

Administration of Barack Obama, 2011

Remarks to the Women's Leadership Forum

May 19, 2011

The President. Hello, everybody! Hello, hello, hello! It is good to be with all of you. First of all, how about the outstanding new chair of the DNC, Debbie Wasserman Schultz? Give it up for her. We've got a couple of other outstanding Members of Congress who are here: Senator Kirsten Gillibrand is here, and Representative Donna Edwards is in the house.

Now, I was a little confused when they told me I was coming here to address the Women's Leadership Forum, because I address a women's leadership forum every night at dinner. [*Laughter*] I just left a women's leadership forum. [*Laughter*] I have Michelle, Malia, Sasha, my mother-in-law. [*Laughter*] It's just me and Bo—[*laughter*]—trying to get a word in edgewise. [*Laughter*]

Audience member. We're going to let you talk.

The President. Oh—that's a change. [*Laughter*] The last time I spoke to the Women's Leadership Forum was back in 2008. And a lot has changed since then. I'm a little grayer. [*Laughter*] Back then, we were in the middle of the worst recession since the Great Depression, a recession that would ultimately cost us 8 million jobs. Today, we've got a recovery that's taken hold. Our economy has now been growing for the past five quarters. We've created over 2 million private sector jobs in the last 14 months, more than three-quarters of a million private sector jobs in the last 3 months alone. Each of the Big Three automakers are now making a profit for the first time in years.

So obviously, the economy as a whole has an enormous impact on women and everything that women are doing to hold families together during extraordinarily rough times. But we've done a few other things. Along the way, we appointed two more women on the Supreme Court, including the first Latina on the Supreme Court. We launched a competition called Race to the Top that's being touted all across the country for bringing about changes people couldn't imagine at the local level in schools, and it's also helping to recruit more women into the math and science professions, which we think is absolutely critical.

We finally passed health care reform to make sure that health care is affordable and available for every single American in the United States. And as part of reform, insurance companies will cover preventive care like mammograms with no out-of-pocket costs. And it will be illegal to charge women more than men just because of their gender.

So we're making some progress, but we've still got a long way to go. For all the strides that we've made, women still hold fewer than 20 percent of the seats in Congress, which explains something. [*Laughter*] Women still only make up 3 percent of the Fortune 500 CEOs. Women are still earning only about 77 cents for every dollar that a man is earning. That's why the first bill that I signed into law was the Lilly Ledbetter bill, to make sure that women get an equal day's pay for an equal day's work. That's not too much to ask.

I was disappointed when another important bill to help end pay disparities, the "Paycheck Fairness Act," failed by just two votes when not a single Republican would vote for it in the Senate. So I'm going to keep on fighting to pass that piece of legislation.

Because SBA loans are three to five times as likely to go to women and minority business owners as conventional loans, we've invested in the SBA. And Karen Mills, our SBA Administrator, is doing an outstanding job. We are making sure that women entrepreneurs have the support they need not only to start a business, but to expand a business and create new jobs across America in the process.

Because about one in five women will be sexually assaulted in college, Vice President Joe Biden is working with our Adviser on Violence Against Women, Lynn Rosenthal, to help make sure our universities are fulfilling their obligation under Federal law to stop the scourge of sexual assault on college campuses across America.

We created the White House Council on Women and Girls, led by our very own Valerie Jarrett. We created the Office of Global Women's Issues at the State Department, led by Ambassador Melanne Vermeer, to make sure our administration is focused on the issues that are facing women and girls here and around the world.

Overseas, we lifted the global gag rule that restricted women's access to family planning. We're making important investments in child and maternal health. And we are working to stem the unspeakable cruelties that are being perpetrated against girls and women in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

When it comes to our budget, we need to live within our means, and we've got to cut what we don't need so that we can afford to do the things that we have to do to grow our economy. But what I told the House Republicans during the budget fight is that I'm not willing to defund Planned Parenthood. I'm not willing to sacrifice basic health care and lifesaving preventive care for millions of women.

Now, the cause of women aren't just important to me as President, they are personal. I saw my grandmother hit a glass ceiling at the bank where she worked for years. She could have been the best bank president they ever had, but she never got that chance. I saw how Michelle was made to balance work and family when she was a vice president at a hospital. As a father, I want to make sure that my daughters and all of our daughters have the chance to be anything that they want. That's the America that we believe in. That's the America we're fighting for.

So to all of you who are activists in your communities, in your neighborhoods, in your work places, I want to say thank you for everything that you've already done to help advance the cause of justice and equality and prosperity and fairness. But I also want to underscore that we are not close to being finished. We are not close to being finished. Back in 2008, on that night in Grant Park, I told everybody, this is not the end, this is the beginning. And I warned everybody we were going to have a steep hill to climb. Change is never easy. And change certainly is not easy in a democracy because people argue, people have different points of view. That's part of what makes a democracy vital and healthy.

But we've made enormous strides over the last 2½ years. And that shouldn't be a cause for complacency, but it should give us enormous confidence that we can make even more changes over the next 5½ years. As long as each and every one of you continue to be involved, continue to be engaged, continue to speak out, I promise I will be right there with you, every step of the way.

God bless you. God bless the United States of America. Thank you, everybody. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:02 p.m. at the Grand Hyatt Washington hotel. In his remarks, he referred to his mother-in-law Marian Robinson.

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Names: Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Edwards, Donna F.; Gillibrand, Kirsten; Jarrett, Valerie B.; Kagan, Elena; Mills, Karen G.; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Robinson, Marian; Rosenthal, Lynn; Sotomayor, Sonia M.; Verveer, Melanne S.; Wasserman Schultz, Deborah.

Subjects: Budget, Federal : Government programs, spending reductions; Business and industry : Automobile industry :: Improvement; Business and industry : Minority-owned businesses; Business and industry : Wage discrimination; Business and industry : Women-owned businesses; Civil rights : Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009; Civil rights : Women's rights and gender equality; Congo, Democratic Republic of the : Human rights issues; Democratic Party : Democratic National Committee; Economy, national : Improvement; Economy, national : Recession, effects; Education : Postsecondary education :: Sexual assault, prevention efforts; Education : Science and math programs; Education : Standards and school accountability; Education, Department of : Race to the Top Fund; Employment and unemployment : Job creation and growth; Employment and unemployment : Job losses; Foreign policy, U.S. : Civil and human rights, promotion efforts; Health and medical care : Affordability and costs; Health and medical care : Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act; Health and medical care : Preventive care and public health programs; Judiciary : Supreme Court :: Associate Justices; Legislation, proposed : "Paycheck Fairness Act"; Small Business Administration : Administrator; Small Business Administration : Loan guarantee facility; State, Department of : Global Women's Issues, Office of; White House Office : Assistants to the President :: Violence Against Women; White House Office : Vice President; White House Office : Women and Girls, White House Council on; Women's Leadership Forum.

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