

Unveiling the power behind the curtain: The influence of political wives of local chief executives in the Philippines

Mengungkap kekuatan di balik tahta: Pengaruh politik para istri kepala daerah di Filipina

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Abstract

For centuries, the role of political spouses has been a crucial, though often overlooked, facet of political life. While scholarly and public attention predominantly fixates on the politician, the contributions of their partners have played a significant role in shaping and influencing the political landscape, a dynamic frequently underexplored in political discourse. To explicate the phenomenon, the study was conducted to explore the role of political spouses in the political landscape of the country, particularly the power of wives of local chief executives (LCEs) in local governance. The study is qualitative research that employed case study design to examine the scope of influence and extent of control of the first ladies of municipal and city mayors in Mindanao during the 2022-2025 term of office—an area of public leadership that remains largely understudied within mainstream political analysis. The study revealed both shared and diverse views and insights among political wives in balancing their roles as mothers and spouses of local chief executives. Across participants, they regarded their roles as demanding yet rewarding, requiring adaptability, strong support networks, and effective time management. They consistently acted as informal advisors, influencing policy and advocacy efforts through their proximity to power. Their accounts highlighted active engagement in community development and navigating public and private responsibilities. While their perspectives were broadly similar, individual journeys differed based on strategies employed to manage these dual demands.

Keywords: case study; gender politics; local governance; power dynamics; wives of politicians

Abstrak

Selama berabad-abad meskipun sering diabaikan, peran istri kepala daerah di Filipina telah menjadi aspek penting dalam kehidupan politik, perhatian akademisi dan publik lebih banyak tertuju pada politisi sebagai individu, meskipun senyatanya, istri kepala daerah memainkan peran yang signifikan dalam membentuk dan memengaruhi lanskap politik. Fenomena ini seringkali kurang dieksplorasi dalam wacana politik, oleh karena itu penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi peran istri kepala daerah dalam lanskap politik negara, khususnya kekuatan istri kepala eksekutif daerah (LCE) dalam pemerintahan daerah. Penelitian ini merupakan riset kualitatif yang menggunakan desain studi kasus untuk mengkaji ruang lingkup pengaruh dan tingkat kontrol yang dijalankan oleh para ibu negara dari wali kota dan bupati di Mindanao selama masa jabatan 2022–2025, suatu aspek kepemimpinan publik yang masih sangat kurang diteliti dalam analisis politik arus utama. Penelitian ini mengungkap pandangan dan wawasan di antara istri-istri kepala daerah dalam menyeimbangkan peran mereka sebagai ibu dan pasangan kepala eksekutif daerah. Penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa istri kepala daerah mengaggap peran mereka sebagai tugas yang menuntut namun memuaskan, memerlukan kemampuan beradaptasi, jaringan dukungan yang kuat, dan manajemen waktu yang efektif. Para istri kepala daerah secara konsisten bertindak sebagai penasihat informal, memengaruhi kebijakan dan upaya advokasi melalui kedekatan dengan kekuasaan. Pengalaman mereka menyoroti keterlibatan aktif dalam pengembangan masyarakat serta navigasi tanggung jawab publik dan pribadi. Meskipun pandangan mereka secara umum serupa, perjalanan individual dari istri kepala daerah berbeda tergantung pada strategi yang digunakan untuk mengelola tuntutan ganda ini.

Kata kunci: studi kasus; politik gender; pemerintahan lokal; dinamika kekuasaan; istri politikus

Introduction

Throughout history, the spouses of politicians have played a vital but often undermined role in shaping the political landscape. While the elected official gets all the attention, many of the most important decisions

are made with the quiet influence of their partners. In many contexts, especially in patriarchal societies, political wives are seen as passive figures. This overlooks their strategic involvement in managing public image, guiding political direction and even steering electoral campaigns (Barreto & Segura 2014, Stokes 2015). In practice, their roles often expand to informal advisory capacities where their insights and close connections to authority shape policy outcomes in subtle but lasting ways (Dittmar 2020).

In the Philippines, the relationship between public officers and their spouses has emerged as a significant source of scholarly discourse on influence and power. The official post held by their husbands often provides political spouses an opportunity to exercise considerable authority within the political sphere. This political reality is manifested between the Chief Executive of the Philippines and his First Lady, Liza Araneta Marcos. During the first quarter of her husband's presidency, the First Lady faced numerous allegations for significantly involving in the President's governance, particularly in relation to important appointments and major governmental decisions. Nonetheless, these allegations were denied by her in interviews, asserting that she had never attended any cabinet meetings. These accusations open discourse on how the spouses of key officials navigate the blurred lines between their role as the mother and wife and the domains of government affairs.

At the local level, numerous political spouses have assumed the position of their husbands due to death or disqualification, and these transitions are rarely driven by personal ambition. In the municipality of Libungan, for example, Honorable Angel Rose Cuan assumed office due to the death of her husband. She championed good governance in the locality, opening numerous social development programs for her people. In a similar case, Honorable Evangeline Pascua-Guzman of the municipality of Kabacan assumed the office of her husband after the end of his term. She advocated for rural development through sustainable agriculture and public health among local communities. These storied experiences of political spouses turned into local politicians demonstrate that women in political families do not merely assume leadership roles to preserve familial power, but rather as a genuine response to the community's call for good governance and community development (McCoy 1994, Hutchcroft 1998, Mendoza et al. 2012, Querubin 2016).

In 1975, Robert Dahl, in this seminal works on power, described these political transitions, asserting that influence is not an asset intrinsically attached to any public office but a relational outcome produced through political skills, perceived legitimacy, and the shifting landscape of public perception. In cases of widowhood or succession, the exercise of influence is derived mainly from symbolic capital and emotional resonance with the people rather than through formal political frameworks. This emphasizes the nuanced and multilayered nature of political legitimacy and challenges the old norm that political power only resides to public officials (Weldon 2002).

Basu (2017) states that political spouses sustain their presence in public service by actively taking part in advocating for policy reforms, mobilizing stakeholders participation in community development, and expanding political alliances, especially during periods of political uncertainty. To understand the essence of power, Dahl's anti-fundamentalist approach compels scholars to look beyond its legalistic dimensions and extend the analysis to emotional, symbolic, and institutional dimensions. This is particularly relevant in Philippines public administration where family-based networks and relational politics remain at the center of local governance. In the case of Mayor Cuan and Mayor Pascua-Guzman, political spouses are not merely viewed as placeholders. Instead, their power is rooted in a complex amalgamation of public trust, personal loss, and the strategic use of political acumen to ensure continuity, especially during political turbulence and transition. The public trust over them does not just come from their surnames but from their leadership performance in highly visible spaces.

According to the 2021 Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum, the Philippines ranked 17 out of 156 countries in empowering women in politics, citing notable national government leaders like Former President Corazon Aquino and Vice-President Leni Robredo. However, these metrics focus only on formally elected women and do not account for the role of political spouses operating behind the

curtain of success of male chief executives. In the same vein, political spouses are underrepresented in the academic research both locally and globally. In the literature scanning of the present research, it was found that little attention was given to the lives of women who transition from private life to informal public leadership through their marital ties since most of the studies focused on elected women leaders with independent political identities.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining how the political wife of a local chief executive exerts influence in her region. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following questions: (1) How does a political wife view her role as a mother and as the spouse of a local chief executive? (2) What is the achieved influence of a political wife? (3) What is the scope of a political wife's influence within their locality? (4) What is the sphere of control of a political wife? Addressing these research questions contributes to the evolving discussion on the interplay between gender and governance in Southeast Asia where personal networks and loyalty profoundly shape political life.

Research Method

The researchers employed a qualitative research approach and case study research design to develop a robust understanding of the political influence of politicians' spouses, drawing on multiple cases such as the eight local government units in Mindanao. According to Yin (2014), a collective or multiple case study design is appropriate for exploring a complex phenomenon that cannot be adequately investigated through a single case. This approach allowed the researchers to analyze and compare cases, such as the experiences of eight political wives, identifying common themes, patterns, and differences that address the research questions and provide insights into the phenomenon under study.

The study involved eight political spouses in the data collection. These women are wives of municipal or city mayors in a province in Mindanao currently serving during the 2022 – 2025 term. Ragandang (2022) suggested that "there is no issue of bias of studying your own backyard, especially if it aims towards benefiting the community." Nevertheless, ensuring representativeness among the prospect participants attains rigor of qualitative data by drawing perspectives exclusively from political spouses. Purposive sampling was used to identify and select participants who were best suited to answer the research questions. The selection criteria required participants to be the spouse of a local chief executive in the Philippines who had served for at least one term. To maintain the anonymity of the participants, the researchers deliberately did not disclose the specific locales of the study.

The researchers formally communicated with the concerned authorities to request permission to initiate the study. They began reaching out their prospect participants guided by their inclusion criteria after securing permission to conduct the study. Informed consent was provided to the interested participants to explain the purpose of the research, their rights, and the assurance of non-maleficence. In-person interviews served as the primary data collection strategy. The data were analyzed following the methodological framework of Attride-Stirling (2001) and Into & Gempes (2018). Analyzing the core ideas of the conversations with the political spouses helped the researchers formulate themes. Further, relevant normative and empirical theories were consulted to interpret the emerging worldview of the phenomenon of interest. To ensure trustworthiness of the findings, the researchers conducted member checking and included the audit trail of the research methodology in the manuscript.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study based on the gathered data from the interviews with the participants. Eight political spouses were interviewed to elicit relevant anecdotes on how political wives exert influence within informal public spheres. Table 1 presents the socio-demographic profile of each political spouse included in the study. To protect their identities, specific pseudonyms were assigned and consistently used throughout the discussion to preserve the personal informal of the participants while maintaining coherence in narrating their lived experiences.

Table 1.
Sociodemographic profile of political spouses

Pseudonyms	Age	Educational attainment	Occupation (Before & after the marriage)
JSC	56	Bachelor's degree	Data Analyst – Housewife
MTJ	61	Master's degree	Professor
LPS	59	Bachelor's degree	Project Facilitator
TMM	45	Associate degree	Public Servant – Housewife
RSD	56	Associate degree	Employee – Housewife
ECL	47	Master's degree	Professor – Housewife
LSA	61	Associate degree	Business Executive
IAL	60	Professional degree	Attorney

Source: Author modification and notes on qualitative inquiry of Lahman et al. (2023)

Grounded on Dahl's (1957) theory of power, this study examined the role of political wives as a mother and the spouse of a local chief executive, their achieved influence, the scope of their power within their locality and their sphere of control. This offers an in-depth analysis of who gets to shape political outcomes and the ways in which power is enacted outside the limits of public office, challenging the traditional definitions of political agency.

Perception of a political wife of her role as a mother and as the spouse of a local chief executive

Table 2 presents the perception of political wives of their role as a mother and a spouse of a local chief executive. The study found that juggling the demands of public life with personal obligations made being both a mother and a political spouse an arduous task. It requires a special combination of abilities and perseverance to balance the responsibilities of raising a family while supporting a partner in the political sphere.

Life as a mother and political spouse is challenging

The study revealed that the dual roles of being a mother and a political spouse are deeply demanding, both emotionally and logistically. As mothers, the participants were responsible for their children's health, education, and moral upbringing, tasks that required constant care, emotional presence, and energy. At the same time, their public role as political spouses involved supporting their partners' political careers through community engagements, public appearances, and advocacy work. This duality created a complex balancing act between private obligations and public expectations. As Utomo & McDonald (2023) noted, political wives often struggle to protect their children's privacy while meeting societal demands. Similarly, Jabbari et al. (2023) emphasized how this burden, though rewarding, can be a source of strain. Participants such as JSC, MTJ, and RSD acknowledged these challenges, especially as many of them also held professional jobs. To manage the overlap of roles, they developed detailed time management strategies to maintain their effectiveness in both public service and family life.

Kantor (2007), a reporter for The New York Times, provided an in-depth account of the lives of Barack and Michelle Obama during their tenure in the White House. "The Obamas" delved into Michelle Obama's experiences as a political spouse, exploring how she navigated the demands of being the First Lady while also maintaining a focus on her family and personal values. Kantor (as cited by Kallenberger 2015), discovered that managing this dual role required striking a careful balance between private and public life, ensuring that parenting did not suffer as a result of the time and energy spent on political obligations. Mothers married to politicians often found themselves dividing their lives, alternating between the personal, private realm of their families and the demanding, public realm of politics. One of the participants shared:

"In the beginning, I really struggled because I was not just thinking about being a mother and a wife. I also considered my role as an employee. The stress at work all day, and sometimes coming home to additional problems, made it inevitable for me to feel frustrated and become the cause of conflicts at home." (Informant JSC).

Another participant agreed:

"Navigating both roles can contribute to stress, anxiety, and emotional strain, to be honest. I've developed a robust support system that includes my family, friends, and colleagues who understand and support my husband's political aspirations. Having a network to rely on can be invaluable during challenging times because they help you in those trying moments." (Informant MTJ).

Balancing the roles of mother and political spouse is a demanding and complex task that requires resilience and careful time management. These women must simultaneously nurture their families and fulfill public responsibilities, often while managing professional duties. This dual role creates emotional strain and stress, as they navigate the challenges of maintaining family well-being alongside supporting their partner's political career. Strong support systems and personal perseverance are essential for managing these overlapping demands, highlighting the significant and often unseen sacrifices political spouses make in both their private and public lives.

Life as a mother and political spouse is fulfilling

Bianchi et al. (2006) observed that parenting continues to be a gendered experience, with women dedicating approximately twice as much time to child-rearing as men (Elder & Green 2016). In the context of political spouses, however, informants in this study reported that they were able to manage the dual demands of motherhood and their roles as political partners. Unlike others who may struggle with balancing these responsibilities, these individuals appeared to navigate the complexities of both roles with relative ease and efficiency. They find a sense of fulfillment in meeting the demands of their work while being mothers to their children and wives to their husbands. With a strong support network and effective work-life balance, they are able to overcome the difficulties that arise from balancing these dual roles.

Jacobson & Carson (2015) added that a political wife's support system often comes in different forms, such as a network of friends and strong emotional support provided by their family. He noted that professional networks and political allies in their localities provide them with a sense of direction and solidarity. Moreover, resilience and strong mental health can be achieved by having someone to rely on during trying times. This viewpoint underscores the importance of seeking help in balancing complex situations. Networking, division of labor, and clearly defined roles are proactive and powerful strategies for managing the exhaustion and emotional pressure of being a political spouse. One of the participants indicated:

"Having reliable help with childcare, as well as emotional support from friends and family, can make the balancing act more manageable for me. I'm not the only one who should function. We all have our own tasks, and we need to perform them individually so that we don't end up always relying on others." (Informant TMM).

As suggested by a political wife:

"For me, open and effective communication with my spouse is really important. Discussing expectations, sharing responsibilities, and being aware of each other's needs can help prevent misunderstandings and foster a healthy relationship. As for the children, if you're able to provide for their daily needs, then you're doing something right as a mother. Both of these aspects require massive attention so that you don't miss out on being both a spouse and a mother." (Informant ECL).

Another participant added:

“Being flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances is key. The nature of public office can bring unexpected challenges, and being able to adjust plans accordingly is important. We make sure to connect with other individuals in similar situations.”
(Informant LSA).

Balancing professional responsibilities with the roles of mother and spouse brings both psychological and social fulfillment. Psychological fulfillment comes from their ability to juggle the complex demands of both work and family, tapping into their deep need for purpose, identity, and self-efficacy. Successfully managing these roles fosters their personal growth, boosts their confidence, and builds emotional resilience, creating a profound sense of accomplishment. It reinforces their ability to contribute meaningfully to different aspects of life.

On top of that, social fulfillment comes from their support network of friends, family, and professional connections (Jacobson & Carson 2015), which becomes an essential resource in easing the pressure of balancing these roles. These relationships offer emotional support, practical help, and a sense of solidarity, all of which help reduce stress and maintain well-being. The interdependence within these networks creates a sense of belonging, strengthening their connections and adding to their overall life satisfaction.

However, achieving this dual fulfillment is not without its challenges. The competing demands of these roles can often result in stress and role strain. Moreover, Tesler (2016) added that the demands of public service often disrupt regular family routines, as erratic political schedules can make it challenging to plan consistent activities. This may lead to feelings of guilt or resentment due to the inability to dedicate the same amount of time to family life as others might. However, such challenges often foster creativity and adaptability. Families in these circumstances learn to maximize their limited time together, whether through brief shared meals, weekend getaways, or integrating family into public activities whenever possible, emphasizing the importance of meaningful connections.

Table 2.

Perception of political wife of her role as a mother and a spouse of a local chief executive

Key themes	Qualitative data
Life as a mother and political spouse is difficult yet fulfilling.	• The need for adept multitasking, constant schedule balancing, and a reservoir of patience. • The roles and responsibilities are complex and challenging. • The public often looks up to individuals in these roles as symbols of stability, unity, and the embodiment of traditional family ideals. • Appears to navigate the demands of both roles with a sense of ease and capability. • Juggling family and political obligations is a difficult and common component of being a mother and a political spouse. • Open communication is essential in understanding people's expectations and concerns. • Connecting with people with similar experiences is vital in building a supportive network. • Her role anchors on the ideals of motherhood which are characterized by nurturing and loving qualities.

Source: Author modification and notes on qualitative inquiry of Into & Gempes (2018)

Interviews with the eight participants suggested that life as a mother and political spouse is inherently complex, marked by both challenges and rewards. Recurring themes highlighted the demanding nature of juggling family life with political responsibilities, the importance of effective communication, the need for flexibility and adaptability, and the value of building a strong support network. Participants emphasized their difficulties in balancing private and public responsibilities, noting the risks of stress and emotional exhaustion, as well as the need for making compromises.

Achieved influence of a political wife

Table 3 illustrates the influence exerted by the wife of a local chief executive in the Philippines. The study found that political wives today play a vastly different role in politics than they did in the past. Many actively participate in negotiations, policy work, and the creation of their own political identities. They are powerful individuals in their own right, no longer confined to supporting roles. Political spouses now have platforms to advocate for social issues that matter to them, using public appearances, social media participation (Fulleros & Nitafan 2024), and involvement in various organizations.

Capacity to use persuasion and control

JSC, MTJ, and LSA offered different understandings of the concept of influence, asserting that power is characterized by the use of persuasion and control. Power includes the ability to steer and shape events, including influencing choices to achieve positive outcomes. From the participants’ perspectives, influence can be exercised in a more assertive and authoritative manner, where the influencer actively directs the decision-making process.

Wright (2016) added that a husband’s inclination to confer with his spouse indicates a desire for agreement and shared viewpoints on important matters. Accordingly, husbands respect their spouses’ opinions and may even believe that conclusions are stronger and more comprehensive when viewed through the prism of their combined wisdom. This cooperative approach to decision-making demonstrates a degree of trust and respect within the partnership, as the spouses attempt to maintain harmony and unity in their opinions. To quote:

“Actually, the word ‘influence’ is quite heavy. It can be seen as a form of control, especially if you consider how powerful influence can be, particularly in politics. But for me, influence is something that you can use to persuade or, at the very least, affect your husband’s decision-making. That’s when you can identify whether you have influence over your husband or not.” (Informant JSC).

According to the data, political wives often exercise a form of informal advisory influence in decision-making processes. As trusted confidants, their proximity to their spouses allows them to provide honest, unfiltered feedback that complements or challenges the formal counsel received from advisors or political teams. Their insights, shaped by personal experiences, values, or social advocacy, may guide decisions on policy, strategy, or public communication, offering a more holistic perspective that balances political pragmatism with human considerations.

Moreover, political wives often influence their husbands by acting as sounding boards during critical decision-making moments. Penning (2019) pointed out that first ladies have shaped policies, not by holding formal office, but through their advisory roles and public advocacy. Their close proximity to power enabled them to provide insights, guidance, and influence over policy matters (Knuckey & Kim 2016).

They can shape their spouse’s priorities by highlighting issues that align with their passions or by advocating for causes that resonate with their shared values. This influence is not limited to private discussions but extends to shaping public stances, as their advocacy for issues such as education, healthcare, or social justice can become integrated into broader political agendas.

Beyond this, the emotional and psychological support provided by political wives creates an environment where their husbands feel confident in seeking advice. This sense of trust and respect strengthens the partnership, enabling the husband to consider viewpoints outside the pressures of formal politics. In some cases, political wives have been known to redirect or even soften their spouse's opinions, helping to create more balanced and comprehensive decisions that reflect their combined wisdom. Their influence, while often subtle and behind-the-scenes, can have a profound effect on shaping the priorities and directions of political leadership. Thus, political wives wield invisible power, influencing government policy without holding an official political role (Gould 2001). One participant narrated:

“We can influence by offering support, advice, and insights to our partner who holds a political office. The close personal relationship allows us to create a unique perspective on issues, and the advice given can play a role in decision-making.” (Informant MTJ).

Another spouse added:

“Managing this presence effectively can influence public perception. Positive media coverage, interviews, and public appearances can contribute to building a favorable image. The collaborative effort between me and my husband garners positive public perception.” (Informant LPS).

Political spouses often wield significant informal influence through persuasion and control, shaping their partners' decisions both privately and publicly. Their close personal relationship allows them to act as trusted advisors, providing honest feedback and unique perspectives that complement formal counsel. This influence extends beyond private conversations, as their advocacy on social issues can shape political priorities and public agendas. By offering emotional support and strategic advice, they help create an environment of trust and collaboration, enabling more balanced and thoughtful decision-making. Though their power remains largely behind the scenes, political spouses play a crucial role in steering political leadership and shaping public perception.

Advocating for social change

Despite the often contentious nature of politics, LPS, TMM, and ECL asserted that political spouses also play significant roles in advocating for social change. The prominence and attention they receive as the spouses of local chief executives, combined with the political networks they develop locally, offer them opportunities to raise social awareness about local issues, create programs for the community, and lobby relevant public policies in local legislatures. Being a political spouse enables them to leverage their influence to mobilize support, drive conversations, and contribute meaningfully to public discourse.

Craighill & Eastabrooks (2012) added that spouses of politicians possess informal power to advocate for social change, despite often being seen as mere shadows of their husbands. Many political spouses around the globe use their influence to help others, advocate for public policies aimed at solving local issues, listen to people's concerns, and deliver on public needs. They engage in more planned and deliberate interactions with the public. To quote:

“The visibility of a political spouse provides an opportunity to advocate for specific causes or social issues. By using this platform, we can draw attention to important matters, mobilize support, and contribute to public discourse. In our context, it's quick for us to extend our help since there's a network and resources readily available.” (Informant LPS).

Another participant expressed:

“There was a moment when my collective efforts led my husband to recognize the urgency of education reform and commit to championing it. With my support, he was able to advance the initiative and align it with his legislative agenda. The proposed reforms were ultimately incorporated into policy proposals, and he worked tirelessly to build consensus and obtain the necessary support to move them forward.” (Informant ECL).

The findings uncover that political wives are not just supportive partners that often operate behind the scenes, but influential figures with purpose and conviction. Their roles extend beyond the corners of their families as they bring attention to urgent social issues that are often overlooked since the spotlight is often given to their husbands. More than just social change advocates, they bridge policymakers, civil society, and grassroots communities to foster collaboration in sustaining community development. In attaining these ends, Wilding et al. (2018) added that digital platforms have become powerful tools., affording the spouses an avenue where they can articulate advocacies and gain local stakeholders support. As a secondary effect, they also gain traction of public attention and confidence in their husband’s leadership which in turn sustains their family’s political career. Through these strategic and pro-people engagements, political spouses transform symbolic roles into engines of influence by combining empathy, advocacy, and communication into a powerful force that drives favorable political and social development outcomes.

Improving political identity

The wives of chief executives engage in numerous public appearances during their spouses’ term in office, attracting significant media attention across both news outlets and entertainment platforms (Stokes 2005, MacManus & Quecan 2008). They serve as prominent surrogates, representing their husband in various public and official capacities (Burrell 2001). As a result, the public has ample opportunities to become familiar with and form opinions about the wives of the chief executives, influencing perceptions of both their personal roles and political influence.

Narrating the findings of the study, RSD and IAL pointed out that they use their prominence in the political scene not only to engage in initiatives for rural community development but also, importantly, to improve the public perception of their families. Abramson et al. (2015) asserted that the influence of political spouses is an evolving concept, often more about maintaining a public image than directly influencing policy. Further, Williamson (2023) suggested that portraying a strong and caring motherly image has a positive impact on how the public views both the political spouse and the associated political figure. On the same ground, Fuller (2014) added that media coverage of political spouses often shapes public perception and, consequently, political agendas. Political spouses increase their visibility and participate in various immersions and community-related activities to enhance their husbands’ public image, making them appear as though they share the common characteristics of ordinary Filipinos. One of the participants offered:

“Managing this presence effectively can influence public perception. Positive media coverage, interviews, and public appearances can contribute to building a favorable image. The collaborative effort between me and my husband garners positive public perception.” (Informant RSD).

Another political wife agreed:

“It encapsulates the ability to shape opinions, foster positive connections, and contribute meaningfully to the political landscape. A political wife holds a unique position as a representative figure, leveraging her visibility to influence public perception of her spouse and the broader political agenda.” (Informant IAL).

A common feature observed among political wives is their purposeful and calculated engagement in politics. Over the years, political wives have evolved into powerful individuals, influencing public opinion through media participation, swiftly advocating for policies, and actively participating in community-related activities. In the interviews, the political spouses highlighted the importance of cooperation among their family members, asserting that clear roles, open communication, and shared and informed decision-making within their family have helped them balance their personal and public duties.

Table 3.
Achieved influence of a political wife

Key themes	Qualitative data
Political wives have moved beyond traditional roles, becoming advocates for social issues, policy reforms, and establishing independent political identities.	• Influence can be wielded more assertively and authoritatively. • The close personal relationship between political spouses allows them to develop unique perspectives on various issues. • This reflects an understanding of the broader responsibilities associated "with the public role of a political spouse. • Enhancing their partner's reputation by participating in community affairs and endorsing causes that can influence public opinion. • This strategy of showcasing the political figure's human side helps make them appear more approachable and relevant. • Her involvement extended beyond mere recognition, as she actively helped to incorporate proposed changes into legislative initiatives. • Creating a positive image by participating in interviews, making public appearances, and strategically engaging with positive media coverage. • A political spouse has the opportunity to influence perceptions, cultivate favorable relationships, and make significant contributions to the political scene.

Source: Author modification and notes on qualitative inquiry of Into & Gempes (2018)

They added that being visible to the public in most cases helped them gain the people's trust and exert positive influence. Political spouses actively leverage their reputations to shape political attitudes, whether through personal narratives, involvement in community events, or advocating for specific causes. Nevertheless, Burrell et al. (2011) suggested that maintaining a public persona requires deliberate decision-making and careful image management. Political spouses must balance the delicate act of remaining both professional and relatable, as their decisions, modes of communication, and forms of self-expression are frequently influenced by their constant awareness of being under public scrutiny.

Scope of influence of political wives within their locality

According to Robert Dahl, the father of modern political analysis, understanding the concepts of scope and domain is essential for analyzing the exercise of power in a political setting. Accordingly, the domain of power pertains to the number or categories of individuals over whom power is wielded. It focuses on the range of people, groups, or institutions that fall under the influence of the power holder. Conversely, the scope of power relates to the breadth of actions or decisions that the power encompasses. This includes the particular issues, decisions, or behaviors that are subject to the influence or control of a person or group. This study is particularly focused on exploring the scope of power held by political spouses rather than their domain of power, given that their involvement in politics is informal and indirect, primarily through their connection to their husbands.

Table 4 illustrates the scope of influence of political wives within their locality. The study found that political wives were often involved in community service. Their engagement in the activities of the community not only strengthened their relationships with the people but also provided them opportunities to speak on important issues and support causes aligned with the collective aspirations of their constituents.

Local actions

For JSC, ECL, and LSA, the power exercised by political spouses was deeply rooted in their active grassroots participation and not from the positions of their husbands. This was demonstrated by Nitafan et al. (2024), asserting that civic participation expands one's network. Political spouses hold a belief that they effect social change. With this attitude and behavior, they were able to champion initiatives that prioritized the social welfare, especially the children and the elders, focusing primarily on the areas of education and health. These roles transcended the traditional expectations of political wives and positioned them as agents of social transformation.

Jacobson & Carson (2015) further affirm that political spouses, given their political privileges, can initiate collaborative efforts aimed at addressing pressing social issues among communities through their political network with other influential families and local stakeholders. They engage in strategic dialogues that not only increase their visibility and public trust but also provide serves an opportunity for them to align their family's political goals with the shared values and collective aspirations of their people. This is supported by Yap & Nitafan (2026) who emphasized that effective communication and cooperation are critical in managing decisions and resolving problems within public service. One of them shared:

"If there are outreach programs by the Local Government Unit (LGU) or any organization affiliated with our municipality, I always try my best to participate. Whether my husband is available or not, I sometimes become the representative for our family, considering that our schedules are based here. I am more focused on children's welfare. If the office informs me about any activities they plan, whether inside or outside the municipality, as long as it involves children, they immediately contact me. They know that's really my focus." (Informant JSC).

One of the spouses added:

"We are trying to provide support and assistance to community members facing challenges with government services. We help individuals navigate bureaucratic processes or connect them with the appropriate resources. As an educator, implementing educational programs to inform residents about local policies, services, and opportunities is my top priority." (Informant ECL).

The local actions of political spouses reveal their vital role as engaged community advocates whose influence extends well beyond traditional ceremonial functions. By actively participating in civic initiatives and focusing on pressing issues such as children's welfare and community development, they transform their position into one of meaningful social impact. Their involvement fosters partnerships and collaboration with local institutions and families, enabling them to address urgent concerns effectively. Through these efforts, political spouses not only support their partners but also become agents of positive change within their communities, demonstrating the significant and tangible power embedded in their informal yet strategic local engagements.

Empowering communities

MTJ, LPS, and TMM firmly embraced the advocacy role of political spouses. They see it as a calling to champion community-driven policies. By actively engaging in legislative sessions and building relationships with local leaders, they positioned themselves as vital networks between the people and decision-makers. Burrell (1999) observed that political spouses unite stakeholders around shared goals by identifying common ground, while Ferguson (2005) on the other hand emphasized that such cooperation not only drives favorable ends but also strengthens lasting relationships. Political spouses use their close proximity to power to take purposeful action through strategic public appearances and pro-people leadership. Through these strategies, they can amplify voices, shape public policies, and anchor unity in times of need. One of the participants stated during the interview:

“We are usually the advocates for policies and initiatives that address the needs and priorities of the community. This may involve collaborating with other local leaders, attending legislative sessions, and working to influence decision-makers at various levels. As long as there are connections along the way, it is not difficult to build relationships and influence with them.” (Informant LPS).

Another political spouse added:

“I usually serve as a representative of the community, conveying our interests to higher levels of government and advocating for resources, support, and policies that benefit the local population. Sometimes, I get teased that I might be the next one to run in our family. But believe it or not, I have no plans for that. It’s just that I’m happy when I see the people I help are also happy. I make sure to maintain open and transparent communication with other political figures and community leaders in our area.” (Informant TMM).

Table 4.
Scope of influence of a political wife within their locality

Key themes	Qualitative data
Building strength from the ground through local actions and empowering communities.	• The role extends beyond the traditional duties of a political spouse, transforming them into proactive advocates for policies. • She aims to build and strengthen community ties by participating in events and directly communicating with residents. • Building relationships and exercising influence becomes easier when meaningful connections are established. • A commitment to honest and open communication with local government and community leaders is essential. • Collaborative efforts foster a sense of shared responsibility and improve living conditions. • A proactive educational approach enhances community understanding and fosters self-advocacy. • It involves active collaboration with local leaders, attending legislative sessions, and working diligently to influence decision-makers at various government levels. • A genuine commitment ensures ongoing discourse and information sharing, promoting cooperation and understanding.

Source: Author modification and notes on qualitative inquiry of Into & Gempes (2018)

Beneath the surface of public ceremonies and formal titles lies a deeper truth; political spouses are not mere figures of tradition but quiet architects of change. As revealed by participants, these women move with intention and impact. They champion causes like children’s welfare, cultivate community trust, and build coalitions from the ground up. Their presence is not ornamental but operational. In every handshake, speech, and initiative, they shape the rhythm of local progress which serves as proof that leadership often begins where no spotlight reaches.

Cottle (2012) captures this spirit precisely. Her research shows how political spouses, when informed and engaged, can transform uncertainty into action. Whether rallying stakeholders around environmental concerns or bridging communities with dialogue, their influence is strategic, compassionate, and grounded in lived experience. The present study echoes this political reality where political wives are not simply extensions of their husbands’ legacies but are leaders in their own right, crafting solutions and guiding communities through moments that matter most.

Sphere of control of a political wife

Table 5 presents the sphere of control of a political wife in terms of support system. Dahl (1957) argued that a wide sphere of control in terms of political influence is particularly relevant to political wives, who wield significant influence through informal networks and resource management. The study found that political spouses cultivated relationships with key stakeholders by attending political functions, fundraisers, and community events. These connections significantly shaped the political influence of the spouses. Relationships were nurtured in both informal and formal settings. Casual gatherings, private dinners, and interactions with other political families provided opportunities to develop rapport and trust. These connections bolstered and sustained the politician's career by enhancing both the political spouse's personal network and the broader support structure. In the political sphere, robust partnerships could lead to endorsements, strategic collaborations, and a reservoir of goodwill beneficial during elections or challenging political periods.

Cultivating relationships

JSC, TMM, and ECL demonstrated a commitment to promoting social justice through their involvement in advocacy and support for causes or social issues. Their dedication was evident in activities such as endorsing philanthropic organizations, highlighting urgent concerns, and actively participating in projects related to social welfare, health, or education.

Shoop (2010) underscores the critical importance of representation in political contexts, asserting that the inclusion of diverse voices and backgrounds within the political arena is fundamental to fostering more inclusive, equitable, and responsive governance. Nitafan (2024) argued that an individual's prosocial attitude can serve as a significant determinant of their willingness to advocate for others. By ensuring that a wide range of perspectives is actively represented, political representation not only enriches the decision-making process but also strengthens democratic legitimacy, reflecting the complex and multifaceted nature of society. This approach, according to Shoop (2010), enables more nuanced policy formulation and cultivates a political environment where the interests of marginalized or underrepresented groups are more effectively addressed. One of the spouses expressed:

"We may engage in advocacy and champion causes or social issues that are important to us. This can include promoting charitable organizations, raising awareness about specific issues, or supporting initiatives related to health, education, or social welfare. In my case, as I mentioned earlier, it's focused on child welfare." (Informant JSC).

In addition to cultivating relationships within the political sphere, the study revealed that political spouse strategically harnesses her influence to engage and win over diverse constituencies. By actively participating in interactions with voters, local authorities, and advocacy organizations, the political spouse not only strengthens her own standing but also enhances her partner's appeal. Through deliberate involvement in initiatives that resonate with a variety of demographic groups, the political spouse contributes to the establishment of a broader and more inclusive support base, reinforcing the couple's political position. This multifaceted approach not only fosters a more cohesive network of supporters but also consolidates the political couple's legitimacy and outreach. According to a participant:

"During political campaigns, political wives often have considerable influence. Their involvement in campaign activities, public appearances, and engagement with voters can significantly impact the campaign's success. That's why, if you notice during campaigns, the spouse or the entire family is often seen together." (Informant ECL).

The data above highlight the intricate roles of political spouses of local chief executives. The findings underline their active contributions to shaping public perception, supporting their initiatives of their partners. While each spouse has varying levels of involvement in public service, they all acknowledged

that their influence goes beyond public appearances and campaign activities. They serve as a source of inspiration and additional human resource to their husbands, which helps pave for their husbands' political success by championing social welfare and inclusive community development.

Table 5.
Sphere of control of a political wife in terms of support system

Key themes	Qualitative data
A political spouse cultivates relationships with political allies and supporters to strengthen her influence.	• Causes are actively supported and promoted, often by advocating for those who might not otherwise have a voice. • The political spouse exercises considerable control over personal and family matters. • The political spouse often exerts significant control over social and professional networks. • The political spouse actively participates in community affairs and advocacy for specific causes, using this involvement to influence issues aligned with their interests and values. • The decisions on balancing personal and public life are firmly controlled by the political spouse. • The influence of political wives is especially pronounced during political campaigns. • The decisions regarding balancing personal and public life are firmly controlled by the political spouse. • This advocacy helps shape the public image and foster connections with constituents who share similar values.
Source: Author modification and notes on qualitative inquiry of Into and Gempes (2018)	

Nitafan & Idris (2024) added that spouses' skill to read social situations and create meaningful social relationships and connections strengthen their political influence. Their political skills allow them to navigate diverse political environments and build networks with voters and advocacy groups which in turn then help enhance their partner's support base. Further, their ability to appear genuine in public interactions and their involvement in several community activities strengthens their credibility and builds trust among their targeted supporters and other key stakeholders. This effective use of political acumen empowers them not just in helping their partner achieve their political goals and aspirations but also contribute meaningfully to the development of their respective communities.

Conclusion

This research is a case study that investigates the political influence of the wives of local chief executives across various municipalities in Philippines. It delineates the intricate roles they play as both mothers and informal political figures. The in-depth interviews of the researchers with the participants suggest that the wives should not be oversimplified as supportive partners. Through their advocacies for social change and influence in harnessing opportunities for participatory governance, they serve as strategic and impactful key players in public management and sustainable community development. Moreover, the participants emphasized that effective communication and open dialogue are crucial in maintaining strong partnerships between public officers and the community. They also highlighted the importance of time management and setting boundaries between personal and public life to avoid burnout from their domestic and public responsibilities. In parallel, it was learned from the findings that maintaining a strong sense of self and engaging in activities the political spouses find personally meaningful induces sense of fulfillment among themselves, leading to a more sustainable public service career. Similarly, the unwavering support they demonstrate to their husbands does not just strengthen their spouse's well-being but also fortifies their political influence of their family.

Despite the relevant insights drawn from the study, the study confronts several limitations. The study is constrained on the storied experiences of political spouses, and it did not include the role of other actors such as their partners, children, and their respective constituents. Further, the use of qualitative research approach limits the applicability of the findings to broader populations. Nonetheless, the results allow for analytic generalizations which can be used in theorizing about the relationship of gender and power dynamics and governance, particularly in contexts with similar sociopolitical structures. Despite these limitations, the study contributes significantly in the discourse of gender politics by challenging stereotypes on women in politics and governance, underscoring the strategic and active role of the wives of local chief executives in public service. Novel in its approach, the findings of the study provides foundation for future comparative studies and policy reforms that recognize and leverage the meaningful contributions of political spouses in public service and sustainable community development.

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