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**Namibia's First Lady Monica Geingos – Beyond the orthodox
First Lady setting (2015-2020)**

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Abstract

Postcolonial African First Ladies are an under-researched area not only in Political Science but also from a multidisciplinary perspective. This text responds to calls for further research in this area. In southern Africa, the work of van Wyk (2017) is pioneering and helpful in providing the framework of studying First Ladies in the region. This text furthers this debate by adding to the existing literature the case of Namibia's third First Lady, Monica Geingos, the wife of the country's third President, Hage Gottfried Geingob. The text submits that Monica Geingos's First ladyship is one that goes beyond orthodox setting of First Ladies operating and seen as mothers of nations and caregivers concerned about 'soft' social issues. The text illustrates how Geingos's meandering through political and economic contexts not only generated debates but demonstrates that the orthodox way of looking at and studying First Ladies may not be helpful.

Keywords: *First Ladies, Namibia, Monica Geingos*

Introduction – Furthering the First ladies of southern Africa research

This text was provoked and stands in tandem with the work of van Wyk (2017) that analyzed the state of First Ladies of southern Africa. The

subject matter remains insufficiently researched in southern African Political Science. van Wyk (2017) argued that while southern African First Ladies have wielded political power, given their proximity to the political epicentre, studies in Africa “on political leadership and presidential studies predominantly focus on, amongst others, the role of so-called Big Men, Presidents, electoral authoritarianism and coup d’états” (van Wyk, 2017, p. 157). This approach to the study of African political leadership and presidential studies, van Wyk (2017, p. 158) adds, “results in a misunderstanding of the political and power dynamics in African states”. Her study is premised on three justifications. First, she argues that southern African First Ladies remain an under-researched area. Second, she argues that the role of First Ladies on the African continent is changing and southern Africa, as part of the changing global environment, is not immune to these changes. Third, the political influence of First Ladies cannot be underestimated. To buttress the last justification, she relies on the work of Watson (2000) who argued that First Ladies have tremendous influence on their husbands and characterized this influence as political, pillow and public. She then adds that two more ‘Ps’: the past and patronage (van Wyk, 2017). She notes:

This exploratory study analyses and assesses the political influence, role, functions, ambitions and impact of First Ladies in southern Africa... The study of First ladies offers valuable insights into, amongst others, presidential leadership, democratic accountability, and the role and status of women in southern Africa... the purpose is to determine the political influence, role, functions, ambitions and impact of first ladies in order to deduce a typology of southern African First Ladies. As the article predominantly focuses on First Ladies in their national contexts, I then explore the international (i.e diplomatic) position of First Ladies; another neglected academic area. The penultimate section raises questions about the accountability of Southern Africa’s First Ladies as politically influential, but not publicly elected leaders (van Wyk, 2017, pp. 157 - 158).

van Wyk (2017) submits that in southern Africa, the influence of First Ladies cannot be divorced from the history (i.e. the fourth P: the past) of the region. In this context, she argues that apart from being First Ladies in a post-colonial context, some former First Ladies in southern Africa were wives of liberation struggle leaders. They had titles such as ‘Mother of the Nation’ bestowed on them even before they assumed positions of First Ladies in their respective independent southern African

countries. The analysis on First Ladies should, therefore, take the past into account – beyond Watson (2000) political-pillow-public nexus.

The southern African region and by extension the African continent, has cases of First Ladies who are occupying other political and executive positions thus making it unwise to limit the analysis on their status as wives of Presidents. In this context, van Wyk (2017) gives the example of the former First Lady of Zimbabwe, Grace Mugabe, who simultaneously held the position of the ruling party ZANU-PF Secretary for Women Affairs and thus a member of its highest decision-making body, the Politburo. Although she was never a First Lady officially, having separated from her husband in 1994 and divorced in 1996, Winnie Mandela was not only a wife of a political figure, Nelson Mandela, she was also a leader within African National Congress (ANC) (president of the ANC Women's league) and government (Member of the South African Parliament). Elsewhere in Africa, Janet Museveni, the First Lady of Uganda, serves in the Cabinet of her husband (van Wyk, 2017).

With these solid examples, van Wyk (2017) makes a clear case that Africa and southern Africa defies generalizations. She acknowledges the methodological challenges that comes with the study of First Ladies such as the fact that some southern African and African Presidents are in polygamous marriages. Questions such as who is the First Lady, in polygamous marriages, and which First Lady is to be considered and why arises. Other challenges relate to theoretical questions. Although responsible for enormous influence on the head of elected executives, First Ladies are not elected nor appointed to necessitate their status as public office bearers. They are not even mentioned the constitutions of their countries. They are, therefore, not accountable to the public. Since their offices, the so-called Office of the First Lady as established in southern Africa, are not public offices it, therefore, presents a serious challenge in terms of access to information and in terms of accountability. While acknowledging these challenges, van Wyk (2017, p. 162) is adamant that “these challenges, notwithstanding, should not deter studies on this important African political institution”. She concludes that First Ladies in southern Africa are influential political actors who play a variety of formal and informal roles. Their roles take place both nationally and internationally. She then recommends further research on First Ladies in southern Africa particularly the “link between their status, gender constructions, and that of women in their societies; as well as their role in regional politics” (van Wyk, 2017, p. 170). She signs off with a call for “constitutional clarity on and accountability in respect of the

formal role, powers, functions and related issues on First Ladies” (van Wyk, 2017, p. 170).

Although there are few other similar studies on African First Ladies, such as Elebute and Oyedele (2020), Ogamimma and David (2017) and Awodola (2016), there exist very little comprehensive and analytical studies on African First Ladies, more so southern African First Ladies, dwarfing the work of van Wyk (2017) as confirmed by Kreitmeyr (2019). It is for this reason that this study greatly builds on the work of van Wyk (2017). It thus accepts van Wyk’s (2017) invitation and recommendation for further research on First Ladies of southern Africa. It does so by bringing a Namibian case as an illumination to the debate. Although van Wyk (2017) mentions Namibia, particularly in reference to Kovambo Nujoma as Founding First Lady and ‘Mother of the Nation’ and the establishment and institutionalization of the Office of the First Lady in Namibia, it becomes clear that her analysis did not go beyond 21 March 2015 when Monica Geingos became First Lady, as a wife to Namibia’s third President Hage Gottfried Geingob. The text, therefore, contributes to the First Ladies debate by bringing in the First Ladyship of Monica Geingos. van Wyk’s (2017) approach and analytical categories - the political influence, role, functions, ambitions and impacts of the First Lady – are adopted and used to analyse the First Ladyship of Monica Geingos. The text first locates the debate within Political Science before surveying African literature on First Ladies. It then proceeds to discuss the Monica Geingos case starting with her background (van Wyk’s past criteria), the making of the Geingob administration and the Monica Geingos First Ladyship, and the activities and events that gave meaning to a growing perception of political power and influence over the President and political matters. The text then concludes with reflections and interpretations of the First Lady debate and joining van Wyk’s (2017) call for constitutional clarity on the formal status of First Ladies.

Literature on First Ladies

In the 2011 report titled, *Political Science in the 21st century*, commissioned by the American Association of Political Science (AAPS), Luis Ricardo Fraga, Terri Givens and Dianne Pinderhughes argued for a need for Political Science, in the 21st century, to be dynamic and expand its horizon:

Progress in research, teaching, and professional development to expand diversity and inclusion has occurred, but the progress is small and certainly does not put political science in a leadership role in integrating expanding multiculturalism within its professional activities. The profession that studies power and its consequences, the profession that knows more about democracy and effective civic engagement than any other, and the profession that studies the consequences for social stability and human rights resulting from the absence of access and inclusion for all segments of a society's population should take a strong leadership role in advancing its own intellectual, professional, and demographic development. New actions must be taken if the discipline of political science is to have the chance of accepting the responsibilities of leadership in this regard (Fraga, Givens, & Pinderhughes, 2011, p. 56).

William Boyer, a professor of Political Science at the University of Delaware in the United States of America, had already made similar calls 20 years earlier (Boyer, 1990). Boyer (1990, pp. 50-21) urged Political Science and political scientists to change their focus and research agenda to account for the changing world:

We political scientists need not abandon our concern with this concept as providing the central unity of our discipline. I do argue, however, that governments of, within, and between nation-states should no longer command such an exclusive hold on our attention. We need to shift more attention from government to governance... we cannot afford to continue to remain prisoners of our obsolescent past. As political scientists, we must understand that nation-states are limited in their power to deal with world crises. We must become global in our vision, teaching, and research. We must think unhabitually.

Jison (2014) adds that while political scientists must continue to describe political developments, it is equally important that they ascend to academic pedestals to prescribe proposals and recommendations for common good. He argues that to remain relevant in this rapidly evolving world, political scientists must "learn how to step out of their comfort zones, how to get out of their boxes, and how to be bolder." Similar observations have been made by Aldrich, Alt and Lupia (2007), Kopraveva (2014) and Senyushkina (2017).

These longstanding calls for Political Science and political scientists to go beyond orthodox tools of analysis – in this context states, presidents and presidentialism – that ignored and 'peripherised' other

areas of study are in tandem with van Wyk's (2017) exploratory research on First Ladies of southern Africa. van Wyk (2017, p. 158) is immaculate:

One of the best reasons to study southern African First Ladies is the fact that it is an under-researched area, which may be due to the historically subjugated status of women in societies, patriarchy and the under representation of women in political institutions such as parliament, cabinet and the executive. Besides this, the First Ladies of southern Africa live in one of the most conflict-ridden regions of the continent with prevailing poor governance and low levels of socio-economic conditions.

If the justification that the debate and research on First Ladies of southern Africa is important because it is an under-researched area cannot be taken seriously, it is necessary to illustrate that it is part of the call by political science bodies and political scientists on the need to be dynamic and explore research areas that are not part of the mainstream - as elucidated by scholars such as Boyer (1990), Aldrich, Alt, and Lupia (2007), Fraga, Givens, and Pinderhughes (2011), Jison (2014), Kopraveva (2014) and Senyushkina (2017).

The debate on First Ladies can be located as part of the greater literature on women representation, gender and feminist studies. Mama (2011) locates an earlier African contribution to this debate from the organized work of the Association of African Women for Research and Development formed in the early 1980s. The second important development is the creation of the African Gender Institute (AGI) in the early 2000s at the University of Cape Town. The AGI and its programs were aimed at building knowledge for gender equality in African contexts. Other than the history of continental wide initiatives meant to encourage research in the field, there have been several scholars who conducted several studies on women representation and women in politics. Kah (2014) not only studied specifically the role of the First Lady of Cameroon, Chantal Biya, but also drew a great deal from the work of other scholars such as Tamale (2001) whose work focused on attitudes towards women's presence and active participation in politics, and Dalmasso (2008) whose work focused on women and radical reforms in Morocco. Kah (2014, p. 124) draws parallels between the political impacts of Cameroonian, Ghanaian and Senegalese former First Ladies more illustratively:

The projection of 'charitable' activities to secure the stay in power of bad leaders has always been a source of conflict. CERAC and JACHABY were formed as apolitical associations but their activities have shown that they are not apolitical because apart from worshipping Chantal Biya, these two associations have in their public activities become political arms of the ruling CPDM... Elsewhere in the continent like in Senegal and Ghana, Elizabeth Diouf and Nana Rawlings (former First Ladies of Senegal and Ghana) recognised and used the female vote to secure a tenure prolongation for their husbands.

Some scholars refer to this political impact as 'First Lady Syndrome' or 'First Lady phenomenon'. Ibrahim (2004), for example, whose work focused Ghanaian and Nigerian First Ladies, Nana Agyeman-Rawlings, wife of former President Jerry Rawlings (1981 - 2001) and Maryam Babangida of former President Ibrahim Babangida (1985-1993) and also other First Ladies such as Chantal Biya (Cameroon), Suzanne Mubarak (Egypt) and Aisha Hamani Diouri (Niger) amongst others, explains that:

In many African countries, the First Lady phenomenon has opened doors for women that had previously been closed. At the same time, it has created a dynamic in which political space has been appropriated and used by the wives and friends of men in power for purposes of personal aggrandizement, rather than for furthering the interests of women.

Although most African literature on First Ladies does acknowledge that they made an impact in the political systems and the political power structures, both Mama (1995) and Kah (2014) explain that First Ladies can also abuse power and engage in self-serving politics which is not any different from patriarchal politics. They call this femocracy, which is defined by Mama (1995, p. 1) as

an anti-democratic female power structure, which claims to exist for the advancement of ordinary women, but is unable to do so because it is dominated by a small clique of women whose authority derives from their being married to powerful men, rather than from any actions or ideas of their own.

Using the case of Cameroon, Kah (2014, p. 117) provides a more helpful and elaborate description of femocracy:

Femocracy can be defined to mean the ability of married and/or unmarried women holding positions of recognition and influence to mobilise both an educated and a largely uninformed and uneducated number of women using state resources and other instruments of power at their disposal. Their ability to mobilise may also be based on some 'faces behind the mask' who include men of position and who are willing to share political space and prolong their stay in leadership positions in the country. The mass mobilisation of other people is for the purpose of achieving a socio-economic and more importantly a political goal for self aggrandisement and edification. It is also a way of breaking into a male dominated socio-political space as allies or partners or both.

In summary, it can be stated that in African scholarship, First Ladies research took place within in the context of general studies, feminist discourses, and women empowerment and participation in politics. At the conceptual level, concepts such as femocracy, the First Lady syndrome and the First Lady phenomenon have been used to describe and explain the role of First Ladies in African politics.

The case of Monica Geingos

Patriarchy, 'Mothers of the Nation' and political articulation on First Lady

Monica Geingos (née Kalondo) was born in Namibia's diamond mining town of Oranjemund in 1977 (Kambowe, 2015). On 14 February 2015, then aged 38, she married then 74 years old Hage Geingob, then Namibia's 'President-in-Waiting', in what was described by Namibia's leading newspaper, *The Namibian*, as 'a low-key Valentine's Day wedding ceremony' at a Windhoek hotel (The Namibian, 2015). On 21 March 2015, Hage Geingob was officially inaugurated as the country's third president with Monica Geingos, his new wife, alongside him at the Independence Stadium. In what could be seen as the recognition of the role of First Ladies, Geingob, in his inauguration speech stated the following about former First Ladies:

I cannot leave out the two former First Ladies, Madam Penehupifo Pohamba and Madam Kovambo Nujoma. Thank you for mothering Namibia. You hold a special place in our hearts and stir our emotions when your names are mentioned (Geingob, 2015).

With this statement made at an official state event, Geingob not only recognised the role of First Ladies but supported two arguments of van Wyk (2017). His reference to the two former First Ladies as ‘mothering Namibia’ who hold ‘special places in our hearts’ and whose names ‘stir emotions’ supports van Wyk’s (2017, 170) claims in two ways. Firstly, the claim of gender bias in that the First Ladies’ role was that of a ‘spouse; mother, care-giver and nurturer of the sick, young, elderly etc.’ Secondly, the statement supports van Wyk’s (2017, 170) argument that First Ladies are officially portrayed “in patriarchal terms as a national symbol; the ideal Woman; a trophy; and a trailblazer for issues stereotyped and associated with women”. This Namibian illumination is one of several indications that van Wyk’s (2017) arguments on First Ladies of southern Africa holds validity.

After Hage Geingob was sworn in as President on 21 March 2015, it was not only clear that Monica Geingos would take over as First Lady. The tribute by her husband to former First Ladies as the mothers of Namibia occupying special places in the hearts of Namibians and whose names stir emotions meant that Monica Geingos is expected to continue in the same path. On 26 June 2015, three months after becoming First Lady, Monica Geingos hosted a luncheon at State House in “honour of Former First Ladies Madame Kovambo Nujoma and Madame Penehupifo Pohamba, in recognition of their commitment, dedication and service to the Namibian people” (Geingos, 2015).

As stated earlier, one of the distinguishing contributions of van Wyk (2017) to the debate on First Ladies of southern Africa is that First Ladies’ influence cannot only be limited to Watson’s (2000) three ‘Ps’; political, pillow and public. Through compelling evidence, van Wyk (2017) demonstrates that the past, one of the ‘Ps’ she added to Watson’s (2000) ‘Ps’, matters as well. She submitted that “the political influence of the past should not be underestimated in the southern African context. Several First Ladies are or have been, married to liberation leaders-turned-Presidents; often bestowing on these women the title, “Mother of the Nation” (van Wyk, 2017, pp 158). This is indeed true in the Namibian context whereby both former Presidents Nujoma and Pohamba were liberation leaders. As stated earlier, President Geingob, at an official independence function and during his inauguration, referred to the former First Ladies, wives of Nujoma and Pohamba, as ‘mothers of Namibia’.

That Geingob is one of the liberation-leaders-turned-president can be used to support van Wyk’s (2017) argument. When the case of

Monica Geingos is considered, the argument on the past applies and is relevant albeit in a different context. Said differently, the case of Monica Geingos supports van Wyk (2017) in a different context. Before she became a First Lady, Monica Geingos, then Monica Kalondo, was already a woman of relative influence in Namibian politics and economy. She has been a businesswoman in banking and the private equity sectors. In 2015, she declared that her wealth stood at N\$ 60 million (Mathias, 2015; Kambowe, 2015). Her experience and successes have also gained her several national and regional economic awards. On the political front, Geingos held several influential positions. In 2006, she was appointed as Deputy Chairperson of the Public Office-Bearers Renumeration Commission, a body that determined the salaries of politicians (Dentlinger, 2006). In 2008, she was appointed as a member of SWAPO Party Think Tank, the think tank of ruling party, the South West Africa Peoples Organization (SWAPO) responsible for the formulation of SWAPO policies that ultimately culminated into the government's policies (NAMPA, 2013). Towards the end of his second term, President Hifikepunye Pohamba appointed her in May 2013, as a member of the Presidential Economic Advisory Council (Masawi, 2013). By not taking these important indicators of Monica Geingos's political and economic past and stature seriously is to flirt with what van Wyk (2017, 158) termed "misunderstanding of the political and power dynamics" in the First Lady debate. The political influence of the past should not, as van Wyk (2017) warns, be underestimated in this context. This aspect will be clearly illustrated below.

The constitution of Geingob's Executive

After his inauguration, President Geingob made several appointments that are of interest to the study and role (real or perceived) of First Lady Monica Geingos. On 29 June 2015, President Hage Geingob announced what he termed the 'A-Team', a team of 'experts' who would serve as his advisors and also other individuals to serve in strategic positions. Amongst those appointed were John Steytler (Economic Advisor), Penny Akwenye (Policy Implementation and Monitoring Advisor) and Yvonne Dausab (Chairperson of Law Reform and Development Commission) (Immanuel, 2015; Muraranganda, 2015).

A year earlier, on 10 June 2014, Monica Geingos held a press briefing to announce to the public that she had appointed John Steytler (who would later become her husband's economic advisor) to the board of her

private Bank, EBank, preferring him as Vice-Chairperson with her as Chairperson. On the same day, she also announced Yvonne Dausab (who later became the head of the Law Reform and Development Commission during President Geingos' first term) as a Member of the EBank Board (Kalondo, 2014). It should, therefore, not be seen as a mere coincidence that both John Steytler and Yvonne Dausab – both Geingos close associates – were again announced to the public on the same day to serve in the executive circles of her husband. It should also be noted that apart from appointment to the board of her private bank, she served with John Steytler in various bodies such as the SWAPO Think Tank and the Presidential Economic Advisory Council (Masawi, 2013; Namibian Sun, 2014). Geingob's advisor on policy implementation and monitoring, Penny Akwenye, worked very closely with Geingos' Technical Advisor Tuli-Mevava Nghiyoonanye at the Millennium Challenge Account – Namibia (MCA-N), a US foreign aid agency, where the former was Chief Executive Officer while the latter was Director of Education (Development Bank of Namibia, 2015; Namibia Economist, 2015; New Era, 2014). Tuli-Mevava Nghiyoonanye also served as a member of the SWAPO Think Tank together with John Steytler and Monica Geingos (Namibian Sun, 2014). The two, Akwenye and Nghiyoonanye, proceeded from MCA-N, that came to an end in 2014, to State House where they became advisors to President Geingob and First Lady Geingos respectively.

The fact that most of Geingob advisors are close associates of the First Lady, or linked to close associates of the First Lady, cannot be ignored. As van Wyk (2017, p. 159) points out “the proximity of First Lady, and easier access, to the executive contributes to her political power and influence”. Further, the case of the construction and constitution of Geingob's ‘A-Team’, albeit to a smaller extent, buttresses van Wyk's (2017, p. 158) point that the “political influence of the past should not be underestimated in the southern African context”. This will emerge clear in the subsequent sections.

In August 2017, Tjekero Tweya, then Minister of Information, fired businesswoman Ally Angula as chairperson of the board of the state-owned company Namibia Post and Telecommunications Holding (NPTH). Although it was reported that Angula and Tweya had differences over governance issues at NPTH, the media reported that Tweya was reportedly accusing Angula of insubordination saying “Angula thought she was powerful because she was a friend of First Lady Monica Geingos” (Shapwanale, 2017). Angula then wrote a letter to

President Geingob following her dismissal that resulted in Tweya being ordered to reinstate her (Shapwanale, 2018). Although denying the role of the First Lady in the Angula-Tweya saga, President Geingob, through his lawyer Sisa Namandje, confirmed to the media that Angula and Geingos are indeed close friends (Shapwanale, 2018). Only five months after ordering Tweya to reinstate Angula as board chairperson of NPTH, Geingob removed Tweya as Information Minister on 8 February 2018, instead shifting him to the Trade and Industrialization portfolio (Immanuel & Kahiurika, 2018). Two years later, in March 2020, Geingob fired Tweya from his Cabinet. Yvonne Dausab, whose affiliation to Geingos was discussed earlier, was promoted from Law Reform and Development Commission to cabinet, occupying the position of Minister of Justice. Another example is 23 years old Emma Theofilus, who frequented several programs and activities of the First Lady was appointed as deputy Information minister (Nakatana, 2020: Amupanda, 2020).

The discourse on the influential political role of Geingos, real or perceived, has not gone unnoticed by the First Lady herself. She has attempted to distance herself from this discourse claiming that such is the work of dirty factional politics in the ruling party aimed at tarnishing the image of the First Family. She also added that she has no executive political ambitions (Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2020; NAMPA, 2019). Be that as it may, the objective facts such as cases of Geingos associates entering the husband's executive cannot be ignored on account of Monica Geingos' dismissal as smear campaigns and dirty factional politics within the ruling party.

Continuity and Change - The Office of the First Lady under Monica Geingos

The Office of the First Lady in Namibia is located within the Office of the President. In discussing the Office of the First Lady of Namibia, van Wyk (2017) covers the institutional designs and objectives of this office during the tenure of Penhupifo Pohamba, the then First Lady and wife to President Hifikepunye Pohamba. The mission of the Office of the First Lady then, as captured by van Wyk (2017), focused mainly on health and social challenges such as maternal and child health, HIV/AIDS, poverty alleviation, empowerment of women, issues of widows, orphans and vulnerable persons, reproductive health and teenage pregnancies. The focus of former First Lady Pohamba must be

understood from this context that she was a registered nurse with experience in midwifery (Tjihenuna, 2013).

The mission of the First Lady radically changed with the ascendancy of Monica Geingos. In June 2015, First Lady Geingos published her mission statement as that of complimenting and supporting her husbands declared 'war on poverty' through supporting sustainable socioeconomic interventions (Geingos, 2015). Although she does not ignore health and social issues of her predecessor, she did not state these as part of her office mission. Elsewhere, the official Facebook page of the Office of the First Lady (<https://www.facebook.com/FirstLadyOfNamibia>) projected the focus areas of her predecessor as somewhat 'by-the-way' issues stating that "Madame Geingos will also apply her energy towards projects relating to Maternal and Child Health Care, Early Childhood Development, Gender-Based violence and communicable and non-communicable diseases" (Geingos, 2015).

In a 2016 interview with the editor of *New African Woman* magazine, Regina Jane, Geingos further clarified her focus area thus eliminating doubt that she has shifted radically from the focus area of her predecessor

My main focus area is really about the integration of two economies. You normally have an urban economy and a rural economy. Most of our population is in the rural economy and only about 10% – 15% of our population participates in the urban economy. My focus is on initiatives, which remove the obstacles that prevent the majority of the population from participating in the "urban" economy (Jane, 2016).

The above account firstly demonstrates that a lot has changed in terms of the agenda and focus area of the Office of the First Lady in Namibia with the departure of former First Lady Penhupifo Pohamba and the arrival of Monica Geingos. The former's focus was on health and social issues while the latter focuses mainly on economic issues. Second, it now emerges clearly that the background of a particular First Lady also plays a greater role in terms of determining the agenda and focus area. As a nurse, Penhupifo Pohamba was interested in health issues. In fact, she asked the Ministry of Health for permission to allow her to continue to practice as a nurse at the Robert Mugabe Clinic while she was a First Lady (NAMPA, 2015).

As a businesswoman, Geingos is interested, albeit not exclusively, in economic issues. In November 2016, she informed the BBC that “we all have a specific role to play and mine is in business...business is what I know best and it is what I have been involved in all my adult life” (New Era, 2016). Under Monica Geingos, the Office of the First Lady introduced several initiatives such as the First Lady Advisory Council consisting of several experts to advise her, the Study with First Lady of Namibia which provides higher education opportunities to students, the #BeFreeMovement that focusses on teenage issues and gender-based violence and the One Economy Foundation that is said to be concerned about economic inequality and transformation (Geingos, 2016; Nakashole, 2016; Nekomba, 2016). These initiatives are all new to the institution of the Office of the First Lady when analyzed historically. While all initiatives were widely accepted, the One Economy Foundation, as discussed in the next section, caused several debates worth noting.

On 14 May 2016, Monica Geingos launched her One Economy Foundation in Windhoek at a flamboyant gathering where her husband, President Hage Geingob, was the guest of honor (Nakashole, 2016). At the launch, the First Lady outlined its mission as “to contribute to ensuring that fewer Namibians fall through the cracks and many more have a bridge to access their life’s opportunity” (Nakashole, 2016). The Foundation’s official Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/OneEconomyFoundation/>) explains that it is;

a section 21 non-profit organization which concerns itself with Namibia’s dual economy wherein a small segment of the population participates and thrive in the “first”, profitable, knowledge-based economy and the majority of Namibians barely survive in the “second” economy. The Foundation strives to serve as a conduit for transformation by connecting Namibia’s formal and informal economies and serving as a bridge over which Namibians in the “second” economy or operating on the peripheries of the “first” economy can cross and fully utilize their talents in one economy (One Economy Foundation, 2016).

Shortly after the launch of the One Economy Foundation, a weekly Namibian newspaper, *Windhoek Observer*, in its editorial on 2 June 2016, questioned the role of the First Lady, without mentioning the One Economy Foundation, bemoaning the perceived use of political influence and proximity to state power for the benefits of her private economic activities (Windhoek Observer, 2016). In a subsequent editorial

on 2 December 2016, the newspaper went on a specific and direct offensive. It is necessary to reproduce some parts of the editorial at length:

Last June, we probed the sensitive issue of the role of the First Lady and many of our readers responded to that discussion....we note that during last month's investment promotion conference, there was a gala dinner the evening before the opening of the event that was hosted by the First Lady's private One Economy Foundation at which the invited dignitaries, guests and delegates were in attendance. The investment promotion conference was an official government program, the One Economy dinner was not. How then, were the two events paired? Though we fully support the goals of the Foundation and applaud the First Lady for its creation and management, we are concerned when a private effort that benefits a non-governmental trust hosts events in full or in part using State funds and the good offices of the presidency. The lines between government programs and private charity organizations should be clear – if One Economy is an official part of the Harambee Prosperity Plan (HPP) and is noted as such in the Cabinet resolutions, then the blending of the Foundation with official government events is in order. But, if the One Economy Foundation is a private program and was the host of that gala dinner, then ideally, it should have paid the full costs and had its event de-linked with the investment conference.

In response to this editorial, One Economy Foundation Chief Executive Officer, Uajo Akwenye, responded on behalf of the Board of the Foundation refuting the allegations although scant on details and failing to provide strong evidence necessary to rebut the newspaper allegations. Part of her statement reads:

The “gala dinner” referred to in the editorial was the One Economy Welcoming Cocktail Reception held on the evening of 7 November 2016. While there were over 800 participants who attended the Invest in Namibia Conference, the ONE cocktail was held at a separate location to the Conference, which location could only accommodate 70 standing guests. Of the 60 people who attended, half were international delegates and the other half were local stakeholders. This was by no means a large or expensive “gala dinner”; the cocktail was billed as a Side Event to the Investors Conference and was never intended to be part of the Official program... During her brief speech, the First Lady focused strictly on social issues...Like all One Economy Foundation

events, it was neither partly nor fully funded by State funds as alleged (Akwenye, 2016).

The validity of the concerns raised by the *Windhoek Observer* cannot simply be dismissed as sensational journalism. Before he assumed office, and indeed before the establishment of the One Economy Foundation, journalists asked President Geingob similar questions. In an interview with Christof Maletsky, the then Managing editor of *The Namibian* newspaper, just shortly before he became President, Geingob responded to the questions relating to the roles and business interests of his wife;

...it would not be fair to expect her to materially reduce her income with no compensation, for the sole reason that she married me. In the same vein, it is important that the necessary guidelines are developed to ensure she does not unduly benefit either (Maletsky, 2015).

To date such guidelines do not exist and as such, questions posed by the *Windhoek Observer* cannot be ignored. As a case in point, in March 2017, Bannerman Mining Resources which owns and operates Etango Uranium mine announced that it has given 5% shares to One Economy Foundation. The company clarified that the shares are not a donation but a strategic investment. The dividends that will be due to the One Economy Foundation will be directed to share payments (Namibia Economist, 2017). That the granting of shares is an investment, as opposed to a donation, raises further legitimate questions if this is not an attempt by Bannerman Mining Resources to align itself with executive power, through the President's wife private foundation, for the benefits of both the First Lady's foundation and the mining company. Secondly, it raises questions as to why this opportunity was not presented to other charitable foundations. Thirdly, it warrants questions as to what happened to President Geingob's promise of guidelines to ensure that the First Lady does not unduly benefit given that the Bannerman shares may appear as a case of undue benefit (Maletsky, 2015).

In 2008, the Namibian government established a state-owned mining company, Epangelo Mining Company (Pty) Ltd to enable state participation in mining and mineral resources development (Epangelo Mining Company, 2017). To support these efforts, cabinet declared, in April 2011, uranium, copper, gold, zinc and coal as strategic minerals. "These would only be explored and mined exclusively by the State-owned company Epangelo Mining" (Weidlich, 2014). From this point,

one would've thought that in its efforts towards reforming and 'Namibianising' the mining sector, Epangelo would be a priority (Halwoodi, 2014). In 2014, it was reported in the local media that Epangelo Mining Company was struggling financially as it remains underfunded (Halwoodi, 2014). When all these efforts and reports were taking place, President Geingob was a key member of government as a cabinet minister and later as Prime Minister. Monica Geingos was not only a key participant in the Namibian economy during this period, she was also a member of the SWAPO Party Think Tank and the Presidential Economic Advisory Council where these policy directions may have originated or passed. It, therefore, raises legitimate concerns on how the President and First Lady allowed for mining shares to go to their private foundation when they were participants, directly or indirectly, in the establishment of Epangelo Mining.

Debate on the political power of the First Lady

The debate on the First Lady's political power is illustrated by the discussions, as intimated earlier, where the *Windhoek Observer* ran two editorials in one year questioning the role of the First Lady. In one editorial the newspaper argued:

we have heard murmurs of concern about perceived incursions by the First Lady into policy areas that many believe are regulatory and law-making and therefore are not under her remit... While the First Lady is arguably a de facto part of government, she does not have a de jure role in the governance of Namibia nor has she been elected or appointed to any legal policymaking position within the public service. If the president has asked the First Lady to clarify government positions on his policies, and her comments and speeches emanate from him, so be it. Perhaps a public statement to that affect would be appropriate. But with a full Cabinet, an A-Team of advisors, and a State House media office, we begin to question whose job it is to speak, clarify or answer questions about government, regulatory actions and challenges. We think there are a few articulate and well-received spokespersons available than Monica Geingos (Windhoek Observer, 2016)

This debate forced government to respond and clarify the role of the First Lady in December 2016. At the time, there were reports that Geingob's bodyguard was excluded from his international trips because of a 'fallout' with the First Lady (Beukes, 2016). Frans Kapofi, the then

Minister of Presidential Affairs, was quoted in the *Namibian Sun* newspaper arguing that Monica Geingos never formed part of official government programs or policy questions (Beukes, 2016). Kapofi was quoted by Beukes (2016) clarifying the role of the First Lady as follows;

By virtue of their positions, first spouses, especially first ladies, have historically harnessed the visibility provided by their association with Heads of State and government to promote and support social causes. As a result, the positive roles of first spouses and the impact that they historically made in the context of social upliftment and development has been recognised at national, regional and international levels.

On her part, the First Lady always emphasized her apolitical, policy and executive role. In one instance she dealt with this question in an interview with the BBC; “politics is not my purpose and it’s not my passion” (New Era, 2016). In an attempt to refute allegations of the First Lady’s influence or ‘encroachment’ into the political and policy space, former Presidential Affairs Minister Frans Kapofi disclosed and affirmed by van Wyk’s (2017) argument on a patriarchal definition of the role of First Ladies. Geingos evidently disagree with what Kapofi defines as her role. In a 2016 interview with *New African Woman* magazine, she retorted:

Another misconception about first ladies is that they are primarily decorative. I’ll challenge you as a journalist to go and do some homework on the backgrounds on most of the African first ladies. The President of the Organization of African First Ladies, Ghanaian First Lady, has a master’s degree in governance and leadership, the Ethiopian First Lady has two Master’s degrees. If you go through more profiles, you will find trained lawyers, medical doctors, engineers and First Ladies who may not have educational qualifications but who have and continue to play a meaningful role both before and after becoming a First Lady (Jane, 2016).

While both the President and the First Lady, and the Presidential Affairs Minister have all denied the role of First Lady in a political and policy arena, there are undeniable developments that point to an underground role of the First Lady in the affairs of the state. What is clear is that the First Lady Monica Geingos, because of her past and proximity to the President, has now and then come across as wielding serious influence with political and economic undertones thus generating a debate on her role.

Conclusion

This text has demonstrated that First Ladies are indeed influential actors. The nature of the influence must be understood beyond proximity to include the background of a particular First Lady. Indeed, it is these backgrounds that inform the agenda of First Ladies as has emerged clear herein. As such, the agenda of First Ladies operates in two spaces. There are invited spaces whereby the First Lady finds programs and activities already established by past cultures or tradition or her predecessors requiring continuity. There are also invented spaces where an individual First Lady develops her own new programs. Said differently, First Ladies are evidently at liberty to determine their agenda. The text, in furthering the debate, brought the case and analysis of the third First Lady of Namibia, Monica Geingos, whose tenure was not covered in southern African First Ladies research. With this account, the debate on First Ladies in Namibia has been quantitatively covered. In the past, only two former First Ladies, Kovambo Nujoma and Penhupifo Pohamba, featured in First Ladies of southern Africa research. While the discussions on Monica Geingos' First Ladyship corroborates other scholars' observations as discussed herein, it also adds new perspectives particularly on the influence of southern African First Ladies whose background is not necessarily rooted in the liberation struggle nor were they married to liberation struggle leaders before independence. This text thus joins calls for constitutional or legislative clarity on the role of First Ladies. In the case of Namibia, this need has also been embraced by President Hage Geingob, although yet to be enforced, who called on guidelines to regulate the activities of First Ladies, particularly in the area of economic accumulation.

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