earlier. The cases also support the notion of six, often overlapping, types of and corresponding functions of first ladies (Van Wyk 2017, 164). First, there is the spousal or motherly type (low to no political profile corresponding to women's position in society)—for example, Zina Wazouna Ahmed Idriss and Hadja Halimé of Chad. Second, there is the ceremonial type that accompanies the President to official functions. This relates to all the cases presented here. Third, there is the political first lady. Examples cited here include Janet Museveni, and Sally and Grace Mugabe. These women are politically ambitious and influential but not publicly accountable. Fourth, there are the policy first ladies, women who are the confidants of their husbands, serving as informal policy advisers. Janet Museveni, and Sally and Grace Mugabe are examples of these. In the fifth instance, there are the diplomatic first ladies such as Saba Haile and Amani Musa Hilal of Chad. The sixth type of first lady is the socially conscious woman who has her own development foundation or is involved in various developmental NGOs—albeit for personal gain. Examples here include Janet Museveni and Grace Mugabe. Finally, this contribution adds a seventh type, namely the economic first lady who has economic and business interests. Grace Mugabe and Hinda Déby are exceptional examples of economic first ladies who have accumulated great wealth and have extensive access to economic resources. The cases also confirm Mama's (1995) notion of femocracy, and Ibrahim's (2004) idea of the "first lady syndrome," which is characterised by marginalising women, supporting autocratic principles and advancing personal interests.

The next section focuses on the position, role and influence of first ladies vis-à-vis the state apparatus led by their husbands, and their societal impact.

First ladies, States and Societies

The selected cases illustrate the political significance and influence of African first ladies. Political influence is an important currency in a competitive political environment. The political significance of these women include their political status derived from their marriage to their country's president, thus their proximity to the president, the "political capital" their husbands derive from them (Troy, cited in Sulfaro 2007, 486), their influence in their husbands' and their own patronage networks, their status as a symbol of women in their countries, and their own political agendas.

First ladies derive their primary political status and influence from their marriage to the president of their country: they do not attain status and influence as individuals (Mama 1995, 41). As the intimate partner of the country's major political decision-maker, the

First Lady advises her husband and controls access to him (Stookesbury and Edgemon 2003, 100). Hence, Mama's (1995, 41) critical view about the status of first ladies quoted earlier. Unlike her husband, a first lady is not a democratically elected individual, and thus, unlike her husband, not a publicly accountable official. However, in all cases presented here, first ladies' husbands are regarded as undemocratic leaders who are not accountable for their actions. Janet Museveni, for example, is a notable exception as she serves in her husband's Cabinet, and is thus *ex officio* publicly accountable. When Yoweri Museveni appointed his wife in 2009 as Minister of State for Karamoja, the Karamojong saw this as Museveni's good intentions towards the ethnic group by sending his own wife to live and work among them (Van Wyk 2017, 160). By 2010, Janet Museveni had implemented her husband's government Karamoja Food Security Plan, which stabilised the sub-region (Nsibambi 2014, 162). One of the most important functions of a first lady is that she is a source of political capital for her husband that often enhances public trust in him, his party, and his government, and contributes to his credibility by endorsing his political campaigns and programmes, as well as maintaining and promoting his political networks. The first lady as a source of political capital is evident in Janet Museveni's appointment as Minister of State for Karamoja and Grace Mugabe's entry into Zimbabwe's national politics and her positioning herself as her husband's political surrogate and successor, thus extending Mugabe's rule of Zimbabwe (Van Wyk 2017, 160). Besides being the Secretary for Women Affairs of the ruling party, ZANU-PF, since December 2014 she has risen rapidly through the ranks to become a member of the party's Politburo. The pro-government newspaper, *The Herald* (2015), described Grace Mugabe's entry into politics and her "Meet the People Tours" as what "killed [the] factionalism" that had been "created" by the former Vice-President Joyce Mujuru "and her cabal." Grace Mugabe was also accredited with exposing Mujuru's corruption (which turned out to be trumped-up charges), thus protecting the unity of her husband's government (Van Wyk 2017, 160) and serving as a source of political capital.

The wives of Africa's longest-serving leaders play an important role in their husbands' political survival by entrenching and promoting their patronage networks and establishing their own patronage networks in support of their political ambitions and their husbands' rule. Like their husbands, these women deliver spoils to individuals for their loyalty, support and endorsement. These spoils typically involve material gain and/or political power and access. The Chadian First Lady and Grace Mugabe's patronage networks have been mentioned earlier.

First ladies are expected to fulfil certain official duties and functions, and often have a dedicated Office to support them in the execution of these duties and functions. This enhances these women's institutional advantage and influence. Besides their formal political roles, first ladies also have political symbolism as representatives of the ideal women in their society, often being trophy wives who are submissive to their husbands and their culture's patriarchy (Watson 2000, 100), and recognised as the Mothers of the Nation, thus further reinforcing certain gender stereotypes (Sulfaro 2007).

Despite some recent democratic gains in Africa, the tenure of these so-called long-distance men (long-serving African leaders) has produced poor results in terms of the advancement of women (see Table 2), resulting in these states occupying positions at the bottom of international freedom and gender development indices (Freedom House 2017; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2016).

Table 2: Selected socio-political indicators: Chad, Eritrea, Uganda and Zimbabwe in comparative perspective

	<i>Freedom status (FH)</i>	<i>Gender inequality index (UNDP)</i>	<i>Gender development index (UNDP)</i>
Chad	Not free	Low	Low
Eritrea	Not free	Low	Low
Uganda	Not free	Low	Low
Zimbabwe	Partly free	Low	Low

Note: FH = Freedom House; UNDP = United Nations Development Programme
Source: Freedom House 2017; UNDP 2016

Table 2 also indicates the contrast between first ladies' privileged position of influence and power, and that of the larger female population in their respective countries. In this instance, first ladies defy the notion of stiwanim (social transformation in Africa including women) that posits that women, especially women in powerful positions, are agents of transformational change (Ogundipe-Leslie 1994). The cases also contradict Nnaemeka's (2004) notion of nego-feminism according to which women negotiate their position in society. First ladies such as Sally and Grace Mugabe, Zina Wazouna Ahmed Idriss, Hadja Halimé, and Saba Haile confirm Acholonu's (1995) notion of motherism, which is that African women's primary occupation is that of motherhood. In fact, Sally and Grace Mugabe have both been described as Mothers of the Nation. Based on the cases presented, the status, power and influence of first ladies are best explained in terms of the intersectionality theory, in the sense that first ladies, despite their privileged position compared to women in society, remain at the receiving end of multiple sources (e.g. marriage, citizenship, ethnicity, gender and class) of oppression.

Besides being the spokespersons of their long-serving husbands' political agendas (Sulfaro 2007, 488), most of the selected first ladies have their own political agendas and patronage networks, as alluded to earlier. First ladies Janet Museveni, Grace Mugabe and Hinda Déby, for example, have developed a public policy agenda independent of and/or parallel to that of their husbands' government. Their status as the "social-worker-in-chief" (Troy 2006, 142) should not be underestimated as they have access to people (i.e. voters, donors and financiers), as well as influence, power and money in the NGOs they have established and/or endorsed.

Assessment

The political potency of first ladies is affected by socio-cultural factors in their societies (the role of women, gender and family in a society's history, and culture) (Claveria 2014, 1158; Watson 2000). African first ladies' efforts to improve the lives of ordinary Africans have yielded mixed to few results. Africa remains a continent of poverty and under-development, as indicated in Table 2. Notwithstanding conditions, the "cult of the First Lady" and the "First Lady Syndrome" prevail, and the lives of many women remain unchanged (Ibrahim 2004).

Parity between men and women remains skewed. A case in point is Chad; nevertheless the Chadian government has agreed to several legal and policy documents to rectify this. The Constitution, Penal Code and Criminal Code set out a number of strict guidelines with regard to gender equality, the prohibition of prostitution, and the equal status of women. However, the legislation does not specify what constitutes abuse or harassment. Chad accepts the marriage of girls over the age of 13, and punishes those who take wives younger than 13. In Chad, a number of projects and programmes have been set up to address gender equality, the education of girls, and sexual and reproductive rights. In 2008, 17.2 per cent of ministers in the government of Chad were women (UNECA 2012a) whereas in 2012, 12.8 per cent of parliamentarians were women. Updated information was hard to obtain.

The Chadian First Lady, Hinda Déby, is most well-known for her beauty and fashion-consciousness (*Washington Post* 2006), but her official office focuses on social issues, particularly HIV/AIDS. In addition to this, Hinda Déby's office manages a number of high-profile international projects, including

- her membership of the Organization of African First ladies against HIV/AIDS (OAFILA);
- a national Ministry of Health programme, Strengthening the Health and Support System for the Fight against HIV/AIDS and Epidemic Diseases ; and
- the overseeing of and reporting on the Chadian government's Action Plan for the Elimination of Mother-to-Child Transmission of HIV and Reproductive Health to the UN (Présidence de la République du Tchad 2017).

Besides these projects, Hinda Déby focuses on maternal, neo-natal and infant mortality, violence against women and the education of girls (Présidence de la République du Tchad 2017), which reasserts her image as a mother who nurtures and cares for her nation.

In Eritrea, a number of official legislative mechanisms protect women's rights. The Eritrean Constitution supports the high status of women and acknowledges their participation in the liberation and independence struggle. In addition, it prohibits child

marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), gender-based violence and rape, all of which are punishable by law (UNECA 2012b). Although women are protected in the national legislation of Eritrea, their participation in the political system appears to be limited; possibly due to the position of women in an Islamic society. The current information is outdated and little to no English government sources exist to show updated information. The UNECA African Women's Rights Observatory notes that, in 2008, only 17.6 per cent of ministers were women, and in 2012, only 22 per cent of Members of Parliament were women (UNECA 2012b). More recent information is not available. Freedom House (2016b) cites that while some women do indeed hold some senior government positions in Eritrea and the country has made an effort to promote women's rights, societal discrimination associated with traditionalism, for example, FGM and sexual abuse of women in the military, persists. Although there is formal appreciation for women, and this appreciation is expressed in legislation, the status of human rights in Eritrea poses a significant question: Is there a correlation between women's and human rights and the role of women in government or women in official positions?

As First Lady of Uganda and UWESCO's founder-patron, Janet Museveni has continued her support of UWESCO, consolidating her influence on socio-economic and health issues in the country. UWESCO has since extended its scope to focus on war-related and HIV/AIDS-affected orphans in Uganda, a national programme covering all districts in the country. By 2017, UWESCO has cooperated with some "major UN agencies and other international donor agencies" (JMO 2017).

Janet Museveni remains involved in women's issues. For example, she has a part in the functioning of the National Strategy for the Advancement of Rural Women in Uganda, an NGO focusing on the empowerment of poor rural women (JMO 2017). Besides this, she continues her involvement in youth matters through the Uganda Youth Forum, which is an NGO. Like UWESCO, this forum "engages the youth of Uganda for purposes of character and behavior formation particularly with regard to HIV and AIDS prevention" (JMO 2017). Being engaged with the youth attests to her motherly inclinations, for which she is affectionately known, and she has endeared herself to many who refer to her as Uganda's "Mother of the Nation." The perspective the people have of her is further entrenched in her endorsement of the goal of the Safe Motherhood Initiative of the Ugandan Ministry of Health and the World Health Organisation to reduce maternal mortality and morbidity. She is also co-chairperson of the CURE Hospital, an international hospital dedicated to the care of crippled children in Uganda (JMO 2017). Janet Museveni is an active member of the Organization of African First Ladies against HIV/AIDS (OAFLA), an organisation that unites the first ladies of Africa in the fight against HIV and AIDS in some regions of Africa, including Uganda (OAFLA 2017).

Sally Mugabe founded the Zimbabwe Women's Cooperative in the United Kingdom (UK) in 1986, a cooperative that was largely financed and aided by Akina Mama wa

Afrika, a London-based African women's organisation that focused on developmental issues as well as issues that affected women particularly in Africa and the United Kingdom (Pindula 2016). Sally Mugabe also founded the Zimbabwe Child Survival Movement in 1988 (Mosti 2014). Grace Mugabe is also involved in charity projects, which include an orphanage, the Grace Mugabe Children's House, and a primary school in Mazowe. Furthermore, she is involved with Danhiko projects, which some have argued are "just a continuation of Sally's philanthropic works" (Pindula 2016).

Conclusion

In summary, despite first ladies' involvement in women's issues, the authors of this article have to concur with Ibrahim (2004, 14) that these ladies have created a dynamic in which political space is being appropriated and abused by the wives and friends of men in power for their personal aggrandisement rather than furthering the interests of women.

This article has demonstrated that the first ladies who formed part of the case study have not raised the profile of women and improved women's lives in their respective countries. The wives of Africa's longest-serving leaders regulate societal relations, extract natural and other resources such as political support, are involved in tenders and government funding, and are able to appropriate and use material (funds, tenders) and immaterial (influence, status, prestige) resources (Migdal as cited in Tripp 2000, 3). Hence, a perpetuation of the so-called First Lady Syndrome makes these women role models for women in their societies but also reinforces the notion that a woman's power and influence is acceptable only when she is married and/or married to a powerful man (Ibrahim 2004, 2). The women selected for this case study illustrate and confirm the truth of Ibrahim's statement. Hinda Déby of Chad, for example, has secured access to power and influence for predominantly male members of her family. Idriss Déby married Amani Musa Hilal, an arrangement that could be described as bride-buying with the purpose of establishing and maintaining friendly tribal and international relations. Yoweri Museveni also used his wife to achieve political ambitions. He appointed his wife as Minister of the Karamojong to quell tribal conflict. Thus, like Idriss Déby, he scored significant political capital due to his wife. Another example is Grace Mugabe who was instrumental in ousting Joyce Mujuru, a potential successor of Robert Mugabe. In 2017, Grace Mugabe, after assaulting a girlfriend of one of her sons, secured diplomatic immunity from the South African government in order not to be prosecuted (Department of International Relations and Cooperation 2017).

Based on four illustrative cases, it can be said that African first ladies married to the continent's longest-serving presidents are politically influential, resulting in femocracy and the support of their husbands' patriarchal and undemocratic rule to the detriment of the position of women in society. The selected first ladies are politically significant as they have their own political agendas and have supported their husbands' long-term

tenures. In institutionalising femocracy they support undemocratic rule in Africa and they fail in being substantive representatives of women in their country.

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