

The changing role of the first ladies

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First lady is the unofficial title bestowed upon the wife of the president of the United States. The role of the president of the United States originated with George Washington and so did the role of the first lady. During these times, the roles of women were usually limited to being homemakers and hostesses. Women did not work outside the home and often were not seen as equals to men. Therefore, the first lady's duties at that time consisted of hosting social events and keeping the house in which the president lived in order. Through the passage of time, the role of women has undergone a metamorphosis.

Women are now on a more level playing field with men and often hold powerful positions in the workforce. With this change, the role of the first lady has evolved. The "first lady, meaning the role of the wife of the president, has changed significantly over time. It wasn't until 1877 that the term 'First Lady' was coined. It was first bestowed upon Lucy Hayes, and since then it has stuck" (First Ladies-New World). The first lady is not an elected position so no official duties are appointed to them, and unlike their husband do not receive yearly benefits or payments.

However, presently the first lady plays an active role throughout their husband's presidency by participating in charitable and humanitarian causes that they are interested in. Initially, when the presidency of the United States originated, the position of the first lady was not as developed as it is today. The First Lady at the time was Martha Washington. Though she had a good name in the eyes of the public and did no wrong, she wasn't seen as anything more than a hostess offering warm hospitality. Martha Washington,

at this time, was very good friends with the Vice President's wife who we would eventually see as first lady.

Abigail Adams she, like Martha Washington, valued entertainment and continued the formal pattern of entertaining throughout her husband's term as President (Martha). However, though the first ladies were well known, they were not active participants in the improvement of the country. Over the next couple centuries the role of the first lady evolved. These women began to take on tasks or duties that they believed would better the country. "Eleanor Roosevelt revolutionized the role of the first lady, transforming it from hostess to a public policy advocate" (Ragone).

Roosevelt was one of the few first ladies who understood the social conditions of the United States (Anna Eleanor). This was one of the many things that helped her greatly change this role. She was an ambitious woman who did not care how the public perceived her. She made sure of this by "speaking and working for the League of Women Voters, the National Consumers' League, the Women's Trade Union League, and the women's division of the New York State Democratic Committee" [during Franklin's time as governor](Eleanor Roosevelt).

In 1932, when President Roosevelt was elected, things for Mrs. Roosevelt changed greatly. She was now the eyes and ears for her husband. She made sure that certain things in the public received attention. Because Mrs. Roosevelt went on these fact-finding trips for her husband, she was seen as "the advocate for groups such as: working women, African-Americans, and youth tenant farmers" (Eleanor Roosevelt). She was unafraid of speaking out

about certain issues that concerned her. She made sure that each of these issues was touched upon in her husband's New Deal programs.

She made it impossible for her husband to overlook women rights, African-Americans, and the jobless youth (Eleanor Roosevelt). In the 1930's, Mrs. Roosevelt was appointed as the deputy director in the office of Civilian Defense because she was not afraid to speak out about things that bothered her with the "administration's policy of aiding antifascist governments" (Eleanor Roosevelt). Even after her husband's death in 1945 she continued her public advocacy by becoming an "American delegate to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights" (Eleanor Roosevelt).

Eleanor Roosevelt was an inspiration to many for her bravery and for the way she changed the role of the first lady. Another influential first lady was Betty Ford. She was best remembered for her frankness and honesty, which endeared her to the public. Years after she left the White House Ford would write in her autobiography, "I was an ordinary woman who was called onstage at an extraordinary time. I was no different once I became first lady than I had been before. But, through an accident of history, I had become interesting to people"(Betty Ford).

This statement summed up how Ford remained humble about how popular she had become with the public. Early in her husband's presidency, Mrs. Ford was diagnosed with breast cancer and had to undergo a mastectomy. She was open with the public about what she was facing with the breast cancer. This was not the norm in Washington at the time. "We were in a position where my husband had been sworn into office during a very, very difficult

time. There had been so much cover-up during Watergate that we wanted to be sure there would be no cover-up in the Ford Administration.

So rather than continue this traditional silence about breast cancer, we felt we had to be public"(Betty Ford). This openness was well received by the public and led to a public awareness about breast cancer, along with its detection and treatment. Betty Ford was often outspoken and supported issues that she felt passionate about during her time as First Lady. She campaigned for the Equal Rights amendment that would guarantee equal rights for women and encouraged President Ford to appoint women to high level positions such as, Secretary of housing and Urban Development and the Ambassador of Britain (Betty Ford).

Betty Ford also supported social causes such as Washington's Hospital for Sick Children, the Heart Association, Goodwill Industries and various other ones(Betty Ford). Another issue that she was outspoken about was her support of women and their free choice of having an abortion. She was also supportive of couples living together without being married (Betty Ford). This view, though not popular with conservatives, was supported by the public. Even after leaving the White House, Betty Ford remained actively involved in issues involving breast cancer, women's issues and other social causes that she was involved in during her time in Washington.

She also remained as candid with the public about her personal issues she encountered after leaving the White House. When she was faced with being addicted to prescription medication and alcohol and entered a treatment center, she openly shared her struggles with the public. Mrs. Ford became an advocate for drug and alcohol awareness, education and treatment. She

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helped to initiate The Betty Ford Center, a chemical dependency treatment facility in California, which has become a well-respected treatment facility (Betty Ford).

First ladies like Betty Ford, use the knowledge they obtain from the past first ladies to help formulate their role in the White House and to have an influential presence in regards to issues that are current and they feel passionate about. This drastically has changed the role that the First Lady. One first lady that was not only active with humanitarian causes but was also involved in the political arena was Hillary Clinton. Hillary Clinton was a strong and motivated person in her own right before becoming First Lady of the United States.

She was a lawyer with her own career and ambitions. Hillary Rodham Clinton had experience as a corporate lawyer, a tenacious fighter for educational reform, a nationally recognized expert on children's legal rights, and a director of both corporate and nonprofit boards" (Hillary Clinton Biography). The public recognized Hillary Clinton as " a force to be reckoned with in American Politics" (Clinton, Hillary). What came along with the public's perception of Clinton being outspoken was not always positive and she was often criticized for being so actively involved. As First Lady, Hillary Clinton was very involved in her husband's administration.

Her political involvement was unprecedented, " Clinton was the only First Lady to keep an office in the West Wing among those of the president's senior staff. While her familiarity with the intricate political issues and decisions faced by the President, she openly discussed his work with him, yet stated that ultimately she was but one of several individuals he consulted

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before making a decision" (First Lady Biography). No longer was the First Lady an ornament on her husband's arm, but intelligent and an independent woman who made valuable contributions to her husband's administration and to the world in general.

Though Mrs. Clinton was politically active, she managed to maintain a traditional role of First Lady also. " Hillary Clinton did not ignore the traditional role of First Lady. With a lifelong interest in regional American history, she initiated the Save America's Treasures program, a national effort that matched federal funds to private donations to rescue from deterioration and neglect, or restore to completion many iconic historic items and sites, including the flag which inspired the Star Spangled Banner, and the National First Ladies Historic Site in Canton, Ohio" (First Lady Biography).

Throughout the two terms that Mrs. Clinton spent in the White House, she continued to focus her support on women's and children's health and welfare issues. Hillary Clinton would go on to be elected to the United States Senate for the state of New York and was appointed by President Obama upon his election to be Secretary of the State. In recent years, there are women that have made a difference in the White House and in the world.

Laura Bush is one of those women. She became a first lady in 2000 after her husband, George W. Bush, was elected president. " Mrs. Laura Bush was a champion of President Bush's ambitious agenda and a gracious representative of the American people" (Laura Welch). Due to her background in education, Laura Bush dedicated herself to helping improve the education of the United States. She wanted to push the school systems to increase the literacy rate, so she became the key advocate for the No

Child Left behind Act (Laura Welch). Due to the success of her education reform, she was asked to convey it globally in 2003 (Laura Welch).

By spreading education reform globally she was able to help millions of children who were unable to read now excel in their studies. Her particular focus while traveling and meeting with these children was to encourage girls in pursuing an education (Laura Welch). On September 11, 2001 Laura Bush's life changed dramatically when the bombing of the World Trade Center's took place. This shook her up and made her realize that it was her duty to be in the eye of the public and make a difference in the world. " After 9/11, Laura appeared more frequently on talk shows and on news magazine programs such as CBS TV's 60 Minutes" (Laura Welch).

When George Bush was re-elected in November of 2004, this meant that Laura Bush could continue her charitable causes. She continued to push for equal rights for women, so in 2005 at the World Economic Forum, she made sure that her vision of getting women equal voting rights in the Middle East was voiced. After the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina, Bush made it a goal to raise money for the schools and libraries that were devastated by this tragedy (Laura Welch). She also continued to work hard to promote the No Child Left Behind Program and the increase in literacy rates.

Most of the recent First Ladies have been independent and strong women that have made an impact in their own respective careers. Michelle Obama is one of these women. Michelle Obama had a career as a lawyer when she met President Obama, and then worked at various public service jobs, first for the city of Chicago and then for the University of Chicago. After her father and a close friend had died, Michelle Obama stepped back and reexamined <https://assignbuster.com/the-changing-role-of-the-first-ladies/>

her life. She stated, " I needed to consider what I really cared about, which was work that had a community-based feel, using my education to benefit others" (Michelle Obama).

Though her career is important to her, her family is her number one priority. When her husband began his campaign she joined him, but limited the time she was away from her children and only entrusted them with her mother. As the First Lady, Mrs. Obama continues to focus on issues that are close to her heart such as, supporting military families, helping working women balance career and family, encouraging national service, promoting art and art education, and fostering healthy eating and healthy living for children and their families across the country (Michelle Obama -White House).

The role of the first lady is now not only seen as a figure but an important part of who the president is and what they will do for the world. Looking at the role of the First Lady from the start of presidency in the United States until now, there is an obvious change in the women that have held the title and how they are regarded by the public. From the 20th century, when Eleanor Roosevelt and Betty Ford were First Ladies to the 21st century, when Laura Bush and Michelle Obama became First Ladies there are obvious role changes.

The wives of the presidents have slowly evolved for the better and made an impact on so many people. Many of the First Ladies have played pivotal roles in supporting women's rights and the ability of women to participate equally with their male counterparts. The First Lady is no longer seen as just a hostess, but is seen as an independent woman who has her own thoughts and views and takes actions to bring about change in the world.

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