

ROLE OF FIRST FAMILY IN COUNTY GOVERNANCE: REFLECTIONS AND UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

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Abstract

The role of the First Family in the devolved governance structure has received little attention in public management discourses. This paper outlines the issues of enthusiasm, complexity, and roles of especially First ladies in county governance. After appraising the role of the first family, the author suggests an optimistic view in public management practice. The role of first ladies has been modest and evolving, and in many cases, politically risky or uncertain. The author calls for a less skeptical view of the role of the first family and clear guidance to functions of the office of the first lady.

Keywords: First family; First lady; county governance; Governor; Advocacy.

Introduction

Public officials face enormous challenges and the role of the First family is an important component of the County Governor's administrative structure. Although there has been considerable public debate over the roles of the First Families, not much scholarly scrutiny and assessment of their roles has been attempted. Using qualitative data, this paper is an attempt to create a profile of the emerging duties and responsibilities of first families. Specifically, the paper is an initial assessment of the performance of the first cohort of County First Ladies.

Much anxiety concerning roles of First Ladies emerged after Kenya implemented the 2010 Constitution. A letter from The Attorney General Githu Muigai to the Transition Authority recommended that County Governors desist from using the term "First Ladies" (Obala, 2014). According to the Attorney General, the establishment of a position of County First Lady was problematic for at least two reasons. First, it draws from practice in federal systems of government and Kenya is not one. Second, such an office would not fit into the structure of the offices under the County Public Service. The legal position was that to be a part of the County Public Services, officials had to be hired through competitive and merit based selection processes. However, Muigai argued that although county first ladies had no formal role in the new jurisdictions, they could still engage in social and charitable causes. Muigai also suggested no funds be allocated public funds for their outreach activities.

Role Theory and Dynamics

In order to put together a profile of perceived and or expected roles of the county first lady, we rely on existing social science frameworks. Role theory, as applied in various sub-disciplines focuses on the reasoning of ruling elites and their perceived self-interests. Following work done by various social scientists, roles have much to do with power and those who project it (Holsti, 1970; Moreno, 1961; Sarbin, 1966; Spiegel 1971; Turner 1962; Zurcher, 1983). Thus, role(s) as forms of elite behaviors can also apply to individuals, who seek to establish their

sense of purpose. Such sociological interpretations imply that behavior of a top public official can be distinguished from that of "others." Roles mean the individual recognizes their sense of selfhood and identity and engage their environments in accordance with that societies norms and expectations. According to Glen Chafetz (1997, p.664), there a behavioral component to actualizing these expectations. Extrapolating from these social – psychological perspectives, one may explain some of the emerging commitments, rules and actions of county First ladies and families. The county government offers these new officials opportunities to define their multiple roles and also create an image of what society will construe to be the image of their offices. These constructed roles can be arranged in a hierarchical sense with core functions being delineated and each with its own rules and appropriate behaviors. As a collective unit, County First Ladies can also develop and understanding of the limits and opportunities embedded in their surroundings. As such, they have greater ability to predict and improve on their interactions with community members. The next section proceeds to make sense of the emerging roles county first ladies.

Evolving Nature of Roles of the First Lady

In the era of twenty-four-hour new cycles and the internet platforms, reports on activities of first families are readily available for an assessment of their constructed roles. A popular view is that first ladies offer support for their spouses. The support model extends beyond the home and spouses are actively involved in campaign politics.

For instance, an emerging pressure group was reported in May 2016 to have met in Nyamira, initially for purposes of fundraising for the Nyamira Catholic Church but extended its role to campaigns. This group including, chair to the caucus Mrs Obado (of Migori), and spouses from the counties of Nyamira, Kisii, Kakamega, Kisumu, Siaya, Busia, Bungoma, Trans Nzoia, and Homa Bay not only discussed matters of county development and their roles in the process and enforcement of gender equality rules in public office appointments, but engaged in advocacy to

have their husbands reelected in 2017 as governors of their respective counties. The First ladies argued, their spouses needed more time to finalize their development agendas. They observed that electing new Governors after only five years would amount to introduction of new development plans. Technically, to change term limits for Governors would mean amending the enabling laws and constitution, which is for the time being not politically feasible.

Other direct action, using platforms as first ladies have also been reported. A good example is Kakamega County First Lady Priscillah Oparanya who in early 2016 met women leaders from her county and urged them to register as voters for the 2017 elections. Her appeal was for voters to participate in all elections including that for Governor and the nation's presidency. Being part of the campaign is commonplace. In fact, many county governors reported to have been successful due to the ability of their partners to connect with women voters. In Nyeri county, for example, First Lady Margaret Gachagua, herself an accomplished educator played a key role in mobilizing women votes. Mrs. Keziah Wanjiku, first lady Nyandarua County played a similar role and is known to be a strategic campaigner. In 2013, the Standard published a series titled "Know your Governor and their First Ladies" in which the paper reported the crucial role of spouses in successful elections. Many first ladies were described as the "forces behind" their husbands' electoral success. It is well known that candidates to public office tap into resources available from family members such as spouses and children. First Ladies are not an exception and have been surrogates, whose role has been to promote positive messages on behalf of the candidate.

Direct Initiation of Projects

Several First Ladies are leaders in their own right. Being a leader within the framework of devolved government includes actively initiating projects. Examples of that role are evident in numerous actions. In 2014, Bungoma County First Lady Dr. Margret Makelo Lusaka started the Skip –A-Lunch Initiative that was to raise funds for providing basic necessities for young girls from lower income families. The project provides sanitary towels to young schoolgirls and investing in girl education by providing reference books across county schools. The First Lady also distributed basic needs to young mothers who deliver babies at local hospitals. In a similar vein, the First Lady of Siaya County, Mrs. Rosella Rasanga also initiated project to provide sanitary towels to young girls in Siaya.

Migori county First Lady Hellen Obado initiated the Kuku ni Pesa project to boost poultry farming in the county. The project targeted 3,000 women who sell poultry and eggs. The First Lady fundraised KSh 8.2 million seed money and received further support from the Department of Agriculture.

In Nairobi, First Lady Dr. Susan Mboya- Kidero, launched a program to empower young girls and equip them with skills to participate in economic activities. Her No Child Left Behind initiative supports elementary education in Nairobi's informal settlements. She continued philanthropic works associated with a prior organization, Zawadi Africa, which supports young girls through positive role models and scholarships to some of the best universities in the world.

Deputizing the Governor

Although the First Lady's role can be to "support" the Governor by standing with them at ribbon cutting events, there is another version of this ceremonial duty that some have performed. First Ladies have on occasions deputized the Governor and performed official functions normally associated with the county's chief executive. In October 2016, First Lady of Kitui, Mrs. Edith Malombe officially opened a maternity wing in the Inyuu area.

In similar vein, Mrs. Philomena Kabogo, Kiambu County's first lady represented the county at the occasion commissioning an incinerator at Limuru Girls High School. The county funded the project through its Department of Water, Environment and Natural Resources. The list of first ladies deputizing for the Governor include Embu County's First lady Teresia Wambora distributing seeds to cotton farmers to revise cotton growing.

Promoting the Philosophical Virtues of Devolution

First ladies, much like a plurality of their partners have also been on record touting the positive outcomes of the devolution process. Many have used social media to publicly praise the new political dispensation. Case in point, First Lady of Machakos County has a Twitter handle and has used it to make pronouncements praising the transformative nature of Devolution.

Direct Participation in Charity and Fundraising Activities

Within this model is the attempt by Vihiga County's First Lady, Elizabeth Akaranga's half-marathon run held in 2015. The *Weekly Citizen* (July 20-26, 2015, p. 14) reported that locals boycotted the fund-raising events leading to low collection of funds to support efforts aimed at reduction of maternal deaths in the county. Although the target of KSh. 40 million was not met, critics, who included a group of MCAs protested using County money for buying event T-Shirts. Still, the spirit of the event is an example of a first lady's direct participation in developmental activities.

Sensitizing the Public (and Public Education Advocacy and Outreach) Efforts

Most, if not all, First Ladies have participated in outreach activities aimed at sensitizing members of their audiences on various issues of public interest. Witness the following examples:

- First Lady Taita Taveta Hope Mruttu launched the Save Our Queens Campaign, which is a campaign to spread awareness of Gender Based Violence affecting girl children in Taita Taveta and the country. Taita Taveta is one of the counties with the highest prevalence of gender-based violence in Kenya.
- Machakos First Lady Lilian Nganga, is an avid promoter of Youth Empowerment Programs. She personally led outreach and advocacy projects that included; HIV/AIDS Awareness campaigns, Children Welfare Programs, and Cancer Awareness activities.
- Mrs. Hodhan Ibrahim, First Lady Mandera County has also been an active supporter of youth empowerment in northern region of the country. This view is widely shared among other first ladies.
- Mrs. Florence Lagat, First Lady Nandi County has also taken initiatives to support shun against stigmatization of persons with HIV/AIDS. In 2014 the prevalence in Nandi County is 4.3 percent down from 12 percent in 2004.
- Mrs. Margaret Gachagua, First Lady Nyeri County, in 2015 was the face of environmental conservation in the Aberdare region. She officiated at functions aimed at raising awareness of issues of environmental protection and the importance of protecting water towers.
- Mrs. Lucia Mbugua, Nakuru County's First Lady actively supported the he Beyond Zero Mobile Clinic initiative that provides free access to maternal health care services. She launched and oversaw the program's implementation in Nakuru County. The County's program is a part of the National Program, originally initiated in January 2014 by Mrs. Margaret Kenyatta, Kenya's First Lady Beyond Zero was designed to reduce maternity death rates in the country. Data from various sources shows that Kenya has yet to meet the Millennium Development Goal of lowering

the maternal death to below the current 488 per 100,000 live births.¹ Kenya remains one of the most dangerous places for women to be pregnant and thanks to the efforts of Kenya's First lady, the issue is now widely given much publicity. The program also seeks to reduce rates of mother to child transmission of HIV/AIDS.

In times of Grief and Show of Empathy

First ladies have been known to be the faces of government at county level and offered sympathy and concern over numerous occasions including bereavements and accidents. In some instances, they have donated food, mattresses, and equipment like wheelchairs to purposes in distress. Many of these occasions have been reported on Facebook and other social media websites. For instance, Wajir First Lady Mrs. Rukia Abdinasir, among others, donated relief items to disabled children in their counties. In addition, she provided wheel chairs to adults in need. Her counterpart, First Lady of Garissa Mrs. Amina Abdullahi also donated sewing machines and other items to disabled persons, widows, and orphans in her county.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the role of the County First Lady is not just to be part of the support team for the Governor's vision. Neither is their role confined to welcoming people to the Governor's home. The role has morphed into one of being co-leader in matters of county development and also as an effective citizen with civic responsibility. The support role, which is associated with family members, applies to all public offices. For the County Governor, it can take a more nuanced role, including serving as policy advisor in certain portfolios, a time keeper to remind the Governor of the urgency of completing campaign promise, be an ear to learn of new concerns that require the Governor's attention and checking on status of on-going programs and projects. All the above activities are political and also serve the government's purpose. Since the Governor's spouse can command and attract media attention, they can help obtain responses from county officials and serve in public interest.

End Note

1. World Health Organization (WHO). 2011. Maternal and Child Health, Kenya. Retrieved from http://www.who.int/pmnch/media/membernews/2011/20121216_kenyaparliament.pdf

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