

**FEMOCRACY AND THE QUEST FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT AND  
DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA UNDER THE FOURTH REPUBLIC**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Women involvement in governance- femocracy is rare in Nigeria and Africa in general. However, a new trend has emerged in femocracy and it becomes pertinent to interrogate this trend and its effect on the empowerment and development of women in Nigeria. Among others, the paper therefore assesses the trends of femocracy in Nigeria; and examines the role of femocracy in women empowerment and development in Nigeria under the Fourth Republic. Scholarly efforts have been made to highlight the role of women in politics/governance in Nigeria, however, it still remains to be unravelled the specific effect of femocracy on the empowerment and development of women. Hence, the study. The paper relied on secondary data. The paper finds that femocracy, although often politicised, has contributed immensely to women empowerment and development in Nigeria. It therefore recommends that femocracy be depoliticised in order to fully harness it for the betterment of women.*

**Introduction**

Given the prevalence of men in governance in Africa, the clamour for women's participation had emerged, and continues to persist. While democracy is government by the people (irrespective of gender), femocracy is governance by women. However, there is a link between the two, as Mama (1995) noted that women's participation in governance determines the level of democracy in a country. While the trend of women participation in governance continue to grow in the rest of the globe, such as Croatia, Lithuania, and Malta, etc. (female presidents); United Kingdom, Norway and Bangladesh etc. (female Prime Ministers); to mention a few. The same cannot be said of Africa, where this occurrence is scanty, with only Namibia having a sitting female Prime Minister. Women are rarely given a chance to participate in governance in Africa. Given this trend therefore, African ladies have often resorted to the office of the first lady (wife of the president or governor) to contribute their

quota in governance. Agbalajobi (2010) has attributed the dominance of women by men in governance in Africa, to factors such as cultural, religious and traditional practices. Meanwhile, the equal representation of women and men in politics has been established as strategies for development and poverty alleviation (Ntiwunka, 2013).

With respect to the phenomenon of first ladyship, Mama (1995) traced the historical evolution and the level of prominence the practice has gotten over the years. According to her, “The first lady phenomenon...has reached new levels of dominance... The first lady syndrome was conspicuous in the early days of Kenya’s independence, and following Siyad Barre’s seizure of power in Somalia. The wives of both Heads of State wielded a great deal of public influence and amassed vast fortunes for themselves.” (Mama, 1999: 40-41). In Nigeria, wife of presidents (first ladies) have therefore, capitalized on this privilege to be involved, one way or the other, in governance during the periods their spouses are presidents. Their role in such governance opportunities have often been directed towards the empowerment, development and betterment of their women counterparts.

The concept of femocracy became established in the Nigerian social political structure in 1985, under the Ibrahim Babaginda’s military regime, when the office of the first lady became exalted by Mariam Babaginda, the president’s wife. Using her privilege as the first lady therefore, Mariam Babaginda launched the Better Life for Rural Women in 1986. The programme was aimed at the empowerment, development and betterment of mostly rural women, via education on hygiene and family planning; importance of good child care and education of the child; business and Agricultural training, etc. (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2006; Online Nigeria, 2002). This was followed by the next first lady, Maryam Abacha, who also launched the Family Support Programme (FSP), and the Family Economic Advancement Programme (FEAP) with similar aims of her predecessor’s (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, 2006; Ajadi, Adebisi, & Alabi, 2010).

Although the idea behind femocracy had been for the betterment of women, it has been criticized as a “feminine autocracy”, only “advancing the interest of small female elite” (Mama, 1995: 41). nevertheless, given the various programmes that have been launched for the betterment of women by various first ladies’ administration, it becomes pertinent to interrogate how much femocracy has really better the lives of women in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic. The remaining parts of the paper is structured as follows; the next section takes on

a conceptual discourse, while the section that follows presents the theoretical underpinning of the study. The next section undertakes the historical evolution of femocracy in Nigeria and the following section presents the trends and patterns of femocracy in Nigeria. The last two sections present the findings on the effect of femocracy on women empowerment and development and the conclusion and recommendations respectively.

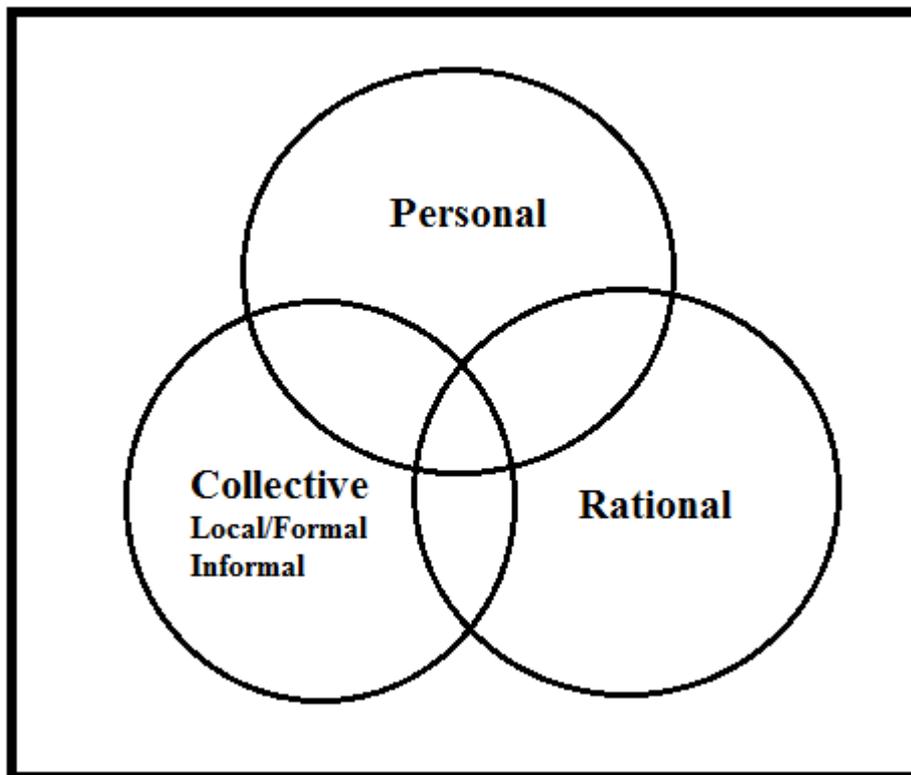
### **Conceptual Discourse**

Femocracy simply refers to the participation of women in governance, especially for advancing the course and interest of women. It is governance that does not exist for all, but for the women. It is government of the women, by the women and for the women. Hence, Mama's (1995) assertion that femocracy is an anti-democratic female structure. This is because, although it claims to be for the betterment of women, often times, it is unable to do that because it is a governance made up of a small clique of women who derive their authority from the status of their husbands being presidents or Heads of State. The concept has thus come under stiff criticism of disguising to serve the interest of women, while most times, actually advancing the interest of a few female elite (Mama, 1995: 41). Femocracy has gained both local and international supports, and donations towards the betterment of women for whom it exists. The concept can thus, simply be referred to as governance by first ladies (wife of presidents).

According to the New International Webster Comprehensive Dictionary of English (2013: 477), the term first lady refers to "the wife of the president of the United States, or if he has no wife, the lady chosen by him to be the hostess of the White House." Even though this definition is restricted to the United States, this description of the first lady also applies in other countries of the globe. First lady refers to the wife of the President of a country, Head of State, or the wife of a state governor. Hence, the President's wife becomes the first lady of the country, while the governor's wife becomes the first lady of the state. Ajayi (2010: 19) defines first lady as "the woman who is foremost in position, rank and importance among other women. The person so designated has precedence over her female counterparts." In another development, first lady has been referred to as "the most important lady and particularly the wife of a President or Head of State" (Simpons & Weiner, 1989: 959).

Empowerment refers to the act of improving someone or something in terms of quality, worth and value. The Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary defines empowerment as an act "to give somebody more control over their life or the situation they are in." for Hashemi, Schuler & Riley, 1996), empowerment refers to the creation of a social environment that gives room for individual or collective decision making or choices, in order to achieve social transformation. For them, it has to do with the acquisition of knowledge, power and experience, to improve or strengthen inherent ability. As Batliwala (1994) posits, empowerment has to do with the control over resources (which includes physical, human, intellectual and financial), and also, control over ideology (which includes believes, values and attitudes) without any form of restriction. Elsewhere, Rowlands (1997: 14-15) is of the opinion that empowerment operates within three dimensions, *viz*: personal (the development of self-confidence and capacity); rational (the development of negotiation and influential abilities); and collective (the involvement in political structure).

**Figure 1: Three Dimensions of Empowerment**



**Source:** Rowland (1997: 14)

Taking from the concept of empowerment, women empowerment/development refers to all the strategies, process and plans put in place to improve women's capacity and ability. Women empowerment is "essentially the process of uplifting of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones in the society." (Dandona, 2015: 36). Women empowerment also means the development of women in terms of mental and physical capacity, and the power and skills inherent in them, so as to give them greater social freedom and social recognition, owing to their enhanced social status (Akomolafe, 2009, as cited in Onah, 2011: 132). The concept therefore, has to do generally with the actions taken to improve on the social status of women.

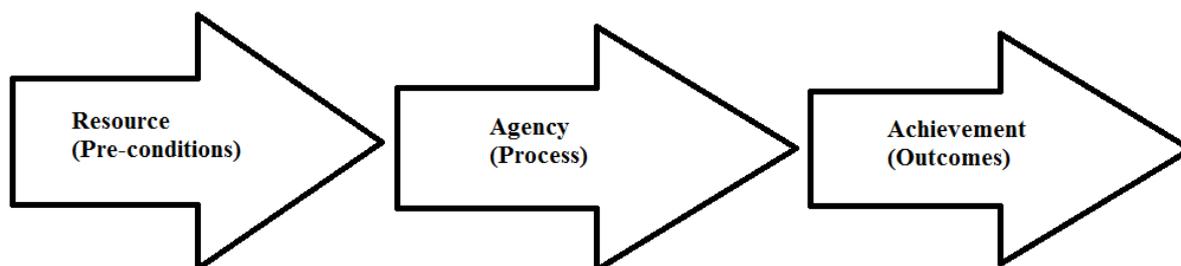
### **Theorizing Femocracy and Women empowerment**

In order to succinctly provide easy understanding of femocracy and women empowerment in Nigeria's Fourth Republic, the paper adopts the theory of Gender and Development (GAD) and Kabeer's (1999) women empowerment theory. Gender and Development approach (GAD), which emerged in the late 1980s, deals with "social, economic, political and cultural forces that determine how men and women participate in, benefit from, and control project resources and activities differently" (Ntiwunka, 2013: 5). It focuses on socially determined relations between men and women, and to ensure that decisions which has to do with development, be an equal contribution from both men and women in the development process (Williams, Seed & Mwau, 1994: 7). The approach encourages women's participation on equal basis with the men in all ramifications (Tasli, 2007). GAD therefore strays from the Women in Development (WID) approach which focuses attention only on women in development. The GAD approach is chosen for this paper because, while femocracy involves women in governance, the concept cannot operate without the men, by virtue of whom the women are first ladies, and can operate in that authority. In clear terms, the operation of femocracy is a function of the male presidents/Heads of State in Nigeria. This theory will therefore be useful to explain the place of women in enhancing development, especially of women, which femocracy watches out for.

On the other hand, Kabeer (1999) propounded the theory of women empowerment. For him, there are three basic dimensions of empowerment through which women empowerment occurs. These include; resources (preconditions), agency (process) and achievements (outcomes). With respect to resources, Kabeer averred that they are in the form of material,

human and social forms, and they increase the ability to exercise choice and make decisions. Agency could either be active or passive (Kabeer, 1999). Passive agency refers to a situation where actions are taken with only few options available. On the other hand, active agency refers to ‘purposeful behaviour’ (Kabeer, 1999). The theory further differentiates between effective agency and transformative agency. Accordingly, while effective agency provides women with greater efficiency in carrying out their roles, transformative agency gives women the ability and vigour to challenge the restrictive nature of their roles. Lastly, achievements, also referred to as ‘outcomes’, depicts the extent to which one’s capabilities, in terms of resources and agency, are realized (Kabeer, 2001; 2005).

**Figure 2: Diagram Illustrating Kabeer’s Dimensions of Empowerment**



**Source:** Culled from Kabeer (1999: 442-448)

Kabeer’s theory of women empowerment will also be useful in the study. It will help explain the various dimensions of women empowerment/development in Nigeria, via the instrumentality of femocracy. This will help unravel the preconditions (resources), process (agency) and the outcomes (achievements) of the various programmes/projects put in place under the auspices of femocracy, towards the empowerment of women in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic.

### **Historical Evolution of Femocracy in Nigeria**

The office of the first lady in Nigeria came into prominence with the rise to power of President Babaginda in 1985, when his wife, Mariam Babaginda created the office for herself as the first lady, being the president’s wife. Previous wives of Heads of State before Mariam Babaginda had existed merely as the wife of the Head of State and had not operated in any

capacity or office (Mama, 1995; Iheanacho, 2016). Although, the position of the first lady has grown with much popularity and continue to gain prominence over the years, the office is not recognized by the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. For as argued by Iheanacho (2016: 135), and rightly so, the office of the first lady in Nigeria, as it were, “lacks constitutional backing Act of National Assembly or Decree. What obtains is welfare services to the first lady through the executive arm of government at the federal or state levels.” Fatima Abubakar, wife of President Abdulsalami Abubakar, had also reaffirmed the unconstitutionality of the office of the first lady in Nigeria (Abiyamo, 2013).

The passiveness of the office of the first lady was turned around by Mariam Babaginda, wife of President Ibrahim Babaginda. This, she majorly achieved via the launch of the Better Life Programme for Rural Women (BLPRW) on 13-16, September 1987. The programme involved a lots of pet projects across the country and gave prominence to the office of the first lady, and also became recognized as a crucial contributor to the country’s political economy (Iheanacho, 2016). The BLPRW was targeted at the transformation, empowerment and development of the vulnerable women in the country, especially those in the rural areas. By November 1993, when the administration of President Babaginda came to an end, the BLPRW had succeeded in establishing 9,492 Co-operative Societies for women to have access to finance, and sundry resources; 1,435 cottage industries; 1,784 farms and gardens; 495 shops and markets; 1,094 multipurpose women centres for skills acquisition; and 135 fish and livestock farms (Iheanacho, 2016: 138, 140). given this development, with each president who comes to office, the number of first ladies in Nigeria’s history has continue to risetremendously, and the office has become even more popular and officially recognized in the structure of political leadership in the country.

Following the foregoing, and Mariam Babaginda’s strides with the BLPRW of 1985-1993, the Crusade of Family Support Programme (FSP), and later Family Advancement and Empowerment Programme (FAEP) of 1993-1998 was launched Maryam Abacha. Also, Fatai Abubakar set up the Women’s Right Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA) of 1998-1999; Stella Obasanjo’s Child Care Trust (CCT) of 1999-2007; Turai Yar’Adua’s Women and Youth Empowerment Foundation (WAYEF) of 2007-2010. Furthermore, was the Dame Patience Jonathan’s Women for Change Initiative (WCI) of 2010-2015 (Iheanacho, 2016: 140); and currently, the Aisha Buhari’s Future Assured of 2015 to date. The next

section takes an analysis of these various elements of femocracy in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic and how they have contributed or otherwise to women’s empowerment, development and empowerment.

**Trends and Patterns of Femocracy in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic**

The section presents the various patterns which femocracy has taken in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic since 1999 in the forms of pet projects put in place by various first ladies for the empowerment/development of women. Femocracy in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic started with Stella Obasanjo’s Child Care Trust (CCT) of 1999-2007; followed by Turai Yar’Adua’s Women and Youth Empowerment Foundation (WAYEF) of 2007-2010; Dame Patience Jonathan’s Women for Change Initiative (WCI) of 2010-2015; and Aisha Buhari’s Future Assured of 2015-date. The table below presents the trends of femocracy in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic.

**Table 1: Trends of Femocracy in Nigeria’s Fourth Republic**

S/N	First Lady	Programme	Year
1.	Mrs. Stella Obasanjo	Child Care Trust (CCT)	1999-2007
2.	Hajia Turai Musa Yar’Adua	Women and Youth Empowerment Foundation (WAYEF)	2007-2010
3.	Dame Patience Jonathan	Women for Change Initiative (WCI)	2010-2015
4.	Aisha Muhammadu Buhari	Future Assured	2015-date

**Source:** Iheanacho (2016: 138); and updated by the Author

**Child Care Trust (CCT) (1999-2007)**

The Child Care Trust was initiated and launched by Stella Obasanjo, wife of President Olusegun Obasanjo and first lady of Nigeria from 1999 to 2007. the pet project was targeted at children, especially the less privileged and disabled, and orphans (Ntieunka, 2013; Iheanacho, 2016). On assumption of office as the first lady of the country in May 1999, Stella

Obasanjo established the CCT in November 1999. According to Punch report of January 15, 2001, the programme was established to tackle the problems of poverty, unemployment, nutrition, health and education, mostly as they affect children who are the only hope of women. The programme witnessed some giant strides through the provision of succor to many disadvantaged children, by offering them scholarships, medical services and accommodation (Arum, 2010: 276-277). The pet project of Stella Obasanjo later metamorphosed into the Special for Children with Special Needs, Abuja (Iheanacho, 2016), and the Stella Obasanjo Hospital in Benin City.

### **Women and Youth Empowerment Foundation (WAYEF) (2007-2010)**

On assumption to office as the first lady of Nigeria in 2007, Turai Yar'Adua initiated several programmes mostly directed at women empowerment and betterment. Prominent among these programmes was her pet project; the Women and Youth Empowerment Foundation (WAYEF). The project had the primary objective to enhance and promote the living conditions of Nigerian women and children (Vanguard 17<sup>th</sup>, February, 2009). Iheanacho (2016: 141-142) posits that the WAYEF made impacts in at least five different aspects of need and services to the vulnerable. *Viz.*: provision of eye services for cataract and child blindness; health improvement for maternal and new born; screening programme for breast and cervical cancer; HIV/AIDS and STD intervention programmes; and diabetes awareness and education programmes. The project also saw the refurbishment of the Suleja Prison Workshop and equipped it with tools to empower inmates for self-reliance and economic viability after serving their jail terms (Iheanacho, 2016). The effectiveness and prominence of the WAYEF pet project had earned the first lady, Turai Yar'Adua an honorary award of National Goodwill Ambassador for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (MNCH).

Furthermore, in order to improve the welfare of the less privileged and disadvantaged, especially with respect to the health of women, the first lady signed a Memorandum of Understanding with MD Anderson Cancer Centre in Houston Texas (Daily Triumph, August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2008, as cited in Arum, 2010: 277). The Centre helped women suffering from cancer. Also, through Turai Yar'Adua's efforts, Arum (2010) averred that the Federal Government developed an Integrated Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (IMNCH). This was directed towards women and new born babies.

### **Women for Change Initiative (WCI) (2010-2015)**

When she came into office in 2015, the wife of President Goodluck Jonathan, Dame Patience Jonathan initiated the Women for Change Initiative. Like its predecessors, the programme was primarily targeted at women's empowerment/development. The project empowered women mostly through the distribution of items such as sewing machines, cash, outboard marine engine boats, hair dressing and catering equipment, barbing kits, computers, grinding machines and motorcycles (Iheanacho, 2016). The programme functioned in collaboration with and supported by the Office of the Special Adviser to the President on MDG. The programme also strived to push for the repositioning of Nigerian women and lift them from the low esteem of low level of political involvement and representation, to increased level of participation and representation. This feat recorded significant achievement.

### **Future Assured (2015-Date)**

Following the trend of her predecessors, Aisha Buhari, on assumption of office as the first lady in 2015, when her husband, Muhammadu Buhari became the president of Nigeria, also launched the Future Assured pet project for women empowerment/development. The project is a social investment project, aimed at ameliorating poverty particularly among youths and women in the country. According to Aisha Buhari, the Future Assured programme is out to address five major goals of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include; poverty, no hunger, gender equality, good jobs and economic growth (Aisha Buhari, as cited in Vanguard, November 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016). The project has seen the training of over 2,200 women on skill acquisition in Lagos State. The various trainings include cosmetology, beads stringing, interior decoration, event management, *gele* tying, and make up, shoe and bag production. This was also followed by the distribution of 5000 maternity kits to expectant mother, with basic needs for women at child birth and the immediate needs of a new born baby Future Assured, 2018).

### **Findings and Discussion: Effect of Femocracy on Women Empowerment and Development in Nigeria**

As earlier established in a previous section of the paper, femocracy exists specifically for the empowerment, development and betterment of women. Although femocracy has come under

criticism of not been able to fulfil this primary aim, on the grounds that it has largely been hijacked by a small clique of women, who advance the interest of a few female elite, rather than the majority of women (Mama, 1995), it has however contributed some positives, one way or the other, towards the empowerment of women in Nigeria's Fourth Republic. As has been revealed in the paper, the various pet projects put in place by the various first ladies have contributed in no small measure to the empowerment of women. The practice of femocracy in Nigeria, has seen to the establishment of two micro-credit schemes to assist women. These include the Women Fund for Economic Empowerment (WOFEE), and the Business Development Fund for Women (BUDFOW) (Idike, 2014: 160), with the primary motive of assisting women with facilities with an interest rate of 10 percent. The activities of femocracy has also led to the construction and equipment of 77 skills acquisition centres across the country, in order to increase income generation, through job creation for women, especially those at the grassroots (Idike, 2014: 60).

With respect to empowering women for political representation and participation in governance, femocracy has made significant impacts, especially under the first ladyship of Dame Patience Jonathan. This had seen the increase in women's representation in government from 10 percent in 2011 to over 33 percent in 2013; with 13 female ministers out of 42, representing 31 percent, and 4 female Special Advisers out of 18, representing 23 percent (Calebs, 2014). The activities of femocracy in Nigeria's Fourth Republic have seen the drastic upscaling of the number of women representation in government. Some of which include: the appointment of a female Chief Justice of Nigeria since independence; the appointment of a female Petroleum Minister in the country's political history, to mention but few (Ajah, 2014).

From the foregoing, some of the contribution of femocracy towards the empowerment and development of women are identified below:

1. The training of women in skills to become self-reliant;
2. Provision of health care facilities to address basic health problems confronting women;
3. Provision of physical, mental and educational care for vulnerable children who are the only hope of the woman;
4. Distribution of items to women to meet their basic needs;

5. Provision of low interest rate credit and loan facilities to women to grow their medium/small scale businesses;
6. Fighting for the voiceless women in the society; and
7. Increase in political representation and participation of women

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

From the revelations made in the paper, there is therefore no gainsaying whatsoever, that femocracy plays tangible and very colossal role in the empowerment, development and betterment of women. Since the inception of the concept in Nigeria in 1985 by the Mariam Babaginda's first ladyship, femocracy has, through various pet programmes put in place by the various first ladies, empowered mostly women across the country. However, it is pertinent to note that as Mama (1995) has rightly observed, femocracy has been hijacked for the benefit of a few in Nigeria. Femocracy is still largely politicized, and used mostly for electioneering campaigns, rather than for genuine empowerment, development and betterment of women. There is therefore the need to completely depoliticize the practice of femocracy in Nigeria to enhance better women empowerment in the country. Although politicized, femocracy, to a large extent, still contribute immensely to women empowerment and development. Femocracy will therefore achieve greater heights and reach out to larger population of women in the country when it is taken out of the realms of politics and given more Federal Government, NGOs and international support.

From the findings of the paper, the following recommendations are made:

- there is the need for politicians and their spouses to completely depoliticize femocracy in Nigeria to better empower and develop women;
- both the Legislative and executive arms of government should work towards the constitutionalizing femocracy to better empower the concept for enhanced performance and operations;
- the concept of femocracy must be expanded by the law legitimizing it, to include more women, rather than just a clique of women; and
- Nigerian first ladies, even though the office is not yet given a constitutional backing, must however, make more frantic and sincere efforts to use their privileges and opportunities to better the lives of their fellow women.

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