

The President's Weekly Address

March 12, 2011

March is Women's History Month, a time not only to celebrate the progress that women have made, but also the women throughout our history who have made that progress possible.

One inspiring American who comes to mind is Eleanor Roosevelt. In 1961, the former First Lady was unhappy about the lack of women in Government, so she marched up to President Kennedy and handed him a three-page list of women who were qualified for top posts in his administration. This led the President to select Mrs. Roosevelt as the head of a new commission to look at the status of women in America and the unfairness they routinely faced in their lives.

Though she passed away before the commission could finish its work, the report they released spurred action across the country. It helped galvanize a movement led by women that would help make our society a more equal place.

It's been almost 50 years since the Roosevelt commission published its findings, and there have been few similar efforts by the Government in the decades that followed. That's why last week, here at the White House, we released a new comprehensive report on the status of women in the spirit of the one that was released half a century ago.

There was a lot of positive news about the strides we've made, even in recent years. For example, women have caught up with men in seeking higher education. In fact, women today are more likely than men to attend and graduate from college.

Yet there are also reminders of how much more work remains to be done. Women are still more likely to live in poverty in this country. In education, there are areas like math and engineering where women are vastly outnumbered by their male counterparts. This is especially troubling, for we know that to compete with nations around the world, these are fields in which we need to harness the talents of all our people. That's how we'll win the future.

And today, women still earn, on average, only about 75 cents for every dollar a man earns. That's a huge discrepancy. And at a time when folks across this country are struggling to make ends meet and many families are just trying to get by on one paycheck after a job loss, it's a reminder that achieving equal pay for equal work isn't just a women's issue, it's a family issue.

In one of my first acts as President, I signed a law so that women who've been discriminated against in their salaries could have their day in court to make it right. But there are steps we should take to prevent that from happening in the first place. That's why I was so disappointed when an important bill to give women more power to stop pay disparities, the "Paycheck Fairness Act," was blocked by just two votes in the Senate. And that's why I'm going to keep up the fight to pass the reforms in that bill.

Achieving equality and opportunity for women isn't just important to me as President. It's something I care about deeply as the father of two daughters who wants to see his girls grow up in a world where there are no limits to what they can achieve.

As I've traveled across the country visiting schools and meeting young people, I've seen so many girls passionate about science and other subjects that were traditionally not open to them. We even held a science fair here at the White House, where I met a young woman

named Amy Chyao. She was only 16 years old, but she was actually working on a treatment for cancer. She never thought, "Science isn't for me." She never thought, "Girls can't do that." She was just interested in solving a problem. And because someone was interested in giving her a chance, she has the potential to improve lives.

That tells me how far we've come. But it also tells me we have to work even harder to close the gaps that still exist and to uphold that simple American ideal: We are all equal and deserving of the chance to pursue our own version of happiness. That's what Eleanor Roosevelt was striving toward half a century ago. That's why this report matters today. And that's why, on behalf of all our daughters and all our sons, we've got to keep making progress in the years ahead.

Thanks for listening.

NOTE: The address was recorded at approximately 3:10 p.m. on March 11 in the Roosevelt Room at the White House for broadcast on March 12. The transcript was made available by the Office of the Press Secretary on March 11, but was embargoed for release until 6 a.m. on March 12.

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Subjects: Civil rights : Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009; Civil rights : Wage equality; Civil rights : Women's rights and gender equality; Economy, national : Recession, effects; Education : Science and math programs; Holiday's and special observances : Women's History Month; Science and technology : Global competitiveness.

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