

First Ladies in Nigeria: The Rise of Amazon Crusaders for Better Life of the Vulnerable

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Abstract

This paper is a study of the status and operations of Nigerian First Ladies. The rise and boom dates back to 1987, during the tenure of Maryam Babangida—wife of the then president. Subsequent national First Ladies cued into the structure and legacy of the office and extended the phenomenon to state First Ladies. Like Amazons, they have continued to rise in fame, with exotic paraphernalia of office and pet-projects, making Nigeria a bee-hive of First Ladies operation. Through ethnographic and phenomenological method of knowledge inquiry and presentation in qualitative analysis the report is replete with reasons for the boom—the major being the people's cosmology of woman and motherhood and, the onerous desire of women to adequately cue into the global project of gender balance in advancement. In spite of the marginal status of the office in the body polity of the nation, First Ladies have contributed significantly to human development index of the target group and, provided strategic platform for women mobilization and consciousness in public affairs.

Keywords

Nigeria, First Ladies, Amazons, Crusaders, Better Life

1. Introduction

The emergence of women advocates and activists has a relative long history with a variety of approach and strategies, in different parts of the world. Coordinated efforts toward women advancement, as an issue on the front burner of global concern for quality life dates back to the 1923 League of Nations. Sequel to the outcome of the League was the systematic articulation and enumeration of global Covenants and Treaties as stated in the founding documents of the United Nations (UN). Since then women issues have become ever topical in national planning, across the regions of the world.

The seeming and underlying rationale of the global concern is the conception of women as occupying important and vulnerable status in life. Across the world, women are undervalued. They lead their lives in conditions of marked inequality, in comparison with their male counterparts. To reduce this sex polarity imbalance and marginalizing conditions is the primary reason for UN devotion of enormous resources to the project of women advancement. UN has specialized Agencies and Commissions for women's course. To complement the activities of the Agencies and Commissions are the various women Conferences and Assemblies etc., and promotion of covenants that emerge therefrom. One of such covenants is the one on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, (see [United Nations, 1995](#)). Currently, there is the policy of Gender Mainstreaming, which emphasizes on synergy between men and women advancement, as one common purpose for human development, ([United Nations Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2000](#)). It is from the UN blueprint for women, particularly from the last women Conference held in Beijing, China and the Gender Mainstreaming policy that the 35% Affirmative Action project of Nigerian women is staked.

The UN feel concerned about the universal condition of women, especially, the disadvantaged status of women in Africa, where Nigeria belongs. Nigerian women face obstacles which range from cultural configurations, to political doldrums and apathy. However, contemporary women are challenged by this disadvantaged social location in their various cultural groups and society. Women are taking cue from the UN framework toward rescuing themselves from the clutches of human underdevelopment and ephemeral place in sensitive human affairs. In Nigeria, one phenomenon that is in tandem with women advancement in office of FL. Prior to 1987, the office and status of FL was not popular. From 1987, they began to emerge like Amazons purveying strategic visions in the structure and vigour of crusaders. An insight analysis of this women-skewed phenomenal development is the fabric of this essay.

2. Methodology and Organization of Study

The focus of the study is federal and state FLs in Nigeria. Our guiding method is indepth qualitative analysis of data collected through the techniques of ethnography (observations, oral interviews and focus group discussions), skewed in phenomenological approach of inquiry and explanation. The usefulness of this method in this type of study is underscored by [Haralambos and Holbon, 2008](#). The primary data sources were also balanced with documented reports from the office of FLs. The report identified the antecedent factors for the rise and boom of the status and office of FLs. Next in the essay is a table form presentation of the programmes and projects of the FLs, to enable thematic conception and analysis of their typology and structure. Also, hosted in the report is latent reasons for projects seemingly skewed towards the vulnerable in society. In the last major section of the report kit is spotlight and discussion of the strength and driving force of FLs' fame, as profoundly rooted in their amazon-like character and "power connection".

3. The Rise of First Ladies in Nigeria

The status and office of FL is a modern political import to Nigeria. In the lucid definition of [The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of English Language \(2013: p. 477\)](#), First Lady (FL) is "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". This has become a practice in many other nations and governments all over the world. It is not surprising to observe that the status and office is embraced in Nigeria as a socio-political culture and convention. After all the presidential system of government practiced in Nigeria is copied and modeled in the American pattern. As prominent and popular as the office of FLs in Nigeria, it lacks constitutional backing, Act of the National Assembly or, Decree. What obtains is welfare services to the FL through the executive arm of government at the Federal or State levels. No legal budget or direct allocation to the office. Hajiya Fatima Abubakar, the FL and wife of President Abdulsalami Abubakar between 1998 and 1999 lucidly pronounced the non constitutional backing of the office, (see [Abiyamo, 2013](#)). Yet, since its import and infusion into the socio-political structure of Nigeria, occupants of the position wield enormous power and influence in the society.

The wives of Nigeria's leaders—Presidents, Prime Minister, Heads of State and, Governors or Military Administrators prior to 1987 existed as "mere wives". The pre-1987 FLs' office existed in moribund states. At best they featured as "better halves" whose impact in the affairs of the state remained covet and advisory. In other words, they were ceremonial, seldom and passively heard in public and state matters. The moribund state of the office was radically transformed in 1987, under the Military administration of Ibrahim Babangida. This was the

departure point, from inactive to vibrant position. It was Babangida's late wife, Maryam that completed this dimension of American political system in Nigeria. In other words, Maryam Babangida is the founding mother of contemporary Nigeria's exalted position of FL. Through her structural configuration of the activities of the office under the frame of Better Life Programme for Rural Women (BLPRW), with avalanche of pet-projects across Nigeria, the status of FL became reckoned as important and crucial in the country's political economy. Conscious of the absence of constitutional backing for the operations, BLPRW was incorporated and run as a Non Governmental Organization (NGO), in the tune and tempo of a crusade, targeted at transforming the life of the vulnerable, especially women amongst the rural populace. Sequel to Maryam Babangida's legacy, the position of FL became popular and officially recognized in the structure and chain of political leadership, at the three tiers of governance, especially at the Federal and State levels.

With the re-establishment of democratic system which makes it possible for periodic election of different persons as presidents and governors respectively, the phenomenon now is rise-and-rise of FLs in the character of Amazons. Each tries to prosecute specific projects. The prominence of the position of FL is underscored by the current practice of political office seekers joining voice with their spouses to outline promises of what the office of FL, under their administration would offer the women folk and the vulnerable in society. So, the quest for occupation of the office of FL has permeated into all other prominent public offices held by men. It is now common to see wives of Ministers, Commissioners, Commanders of military unit, Vice-Chancellors' of University, Monarchs, Directors of Agency and Parastatals etc., set up and assume the office of FLs of such units of political formation and state governance. Hundreds of Nigerian women now bear the titles of FL (<http://www.onlinenigeria.com/abmx/abmx/abm.asp?z=7>:scirp>>). Of course, they are so recognized. Even wives of the clergy are not aloof in the rise and incursions of the phenomenon of FL status, in their spouses' episcopacy or area of influence. The quest for who assumes the position even cause bickering and unhealthy competition between wives of a polygamous public office holder. This is the case in Nassarawa State, under the governorship of Al-Makura, (2007 to 2015). His two wives Hajiya Salamatu and Hajiya Mairo, both lay claim to the position of FL and equally run their different pet-projects and paradigm crusade for the vulnerable.

4. Antecedent Factors for the Rise of First Ladies of Amazon Character

The various cultural groups that make up Nigeria have some common issues in their cosmology of womanhood, Iheanacho (2007: pp. 120-148), has amply discussed this in an earlier report on Nigerian women. The people understand and explain the bi-polar composition of humanity as a supernatural design shroud in mystery. The people only try to "peep" into it through myths and worldview. In the main, the cosmological understanding of the nature of humanity as male and female is that it is a divinely aimed at companionship and balanced existence. In practice, the bi-polarity of sex is consummated in heterosexual relationship, understanding, cooperation and interaction. Iwe (1990: p. 31), underscore this cultural setting and values as he states that "it is nature that establish human sexuality as the indispensable means for the sound, harmonious and socialization of the human person".

For the people, being male or female is a divine function which is only made manifest to the people through anatomical features and biological characteristics. Culture only nurture the structures and institutionalize the traditions necessary for socialization and upbringing of a particular sex, for adaptation and integration into social groups and formations. Both male and female are therefore indispensable in the functioning, harmony, growth and development of the society. Each sex polar has special endowments for good relationship and survival of the society, (Iheanacho, 2007: pp. 120-124). This understanding of the human condition and relations looms large in the people's culture as a latent fabric of existence. The conservative tendencies of the patriarchal structure of society repress this impulse. Consciousness of women affairs finally found avenue in the structures of the changing world order, (see Molloy, 2008: pp. 539-541). This is what is crystallized in the activities of the FLs.

Motherhood responsibilities are part of prime training of Nigerian women in their various traditional socialization schemes. The virtues of mother of the household is part of being a responsible woman in Nigerian society. This is why in spite of patriarchal structures which dominate the cultures, the affinity between the child and the matrilineal descent is intimate. The Nigerian woman always seek for opportunity to express and actualize the motherhood in her—manifestly in caring for people. It is this motherhood concern that contribute to the zeal of wives of public office holders assumption of office of FL, with main focus on ameliorating the living condition of the vulnerable. The pet-projects which are skewed in favour of children, women, youth and the downtrodden underscore this antecedent catalyst.

Nigerian females are traditionally socialized to be dependable companions. As maidens they are always avai-

able to listen and help their parents, especially the mother. Such disposition is extended to their siblings and distant relations. Umoren (2003: p. 81), underscore this virtue with a Niger Delta parable, which states that “the exploit of a wrestler who has no sister do not resound to the world”. The boom in the activities of the FLs are in tandem with the connotations of this parable. At marriage the female becomes a more valuable treasure to her families of orientation, and of reproduction respectively. In the family’s traditional upbringing and pre-marital training, the mother educate her on the strategies of sustaining the enabling environment, peaceful disposition and services necessary for maintaining the bond of relations. It is in such state of positive contribution that Nigerian women impress and influence their men. The wife becomes a companion to the husband and family—she assumes the status of a help-mate and dependable partner in the management of the family. Wives do not hesitate to warn their husbands against bad company, and protest when they suspect any such association. The underpinning rationale is that the women provide buffer to protect their husbands’ social status and reputation. Women are their “husbands’ eyepiece”. It is this pattern of marriage relations and family system that the FLs try to replicate in the more elaborate modern paradigm. The traditional pedagogy of the girl-child and family orientation inculcate in the Nigerian woman the potent virtues and skill which are alignable to the status and role of FL, as is currently experienced. The childhood traditional training received by women are remote factors which incubate the variables that are now being developed in the status of FL. This was the character exhibited by Patience Jonathan when the news of the Boko Haram abduction of the over two hundred school girls at Chibok was broken. Her outburst was a spontaneous expression of the “motherhood” in her.

One of the immediate and modern catalyst for the boom of the office of FL, is the global concern and effort to improve the status of women across the world. From 1946 women issues were entrenched into the statutes of the UN, as a cardinal project. Since then, four international conferences have taken place to seek ways of bettering the lot of women. The effort of UN toward the advancement is structured into four approaches namely: the period of effort at securing the legal foundations of equality of both sexes—between 1945 and 1962; the period of effort at recognizing women’s role in development—between 1963 and 1975; the period of declaration of UN Decade for women—between 1976 and 1985; and the period of effort toward equality, development and peace—between 1986 and 1995, when the last Conference was held, (see [United Nations, 1995](#)). Within these frames of operation are several minor conferences and assemblies, out of which covenants, policies, and treaties emerge with variety of strategies toward networking the plans of action. In most of the UN Documents, nations and Governments are encouraged to implement the blueprint in synergy with plausible inputs that suit local peculiarities.

Nigeria feature prominently in UN programmes for women. This was more so during and after the Beijing Conference. The aftermath of the Conference was the emergence of the slogan of “non violence and empowerment of women”. Spurred by this popular vision, Nigerian women became eager to implement the Resolutions of the Beijing Conference and all other policies and covenants on women that had been in moribund status in the nation’s history. This renewed vigour of gender struggle was sustained up till 1997 when the then FL capitalized on the looming global phenomenon for advancing the cause of women, to rise like an Amazon and used her status for the crusade.

Furthermore, global blueprint toward women advancement in the UN documents, such as the Covenant on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Covenant on the Right of the Child, the Child Right Act and, the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) etc., challenged FLs and other women to action. Closer reflection on the condition of the Nigerian woman and the child shows that they fit into the frame of the vulnerable which is being targeted in the covenants and the MDG.

Giving this background, Maryam Babangida established the office of national FL with elastic operational frame. There was also the justification drawn from America, where Nigeria’s presidential system of government is copied. A Guardian Newspaper report cites the former president of America, John F. Kennedy thus: “...each president’s wife, since she is not bound by constitutionally defined rules, should fulfill her responsibilities according to the dictates of her own temperament and capabilities” ([The Guardian, 2014, April 9](#)). By 1997 UN released another blueprint for women advancement called Gender mainstreaming as a follow-up to realizing the outline of the Beijing Conference. According to United Nations Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights (2000) Gender mainstreaming, is a policy frame for integrating the lot of both male and female gender into a holistic and wholesome project of human development with focus at gender balance and equality platforms.

Gender mainstreaming policy emerged in Nigeria in the later period of military rule, penultimate to the present democratic government, characterized by increased freedom. All these culminated in clearing the way for the robust and vibrant rise of FLs in the form of amazons and crusaders, agitating for, and initiating pro-

grammes toward advancing the course of the vulnerable, and women in particular.

The operation and exploits of the FLs shows that the status is powerful, prestigious, viable and lucrative. The position was seemingly a “fallow land”, endowed in resources. Consequently, a strong contributory factor to the current boom and enchantment of FLs is women’s desire to wield more power, command uncommon prestige and amass wealth to relatively parallel the men (husbands) who exploit the main public offices. In all of these lies the factors which boost and sustain the status and office of FLs in Nigeria. Today the office is even more popular and robust than many constitutionally founded institutions.

5. First Ladies’ Crusade and Pet-Projects

FLs establish NGO as platform and springboard on which they participate in the global effort toward quality life. Under the auspices of their respective NGO’s the FLs define their mission in the form of crusade and launch their pet-projects. Pet-project is the popular name used to refer to the public projects of FLs. The project which a FL embark on is the function of her personal interest, based on her crusade drive. It is in this personal cherish impulse that lies the pet character of the projects. The pet drive of a FL is the operational force of her projects. FLs commit quality time and resources to the projects. They are seemingly passionate “vigorous and concerted” (*The New International Webster’s Dictionary of the English Language*, 2013:311) in their pursuit of the realization of the projects as paradigm mission to change the condition of the vulnerable, for better. In other words, the projects are mainly targeted at addressing the plight of the vulnerable in the society, especially, women, children, the downtrodden etc. Crusade in the context of the FLs’ projects is used to mean “a remedial enterprise undertaken with zeal and enthusiasm” (*Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 1999: p. 301).

Analysis of the projects is presented in **Table 1** and **Table 2**. The first is on the national FLs (wives of Presidents), and the second which is in **Table 1** and **Table 2(a) & Table 2(b)** are on the state FLs (wives of State Governors).

Table 1 is made up of FL’s during the military and civilian administrations. During the military era, as captured in the table (1987-1999), the rise and popularity of the office and status of FL was more a national affair, with monolithic pet-projects, replicated by wives of Military Administrators at the state level.

At the end of the 1999-2007 dispensation of democratic governance many state Governors vacated office, either due to completion of maximum tenure of office or loss of re-election bid. Consequently, their FLs’ crusade platform and pet-projects were also affected. Incoming FLs seldom continue the project of their predecessor. To capture the dispensation of FLs at the state level is the reason why we have two tables for the Governors’ wives.

6. Structure of Pet-Projects

6.1. Economic Empowerment

This is one priority area that orchestrate the FLs crusade for better life of the vulnerable. This content dates back to 1987, the time of Maryam Babangida. Her pet-projects were carried out under the crusade of Better Life Programme for Rural Women (BLPRW). By November 1993 when the administration of her husband came to an end, BLPRW had established 9,492 co-operative societies for women to have access to finance and sundry resources. BLPRW also founded 1435 cottage industries; 1784 farms and gardens; 495 shops and markets; 1094

Table 1. National FLs’ crusade and Pet-projects (1997-2015).

S/N	Name of First Lady	Year	Programme
1.	Mrs. Maryam Babangida	1985-1993	Better Life Programme for the Rural Woman (BLPRW)
2.	Hajiya Maryam Abacha	1993-1998	Family Support Programme/Family Economic Advancement Programme (FSP/FEAP)
3.	Hon. Justice Fati Abubakar	1998-1999	Women’s Right Advancement and Protection Alternative (WRAPA)
4.	Mrs. Stella Obasanjo	1999-2007	Child Care Trust (C CT)
5.	Hajia Turai Musa Yar’ Adua	2007-2010	Women und Youth Empowerment Foundation (WAYEF)
6.	Dame Patience Jonathan	2010-date	Women for Change Initiative (WCI)

Source: Compiled from data collected in course of the research.

Table 2. (a) State FLs' crusade and Pet-projects (1999-2007); (b) State FLs' crusade and Pet-project (2007-2015).

(a)

S/N	Name of First Lady	State	Project
1.	Ifeoma Uzo Kalu	Abia	Save the People Foundation (STPF)
2.	Zainab Boni Haruna	Adamawa	Rural Empowerment Acceleration Programme (REAP)
3.	Valentine Attah	Akwa Ibom	Child Development Trust (CDT)
4.	Patience Jonathan	Bayelsa	Areuera Reachout Foundation (ARF)
5.	Fatima Ali Sheriff	Borno	The Beacon of Hope (TBH)
6.	Ukamaka Egwu	Ebonyi	Widow Care Foundation (WCF)
7.	Ekinwona Igbinedion	Edo	Ichia Renaissance (IR)
8.	Nkoyo Ibori	Delta	Shelter Initiative
9.	Theresa Udenwa	Imo	Healtland Child Care Foundation (HCCF)
10.	Zahra'u Turaki	Jigawa	Rural Education Foundation (REF)
11.	Asm'au Makarfi	Kaduna	Millennium Hope Programme (MHP)
12.	Zainab Idris	Kogi	Family Advancement Programme (FAP)
13.	Torin Saraki	Kwara	Well-being Foundation (WBF)
14.	Oluremi Tinubu	Lagos	New Era Foundation (NEF)
15.	Zaynab Kure	Niger	Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES)
16.	Princess Omolla Oyinlola	Osun	Women and Children Development Initiative Foundation (WOCDF)
17.	Mutiati Ladoja	Oyo	<i>Idera-De</i> Foundation (IDF)
18.	Valentine Dariye	Plateau	Women Alive Foundation (WAF)
19.	Mary Odili	Rivers	The Adolescent Programme (TAP)
20.	Jamila Bafarawa	Sokoto	<i>Nna Ama'u</i> Foundation (NAF)
21.	Priscilla Nyame	Taraba	Women and Youth Foundation (WYF)
22.	Maryam Ibrahim	Yobe	Tsangaya Support Trust (TST)
23.	Karima Sani	Zamfara	Under-Five Nutritional Foundation (UNF)

Source: Compiled from Data collected in course of the research.

(b)

S/N	State	Name of First Lady	Project
1.	Abia	Lady Mercy Udochi Orji	Hannah-May Foundation
2.	Adamawa	Dr. Zainab Murtala Nyako (recently impeached Governor)	Women Education and Empowerment Initiative in Nigeria (WEEIN)
3.	Akwa Ibom	Mrs. Ekaette Akpabio	Family Life Enhancement Initiative (FLEI)
4.	Anambra	Chief Mrs. Ebele Obiano	Caring Family Enhancement Initiative (CAFÉ)
5.	Bauchi	Hajiya Aisha Isa Yuguda	Girl-Chil Education Project (GEP)
6.	Bayelsa	Dr. Mrs. Rachael Dickson	Raising the Ijaw Child
7.	Benue	Mrs. Yemisi Dooshima Suswan	SEV-AV Foundation
8.	Borno	Hajiya Nana Kashim-Shettima	Support for Women, Orphans and Tsangaya (SWOT)

Continued

9.	Cross River	Barr. Mrs. Obioma Liyel-Imoke	Partnership Opportunities for Women Empowerment Realization (POWER)
10.	Delta	Dr. Mrs. Roli Uduaghan	Master Key Foundation (MKF)
11.	Ebonyi	Mrs. Josephine Elechi	Mother & Child Care (MCC)
12.	Edo	Late Mrs. Clara Oshiomhole	Health Foundation for Maternal and Edo Child Care
13.	Enugu	Mrs. Clara Chime	Child and Mother Empowerment (CHIME)
14.	Ekiti	Erelu Olabisi Fayemi	Multi-Births Trust Fund & Ekiti Development Foundation
15.	Gombe	Hajiya Adama Dankwambo	Hajiya Adama Women Empowerment Initiative (HAWEI)
16.	Imo	Nneoma Nkechinyere Rochas Okorochoa	Women of Divine Destiny Initiative
17.	Katsina	Hajiya Fatima Shema	Save Humanity Foundation
18.	Kogi	Hajiya Alima Wada	Kogi Women Empowerment Network (KOWEN)
19.	Kwara	Mrs. Omolewa Ahmed	Life Empowered Anchor (LEAH)
20.	Lagos	Dame Emmanuella Abimbola Fashola	Lagos Empowerment and Resource Network (LEARN)
21.	Nasarawa	Hajiya Salamatu Al-Makura (1 st Wife) Hajiya Mairo Al-Makura (2 nd Wife)	Women and Child Care Enhancement Foundation Tallafi Women and Youths Foundation
22.	Niger	Hajiya Jummai Babangida Aliyu	Life Rehabilitation Programme (LIFEREHAB)
23.	Ogun	Mrs. Olufonso Amosun	Uplifting Development Foundation (UDF)
24.	Ondo	Mrs. Olukemi Mimiko	Maternal Pulse Foundation (MPF)
25.	Oyo	Mrs. Florence Ajimobi	Widowhood Support Programme
26.	Plateau	Mrs. Ngo Talatu Jang	Women in Agriculture and Youth Empowerment Foundation
27.	Rivers	Mrs. Judith Amaechi	Empowerment Support Initiative (ESI)
28.	Taraba	Mrs. Hauwa Suntai	Women and Youth Foundation (Inherited from her Predecessor, Mrs. Priscilla Nyame)
29.	Zamfara	Asma'u Abdul'aziz Yari Abubakar	Hannun Taimako Foundation (HTF)
30.	FCT	Hajiya Aishatu Mohammed	Al-Muhibbah Foundation

Source: Compiled from Data collected in course of the research.

multipurpose women centres for skills acquisition and, 135 fish and live stock farms. The projects were established at different locations across the country. “Better Life” became a household name then. The projects were also cherished and meaningful in the people’s life. Faced with the economic hardship of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) the programmes of BLPRW crusade added value to the life of the Nigerian populace.

The crusade of Family Support Programme (FSP) and later Family Advancement and Empowerment Programme (FAEP) of Maryam Abacha offered loan facilities to women with viable plans. Many poor families found succor in this programme. Under Turai Yaradua the economic empowerment largess of the office of the national FL is also noted in the Women and Youth Empowerment Foundation programme she operated. Through Turai’s crusade, the Suleja Prison Workshop was refurbished and equipped with necessary tools for empowering the inmates to be self-reliant and economically viable after the period of jail. The pet-project of Patience Jonathan (wife of President Goodluck Jonathan), through her crusade platform—Women for Change Initiative (WCI), empowered people. The most recent was the distribution of economic empowerment items to the vulnerable in Rivers State, in October 2014. Items distributed to people were sewing machines, cash, and outboard marine engine boats. The project was in collaboration with the office of the Special Adviser to the president on MDG. The project is in line with the MDG agenda. Other items of empowerment given were hair dressing and catering equipments, barbing kits, computers, grinding machines and motorcycles.

At the state level, economic empowerment is also a cardinal aspect of the FLs' crusade. Outstanding projects at this level include the Rivers State FL's Empowerment Support Initiative (ESI). In partnership with Skye bank, ESI procured brand new cars and distributed to women for commercial transport. The city of Port Harcourt, the state capital, and its neighbourhood are adorned in ESI-Sky Bank cabs, with women drivers competing favourably in the cab business. The women in Agric and Youth Empowerment Foundation of the Plateau State FL is another programme in this perspective of crusade for better life of the vulnerable. This is same with the Kogi Women Empowerment Network (KOWEN), founded by Hajiya Halima Wada, the State FL.

The office and centres of operation of the FLs' crusade and pet-projects provide employment opportunities. The personnel composition of the offices are skewed in favour of women and the less privileged.

6.2. Educational Empowerment

This aspect of empowerment also features prominently in the crusade of the FLs. The empowerment takes the form of formal and informal education and vocational training. The ESI crusade of Rivers State FL, Judith Amaechi established schools near major markets in the state capital, while schools for children of indigent parents is nearing completion. The FL's aim is to create opportunity for women to drop their child (ren's) at school while their trading business is not interrupted. This programme is aimed at making sure the children's education is not undermined. Similar educational empowerment programme is run in Jigawa State by the FL, Hajiya Zahra'u Turaki, under her Rural Education Foundation (REF) crusade. In Akwa Ibom State the FL's Family Life Empowerment Initiative (FLEI) crusade has provided facelift and necessary resources for alternative care-giving and education to the Children's Home at Ikot Ekpene. The programme has given a more dignified attitude and sense of belonging to the challenged children of the centre. At the FLEI founded Gospel Village and the Motherless Babies Home at Abak, it has endowed a scholarship fund to support the education of some of the brilliant children upto University level. FLEI educational empowerment facilities are also extended to the state owned Children's Remand Home. Education empowerment also forms part of the crusade of other state FLs, as in the case of Hajiya Nana Kashim of Borno State, under her crusade—the Support for Women, Orphans and Tsangaya (SWOT). The Girl-child Education Project (GEP) of Hajiya Aisha Isa Yuguda of Bauchi State, the Women and Children Development Initiative Foundation (WOCODIF) crusade of Princess Omolola Oyinlola, the FL of Osun State, and the Women Education and Empowerment Initiative in Nigeria (WEEIN) of Zainab Murtala Nyako, the FL of Adamawa State are some other examples of educational empowerment of the vulnerable. Yet, FLs that do not have direct programme on education give support facilities to indigent pupils and students.

6.3. Health and Social Welfare

During the life span of Maryam Babangida's crusade of BLPRW, the projects were aimed at culminating in the economic good of women, the family and the children. Like Amazons with elastic power, subsequent FLs at both the Federal and State levels extended the horizon of their crusade to the holistic wellbeing of the vulnerable, in the form of provision of health and welfare services. The elastic stretch of FLs' crusade to the health industry was pioneered by Maryam Abacha under the FSP and FEAP. The FSP and FEAP crusade established medical centres in states with high level of Vesico Vaginal Fistula (VVF), as in Ebonyi, Sokoto, Zamfara etc. The FL also established the National Programme on Immunization (NPI) scheme. The NPI has continued to exist after her leave of office. Another enduring legacy of FEAP is the building of the National Women and Children Hospital, at Abuja. The project was commissioned on 22 May, 1999 by the succeeding president, General Abdulsalam Abubakar, and renamed National Hospital in the year 2000. Thus, what is today known and, serve as National Hospital is a gain from the crusade of one of Nigeria's Amazons. Stella Obasanjo's Child Care Trust (CCT) crusade provided social welfare services and care for the physically and mentally challenged children. Her crusade's venture into this area culminated into the establishment of the Special Children's Model Centre in Bwari Area District, Abuja.

President Umaru Yar'Adua's take over of the reins of governance from Olusegun Obasanjo led to the rise of yet another national Amazon, in the person of Turai Yar'Adua. The FL launched the crusade of Women and Youth Empowerment Foundation (WAYEF). Under Turai the elastic influence of the office of FL and pet-projects extended to youth empowerment. The project made impact in five aspects of need and services to the vulnerable. WAYEF provided eye services for cataract and, child blindness cases. There was maternal and new born health improvement programmes. There was screening programme for breast and cervical cancer. WAYEF

crusade also included HIV/AIDS and STD intervention programmes, and, the Diabetes Awareness and Education Programmes. Women and the less privileged thronged these centres. The remarkable achievements recorded in this aspect of her crusade earned her the honorary award of National Goodwill Ambassador for Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (MNCH).

Health and social welfare programmes also feature prominently in the crusade of the state FLs. At Abia State, there is the Hannah-May Foundation founded by the FL, Mercy Udochi Orji. At the centre, the vulnerable are screened for cancer, eye ailments etc. Free eye glasses, crutches and wheelchairs are given to those who need. Ear wax is also given to those with hearing impairment. The Hannah-May Foundation also bring succor to indigent widows, through its housing scheme. Through the Foundation, many Abia widows are now proud owners of houses. House ownership scheme is also a major contribution of the Akwa Ibom State FL Ekaette Akpabio. Through her FLEI, crusade many widows in the state, now own houses.

Maternal and child health promotion is also a major area of operation of the FLEI crusade. This aspect of the FL's initiative is targeted at mobilization and health education, particularly on antenatal care, and the provision of free immunization facilities for pregnant women. This programme contributed to the reduction in maternal mortality in the state. Also, as part of the FL's crusade, to reduce infant mortality FLEI procured infant incubator facilities for some public hospitals in the state. FLEI health and welfare scheme was also extended to the Leprosy Hospitals at Ekpene Obom, and Etinan. The leprosariums were renovated with improved facilities, and placed on monthly housekeeping allowance from the FLEI's fund, to augment what the hospital receive from other sources of funding. Through the agitation of the FL, the state government constructed access road to the Saint Louis Centre for the Deaf and Dumb, at Ikot-Ekpene.

In Zamfara State, the FL, Karima Sani's crusade—the Under Five Nutritional Foundation (UNF), operate centres for the distribution of food items for infants under the age of five. Such special attention on mother-care and better life of the infant was a prominent project of the Heartland Child Care Foundation (HCCF) of the Imo State FL, Theresa Udenwa. FL, Zainab Idris of Kogi State's Family Advancement Programme (FAP); the Caring Family Enhancement Initiative (CAFEI) of the Anambra State FL, Ebele Obiano; the Health Foundation for Maternal and Child Care Project of the FL of Edo State, Clara Oshiomhole; the Multi-Births Trust Fund of the FL of Ekiti State, Erelu Olabisi Fayemi; the Maternal Pulse Foundation (MPF) of Olukemi Mimiko, the FL of Ondo State; the Woman and Child Care Enhancement Foundation of the first wife of Governor Al-Makura, of Nasarawa State, Hajiya Salamatu Al-Makura, the Child and Mother Empowerment (CHIME) programme of Clara Chime, the FL of Enugu State; the Mother and Child Care Initiative (MCCI) of the FL of Ebonyi State, Josephine Elechi; the Raising the Ijaw Child (RIC) project of Rachael Dickson, the FL of Bayelsa State; the Save Humanity Foundation Programme of the Katsina State FL, Hajiya Fatima Shema, etc; are other robust pet-projects targeted at ameliorating the plight of vulnerable mothers and children, from the womb to the environment.

Apart from pregnant women and infants, widows and other vulnerable people also benefit in the pet-projects of the state FLs. This is the case of the Life Empowered Anchor (LEAH) crusade of the Kwara State FL, Omelewa Ahmed; the Life Rehabilitation Programme (LIFEREHAB) of the Niger State FL, Jummai Babangida Aliyu; the Widow Support Programme of Florence Ajimobi, the FL of Oyo State; the Women of Divine Destiny Initiative (WDDI) of the Imo State FL, Nneoma Nkechinyere Rochas Okorochoa; and the Uplifting Development Foundation (UDF) of Olutonso Amosun, the FL of Ogun State.

6.4. Social Justice

The FLs' crusade for better life of the vulnerable also stretch to social justice. The prime pet-project in this aspect was the Women's Right Advancement (WRAPA) founded by Hon. Justice Fatima Abubakar. WRAPA was a project of advocacy, sensitization and protection of the rights of women, toward challenging and eliminating all forms of humiliating and dehumanizing practices and violence against women. The FL's career background, as a judge of the High Court boosted the operations of the crusade. This first effort toward the social justice perspective of women advancement also found way into the schedule of some of the state FLs. The Women for Change Initiative (WCI) crusade of Patience Jonathan is championed the campaign for repositioning Nigerian women, from their low esteem and representation to increased recognition and participation in politics and public office holding. This is the driving force of the Affirmative Action agenda.

Social justice agenda was the case in Rivers State during the FL tenureship of Mary Odili, also a Judge. Mary Odili's The Adolescent Programme (TAP) focused attention at bringing succor to the abandoned and unjustly

treated adolescents, as in cases of sexual harassment, rape, “unwanted pregnancy” etc. Young girls found solace at the TAP centres in the state. Other FLs who do not have specific social justice units in their crusade blueprint yet attend to such challenges, as part of their oversight and marginal responsibility for the course of womanhood and better life. Many of the FLs also rise in aid to the pursuit of the inheritance right of the girl-child and widows who are discriminated in the cultural systems skewed in favour of men and the boy-child. Like Amazons they rise intuitively, mobilize human and material resources to stand and fight for such victims, whose cases and details are clear, seemingly convincing and verifiable.

6.5. Prayer Assembly

Prayer session is a content of the FLs’ crusade. The FLs complement their pet-projects with divine supplication. The aim is to bring their programmes in alignment with their belief system, toward asserting its legitimacy and to sustain public acceptance of the activities, as design toward doing the will of God. FLs establish prayer houses or grounds at satellite towns, near the capital city. Some FLs use state stadium, civic centre, government house etc. They configure religiously symbolic names for such prayer places. In Abia State it is called Hannah’s Ground. At Benue State it is Deborah’s Favour Assembly. It is a network of Wailing Women and, Women of Divine Destiny, in Rivers and Imo State, respectively. At Akwa Ibom State, there is the Ibom Prayer Ground. At the prayer sessions “prayer warriors”, pastors and different types of clergymen are mobilized to pray for the state, the nation and particularly the programmes of Government and the projects of the convening FL. In their prayer requests, emphasis is laid on seeking God’s intervention for the course of women, especially the vulnerable—the exploited, the handicapped, and the unjustly treated.

In the prayer sessions prominent women in Biblical history (in the case of Christian FLs) are referenced as sources of inspiration. At intervals during prayer, the assembly call passionately on revered women in the Bible who found favour in God, to intercede for the success of the FL’s crusade and women in general. Outstanding women of the Bible frequently called to women’s cause are Hannah, for her faith and eventual blessing with a child (see 1 Sam. 1), Deborah for her leadership qualities and God inspired military prowess in the mist of men, (see Judg. 4). The widow of Zarephath (1 Kg. 17:8-24), Elisha’s miracle for the widow (2 Kg. 4:1-7) and Jesus’ compassion for the widow of Nain (Lk. 7:11-17), and Jesus’ commendation of the widow’s offering (Lk. 21:1-4) are invoked, for putting all their resources and trust in God, who does not abandon the vulnerable like them. They also call on Esther for her ingenuity, patriotism, courage and devotion to her people (see Es. 1ff). Mary the mother of Christ is also referred to for her role in the salvation event (Mtt. 1ff, Mk. 1ff 2K 1ff). The narrative of the Judge and the persistent widow is also recast to encourage women in their long struggle for advancement and better life (see Lk. 18:1-8). Other thematic pedagogies are drawn from the scripture to seek divine support for the cause of women and the particular FL and her husbands’ programmes. FLs also organize special services in churches.

Unlike Christian FLs, special prayer places and regular sessions are not common among Muslim FLs. Yet, many of them organize special prayer sessions and, as well welcome, and host prayer teams. In all, the prayer session initiative is a channel through which the FLs seek God’s direction and protection of their husbands, as they face the challenge of governance. In many states the prayer session has become rallying point for those seeking political and public office, and government contract jobs. Many men and women of such interest join in the prayer assemblies.

6.6. Service to the Dead

Religious content is not peculiar to the activities of state FLs. It is also a major focus of the crusade of Hajiya Aishatu Bala Mohammed, the First Lady of the Federal Capital Municipal Governance. Aishatu’s Al-Muhibbah Foundation gave quality attention and resources to rehabilitation and improvement of the aesthetic craft at the Muslim and Christian Cemeteries within the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Thus, the dead are also vulnerable. The philosophy of the project is shroud in the believe that the dead also deserve to rest in dignity and dignified environment. The antecedent of this crusade is the people’s traditional believe in the dead “still existing”, but in a different form, yet active in the affairs of the living.

6.7. Latent Religious and Cultural Rationale for FLs Service to the Vulnerable

There is the desire to sustain the affinity between mother and child, characteristic of Nigerian women, in the tra-

ditional setting. Women are always at the service of their children. The affinity and service are conceived to be divinely ordained. Therefore, to be a woman is to be at the service of children and caring for the weak. Even barren women take delight in fostering orphans and other children in their extended family systems and kin group. There is natural friendliness between the Nigerian mother and her child(ren). The tie is difficult to separate. Women therefore herald ontological order, favour and peace in the household and society through child birth and care. They use their child(ren) to attract favour and influence men.

Accordingly, FLs use their pet-projects, skewed in favour of women, children, and other vulnerable people as a modern paradigm to attract supernatural and human favour. Of course, the projects attract huge donations and favour from men and women of substance and affluence in government, business and society at large. In traditional Nigerian societies, a woman carrying a baby is never beaten by anybody, no matter the level of provocation. Infants are also perceived as “sacred protection” to those carrying them, especially their mothers, (see Ilogu, 1985: p. 14; Onunwa, 1990). There is seldom any Nigerian FL, (even the few without major pet-projects), that do not take responsibility in mother and child care in one way or another. At least every first January each of the FLs seek and celebrate first baby of the year in their various states, while the national FL celebrates the first baby at the Federal Capital. It is the intrinsic fecundity impulse and milk of motherhood that shroud the pet-projects and the holistic crusade for better life of the vulnerable.

Furthermore, from the perspective of Muslim FLs, the concern for the vulnerable is a religious duty which find justification in the teaching of the Qu’ran on sadaq (see Fieser and Powers, 1998: p. 400). It is also a practical demonstration of Allah’s compassion for the less privileged in society. In like manner, Christian FLs operate the office as a religious call to duty and service to humanity. They aim to buttress the biblical statement that when the righteous rule the people rejoice (Prov. 29:2), and that faith without works is nullity (Jms. 2:15-26). Thus, the FLs conceive their crusade projects as a way of practical demonstration of the virtues and discipleship of Christ, by showing compassion and giving succor to the less privileged as Christ did in his earthly ministry. This definition is fundamental to the prayer content of their crusades.

7. The Operation Character of FLs

Since Maryam Babangida’s ascendance of the status of FL and launch of the BLPRW the emergence and activities of subsequent FLs is on continuous boom. In the character of Amazons, their operations and power have remained elastic, both vertically and horizontally, as they continually wield and exercise enormous power and influence with rising exotic paraphernalia of office and, vertically in terms of project types and expansion. Against this backdrop, Ofiebor (2013) described the operations of FL. Patience Jonathan as superfluous in character. The rise-and-rise of FLs make them popular as strategic mobilizers and leaders of women. The various pet-projects are rallying points for women interaction and resource mobilization for economic fortunes and participation in politics and governance. Even at the marginal horizon of state politics, the impact is significant. The avalanche of projects and the numerous benefits woo army of political gladiators and warriors to FLs’ course. Consequently, the FLs have legion of loyalists in their command. FLs now take chieftaincy titles and sundry awards in recognition of their activities. Patience Jonathan, for instance has extended her power to being the president of the African FL’s Peace Mission, and other related regional activities of women in West Africa.

The numerical strength of their followership and command network bring them into full political limelight. The FLs function as co-ordinators of inter government agencies and policies for the course of women, and for the success of their husbands’ administration. The elastic influence of the FLs is on steady build up, such that the seeming interest of the office holder is respected and treated as sacrosanct by many a public office holder and the citizenry. Even when such interest and power elasticity is incongruous with the associated institutional framework.

FLs now use their crusade platform for campaign, and the services they render as tools to herald the “good intention” of their husbands’ administration. Political office seekers use the channel of their programmes to lobby for support and endorsement. Truly, those who obtain a FL’s favour find lee-way to acceptance by the husband and political party respectively. This is also the case in non-elective appointments. Political appointees who have issues with the FL do not last in such position under her husband’s administration.

Apart from the influence on their husbands, FLs have emerged at the centre stage of Nigeria’s partisan politics. They participate actively in their husbands’ electioneering campaigns and the project of wooing the electorate to their party of affiliation. The passionate and dogged pursuit of the 35% Gender Affirmative Action of Pa-

tience Goodluck Jonathan is a case in point. Like an Amazon, the FL victoriously led Nigerian women to wrestle down 35% of political offices, into the hands of women. In the electioneering campaigns for the 2015 general elections the FL promised to canvass for 50% public office space for women in the next government formation, if her husband wins his second term presidential bid. The same scenario was the case at the state levels.

FLs find their way through state connections to attract public funds to finance their projects. In the frame of NGO based projects, FLs bring individuals and organizations doing business in the nation to make donations. The donations run into very huge sums of money at the discretionary disposal of the particular FL. Of course organizations and individuals seeking government contract jobs or have done business with government respond to the concerned FL's "money call" in appreciation, as one good turn deserves another. Each FL is the sole administrator of her projects and funds without budgetary ceiling and checks-and-balances.

Nigerian women have so embraced the office of FL as a veritable avenue for them to make-up for what they fail to achieve in the male dominated political space of the nation. Women across the states of the nation, would rise vehemently to resist any attempt to scrap the office and status. The only legislation that is seemingly welcome is that which will legalize and reform the operations of the office, to the advantage of women's power holding and exercise.

8. Conclusion

Rising from a simple and moribund status, the office of FL in Nigeria had a turning-point in 1987, under Maryam Babangida. Since then the office has continued to grow from strength to strength, and as key unit in the nation's politics. The robust development led to the paradigm departure from mono and unilinear pet-projects to liberalization of choice of project(s) by state FLs. This idea was a hallmark legacy of Stella Obasanjo, the foremost active FL in the nation's democratic governance. The liberality is the antecedence of the current diversity of pet-projects—all geared toward the overall crusade for better life of the vulnerable.

The activities of FLs face some criticisms—such as excesses in the use of state connections, abuse of power, meddlesomeness in their husband's administration, lack of checks and control mechanism in their operations. These make them powerful and dictatorial. Here lies the background of the metaphorical definition of the status as possessing amazon character, while their programmes and the associated projects are their pets, executed in the manner of crusade.

However, the crusade and projects have made remarkable achievements in the overall human and capital development of the nation, women and the vulnerable in particular. The projects have given many people succor and new hope in life. Above all, the phenomenon of FL is a veritable instrument for improving women's consciousness and participation in politics and public affairs, toward their advancement.

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