

In Obama White House, First Lady Shows She's Part of the Team

First lady Michelle Obama is embarking on a set of visits to her husband's administration agencies, signaling she'll be more than just the "mom-in-chief."

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Michelle Obama, in a visit to the Department of Education earlier this week, had to catch herself when she repeatedly used the word "we" as she discussed her husband's policies.

"I shouldn't say 'we,' but the administration, 'we,'" the first lady told department employees after speaking in the first person about a dozen times.

But to some, Obama has already shown her cards. Her planned visits to a slew of Cabinet agencies signal that she intends to take a far more active role than the "mom-in-chief" title she's already given herself.

"Those are forays into public policy, so that's a little bit surprising," said Myra Gutin, Rider University professor and author of "The President's Partner: The First Lady in the Twentieth Century."

"This is a first lady first," Gutin told FOXNews.com of the agency visits. "For me, it's sending mixed signals."

Mindful of the trouble Hillary Clinton had in promoting Bill Clinton's health care plan in the '90s, the White House is probably leery of assigning a policy issue to the first lady. But, like Clinton and Laura Bush after her, Michelle Obama appears to be taking an active role as an unofficial White House spokeswoman.

Obama visited staff at the Department of Housing and Urban Development Wednesday as part of her flurry of recent activities. There she made the case for her husband's economic recovery plan, telling hundreds of enthusiastic employees that the department would play a "critical" role in the stimulus plan.

Monday's stop at the Education Department followed a lunch with second lady Jill Biden and Washington Mayor Adrian Fenty, whose city is funded in large part with federal dollars. On Wednesday, the first lady and the president visited a Washington public school.

Obama's first solo event as first lady was last week, when she hosted a reception for Lilly Ledbetter, the namesake of a fair pay bill that was the first legislation President Obama signed.

Michelle Obama called the legislation an "important step forward" and said, "it's also one cornerstone of a broader commitment to address the needs of working women."

The first lady's Web page on the White House Web site says that her daughters, Malia and Sasha, will be her top priority in Washington.

And in a "60 Minutes" interview with her husband shortly after the election, she said her primary focus in the first year will be ensuring that the girls "make it through the transition."

But she ticked off education, military families and "the work-family balance issue" as topics she's attuned to, and she said she wants to contribute to the Washington area.

President Obama added that his wife would "design her own role."

The first lady's Web page offers a cursory glimpse of how she views her role alongside the administration.

"As first lady, Michelle Obama looks forward to continuing her work on the issues close to her heart -- supporting military families, helping working women balance career and family, and encouraging national service," it says.

Gutin said Obama's early actions contradict the White House mom image she projected before Inauguration Day. But Gutin said her foray into issues jibes with her abilities.

"Heaven knows she's bright and creative and she's got a lot of energy," Gutin said. "I think she certainly has the intellect of Hillary Clinton."

Like Clinton, Michelle Obama has an Ivy-League law degree. She graduated from Harvard Law School and from Princeton University before that with a degree in sociology. Like Clinton, Obama enters the White House as a career woman.

But unlike Clinton, she's not taking a West Wing office. Like Laura Bush and other first ladies, she's sticking to the East Wing. A representative for Obama could not be reached for comment.

First ladies inevitably find their niche. Laura Bush, who started out as a soft-spoken advocate for childhood education and literacy, broke her own mold to set a couple of "first lady firsts" -- the first presidential spouse to hold a briefing in the White House press room (to speak out against military rulers' handling of a cyclone in Burma), and the first to deliver the Saturday presidential radio address.

Obama said Monday at the Department of Education that she's still getting her bearings, and her visit to the many administration departments is aimed to "do just something simple, and that's to say thank you."

"I'm going to spend the next several weeks or months, however long it takes, going from agency to agency, just to say hello, to learn, to listen, to take information back where possible," she said. "But truthfully, my task here is to say thank you and roll up your sleeves, because we have a lot of work to do."

We, as in the administration.

FOXNews.com's Judson Berger and FOX News' Daniela Sicuranza contributed to this report.