

# *A Role Without A Rulebook*

The Influence and Leadership of Global First Ladies

BY NATALIE GONNELLA-PLATTS AND KATHERINE FRITZ



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The Bush Institute contracted this study in order to contribute to the evidence base on the impact of global first ladies.

While making the study available to partners, and the public, the Bush Institute is examining how the findings of the study can serve to strengthen programming efforts at the Bush Institute to further empower first ladies around the globe to effectively use their unique platforms to advance issues for women and girls in their countries.

This report is provided as an educational public service to explore the role and influence of first ladies. While the Bush Institute and ICRW strive toward this public service purpose in producing the study, it does not necessarily endorse all of the methods, views, or opinions expressed by the First Lady, her country's government, or other individuals interviewed. Thus, this publication and the content discussed is intended solely for information purposes and is not to be construed, under any circumstances, by implication or otherwise, as an endorsement of national policies or government actions.

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# *A Role Without A Rulebook*

## The Influence and Leadership of Global First Ladies

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**ExxonMobil**

## INTRODUCTION

*“I hope someday someone will take the time to evaluate the true role of the wife of a President and to assess the many burdens she has to bear and contributions she makes.”*

– President Harry S. Truman

Like many heads of state, Harry S. Truman developed a first-hand appreciation of the substantive contributions his wife, First Lady Bess Truman, made to his administration and the nation. He keenly understood the considerable challenges she faced in doing so. President Truman’s wish for the role of first lady to be evaluated and recognized for its contributions has only recently begun to come true. Historians are increasingly taking up the stories of first ladies and telling them in ways that bring to light their unique personalities, convictions, skills and contributions as leaders and influencers.<sup>1</sup>

The George W. Bush Institute (Bush Institute) and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) set out to contribute to this expansion of scholarship about first ladies. This study examines the leadership potential of the first lady role, the common and uncommon challenges women face in realizing that potential, and how first ladies overcome those challenges to effect change on their chosen issues. In particular, the goal is to contribute a global perspective to the study of leadership among first ladies. This study compares and contrasts the experiences of historical and contemporary first ladies from 12 countries across five continents. While there exists a growing prevalence of men as first spouses, considering historical context, this study examines the role and influence of women in this role.

First ladies provide unique case studies for leadership. For this research, the definition of the office of the first lady is the state and non-state structures, processes, and resources that provide the spouse of a head of government or state with independent mechanisms and space through which to take actions of a public nature.

Naturally, the role varies by country and context—it may be endowed with financial resources or lack any budget at all, it may be staffed or un-staffed, and it may be legally or formally recognized or not. Even in countries where the role is most formally recognized culturally and politically, it is typically a role without a rule book. As Mrs. Laura Bush noted, when interviewed about her role during her time at the White House, “the role of First Lady is whatever the First Lady wants it to be.”<sup>2</sup>

The role is defined by flexibility and opportunity on one hand, and constraints on the other. It is continuously defined and redefined by the unique personalities, capabilities, and active engagement of the women who serve in the office. Despite challenges, time and again, examples emerged of first ladies making an impact.

This impact takes different forms, but as this report makes clear, first ladies often find themselves uniquely positioned to champion the wellbeing and rights of socially marginalized groups, including women and girls. Many of the women interviewed for this report have held significant leadership roles in politics, business, and civil

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1 Goodwin, D.K. (1994). *No Ordinary Times: Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt: The Home Front in WWII*. New York City, NY: Simon & Schuster.

2 *First Ladies of the United States*. National First Ladies Library, n.d. Web.<<http://firstladieslibrary.org/biographies/>>.

society, both before and after their time as first ladies. Sharing their experiences will contribute to wider lessons that can inform and inspire current and future first ladies as well as women leaders everywhere.

## METHODOLOGY

For this study, qualitative methods were used to explore the experiences of contemporary and historical first ladies from around the globe. The first step was to conduct a background literature review that included historical sources, such as memoirs and biographies of first ladies and their aides, as well as books and peer-reviewed journal articles that provided historical analysis of a first lady's role over time. Sources were found by systematically searching scholarly databases using a list of key terms. A broader internet search was conducted for less scholarly sources of information such as news stories, blogs, and unpublished papers and presentations. The background sources were analyzed to extract key themes regarding the expanding role and mandate of first ladies and the factors that shaped their agendas. To add another perspective, factors that supported or inhibited their exercise of leadership on issues of interest to them were analyzed.

These same themes were used when conducting in-depth interviews with current and former first ladies, some members of their staff and advisors, and historians who had extensively studied first ladies. A number of criteria guided the selection of which first ladies to interview. First, a deliberate sample was sought that would include a majority of respondents from outside of the United States; this was done as a major goal of this research is to expand the knowledge base about the experiences of first ladies worldwide, which has largely been undocumented. All first ladies interviewed were required to have served in the role for at least one year. Interviews were also sought from first ladies from a variety of countries across Europe, Africa, Latin America, and Asia, including high, middle, and low-income nations in addition to the United States. Women married to prime ministers as well as to presidents were included as well.

Invitations to the first ladies were extended by the Bush Institute and, as much as possible, were coordinated to occur around international events and other gatherings that would have involved first ladies.

Twenty-eight invitations were extended for interviews with first ladies and the research team received nine acceptances. Most of those who accepted made themselves available in person or over the phone for interviews, which were audio recorded and transcribed. In addition to in-person interviews, invitations were also extended for participation in the study via paper survey, receiving two submissions from first ladies who were not interviewed and two from first ladies who granted in-person interviews. Interviews with authors and historians were conducted when possible, based on their interest and availability, as was the case with staff, advisors, and content experts who had engaged with first ladies across advocacy and/or social programs. In-person or telephone interviews were conducted with three historians, one staff member, and 14 content experts. Some (but not all) of these interviews were also audio recorded and transcribed. The research was reviewed and approved by ICRW's institutional review board to ensure it met international standards for ethics in human subject research.

Transcripts and notes from the interviews as well as written responses from the surveys were analyzed using a qualitative data analysis software program called Nvivo. Data were coded by descriptive and analytic themes. Because this was primarily an exploratory inquiry, the analysis was conducted with no a priori hypotheses; instead, we used inductive analysis to detect common and divergent themes that are described in this report. In analyzing how first ladies were able to overcome challenges to exercising leadership, a conceptual framework leveraging key themes<sup>3</sup> explored by the Bush Institute through its leadership programs was used. This framework

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3 Smallwood, Norm, Sweetman, Kate, and Ulrich, Dave. *Leadership Code: Five Rules to Lead By*. Boston: Harvard Business, 2009. Print.

is comprised of five leadership capabilities: personal proficiency; vision; strategy; time and talent management; and execution.

This research builds upon and expands prior scholarship on first ladies, expanding the lens to include a global comparative perspective. However, the findings from this research do not presume to be representative of all first ladies across the globe. The sample of first ladies was limited to those who were interested and motivated to take part. Their experiences may differ from those who were not willing to participate or those outside of the sample. It is possible that because some of the first ladies interviewed had previous interaction with the Bush Institute, their perspectives had been influenced in similar ways, creating more commonality in responses than would be the case otherwise. This is considered a limitation in the analysis and the conclusions. Finally, this research was not designed to evaluate or “score” the success of first ladies based on any external criteria. Rather, this study sought to qualitatively analyze, among a small sample of first ladies, the many factors at play in how first ladies navigate and overcome challenges in exercising leadership.



## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Understanding the challenges and opportunities today's first ladies experience requires perspective on how a first lady's authority, recognition, and influence has developed and expanded over time. The role today encompasses a broad spectrum of responsibilities, from social hostess to issue-based advocate. How did this complex role come to be?

This section briefly outlines the historical development of the role, which is characterized by a gradual expansion of responsibility and opportunity to lead. On one hand, the gradual expansion of the first lady role does not seem surprising. Changes in the role over the past two centuries roughly track the historical trend toward more gender-equitable marriages, women's entry into the workforce, and their expanding voice and political participation in societies globally. A historical perspective also makes clear that first ladies have not only kept pace with past transformations, in some cases they have helped set the pace by forging unprecedented models of women's leadership and advocacy.

A four-part typology has been developed to describe the expanding role of first ladies using historical and contemporary examples to illustrate. This typology includes the roles of hostess, teammate, champion, and policy advocate, keeping in mind that the roles have been simplified and the classifications are not mutually exclusive. Although the four role types roughly map onto chronology—with early first ladies fitting into the hostess category primarily and contemporary first ladies increasingly taking on the champion and advocate role—the typology is best viewed not as an evolutionary trajectory but rather a description of the distinct yet overlapping modalities through which first ladies exert their influence. Most first ladies today still balance these multiple overlapping and, at times, conflicting responsibilities.

Finally, it is important to note that to date, historical research on first ladies has focused primarily on the United States. This is reflected in the discussion, with many examples drawn from American history. However, parallel historical trajectories in many younger and non-western democracies around the world can be seen. The growing legitimacy and formalization of a first lady's office is exemplified in countries such as Afghanistan, Chile, Ethiopia, and Namibia, as well as in the United States. More research needs to be conducted in order to fully appreciate the historical underpinnings of first lady roles in diverse societies.

### Hostess

Historically, the role of a first lady has been associated with that of a hostess. In this capacity, first ladies are expected to fulfill ceremonial responsibilities such as coordinating social gatherings, greeting guests, and attending events with their husbands.

In the United States, this precedent was set by Mrs. Martha Washington, spouse of George Washington, the country's first president. As the first to assume the unique position of America's First Lady, Mrs. Washington's every action would determine the expectations faced by her successors. Upon entering the role, she began to host weekly receptions for local constituents, members of Congress, and foreign dignitaries. Every Friday evening at the presidential mansion, guests would meet Mrs. Washington, enjoy food, and engage in conversation. While some criticized these receptions as reminiscent of the practices of the British monarchy, Mrs. Washington characterized her gatherings as critical to participatory democracy because they gathered diverse groups of

people for discussion.<sup>4</sup> Thus, even though her actions would be viewed as largely fulfilling a traditional female responsibility—to host social gatherings—her entertaining can also be seen as contributing to the diplomacy that was essential for the American presidency. With time, the role of first lady has expanded and adapted, but the ceremonial hostess responsibilities have persisted. And for good reason—this type of influence may be seen to fall under what is now commonly known as co-optive or soft power<sup>5</sup> and continues to form a critical responsibility of first ladies and presidents in the United States and other countries. Anita McBride, chief of staff for Mrs. Laura Bush from 2005 to 2009, reminds us that the first lady’s social office “is not to be diminished...it’s very important.” McBride goes on to describe Mrs. Bush’s approach in this regard:

*“[She] wanted to increase the amount of social entertaining at the White House because after 9/11 a lot of things changed [like] access to the White House and the number of state visits that we could host. The President was seeing foreign leaders all the time and it was a very delicate thing, protocol wise, to host a state dinner for one and not another when you were seeing so many...this is an important element to the role of President and First Lady.”*

Mrs. Sonia Gandhi, widow of the former Prime Minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi, regularly accompanied her husband on domestic and international travel. Unusual for the wife of an Indian politician, her presence helped strengthen existing relationships as well as build new ones. In an interview for this study, Rani Singh, reporter and author of *Sonia Gandhi: An Extraordinary Life, An Indian Dynasty*, describes: “[T]his cultural diplomacy they did, all these whirlwind tours of countries actually raised India’s prestige on the international scene, so it was reasonably well-received... she was seen as an asset.”

Over time, a first lady's role as hostess has become more culturally contested. Despite the influence it can have in cultural diplomacy, the hostess role conforms to what many view as an archaic gender stereotype. Many first ladies today find their leadership capabilities undermined by the expectation that they will take an active role in planning and hosting social events, something explored later in the report.

## Partner/Teammate

Another crucial part of a first lady's role, historically and in current times, is that of a political partner or teammate. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, marital relationships have gradually become more gender equitable, offering many first ladies newfound opportunities to wield political influence and power as teammates with their husbands. The ways this dynamic has played out are as unique as the individual relationships between wives and husbands, and of course are shaped by historical context. Mrs. Clementine Churchill, Mrs. Edith Bolling Wilson, and Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt provide interesting historical examples.

In the United Kingdom, where no formal role for a first lady exists even today, Mrs. Clementine Churchill carved out a platform of considerable influence. Her active involvement in political affairs as a first lady was a continuation of her involvement in Sir Winston Churchill’s career throughout their marriage. She considered herself a counterpart and advisor to her husband – not dissimilar to a chief of staff. Their relationship was a

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4 "The First, First Lady." *George Washington's Mount Vernon*. N.p., n.d. <<http://www.mountvernon.org/george-washington/martha-washington/the-first-first-lady/>>.

5 The term was introduced in 1990 in a book called *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* by Joseph Nye of Harvard University. Soft power refers to getting others to want the outcomes you want through presenting your own culture, political values and foreign policy rather than through coercion or payment.

partnership whereby Mrs. Churchill would step in when her husband needed help engaging the public or when political affairs went wrong. In interviewing biographer and political commentator Sonia Purnell, she describes Mrs. Churchill as “more of a first lady” than even her American counterparts:

*“Now that’s not because she has an office, she didn’t have staff; there was no formal position. However, it was what she made of it that made her such an important and distinguished figure and she was able to do that because she’d been involved in Winston Churchill’s career right from the point that she married him in 1908...She realized that to fulfill that job was a hugely demanding one. He didn’t ever really have a chief of staff...so she really stepped into that and she started advising him on his speeches, on his appointments, the things that might go wrong, things that he needed to look out for, and it very much became a partnership.”*

Purnell spoke at length about the visible and influential role Mrs. Churchill had during World War II, standing on rooftops to direct the fire brigade during the Blitz and directly advising her husband on which world leaders to ally with. Purnell points out that Mrs. Churchill also went on record to contradict him. In one case, she outright forbade him to take bilateral action with Greece until she returned home from her travels and could make the opposite case to his proposed allegiance. It is worth noting that Mrs. Churchill’s active involvement in political affairs was shaped by her experience of two world wars. As a wartime first lady, she recognized the contributions that the British people – especially women – would make on the home front. She encouraged women to enter the workplace and take part in the war effort, improved the quality of air raid shelters, and offered compensation to those who lost their homes. Throughout this period, the British people came to rely on her for their wartime needs. Not only had she proven her commitment, but people knew the nature of her relationship to her husband as a spouse, a teammate, and an advisor. As Purnell notes:

*“She was always optimistic and I think that made people want to help her and of course everyone knew she had the ultimate authority of the Prime Minister. Anything that she asked to be done, people knew that Churchill himself would always back up his wife.”*

Among American first ladies, Mrs. Edith Wilson engaged in a unique political partnership that was unfortunately born of a tragedy. It happened unexpectedly in October 1919, when President Woodrow Wilson became incapacitated by a serious stroke. Mrs. Wilson began to monitor all matters of state and to report that information to her ailing husband. In essence, she coordinated the operations of the executive branch of the government for the rest of the president’s second term, until March 1921.<sup>6</sup> She also served as a liaison between the president and the congressional leaders. In her memoir, Mrs. Wilson wrote:

*“I studied every paper sent from the different Secretaries or Senators, and tried to digest and present in tabloid form the things that, despite my vigilance, had to go to the President. I, myself, never made a single decision regarding the disposition of public affairs. The only decision that was mine was what was important and what was not, and the very important decision of when to present matters to my husband.”*

Similarly, in *My Memoir*, published in 1939, she humbly called her role a stewardship and insisted that her actions had been taken only because the president’s doctors told her to do so for her husband’s mental health.<sup>7</sup>

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6 "Edith Bolling Galt Wilson." *The White House*. The United States Government, 31 Dec. 2014. Web. <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/1600/first-ladies/edithwilson>>.

7 Wilson, Edith Bolling. *My Memoir*. N.p.: Bobbs Merrill, 1939. Print.

Interestingly, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt's active role as political partner to her husband, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), was also spurred, in part, by her husband's disability. After his mobility was impaired in 1921 due to polio, Mrs. Roosevelt became an active surrogate for her husband at public events, helping to keep his political prospects alive during his convalescence. While Mrs. Roosevelt had already been active as an advocate and political organizer in the Democratic Party, this period of standing-in for her husband accelerated her public participation in politics<sup>8</sup>—a path that would ultimately lead to her becoming one of the most revered women leaders of the 20th century. As one biographer writes:

*“...Howe [FDR's political advisor] encouraged Eleanor to become more involved in New York's Democratic Party, where she could serve as FDR's legs, eyes, and ears. Such activities were a boon to Eleanor, for they allowed her to work on the progressive causes in which she truly believed, providing her with a life of her own.”*

Despite having a rocky personal relationship, Eleanor and Franklin forged a long and productive working partnership, leveraging each other's strengths and assets to steer the country through the tumult of the Great Depression and World War II. This political partnership dynamic continues today, with first ladies occupying more visible partnership roles than ever before.

Echoing Mrs. Roosevelt, Ms. Maria Julia Pou, former First Lady of Uruguay, spoke about the value a first lady can add to her husband's perspective by serving as an extra set of “eyes and ears.”

*“Sometimes the entry point for a president is a woman that sees, or reads things, that others do not. I have lived that many times. And then I would tell [my husband], ‘I have heard this, what do you think?’ For example, when my father became a widower, I used to [assist him with] the groceries. Cashiers would talk to me so I would go to different markets. Sometimes, first ladies should provoke things, and people talk to you.”*

Many first ladies interviewed emphasized the active role they played in their husband's political campaigns as well as the personal sacrifices that were required. Prior to becoming First Lady of Spain, Ms. Ana Botella worked in administration and television journalism. During the campaign, she gave speeches and took part in public events. She explained, “I traveled a lot with my husband. I was sent to many unsuspected places during [the] campaign. I went to many places that nobody wanted to visit. I made many miles.” Ms. Botella recognized how important the presidency was to her husband's career, and so she left her job, and tried to be as committed as possible to being a visible first lady. She recalls:

*“When he became President, I participated in politics, campaigns, and public events. I stopped working. What did I do? On the one side, I am conscious that this is the most important time in my husband's life. Therefore I tried to help make this work the best possible way.”*

Ms. Botella's efforts to complement her husband's work ultimately helped her own career – as she credited her role as first lady to the success of her subsequent campaign to become Mayor of Madrid.

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8 Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia. “Franklin D. Roosevelt: Life Before the Presidency.” Accessed February 2, 2017. <<http://millercenter.org/president/biography/fdroosevelt-life-before-the-presidency>>.

Mrs. Ana Garcia de Hernández of Honduras used the word “complementarity” to describe the partnership with her husband. When her husband was running for president, she played an active role on the campaign trail – so much so that she followed her own agenda. When her husband spoke on one issue, she spoke on another – jointly covering all ground.

*“During the campaign, we had two separate agendas and we had very active roles. What he did not discuss, I discussed. There has always been a lot of complementarity between him and me at work. Maybe I can say that there are many cases where [this is not the case], but we both were active in the political campaign from the beginning, visiting many different communities around the country to [engage] and talk about the social area in my husband’s work.”*

## Champion

One of the most prominent roles of a first lady today is that of champion. In the United States, first ladies are now expected to choose and champion one or two key issues during their time in office. This champion role has become common worldwide. Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt was probably the most prominent model for this role. As America’s longest serving first lady, she was an indefatigable champion for a range of social justice causes.

As described by historian and biographer Allida Black, one of the last sentences she wrote before she died was that, “Staying aloof is not a solution. It is a cowardly evasion.” Mrs. Roosevelt lived by this ideal of active engagement and her vision for justice and inclusivity were cemented in her platform as first lady and beyond. During and after her time as first lady, she was a champion for issues that challenged the prevailing culture, such as racial equality, labor rights, and women’s rights, and she succeeded in this role in large part due to her intrepidity, as Black describes:

*“She refused Secret Service protection, and as she begins to speak out on issues of controversy, especially those revolving around race, the death threats on her escalate. She was very aware of both the support she had in the country and the nerve that she struck...Every day she saw in the most intimate, painful personal way possible, the shortcomings of democracy, but she never lost faith in trying to make it better...an act of unimaginable devotion and commitment.”*

Mrs. Roosevelt’s focus on championing the rights and wellbeing of socially marginalized populations, including women and children, was a common theme for other historical figures and, as explored later in the report, for many contemporary first ladies as well. Historian Sonia Purnell shared that during WWII, Mrs. Churchill pushed Sir Winston to be inclusive of women in the war effort. Though he remained conservative in his views, it was Mrs. Churchill who understood that “women’s contribution would be absolutely necessary” to winning the war. Despite his doubts, just before assuming the role of prime minister, Sir Winston gave a speech about how women needed to come and help the war effort, and according to Purnell:

*“[T]hat speech has [Clementine’s] fingerprints all over it. These were not [her husband’s] natural sentiments but she talked him around. And he would then subsequently become a very enthusiastic supporter of women fulfilling a huge role in the war and acknowledged that the war effort would have been much less likely to succeed without women.”*

A more contemporary example of a first lady forcefully championing an issue she cares deeply about was the speech given by former American First Lady and Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995. Now considered a pivotal moment in the global feminist movement, Secretary Clinton's decision to speak and the content of her remarks all came in direct opposition to the guidance and agenda of both her spouse and his administration. State Department officials had explicitly counseled her not to speak, not to embrace human rights, and not to attack China – all of which she ultimately did:

*“Tragically, women are most often the ones whose human rights are violated. Even now, in the late 20th century, the rape of women continues to be used as an instrument of armed conflict. Women and children make up a large majority of the world’s refugees. And when women are excluded from the political process, they become even more vulnerable to abuse. I believe that now, on the eve of a new millennium, it is time to break the silence. It is time for us to say here in Beijing, and for the world to hear, that it is no longer acceptable to discuss women’s rights as separate from human rights.”*

Almost unanimously, the first ladies interviewed for this study spoke of the importance of having a platform stemming from issues they were passionate about. In this regard, they also expressed a strong desire to have a specialized staff to advance their particular initiatives.

Demonstrating the influence of first ladies on the global stage, principals are often tapped as advocates by international organizations. During her time as First Lady of the Dominican Republic, Vice President Margarita Cedeño de Fernandez was appointed as a Goodwill Ambassador on behalf of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Dr. Christine Kaseba-Sata, former First Lady of Zambia, served as the World Health Organization's Goodwill Ambassador on Gender-Based Violence, helping to steward attention on the issue and the adoption of a landmark resolution strengthening the role of the health care system in prevention and support for survivors. In 2016, Namibian First Lady Monica Geingos, a champion for youth empowerment, was appointed as the UNAIDS Special Advocate for Young Women and Adolescent Girls. Speaking on the influence of Mrs. Geingos in this role, UNAIDS Executive Director Michel Sidibé said:

*“I am delighted that Madame Geingos has accepted this position. She will be using her platform to find partners and solutions to some of the difficult health issues facing young women and adolescent girls today, including HIV prevention and sexual and reproductive health, as well as access to education.”*

## **Policy Advocate**

In some cases, first ladies have expanded their role as issue champions to take on a more explicit role as policy advocates. In the advocate role, a number of first ladies have proven instrumental in advancing policy and encouraging government and private sector action.

Former American First Lady Mrs. Rosalynn Carter was an active champion for the issue of mental health throughout her tenure in the East Wing, and from 1977 she also served as honorary chair of the President's Commission on Mental Health. She was the second first lady to testify before a congressional committee; the first was Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, who in 1940 testified on housing conditions among indigent people who lived in welfare institutions. Mrs. Carter testified on behalf of the Mental Health Bill, which was subsequently enacted in 1980.

An advocate for women's rights in Costa Rica, during her time as first lady, Mrs. Margarita Penón was a key promoter of the country's Gender Equality Law. Passed by Congress in 1989, the legislation broadened concepts of gender equality to more comprehensively address education, sexual violence and abuse, and economic and social protection.<sup>9</sup>

As first lady, Mrs. Laura Bush had a strong influence on the global human rights agenda, including her advocacy for women and girls in Afghanistan and human rights and democracy in Burma. Describing this advocacy in her book *Spoken From the Heart*, Mrs. Bush reflected on her influence with regard to Burma, noting, "While I was in the White House, some of what I did to aid the Burmese had to be done in secret... But by the fall of 2006, I could no longer remain publicly silent." As Jerry Zremski documented in a 2016 series for the *Buffalo News* on Burma, "The first lady's office organized that [United Nations] panel on Burma. The next year, she met with refugees from Burma at the White House, and when the Burmese army cracked down on Buddhist monks in August 2007, she called Ban Ki-Moon, the U.N. secretary general, and asked him to act."<sup>10</sup>

She was the first American First Lady to conduct a press conference in the press briefing room at the White House; the topic was how the regime in Burma was denying access to humanitarian relief after Cyclone Nargis, and that this was a result of the military dictatorship. In 2008, during a visit to Thailand, she toured refugee camps and border lands. Encouraging bipartisan action, Mrs. Bush responded to invitations to Capitol Hill by the Senate Women's Bipartisan Caucus on Burma, and stood with them, arm-in-arm, advocating on behalf of human rights in Burma and the release of Aung San Suu Kyi.

In Ethiopia, Mrs. Roman Tesfaye has proven an instrumental force in efforts to address the issue of women's cancers in the region. An advocate for women's health, in her role as first lady, Mrs. Roman founded the Ethiopian National Cancer Control Committee and supported the creation of the country's first National Cancer Control Plan, launched with the Ethiopian Federal Minister of Health in 2015. Her efforts have placed increased attention on the need for improved treatment systems in combatting non-communicable diseases and the value of public private partnerships, like Pink Ribbon Red Ribbon, a global partnership to fight women's cancers in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America.

As seen in the next section, first ladies tend to tread carefully when deciding when and how to engage in the role as policy advocate. Secretary Clinton provides an interesting case in point. Building on her past advocacy work with the Children's Defense Fund, she effectively influenced the national discourse on whether access to affordable healthcare should be seen as a right rather than a privilege. However, when she adopted a more active role in policy making by accepting to lead the Clinton Presidency's healthcare reform effort, she was widely criticized and the effort was decried as a failure. A manifestation of this role was the symbolic move of the First Lady's Office from the traditional, residential East Wing of the White House to the policy-oriented West Wing—a move that was widely rebuked and, indeed, has not been replicated by subsequent First Ladies to date. Ultimately, her vision—or a version of it—was enacted during President Obama's presidency with the passage of the Affordable Care Act.

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9 Leitinger, I. A. (1997). *The Costa Rican women's movement: A reader*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

10 Zremski, Jeremy. "Laura Bush: A Hero to the Refugees of Burma." *Buffalonews.com*. The Buffalo News, 2016. <<http://projects.buffalonews.com/long-reads/burma/laura-bush.html>>.

## THE ROLE OF FIRST LADY TODAY

First ladies today are writing the next chapter of that continuing story. What do their experiences tell us about the challenges and promise of first ladies as leaders? This section examines how recent and current first ladies, from diverse countries, navigate a complex leadership role—one that is full of possibilities, yet defined by constraints and contradictions. Many common themes in how first ladies experienced the constraints and challenges of the role, while they also seized opportunities to guide, influence, lead, and serve are highlighted.

### Constraints and Challenges

#### *A role without a rulebook*

The first and most obvious challenge of being a first lady involves stepping into a role that is often poorly defined, or in some cases not defined at all. In the vast majority of examples, expectations for how a first lady will occupy her time while “in office” are defined by custom rather than law. While this flexibility may present an opportunity for women to mold the role to fit their personalities and interests, it also poses a unique set of challenges—namely that in order to be successful, first ladies must actively craft and defend their leadership platform.

One way to learn about how this challenge played out for first ladies worldwide is to identify where their role sits on a spectrum that ranges from highly institutionalized on one extreme to completely informal on the other. We spoke to several first ladies whose countries lacked any institutionalized role for first lady. Mrs. Garcia de Hernández explained this situation:

*“What happens with the First Ladies in Honduras is that there is not an institutional body that backs up their work. For example, in Guatemala, there is an office that supports the work of the First Lady. In Mexico, we know that there are roles already established for the First Lady. Not in Honduras, this is more voluntary work defined by each woman with their own agenda.”*

Similarly, in Japan, Mrs. Akie Abe reflected in a 2016 interview, “It means nothing to be the prime minister’s wife—she is just the wife of a prime minister...She is not a member of the Imperial family, so she doesn’t have any official duties. She gets no budget from the government, nor is she afforded any protection from police.”<sup>11</sup>

Ms. Botella found herself in a similar situation. In the absence of a formal role, she crafted a position she felt was suitable for her personality and the circumstances:

*“The role of [first lady] did not exist. There were no real precedents so I tried to adapt myself to the circumstances and my own personality. When there is nothing established, your primary role is to contribute to make things work well during the years of the presidency.”*

In the middle of the spectrum are countries where the role has only recently been established, and a new first lady must create a precedent.

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11 Daimon, Sayuri. "Japan's First Lady, Akie Abe, Speaks Her Own Mind." *Japantimes.co.jp*. The Japan Times, 18 June 2016. <<http://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2016/06/18/national/japans-first-lady-akie-abe-speaks-mind/>>.



In Namibia, a formal Office of the First Lady was only institutionalized after former First Lady Mrs. Penehupifo Pohamba was selected as President of the Organization of African First Ladies Against HIV/AIDS (OAFLA) in 2011, three years before the end of her husband's second term as President.

Mrs. Roman was the first Ethiopian First Lady to have a position formally supported within the Prime Minister's Office. She found that she had to justify her position to those within government:

*"It is the first experience for Ethiopia to sit in the Prime Minister's Office as a first lady and to be part of that office. The former First Lady was active in social activities, but she used her own office and of course she has been supported logistically in a different manner but not as directly as I was. So it's somehow new for the people around there... What helped me to win their support was that I tried to explain what I'm going to do, how it's going to be done, and just by communicating very clearly what's the advantage of being there and what we are going to gain from that establishment."*

Even though the Office of the First Lady of Ethiopia is now recognized as an official unit within the Office of the Prime Minister, it is not provided an annual budget. Mrs. Roman, whose work is purely voluntary and non-paid, has three professional and one support staff to execute the daily activities. Since the Office is not government funded, Mrs. Roman must marshal the resources required to implement core activities from local and international donors and partners.

By contrast, the First Lady's Office in the United States is comparatively formal and generously resourced; however, its staffing, and therefore its capacity, is controlled by the President's Office and must be actively negotiated. As Anita McBride explains, staff members working with the First Lady are actually "considered staff of the President of the United States assigned to the Office of the First Lady." The Chief of Staff of the President, working with the Head of Management Administration, determines how many staff members the First Lady will get based on past practices and budget considerations.

Similarly, in Namibia, the first lady is a formal role with historic precedent and resources, yet the responsibilities and mandate of the role remain nebulous and must be negotiated by each woman who holds the office. Throughout her interview, Mrs. Geingos stressed that first ladies need to be strong and determined enough to shape the role for their own purposes:

*"Normally when you assume the Office of the First Lady there's nothing. There's nobody and there's nothing because the previous staff have left with the former first lady and you normally don't even find a computer with any information... There will always be challenges around the role and function [of first ladies], and first ladies need to almost determine their role first themselves. You'll always get conflicting advice and guidance—security will tell you one thing, protocol will tell you another thing, the minister will tell you a different thing. And sometimes your husband will not necessarily be supportive of a specific activity or there may be political considerations that make it very sensitive. The First Lady really needs to first decide, within herself, what is it that she really wants to do—because you're never going to get one version."*

### ***The burden of gender stereotypes***

As seen in the discussion of first ladies in a historical perspective, the role of ceremonial hostess has always been prominent for first ladies. The expectation that first ladies will concern themselves with coordinating the functions of house and home helps to perpetuate gender stereotypes that can become challenging for first ladies to

navigate. Demonstrated in interviews and other resources explored across this study, archetypes associated with the role of the first lady often take precedence over individual personality and personal proficiency. As Secretary Clinton described in her experience in the East Wing, "Who I really am as a person is ultimately less important to the public than what they want me to represent as a persona."<sup>12</sup>

Many first ladies interviewed for this study said that such traditional expectations – because they are tied to inequitable gender norms and stereotypes – at times demeaned their expertise and capacity. Vice President Cedeño de Fernandez recognized that her primary challenge was “changing the perception of the role of a first lady.” Mrs. Rula Ghani, First Lady of Afghanistan, who has publicly championed the rights of Afghan women and girls, admitted that “I think up until now...there are people who think that my role is not really very important.”

Mrs. Roman, who significantly expanded the role of First Lady in Ethiopia, articulated a similar frustration in juggling her ceremonial roles with her desire to spend time pushing forward her advocacy initiatives:

*“One of the challenging things is that I have to support my husband, the Prime Minister. I have to accompany him in his state visits and to some of the important events...[That is the reality for] every First Lady... When our husbands need us we accompany them, we receive guests, [and] when we have to be there for any [number of] reasons, we are withdrawn from our [priority issues].”*

As Mrs. Roman’s words convey, the public is accustomed to seeing the first lady at her husband’s side; if she were missing or replaced by another person, her absence would likely raise questions.

For Ms. Vanda Pignato, former First Lady of El Salvador, gender stereotypes were evident in the resistance she encountered in developing Ciudad Mujer - a Salvadoran government initiative to establish one-stop centers that provide specialized services for women including job training, maternal and reproductive health support, self-sufficiency education and skills training. Reflecting on these challenges in *Ciudad Mujer: A New Public Management Model for Equality and Peace*, Ms. Pignato cited distrust from government officials and gender advocates over “the fact that the First Lady left her traditional role of charity”<sup>13</sup> to take on social inclusion and to combat violence and discrimination of women. “An empowered woman who is always ready to fight back makes people uncomfortable,”<sup>14</sup> she said. Like Ms. Pignato, many first ladies interviewed across this study expressed a desire to do more with their role.

Mrs. Laura Bush sees the disregard accorded to first ladies as symptomatic of the wider disrespect often reserved for all women in positions of influence:

*“The role of the First Lady is often seen as just a social role where you decorate the Governor’s mansion, the White House, or wherever you live. But I think that this view is not just for the First Lady. This is in general for women who are not taken as seriously, as men are, especially women candidates. And that’s changing.”*

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12 Anthony, Carl Sferrazza. "It's Not Easy Being First Lady." *CNN.com*. Cable News Network, 13 Jan. 2012. Web. <<http://www.cnn.com/2012/01/12/opinion/anthony-first-lady/>>.

13 Pignato, V. (2015). *Ciudad Mujer: A New Public Management Model for Equality and Peace*. San Salvador: Impresos Múltiples, 37

14 Pignato, V., 37.

She goes on to describe how former American First Lady Lady Bird Johnson was belittled by the press:

*“I remember when Lady Bird Johnson, who I admired and knew well because she was a Texan, started what really was the beginning of the environmental movement. Her use of native plants and planting the roadsides with the wildflowers and wild grasses that would’ve grown there before. And I remember that people thought, ‘Oh, isn’t that nice? The little First Lady likes flowers’ instead of what it really was. She made a huge impact, especially in our state. Eventually, she was taken seriously, but at the time it was seen as simply a sweet hobby instead of as an important effort for the environment.”*

Another challenging facet of gender stereotyping for first ladies pertains to the public’s endless fascination with the first lady’s appearance. For example, in *The Atlantic*, Megan Garber writes that whenever Secretary Clinton experimented with clothes, media outlets were always quick to criticize – distracting from her actual work. Thus, Garber argues that Clinton now sticks to her signature pantsuit as a means of avoiding conversation on her appearance.<sup>15</sup>

However, the men who occupy the role of first spouse are rarely subject to having their appearance scrutinized. Whether looking at examples like Dennis Thatcher (Margaret Thatcher), Joachim Sauer (Angela Merkel), Nicholas Robinson (Mary Robinson), or the newly installed Philip May (Theresa May), male spouses have escaped the relentless critiques their female contemporaries had to endure. Recently, the British press called out the double standard in their coverage of Mr. May’s first appearance outside 10 Downing with his wife, Prime Minister Theresa May. *The Telegraph* satirically commented on Mr. May’s outfit:

*“There were...tongue-in-cheek comments elsewhere about the shoes and the ‘sexy suit’ he wore to Downing Street, too: ‘Philip elongated his pins with a pair of black brogues as he accompanied his wife to step over the threshold of their new home...’; ‘a single fastened button at the waist helped show off his fantastic figure and a pale blue tie brought out the colour of his eyes’, and ‘round glasses perched on his nose accentuated his amazing bone structure’. Of course First Wives have had to put up with this kind of scrutiny for years. So, why not First Husbands?”*

Mrs. Geingos represents how things have begun to change for some first ladies. She has worked to establish an alternative set of norms regarding the behavior of first ladies:

*“I am very lucky. I’ve got a country that wouldn’t care whether I wear the same outfit every two weeks. Or whether I wear makeup or have braids in my hair. We’ve kind of established one another between myself and my country in terms of I’m not a fashionista. I’m not going to speak carefully. I will speak what I speak and you must take it as you take it. And I don’t get lambasted for things that I see other first ladies being criticized for simply because we’ve built a rapport.”*

### ***The legitimacy gap***

A third theme that commonly arose in the interviews with first ladies was the challenge inherent in exercising leadership without having been chosen to do so. The limits of a first lady’s influence as a leader are inevitably

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15 Garber, Megan. "Why the Pantsuit?" *The Atlantic*. *The Atlantic*, 2 Aug. 2016. Web. <<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/08/youre-fashionable-enough-hillary/493877/>>.

constrained by this undeniable reality: she has no mandate from citizens to pursue specific agendas. Ms. Botella expressed the situation simply: “I knew very well that I was not the one who was elected. My husband was the one who had been elected.” Mrs. Pat Nixon, former First Lady to the United States, echoed this sentiment during her time in the role, citing the position as “the hardest unpaid job in the world.”

Fulfilling expectations as a first lady without formal authority is a tough paradox. Unappointed, unpaid, yet official, first ladies navigate a tightrope of conflicting expectations and demands. One of the first challenges faced by many first ladies is establishing their legitimacy to lead and influence. Doing so successfully doesn’t come easily and requires great skill and fortitude.

*The New York Times* journalist Lynn Rosselini captured the struggles faced by American first ladies who are often criticized for not striking the “right” balance of activism and passivity. Reporting on the criticism received by former American First Lady Mrs. Nancy Reagan in her early years at the White House, she wrote:

*“Eleanor Roosevelt was assailed by her contemporaries for the very activism that made later generations regard her as outstanding. Mamie Eisenhower was criticized for being inactive, and Jacqueline Kennedy for spending too much money on clothes. Betty Ford was criticized for speaking out too much and Rosalynn Carter for sitting in on Cabinet meetings. As for Nancy Reagan, there are those who applaud her attempts to restore white-glove elegance to the White House.”<sup>16</sup>*

First ladies may also find their legitimacy as leaders constrained by the political atmosphere that surrounds their husbands. A first lady’s agenda can be criticized or demeaned by political opponents – thus obstructing her ability to effectively influence change. For instance, Mrs. Kateryna Yushchenko, former First Lady of Ukraine, described how her husband’s political opponents blocked her from implementing social reforms and projects:

*“My husband’s political opponents tried to stall some of our initiatives, or criticized them in media...The entrenched bureaucracy resisted some of the reforms we tried to effect in health, education, and the arts...We were not able to finish our biggest project, the construction of a state-of-the-art children’s hospital, because of huge bureaucratic barriers, inactivity among people in my husband’s administration, and interference [by] political opponents.”*

Likewise, former Chilean First Lady Mrs. Cecilia Morel, whose husband’s election with the National Renewal Party ousted the opposition Coalition of Parties for Democracy after 20 years, revealed the resistance she experienced upon entering office. The lack of continuity between administrations left her largely isolated, struggling to obtain support from the preceding staff and the members of nonprofit organizations through which the first lady’s office operated.

*“The 2010-2014 Administration came with the triumph of a political coalition that acted as the opposition for 20 years. Thus, there was no one to consult from previous administrations for support. Initially, there was even some resistance from the people that had worked for two decades in the Foundations under a different political view.”*

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16 Rosellini, Lynn. "First Lady Tells Critics: 'I'm Just Bein Myself'." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 12 Oct. 1981. Web. <<http://www.nytimes.com/1981/10/13/us/first-lady-tells-critics-i-am-just-being-myself.html>>.

Mrs. Michelle Obama, as the first African-American First Lady of the United States, has recounted her experiences with racism during her eight years at the White House. While her messaging of “when they go low, I go high,” a motto for maintaining resilience in the face of criticism, became widely popular towards the end of her husband’s term, Mrs. Obama admits that she initially lost sleep over these personalized attacks:

*“And over the years, folks have used plenty of interesting words to describe me. One said I exhibited ‘a little bit of uppity-ism.’ Another noted that I was one of my husband’s ‘cronies of color.’ Cable news once charmingly referred to me as ‘Obama’s Baby Mama.’ And all of this used to really get to me. Back in those days, I had a lot of sleepless nights, worrying about what people thought of me.”<sup>17</sup>*

When first ladies take on positions of activism and political involvement, they are afforded a small margin of error before they become subjects of criticism. In an effort to maintain their legitimacy as leaders in an unelected position, they may be compelled to walk a tightrope. This kind of pressure relates to the gender stereotyping that many first ladies – and women in positions of leadership – commonly experience.

As mentioned earlier in this report, contrary to her success on the campaign trail, Secretary Clinton’s symbolic relocation of the First Lady’s Office from its traditional location in the East Wing of the White House to the policy-oriented West Wing was widely criticized and seen as overstepping the boundaries in which a first lady can operate, even though the role is not prescribed.

Likewise, after her husband’s death in 2014, Dr. Kaseba-Sata launched a bid for her party’s nomination in the by-election. Criticized by political opponents, her actions were cited as “shocking and morally wrong...defying all established Zambian cultural and traditional norms of a dignified grieving widow.”<sup>18</sup>

## Seizing Opportunities to Lead

Though the first lady role is frequently portrayed as being one of privilege, it is also one of responsibility. Executing those responsibilities successfully comes with experience, skill, and commitment. This section explores the many ways first ladies overcame the challenges of the role and succeeded in advancing the issues they cared deeply about. In doing so, a five-part leadership framework that was explored by at the Bush Institute was utilized to distill the key components of successful leaders: personal proficiency, vision, strategic focus, management of time and talent, and capacity to execute on plans. Moreover, how current and recent first ladies have exhibited these key leadership skills and qualities, and to what end is also explored.

### *Personal proficiency*

For any leader, woman or man, personal proficiency is the bedrock upon which they build and execute an agenda. First ladies around the world today are actively expanding their role by putting their professional expertise to work. In some instances, heads of state formally call on their spouse to assist with governance. In

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17 Chan, Melissa. "Michelle Obama Has Faced Racism as First Lady. Here's How She Responded." *Time.com*. Time, 16 Nov. 2016. Web. <<http://time.com/4573554/michelle-obama-racism-first-lady/>>.

18 Malambo, Clement. "Zambia: It's Wrong for Kaseba to Reach for Presidency - Msoni." *AllAfrica.com*. All Africa, 19 Nov. 2014. Web. <<http://allafrica.com/stories/201411200318.html>>.

others, first ladies leverage their past experience to establish an independent yet complementary action agenda. Either way, a first lady's preparedness to champion issues and advocate for policy is greater than any time in history.

Ms. Botella astutely observes the changes she has seen in the role:

*“I think that the role of the First Ladies, either the wives of Presidents or Prime Ministers, has changed lately because of the changes in the role of women [more broadly]. Women’s incorporation [within] the labor market, [and their] visibility, and [decision] opinion making [in] public life in general. This affected change in the role of the first ladies because of a very complex thing. It is very difficult to ask a woman who has university level education and has [established a career] to stop working when her husband [is elected into office].”*

As Ms. Botella points out, contemporary first ladies increasingly desire to continue their professional work by channeling that energy into their role as first lady. The interviews revealed many examples of how first ladies translated their past experience into their current leadership.

Mrs. Laura Bush explained how she drew on her experience as a teacher and librarian to help her husband advance his education agenda.

*“I knew from the beginning when George was Governor and then President that my background of being a teacher and a librarian was helpful – especially to a governor because education is such an important part of the role. When George became President, No Child Left Behind was a big focus, a comprehensive education law that he had championed during the campaign. There were a lot of things that I could do to help...a lot of ways I could build on my own expertise to help my country.”*

Similarly, Mrs. Garcia de Hernández has been part of her husband’s political career over many years. She described how her work as the first lady built on her experience from working in tandem with her husband to develop social programs for the poor. Her activities as first lady are now fully integrated into government mechanisms:

*“[Our engagement in politics] was first a family decision. Together with my husband...we launched a social program called Vida Mejor (Living Better). With Vida Mejor we started to understand people’s perceived needs, the poorest people’s needs...Little by little this program started growing. [Now], I work really hand-in-hand with the Vice Minister of Social Development and Inclusion because she is in charge of social management with the Minister. The Director of the Center for Women is also here. My job is to support institutions and, yes, I take advantage of my role as first lady, my leadership, to give the work more political visibility... My husband [also] designated me to be the coordinator of the task force to serve migrant children [and the] coordinator of the Criando con Amor (Raising with Love) program...[First and foremost] is that the work we are doing in my office is aligned with the vision and plan of the country.”*

Mrs. Geingos, who has led an active career in the private sector, utilized her background in finance and as a women's rights advocate to promote gender equity within both the policy and function of the President's Office:

*"I was the first female chairperson of a commercial bank and private equity firm. When I entered, there weren't women so I think I managed to play a relatively trailblazing role in relation to [female leadership] in the private sector... The women's empowerment movement in Namibia is generally strong and I like to think I'm part of that in terms of advocating for [gender equality] and pushing sensitivities. For instance, if I see a guest list [without women], I'll ask my husband why are there only men [invited]?. "Oh, oh, we didn't think about it, sorry, sorry, sorry." We correct it. It doesn't get done intentionally, it just needs guardians who point it out, and it'll be rectified the minute you point it out so I think we're doing quite well."*

A lawyer by training, Vice President Cedeño de Fernandez described how gender stereotypes have limited the scope of what first ladies seek to accomplish—focusing on piecemeal philanthropic endeavors as opposed to working at the policy level for systematic and sustainable change. She goes on to describe her approach toward the work, rooted in her professional expertise and passion for bringing about change:

*"There has always been a stereotype about first ladies having to dedicate [themselves] only to social welfare. I had studied so much, and there were so many things to do, that [it would have been a waste] to dedicate [my time to] only distribute wheelchairs, baskets, and other things like that."*

Overcoming these barriers through action, Vice President Cedeño de Fernandez would go on to serve as a vital voice in the development of social programs in her husband's administration. Through a strategic agenda aligned with the President's policy objectives, including advancing progress on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Vice President Cedeño de Fernandez turned the Office of the First Lady into an "agent of social transformation." Her efforts to address poverty, the digital divide, child health, and family strengthening were widely recognized by international organizations and non-profits. As a result, during her time as first lady, she was appointed to a number of international advocacy positions.

One common theme among the first ladies interviewed for this study was the tactic of enhancing personal proficiency by networking with other first ladies and learning from their experiences. Many first ladies noted that in the context of absent or conflicting guidance on how to structure their activities as first lady, advice that is passed down between first ladies or shared among peer first ladies becomes a lifeline. Mrs. Roman articulated the sense of relief she got from interacting with other first ladies:

*"Luckily, we have an organization named OAFLA. That platform gives us a good opportunity to exchange our views and share our experiences. To be frank, when someone starts as a first lady, it feels like something frightening... [H]ow can I start to be public and so on... When we meet each other, we encourage and advise each other, and we share experiences... [and principles]."*

Similarly, Mrs. Laura Bush, spoke about the myriad ways she had benefitted from her relationships with other first ladies:

*"Well of course I had my mother-in-law, [Mrs. Barbara Bush]. I had a special role model, somebody who I'd watched for years. I was also the First Lady of Texas for six years. One of the things we had with the National Governor's Association (NGA) was a First Ladies Association. At least once a year, state first ladies*

*met at the NGA meetings, There would usually be a formal program with a First Lady presenting a project that others could learn from or duplicate, and this was really helpful...I also had friendships and association with a number of first ladies from other countries, like Cherie Blair.”*

Following her experience of having virtually no transition between the former first lady and herself, Mrs. Geingos has been making great efforts to institutionalize partnerships among the first ladies within her country.

*“It’s only another first lady who can prepare you for that role, especially the former first lady from your own country. So try as much as you can, no matter how toxic or friendly the relationship between your husbands may be, to establish that relationship ... I’ve started what’s called the First Ladies Advisory Council, and my office will be secretariat. I want it chaired by the former first lady and [Namibia’s first] first lady is also a member.”*

### ***Vision: The people’s work***

Historically and continuing to the present, one enduring trend is how first ladies have effectively established a strategic vision by forging a special relationship with their country’s citizenry. As Ms. Botella noted, “Your role is to make a series of things visible ... You can help make visible the work of many groups that lack visibility ... I was always in touch with the people.”

By being compassionate listeners and supportive facilitators, first ladies often utilize a form of leadership first described in the 1940s by Mary Parker Follett, an American social worker and pioneer of management science. She described the power inherent in a strategy of reciprocal leadership encapsulated in the phrase “power with, not over.”<sup>19</sup> First ladies bring a focus on advancing “the program of the population” and building bridges between citizens and their leaders.

Mrs. Geingos underscored this point, highlighting the apolitical nature of her role and her responsibility to all Namibians regardless of their political loyalties and backgrounds:

*“I’ve always been engaged in assisting the party, and as First Lady, I don’t see my role as necessarily political. I try and always tell people when we’re talking about things, [for example] if we go to grassroots women, we couldn’t care less if [they are] women from the ruling party or women from opposition parties. We couldn’t care less about [differences in] ethnicity, language, or region. I think I see my role as First Lady as a national figure, the same as my husband. Your obligation isn’t to the people who elected you or the people who like you. Your obligation is to everybody.”*

Describing her appreciation for the opportunity to make a difference, Vice President Cedeño de Fernandez stressed the essential need for having a vision as well as empathy in approaching the role of first lady:

*“I want to say that we have to work unselfishly with no other interest than improving the living conditions of our people. If we do this with love and without political interest, people will understand, and God helps. Even if you are not interested in politics, at least you will know that you did something, that you were useful*

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<sup>19</sup> Follett, Mary P. "Dynamic Administration: The Collected Papers of Mary Parker Follett", ed. by E. M. Fox and L. Urwick (London: Pitman Publishing, 1940)



*during the presidency. In my country, a first lady can do many things and has a lot of power. Instead of using the power over somebody, let's use the power to do something to improve people's quality of life - to help empower women, to [provide children better] living conditions, to improve citizens' rights, and to exercise free rights to progress."*

Despite legitimacy gaps in Japan, Mrs. Abe is recognized as a national figure both at home and abroad. She attributes this to her nature as an individual and specifically to her ability to connect with people beyond cultural and societal boundaries. "I don't think I have any special talents...I'm one of the few people in this country who can talk to a wide range of people, from the Emperor to the homeless."<sup>20</sup>

"First ladies occupy a very unique position, [an] advantageous position, in that they are close to their husbands more than any other person, and also they are very close to their people. And their motherly and sisterly approach, it's a very unique position... I didn't want to lose a single minute, a single day without doing my best, without trying to address the program of the population," reflects Mrs. Roman.

Building on this service ethic, it is not surprising that first ladies often focus on advancing agendas that are highly aligned with government priorities, therefore complementing existing initiatives instead of establishing superfluous efforts. This also gives them an opportunity to supplement any gaps in resources while promoting collaboration and public engagement among government, private sector, and civil society stakeholders.

In Namibia, a chief emphasis of Mrs. Geingos's work is accomplished through her recently launched One Economy Foundation. With a focus on merging the "dual economies," (the first and second economy) Mrs. Geingos has aligned the Foundation's principles alongside the government's Harambee Prosperity Plan, a policy blueprint focused on economic advancement, effective governance, infrastructure improvements, and social inclusion. As a result of her foundation, there are links between Mrs. Geingos's initiatives and the wider efforts of her husband's administration.

While there are obvious benefits in this symbiotic relationship, Mrs. Geingos also offered words of caution, accentuating the value of balance in this approach:

*"To me, it's complementary [to the Presidency], which is what the role of the first lady should do... Obviously you don't want to utilize the support of your husband too much. It [can] create problems... I'm very careful with that. I have my husband's support and I know it [and] it's not something I utilize easily when I have challenges. There's some things I just don't tell him, otherwise he may feel an obligation to assist. ... I think he's got enough issues. But in terms of the partnership, it works exceptionally well."*

In Afghanistan, where Mrs. Ghani has focused on gender empowerment, her vision for her platform is rooted in both her character as an individual and the opportunity to augment existing efforts. Insistent on using her voice to complement the work of government institutions and civil society activists, Mrs. Ghani emphasized how she carries out her platform on behalf of the people:

*"My motto is to listen, to facilitate, to advocate, so basically I start from listening. I don't set the agenda. It's the people who come to me and who explain to me what they want and what are their concerns, what are*

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<sup>20</sup> Daimon, Sayuri. "Japan's First Lady speaks her mind."

*their complaints, what are their hopes, and sometimes I know what to do, so I help; I'm very flexible. I keep telling my team it's not about me...It's not about what I want. It's much more about trying to make it easy for the women of Afghanistan who have not had an opportunity to raise their voice or to be heard. It's an opportunity to be able to be present in the conversation."*

As first lady, Mrs. Ghani has an "open door policy" that gives her the opportunity to hear from citizens and elevate their concerns across ministries and other institutions.

### ***Strategic Focus: Empowering people who have been left behind***

The mutually supportive bond many first ladies forge with citizens can be easily misconstrued and underestimated. The first ladies interviewed for this research portrayed it as a source of power, inspiration, and legitimacy. As Vice President Cedeño de Fernandez stated while reflecting on her approach to her leadership platform:

*"We needed to do something that brings a change on people, to have a real impact on the population, and to empower people that are left behind. Let's not use the word 'forgotten' or 'invisible,' but let's say people that were facing challenges in terms of inclusion and integration."*

This section explores the many ways first ladies advance important issues, including improving the status and wellbeing of women, children, and other vulnerable populations.

Mrs. Laura Bush's influence in advancing human rights is reflected in her advocacy for women in Afghanistan, her support to the human rights activism in Burma, and her promotion of global health programs like the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and Pink Ribbon Red Ribbon. Both behind the scenes and in public roles, Mrs. Bush's efforts have focused increased attention on situations often overlooked by the public. Reflecting on her platform of solidarity with those fighting gender inequality and oppression in Afghanistan, Mrs. Bush wrote in the introduction to *We Are Afghan Women: Voices of Hope*:<sup>21</sup>

*"I am fortunate to have been able to help. I can speak out. I can support relief efforts. I have met with Afghan women who are teachers, lawyers, judges, human rights workers, and parliamentarians. I host conferences. I give speeches and publish op-eds. I have met with women studying to become police officers. I support scholarship programs and present diplomas. I serve as an honorary co-chair of the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council, a unique public-private partnership to improve the education, health, economic, and leadership status of Afghan women and children. And I can ensure the inspiring and beautiful voices of Afghan women will be heard."*

By using their platforms as "voices of the voiceless," first ladies have at times found opportunities to push against deeply engrained biases by opposing stigmatization of vulnerable groups and offering a more inclusive and equitable vision of society that predates later political and legal advances.

In India, during her travels with her husband to rural communities, Mrs. Gandhi recognized the opportunity to connect with citizens who otherwise were without a voice. As Rani Singh described:

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21 *We Are Afghan Women: Voices of Hope*. New York: Scribner, 2016. Print. xix

*“[W]hen they were working in India, visiting rural areas, Sonia would always act... She would always make a beeline for the neediest and the weakest person in the crowd; she seemed to have a natural concern. And somebody said she seemed to grow her strengths from looking into the faces of the poor when she went into constituencies.”*

Mrs. Geingos has been working to combat violence against women and girls. With the aim of understanding and addressing the underlying issues that incite gender-based violence, her work includes strategic engagement with both survivors and perpetrators of violence:

*“We have a serious issue with gender-based violence. If you have a gender-based violence issue in the house, we must assume that you’ll never climb to the top of the ladder wherever and whatever you’re doing. We’ll also assume your children will not be able to exercise their best academic ability either. We need to go into the homes in relation to certain issues, and that’s what we’re doing... [with a] focus [that] tries to take a holistic view. What we’ve done differently is look at supporting the victims better, both from a process [and a] policy perspective, And we’re also trying to look at the recourses now from the perspective of the perpetrator... We’ve been really trying to take [a] partnership approach and also [work] on the stigma related to inmates to say that you can’t call people animals because our jails are reflections of our societies. If those are animals, then we created them. And if we reject them when they come out of jail, they’ll simply go back into the same behavior that took them there. So we are very actively supporting our correctional facilities.”*

Likewise in her interview, Mrs. Ghani made it clear that she wanted to use her bully pulpit as first lady to make space for Afghan women to vocalize their problems and find solutions. She did not want her position as the country’s first public first lady to overshadow any of the work that Afghan women activists had done; instead, she wanted to help them find the resources they needed and the right audience. In her own words:

*“I facilitate, I’m there to make it easier. I have an advisor that knows what she’s doing and we facilitate; [and] I think I’ve been very careful not to upstage anyone. [Y]ou have to remember that in Afghanistan, we have some very active women who are political advocates, and they’re very articulate. [T]hey really know their business. [T]hey know what they’re doing, and I’m not here to do their work or to upstage them.”*

Mrs. Ghani has recognized the strengths and potential of Afghan women. While their narratives are often framed in the context of war, she would like to help them take the opportunity to speak for themselves, express their own stories, and find their own solutions:

*“What I’ve been trying [to do] is to encourage the women to raise their voice. I always tell them, “You know your problems much better than I do.” I am not very familiar with their own circumstances, especially if they come from far [away] provinces. They know what their constraints are; they know what their basic problems are. They have to find their own solution...and they usually are very good at [this]. Usually our discussions, [end] with an idea of what they want to do. I cannot say I’m pushing for this or pushing for that I’m really pushing them to be more active and to be responsible for their own destiny. And I have found that Afghan women are really very strong, they’re really very clear about what their problems are, and they’re very creative about how to go about finding solutions. So I cannot take credit for what they’re doing.”*

During her early months as the American First Lady, Mrs. Barbara Bush visited Grandma's House, a Washington-based facility that cares for abandoned and neglected children, including HIV positive infants. Citing a "tremendous need" for love and understanding around those battling the disease, throughout her visit Mrs. Bush aimed to dispel inaccuracies and stigma: "You can hug and pick up AIDS babies and people who have the HIV virus without hurting yourself . . . There is a need for compassion."<sup>22</sup> Cradling an infant during her visit, the first lady's motherly demeanor was captured in a now famous photograph published in newspapers across the country. "We've had so much trouble with all the talk about the dangers of personal contact. Here, the First Lady isn't afraid – and that's worth more than a thousand public service announcements," said Jim Graham, administrator of the Whitman-Walker Clinic at the time. "You can't imagine what one hug from the First Lady is worth."<sup>23</sup>

Reflecting on the experience, Mrs. Bush noted:

*"The day you become the "wife of the President-elect," no matter what you say, it's crucially important, it's amazing . . . [W]hen George became President, I told my office that I wanted to do something every single day for somebody."*

In Tanzania, during her role as first lady and continuing into her advocacy through the Wanawake Na Maendeleo (WAMA Foundation), Mama Salma Kikwete has challenged the engrained stigmas and misconceptions related to maternal health services, especially with regard to women's cancers. She recognized that women are likely to come forward and use such services when they hear from a woman they trust – "[if you are] a leader [you] should show the way."<sup>24</sup> Plagued with the second highest rate of cervical cancer in sub-Saharan Africa, a disease both preventable and treatable, Mama Kikwete's actions had a notable influence in breaking down stigmas and saving lives.

### ***Management of Time and Talent***

As explored across this study, first ladies regularly encounter a set of pre-conceived expectations about their role. In some form or another, this often includes adopting an agenda, engaging with the public, and the assumption of a high level of visibility. As U.S. President Ronald Reagan once said in response to Mrs. Reagan's active schedule, "You know, with the first lady the government gets an employee free; they have her just about as busy as they have me."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Romano, Lois. "The Hug That Says It All." *The Washington Post*. WP Company, 23 Mar. 1989. Web.

<[https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1989/03/23/the-hug-that-says-it-all/7a1ca11b-51cc-453f-bc0d-8cd92392aba2/?utm\\_term=.bdbc827be6a5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1989/03/23/the-hug-that-says-it-all/7a1ca11b-51cc-453f-bc0d-8cd92392aba2/?utm_term=.bdbc827be6a5)>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Gonnella-Platts, Natalie. "Leading by Example: The First Lady of Tanzania and Her Fight Against Women's Cancers." George W. Bush Institute, 2015. <<http://www.bushcenter.org/publications/articles/2015/02/leading-by-example-the-first-lady-of-tanzania-and-her-fight-against-womens-cancers.html>>.

<sup>25</sup> "Ronald Reagan: Remarks in an Interview with Independent Radio Network Correspondents on Domestic and Foreign Policy Issues." Ronald Reagan: *Remarks in an Interview With Independent Radio Network Correspondents on Domestic and Foreign Policy Issues*. The American Presidency Project, University of Santa Barbara, 18 Dec. 1982. Web. <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=42130>>.

Unfortunately, first ladies may not have the capacity to respond to all demands. Their ability to implement programs, connect with citizens, and effectively influence change largely depends on their access to and management of resources, particularly reliable staff members.

"I think the American first lady can do anything she wants to do. And probably anything she doesn't want to do," said Mrs. Barbara Bush, adding that, "A good office makes a difference. I mean a huge difference. I had a very good office, who opened up things for me."

In many cases, the availability of these resources depends on the formal recognition of a first lady's position or office. For instance, Mrs. Sophie Gregoire Trudeau, wife of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, is not formally recognized with an official position, and she has no physical office or any staff beyond one assistant. Despite this resource gap, Mrs. Trudeau is inundated with speaking requests and other public demands on her time. While she has expressed a desire to do more, she has been clear in her limitations: "I'd love to be everywhere, but I can't. I have three children and a husband who is prime minister. I need help. I need a team to help me serve the people."<sup>26</sup>

Mrs. Trudeau's comments drew intense backlash from political opponents who mocked her request for help. While some social media users echoed this criticism, others called attention to the outdated reaction many people have when women are candid in needing help. Altogether, Mrs. Trudeau's situation clearly illustrates the inherent tension between public demands and the enduring fact that a first lady is, by definition, not elected and thereby subject to questions as to what extent she is eligible for support.

Mrs. Roman recognized that maintaining an adequate staff was one of the greatest challenges to effectively fulfilling her role. In her own words:

*"The most critical challenge I face in executing my role is acquiring and retaining adequate numbers of professional staff. My office, as the first [official] Office of the First Lady in the history of the country, has been in existence for only three years, which makes it relatively new and still in the process of defining, clarifying, and expanding its role. We need to establish standard systems and procedures to increase the efficiency and outreach of the office ... There is a significant resource need not only to sustain and strengthen the ongoing initiatives, but also to expand our scope of work to more areas that require intervention. Access to technical and financial resources are very important and among our key challenges."*

To secure these resources, Mrs. Roman looked to partner with institutions in both the public and private sectors. She also decided to anchor her office within that of the Prime Minister's so she could obtain logistic support from existing staff.

Like Mrs. Roman, Mrs. Ghani was first in her country to lead an official office. She also indicated that finding qualified staff was one of her main priorities. She started with just one secretary, who had worked with the previous first lady, but quickly recognized that an influx of visitors and requests would require greater support. Mrs. Ghani worked with her husband to establish a team of talent totaling ten individuals, all of whom she emphasized were professionals old enough to remember a peaceful and stable pre-war Afghanistan:

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26 "I Need Help': Sophie Grégoire Trudeau's Plea Sparks Anger in Canada." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 15 May 2016. Web. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/16/i-need-help-first-lady-sophie-trudeaus-anger-canada>>.

*“And in the third week, which was already October, I started with one secretary who used to be social secretary of the previous first lady, Mrs. Karzai. And I thought I’d have occasional visitors and all this. Eventually I got advisors. I got delegation after delegation coming to see me, and the office grew gradually. Right now I have four advisors who are ladies who are a few years younger than I am, but basically the generation that knew Afghanistan before the war. And maybe some of them have lived abroad and have come back. Others have been there throughout the war, and I have equal number of supporting staff. All together we are about nine to ten people.”*

In cases where first ladies had access to staff and resources, they acknowledged them as integral contributors to their success. In Chile, where the Office of the First Lady has historically operated within the Sociocultural Division of the Presidency, Ms. Morel cited the value of her staff as “[o]ne of the most important facilitators” to leveraging her platform effectively as first lady. In reflecting on the critical need for experienced personnel, Ms. Morel added, “[B]eing able to delegate and trust the people on [her] Cabinet and the Directors of the different programs . . . became the key ingredient to a successful term.”

Mrs. Laura Bush uniquely benefited from having staff members that she worked with as First Lady of Texas when her husband served as governor of the state. When describing the ease with which she assumed the role of First Lady, she did not hesitate in giving due credit to her staff:

*“I knew what I could work on and I also had a really good staff. And this is one thing that a lot of first ladies don’t have... I had people that went with me from Texas that had worked for me and been on my staff.”*

Thus, not only did she have a supportive staff that helped her implement her agenda, but also many familiar staff members who had worked on her state initiatives. For example, the Texas Book Festival would later inspire the federally-funded National Book Festival, an event program that also continued during the Obama administration.

### ***Executor***

Despite the challenges that persist across the role, first ladies have forged ahead. Leveraging the visibility of their platform through effective collaboration and communication, spouses of state leaders have encouraged action in response to critical issues at home and abroad.

Reflecting on this unique ability to inspire change, Ms. Pou noted:

*“You are not a simple citizen and nobody looks at you as a simple citizen. [W]hen a first lady picks up the phone and calls somebody, it’s Somebody.”*

For example, Mrs. Obama was instrumental in the implementation and scale of Let Girls Learn, a government initiative to ensure access to quality education for girls worldwide. Galvanizing multi-sector support, Mrs. Obama’s engagement on behalf of the 62 million girls out of school globally yielded an initial \$250 million dollar appropriation in the President’s Budget Request and a public-facing campaign for grassroots donations to the Peace Corps in support of the program, resulting in more than \$2 million raised in the first year alone of the initiative.

“By encouraging dialogue and friendly relations” among stakeholders, Ms. Morel leveraged public-private partnerships to steward action on issues including nutrition and wellbeing, education, and women’s and youth empowerment.

Working in collaboration with existing institutions during her time as First Lady (and continuing afterwards), Ms. Pignato led the development and implementation of Ciudad Mujer. Through Ms. Pignato’s leadership and strategic engagement with citizens and stakeholders, Ciudad Mujer’s holistic model quickly gained attention beyond its borders. Ms. Pignato correspondingly emerged as a leading figure for other first ladies in the Latin American region. In one instance, her influence was seen at an event at the International Development Bank in October 2015, where Vice President Cedeño de Fernandez and Mrs. Garcia de Hernández joined her to discuss the adaptation of the model and its role in empowering women across Latin America and the Caribbean. Since its inception in El Salvador, program elements have been adopted in Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Colombia, Trinidad and Tobago, and Paraguay.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to collaboration and outreach, some first ladies take steps to directly engage with local, national, and international media by conveying their stories themselves. A prime example is Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt who, according to historian Allida Black, “wrote 27 books, more than 8,000 columns and more than 500 newspaper articles, and gave 75 speeches a year all without a ghost writer.” She describes Mrs. Roosevelt as a “master of the media,” as she directly coordinated with the press to avoid misrepresentation. She held regular press conferences so that she could communicate in her own style, and invited only female reporters so that women could maintain their jobs during the Great Depression. Mrs. Roosevelt published a newspaper column for 26 years so that, as Black proclaims, “. . . if the press got it wrong, she used her column to get it right.”

Likewise, Anita McBride described the media’s role in supporting a first lady and engaging the public. As Chief of Staff, McBride invited reporters to travel with Mrs. Laura Bush and her team on international trips so that the importance of her work could be conveyed to the American public.

*“The media is sometimes interested, and sometimes they’re not. That was always one of the things that was a priority for us, bringing the story. . . back home. We tried very hard to always have a traveling press pool with us that represented different media outlets, cable news stations, the network stations, newspapers, radio, in the hopes that you can get this information out to as many people as possible.”*

McBride also describes how Mrs. Bush established a positive relationship with the media. Throughout her public involvement, she learned how to coordinate with them, and was always well prepared to respond to any kind of question.

*“[M]edia training is helpful, but still I come back to the fact why I think Laura Bush, in particular, always had a positive relationship with the press. She really had a deep knowledge of what she was talking about; she was well-read, she was well-studied, she was properly briefed. She had a gift of knowing how to use language, saying more with less, so there’s a bit of innate instinct. She was very astute, and this is coming from a woman who was very shy, [who] never wanted to be in the public eye, but had to learn how to do it. [She also recognized that] it was important for her voice to be out there because, again, it was helping her husband.”*

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27 "El Salvador Expands Ciudad Mujer with IDB Support." *Inter-American Development Bank*. N.p., 25 Nov. 2015. Web. <<http://www.iadb.org/en/news/news-releases/2015-11-25/el-salvador-expands-ciudad-mujer-with-idb-support,11337.html>>.

Moreover, as social media has rapidly expanded across the last decade, first ladies have proven to be some of the most prominent influencers among these platforms. For example, ranking the most powerful women on Twitter in 2014, Forbes cited three (current and former) first ladies to their list: Secretary Clinton, Mrs. Sarah Brown (spouse of the former prime minister of the United Kingdom), and HM Queen Rania al Abdullah of Jordan.<sup>28</sup>

"Mobile technology and social media have enabled us to widen our call . . . We all have a part to play in supporting those around the world who strive for change,"<sup>29</sup> wrote Mrs. Brown in a 2013 op-ed in support of White Ribbon Alliance. In addition to the Forbes list, in 2012 *The Independent* scored her Twitter handle as the second most influential in the United Kingdom – the only woman in the top 10 (of only 17 included across the list). At the time, Richard Branson was the only person who outranked her.<sup>30</sup>

With social media evolving throughout her time at the White House, Mrs. Obama regularly utilized digital opportunities to connect with audiences and build support for platform efforts.

Her "Turnip for What" video<sup>31</sup> on Vine garnered six million views in a single day<sup>32</sup>, and she strategically launched her official Snapchat channel ahead of her 2016 trip to Liberia, Morocco, and Spain in support of Let Girls Learn.<sup>33</sup> "[Social media] bypasses the middle man," said Mrs. Obama in a 2014 interview with *The Verge*<sup>34</sup>. "People can get to know me directly. They can see that I'm kind of silly sometimes, that I care. They can feel the passion, [and] they don't have to have it filtered through another source. And young people in particular like that."

For Mrs. Geingos, the use of social media has provided a means to bring her concerns to attention, especially for young people whose voices have traditionally been overlooked by government institutions:

*"[Y]oung people are starting to feel very familiar with me because I speak to them a lot on social media. When they start experiencing challenges in the system, they are very quick to call my office. It's not our business, but I will take their complaint. I will [create] a cover letter, and I will send it to the [appropriate ministry]. Some ministers react well, others don't, but my belief is that the Office of the First Lady is an*

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28 Leahey, Colleen. "The Eight Most Powerful Woman Tweepers." *Fortune.com*. Fortune, 05 Oct. 2014. Web. <<http://fortune.com/2014/02/06/the-eight-most-powerful-women-tweepers-fortunes-most-powerful-women-global-edition/>>.

29 Brown, Sarah. "Grassroots Mobilization Saves Mothers' Lives." *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine, 30 May 2013. <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/skollworldforum/2013/05/30/sarah-brown-grassroots-mobilization-saves-mothers-lives/#34d0320e5f0a>>.

30 "The Twitter 100: The Full At-a-glance List." *The Independent*. Independent Digital News and Media, 2012. Web. <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/news/the-twitter-100-the-full-at-a-glance-list-7467920.html> <<https://vine.co/v/OqJKZVQami9>>.

31 "Hey, Alphacat. The First Lady Wants to Know... #TurnipForWhat?" *Vine*. The White House, 15 Oct. 2014. Web. <<https://vine.co/v/OqJKZVQami9>>.

32 Michelle Obama 360: An Exclusive Look at How the First Lady Mastered Social Media." *The Verge*. The Verge, 14 Mar. 2016. Web. 08 Feb. 2017. <<http://www.theverge.com/2016/3/14/11179572/first-lady-michelle-obama-vr-interview-social-media-pictures>>.

33 "First Lady Michelle Obama Launches Snapchat Account Ahead of Upcoming Let Girls Learn Travel to the Republic of Liberia, the Kingdom of Morocco and the Kingdom of Spain." *National Archives and Records Administration*. National Archives and Records Administration, 21 June 2016. Web. <<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/21/first-lady-michelle-obama-launches-snapchat-account-ahead-upcoming-let>>.

34 Opam, "Michelle Obama 360: An exclusive look at how the First Lady mastered social media."



*apolitical conduit between those who feel disenfranchised, those who feel [left out]of the so-called system,.  
[For] people who don't have access, I feel my role is to connect them."*

In addition to her active presence on Twitter and Facebook, Mrs. Geingos has also embraced the power of social media to stay engaged with critical stakeholders who are working to advance initiatives across Namibia. This includes her active participation in a WhatsApp group, created by the Namibian Minister of Health, to connect key decision makers across the country.

## THE NEXT ACT

Women’s professional and leadership journeys start well before they become first ladies and certainly don’t end when they leave office. In many cases, women build upon their experiences as first ladies to take on prominent leadership positions after leaving office. In fact, for some, the most interesting chapters of their leadership careers are written after the formal Office of the First Lady. As Mrs. Laura Bush noted:

*“Everything that you work on, you’re never finished with. You don’t get to rub your hands together and say, ‘Well, we took care of education,’ because you don’t, there’s another class of first graders. Everything I worked on are things that everyone in society needs to work on. I think we don’t ever get to really say we’re finished with an issue. They’re all ongoing just because that’s how life changes.”*

Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt provided an exceptional example. Following the death of her husband in 1945, President Truman appointed her to serve on the first U.S. delegation to the United Nations, where she chaired the Human Rights Commission and helped author the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Adopted by the UN in 1948, the declaration forms the foundation of human rights law today. It is the basis for a multitude of international treaties and conventions that bind nations to a common set of values. Building upon her legacy as champion and advocate for the rights and dignity of marginalized people, Mrs. Roosevelt became, in President Truman’s words, “First Lady of the World.”

Mrs. Roosevelt’s legacy and exalted status on the global stage is, of course, a rarity, forged from her unique personality and the extraordinary historical times in which she lived. First ladies’ achievements need not be so venerated for them to nevertheless be meaningful.

Though often overlooked, former first ladies many times put their leadership skills to work as philanthropists, advocates, public servants, and business owners.

For example, in addition to her work as a lawyer and businesswomen, Mrs. Cherie Blair, spouse of the former prime minister of the United Kingdom, is a prominent advocate for gender equality worldwide. Assuming financial responsibility for her family at a young age, Mrs. Blair is well known for her promotion of women’s economic empowerment and financial independence. The first in her family to attend university (and the first wife of a British Prime Minister to hold a degree), her personal experience inspired her work with the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women, an organization focused on building confidence, capability, and capital for women worldwide. Reflecting on her work in this regard, Mrs. Blair noted:

*“I’ve always felt very strongly that no woman should be held back from realizing her dreams just because she is a woman ... The specific inspiration for the Foundation came during my time in Downing Street, when I had the extraordinary privilege of traveling a great deal. I met so many incredible women around the world – women who were struggling to set up businesses and create better lives for themselves and their families. Many of them succeeded, against the odds, but many did not. I thought that there must be a way to empower these women to overcome the barriers they faced, such as not being able to access the*

*capital, skills or networks that are so crucial to business success. That's where the idea for my Foundation was born.<sup>35</sup>*

Utilizing personal proficiency, strategic focus, and the value of collaboration to execute goals, to date, the Foundation has reached over 136,000 women in 90 countries across the globe. In 2013, Mrs. Blair was awarded a Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (CBE) by HM Queen Elizabeth II for her services to women's issues and to charity in the United Kingdom and Overseas.

Looking beyond her time in the East Wing, Secretary Clinton's political accomplishments are well-known worldwide, including her service as Senator for New York State, Secretary of State in the Obama administration, two presidential bids, becoming the first woman nominee of a major political party, and the first woman to win the popular vote in a general election. Secretary Clinton is the most visible former first lady to seek major political office, but certainly not the only one. As mentioned earlier in this report, in the Dominican Republic, Margarita Cedeño de Fernandez now serves as Vice President and was re-elected to her second term in 2016. In Spain, Ms. Botella served as Mayor of Madrid from 2011-2015, the first female elected to the role in the city's history. Mrs. Sonia Gandhi has served as the President of the Indian National Congress since 1998. Mrs. Margarita Zavala de Calderon, former First Lady of Mexico, is currently pursuing a bid for her country's presidency in the 2018 election. And in Uruguay, although she stresses that it was at first "absolutely not in [her] plans," Ms. Pou ran and won a seat in the country's Senate. She used her experience as first lady to set a vision and to connect with constituents. Having the opportunity to draw from her expertise and interests greatly helped her while she was in a political office. Reflecting on the experience, Ms. Pou noted:

*"It was because I began to help, and of course I was known all over the country. And men in politics began to realize that it was important to have some women, and having the recognition factor is an advantage ... you do not need to tell them who you are. For me, I say that politics is social action with decision-making power."*

Mrs. Laura Bush has remained active through the Bush Institute and the Laura Bush Foundation for America's Libraries. Ms. Graça Machel who, in addition to many notable roles, served as First Lady of Mozambique and later South Africa, continues to advocate for gender equality within Africa and across the globe. Mrs. Barbara Bush is widely known for her enduring commitment to family literacy through the work of the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy. Mrs. Samantha Cameron, spouse of the former prime minister of the United Kingdom, launched her own fashion brand, returning to her professional focus on art and design after leaving 10 Downing Street.

While this is by no means an exhaustive list, it is a good representation of how first ladies continue to serve as champions (and at times, in a more active but less widely known manner) beyond their spouse's time in office. Though they are no longer the acting first lady, for many spouses of former heads of state, the legacy of the position and their visibility as women leaders continues to bear influence across a vast array of environments, issues, and opportunities.

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35 McPherson, Susan. "How Cherie Blair Is Fighting For Women's Economic Independence." *Forbes*. *Forbes Magazine*, 23 Dec. 2016. Web. <<http://www.forbes.com/sites/susanmcperson/2016/12/21/how-cherie-blair-is-fighting-for-womens-economic-independence/#68e04635fb29>>.

## CONCLUSION

As documented in the examples across this study, a first lady's journey can be an arduous path. Unelected but still official, first ladies must play both public and non-political roles. Amid a highly visible platform with little room for error, often without formal structure or support, gender typecasts manifest scrutiny.

Yet despite these challenges, many first ladies continue moving forward, seizing on opportunities to lead. Hostess, teammate, champion, and policy advocate at home and abroad, first ladies are increasingly recognized as figures of influence. Aided by their empathy, accessibility, and individuality, they have used their podiums effectively by applying core leadership attributes to whatever they decide to do.

In looking to the future and continued expansion of a first lady's role, the research team identified four recommendations to support their efforts, their staff, and those who wish to engage with first ladies on mutual areas of interest. Though this report specifically examines the role and influence of first ladies, the recommendations identified below also yield value for women leaders generally who seek to build a platform for impact:

### **1. Develop a strategic vision**

Among competing priorities and ever present constraints, first ladies are markedly aided by the development and implementation of a strategic vision. Despite inadequate resources and an undefined "job description," by aligning their visions with the unique prominence of their position, first ladies can set a clear path forward, advancing important causes and opportunities for action.

### **2. Engage with citizens and peers**

First ladies have a unique opportunity to transcend boundaries. Their capacity to engage with citizens from all walks of life presents an opportunity to break down barriers and elevate issues of importance. When used effectively, a first lady's social capital can generate a vital bridge between civil society and government institutions. Moreover, first ladies benefit from engaging with their peers. Communication and outreach with predecessors, successors, and contemporaries affords opportunities to share best practices and learn from others who are or were in similar positions of influence.

### **3. Encourage collaboration among stakeholders**

Collaboration is a vital force for change. Partnerships, by their very nature, present an opportunity to engage diverse ideas. As apolitical influencers, first ladies have a powerful opportunity to unite people and/or groups and encourage cooperation. In working toward a common objective, collaboration also presents opportunities to offset resource limitations and other barriers while encouraging sustained impact across campaigns and programs.

### **4. Promote the value of women as leaders**

At every level of society, women's leadership matters. When women are educated, their children are more likely to be educated. When women have access to quality health care, their families are healthier. When women have equal entry to the economy, their communities are more prosperous. For communities to flourish, every citizen must have equal opportunities to maximize her or his potential. With a distinctive ability to engage civil society and government institutions, spouses of state leaders are moving the needle forward on critical issues at local and national levels. Because it inspires both advocacy and action, when used effectively, a first lady's podium is a catalyst for change.

## ABOUT US

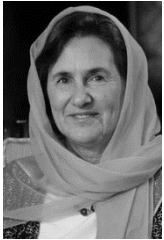
### **The George W. Bush Institute**

Housed within the George W. Bush Presidential Center, the George W. Bush Institute is an action-oriented, nonpartisan policy organization with the mission of developing leaders, advancing policy, and taking action to solve today's most pressing challenges. The work is achieved through three Impact Centers – Domestic Excellence, Global Leadership, and the Engagement Agenda – by which the Bush Institute engages the greater community with its important work. The Bush Institute's First Ladies Initiative engages and supports First Ladies from around the world to effectively use their unique platforms to advance issues for women and girls in their countries.

### **The International Center for Research on Women**

The International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) is the world's premier research institute focused on women and girls. ICRW's research analyzes the obstacles preventing women and girls from being healthy, safe, economically strong and able to fully participate in society. Headquartered in Washington, DC, with regional headquarters in New Delhi, India, and Kampala, Uganda, ICRW collaborates with partners at local, regional and international levels to conduct pioneering empirical research, provide technical services, build capacity and advocate for evidence-based policies and programs to safeguard women's human rights, promote gender equality and create the conditions in which all women and girls can thrive.

## BIOGRAPHIES OF GLOBAL FIRST LADIES PROFILED FOR THIS REPORT



### **Mrs. Rula Ghani, First Lady of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan**

Mrs. Rula Ghani, current First Lady of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan since 2014, is the wife of President Ashraf Ghani.

An outspoken advocate for the marginalized peoples of Afghanistan, particularly women, Mrs. Ghani frequently attends and speaks at international events and serves as a connection to the government for Afghan citizens, regularly hosting visitors in her office.

Born to a Lebanese-Christian family, Mrs. Ghani holds advanced degrees in political science and journalism from Sciences Po, the American University of Beirut, and Columbia University. Time Magazine named Mrs. Ghani one of the 100 Most Influential People of 2015.



### **Ms. Cecilia Morel, former First Lady of the Republic of Chile**

Ms. Cecilia Morel served as the First Lady of the Republic of Chile from 2010 to 2014 during the presidency of her husband, Sebastián Piñera.

A family counselor by trade, Ms. Morel's passion for vulnerable communities served as the impetus for the creation of a number of social organizations, including a home for disadvantaged youth in Conchalí, a project to promote the dignity of young people imprisoned in Puente Alto, and the Emprende Women's Foundation, an organization that promotes the employment and training of vulnerable women. She also created and managed Choose Healthy Living, a public policy that sought to promote healthy habits in Chile, which became law in May 2013.

As First Lady, Ms. Morel presided over the seven foundations of the Presidential Sociocultural Directorate, where she proposed improvements to service and administration resources, sought to strengthen public-private partnerships, and transparency.

Since leaving office, Ms. Morel formed the Chile Vive Sano Foundation to fight obesity. Born in San Jose de Maipo, Ms. Morel received a degree in family counseling from Carlos Casanueva Institute.



### **Vice President Margarita Cedeño de Fernández, former First Lady of the Dominican Republic**

Vice President Margarita Cedeño de Fernández, wife of former President Leonel Fernández Reyna, served as First Lady of the Dominican Republic from 2004 to 2012.

As First Lady, Vice President Cedeño de Fernández championed the rights and dignity of vulnerable populations. Through the implementation of poverty reduction and development programs at the national level, she pursued four major projects, including a training program for impoverished families; the creation of rural community technology centers; Social Solidarity, a program to raise awareness of preventative health measures and to provide medical support to underserved areas; and a reading program to promote the cultural development and understanding among citizens.

Vice President Cedeño de Fernández was named Goodwill Ambassador of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), as well as Continental Ambassador for the Elimination of Rubella in the Americas, and Global Ambassador for the Special Olympics. She also served as a member of the International Panel of Eminent Persons of UNCTAD.

In her current role, an office she assumed in 2012, Vice President Cedeño de Fernández continues her advocacy for vulnerable Dominicans. A native of Santo Domingo, she received a Doctor of Law from the Autonomous University of Santo Domingo.



**Mrs. Roman Tesfaye, First Lady of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia**

Mrs. Roman Tesfaye is the current First Lady of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and is married to Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, who took office in 2012.

As First Lady, Mrs. Roman has focused her attention on building economic opportunities for Ethiopian women, addressing nutrition and education for youth, and promoting global health initiatives that combat women’s cancers. Her work on these issues was recently honored at a 2016 women’s summit where she received the Special Congregation Proclamation by the General Assembly of the state of Georgia.

Prior to serving as First Lady, Mrs. Roman was the economic advisor of South Region’s administration. Mrs. Roman has also previously held high-level roles within the Ministry of Women’s Affairs, the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission, and for two terms, the Southern Regional State Parliament as an active member.

Mrs. Roman was born in Wolaita, Ethiopia and holds two master’s degrees in economics and organizational leadership.



**Mrs. Ana Garcia de Hernández, First Lady of the Republic of Honduras**

Mrs. Ana Garcia de Hernández is the current First Lady of the Republic of Honduras and is married to President Juan Orlando Hernández, who took office in 2014.

As First Lady, Mrs. Hernández leads efforts on a number of causes, including the prevention of teen pregnancy and the child migration crisis from Central and South America. She also works to highlight the needs of the elderly and disabled, promote early childhood development, and raise awareness for women’s issues, including women’s cancers.

Prior to her role as the First Lady, Mrs. Hernández and her husband worked with the Better Life Program, developing social projects to supply water filters to needy communities, support budding entrepreneurs, build classrooms, provide scholarships and courses in English, promote women’s involvement in the production of handicrafts, and other endeavors.

Born in the city of Tegucigalpa, Mrs. Hernández attended the National Autonomous University of Honduras and the University of Albany.



**The Honorable Sonia Gandhi, former First Lady of the Republic of India**

The Honorable Sonia Gandhi, widow of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, served as First Lady of India from 1984 to 1989.

Upon taking office, Mrs. Gandhi traveled with the Prime Minister on several state visits, serving as a cultural ambassador of India’s rich history. As spouse to the Prime Minister, Mrs. Gandhi was inspired by the women and children of rural India, advocating for their needs and wellbeing. While Mrs. Gandhi preferred to remain out of politics during her husband’s administration, she was known to have influenced the Prime Minister to take a keen interest in women’s issues and cultural affairs.

After her husband was assassinated in 1991, Mrs. Gandhi officially took charge of the party in 1998 and was elected to parliament in 1999. Her work for the party includes her support for the party’s welfare schemes; the right to information; food security; education laws; demand for a new state of Telangana; and reform of an anti-LGBT law.

Born in Orbassano, Italy, Gandhi attended the University of Cambridge where she studied English.



**Mrs. Monica Geingos, First Lady of the Republic of Namibia**

Mrs. Monica Geingos is the current First Lady of the Republic of Namibia, and is married to President Hage Geingob, Namibia’s third president.

A lawyer and businesswoman. Mrs. Geingos has over 15 years of professional experience in the financial sector. Leveraging her unique platform to inspire change, in 2016 Mrs. Geingos created the One Economy Foundation to create a more inclusive economy for all Namibians. In addition to her foundation, Mrs. Geingos is a prominent advocate for women’s and youth empowerment, education, and efforts to combat gender-based violence.

The youngest member to be inducted into the Namibian Business Hall of Fame, Mrs. Geingos has received numerous awards for her work and has served on the boards of large public and private sector companies. In 2016, the UNAIDS Executive Director appointed Mrs. Geingos as Special Advocate for Young Women and Adolescent Girls.

Born in Oranjemund, Mrs. Geingos attended the University of Namibia.



**The Honorable Ana Botella, former First Lady of Spain**

The Honorable Ana Botella, wife of former President José María Aznar, served as the First Lady of Spain from 1996 to 2004.

As First Lady, Ms. Botella focused on a number of projects to empower marginalized communities and improve lives across Spain. In 2003, she was elected to the City Council of Madrid, where she also served as Second Deputy Mayor.



Following her time as First Lady, Ms. Botella joined the Environment Department in 2007. She later went on to take office as mayor in 2011 and remained in the position until 2015, serving as the first female mayor in Madrid's history.

A native of Madrid, Mayor Botella received a degree in Law from the Complutense University of Madrid. She currently serves as the Executive President of the Integra Foundation.



**Mrs. Kateryna Yushchenko, former First Lady of Ukraine**

Mrs. Kateryna Yushchenko, wife of former President Viktor Yushchenko, served as the First Lady of Ukraine from 2005 to 2010.

As First Lady and Chairperson of Ukraine 3000 Foundation, Mrs. Yushchenko was and continues to be active in charitable, historical, and cultural activities. In her role as First Lady, Mrs. Yushchenko focused on healthcare, education, disability rights, and child poverty. Ms. Yushchenko also sought to promote her country's culture, art, and history in Ukraine and abroad.

Mrs. Yushchenko was born to immigrant parents and raised in Chicago, Illinois. After receiving a degree in international economics from Georgetown University and an MBA from the University of Chicago, Mrs. Yushchenko worked in various roles in the United States government.



**The Baroness Spencer-Churchill of Chartwell, former First Lady of the United Kingdom**

Mrs. Clementine Churchill, wife of Sir Winston Churchill, former prime minister of the United Kingdom, was First Lady from 1940 to 1945 and again from 1951 to 1955.

A passionate advocate, Mrs. Churchill is credited with having significantly influenced her husband's actions during his tumultuous times in office. Her philanthropic endeavors during the Second World War were extensive and her regular engagement with citizens allowed her the unique position to report to her husband on public sentiment. Mrs. Churchill served as the president of the YWCA Wartime Fund from 1941 to 1947, taking a special interest in hostels for service women and continued her work after the war and chaired its national hostels committee from 1949 to 1952. Widely considered her most substantial public work, Mrs. Churchill became chairman of the Red Cross Aid to Russia Fund and raised £6,700,000 through Mrs. Churchill's Fund.

After her husband's death in 1965, Mrs. Churchill became a cross-bench member of the House of Lords.

Born in London, Mrs. Churchill received three honorary degrees.



**Mrs. Barbara Bush, former First Lady of the United States of America**

Mrs. Barbara Bush, First Lady of the United States from 1989 to 1993, is the wife of former President George H.W. Bush.

A tireless advocate of volunteerism, Mrs. Bush helped countless charities and humanitarian causes during her years in public life. Today, she enjoys reading to children at schools and hospitals across the nation.

Mrs. Bush's primary cause through the years has been promoting literacy. She believes that so many of our nation's problems would be solved if every man, woman and child could read, write and comprehend. In 1989 she founded the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy which supports family literacy programs where parents and children can learn and read together. The Foundation works to bring the benefits of literacy to every family in America by awarding money to build effective family literacy programs.

She authored two children's books, *C. Fred's Story* and the best-selling *Millie's Book*, whose profits benefited literacy. She also wrote the best-selling *Barbara Bush: A Memoir and Reflections: Life After the White House*.

Born in New York City, Mrs. Bush remains dedicated to the work of her Foundation since leaving the White House.



**Mrs. Laura Bush, former First Lady of the United States of America**

Laura Bush, wife of the 43rd President of the United States, George W. Bush, served as First Lady from 2001 to 2009.

For decades, Mrs. Bush has championed key issues in the fields of education, health care, and human rights. The author of the bestselling memoir, *Spoken From The Heart*, and co-author of bestselling children's books *Read All About It* and *Our Great Big Backyard*, Mrs. Bush founded both the Texas Book Festival and the National Book Festival in Washington D.C. Today, as the Chair of the Women's Initiative at the George W. Bush Institute, Mrs. Bush continues her work on global healthcare innovations, empowering women in emerging democracies, education reform, and supporting the men and women who have served in America's military.

Mrs. Bush was born in Midland, Texas. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in education from Southern Methodist University and a master's degree in library science from the University of Texas. She taught in public schools in Dallas, Houston and Austin and worked as a public school librarian. She served as First Lady of Texas from 1995 to 2000.



**Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, former First Lady of the United States of America**

Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of Franklin D. Roosevelt, served as First Lady of the United States from 1933 until 1945.

Challenging prior standards for the wife of a president in the United States, Mrs. Roosevelt spoke as a representative of the League of Women Voters, penned her own newspaper column, and visited US troops during the Second World War.

Mrs. Roosevelt's stance against racial discrimination and her work for those living in poverty during her time as First Lady served as the influence for her appointment as a delegate to the UN General Assembly by President Harry Truman. Mrs. Roosevelt went on to help write the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, serve as Chair of the UN Human Rights Commission, and become appointed to the National Advisory Committee of the Peace Corps and the President's Commission on the Status of Women by President John F. Kennedy.

A native of New York City, Mrs. Roosevelt attended Allenswood Girl's Academy in London where she studied classical languages and the arts, and attended private studies in history and politics.



**Ms. María Julia Pou de Lacalle, former First Lady of Uruguay**

Ms. María Julia Pou de Lacalle, wife of former President Luis Alberto Lacalle, was the First Lady of Uruguay.

While serving as First Lady, Ms. Pou championed the rights of persons with disabilities in Latin America. A native of Montevideo, Ms. Pou attended the Sorbonne in Paris, where she graduated with a degree in literature. She worked as a Senator of the National Party from 2000 to 2005.

