

NIGERIAN WOMEN OF POWER AND THEIR SOCIAL MUNIFICENCE IN A POSTCOLONIAL AND AVANT-GARDE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This study enumerates the prevailing social menaces in Nigeria which have been ravaging the society. These menaces, in part, can be traced to the non-functionality of the pet initiatives of the women in power corridor in the country, because the First Ladies sought to curb these social ills ab initio. But the initiatives died after the husbands of the initiators left office. The study adopted the Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism as theoretical guide and employed the qualitative research method in the context of the avant-garde attitude. These near-defunct pet initiatives include Stella Obasanjo's Child Care Trust, Titi Abubakar's Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF), The Turai Yar'Adua's Initiative for Social Development, the Dame Jonathan's Women for Change Initiative, Amina Sambo's I-Care Women and Youth Initiative, the Aisha Buhari's Future Assured and Dolapo Osinbajo's Project Ayodele. The fact that these pet initiatives lost relevance and went down the drains after the husbands of the pet initiators left power contributed to the worsening social ills such as cases of cancers and rape violence today in Nigeria as the continued existence of the projects would have reduced prevalence and intensity as obtainable today. This goes to indicate that the burgeoning of the pet projects run by the women was on the political eminence of the husbands of the initiators. That is patriarchy sustains feminine humanity-mediated conceptions. It is suggested that the pet conceptions of the First Ladies should receive some level of financial supports by both government and philanthropists so as to sustain their ideas after their husbands have left office. This will go a long way to reduce the prevalence of social ills such as cancer epidemic and rape violence against women.

Key words: Women initiatives, Avant-garde, First Ladies, Better Life, Stiwanism

Introduction

The term "First Lady" first truly found its way into the vocabulary of public administration in Nigeria during the administration of military President Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida (1985-1993). The term was used informally in the presidential circle to refer to the wife of any president or Head of States prior to 1985. But it was during the administration of the then President Babangida that the title became glamorized when it was used to describe and address Maryam Babangida, wife of the president. The use of the title brought a lot of elegance and sophistication to the wife of the president and her position. Some major factors could be adduced as being responsible for the glamour and

elegance that attended the use of the title for Maryam Babangida. The first was the feminine nature of the title. The second was the innovativeness that later came through it. Another factor was power of the military. The style of the administration as the Head of States converted to presidential military governance style which was new in the country. Additionally, the pet project, Better Life for Rural Dwellers Program, which Maryam Babangida founded, was a sensational initiative at the time because of power and the exciting feeling the project evoked in the entire citizenry at the time. During this period from 1985, women were not considered substantial as members of the society who deserved the attention of an eminent personality that was at the corridor of power. The power energy behind the pet project made it substantially successful and this has resulted in the status of the Better Life initiative in Nigeria today as a viable source of inspiration for similar subsequent pet projects by the wives of the presidents and vice presidents. These assertions are corroborated in the submission that:

Before the Late Mrs Maryam Ibrahim Babangida came along, you could almost say that in Nigeria, the role of First Lady was non-existent... It is common knowledge that it was she who animated the office of the First Lady, bringing music and colour to the political jungle at the time. She founded the Better Life Programme to empower rural women and liberate them from poverty, a feat that was as radical in scope then as it would be now. (Nnabuike 2020:1)

In the above, there was the factor of power against the social culture in the running of the Maryam Babangida's women empowerment program as Nigeria's First Lady at the time. As at the time of the inauguration of the Better Life Programme for the Rural Women, the cynical perception of women by the indigenous culture and society was overrun by political power and will. This goes to suggest that political will has played a significant role in government attention to the plight of women in Nigeria.

However, it has been noted that most of the pet initiatives of the First Ladies after the Better Life initiatives have gone into near dereliction. This is because there is no longer financial support for the pet projects which their husbands provided while still in office as they men have left political power. This dearth of finance has had terrifying consequences in the Nigerian social system. This is because the social ills such as the incapacitation of the vulnerable groups which the initiatives were conceived to address are left unattended to from the humanitarian perspectives continue to ravage the Nigerian society. The focus of this study is to enumerate such consequences as a result of the defunct humanitarian concepts of the women in the Nigerian power corridor. These include Stella Obasanjo's Child Care Trust, Titi Abubakar's Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF), The Turai YaADua's Initiative for Social Development, The Dame Jonathan's Women for Change Initiative, Amina Sambo's I-Care Women and Youth Initiative, the Aisha Buhari's Future Assured and Dolapo Osinbajo's Project Ayodele. These initiatives by the women in power corridor barely exist, and there is vacuum emanating from their defunct state as the ills they sought to fight still ravage the Nigerian society today. This paper enumerates the health and social menace that persist as a result of the non-functionality of the pet project. To this extent the relevance of women in Nigeria is conspicuous.

Methodological Approach

In order to attain a near-impeccable result in this study, some methodological approaches were adopted. These included the qualitative research approach. By this, conclusions in the study are based on rationalization of thoughts based on available circumstances. In addition to this, the yardstick of 1985 was used as basis of derivations on the relevance of the pet project. This

periodization is crucial and strategic because the pioneer pet project in Nigeria by a First Lady started with the Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida administration which started in 1985. In the same vein, women in power corridor were chosen because of eminence and political clout needed for research social relevance. This is because much has been said about subaltern women in the market place, and such places as the village setting and the vulnerable groups.

Theoretical Guide

This study is guided by the Molara-Ogundipe-Leslie's theoretical principle of Stiwanism. This is an Africa-originated women-study theory which seeks the inclusion of women in the social schemes of things. The theory lampoons violence exhibition in the quest for obtaining patriarchal validation of the relevance and access of women to social empowerment. It seeks negotiation and lobby to achieve this gender goal. The theory is considered appropriate for this study because the central goal is to seek the backing of men for the initiative of the women in power corridor. This is especially so because the women concerned have reached the lofty height of political power and position riding on the backs of their husbands. To this end, lobby and negotiation are crucial tools of access to social power. The avant-garde context of reasoning is for the purpose of multidimensional perspectives to the contributions and significance of women in the Nigerian social system.

The Concept of Power in Nigerian Society

Power is a complicated social materialist phenomenon in Nigeria. Its complicatedness stems from the inordinate desire for it by many Nigerians and the intuitive propensity in many Nigerians to explore the efficacy of power in getting things done to pursue their own vindictive intentions. This is with the ultimate goal of oppressing and suppressing the other person in society. There are many sources of power in Nigeria which signifies the different types of power in the country. Such types include political power, religious power, power of riches, *juju* power, as well as patriarchal power. Custodial holders of each of these types of power have used them to oppress people in their immediate community or the larger Nigerian society. For example, Nigerian politicians amass wealth in office and intimidate the masses whose money the public office holders stole in the first place. The politicians make draconian rule to allow multiple taxation without providing corresponding amenities. They make the sirens of their official (and personal) vehicles blare in order to scare other road users off the road on daily basis. This constitutes misuse of power constantly perpetrated by Nigerian political leaders. Tajudeen (2015) codifies abuse of political power as including acts such as mismanagement, governance mishandlings, corruption, maladministration, and tyranny. Yet, such abuse of the power imbued in the political power holder through constitutional, penal or legal instruments is capable of bringing about a threat of monumental proportion to the existence of both constitutionalism and society. In the same vein, Adetoro and Omiyefa (2014: 87) further opine that:

Despite more than a decade of democratic governance and endorsement of universal declaration of human rights charter, Nigerians still face a lot of human rights abuses. This is because contrary to democratic ethos, the state is still largely authoritarian in leadership and security operations.

Similarly, those that hold the power of riches especially as the riches have been acquired through political access in Nigeria also explore their status to oppress the common people. This is the crux of the submission that Nigerian political office holders in their reckless deployment of the corrupt sleaze and oppressive scheming orchestrations do advance their kleptomaniac agenda such that their corruption in political offices is utilized as a means for the oppression of the Nigerian masses. (Onyejizu, 2021). This scenario of oppression is made worse and more pathetic in Nigerian society because in the opinion of Ugiagbe and Eweka (2014), cultural tenets, traditional dictates, and

customary philosophical belief systems permeate all the facets of Nigerian human engagements.

Violations of the United Nations' Conventions on Women and Children

The non-actualization of the objectives of the humanitarian initiatives for women and children as conceived by the Nigerian First Ladies as a result of lack of independence and wherewithal contravenes United Nations' frameworks for the well being of women and children. Such frameworks include The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and The Convention on the Rights of the Child. The former is a United Nations' action taken through the General Assembly in 1979 which stipulated that nations of the world, especially the signatories to the United Nations should end all forms of limitations, segregations, and restrictions against women. According to LeBlanc (2009), the United Nations General Assembly ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. The ratification brought to an end a ten-year debate as well as deliberations on the merit of this project and the contents of its central tenets. The convention was signed into implementation unanimously by the member-states of the United Nations. Indeed, by September, 1990, the convention had been localized in the countries that signed it. These were more than twenty member-nations, and this was the threshold figure established by Article 49 of the convention, and this made it implementable. This intensified the process for the election of the ten-member Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The protection of the rights of the child is so important that many member-nations, in the words of Kilkelly (2018) have chosen to give it the effect of the law. Kilkelly goes further to explain that the Convention on the Rights of the Child is a United Nations' framework which is a binding treaty of international law. And that Article 4 of the Treaty requires that States Parties to take legal and administrative including other approaches to implement the provisions of the Treaty. It could be deduced from the foregoing that the inability of many of the former Nigerian First Ladies to care for the under-privileged Nigerian (African) child as optimally as they desired at the outset of the conception of the initiatives is a setback of monumental consequences.

Nigerian Men's View of Women, the Youth and Children in Social Context

It was asserted earlier that the patriarchal consciousness of the Nigerian society enabled by traditional conception of power in Nigeria, religion, culture, and other cultural agents could be seen as being responsible for the attachment of the humanitarian initiatives of the women in power corridors in Nigeria to men. This has however led to the minimal impact of the humanitarian projects of the women in Nigeria using the impact of the Better Life Programme as yardstick. There are many implications of the dysfunctional states of the initiatives of the First Ladies and their counterparts at the level of Vice-presidency. These implications are severe, and they have been manifesting in Nigeria in the present time. It would be recalled that the areas of concentration of the First Ladies' initiatives are the plights of the vulnerable groups, and these are women, children, the youth, the aged, as well as people with special needs. These vulnerable groups have been selected by the First Ladies with a view to meeting their interests, and the women have done so because the cultural and religious influence on Nigerian (African) men often schemes the vulnerable groups out of concentration and priority. For example, the Bible forbids women from being heard in the church (society), as Ademiluka (2017) analyses in the Nigerian context that 1 Corinthians 14:33b-36 is an injunction by Paul the Apostle stating that women should be silent in church. Also, the Quran requests women to be submissive to their husbands as pointed out earlier. Most cultures in Nigeria undermine the rights of children and the youth. Indeed, the Yoruba in Southwest Nigeria often say “Ki l'omodemo? (What does a child know?). The Yoruba elders characteristically say “Kini a n fi agba se ju ki a fi re omode je lo” (the essence of old age is to cheat a child). The consequence of the situation is that attention of the government which is significantly populated by men is likely to be off the vulnerable groups as indeed is the situation in the country at the present moment. In Nigeria

today, it could be averted that women and children affairs do not take priorities in the programs of the government. Matters concerning women, the youth (children), and people of special needs are attended to as a ceremony. These have accounted for the sour stories concerning the vulnerable group in the country and other areas of the social causes of the First Ladies such cancer prevention and care. Some of the sour stories are examined as follows.

Consequences of the moribund Pet Concepts

It has been stated that the moribund pet initiatives of the women in power corridor in Nigeria have created a vacuum in Nigeria's social system. This vacuum is essentially seen in the menacing social ills and vices which continue to plague Nigeria as it is conceived that the pet project would have reduced the intensity of the menacing effects of the social ills if the pet projects were not defunct. The consequences of the defunct women's initiatives are discussed forth at this juncture of the study.

The Worsening Cases of Cancers Epidemic in Nigeria

The first of the consequences of the dysfunctional or minimal functional capabilities of the pet projects of the women in the presidential power corridor is the ravaging spread of cancer pandemic. For example, Uchendu (2020) has explained that cancer is in relative paradigm a common disease, and that it accounts for the second most common causes of mortality next to cardiovascular disease around the world. And in Nigeria, Uchendu states that cancer is a poorly addressed disease, and it is a major cause of fatalities in the country. This is a scary revelation especially that in spite of the lethal nature of the disease, the attention it is receiving from the government is poor. This is where the cancer initiative of Turai Yar'Adua would have been of great use especially because of the pact her center signed with the First Lady signed with MD Anderson Cancer Center located in Houston Texas in the United States of America as stated above, earlier.

Fatal Rape of Women on the Increase

In the same vein, the plight of women in Nigeria nowadays is worse than it was when most of the First Ladies' initiatives were conceived. At the time, it was the rights of the women that men trampled in most of cases reported. Today men's onslaught on women is fatal and ritually-motivated, as rape cases are on the rise. Two recent cases attest to the fatal and fetishistic attack of men against women in Nigeria. These are seen in drug-enhanced and ruthless rape cases. One significant case that illustrates the brutal rape onslaught against women was the violent rape and subsequent brutal murder of Bamise Ayanwonla on the Lagos BRT. This occurred on February 26, 2022. Andrew Nice, the driver of the bus, was alleged to have perpetrated the lethal gender havoc along the Lekki/Ajah Expressway in Lagos. Similar to this was the murder of Precious Okeke by her boyfriend while the boyfriend slept with her decomposing body for six days as a money-making ritual rite. This was also in Ajah, Lagos. These incidents are just two out of many of such fatal and ritualistic violence against women which is a departure from mere patriarchal denial of women of their rights to killing the women. These are not marks of a civilized and progressive society. Government alone cannot fight the menace through the police. Initiative such as the pet projects of the First Ladies could have mounted stronger campaigns to sensitize the people especially men against such societal menace.

The Delusion of the Nigerian Youth and their Frustrated Migration Abroad

One other area of concern about the moribund states of the humanitarian foci of the pet projects of the Presidents' First Ladies and the VPs' wives was the degeneration in the quality of the lives of the Nigerian youth. Indeed, the defunct women's initiatives intended to make life better for the youth has resulted in pathetic life conditions for the youth. This is why there is exodus of vibrant Nigerian youth abroad under the aegis of the *Japa* consciousness. In Nigeria, the slogan *Ja pais* a term used by

the youth to describe the frenzy and hysteria of the youth to run away from the country. In the past years, there has been an increase in the number of the youth leaving the country for greener pasture in Europe, the United States, as well as the Far East. They prefer the demeaning condition of engaging in menial jobs abroad to the situation in the country.



Fig 3. Three Nigerian stowaways sitting on the rudder of an oil and chemical ship The Maltese-flagged Althini II from Nigeria to Las Palmas, Gran Canaria, Spain Courtesy of the BBC News @https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63791372?at_campaign=Social_Flow&at_bbc_team=editorial&at_ptr_name=facebook_page&at_format=link&at_link_origin=BBC_News&at_link_type=web_link&at_link_id=085644DE-6FCF-11ED-82BA-E2FE923C408C&at_medium=social&at_campaign_type=owned&fbclid=IwAR2XLjX-xYqV1eKeW6_MoltQS632tWbzIzUXnb8TrsRynrJCLRAr_5K0F9E

The development is particularly true of the young females who currently migrate en mass to the Middle East countries such as Oman, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon to mention but a few. Sasu (2022) has observed that the number of Nigerians who have left the country has increased, and this has been a consequence of economic downturn as well as political instability which have plagued the country for quite some time. Sasu further states that since a couple of decades ago, the net [migration rate](#) of the country has stayed negative. The interpretation of this is that there is a surge in unemployment, inflation, and starvation in Nigeria. The worrisome dimension to the youth migration abroad is the dangerous method of leaving the country they adopt in an attempt to beat immigration protocols and processes. Some go by the desert. Some do hide in the gear compartment of aircraft while many strategically keep themselves on ships out of views, and so on.

A major attempt by the Nigerian youth to draw the attention of the government to their plight was the #EndSARS protest in Nigeria in 2020. This was a protest embarked upon by the Nigerian youth to call for the disbandment of a police detachment known as Special Anti Robbery Squad (SARS) for its officers' onslaught against and extortion of the youth.



Fig 4: An image of the nationwide #EndSARS protest by the Nigerian youth, 2020.
Courtesy Vanguardimages, 2021 @ <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/12/endsars-panel-report-and-white-paper>

The response of the government to the protest was the drafting of armed security operatives to Lekki Toll Gate in Lagos, where the youth had converged in a carnival-like gathering. Scores of the youth were shot dead. The most pathetic dimension to this incident is that the Nigerian government has been denying the massacre. The British Broadcasting Corporation, on November 15, 2021, however, reports that:

An inquiry panel has submitted a report which says Nigerian armed forces shot and killed anti-police brutality protesters last year. Tens of thousands of Nigerians took to the streets last October calling for the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (Sars) police unit to be disbanded. The report, leaked on Monday, has identified 48 casualties after the army opened fire on the demonstrators.

The implication of this is that the youth cannot safely fight for themselves in Nigeria. However, initiatives such as the humanitarian pet projects of the Presidents' First Ladies and their VPs' counterparts could advance the cause of the youth through statutory instrument. This situation of the inability to fight for self or demand for their fundamental human rights from government echoes the vulnerability of the Nigerian youth. What they suffer from especially as perpetrated against them by the present administration includes all social degradations and the inability to measure their counterparts from Europe, North America, and Asia. Voices of the mothers of the nations (the First Ladies) through their humanitarian initiatives could have averted the historic havoc meted to the youth by the government if the initiatives are operating at maximum capacity after their sponsors have left office.

The Prevalence of Child Abuse and out-of-school Children in Nigeria

Two of the social ills plaguing the Nigerian civil society especially in the third decade of the millennial age are identified as child abuse and the phenomenon of out-of-school children. Child abuse is usually a denial of the child's rights to life, to care or to protection and common causes of this civic malady, among many others, are both parental ignorance and government ineptitude. Cultural dictates can also be identified also factors that result in the abuse of a child. This makes the parents and government officials who are originally from the general Nigerian culture subject children to untoward experiences. These may include the denial of children nutrient leading to malnutrition. This applies to Nigeria where in the case of the Yoruba in Southwest Nigeria children should not eat egg or meat. The Yoruba believe that when children eat egg or meat, such makes them steal. That is the dictate of the traditional culture especially among the Yoruba. Also, bad governance has deprived many Nigerians a decent standard of living. This is seen in massive poverty among the people. This has compelled parents to see child labour as an option to support the family. In addition to all these, sexual exploitation of a child by neighbors or family members is another matrix of child abuse prevalence in Nigeria. This happens frequently in the country. For example, Bugaje, Ogunrinde & Frank (2012) aver that the assumption which states that child sexual abuse not prevalent in the traditional African society is doubtful. According to them, child sexual exploitation has been recorded in all parts of the world including Nigeria. They cited the situations in the Northern part of Nigeria and asserted that child sexual abuse is a common civil problem in the Northern city of Zaria. Bugaje et al further posit that "Child sexual abuse represents a current sociocultural issue in the African society. It is associated with significant morbidity and mortality" (111). The morbid dimension to the abuse worsens the despicable onslaught against the

Nigerian child. It is not the Northern part of Nigeria alone that is affected by the menace of Child Sexual Abuse (CSA). It is a nationwide syndrome. This is culled from the report by Gesinde, Okunola, Nwabueze, & Okojide (2020:74) that:

if more non-clinical studies are conducted, a more accurate picture of actual prevalence may be revealed. Furthermore, the studies reviewed in this paper represent the situations from the six geopolitical zone of Nigeria, implying the presence of CSA in every part of the country. The phenomenon can, however, be averted or its incidence could be minimized to the extent of near nonexistence if the initiatives of the First Ladies and the ideals they advance are promoted vigorously more. This is especially true if the pet projects are freed from men's influence and made independent.

Conclusion

The moribund state of the pet initiatives of the Nigerian First Ladies is a humongous loss to the Nation. This is because the campaigns they embarked upon against certain social evils stopped yielding results of awareness and sensitization the moment the patriarchal financiers left political power. To this end, the vices the pet initiative such as Stella Obasanjo's Child Care Trust, Titi Abubakar's Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF), The Turai YaADua's Initiative for Social Development, The Dame Jonathan's Women for Change Initiative, Amina Sambo's I-Care Women and Youth Initiative, the Aisha Buhari's Future Assured and Dolapo Osinbajo's Project Ayodele were advocating against when they were active are prevalent in our society today. Though the initiatives were supported by the husbands of the pet initiators, yet government and public-hearted individuals should support the initiatives such that they would not always die as soon as the men who hold political powers leave office. The continued existence of the pet projects would reduce the number and intensity of the prevalence of the ills in Nigeria today. It needs to be stated that a society still ravaged by epidemic outbreak, forced youth migration, rape violence in the contemporary time is definitely postcolonial and stagnant in the comity of nations. The relevance of Nigerian women is best established through the promotion of their pet project. The fact that such projects are run on the financial strengths of patriarchal hierarchy is notwithstanding. What matters is the humanitarian services they render to society. The current situation of neglect which makes the initiatives moribund undermines the whole essence and relevance of Nigerian women.

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