

## First Ladies of Africa—Beyond Femocracy or Wifeism?: An Introduction

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**Abstract:** *This special issue explores the complex relationship between women and political power in Africa. The contributors probe the various ways elite African women access and wield political authority in history, shedding light on both the public admiration and criticisms faced by powerful, political women. The contributors analyze the historical actions of women who gain influence from their husbands' political power beyond the roles theorized as "wifeism" or "femocrats." By examining the lives of prominent women in Ghana, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda through a historical and feminist lens, the authors provide a nuanced understanding of the informal yet significant impact of politically powerful women within the orbit of prominent male politicians. They contextualize and historicize the roles of these women as they shape national political culture in Africa throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.*

**Keywords:** *first lady, femocracy, wifeism, gender, women, Africa*

As noted by the weekly *Zimbabwe Independent* in 2017, no one could have predicted the significant political impact that Grace Marufu would have when she married President Robert Mugabe in August 1996.<sup>1</sup> Initially described as shy by local media outlets, Grace Mugabe, who was forty years younger than her husband, transformed over the years from a typist for Zimbabwean President Mugabe into a lavish spender known as "Gucci Grace" and "First Shopper" during her first decade as First Lady. In her second decade, she adopted the title of "Comrade Grace" and embraced military attire and the clenched fist gesture of the ruling party.<sup>2</sup> Grace's foray into politics coincided with her election to lead the women's wing of the Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) in 2014. This marked the beginning of her ambitions for the presidency and her public calls for her husband to name her as his successor.<sup>3</sup> Following her push for power, Vice President

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<sup>1</sup> Hazel Ndebele, "The Rise and Fall of Grace Mugabe," *The Zimbabwe Independent*, November 17, 2017, <https://www.theindependent.co.zw/2017/11/17/rise-fall-grace-mugabe/>.

<sup>2</sup> Rudo Mudiwa, "Coups and Phalluses," *Africa Is a Country* (blog), November 28, 2017, <https://www.africasacountry.com/2017/11/on-grace-mugabe-coups-phalluses-and-what-is-being-defended/>; Jamie Tarabay, "Grace under Fire: A First Lady's Ambition Cut Short," *CNN*, December 6, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/17/africa/grace-mugabe/index.html>; Simon Allison, "Grace Mugabe's Rise: Grotesque Ambition or Pure Self-Preservation?" *The Guardian*, August 19, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/aug/19/grace-mugabes-rise-grotesque-ambition-or-pure-self-preservation>.

<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Nyarota, *The Graceless Fall of Robert Mugabe: The End of a Dictator's Reign* (Cape Town, South Africa: Penguin Random House South Africa, 2018), kindle version; Reuters and Associated Press, "Zimbabwe's First Lady Urges Robert Mugabe to Name His Successor," *The Guardian*, July 27, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/27/zimbabwe-first-lady-grace-robert-mugabe-successor>; Max Bearak, "How Grace Mugabe's Power Grab Ended Up Backfiring," *Washington Post*, November 15, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2017/11/15/how-grace-mugabes-power-grab-ended-up-backfiring/>; Chipo Dendere, "To Understand the Coup in Zimbabwe, you Need to Know More about Grace

Emmerson Mnangagwa was dismissed and exiled by President Mugabe, leading to a military coup and the detention of both Mugabes.<sup>4</sup> The controversial actions of Grace Mugabe drew both just and unjust criticism, as detailed in a 2017 *New York Times* op-ed titled, “The Fall of Africa’s Most Hated First Lady.” The piece highlighted the risks faced by women married to politically powerful men, particularly when they deviate from societal expectations. As Sisonke Msimang concluded, “it is worth noting the dangers faced by women married to prominent men, in Africa and elsewhere: When they don’t fit a certain mold, they are often vilified.”<sup>5</sup>

The contributors in this special issue focus on the wives of political heavyweights who don’t always “fit a certain mold.” Most draw on a conception of first ladies as those women married to the male chief executive of their countries. Although the term has roots in the United States,<sup>6</sup> scholarship shows commonality in the roles ascribed to first ladies globally, most of which does not relate to official duties. This issue illustrates how these women’s lives reflect Africa’s political power dynamics and the diverse ways women have accessed political authority. Analyzing the lives of leading women in Ghana, Mozambique, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda, the authors use historical lenses to contextualize the influence of the wives of powerful politicians and consider their role in shaping national political cultures in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The contributors revisit questions raised by some of the first scholars of first ladies in post-colonial Africa. They engage with Amina Mama’s and Hussaina Abdullah’s influential 1995 works on first ladies and women elites in post-colonial Africa. Mama theorized a new role for first ladies in representing and leading women, the “First Lady phenomenon.” She showed how post-colonial African states exploited gender issues—giving primacy to wives of leading political men—to secure foreign aid.<sup>7</sup> Abdullah explored the concept of “wifeism,” where privileged urban women, especially wives of powerful politicians, lead state-sanctioned women’s political organizations. Mama and Abdullah argue that these phenomena are prevalent in post-colonial Africa and are not beneficial for ordinary women, as they are dominated by a select group of women married to powerful men. They both conclude that these practices are anti-democratic and do not empower the majority of women, especially those in rural areas.<sup>8</sup>

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Mugabe,” *Washington Post*, November 15, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/11/15/to-understand-the-coup-in-zimbabwe-you-need-to-know-more-about-grace-mugabe/>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Sisonke Msimang, “The Fall of Africa’s Most Hated First Lady,” *New York Times*, November 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/22/opinion/sunday/grace-mugabe-zimbabwe.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Russell L. Mahan, *Lucy Webb Hayes: A First Lady by Example* (Hauppauge, NY: Nova History Publications, Inc., 2011), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Amina Mama, “Feminism or Femocracy? State Feminism and Democratization in Nigeria,” *Africa Development* 20, 1 (1995), 38.

<sup>8</sup> Mama, “Feminism or Femocracy?” 57; Hussaina Abdullah, “Wifeism and Activism: The Nigerian Women’s Movement,” in Amrita Basu, ed., *The Challenge of Local Feminisms: Women’s Movements in Global Perspective* (Boulder, CO: Routledge, 1995), 222.

Burgeoning scholarship on African first ladies has followed Mama and Abdullah. For example, Jo-Ansie van Wyk, Chidochashe Nyere, Arina Muresan, and Aisha Balarabe Bawa present cross-national accounts of the influence of first ladies in Africa since colonial times. Osagioduwa Eweka's and Nkwazi Nkuzi Mhango's scholarship focuses on the unaccountability of first ladies.<sup>9</sup> Ayo Elebute and Obasanjo Oyedele and Ngozi Nneji Iheanacho argue that Nigeria's first ladies' political beliefs have positively impacted women's political participation in Nigeria.<sup>10</sup> Tendai Mangena centers the demise of women political elites in modern-day Zimbabwe, such as Joice Mujuru, the country's former vice president, and Grace Mugabe.<sup>11</sup>

In my own research on gender and politics in Cameroon, I explore the political impact of first ladies such as Anna Foncha, whose husband led the Anglophone regions of Cameroon in the 1960s. Foncha played a key role in women's organizations, demonstrating political involvement and independence from her husband. She led the West Cameroon Council of Women's Institutes and founded the Catholic Women's Association (CWA), which now has members in Cameroon, the United States and the United Kingdom. Known as "Mothers of the Church," CWA promotes women's solidarity globally and influences politics through maternal imagery and connections with diverse Cameroonian women. Despite being nonpolitical, the organization brings together women from the ruling class, leveraging the power of the Catholic Church. Anna Foncha, who recently celebrated her 100th birthday, is remembered for more than her time as a First Lady.<sup>12</sup>

The contributors to this issue return to the questions that the aforementioned researchers raised with other cases, expanding understandings of the experiences and agencies of first ladies in post-colonial Africa. The authors historicize the actions and experiences of political wives beyond "wifeism," the institutionalization of the roles of

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<sup>9</sup> Jo-Ansie van Wyk, Chidochashe Nyerere, and Arina Muresan, "African First Ladies, Politics and the State," *Politeia* 37, 2 (2018), 1–20; Jo-Ansie van Wyk, "The First Ladies of Southern Africa: Trophies or Trailblazers?," *Politikon* 44, 1 (February 2017), 157–72; Aisha Balarabe Bawa, "First Ladies Navigation into African Politics: A Historical Survey," *History Compass* (2021), 1–8; Osagioduwa Eweka, "Working Behind the Scenes: Rethinking Peace and Development in the First Lady Illusory Continuum of Afropolicom," in Sharon Adetutu Omotoso, ed., *Women's Political Communication in Africa* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020), 133–54; Nkwazi Nkuzi Mhango, "Are African First Ladies or First Raiders?," in Nkwazi Nkuzi Mhango, ed., *Africa Reunite or Perish* (Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa Research and Publishing Common Initiative Group, 2015), 245–59.

<sup>10</sup> Ayo Elebute and Obasanjo Oyedele, "Africa's First Ladies: Communicating Political Thought in Nigeria," in Omotoso, ed., *Women's Political Communication in Africa*, 119–32, [https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-42827-3\\_8](https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-42827-3_8); and Ngozi N. Iheanacho, "First Ladies in Nigeria: The Rise of Amazon Crusaders for Better Life of the Vulnerable," *Advances in Applied Sociology* 6, 3 (2016), 134–46.

<sup>11</sup> Tendai Mangena, "Narratives of Women in Politics in Zimbabwe's Recent Past: The Case of Joice Mujuru and Grace Mugabe," *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 56, 2 (2021), 407–25.

<sup>12</sup> See Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué, *Gender, Separatist Politics, and Embodied Nationalism in Cameroon* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2019); Tata Mbunwe, "Anna Foncha, "Wife of John Ngu Foncha, Clocks 100," *MIMIMEFO*, December 29, 2023, <https://mimimefoinfos.com/anna-foncha-wife-of-john-ngu-foncha-clocks-100/>.

politicians' wives, and beyond labeling them as “femocrats”—women with few ideas of their own who gain power from being married to politically powerful men.<sup>13</sup> By examining how the public has viewed and celebrated African women political elites, the authors complicate understanding about the lives of the women in focus. These issues are examined in relation to their political power, the role they have played in international and domestic affairs in the past, and how, at different times in history, they have taken advantage of longstanding gender roles as political capital.

The contributors in this issue use a feminist lens to complicate the actions of political wives in history. By examining the lives of first ladies through historical and feminist perspectives, we gain insights into how female elites exercise agency beyond their husbands. This approach also highlights how first ladies have advanced women's emancipation in various ways. Thus, many of the works in this issue disagree with scholars who claim that first ladies are never emancipatory or have mainly hindered the advancement of women's interests.

But to be clear, many political wives in this issue did not openly identify as feminist—at its most basic level, an advocate of women's rights based on the equality of the sexes.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps they avoided the term due to its link to Western culture and its defiance of enduring gender roles in Africa.<sup>15</sup> Despite this, they engaged in various political activities that could be considered “feminist actions”, in which participants seek “to fight gender hierarchies and to improve women's status, whether or not they adopt the feminist label.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, many of the “feminist actions,” of the first ladies in this issue included creating and endorsing women's organizations, promoting women's unity, and implementing social and educational reforms specifically targeted towards girls and women.

The scholarly works in this issue utilize a variety of sources, including interviews, archival material, online forums, and Facebook groups. Drawing upon history, communication studies, memory studies, and gender/feminist studies, the authors go beyond standard questions and limits in the field of African gender history by examining the lives of first ladies with limited biographical records. Biographies of the husbands of first ladies also play a significant role in the authors' analysis, shedding light on the broader historical context of the countries where first ladies have wielded their influence. However, political biographies of Africans have typically centered on the husbands of first ladies.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the

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<sup>13</sup> Mama, “Feminism or Femocracy?” 41; Abdullah, “Wifeism and Activism,” 213.

<sup>14</sup> Michelle Denton, *Feminism and Gender Equality* (New York: Cavendish Square Publishing, LLC, 2021), 4.

<sup>15</sup> Simidele Dosekun, “African Feminisms,” in Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso and Toyin Falola, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 4.

<sup>16</sup> Valerie Sperling, Myra Marx Ferree, and Barbara Risman, “Constructing Global Feminism: Transnational Advocacy Networks and Russian Women's Activism,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 26, 4 (2001), 1,158.

<sup>17</sup> Scholars and journalists have just begun to write books about African women politicians like Wangari Maathai, *Wangari Maathai's Registers of Freedom*, ed. Grace A. Musila, *Voices of Liberation: Wangari*

authors draw from biographical sketches and profiles that have appeared in periodicals, oral interviews, newspapers, and press releases as to examine the lives of the women of focus and create a sort of “First Lady biography,” or a First Lady “archive,” as Nancy Henaku does in her work on former Ghanaian First Lady Nana Konadu Agyeman-Rawlings, included in this issue.

In many ways, the position of First Lady is a continuation of how African women have historically acquired power. The fact that their power often derives or begins from the nearness of male power should not diminish our acknowledgment of their authority and historical significance. As Jill Kelly argues in this issue, feminist intellectual history and the analysis of a woman in relation to her husband presents a productive tension. Viewing a woman through the lens of First Lady allows for a deeper understanding of her actions as a political thinker and actor, with access to and influence over various audiences. Historically, men too have usually come to diverse forms of power through proximity to the power of other men, such as through different kinds of connections, including kinship and marriage.<sup>18</sup> Yet, scholarly works have not decreased or downplayed these routes to power for men. African women too have obtained power through various outlets connected to male power, such as complementary political roles.<sup>19</sup> In addition, women have ruled as queens, queen mothers, princesses, or daughters in different societal structures across time and space in Africa. Women have also achieved power through other means including women’s associations and organizations, such as ones for market women, religious denominations, and secret societies.<sup>20</sup> Thus, from female traditional leaders to chiefs in the precolonial and colonial period, to ministers and presidents like Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in the postcolonial era, African women have continually held assorted forms of authority that have evolved with historical events and cultural contexts.<sup>21</sup>

While scholars highlight the historical significance of women in positions of political power in post-colonial Africa,<sup>22</sup> first ladies are often overshadowed in historical accounts. The focus tends to be on other women political figures, such as nationalist leaders like Huda Sharawi (Egypt), Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (Nigeria), Bibi Titi Mohammed (Tanzania), Regina Gelana Twala (South Africa and eSwatini) and Winnie Madikizela Mandela (South

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*Maathai* (Cape Town, South Africa: HSRC Press, 2020); Pamela Scully, *Ellen Johnson Sirleaf* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016).

<sup>18</sup> Stephan Miescher, *Making Men in Ghana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 2, 19.

<sup>19</sup> Nwando Achebe, *The Female King of Colonial Nigeria: Ahebi Ugbabe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 71.

<sup>20</sup> Kathleen E. Sheldon, *African Women: Early History to the 21st Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 45.

<sup>21</sup> For examples, see Achebe, *The Female King*; Mary W. Wanyoike, *Wangu Wa Makeri* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2002); Nyakwea Wai, *Wangu Wa Makeri: A Pioneering Kenyan Feminist* (Nairobi: Kaswanga Press, 1994); Chiedo Nwankwor, “Women Cabinet Ministers’ Substantive Representation in Africa,” *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 28, 1 (Spring 2021), 241–64; Scully, *Ellen Johnson Sirleaf*.

<sup>22</sup> For example, see David Sweetman, *Women Leaders in African History* (London: Heinemann, 1985); Nwando Achebe, *Female Monarchs and Merchant Queens in Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2020).

Africa), Mabel Dove-Danquah (Ghana), and Vera Chirwa (Malawi).<sup>23</sup> Albeit their important roles, first ladies are often overlooked and seen primarily as the wives of male political leaders, despite some being influential nationalist leaders during decolonization and in the postcolonial era. One such first lady is Mozambican Graça Machel. Kathleen Sheldon's work in this issue explores the political power of Machel, who served as First Lady in both Mozambique and South Africa. Machel's involvement in the decolonization movement and her deep engagement with Mozambique's anti-colonial movement in the 1970s are spotlighted. Despite her low public profile, Machel played a significant role in nation-building efforts post-war, including founding the Foundation for Community Development in Mozambique.

The rise of the modern-day understanding of first ladies in Africa began in the early post-colonial era, particularly in the 1960s to 1980s. The 1970s was a significant period for the rise of first ladies due to international gendered politics, including the United Nations' declaration of 1975 as International Women's Year and the Decade for Women from 1975 to 1985. This led many African countries to adopt policies promoting women's participation in politics and increasing their social and economic welfare (while simultaneously demonstrating a progressive stance).<sup>24</sup> As a result, many first ladies in Africa became active political partners of their husbands.<sup>25</sup> But while many first ladies, such as Grace Mugabe, supported their husbands' political careers, few pursued political careers independently.<sup>26</sup>

Yet, first ladies have historically held significant power despite not having official duties,<sup>27</sup> as demonstrated by scholars like Nancy Henaku and Alicia Decker whose scholarship feature in this issue. Henaku's focus on Nana Konadu Agyeman-Rawlings of Ghana underlines how she wielded power through her marriage to President Jerry Rawlings and her own background, exerting influence within and beyond her marriage. Agyeman-Rawlings, who served as first lady for almost twenty years (1982–2000), remained politically active even after her husband's death and ran for president in 2016 and 2020.

Jo-Ansie van Wyk, Chidochashe Nyere, and Arina Muresan point out that first ladies who control access to their husbands and play an advisory role do so because they are the

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<sup>23</sup> Learn more here: Huda Sha'arawi and Margot Badran, *Harem Years the Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist (1879–1924)* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2003); Sania Sharawi Lanfranchi, *Castling off the Veil: The Life of Huda Shaarawi, Egypt's First Feminist* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014); Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Nina Emma Mba, *For Women and the Nation: Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti of Nigeria* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Susan Geiger, *TANU Women: Gender and Culture in the Making of Tanganyikan Nationalism, 1955–1965* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997); Mabel Dove, Stephanie Newell, and Audrey Gadzekpo, *Selected Writings of a Pioneer West African Feminist* (Nottingham, UK: Trent Editions, 2004); Vera Mlangazuwa Chirwa, *Fearless Fighter: An Autobiography* (London: Zed Books, 2007); Joel Cabrita, *Written Out: The Silencing of Regina Gelana Twala* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2023); Sisonke Msimang, *The Resurrection of Winnie Mandela: A Biography of Survival* (Johannesburg, South Africa: Jonathan Ball Publishers, 2018).

<sup>24</sup> Bawa, "First Ladies," 2–3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> Mougoué, *Gender, Separatist Politics*, 7, 74–75.

<sup>27</sup> Bawa, "First Ladies," 4.

intimate partners of these men.<sup>28</sup> In other words, the First Lady's close connection to male power makes her role ambiguous, providing opportunities to exercise individual agency that the selective gaze of the media and historical scholarship might overlook. Thus, as Henaku's work shows, it is impossible to separate the political from the personal in the lives of first ladies, a situation that is also evident in Decker's examination of Miria Obote of Uganda. Decker's analysis highlights the emotional turmoil experienced by Obote during her tenure as First Lady in the 1960s and 1980s, stemming from the attempted assassination and coup that endangered her husband's regime. Despite her involvement in women's organizing and social welfare, she ultimately retreated to private life after her husband's death.

When in public, first ladies like Miria Obote drew upon the deeply rooted tradition of maternal power in Africa, harnessing the symbolic and biological authority of motherhood. Decker shows how, although Obote held a prominent position, she did not see herself as a political leader. Rather, she viewed herself as a wife and mother, responding to the political turmoil surrounding her husband's regime with the remark, "I was just a mother."<sup>29</sup> By emphasizing such maternal influence, first ladies aimed to promote their nonpolitical endeavors and wield a unique power that their husbands could not attain. Ifi Amadiume calls this maternal power "a means of institutional and ideological empowerment" for African women.<sup>30</sup> Rhiannon Stephens argues that "[m]otherhood is widely recognised as an essential aspect of women's lives in Africa, more important than marriage in terms of identity, social status, and political and religious authority."<sup>31</sup> Therefore, first ladies, including those featured in this issue, leveraged their maternal authority to strengthen their social and political standing and rally women's solidarity and support.

First ladies worked both individually and collectively with other women to advance various goals related to social concerns, women's issues, and national development. Most did so under the guise of being apolitical, keeping their discussions of social issues to women's concerns, such as domestic tasks.<sup>32</sup> These initiatives were considered safe, "apolitical" issues for elite women who framed themselves as "mothers" of the nation to engage with politics without threatening male dominance in politics.<sup>33</sup> By emphasizing their domestic roles and national duties, first ladies positioned themselves as maternal figures with political sway, nurturing the nation's welfare and encouraging women to join women's organizations and support their husbands' administrations.

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<sup>28</sup> Van Wyk, Nyere, and Muresan, "African First Ladies," 11–12.

<sup>29</sup> See Alicia Decker's contribution in this issue.

<sup>30</sup> Ifi Amadiume, *Re-Inventing Africa: Matriarch, Religion and Culture* (London: Zed Books, 1997), 198.

<sup>31</sup> Rhiannon Stephens, *A History of African Motherhood: The Case of Uganda, 700–1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1–2.

<sup>32</sup> For example, Berger outlines the issues tackled by the Women's Cameroon National Union in 1960s Francophone Cameroon, including family planning, juvenile delinquency, prostitution, housekeeping, motherhood, and hygiene. Iris Berger, *Women in Twentieth-Century Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 100, 102.

<sup>33</sup> Mougoué, *Gender, Separatist Politics*, 7, 72.

### Defining First Ladies

The role of First Lady is constantly evolving in Africa, with its definition and boundaries of their power fluid. For example, women not presidential spouses claim this position, either by choice or by outside forces, prompting us to reconsider our perceptions of this position historically. As several of the contributions in this issue illustrate, the first lady need not only be national, but can be regional, such as the wife of a political party's leader. Jill Kelly's work in this issue challenges simple notions of first ladyship by examining Nokukhanya Luthuli's political activities as the wife of a South African chief and president of the leading anti-apartheid movement, the African National Congress. She suggests marriage to a leader of anti-colonial or anti-apartheid political organizations can confer status as a First Lady, pointing out that wives of party leaders may wield significant power. This raises questions about the concept of having multiple, competing or overlapping, "first" ladies in a country and expands our understanding of women's roles in positions of influence.

Jessica Ott also focuses on an unofficial First Lady, Fatma Karume of Zanzibar, who led the ruling party women's organization from 1964 to 1973. Fatma was married to Abeid Amani Karume, the founding president of Zanzibar. Even though Zanzibar is not an independent country, its partially self-governing status within Tanzania allowed the Karume family some political autonomy in the archipelago. Ott focuses on Karume's significant political career and her role in encouraging women to take part in nation-building activities traditionally seen as male-centric. Karume's relationships with women's organizations in the Eastern Bloc influenced her approach and had a lasting impact on gender roles in Zanzibar. She also served as a diplomatic proxy for her husband, connecting with first ladies from Tanzania, East Germany, China, and the Soviet Union, bringing their influence into daily life in Zanzibar.

As Amina Mama shares in her reflection in this issue—an addendum to her notable 1995 article on femocracy—first ladies' activities and experiences, and even the very definition of the roles has differed sharply over time and space. Mama references the example of Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, a globally prominent Nigerian-British activist, who addressed Mama's 1995 criticism of femocracy and wifeism in her 2015 autobiography after her husband Kayode Fayemi was elected as State Governor of Ekiti State in Nigeria in 2011 and re-elected in 2019. She explains in her autobiography that she embraces her status as First Lady of Ekiti State to support a range of policy advocacy, grassroots empowerment, and social inclusion programs in Ekiti.<sup>34</sup>

The political relevance of former first ladies in Africa after their tenure ends is often uncertain as their spouses lose authority. Yet, many first ladies remain politically important after their time in office. In my own work, I have explored how Germaine Ahidjo, a former First Lady of Cameroon, maintained significant political influence until her passing in 2021, even while living in exile in Dakar, Senegal. The current Cameroonian government was apprehensive about her potential return, worried that the legacy of her late husband could pose a challenge to their authority. There were concerns that she might seek political power

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<sup>34</sup> Bisi Adeleye-Fayemi, *Speaking Above a Whisper* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Amandla Consulting, 2013).



by running for the presidency, as hinted in her conversational biography from 1996.<sup>35</sup> This is a common theme similarly explored by all the contributors in this issue. The lives of Nana Konadu Agyeman-Rawlings (Ghana), Fatma Karume and Maria Nyerere (Tanzania) and Miria Obote (Uganda) indicate how former first ladies maintain power and influence long after their husbands' deaths. They commemorate their husbands' political legacies, run for president, and pave the way for other women in politics. Despite being labeled as appendages of their husbands' power, these women show autonomy and influence that both further and transcend their husbands' regimes. Their impact on African politics is lasting and expansive, highlighting the role of first ladies as key players in shaping collective memory and political development long after their official tenure as First Lady ends.

Ultimately, first ladies, like their politically elite counterparts, have been both constrained and offered opportunities in their political power because of their ambiguous proximity to male power. Hence, this issue continues a conversation that has long complicated the history of the political power of African first ladies for the good and for the bad. Case in point, in 2021, Grace Mugabe was fined five cows and two goats by a traditional court in Zimbabwe “for having buried her husband in a manner deemed inappropriate” (not according to traditional custom). As this shows, like their politically elite counterparts across time, the history of the power of first ladies, both when their husbands are in power and thereafter, has always been a double-edged sword.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Germaine Habiba Ahidjo and Honoré de Sumo, *Mes confidences à Honoré De Sumo* (Johannesburg and France: Les Éditions Continentales, 1996).

<sup>36</sup> *AfricaNews* and AFP, “Zimbabwe: Grace Mugabe Fined Five Cows for Violating Husband's Burial,” *AfricaNews*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.africanews.com/2021/05/21/zimbabwe-grace-mugabe-fined-five-cows-for-violating-husband-s-burial/>.