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Is Michelle Obama “Letting Down the Team”?

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President-elect Barack Obama will take the oath of office on January 20, thereby accepting the constitutional office to which he has been elected. Simultaneously, Michelle Obama will also accept an official role, though not a constitutional office. The role of the “First Lady” has developed over time, and the wife (thus far at least, all presidential spouses have been wives) of the President of the United States is invested by the public, if not by the Constitution, with a massively influential platform.



Michelle Obama is a woman of significant achievement. She is a graduate of Princeton University and the Harvard Law School. She worked for a respected Chicago law firm and later drew a very large salary as an executive with the University of Chicago Hospitals. She is also the wife of the President-elect and the mother of their two daughters, Malia (10) and Sasha (7). She often campaigned alongside her husband and is a gifted public speaker. Thus, the question many people have been asking is this: What kind of First Lady will Michelle Obama choose to be?

As for Mrs. Obama, she has made her position clear — she will devote herself first and foremost to being the wife of the President and the mother of their children. She is willingly and eagerly choosing the role of “First Mom.” She will not practice law and she will not be actively involved in policy development — at least for now.

Some feminists are outraged at Michelle Obama’s choice and her public statements about devoting herself to her children and to the task of raising them in the White House. Writing at Salon.com, Rebecca Traister lamented what she called the “[The Momification of Michelle Obama](#).”

She wrote:

Michelle Obama is a mom. And her girls are small. This kind of change will undoubtedly be extremely discombobulating for them, and they will require the attention of their parents. Michelle herself has been more than happy to tell people, most notably in a summer interview with Ebony, that her first responsibilities upon getting to Washington will be finding schools and making sure her daughters get comfortable in their new fishbowl, all invaluable responsibilities of a parent resituating his or her kids, a parent who in this case happens to be a mommy.

It’s Michelle’s job because Daddy is going to be the president, and he has to save the country and the world from an economic crisis and war, and so he might be too busy to come check out the new schools and decorate their rooms and help with the dog. But the fact is, he seems to be a pretty good dad, and I bet he will do some of that stuff anyway. What rankles is the smooth and unquestioning assumptions by the media that the fallback position is to assign all those duties to Michelle.

Traister’s essay is revealing in itself, but she is by no means alone. The feminist blogosphere has erupted with debate, indicating both disappointment and indignation in response to Mrs. Obama’s statements.

To use a phrase provided by feminist author Linda Hirshman, Michelle Obama is now accused of “[letting down the team](#)” by choosing motherhood over career at this point in her life. Hirshman famously argues that women who choose

motherhood at the expense of career and professional development are robbing themselves and, by extension, all women of status and progress. Childrearing, Hirshman was bold to write, should be considered as demeaning to any educated adult.

Michelle Obama is, to say the least, well educated. To many feminists, all the gains for women represented by Michelle Obama's Princeton and Harvard education are wiped out by her intention to be, in effect, a stay-at-home mom. In their eyes, she has already let down her team.

The controversy has reached the international press. *The Times* [London] reports that Mrs. Obama has single-handedly reignited the explosive "mommy wars" of recent decades.

As the paper explains, "To the chagrin of Democratic feminists who had hoped she would become the first presidential spouse to manage an independent career at the White House, Michelle has declared herself "mom-in-chief" and apparently turned her back on the \$300,000 salary she earned as a hospital administrator."

More:

Several feminists have complained that despite her degrees from Princeton and Harvard, not to mention her extensive professional experience, she is now being talked about exclusively in "safe" family terms - as the mother of Sasha, 7, and Malia, 10, who will become the youngest children to live at the White House in decades; and also as a female fashion-plate.

Feminist observers have offered several readings of the situation. Some have argued that this "moderation" of Michelle Obama is just part of a public relations strategy. Others have asserted that this just proves that Mrs. Obama is being coerced by oppressive expectations. At least some have taken her at her word — that this is a choice she has made for the sake of her children and her husband.

The entire controversy is illuminating. The eruption of the "mommy wars" is virtually inevitable whenever a woman in the public's eye makes a similar choice. Whether the words are used or not, the accusation is that such a woman is "letting down the team."

In that light, Michelle Obama's choice — and her candor — are truly encouraging. She has almost instantly served as a witness to the importance of motherhood and the honor of rearing children. In so doing, she served the nation — as well as her children — well.

We cannot know in advance how Michelle Obama will be remembered as a First Lady. If her statements are mere public relations, we will know soon enough. All current evidence points to the authenticity of her words. Many of us have had, now have, and will almost surely in the future have significant disagreements with Michelle Obama over issues of public policy and our basic vision for the nation. Nevertheless, with respect to her elevation of motherhood and the priority of children as an honored choice, she deserves our appreciation and support — and our prayers.

