



THE PARTICIPATION OF FIRST LADIES IN AFRICAN POLITICS

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For thousands of years, women have occupied the side-lines of history and as the centuries have gone by, very few have made a name for themselves in politics. Increasingly, however, women are entering the political arena, most notably in Africa and in those parts of the world where quota systems assist them in gaining a small part of the power that tends to be held in male hands. As for the wives of heads of state, their role in politics is far from clear; to date, no country has legislated on the matter. Some wives are kept out of politics and that this should be so, was very much the opinion of Georges Pompidou in 1969¹. Others, however, are expected to follow in the wake of their husbands and do everything possible to further their spouse's interests and career. This is becoming common-place in most developed countries² and also seems to be occurring more frequently in certain African states. This change has allowed some first ladies to go further; by building up their own careers and support bases, they have become actively involved in politics in their own right, instead of simply following their husbands.

But how do first ladies come to participate in their country's political life when unlike their husbands they have not been elected? To answer this, we need to place the first ladies in the political context in which they operate. In order to fully examine the multi-faceted aspects of their political life, this paper looks at their position before, during and after their husbands came to power, each stage being linked, it seems, to their husband's political fate.

Practice indicates that whilst some first ladies still only carry out seemingly non-political, charitable duties others have become overtly politically involved beyond the parameters suggested by judicial norms. These women are no longer content to be passive national figures and have become skilled operators in the political arena, where obtaining and retaining power is key- a fact much appreciated by their husbands. They are political actors, on the one hand through the charitable work they undertake that serves to humanise and soften their husband's image, and on the other, as actors directly involved in the struggle to accumulate power.

I – HOW CHARITY WORK SERVES TO HUMANISE THE HUSBAND'S IMAGE

Maternal and paternal images are poles apart. The paternal model is at one with the male, promoting virility in all its forms – authority, energy and aggressive self-promotion. In contrast, Gérard Mendel points to the 'libidinous impulses towards the mother who is seen as

¹ French President Pompidou stated: 'I find it inappropriate and tiring for women to take part in presidential campaigns...my wife and I both feel the same about this and I hope all husbands do too', as cited by Roger-Gérard Schartzberg, *L'Etat Spectacle. Essai sur et contre le Star System en politique*, Paris, Flammarion, 1977, p. 105

² For examples of such star ladies, see *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Nov.7-11, 2002, p. 4-13 and especially Mariette Sineau's *Profession: femmes politiques*, Paris, PFNSP, 2001.

the source of life, love, warmth, food and other sensory satisfaction. As the mother meets these needs and desires, they are interiorised and become subsumed in the sub-conscious within one all-embracing image – the ‘Good Mother’³ This is the public image, and one which contrasts sharply with that of some husbands, promoted by most African first ladies as they undertake seemingly non-political charity work- an activity of great political value.

A. First Ladies’ charity work: a seemingly non-political activity

As individuals, most first ladies are active in social work often setting up charitable institutions such as foundations⁴ and humanitarian organisations. The majority focus on a few organisations whilst others, such as Janet Museveni in Uganda, have become renowned for the numerous associations they have set up to help women and children.⁵ Henriette Konan Bedié has actively worked with the socially disadvantaged and for the advancement of female literacy. Other first ladies organise meetings to promote women’s rights and the fight against AIDS as, for example, the World Summit for the Economic Promotion of Women⁶ and the First African Synergy Conference against AIDS and Disease.⁷ They use opportunities presented by state visits and official trips where they accompany their husbands [for instance, the Franco-African summits⁸] to meet amongst themselves in relation to causes they are supporting, such as AIDS prevention. A first lady may also visit another without her husband. Several, for example, visited Lagos and later Abuja to learn how Maryam Babangida had made the role of a first lady less symbolic and more substantial.⁹ These meetings also give them an opportunity to exchange views on their charitable activities.¹⁰

Over time, the charitable work undertaken by first ladies allows them to become better known as they appear on television and at political meetings. Yet they must sometimes wonder if they are achieving anything . Firstly, the financing of their activities is often criticised on the grounds that it is state funding as was the case in Nigeria and Ivory Coast ¹¹. The actual value of the work they are carrying out may also be questioned, as in Mozambique and Uganda. Militant feminists in Mozambique criticised Graça Machel, widow of the

³ Schartzzenberg [R-G], op. cit., p.90.

⁴ Activities equally carried out by the wives of western heads of state. For example, Danielle Mitterrand set up the human rights France Liberté foundation.

⁵ Janet Museveni established around 8 charities in Uganda including the National Strategy for Advancement of Rural Women in Uganda [NSARWU], Uganda Youth Forum, Women International Maternity Aid [WIMA], Safe Motherhood Strategy, Family Planning Association of Uganda, Uganda Girl Guides Association.

⁶ The First World Summit for the Economic Promotion of Poor Women in Rural Areas was held in Feb. 1992 in Geneva with the aim of taking these women out of poverty. Elizabeth Diouf, Edith Bongo, Myriam Babangida, Nana Rawlings and Mme De Klerk were present.

⁷ Seven first ladies took part in this conference: Chantal Biya of Cameroon, Ana Paula Dos Santos of Angola, Marguerite Kerekou of Benin, Zina Wazina Deby of Chad, Chantal Compaore of Burkina Faso, Henriette Conte of Guinea and Laraba Tandja of Niger. Also present were the first ladies of South Africa, Namibia, Senegal, Mali, Uganda, Liberia, Morocco, Mauritius, Togo, Egypt, Sudan, Central African Republic and Equatorial Guinea.

⁸ On the sidelines at the Twenty-First Franco-African Summit held at Yaoundé in Jan. 2001, the wives of those heads of state present, including the UN Secretary General’s wife, adopted a resolution, the Yaoundé Declaration, setting out the ways and means to further fight against AIDS.

⁹ Pat Williams, ‘State, women and democratization in Africa: the Nigerian experience’, in Okwuda Nnoli, *Government and Politics in Africa*, Harare, AAPS Books, 2002, p.688

¹⁰ This was, for example, the opinion of Chantal Biya in *Divas* no. 21, Sept. 2001, p. 36

¹¹ In Nigeria, the lawyer, Gani Fawehinmi, protested against the financing of Mme Babangida’s association on the grounds that since she did not have an official position she had no right to receive public money. The Ivory Coast association, Servir, established by Henriette Konan Bedié, has also been accused of secretly receiving government money.



country's first president and now wife of Nelson Mandela, for not having used her position to further the feminist cause.¹² Since the 1990s, Janet Museveni in Uganda has become very involved in the HIV/AIDS campaign but is now at the centre of controversy as her NGO receives American funding through USAID. She has adopted America's policy in the fight against AIDS, namely that espoused by the neo-conservatives who preach abstinence and who do not advocate the use of condoms, in contrast to WHO policy.¹³ Since this approach has become government policy and replaced other dynamic prevention campaigns, AIDS has been on the rise. Faced with this situation, the Ugandan first lady, evangelical disciple as she is, calls on God at every turn.¹⁴ As for the question of public funding, Mme. Babanginda claimed that her association was self-financing whilst Mme. Bedie's aides have accused her critics of lying.¹⁵

B. Politicisation of charity work and the political opportunities it creates

However, the way in which first ladies make use of their charitable activities reveals their barely-disguised political nature. Because this work confers a reputation for humanity, it not only strengthens their own position but also that of their husband. It is this which explains how charitable work has become politicised and used to gain political advantage.

In fact, the origin of certain associations, as well as the increased activity in social work of most first ladies, can be well and truly placed in the political arena, acting as they often do as a way of shoring up the president's position against opposition forces. Some associations by their very name serve as accolades to the husband as is the case, for example, of Nana Rawlings' association in Ghana.¹⁶ This is just one explanation among many why this first lady, seen as J.J. Rawlings' secret weapon, has become a favourite target of the opposition, who accuse her of having personal ambitions.¹⁷ Again, as associations become more active, their political nature becomes even more evident as when, for example, leading politicians participate in their activities¹⁸ or funding.¹⁹ In some countries, associations benefit from the use of state facilities such as the television network and public hospitals.²⁰

¹² *Courrier International* no. 408, Aug. 27- Sept. 2 1998, p.24.

¹³ 'Ugandan Condom Crisis: Basic Facts', Health Gap, Aug. 2005.

¹⁴ *Jeune Afrique* no. 2356, March 5-11, 2006, p. 88.

¹⁵ *Jeune Afrique* no. 1991, March 9-15, 1999, p. 20.

¹⁶ 16. In contrast to most first ladies, Nana Rawlings has not set up a foundation nor carried out humanitarian work. She is involved in the '31 December Women's Movement', created in 1982. The date, 31 December, is not without political significance as it refers to the day her husband returned to power in 1981.

¹⁷ Alexander Sage, 'First Ladies and first ladies: is she the boss?' in *Afrique Politique*, Bordeaux, CEAN, 1998, p.54 .

¹⁸ Certain first ladies are often helped in their activities by members of government, parliament, the president's party, leading businessmen and diplomats. This is the case, for example, in Cameroon, Congo and Ivory Coast. For Ivory Coast, see, for example, *Jeune Afrique*, no. 1991, March 9-15 1999, p. 19. For Cameroon, see, for example, *Le Messenger* no. 1289 from 12-11-2001, p.3.

¹⁹ An education centre was constructed under the auspices of Mme. Konan Bedié's association after contributions from the Ministry of National Education, French government aid and state vocational development funding. The head of state himself made an FCFA gift of 15 million to the association Servir during a charity gala in 1996; see *Jeune Afrique* no. 1991, March 9-15 1999, p. 20. Also in Nigeria, Myriam Babangida's National Commission for Women [NCW] has received government funding [e.g. a Ministry of Foreign Affairs' gift to the value of 50,000 US dollars.] Similarly, the Nigerian Federal Government gave financial support to the regional summit of West African first ladies organised by Mme. Sani Abacha. See the interview with .Mme Abacha, *Jeune Afrique* no.1899, May 28- June 3 1997, p. 22

²⁰ In Ivory Coast, for example, Henriette Konan Bedié's health centre was attached to the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs.

Some first ladies take over their husband's social policies and deal, for example, with poverty, women's rights and AIDS. They come to be perceived as the 'Nation's Mother' in tandem with their husbands frequently-held reputation as 'Nation's Father'. In fact, the first ladies' activities are nothing more than a continuation of their husband's policies and this was stated clearly by Chantal Biya in Cameroon²¹ and Adame Ba Konaré in Mali.²²

The logical outcome is that charitable works, through the events organised in their name, allow the government to carry out its 'social obligations'. This might take the form of concerts, parties or sports events and they are all, in the end, nothing more than a new and spectacular form of politics, which again helps to sell a husband's political image at election time. These activities also allow first ladies to seem closer to the people, a highly-calculated political move involving what Pierre Bourdieu termed 'condescending strategies'²³. Like any actor on the political stage, they do their utmost to seduce the people and attempt to seem like ordinary women. Elizabeth Diouf, for example, found that she had much in common with rural women in Senegal²⁴. These first ladies become role models – by giving the appearance of accessibility, they come to represent some ideal that anyone can reach out for. These actors come to resemble us and represent us both in the drama being played out and in politics. First ladies play the role of an ordinary woman without being one, but in so doing they become closer to the people and so gain a better understanding of their needs. Projecting this down-to-earth image whilst holding high office is the outcome of a well-planned political strategy. The support of a country's women can, in time, be very valuable especially as they represent a larger percentage of the population and are reputedly less politically aware. Until now, this potentially strong electoral force has not really been targeted and this is exactly how Elizabeth Diouf and Nana Rawlings have reaped extensive rewards, with their husbands staying in power thanks to the female vote.²⁵

Through their activities, some first ladies, such as Janet Museveni, have also made political gains. Their participation in politics has enabled them to build up a symbolic and social position which has no basis in law but which has everything to do with appearances. The numerous benefits that come with this position serve to build up its symbolic role as, for example, in the award of titles [such as queen²⁶, honorary doctorates²⁷, Woman of the Year²⁸] and prizes.²⁹ These awards allow first ladies to dictate how people should behave

²¹ In 2001 she declared that 'I carry out my activities alongside my husband as a means of helping him in his heavy but exhilarating task. As an African first lady, your role is to give moral support to your husband', as cited in *Divas*, no. 21, Sept. 2001, p. 42. On the eve of the 2001 presidential elections, she was even more explicit: 'I want to stress that it is my husband who is the presidential candidate and he is the one who makes the nation's policies. I involve myself with humanitarian and charitable work and in so doing help my husband a little as he strives to combat poverty and disease.' as cited in *Divas*, no. 49, Oct. 2004, p. 49.

²² *L'Autre Afrique*, no. 100, Oct. 13-16, 1999, p. 26

²³ These are 'the strategies by which those people in high-ranking positions in a hierarchy, symbolically deny the distance separating themselves from others beneath them, whilst at the same time keeping that distance and benefiting from any returns these purely symbolic efforts give [...]', Pierre Bourdieu, *Choses Dites*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1987, p. 152.

²⁴ *Jeune Afrique Economie*, no. 154, April 1992, p. 26.

²⁵ Williams, op.cit., p. 689

²⁶ The traditional chiefs of the province of West Cameroon installed Mme Biya as 'Queen of the Western Province' during her tour of that region as representative of her association, CERAC.

²⁷ In Nigeria, in Dec. 1991, Nsukka University conferred an honorary doctorate on Mme Babangida as did also the universities of Ogun, Port Harcourt and Ogbomosho.

²⁸ In Nigeria, in March 1990, for example, during a fair organised by her organisation, the BLP, the government press gave Maryam Babangida the title of 'Woman of the Year 1989'.

towards them and this, in turn, tends to both increase their importance and consolidate their position.

Generally speaking, first ladies in working in those areas of society most severely affected by globalisation, state deregulation and economic crises are, in fact, participating in their husband's political activities. That said, these activities compensate somewhat for its shortcomings [and that of the government's]. Their foundations most certainly strive to eradicate society's ills, such as disease, but eliminating the cause of such problems is a government's responsibility and in most cases nothing is achieved.³⁰ However, a first lady's participation in such matters can be seen as political interference and some have been accused of taking the place of the actual ministers of health and social affairs. Their associations and foundations' work must involve some sort of limitation of a minister's powers and this encroachment by certain first ladies is very much a part of their active participation in politics- a role carried out alongside their husbands as they strive together to take and/or keep power.

II – DIRECT POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT WITH THE AIM OF GAINING AND /OR KEEPING POWER

'Behind every great man stands a woman'. The situation in some African countries seems to confirm this old saying when you look at the role of their first ladies in political life. They have become true political entrepreneurs as they work alongside their husbands in the conquest and retention of power.

A. Partnership in the conquest of power

This has been achieved through participation in independence movements, electoral campaigns and in the creation of political parties. Graça Machel is one of Africa's leading iconic figures, not only because of her unceasing efforts for child war victims but also, and above all, because she took part in the fight for Mozambique's freedom. She was both a brilliant student at Lisbon University and, from 1973, a supporter of the Front for the Liberation of Mozambique [Frelimo] in its fight against Portugal. From 1974, she was director of Frelimo's training camp in Tanzania. Some first ladies, for example Rosine Soglo, set up political parties³¹ and others took part in their creation as, for example, Adame Ba Konaré who was drawn in to politics by her husband the ex-president of Mali, and became a founding member of his party, Alliance for Democracy in Mali [Adema].³²

First ladies or the wives of presidential candidates are increasingly taking part in electoral campaigns. In Senegal, Vivian Wade, wife of the opposition candidate, became a star during

²⁹ In 1995, Graça Machel received the Nansen Medal for her exceptional services to child refugees and Edith Bongo received the Elyssa Prize in 1996 from the Committee of Solidarity, Fraternity and Tolerance, a Paris-based organisation, for her work in aid of children.

³⁰ François Soudan, 'The Role of First Ladies' in *Jeune Afrique*, no. 2356, March 5-11, 2006, p. 32.

³¹ As well as her foundation, Rosine Soglo set up the Renaissance of Benin in 1992.

For a time she was its president before passing that role on to the head of state, her husband. She became vice-president of that party and in that role undertook political activities.

³² She announced that 'when I first met him, I must admit that I was not a militant whilst he, at 18, was already president of several associations and unions...He drew me in to his political movement.' *Jeune Afrique*, no. 1881, Jan. 22-28, 1997, p. 25.



the 2000 presidential campaign. Chantal Biya in Cameroon had already campaigned alongside her husband in 1997 and was again involved in 2004 in order to ‘mobilize the supporters of the presidential candidate’³³ In February 2006, in Uganda, Janet Museveni had a high profile during her husband’s campaign. With great charisma and eloquence, she skilfully wooed the crowds and mobilised the Ugandan people behind her husband, who had been in power since 1986 - and, in addition, she gained a parliamentary seat for herself.

That his wife should be at his side when the electoral results are read is of great importance to a politician, both in victory and defeat. As Irving Goffman suggests, her presence transforms ‘a part of his personal joy in to that of the couple so showing that he has not got above himself. In defeat, a politician shows by his wife’s presence that he is not a beaten man.’³⁴

B. Association with the exercising and keeping of political power

First ladies, far from staying out of the political arena, have become associated with their husbands in exercising and keeping power and they do this through their public activities and by discreetly influencing their spouses³⁵. These ladies know how very important their presence is in re-assuring, consoling, encouraging, inspiring and advising. Their public support for certain policies, especially through the media, helps defend their husband’s position as well as enabling them to play other roles in national and international affairs.

In certain African countries, first ladies take part in politics by participating in the activities of the party, of parliament or of the government. They may have positions of power in the presidential party as is the case of Chantal Biya, who has been honorary president of the Organisation des Femmes du Rassemblement Démocratique du Peuple Camerounais [OFRDPC] since 1994. In this role, she is much sought after by party activists.³⁶ She is most certainly a party activist herself in the way she supports her husband whilst at the same time pointing out that she is not the president of the republic.³⁷ On occasions, first ladies are members of parliament such as Simone Gbagbo³⁸ Rosine Soglo³⁹, Winnie Mandela⁴⁰ and,

³³ *Divas*, no. 49, Oct. 2004, p. 49.

³⁴ Erving Goffman, *La Mise en Scène de la Vie Quotidienne. 2 Les relations en public*, Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1973, p.218.

³⁵ One example is Clémence Bare in Niger who justified her position in this way: ‘the very context of Niger as an African and Muslim country forced me to get involved – for me to stay out of politics would have been difficult. It has helped me to protect both myself and my husband.’ *Jeune Afrique/L’Intelligent*, no. 2047, April 4-10, p.23.

³⁶ As evidenced by a meeting in March, 2001 with delegations, one from the National Bureau and six from Mfoundi. During the meeting, the delegates not only talked about their activities but also presented their grievances to the first lady.

³⁷ *Divas*, no. 21, Sept. 2001, p. 36.

³⁸ In Ivory Coast, before her husband’s victory in the last presidential elections, Simone E. Gbagbo was already a member of the people’s commune of Abobo. She had no intention of ending her own political career on becoming a first lady. She is also president of the group FPI [Front Populaire Ivoirien, the main parliamentary party] having been Assembly Vice-President in the previous administration.

³⁹ In Benin, Rosine Soglo is also a parliamentary member. Heading the list for the party Renaissance du Benin at Cotonou she was elected in 1995. She admits that her lengthy political career is partly due to her husband. For more details see *Jeune Afrique*, no. 1884, Feb. 12-18, 1997, p.18.

⁴⁰ Winnie Mandela has long been involved in politics. Long-term president of the ANC’s powerful League of Women, she is also a member of parliament and vice-president of the Organisation of Community Associations in South Africa.



more recently, Janet Museveni⁴¹; some have also become government members as is the case with Graça Machel and Winnie Mandela.⁴²

Defending a head of state's policies constitutes an important part of the political partnership of husband and wife. In Ghana, Nana Rawlings claimed that 'national unity will bring success to the nation'⁴³, a recurrent theme in her husband's speeches. In Cameroon, Chantal Biya said that 'a national resurgence was at the head of efforts to eradicate the precarious and vulnerable position of women'.⁴⁴ Adam Ba Konaré in Mali went further and saw the exercise of power as a sort of partnership between herself and the president, her husband, as if both had the same task⁴⁵. Defending a husband's politics can even go as far as excusing any setback; Rosine Soglo, for example, declared after the defeat of her husband that they had been both too old and too young when they came to power.⁴⁶

An important part of defending a head of state lies in challenging his critics and this was, for example, the intention of Maryam Abacha when she dismissed foreign criticism of her husband⁴⁷. Another element of this defence lies in a demand for justice, especially after assassinations as evidenced by the actions of Clemence Baré since 1999 in Niger⁴⁸. Most first ladies have some influence over their husbands; openly or otherwise, they are often one of his closest advisers⁴⁹. Some, like Mme Diori Hamani in Niger, are frequently consulted⁵⁰ and Rosine Soglo not only sees this as her right but thinks she has much to offer in that role⁵¹. Neither Adame Ba Konaré⁵² nor Clemence Baré deny that they advise their husbands and, in fact, the latter is reputed to have complained, albeit in vain, that her husband did not listen enough.⁵³

Another aspect of a first lady's role lies in giving access to the president through her charitable organisations, This occurred, for example, in 2000 during a tour of West Cameroon by Chantal Biya's Cercle des Amis du Cameroun [CERAC] when the women of that province took the opportunity not only to demonstrate their loyalty to the head of state, but also to present their grievances through his wife.⁵⁴ Again, to circumvent a country's bureaucracy, some people take their case to the first lady, as, for example, with Elizabeth Diouf who was particularly open to students and mothers.⁵⁵

⁴¹ Janet Museveni decided to stand in the 2001 elections against an opposition member, Augustine Ruzmidana, declaring that she had been sent by God to represent the people of Ruhaama in the next parliament. She was elected.

⁴² Graça Machel was Minister of Education from 1975 to 1986 and made a significant contribution to the fall of illiteracy. Winnie Mandela was named Minister for the Arts, Culture, Science and Technology in 1994. She resigned 11 months later after accusations of corruption.

⁴³ *L'Autre Afrique* no. 100, Oct. 13-26 1999, p.24.

⁴⁴ *Divas*, op. cit. p. 40.

⁴⁵ *Jeune Afrique* no. 1881, Jan. 22-28 1997, p. 24

⁴⁶ *Jeune Afrique* no. 1884, Feb. 12-18 1997, p. 20

⁴⁷ Interview by Mme. Abacha, in *Jeune Afrique*, no. 1899, May 28-June 3, 1997, p. 22

⁴⁸ *Jeune Afrique/L'Intelligent*, no. 2047, April 4-10, 2000, p. 21.

⁴⁹ Adame Ba Konaré stated: 'A man is nothing without his wife. If you want something then the president wants it as well. Remember, you are the mother of the nation.' *Jeune Afrique*, no. 1881, Jan. 22-28, 1997, p. 24.

⁵⁰ Foccart Speaks. Interviews with Phillipe Gaillard, vol. II, Paris, Fayard/ Jeune Afrique, 1997, p.134

⁵¹ *Jeune Afrique*, no. 1884, Feb. 12-18, 1997, p.19.

⁵² Interview with Adame Ba Konaré, *L'Autre Afrique*, no. 100, Oct. 13-26, 1999, p.26

⁵³ *Jeune Afrique/L'Intelligent*, no. 2047, April 4-10, 2000, p. 22.

⁵⁴ *Jeune Afrique Economie*, no. 307, April 17-30, 2000, p. 80.

⁵⁵ *L'Autre Afrique*, no. 100, Oct. 13-26, 1999, p. 27



The first lady's role as adviser and channel of communication has a two-fold effect. Firstly, it may not only bring her adulation from many of the people, but also, and especially, it can cause her to be demonised by the opposition – as was the case in Ivory Coast where Henriette Konan Bedié was accused by a leading member of the opposition of being ‘one of our most dangerous opponents’⁵⁶. This was based on the fact that not only had her popularity played a major role in her husband's campaign strategy but also because her clan, the Aboisso clan⁵⁷, reputedly had great influence in the president's immediate circle. Adame Ba Konaré denounced this ‘demonisation’ of which first ladies are so often the victim, claiming that such accusations are ‘exaggerated.’⁵⁸. These same attacks might be said to discourage a greater participation in politics in the sense that it is quite natural for friends and family⁵⁹ in the ‘First Lady's Clan’ and the ‘President's Clan’⁶⁰ to be employed outside the more formal government machine. According to François Médard, such factors make for the creation of what he terms the Patrimonial State in Africa.⁶¹

Certain first ladies play other roles in national and international politics. Graça Machel, for example, has striven to bring about peace in her strife-torn country, most notably demanding the withdrawal of immunity for war crimes against women and children.

III – CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that the majority of first ladies in Africa actively participate in their country's politics.⁶² Even when their position and activities are not precisely defined, they are still an active force in certain African states. Some confine themselves exclusively to charity work whilst others also become involved in politics; both types of activity, in fact, have a political purpose.

Charitable activities are not overtly political but the very nature of their aims in society link the benefactor and the politician, given that to be involved in politics, especially in Africa, necessarily means being a benefactor and humanitarian. This is particularly the case when

⁵⁶ . *L'Autre Afrique*, no. 100, Oct. 13-26, 1999, p. 27.

⁵⁷ *L'Autre Afrique* no. 100, Oct. 13-26 1999, p. 27

⁵⁸ *Jeune Afrique* no. 1881, Jan. 22-28 1997, p. 24-25

⁵⁹ Simone Gbago, for example, has brought friends in to the president's circle. Clotilde Ohouchi is influential in Ivory Coast as a friend of the first lady. Named Minister of Solidarity and Social Security, she is a ‘friend’ and someone in whom the president has confidence for one of his dearest projects, that of national insurance. *Jeune Afrique/ L'Intelligen* tno. 2212, June 1-7 2003, p. 93

⁶⁰ Sage [A], op. cit. , p. 54

⁶¹ For more details, see MEDARD, Jean-François [dir], *Etats d'Afrique; formation, mecanismes et crise.*, Paris, Karthala, 1991.

⁶² This is very much the case in Sub-Saharan Africa. In the countries of North Africa, first ladies are more discreet for traditional and religious reasons. In Morocco, for example, royal spouses, confined as they are to the role of ‘mother to the princes’, never appear in public. However, since Sama Bennani's marriage to King Mohammed VI in July 2002, some sort of evolution can be discerned in the sense that she has become ‘Royal Highness’, the first time such a distinction has been accorded to a wife and which presages a more active role in public life. This evolution has been noted in other North African states as, for example, in Egypt where the first lady was represented at the First African Synergy Conference against AIDS and Disease organised at Yaoundé by Mme Chantal Biya in Nov. 2002.

charitable activities are in fact part of a couple's efforts to gain or keep power. It is difficult to discern how far the achievement of a wife's independence in social issues and that of her husband in politics are linked; what is certain is that one would not exist without the other. It can be seen whenever government leaders, in seeking some means of legitimising their position in their struggles with the opposition, turn to their wives for help. First ladies gain from this as they can use it as a means of furthering their own interests, as, for example, in extending the first lady's role or in establishing an independent political career. It is, in a way, an intelligent and skilled team operation. From this it could be claimed that their activities are the result of some sort of deal as the one strives to maintain his political power and the other seeks to extend her role. The man who seeks to gain or stay in power, advances behind his wife. She it is who takes his part in the talking, promising and deal-making. Above all, her charitable works are lauded everywhere when the search for support is taking place. Her activity here is an invaluable weapon in the political battlefield and its power lies in the fact that charity work hides the interests involved. First ladies tend to camouflage this political agenda by hiding behind their people's misery. The mask finally falls when they openly become actors with their husbands on the political stage and partners with them in the conquest and retention of power.

Their activities, in fact, can be situated in what can be seen as a highly competitive market and those women who participate often pose as partners to their husbands. The majority live in fear that a single word or deed might harm their spouse. In fact, they become public property and an extension of the public men they have married. This 'seconding' has increased since democratic processes were introduced in Africa in 1990. One explanation is that it is always expedient for leaders to try and maximise their chances of survival in an increasingly competitive political market, even by using their wives.

For some first ladies, their husband's coming to power was only one event in their own political career. Graça Machel and Winnie Mandela are such examples; both became political activists at an early age when they joined independence or anti-apartheid movements. Their activities made them iconic figures in their countries and abroad; marriage to leading politicians served only to re-enforce an already highly-developed political consciousness and aptitude. Neither is now a first lady and they intend to pursue their own political careers. Whilst the future seems bright for Graça as she continues in her involvement in Mozambique's reconstruction and development, it is less certain for that controversial figure, Winnie. Her troubles with the taxman and the law courts, parliamentary absenteeism, government resignation and divorce have rather spoiled the image of the anti-apartheid heroine. In any case, a new generation of first ladies and a new function [a new profession perhaps] are in the process of emerging in most African states where leading politicians seek to bolster their positions by bringing in their wives. This mutation in a first lady's role is part of a larger and more general movement for the political emancipation of women – compellingly illustrated by the election as president in 2005 of Madame Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in Liberia, the first woman to occupy this position in Africa.