

POLITICKÉ VEDY / POLITICAL SCIENCES

Journal for Political Sciences, Modern History, International Relations, security studies / Časopis pre politológiu, najnovšie dejiny, medzinárodné vzťahy, bezpečnostné štúdiá

URL of the journal / URL časopisu: <http://www.politickevedy.fpvmv.umb.sk>

Author(s) / Autor(i): Alena Štulajterová
Article / Článok: The Position of First Ladies As Wives of American Presidents and Their Roles in the 21st Century / Postavenie prvých dám ako manželiek amerických prezidentov a ich úloha v 21. storočí
Publisher / Vydavateľ: Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations – MBU Banská Bystrica / Fakulta politických vied a medzinárodných vzťahov – UMB Banská Bystrica
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24040/politickevedy.2018.21.2.101-115>

Recommended form for quotation of the article / Odporúčaná forma citácie článku:

ŠTULAJTEROVÁ, A. 2018. The Position of First Ladies As Wives of American Presidents and Their Roles in the 21st Century. In *Politické vedy*. [online]. Vol. 21, No. 2, 2018. ISSN 1335 – 2741, pp. 101-115. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24040/politickevedy.2018.21.2.101-115>

By submitting their contribution the author(s) agreed with the publication of the article on the online page of the journal. The publisher was given the author's / authors' permission to publish and distribute the contribution both in printed and online form. Regarding the interest to publish the article or its part in online or printed form, please contact the editorial board of the journal: politicke.vedy@umb.sk.

Poskytnutím svojho príspevku autor(i) súhlasil(i) so zverejnením článku na internetovej stránke časopisu *Politické vedy*. Vydavateľ získal súhlas autora / autorov s publikovaním a distribúciou príspevku v tlačenej i online verzii. V prípade záujmu publikovať článok alebo jeho časť v online i tlačenej podobe, kontaktujte redakčnú radu časopisu: politicke.vedy@umb.sk.

THE POSITION OF FIRST LADIES AS WIVES OF AMERICAN PRESIDENTS AND THEIR ROLES IN THE 21st CENTURY

Alena Štulajterová*

ABSTRACT

The role of the first lady has been a phenomenon specific to the American political system, one which developed based on the customs, traditions and needs of American society. Due to the unique nature of the United States President's Office, the position and roles of first ladies have gradually changed over the course of time. In addition to an outline of the etymology of the "first lady" title, the aim of the current study is to present the first lady's responsibilities from diachronic and synchronic points of view. The diachronic view outlines her changing roles from the hostess in the White House to her gradual engagement in politics. The synchronic view presents her current roles, from participation in pre-election campaigns to individual activities she performs in various spheres of life. We used a comparative method to find out essential peculiarities of recent first ladies' engagement in American political and social life. Our comparative analysis revealed that the scope of 21st-century first ladies' activities has been mainly focused on healthcare, human rights, equal opportunities for women, support of children and education. The results provide some interesting insights into their accomplishments and their impact on US political life, aiding scholarly efforts to analyse and interpret this changing political role in the new millennium.

Key words: first lady, United States of America, president, Office of the First Lady, US Constitution, The White House

Introduction

The President of the United States of America is in the very centre of attention of the American political system. He has extensive powers and the authority to influence the arrangement of the world political system. The American president has always been subject to analyses and evaluations from political science. Whilst his actions and popularity are widely discussed, the position of the first lady has attracted only marginal attention. Her role results

* PaedDr. Alena Štulajterová, PhD. is an assistant professor at the Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Tajovského 40, 974 01 Banská Bystrica, Slovakia, e-mail: alena.stulajterova@umb.sk.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24040/politickevedy.2018.21.2.101-115>

from historical traditions and precedents introduced by individual first ladies throughout the United States history.

The first lady has never become a formal office or official part of the executive branch. This is reflected in the United States Constitution, which does not mention the position or authority of the first lady. The “First Lady” title, therefore, is not considered an official title and cannot be compared to similar titles used in Europe. Today, multiple countries have their own first ladies; however, the position of the American first lady is completely different from the position of presidents’ wives in other democratic countries. While in the United States first ladies were able to attract the public attention as early as the first years of the federation’s existence, in Europe presidents’ wives enjoy much less attention.

1 The Historical Development of the “First Lady” Title

The “First Lady” title itself has undergone certain changes in the course of the history. Several years after the US gained independence British culture still dominated the country. In 1789, when the United States Congress elected the first American president, **George Washington**, it resolved to address him and his wife as “Mr. President and Mrs. Washington”. However, the citizens were still used to addressing royalty by titles and called **Martha Washington** (1789-1797) “Lady” to express their perception of her unique position among other women, mainly because of the assistance she provided to the Continental Army in the American War of Independence. (Watson, 2000)

In the beginning of the 19th Century, “folk” social customs prevailed and the wives of the following American presidents, **Abigail Adams** (1797-1801) and **Martha Jefferson Randolph** (1801-1809), were addressed alternatively as “Lady” and “Mrs. President”. Political enemies and partly also the unsatisfied public sometimes addressed them ironically as “Her Majesty” or “Lady Presidentess”, referring to British monarchist titles. The “Lady” title was problematic at that time, since it also referred to the royal classification of England, against which the emerging democracy had revolted.

With the development of democracy in the 1830s, the royal-like addressing gradually disappeared. First ladies were addressed as “Mrs.”, which was in accordance with the democratic spirit of the young nation. The first use of the “First Lady” title was recorded in 1848, when President **Zachary Taylor** admired **Dolly Madison** and referred to her as the “First Lady” of the half-century. Ten

years later, the title appeared in daily newspapers for the first time, and since then it has been publicly used extensively. Regardless of the title's origin, presidents' wives are nowadays commonly addressed as "first ladies" by the public, media and the White House. By the year 1930, the term "First Lady" referred mainly to strong women in certain professions and state governors' wives. Over time, the term was assigned specifically to the president's wife as the significance of her role in the President's Office increased. Moreover, capitalizing the first letters provides the title with certain official tone. Although the title is informal, its use has spread into other countries around the world. (Watson, 2000)

The "First Lady" title currently applies to the president's wife, but there have been cases when the president was unmarried, was a widower as of his election, or became one during his term. There have also been cases when president's wives were unable to perform their duties as first lady. In the aforementioned cases, other female relatives of the presidents fulfilled this role: daughters, sisters, nieces or mothers. Despite fulfilling the same role as the first lady would, these women were referred to as "hostesses". In the history of the United States, there have been two cases when women who married presidents only after their terms of office began were considered first ladies, too, despite not having fulfilled any of the tasks related to the position.

Sometimes when the first lady is unavailable, the president is accompanied by his daughter or another female relative in social events or foreign visits. For instance, when **Betty Ford** was recuperating from breast cancer surgery in 1974, her daughter **Susan** accompanied President **Gerald Ford** at a dinner planned by **Betty Ford** herself. **Susan Ford** did not assume the role of hostess at the dinner, nor did she have the same protocol position as the president. In another example, while First Lady **Hillary Clinton** was busy with her own political campaign in 2000, President **Bill Clinton** officially visited Australia accompanied by his daughter **Chelsea**, who had already performed this role at several public events. (Anthony, 2013) These examples suggest that presidents' daughters could not be considered first ladies, since they did not actually perform the tasks assigned to the first lady. Despite the fact that **Chelsea** went on the foreign visit, she did not act on behalf of her mother, nor did she plan any public speeches, which are usually given by first ladies while their husbands see to their own obligations. In this case, **Chelsea** simply accompanied her father in public due to the short-term unavailability of the first lady.

2 The Issue of Gender and Limitations for First Ladies

Along with the “First Lady” title, the role of the president’s wife has also developed over time. The origins of the position are marked by informality, reflecting the general roles assigned to females and wives at the given time. As part of the effort of the United States to separate itself from British monarchist traditions, it was important for the first lady to be a part of the “folk” in order to understand the needs of the citizens, yet to be perceived seriously by other nations, she was expected to perform her role with royal-like prestige. (Jesenská, 2009)

First ladies have often been assessed within the confines of the gender ideology of their time, which traditionally assigns the public sphere to males and the private sphere to females. In the 18th Century, the first lady’s role was limited to keeping the household, which reflected the contemporary perception of the woman’s role. This attitude continued until the 1950s: first ladies performed the housewife role, took care of the health and morals of the family, but also supervised seasonal decoration and renovations in the White House. Their primary task was to perform the role of hostess in the White House, which included hosting royalty, presidents of other countries and other important foreign politicians. Early on, first ladies were not politically active; they did not give public speeches or otherwise engage in political life. Politics was outside of their purview and therefore considered inappropriate. Their hostess role was limited to their visible participation. (Borrelli, 2011) Preferring first ladies to be active in the household resulted exclusively from the cultural interpretation of the female position and role. The continuous isolation of women from social and political life reflected the deeply rooted unwillingness to share power with women. Understandably, not all first ladies let this cultural norm affect their self-confidence. In their time, they acted as independent partners of the respective presidents, and society perceived them as symbols of femininity.

3 First Ladies’ Journey towards Political Power: Expanding the Hostess’s Role

The modern first lady does not limit her activities to the private sphere only. She attends various social events and actively participates in the politics. Since the concept of the first lady is purely American in origin, it is necessary to analyse how her position has been strengthened and her functions expanded throughout US history. Due to the unique nature of the United States President’s

Office, first ladies had to gradually take up new responsibilities to assist their husbands in the American political scene. It is important to point out that the participation of presidents' wives in this sphere conflicts with the origin of the title itself. Being first implies that she should set an example for other women. Being a lady implies that certain criteria pertaining to her appearance, behaviour and public image will be met as a reminder that she belongs to a higher social class. (Watson, 2000)

Over the course of time, first ladies took up a number of ceremonial functions, which landed them in the centre of both national and international attention, and by the second half of the 20th Century, first ladies significantly engaged in politics and gained political power by acquiring a socially acceptable political role without breaking North American standards of femininity. Their participation in their husbands' political campaigns can be regarded as the most significant manifestation of their political engagement. **Caroli** (2010) emphasizes that the increased engagement of candidates' wives in election campaigns in the 20th Century has greatly contributed to the position and role of the president's wife.

Formerly, candidates' wives were present at national assembly to provide moral support for their husbands, but they would not accompany them to the stage; today, however, their active participation is expected. The public and media expect the wife of the man running for the highest elected position in the country to show her confidence in his abilities. First ladies' participation in the election campaign comprises a compelling visual image of the candidate's marital happiness and stable family life. Since the beginnings of the first visual media, American presidents-to-be have been perceived according to how much they embody symbols of the American nation. Even in the times when only men had the right to vote, the president's family was the primary element of this symbolism. Candidates have always tried to introduce and idealise their spouse, children and parents, because their intention was to project the ideal image of an American family. (Javorčíková – Dove, 2014)

Today, first ladies' engagement in all stages of the pre-election period is visible. They assist their husbands in gaining support within their own political party and trust among the members of Congress, and they also help them draft their public speeches. Their most important asset is probably the ability to empathise with other women and emotionally engage the voter, thus helping to expand the candidate's electorate. They can convey their husband's political programme in a way understandable to the public. The candidates would be

perceived as egoistical if they spoke of their own character traits themselves, and first ladies help them present themselves.

The political participation of first ladies does not concern only active political participation in the election campaign; they can also influence the president directly. **Borrel** (1998) distinguishes four types of influence. The first type relates to the course and management of the president's career. An important representative of this type of influence was **Helen Herron Taft** (1909-1913), who convinced her husband **William Taft** to refuse a Supreme Court seat, which would have stripped him of the opportunity to run for president. First ladies who belong to this group have also used their husbands' careers to achieve their own ambitions. The second type of influence is related to the social hierarchy in Washington. Achieving this objective usually consists in affecting the president's appointments and thus indirectly influencing politics. Since women were not allowed to directly participate in the execution of the political power, they had to resort to political intrigue. A typical representative is **Mary Lincoln** (1861-1865). The third type of influence is when a president's wife acts as a political advisor, taking interest in national politics and deciding what is or is not politically prudent for the president. This type of influence is represented by **Abigail Adams** (1797-1801) and **Hillary Clinton** (1993-2001).

In terms of the use of political authority, there is no clearly established set of first lady responsibilities and functions, and the ramifications of this are twofold. On one hand, this ambiguity allows first ladies to adapt their office to their own personality, skills and political goals. On the other hand, any deviation from the traditions and standards may invite criticism.

Although there is no ideal example of behaviour or public image against which individual president's wives could be compared, almost all of them have been criticized during their term. Active and politically engaged first ladies deviating from traditional values have often been perceived as a threat. A telling example of this is when **Eleanor Roosevelt** spoke out against the Japanese internment camps ordered by **F. D. Roosevelt** during WWII. (Davis, 1998) On the other hand, recluse and inactive first ladies interested exclusively in their household have been reproached for their passiveness and unwillingness to improve the political or social situation. Certain critics have been strikingly radical in their assessment. According to **Watson** (2000), many of these critical voices result from the traditional chauvinist disapproval of female participation in the leading positions.

First ladies face many of the problems women encounter in general; however, their position enhances their gravity. **Schneider** (2010) considers it very important for the first lady to publicly manifest respect for her husband and refuse any benefit from his success. Although the engagement of individual American first ladies has varied, they have all had one thing in common: the position of the United States president's wife is a challenge. They have all faced it after they moved to the White House, and it has always required the ability to withstand criticism, but also deal with the lack of a job description or a constitutional definition of the first lady's rights and responsibilities.

3.1 First Ladies of the 21st Century

At the turn of the century, **Hillary Clinton** (1993-2001) became the first lady of the United States of America. As soon as the pre-election campaign began, she presented herself as a dynamic partner and adviser that intensively supported her husband. She already had her own flourishing professional career at the time of the campaign, which was unique for a first lady. Her prior successes also influenced **Bill Clinton's** pre-election campaign – the main slogan being “two for the price of one”. The married couple publicly demonstrated their fully-fledged political partnership. Yet, at the same time, this demonstration heralded the future first lady's intention to deepen her political involvement. This could be seen right after **Bill Clinton** took the presidential office – she regularly participated in Congress sessions and developed a close cooperation with the members of Congress. She moved her office to the West Wing, so that she could be closer to the Oval Office. The goal was clear – to unite her personnel with that of the president and to deepen their cooperation. (Young, 2013; Harris, 2009) She was highly devoted to the Public Health Service, and her efforts resulted in the establishment of the Children's Health Insurance Program in 1997. Its goal was to provide support for children whose parents were unable to pay regularly for health insurance. (Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton, 2015) She also contributed to the establishment of the Office on Violence Against Women, which came under the Department of Justice. She gained respect for upholding human rights, democracy and equal opportunities for women across the world. (First Lady Biography: Hillary Clinton, 2015) However, the truth is that with the health service reform she also started her own political career – later, she was twice elected to the US Senate.

In the most recent presidential election (2016), this former first lady, senator and secretary of state ran for the presidential office for the second time. If she had been

elected, the history of the USA would have been rewritten twice at the same time. Firstly, she would have become the first female president. Secondly, the Office of the First Lady would have to have been redefined, as for the first time in history it would have been assumed by a man.

After **Hillary Clinton's** eight-year tenure as first lady, the public was curious whether the new first lady – **Laura Bush** (2001-2009) – would continue in the substantial political involvement of her predecessor or fulfil a more traditional first lady role. In response to certain negative public reactions regarding the excessive active participation of her predecessor in political matters, the new first lady decided not to continue this trend. She demonstrated her intention not to participate in political decision-making immediately after taking office by moving the Office of the First Lady back into the East Wing of the White House. Instead, she continued in the steps of her mother-in-law – former first lady **Barbara Bush** (1989-1993) – devoting her time and energy to supporting education and fighting illiteracy. (Gormley, 2003) Through the national initiative “*Ready to Read, Ready to Learn*”, she emphasized pre-school education and retraining war veterans as teachers. She struggled to improve the public school system’s quality of education and she encouraged the increase of the education budget, including teachers’ salaries. In the first year in the Office **Laura Bush** established National books festival where she annually welcomed outstanding writers. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, she began dedicating herself to the rights of Afghan women. In the regular weekly radio president’s speech, she publically protested against oppression on women and children by the Taliban – a fundamentalist political movement. (Pol, 2011) During her husband’s election campaign in 2004, she significantly promoted a public role of the first lady when she gave a political speech about the main political achievements and objectives of **Bush’s** administration at the national congress of the Republican Party. Such political speeches had before been the domain of political supporters of the future president.

During her husband’s second term, she supported his global health initiatives to increase public awareness of individual diseases, cooperating with the president in the effort to eliminate malaria and AIDS in affected regions of the world. In 2007, she founded the Laura Bush Institute for Women’s Health and began to travel throughout the US, striving to increase women’s awareness of heart disease symptoms and emphasizing the importance of early diagnosis. Aside from healthcare activism, she continued to fight illiteracy.

In 2005, **Laura Bush** was appointed Honorary Ambassador for the United Nations in the area of education, science and culture with the goal of supporting

global programmes fighting illiteracy. Nevertheless, like her previous role, this function was not directly connected to political decision-making processes, and she did not publicly express her political views. That is one of the reasons why she was more popular than her predecessor – in her first year in office, she achieved an almost 80% public approval rating. (Pol, 2011)

In 2008, for the first time in history, the US's citizens elected an African-American president – **Barack Obama**. The choice reflected social development, overcoming the racial prejudice and discrimination that has troubled the US throughout history. **Michelle Obama** (2009-2017) thus became the first African-American first lady. Although she was the only first lady having slaves as direct ancestors, Michelle regularly emphasized a feeling of pride in her ancestors, as they helped her to understand the impact of slavery on the lives of contemporary African-Americans. (Bond, 2012)

Michelle Obama combined her intelligence with her authentic interest in others. Like her husband, she was also supported by millions of African-American and Hispanic US citizens, for whom the Obamas embodied hope for a better future (still, the majority of their voters were white). (Obama, 2015) In the first months of her term, she struggled to find a balance between raising her daughters and working for society. Despite her successful law career, she made caring for her daughters her highest priority. Concerning public affairs, she focused on current social issues. (Bodden, 2010) At first, she gave lectures in public schools stressing the importance of education and volunteering. Taking into account the importance of healthy lifestyle, she supported the movement for healthy eating and farming without chemicals. She informed the White House cooks about the importance of cooking from fresh ingredients not just for the White House guests but also at home.

Michelle Obama visited several schools in Washington, D.C. and Chicago, informing students about the need to eat healthy and regularly exercise. In March 2009 – in cooperation with local Washington schoolchildren – she planted a vegetable garden measuring 1100 square metres and placed beehives on the White House south lawn. Students looked after the garden in the summer, harvested the crops and learned to cook various dishes from fresh organic vegetables. Each year a different school was involved. This was how the first lady taught children to eat healthy. (Obama, 2015)

Starting in 2010, **Michelle Obama** fought against childhood obesity through the "Let's Move" programme. Her goal was to join the efforts of parents, teachers, medical staff and sportsmen (Olympians) to solve the childhood obesity problem on

the national level. She pointed out that the occurrence of childhood obesity in the USA had tripled in the previous thirty years, meaning every third child had obesity issues – thereby increasing the risk of other diseases such as diabetes, heart-related diseases, high blood pressure and asthma. Based on the first lady's efforts, President **Obama** founded a task force specialising in fighting childhood obesity; its goal was to reduce obesity to a baseline level of 5% by 2030. (America's Move to Raise a Healthier Generation of Kids, 2015)

In 2014, the first lady launched the initiative "*Reach Higher*" in order to contribute to the formation of an educated society and to urge the youth to acquire an education of the highest quality possible. (First Lady Michelle Obama, 2015) In public opinion surveys her popularity remained at the 66% level – this was related, among other things, to her non-engagement in political issues, her work for social change, her friendly attitude and her openness. Her perceptive understanding of citizens' needs resulted in her being named the fourth most powerful woman on the planet in 2014. (Zsilleová, 2014)

Michelle Obama also received public support for emphasizing the need for confidence-building among non-white citizens, their active participation in society and for fighting discrimination. During her term as first lady, she was able to overcome social stereotypes by presenting a positive image of a strong, intelligent, educated and charismatic African American woman in an executive position. She and her husband embodied the ideal of the 21st Century presidential family.

Melania Trump (2017-) became first lady in January 2017, as of **Donald Trump's** inauguration. She is the first American first lady whose mother tongue is not English. After **Louisa Adams** (1825-1829) she is the second American first lady not born in the USA, and with a height of 180 cm she is – together with **Michelle Obama** and **Eleanor Roosevelt** – one of the three tallest first ladies in US history. Her stated goals as first lady are to help school children fight cyber-bullying, to help women and to improve the overly negative culture of the American media. As far as combating cyber-bullying, she proclaimed: "We must find better ways to honour and support the basic goodness of our children, especially in social media." **Melania Trump** has already visited several middle schools in Detroit area, and urged students to treat one another with respect and kindness. Furthermore, she lent attention to "No One Eats Alone," initiative that is intended to teach children inclusion skills, and to acknowledge the "Week of Inclusion," part of National Bullying Prevention Program in the United States.

As far as her initiatives for women is concerned, **Melania Trump's** first official White House event as first lady was a ceremonial lunch on the occasion of

International Women’s Day on March 8, 2017. The women present at the event were told about her experience as a female immigrant and activities related to gender equality in the USA and abroad. In her speech, she emphasized the role of education as a tool for fighting gender inequality.

During **Donald Trump’s** May 2017 visit to the Vatican, his first official trip abroad, **Melania Trump** declared herself Catholic. She is therefore the first presidential spouse of the Roman-Catholic faith in more than 50 years – since the term of **Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis**.

We could also observe her initiative in the sphere of healthcare. **Melania Trump** has recently visited Lily’s Place clinic that treats infants born with addiction. Her visit is a signal that she intends to focus on elimination of the opioid epidemic in the country.¹ Despite the view of Brower (2018) that Mrs. Trump is the most reluctant first lady in modern history and her apparent antipathy toward the role has made her more willing to ignore the rules and traditions that govern it², we are of an opinion that by the time the Trumps leave the White House, the success and specifics of her work as the first lady – position, which has no job description and no pay – will have been evaluated positively.

Table 1: The Scope of First Ladies’ Activities in the 21st Century

Activities regarding:	Hillary Clinton	Laura Bush	Michelle Obama	Melania Trump
Healthcare	<i>Children’s Health Insurance Program</i>	<i>Laura Bush Institute for Women’s Health</i>		-helping opioids victims
Healthy lifestyle			- movement for healthy eating and regular exercise - <i>Let’s Move</i> - programme fighting childhood obesity	

¹ More than two million Americans are estimated to have problems with opioids, and Appalachia has some of the highest overdose rates in the country. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released a report last year that the incidence of neonatal abstinence syndrome climbed to six per 1,000 hospital births in 2013, up from 1.5 per 1,000 in 1999. In 2012, one infant with the illness was born every 25 minutes. (The New York Times, 10 October, 2017)

² Brower, K. A. *The Quiet Radicalism of Melania Trump*. New York : The New York Times, 25 January 2018.

Activities regarding:	Hillary Clinton	Laura Bush	Michelle Obama	Melania Trump
Human rights	<i>Office on Violence Against Women</i>	- campaigning for the rights of Afghan women	- fighting discrimination	
Education		<i>Ready to Read, Ready to Learn</i> - fighting illiteracy - retraining war veterans as teachers	<i>Reach Higher</i> - urging the youth to acquire quality education; - lectures in public schools on importance of education and volunteering,	-fighting against cyber-bullying in schools - inclusion initiative "No One Eats Alone"
Own political career	secretary of state, member of the US Senate, presidential candidate	honorary ambassador for the United Nations		

American first ladies' priorities are healthcare and human rights, the two areas that **Hillary Clinton**, **Laura Bush** and **Michelle Obama** share in common. Furthermore, **Laura Bush** and **Michelle Obama**'s third priority was education, and **Melania Trump** seems to continue this trend. Two 21st Century first ladies, **Hillary Clinton** and **Michelle Obama**, had their own professional careers before their husbands became American presidents – they were both successful lawyers. On top of that, **Hillary Clinton** has had a significant political career as well. Although **Laura Bush** was appointed Honorary Ambassador for the United Nations in the area of education, science and culture, she did not participate in political decision-making. Similarly, **Michelle Obama** preferred striking a balance between raising her daughters and working for society to an active political career. As stated above, the social-welfare activities of the current first lady are yet to be evaluated, though they surely will be in the near future.

Conclusion

To conclude, while until the 1950s first ladies were not engaged in active political life and performed mainly the role of housewives and hostesses in the

White House, some recent first ladies have been significantly engaged in politics and have gained political power by acquiring a socially acceptable political role. They were politically active in their husband's pre-election period, as well as during the years their husbands were in the Office. In the new millennium, the wives of American presidents are part and parcel of the social as well as political world. The scope of their activities include charity, human rights, equal opportunities for women, support of children, home and global health initiatives and many other. This mutual interconnection of their influence attracts media attention as first ladies provide a view into the life of the country's most powerful man. From a historical perspective, the institution of the first lady has been able to adapt to ever-changing circumstances. Overall, the cardinal influence on the Office's operation was primarily exerted by politically active first ladies who tried to contribute to socio-political change. The position's persistent absence of clearly set tasks mitigates potential criticism of a first lady's actions. Many demand the adoption of a constitutional amendment that would clearly define the first lady's authority. Without a constitutional delineation of their duties and responsibilities, first ladies are able to adjust their function according to their characters and personalities, and to the political goals of their respective presidents.³

References:

- ABRAMS, D. 2009. *Hillary Rodham Clinton: Politician*. New York : Infobase Publishing, 2009. pp. 144 p. ISBN 978-1-60413-077-5.
- ADLER, B. 2006. *America's First Ladies: Their Uncommon Wisdom, from Martha Washington to Laura Bush*. Lanham : Taylor Trade Publishing, 2006. pp. 256. ISBN 978-1- 58979-299-9.

³ As far as the situation in Europe is concerned, in most European countries "First Lady" is not an official function – "only" a public role. In 2017, we could observe an interesting attempt to establish "official first lady status" in France. During Emmanuel Macron's campaign, he pledged to create this status for his wife Brigitte Macron, whose role would be determined by a transparency charter. However, after Macron's arrival at the Élysée, a petition opposing the president's move to create official first lady status for his wife received 314,000 signatures. Despite public opposition, the transparency charter was issued in August 2017, clarifying her competencies and informing the French public of the number of staff assigned to her and the cost (her annual budget amounts to €440 000). Brigitte Macron said she would have a clear role at the Élysée Palace despite public opposition to her taking the official title of France's first lady, and her ambition is to publish her meetings and engagements on the Élysée site so the French know exactly what she is doing. A former school teacher, she is planning to concentrate on "education and disability" issues. (The Guardian, 8 August, 2017)

- ANTHONY, C. F. 2013. *Who is a First Lady?* [online]. 2013 [Accessed on 30. 9. 2017]. Available at: www.firstladies.org/blog/who-is-a-first-lady/.
- BODDEN, V. 2010. *Michelle Obama: First Lady and Role Model*. Edina : ABDO, 2010. pp. 112. ISBN 978-1-60453-703-1.
- BOLLER, P. F. 1998. *Presidential Wives*. New York : Oxford University Press, 1998. pp. 553. ISBN 0-19-512142-2.
- BOND, A. H. 2012. *Michelle Obama, a Biography*. Santa Barbara : ABC-CLIO, 2012. pp. 167. ISBN 978-0-313-38104-1.
- BORELLI, M. A. 2011. *The Politics of the President's Wife*. College Station, Texas : Texas A&M University Press, 2011. pp. 282. ISBN 078-1-60344-284-8.
- BROWER, K. A. *The Quiet Radicalism of Melania Trump*. New York : The New York Times, 25 January 2018.
- CAROLI, B. B. 2010. *First Ladies: From Martha Washington to Michelle Obama*. Fourth Edition. New York : Oxford University Press, 2010. pp. 496. ISBN 978-0-19-539285-2.
- DAVIS, L. 1998. *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Photo-illustrated Biography*. Mankato : Capstone Press, 1998. 24 p. ISBN 1-56065-572-0.
- First Lady Michelle Obama* [online]. 2015 [Accessed on 11.3.2017]. Available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/firs-lady-michelle-obama>.
- GORMLEY, B. 2003. *Laura Bush: America's First Lady*. New York : Simon & Schuster, 2003. pp. 128. ISBN 0-689-85366-1.
- HARRIS, B. 2009. *The First Ladies Fact Book*. New York : Black Dog & Leventhal Publishers, Inc., 2009. pp. 745. ISBN 978-1-57912-809-8.
- HUBBARD-BROWN, J. 2009b. *Eleanor Roosevelt: First Lady*. New York : Infobase Publishing, 2009. 129 p. ISBN 978-1-60413-076-8.
- JAVORČÍKOVÁ, J. – DOVE, M. E. 2014. *Explorations in American Life and Culture, 2nd extended edition*. Belianum: 2014. 175 p. ISBN 978-80-557-0757-0.
- JESENSKÁ, P. 2009. *Prezentovanie rodových rol a stereotypov vo vybraných učebniciach anglického jazyka*. Banská Bystrica : Univerzita Mateja Bela, 2009. 161 s. ISBN 978-80-8083-746-4.
- Laura Bush Biography* [online]. 2015 [Accessed on 11.9.2017]. Available at: www.biography.com/people/laura-bush.
- LINDSAY, R. 2001. *The President's First Ladies*. Englewood Cliffs : R&R Writers/Agents, Inc., 2001. 293 p. ISBN 0-965-37533-1.

- McGEEHAN, J. R. 2007. *The Everything American History Book: People, places, and events that shaped our nation*. Second Edition. Massachusetts : Adams Media, 2007. 324 p. ISBN 978-1-59869-261-7.
- Michelle Obama Biography* [online]. 2016 [Accessed on 11.10.2017]. Available at: www.biography.com/people/michelle-obama.
- NELSON, M. 2003. *The Presidency A to Z*. Third edition. Washington D.C. : CQ Press, 2003. 604 p. ISBN 1-56802-803-2.
- POL, S. V. 2001. *First Ladies: A Profile of America's First Ladies; Michelle Obama to Martha Washington*. Lexington : Pacific Publishing Studio, 2001. pp. 139. ISBN 978-4-53696-804.
- TOWNSEND, V. 2004. *Our President: the Lives of the Twenty-Three Presidents of the United States*. New York : Digital Antiquaria, 2004. pp. 262. ISBN 1-58057-279-0.
- WATSON, R. P. 2000. *The President's Wives: Reassessing the Office of First Lady*. Boulder : Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000. pp. 261. ISBN 1-55587-948-9.
- YOUNG, B. B. 2013. *Encyclopedia of the U.S. Presidency. A Historical Reference*. Volume I, Thematic Essays. New York : Infobase Publishing, 2013. pp. 254. ISBN 978-0-8160-6744-2.
- ZSILLEOVÁ, M. 2014. Trinásť vecí o Michelle Obamovej: Oslavuje 50 rokov. [online]. 2014 [Accessed on 21.8.2017]. Available at: www.sme.sk/c/7070889/trinast-veci-o-michelle-obamove-oslavuje-50-rokov.html.