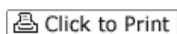




Powered by


[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

## Administration pushes women's issues to fore

Groups disagree on how much progress the steps represent

By Mimi Hall  
USA TODAY

A new White House Council on Women and Girls is assessing every government agency to see whether its programs do enough to benefit women. The first senior adviser on domestic violence and the first ambassador for women's issues around the globe are developing programs to prevent violence against women at home and abroad. First lady Michelle Obama is highlighting women's achievements, helping families and pushing girls to succeed.

The prospect of a woman in the Oval Office ended more than a year ago when Hillary Rodham Clinton conceded the Democratic presidential nomination to Barack Obama. The women's groups who backed Clinton for president now say the man who vanquished her is running an administration more focused on women's issues and equality than any before it. "This has been the most open White House to women's issues and groups," says Feminist Majority Foundation President Eleanor Smeal, a women's rights activist for four decades. "In the first six months, we have been brought in more than ever before. ... It's very impressive."

Says Terry O'Neill, president of the National Organization for Women (NOW): "We clearly have a friend in the White House."

Last November, 56% of female voters chose Obama over Republican Sen. John McCain. The administration's outreach to women ♦ more than 60% of U.S. voters and now nearly half the nation's workers ♦ started right away.

Nine days into office, the president made a show of signing his first piece of legislation: the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Restoration Act. The law negated a ruling by the Supreme Court against a woman who had sued after discovering that her employer had paid her male colleagues more for years.

Signing the bill before the cameras in the White House's East Room, Obama said he did it to honor "women like my grandmother who worked in a bank all her life" and to lay the groundwork for "my daughters, and all those who will come after us, because I want them to grow up in a nation that values their contributions, where there are no limits to their dreams and they have opportunities their mothers and grandmothers never could have imagined."

Weeks later, he announced the creation of the White House council to "ensure that American women are treated fairly in all matters of public policy." He put his longtime friend and senior adviser Valerie Jarrett in charge.

Conservative women are unimpressed.

"Obama's policies reflect the views of hard-core abortion and feminist groups," says Wendy Wright, president of Concerned Women for America. "Considering the diversity of views among American women, it is insulting to assume that there is one 'women's view' and it is represented by liberal feminist activists. ... Obama's choices reflect a stereotypical view of women who are abortion advocates who are dependent on government."

His moves haven't entirely pleased liberal groups either.

NOW and others had pushed for a Cabinet-level post dedicated to women's issues, not a council, arguing that only the prestige of a Cabinet member would give women's issues the attention and clout they deserved.

Despite that disappointment, these groups say they've been impressed with the work they've seen so far, on a host of fronts. Among them:

- Clinton, now secretary of State, is putting a spotlight on women's rights internationally, including issues affecting women's health, education and economic prospects.

"Investments in women are about creating a better world," says Melanne Vermeer, the new ambassador-at-large for global women's issues.

She says societies such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo where women are degraded often "implode" and result in failed states. "These issues do not belong in some kind of box on the margins. There is a commitment in the administration. ... It's very gratifying."

- Obama appointed the first White House senior adviser on violence against women, domestic violence expert Lynn Rosenthal. In her new job, Rosenthal will help develop policies and programs aimed at reducing domestic violence and sexual assault.

"She will be a leader in this White House in stopping the violence and sexual assault of women and will be an integral part of this administration," Vice President Biden said in June when she was appointed to the post.

As a senator, Biden wrote the Violence Against Women Act of 1994, which imposed tougher penalties on abusers and expanded victims' rights to sue. He called it his "proudest legislative achievement."

- First lady Michelle Obama holds many events focused on women, including a Women's History Month event in March in which she enlisted 21 of the nation's most accomplished women ♦ from singer Sheryl Crow to four-star Gen. Ann Dunwoody ♦ to talk to kids in some of Washington, D.C.'s most beleaguered schools.

The first lady's spokeswoman, Katie McCormick Lelyveld, says Michelle Obama's ongoing work with military families also reflects her commitment to women's issues.

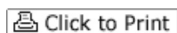
- Tina Tchen, director of the new White House council, says there is "enthusiasm across the board for these issues" in the administration. She's working on programs related to everything from child-labor laws to financial literacy for women.

Former NOW president Kim Gandy says women's groups want the administration and Congress to approve paid family leave, pass anti-wage-discrimination laws and strengthen Title IX rules that prohibit discrimination in school athletics programs.

"There is a lot of policy work yet to be done," she says. "But I believe they're committed to doing it."

Find this article at:

[http://www.usatoday.com/printedition/news/20090914/obamawomen14\\_st.art.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/printedition/news/20090914/obamawomen14_st.art.htm)


[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright 2009 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.