



MICHELLE OBAMA ROCKS!
BY: JULIANNE MALVEAUX

Michelle Obama rocks! Her approval rating of 79 percent exceeds that of the President. Her public appearances, focusing on military families, work life balance, healthy eating, and literacy, have been engaging. When a statue of Sojourner Truth was installed in the Capitol, her presence spoke volumes about the progress African American people, and African American women, have made in our nation. Her presence in the White House is an antidote to some of the demeaning images of African American women that dominate the popular culture.

Despite high approval ratings, though, First Lady Obama's description of herself as "mom-in-chief" has generated feminist carping about whether the Princeton and Harvard educated lawyer is avoiding controversy and leadership around policy issues by focusing on the traditional side of her role as First Lady. How often do African American women really get to embrace the "traditional" side of their roles as wives and mothers? Most African American women have no choice but work; we have often worked to the detriment of our children, living in as household help to support other people's families while leaving our own families to manage on their own. We did it for economic necessity, because we had no choice. First Lady Obama has a choice, and she has chosen, with all due deliberation, to focus on a few issues, but also on her children.

We have come a long way from the 1940s when 70 percent of all African American women were maids. Still, African American women are about 25 percent less likely to work in management and professional jobs than white women are, and more likely to be involved in service occupations. No wonder so many swell with pride when a poised and articulate Michelle Obama has a public role. Those feminists who want Michelle Obama to "step up" and advocate for the causes of their choice fail to put the First Lady in full context and to understand what progress she represents for women of color.

Furthermore, Mrs. Obama has proven to be an effective advocate for work-life balance issues, most recently speaking to Corporate Voices for Working Families about the need for flextime, paid sick leave, and sharing her own challenges around balancing work and family. Her May 7 talk was so well received that Corporate Voices President Donna Klein described her as a "standard bearer" for working families.

We have a long way to go to make the labor market family friendly, and the challenges are all the more pronounced in the middle of a recession. It is inspiring that our First Lady is using her pre-White House experiences as a working mother to explore ways public policy can make labor markets more responsive to the needs of working mothers and their families. The truth she speaks is far more powerful than the strident advocacy some would have her provide.

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