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Work-Life Balance a Challenge, Says Michelle Obama, But Having White House Staff Helps



First lady Michelle Obama greets Jeanette Rivera Boria, project leader of Ethicon, a Johnson & Johnson company, and David Lissy, CEO of the Bright Horizon Family Solution, at a meeting with representatives from Corporate Voices for Working Families in Washington. (Yuri Gripas/Reuters)

By DeNeen L. Brown

First lady Michelle Obama called her "current life" in the White House "a very blessed situation, because I have what most families don't have -- tons of support all around, not just my mother, but staff and administration. I have a chief of staff and a personal assistant, and everyone needs that."

"Everyone should have a chief of staff and a set of personal assistants," Obama told a crowd of business executives meeting today during a "Corporate Voices for Working Families" conference at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington.

Along with the issues of community service and military families, Obama has said as first lady she wants to focus on the struggles of working families.

During her 10-minute speech, Obama advocated for sick leave for parents, flexible work hours for employees and on-site child care, which she said "is something that keeps many of us up at night....You're just wondering where are we going to put our children where we feel like that they're being safe, that they're safe and being loved. That will relieve many of the stresses that parents feel on the job throughout the day."

Obama said she personally knows the challenges of balancing work and family "trying to do a good job at both -- and always feeling like you're not quite living up to either -- and trying not to pit one against the other, really trying to balance."

She called herself someone who strives to do more than 100 percent at work. "If people here are like me -- I call myself a 120-percenter. If I'm not doing any job at 120 percent, I think I'm failing. So if you're trying to do that at home and at work, you find it very difficult and stressful and frustrating."

Obama told the story of her own childhood, growing up in Chicago with a father who worked as a city employee at a time when he could make enough money to allow her mother to stay home with the children.

"When I look back on my childhood and the life that my parents provided, working-class folks with not a lot of money, my father was a blue-collar city worker who worked a shift job," she said. "But because he earned enough as a shift worker without a college degree, he could still support a family of four on that salary. And because he could, with that salary, support us -- we rented a home, we didn't live lavishly -- my mother was able to stay at home. She could afford to make the choice not to go to work while we were growing up. That was how families balanced back then."

She said the economic situation has changed today. "One income really doesn't always cut it anymore. And that's in my lifetime," Obama said. "In most families, both parents have to work, and even if people want to make the choice to stay home. And again, there is no subjective analysis or -- of what is better. But people can't make the choice. It's even harder for single parents, and there are millions of them all across this country who are trying to build a life for themselves and their children, and they find in an economy that's tough that they're not just holding down one but they need a couple of jobs just to make ends meet."

Obama said when she was an executive, she learned that giving her employees more flexibility helped their productivity.

"I found that as I've managed staff, the more flexibility and opportunities that I gave them to be good parents, the more commitment that they made to working with me, the less likely they were to leave because they wouldn't find the same sort of situation somewhere else," Obama said. "So this isn't just about family balance. This is about making work places stronger and more effective, and keeping and attracting the most qualified people. This research is critical to empowering employers and is politically -- particularly important during our current economic climate."

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