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Beyond the Role: First Lady Syndrome and Coaching as a Pathway to Flourishing

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Abstract

This paper introduces *First Lady Syndrome* (FLS) as a conceptual framework for understanding the complex, often invisible leadership role of pastors' wives in Christian church settings. Though lacking formal authority or ordination, pastors' wives are frequently expected to serve as emotional anchors, spiritual caregivers, and public representatives of church leadership. Drawing on the concept of othermothering, this analysis identifies four interrelated constructs that combine to create a distinct and often burdensome role identity: role ambiguity, emotional labor, invisible labor, and image management. By naming these dynamics, FLS provides scholars, practitioners, and church leaders with a diagnostic lens to recognize the systemic and relational pressures pastors' wives face. Coaching is proposed as a strategic intervention that directly addresses these constructs by supporting boundary setting in ambiguous roles, fostering resilience against emotional strain, surfacing and validating invisible labor, and promoting authenticity in the face of image management. Integrating insights from coaching research on women leaders, this paper argues that coaching offers pastors' wives a structured, peer-based partnership that enhances self-awareness, strengthens confidence, and builds sustainable leadership capacity. FLS advances scholarship by formalizing a previously unnamed phenomenon, while coaching offers a practical pathway for flourishing. Together, they provide a framework for understanding and an evidence-based tool for supporting the well-being and leadership impact of pastors' wives within the wider ministry ecosystem.

Keywords: pastor's wife, othermothering, First Lady Syndrome, coaching, women in leadership, flourishing

In many Christian churches, the senior pastor's wife occupies a complex and often paradoxical position. Although she may hold no formal leadership title, she is deeply embedded in the life of the congregation, frequently serving as an informal counselor, mediator, and spiritual guide. Her role parallels that of political First Ladies, who are

expected to maintain a visible, emotionally engaged presence while exercising little to no official authority.

Pastors' wives, also referred to as clergy wives, are often subject to unrealistic expectations from their congregations. They are held to elevated standards of behavior, spirituality, and service, leading many to experience what scholars describe as socially prescribed perfectionism, the internalized pressure to meet others' expectations at the cost of personal well-being (Kum, 2015; Lin & Wang, 2024). Lin and Wang's (2024) study found that perceived judgment from congregants was significantly associated with increased depression, burnout, and loneliness among clergy wives. Notably, even in cases where high expectations were not accompanied by overt judgment, negative psychological outcomes persisted, suggesting that the role itself carries inherent emotional strain.

The emerging focus on coaching female leaders addresses the distinct challenges women encounter in leadership positions, including gender bias, work-life balance, and confidence issues (Green et al., 2021). This coaching framework creates a supportive environment where female leaders can refine their leadership styles, enhance their skills, and effectively manage the complexities inherent in their roles. Such empowerment through coaching is instrumental in fostering greater gender diversity and inclusion within leadership structures (Moin et al., 2023).

This article addresses a persistent gap in leadership and ministry literature: the systemic role ambiguity and chronic underrecognition of pastors' wives within church structures. Pastors' wives are often elevated as visible symbols of spiritual and moral authority while they are simultaneously excluded from formal leadership structures. This symbolic recognition, absent institutional support, produces a paradox of high expectation coupled with structural marginalization (Soothill, 2010).

To address this gap, the article serves two purposes. First, it introduces the term *First Lady Syndrome (FLS)* to describe the recurring patterns of expectations, behaviors, and social dynamics that shape the lived experience of pastors' wives. This concept names the tension of being revered in title yet restricted in agency, often serving as spiritual othermothers whose essential contributions remain undervalued. Second, the article advocates coaching as a developmental and restorative tool uniquely suited to foster flourishing among pastors' wives. By equipping them with space for reflection, growth, and support, coaching offers a pathway for resilience, identity clarity, and sustainable leadership impact within their congregational contexts.

Toward a Comprehensive Framework

Although the experiences of pastors' wives have been explored across religious, sociological, and gender studies literature, the FLS phenomenon remains minimally

examined within theory as a comprehensive framework. Soothill (2010) explicitly uses the term, *First Lady*, in reference to women in charismatic churches. Her work highlights the tension between the prestige afforded to pastors' wives and their lack of formal power, as well as the burdens of constant visibility, spiritual performance, and social polish. Soothill also calls for further inquiry into how the social and spiritual aspects of women's experiences interact within charismatic Christianity, pointing to a broader need for frameworks that capture this complexity.

Similarly, Bowler's (2019) *The Preacher's Wife* closely aligns with this concept of FLS, though the term itself is not used. Her examination of evangelical pastors' wives, especially in the context of megachurches and televangelism, reveals patterns of symbolic authority without decision-making power, along with significant image maintenance and emotional labor. Bowler's work focuses on the dynamics of celebrity culture within ministry, yet the emotional and performative expectations she identifies resonate directly with the core elements of this study's framework.

Koenig and Langford (1998) also contribute to the field by documenting the unpaid, emotionally demanding, and underrecognized work expected of pastors' wives. Likewise, Chavez's (2021) dissertation on Assemblies of God pastors addresses themes of burnout, invisible labor, and spiritual expectation among clergy spouses. While highly relevant, these studies tend to address such issues in isolation or without a unifying conceptual model. Chavez also calls for more research into the distinct emotional and relational demands placed on clergy families, emphasizing the need for practical ministry models that address clergy spouses well-being.

The current study builds on this foundation but addresses a clear gap: although previous research touches on various dimensions of the pastors' wives' role, such as emotional labor, role ambiguity, or image management, few, if any, synthesize these elements into a single diagnostic framework. FLS uniquely integrates four interrelated dimensions: role ambiguity, emotional labor, invisible labor, and image management. This holistic lens provides greater analytical depth, allowing both scholars and practitioners to assess the pastor's wife's experience not as a collection of isolated stressors, but as a complex, systemic role embedded in gendered and spiritual expectations.

While Soothill (2010) makes a symbolic comparison between pastors' wives and political First Ladies, this study expands that idea into a functional framework that diagnoses the consequences, identifies institutional symptoms, and offers implications for leadership development and pastoral care. In doing so, FLS bridges theoretical insight with practical relevance, offering a tool for researchers, ministry professionals, and educators alike to understand and respond to the unique pressures placed on women in this often-invisible role.

FLS is introduced as a scholarly framework that captures their experience across emotional, symbolic, gendered, and institutional dimensions. It not only names the role but diagnoses its complexities. Grounded in the concept of othermothering, this analysis connects theory to the lived realities of pastors' wives. It aims to help them better understand how their informal influence shapes church governance and community life, despite lacking formal authority. This paper outlines and defines the FLS concept and core features, and discusses its broader implications with coaching. It fills a gap in leadership literature by addressing a role often overlooked but deeply impactful and suggesting coaching as sustainable leader development intervention for flourishing.

What is First Lady Syndrome?

Just as the role of a First Lady lacks constitutional clarity, the Bible does not explicitly define the role of a pastor's wife. Traditionally, a clergy wife is seen as the supportive partner of a pastor, minister, or religious leader. This role is often understood as part of a two-person career. The pastor's wife is expected to serve in emotional, social, spiritual, and leadership capacities within the church, yet is frequently viewed as an extension of her husband's ministry rather than an individual. This can create identity challenges, blurred expectations, and strain on her well-being (Lin & Wang, 2024).

The term First Lady was originally used in 1677 to describe the wife of a national leader and has since evolved (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines it as the spouse of a chief executive, while Parry-Giles and Blair (2002) describe the modern First Lady as a rhetorical figure who uses public voice and symbolic leadership to influence politics and promote social causes. In recent decades, First Ladies have shifted from private supporters to public advocates, engaging in policy reform, philanthropy, and gender equity initiatives. Their leadership often reflects their personal background, shaping their advocacy and public roles (Amupanda, 2021).

Amupanda (2021) also notes that the role of First Ladies is marked by a lack of formal authority, despite heavy public scrutiny and expectations. This mirrors the experience of pastors' wives, who may not hold formal church titles but carry significant emotional and spiritual labor. They counsel congregants, manage behind-the-scenes ministry work, and maintain a polished public image. This is often completed without acknowledgment or institutional support (Kum, 2015). Though not politically influential like First Ladies, pastors' wives face similar pressures around visibility, morality, and performance (Crawford, 2007; Nancarrow, 2015). Their role is shaped by expectation, not formal definition, leaving them to navigate emotional exhaustion, role ambiguity, and the complex intersection of family, faith, and leadership, often without clear boundaries or support systems.

Both First Ladies and pastors' wives navigate intense public expectations, scrutiny, and leadership challenges, but in different spheres. First Ladies operate in political and economic arenas, while pastors' wives function within spiritual and community-based contexts. Despite these differences, both roles carry similar pressures and highlight the need for structured support systems to sustain their well-being and leadership.

Historically, the term First Lady was also coined by enslaved African Americans as an honorary title for the preacher's wife, symbolizing her importance and the dignity of the couple's leadership within the church. For the enslaved, the church was one of the few spaces where they could express themselves freely and reclaim a sense of respect and humanity.

This convergence of political and religious leadership roles helps shape this contemporary concept of FLS. While the term is more commonly referenced in political literature, it remains underexplored in leadership and religious studies, lacking a solid theoretical foundation. FLS, as defined here, refers to the experience of a pastor's wife who contends with role ambiguity, emotional and invisible labor, and public image management. This concept aims to deepen awareness of the complex and often overlooked identity of pastors' wives.

Key Characteristics of First Lady Syndrome

The four distinctives that define the lived experience of many pastors' wives are role ambiguity, emotional labor, invisible labor, and image management. These interconnected themes highlight how pastors' wives navigate complex, often contradictory expectations in both personal and public spheres. Drawing from sociology, gender theory, and leadership studies, each concept reveals how individual experiences of stress, identity conflict, and emotional strain are rooted in broader institutional and structural dynamics. Together, these dimensions offer a deeper, multilayered understanding of FLS as a personal and systemic phenomenon.

Role Ambiguity

Pastors' wives often serve in spiritual advisory roles without formal ordination or official leadership titles, creating significant role ambiguity. This lack of clarity around expectations, responsibilities, and authority can lead to stress, disengagement, and organizational tension (Ebbers & Wijnberg, 2017; Gupta & Shaheen, 2017). For women, role ambiguity is often intensified by the clash between traditional gender norms and leadership expectations. Eagly and Karau (2002) highlight two core issues. First, women are often seen as less suited for leadership because stereotypically feminine traits are perceived to conflict with dominant leadership qualities. Second, women who do assume leadership roles often face backlash for violating gender norms.

For pastors' wives, this ambiguity is further complicated by intersectionality because they are not only women, but also spouses and informal spiritual leaders, navigating overlapping identities that bring conflicting expectations (Cho et al., 2013). Their role exists in a liminal space—not quite clergy, not quite laity—making their influence both powerful and undefined. This can disrupt formal church hierarchies and leave pastors' wives excluded from leadership development pathways, leading to underutilization or misalignment of their potential within religious institutions.

Emotional Labor

Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) introduced the concept of emotional labor, defining it as the process of managing one's emotions to meet the emotional demands of a job. This often involves surface acting, displaying emotions that aren't genuinely felt, or deep acting, where individuals try to internally align their feelings with what is expected. Unlike personal emotional expression, emotional labor is commodified; it becomes part of the job itself, particularly in caregiving or service roles (Brook, 2009).

Hochschild (1983) warns that prolonged emotional labor can lead to emotional dissonance. This is a disconnect between one's authentic self and the emotions they are expected to perform, ultimately causing alienation and burnout. This is particularly relevant for pastors' wives. Many report feeling isolated, unable to openly share personal struggles, and often lacking the support systems available to their clergy husbands (Lin & Wang, 2024).

Pastors' wives are frequently expected to maintain a joyful, nurturing presence even during personal grief or frustration. They may suppress disappointment with church leadership or hide emotional fatigue in order to offer care and stability to others (Luedtke & Sneed, 2018). Yet, this labor is deeply emotional, spiritually taxing, and essential to church functioning and is typically unpaid, unacknowledged, and carried out without formal authority. It mirrors the kind of invisible emotional labor Hochschild (1983) described: performed not for personal fulfillment, but to meet the expectations of a community, often at the cost of the caregiver's own well-being.

Invisible Labor

Kinman et al. (2011) identify emotional labor as a core part of clergy work, contributing significantly to what is known as invisible labor: work that is essential yet unrecognized, uncompensated, or excluded from formal job descriptions. Wichroski et al. (1994) expand this definition to include emotional, physical, intellectual, and social tasks that are often gendered and expected, yet left unacknowledged within organizational structures. They argue that the absence of language and frameworks to define much of women's work reinforces its invisibility.

Gender plays a central role in this dynamic. West and Zimmerman (1987) describe how behaviors like nurturing, attentiveness, and emotional support are seen not as tasks women do, but as traits women are. This naturalization blurs the line between identity and labor, making it easier to overlook the real effort involved—even in professional settings. As Wichroski et al. (1994) explain, invisible work often originates in domestic life but becomes institutionalized in formal roles without recognition or structural support.

The experience of pastors' wives exemplifies this. Their unpaid contributions such as hosting, caregiving, event planning, and emotional support are crucial to church life yet fall outside formal roles. Often without titles, training, or choice, they are expected to fill in the gaps wherever needed. Luedtke and Sneed (2018) note that in smaller churches, where resources are scarce, this burden increases, pushing pastors' wives into all-encompassing, undefined roles.

Invisible labor is not just a personal issue; it is a structural and gendered problem embedded in church leadership culture. In the context of FLS, it fuels burnout, role confusion, and systemic inequality. Naming this labor is a necessary step toward recognizing its value and creating more equitable, sustainable church communities.

Image Management

Image management is the intentional or unintentional shaping of a public persona to meet social norms or personal goals. Leary and Kowalski (1990) define *impression management* as the broader strategy of controlling how one is perceived. *Self-presentation* is a specific type of impression management focused on shaping perceptions of the self (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; McKillop et al., 1992).

In the context of FLS, image management highlights the psychological and social pressure pastors' wives face to maintain an idealized public image. They're expected to embody moral perfection, similar to how othermothers are held up as role models for the community. The demand to be the "model Christian woman" can lead to emotional strain and internal identity conflict.

According to McKillop et al. (1992), many pastors' wives would likely score high in social identity measures because their identity is often shaped by public expectations. Their research shows that people in public-facing roles are especially vulnerable to internalizing the image they project. Over time, even performative self-presentations, such as always appearing strong, supportive, or joyful, can reshape private self-beliefs. A pastor's wife may eventually become the role she's been performing, whether consciously or not. Meanwhile, negative emotions or personal struggles are often suppressed, since admitting them would clash with the image being upheld. This

disconnect creates cognitive dissonance between one's authentic self and the persona being presented.

Luedtke and Sneed (2018) further examine how clergy wives manage the pressure to meet both congregational and cultural expectations. Their study reveals that many pastors' wives adjust their behavior and appearance to maintain a flawless public image, often at the expense of authenticity. Participants described feeling constantly "on stage," having to monitor their tone, appearance, and emotional reactions. There's a persistent fear that any misstep could reflect poorly on their husband's leadership, leading many to censor themselves (Luedtke & Sneed, 2018)

Table 1 outlines the core characteristics of FLS and maps their individual consequences, structural symptoms, and institutional implications. By identifying these dimensions side by side, Table 1 offers a multi-layered analysis that connects the personal experiences of pastors' wives to broader systemic patterns. This framework helps illustrate how what may appear as isolated emotional or relational challenges are actually tied to structural conditions and institutional cultures within church leadership.

Although not all wives carry a leadership burden associated with the formal role of their husbands, wives of political and religious leaders are distinct in society for often bearing dual identities. FLS was not a formal thesis in literature, but is a term that has been used informally to describe the unique challenges, expectations, and pressures faced by women in leadership roles, particularly as the spouses of prominent leaders. This analysis is the first attempt to formalize FLS as a scholarly innovation, diagnosing the emotions and behaviors that consistently occur together because of the wife's dual identity as an informal leader. Luedtke and Sneed's (2018) study emphasizes the importance of making clergy wives' voices heard and that simply naming their reality, as distinct from their husbands' roles, is therapeutic and corrective.

Table 1: Consequences, Structural Symptoms, and Institutional Implications of FLS

Characteristic	Individual impact	Structural pattern	Institutional effect
Role ambiguity	Disengagement or overcommitment	Inconsistent expectations, lack of training or clarity	Undefined leadership pathways, inequitable development
Emotional labor	Exhaustion, resentment, isolation	Unacknowledged work, emotional strain, relational tension	Reliance on invisible support, culture of suppression
Invisible labor	Identity loss, role overload, burnout	Gendered assumptions, resource gaps, no formal recognition	Inequity masked by spiritual framing
Image management	Identity conflict, emotional strain	Silenced struggles, limited agency	Reinforcement of toxic norms, performative spirituality

Othermothering: Theoretical Roots of First Lady Syndrome

Othermothering is a concept rooted in Black feminist thought, especially in the work of Patricia Hill Collins. Collins is a distinguished sociologist and Black feminist scholar whose scholarship centers on the intersections of race, gender, and class. In her seminal text *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins (2000) describes how African American women have historically engaged in "othermothering," extending care, guidance, and support beyond their biological children to nurture the well-being of the larger community. She argues that this practice functions as both a survival strategy and a form of resistance against structural inequalities, while also cultivating empowerment and leadership

among Black women. Wane (2000) defines othermothering as the act of women caring for children who are not biologically theirs, with the goal of preserving cultural and social values. Othermothers support biological mothers by sharing child-rearing responsibilities. Community mothers go further, offering mentorship and leadership that extend beyond individual families into the broader community. Bernard et al. (2000) examined othermothering in a Black community through a religious lens. They found that this practice has evolved into a form of ministry. In this context, women, whether or not they have children of their own, take on roles as caregivers, mentors, and spiritual leaders. This version of mothering functions as both a survival strategy and a source of empowerment, giving Black women influence and agency in spaces where they've historically been excluded.

Othermothering is most observed in African American communities (Benard et al., 2000; Wane, 2000). In pre-colonial African societies, caregiving followed a collectivist model where men and women held parallel, not hierarchical, roles. Mothering was embedded in everyday life, with older women mentoring younger ones and passing down cultural knowledge. Colonial education systems disrupted these traditions. By prioritizing boys' education, they placed more caregiving responsibilities on girls and women, shifting the balance of traditional mothering roles and increasing the burden on African women (Wane, 2000).

Othermothering and the Role of the Pastor's Wife

Wane (2000) argues that othermothering pushes back against Western ideals of individualism and the nuclear family, emphasizing the value of communal care and cultural continuity. Leadership in church communities, particularly within Christian traditions, similarly challenges individualism by centering the idea of a spiritual family that functions collectively. Scripture refers to the church as the "body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:27, *New King James Bible*), highlighting the interconnectedness of its members. It emphasizes spiritual family through the use of the terms brother and sister (1 Timothy 5:1-2, NKJV), children of God (Romans 8:16-17, NKJV), and household of God (Galatians 6:10, NKJV). The role of a pastor's wife often reflects the principles of othermothering, especially in churches that value mentorship, spiritual guidance, and community care. Table 2 outlines how the characteristics of othermothers parallel those of pastors' wives.

Table 2: Parallels Between Othermothers and Pastors' Wives

Attribute	Othermothers	Pastors' wives
Spiritual motherhood	Care for children beyond biological ties	Provide emotional, spiritual, and material support to church members
Community leadership	Guide and support the broader community	Strengthen church ties, lead women's ministries, mentor younger members
Mentorship & discipleship	Pass down knowledge, values, and survival skills	Mentor women, couples, and families, reinforcing biblical principles
Emotional & practical support	Share caregiving duties and resources	Counsel and support congregants through personal and faith struggles
Standing in the gap	Step in during crises to support families	Provide stability during illness, grief, or church conflict
Legacy & faith formation	Transmit cultural values and life lessons	Shape the faith and values of the next generation
Challenging individualism	Foster communal child-rearing and support	Promote shared ministry and mutual care in the church

As Wane (2000) notes, "The practice of mothering is not universal, and the way it is conceived, celebrated, and practiced differs across cultures" (p.110). Similarly, the role of a pastor's wife is distinct from that of the spouse of other community leaders, such as a principal, police chief, or CEO. Her position more closely resembles that of a First Lady and othermother, blending symbolic leadership with hands-on care. The concept of FLS captures this dynamic. A pastor's wife, like an othermother, is often a central figure in communal care, mentorship, and spiritual guidance. She embodies a collective model of mothering and leadership rooted in service, presence, and relational influence.

Expanding Othermother: Toward a Framework of First Lady Syndrome

While the concept of othermother provides an important foundation for understanding how women nurture, guide, and sustain communities through informal caregiving roles (Collins, 2000), it does not fully capture the layered realities of pastors' wives. FLS expands this framework by naming the institutional, performative, and political dimensions of their experience. Unlike othermothers who operate primarily within

grassroots networks of support, pastors' wives serve as visible symbols of their husbands' leadership and the church's moral legitimacy (Crawford, 2007; Nancarrow, 2015). Their role is simultaneously relational and representative, marked not only by emotional and invisible labor but also by constant public scrutiny and the weight of embodying the congregation's values. FLS, therefore, builds on the foundation of othermothering while extending it into a more complex framework that recognizes both the caregiving and institutional burdens uniquely placed on pastors' wives.

Biblical Examples of First Lady Syndrome

A biblical example of FLS appears in Exodus 4:24–26, where Zipporah, the wife of Moses, embodies emotional labor, invisible labor, role ambiguity, and image management. As Moses travels to Egypt to fulfill God's command, God suddenly seeks to kill him. This is likely because he failed to circumcise his son, violating the covenant outlined in Genesis 17:10–14. Zipporah intervenes, performing the circumcision herself to save Moses's life. In doing so, she steps into a priest-like role, resolving a spiritual crisis that threatens her husband's divine mission. Her action protects Moses's spiritual authority and public image, yet she receives no recognition and quickly vanishes from the narrative. This reflects the core dynamics of FLS—women stepping into crucial, often spiritual roles without formal acknowledgment or training.

Coaching as a Catalyst for Flourishing

Having outlined the dynamics of FLS, this study now turns to coaching as a strategic intervention. Each construct of FLS—role ambiguity, emotional labor, invisible labor, and image management—highlights challenges that coaching is uniquely positioned to address. As a structured, peer-based partnership, coaching provides pastors' wives with a safe, reflective space to process expectations, clarify identity, and cultivate resilience. This section demonstrates how coaching aligns with the distinctive pressures surfaced by FLS and why it serves as a sustainable pathway for flourishing.

Addressing Role Ambiguity Through Coaching

Pastors' wives often navigate uncertain expectations that leave them overextended or excluded from leadership development pathways. Coaching helps clarify role boundaries by helping clients differentiate between personal calling and congregational assumptions. Through guided reflection and values-based goal setting, coaching enables pastors' wives to establish healthier expectations for themselves and others, reducing stress while fostering agency (Grant et al., 2010).

Supporting Resilience in Emotional Labor

The emotional demands of caregiving and constant performance can result in exhaustion and isolation. Coaching offers a confidential space for pastors' wives to process the dissonance between authentic feelings and expected displays of joy or spiritual strength. By incorporating resilience-building practices, coaching equips them to sustain care for others without neglecting their own emotional and spiritual well-being (Dippenaar & Schaap, 2017).

Making Invisible Labor Visible

Much of the work pastors' wives perform—hospitality, event coordination, and behind-the-scenes support—remains unacknowledged and uncompensated. Coaching helps surface and name these contributions, reframing them as forms of leadership rather than incidental "helping." This recognition not only validates their labor but also empowers pastors' wives to advocate for resources and structural support within their congregations (Moseley, 2011).

Navigating Image Management with Authenticity

Pastors' wives frequently experience the pressure of maintaining a flawless public persona as symbols of morality and congregational credibility. Coaching provides strategies for balancing public expectations with private authenticity, guiding pastors' wives toward identity clarity rooted in personal values rather than external demands. This process reduces the strain of impression management while encouraging authentic presence in ministry life (Stoltzfus, 2005). Moreover, the emphasis on self-awareness and values-based reflection in coaching aligns closely with the need for pastors' wives to navigate image management while maintaining authentic presence in their congregations.

Coaching as a Developmental Framework

These coaching applications align with broader evidence on leadership development. Collins (2009) defines *coaching* as a collaborative relationship in which the coach partners with individuals to unlock potential and maximize performance. Empirical studies affirm its impact across sectors: Pousa and Mathieu (2014) demonstrate that coaching enhances performance, Allison-Napolitano (2013) describes the coach as a "thought partner" who challenges assumptions, and Wiater (2023) notes that coaching ranks among the most effective methods for preparing leaders for future challenges. Its popularity rests in its holistic nature, integrating active listening, reflection, and, in faith-based contexts, the incorporation of spiritual values as essential dimensions of growth.

In sum, coaching directly addresses the systemic challenges revealed through FLS. It equips pastors' wives with tools that not only mitigate the burdens of their informal roles but also foster flourishing and leadership capacity within the wider church community.

Coaching Female Leaders

Research consistently shows that coaching provides distinct benefits for women in leadership by addressing the unique challenges they encounter in professional and organizational contexts. Leimon et al. (2010) argue that women leaders require tailored coaching that responds to evolving personal and professional demands, particularly during critical life stages where competing responsibilities can lead to attrition. Their framework emphasizes building confidence, cultivating networks, and strengthening resilience as central outcomes of effective coaching. Similarly, Brodrick's (2010) study of executive women in healthcare identifies improved self-awareness, stronger workplace relationships, and enhanced career advancement as key results of coaching interventions, highlighting the critical importance of the coach–client relationship in these outcomes. Stachowiak (2011) further demonstrates that coaching enhances job satisfaction and leadership effectiveness among women executives, underscoring its role in supporting women as they navigate the dual demands of leadership and caregiving responsibilities.

These findings extend beyond corporate and healthcare contexts into ministry leadership. The pressures faced by women leaders in secular organizations parallel those experienced by pastors' wives: balancing visibility with authenticity, managing competing personal and organizational demands, and sustaining resilience in environments shaped by gendered expectations. For women experiencing FLS, coaching becomes a particularly strategic intervention. Just as coaching has been shown to build networks and strengthen leadership identity in corporate contexts, it can help pastors' wives reframe their contributions as leadership, manage role ambiguity with greater confidence, and resist the identity strain associated with emotional and invisible labor.

In short, the body of scholarship on coaching female leaders establishes a strong foundation for applying coaching to the context of pastors' wives. By integrating these evidence-based practices into ministry leadership development, coaching offers both recognition of the challenges illuminated by FLS and a concrete pathway for fostering resilience, confidence, and sustainable influence among women in these informal yet high-impact roles.

Implication and Contribution: Coaching Women Who Experience First Lady Syndrome

This article contributes to scholarship by (a) introducing FLS as a conceptual framework, (b) synthesizing prior fragmented studies into a unified model, and (c) presenting coaching as a leadership development intervention for pastors' wives. Recognizing and naming FLS carries significant implications for both scholarship and practice, particularly within religious institutions. Coaching offers a structured, peer-based partnership that aligns closely with the needs revealed through FLS. By emphasizing self-awareness, reflection, boundary-setting, and resilience, coaching addresses the emotional and relational burdens pastors' wives carry while also enhancing leadership capacity. Empirical studies further support its effectiveness in improving self-efficacy, communication, and emotional intelligence (Dippenaar & Schaap, 2017; Grant et al., 2010; Moseley, 2011). As Fry and Wiater (2023) emphasize, coaching interventions yield wide-ranging benefits at both the individual and organizational levels, including improved confidence, strengthened relationships, enhanced communication skills, and greater engagement. Importantly, coaching is distinct from traditional training because it provides a peer-based, judgment-free partnership where individuals can process experiences, gain clarity, and cultivate resilience. This is especially critical for pastors' wives, who often lack safe spaces to share their realities without fear of social or political repercussions (Luedtke & Sneed, 2018).

Research underscores this need for external, sustained support. Kum's (2015) longitudinal study of Korean pastors' wives documented the emotional strain, isolation, and role confusion they faced under cultural and religious expectations. Through a three-year peer-support model, participants reported notable growth in emotional well-being, marital relationships, and resilience. Coaching builds on this principle of structured support by offering an intentional, one-on-one partnership that emphasizes active listening and co-creative problem-solving (Christian Coaches Network International, n.d.; International Coaching Federation, n.d.).

The practical benefits of coaching, particularly in fostering self-awareness, boundary-setting, and emotional regulation, directly align with the challenges surfaced by FLS. Empirical studies affirm these benefits: Dippenaar and Schaap (2017) show that coaching enhances leaders' emotional and social intelligence, Moseley (2011) highlights gains in communication and strategic thinking, and Grant et al. (2010) demonstrate improvements in goal achievement, self-efficacy, and overall performance. These findings suggest that coaching has the capacity not only to alleviate the burdens of FLS but also to empower pastors' wives as resilient, influential leaders in their own right.

Future Recommendation for Research

Future research could productively apply social identity theory to extend understanding of FLS and its implications for women in spiritual leadership. In particular, empirical inquiry into the question, "How are identity and influence constructed and interpreted for women in religious leadership spaces with informal authority?" would provide valuable insights. Such studies could inform leadership development frameworks by illuminating the dynamics of relational and group-based leadership as experienced by individuals in informal roles, thereby advancing both theory and practice. Additionally, this line of inquiry could identify practical tools and strategies to promote the well-being and sustainability of women leaders operating within gendered and often invisible structures of influence.

Future research should also explore how the dynamics of FLS manifest in contexts beyond political science and the church. The core features of FLS—role ambiguity, emotional labor, invisible labor, and image management—are not exclusive to religious institutions. These dynamics are likely present in various organizational settings, including corporate, nonprofit, academic, and ministry environments, where women occupy informal or poorly defined leadership roles.

In such spaces, women are often expected to perform emotionally supportive functions, fill institutional gaps, and maintain organizational cohesion—frequently without formal titles, recognition, or clear boundaries. This includes behind-the-scenes work that sustains the organizational culture but is seldom acknowledged or rewarded. Additionally, women in these roles may be perceived as moral or emotional anchors, expected to tend to others' needs without holding formal authority. These expectations are further compounded by pressures to maintain a carefully balanced public persona: competent but approachable, authoritative but not overly assertive, successful but non-threatening. Investigating how these patterns extend across sectors could offer a broader understanding of gendered labor and help design strategies to support women navigating these complex leadership terrains.

Conclusion

FLS presents a distinct paradox in faith leadership: women who carry profound influence within congregations while lacking formal authority or recognition. By naming the complex web of expectations, emotional labor, and symbolic responsibilities that pastors' wives navigate, this analysis introduces FLS as a new scholarly framework that brings long-overdue visibility to their contributions. Recognizing this phenomenon provides language for what has often been felt but not formally articulated, offering pastors' wives both clarity and validation in their lived experience.

While recognition of FLS provides essential conceptual clarity, sustainable solutions are also required. Coaching represents one such evidence-based intervention, offering pastors' wives structured support to navigate identity tensions, relational pressures, and institutional expectations. As demonstrated in leadership development research, coaching fosters resilience, strengthens self-efficacy, and enhances capacity for influence (Grant et al., 2010; Dippenaar & Schaap, 2017).

In sum, the articulation of FLS advances scholarship by formalizing a previously unnamed dynamic, while the integration of coaching offers a research-informed pathway toward flourishing. Together, they provide a framework for understanding and a practical strategy for supporting pastors' wives as informal yet essential leaders in the life of the church.

About the Author

Cherelle Johnson brings over a decade of strategic insight in leadership development, organizational strategy, and higher education, along with more than 20 years of experience in ministry leadership. An instructor of business and leadership since 2019, she is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership at Regent University, building on her M.S. in Education and B.B.A. in Marketing from James Madison University. Cherelle is also a certified HR professional (SHRM-CP), executive coach, and founder of Dream City LLC and IronDresses Inc., where she has trained leaders across the U.S. and internationally. She serves as an executive pastor at Divine Unity Community Church, founded and led by her husband, where she continues to invest in spiritual growth, leadership, and community transformation. Her teaching and research focus on leadership development, group behavior, and women's empowerment, particularly in ecclesial and organizational contexts.

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