

*Administration of Barack Obama, 2014*

**Remarks at Rhode Island College in Providence, Rhode Island**  
*October 31, 2014*

*The President.* Hello, everybody! Well, can everybody please give Lisbeth a big round of applause? That was a great introduction.

Happy Halloween, everybody. I see a lot of you came as college students. [*Laughter*]

*Audience members.* We love you, Obama! We love you!

*The President.* I love you too. Those of you who have seats, feel free to sit down. Those of you who don't, don't. [*Laughter*] I am not going to be too long. I've got to get back and trick-or-treat tonight with Michelle. Although, Malia and Sasha are a little old and—

*Audience members.* Aww!

*The President.* It's so sad. [*Laughter*] I used to be able to—I mean, we'd dress them up, and we still have the pictures. They'll resent them later, but at the time, they were fine with it. They were so cute.

A good thing about being President is, we never run out of Presidential M&Ms— [*laughter*—and so we're going to be giving those out.

*Audience members.* [*Inaudible*] [*Laughter*]

*The President.* You want some? Is that what you said? Only to kids. [*Laughter*]

We're so proud of Lisbeth, not just for the wonderful introduction, but for being so determined about her education. And she's a really remarkable young lady. I had a chance to speak to her before we came out. It turns out she went to school with my niece and nephew.

*Audience member.* Classical!

*The President.* That's right. At Classical, is that right? So that was neat.

I have also brought some Halloween characters with me: Our Secretary of Labor, Tom Perez. They are all dressed up as really outstanding public servants. [*Laughter*] And Tom has just been doing extraordinary work. His lovely daughter is here, who's a freshman at Brown. Your great Senators, Jack Reed and Sheldon Whitehouse. Your outstanding Congressmen, David Cicilline, is here; Jim Langevin is here. And we're proud of both of them.

But despite how much I love all the folks I just mentioned, the people I really came to see is you. Because every decision I make, every single day, all the policies I pursue as President, are all aimed at making sure we restore the promise of this country for your generation and for every generation that comes after.

Now, the good news is we've made a lot of progress since the worst economic crisis of our lifetimes. So when I first came into office, the economy was in a freefall, the auto industry was in a freefall. Banks were frozen up. We were losing 800,000 jobs a month. Over the past 55 months, our businesses have now added 10.3 million new jobs. For the first time in more than 6 years, the unemployment rate is below 6 percent. Over the past 6 months, our economy has grown at its fastest pace in more than 10 years.

And in education, dropout rates are down, the national graduation rate is the highest on record, more young people are earning their college degrees than ever before. Good job, young people.

In energy, we're less dependent on foreign oil than any time in nearly three decades. Manufacturing—the quintessential producer of middle class jobs, the heart of Rhode Island's economy for decades—manufacturing has now created 700,000 new jobs since early 2010. Ten million Americans have gained the peace of mind that comes with having health insurance. Deficit——

*Audience member.* Thank you!

*The President.* You're welcome. [*Laughter*]

Deficits have come down. Health care inflation has come down. There's almost no economic measure by which we haven't made substantial progress over this period of time. We're better off than we were.

So look, the progress has been hard. It's sometimes been challenging in particular States. But it's been steady and it's been real. Now, the thing is, though, what's also true is that millions of Americans don't yet feel the benefits of a growing economy where it matters most, and that's in their own lives. There are still a lot of folks who are working hard, but having trouble making ends meet.

I know that many of you are working while you go to school. Some of you are helping support your parents or siblings. Here in Rhode Island and across the country, there are still too many people who are working too many hours and don't have enough to show for it. And this isn't just the hangover from the great recession; some of this has to do with trends that date back 20, 30 years. And I've always said that recovering from the crisis of 2008 was the first thing we had to do, but our economy won't be really healthy until we reverse some of these longer term trends, this erosion of middle class jobs and income.

And here in Rhode Island, my administration recently announced a grant to help more long-term unemployed folks get the training and mentoring they need to get back to work. And all across the country, we're taking similar actions, community by community, to keep making progress.

We've got to harness the momentum that we're seeing in the broader economy and make sure the economy is working for every single American. We've got to keep making smart choices. And today, here at RIC, I want to focus on some commonsense steps we can take to help working families right now. In particular, I want to zero in on the choices we need to make to ensure that women are full and equal participants in the economy.

Now, men, I don't want you to feel neglected. I like men just fine. [*Laughter*] But part of the reason that I want this focus is because I was raised by a single mom and know what it was like for her to raise two kids and go to work at the same time and try to piece things together without a lot of support. And my grandmother, who never graduated from college, but worked her way up to become vice president of a bank, I know what it was like for her to hit the glass ceiling and to see herself passed over for promotions by people that she had trained. And so some of this is personal, but some of it is also what we know about our economy, which is, it's changing in profound ways and in many ways for the better because of the participation of women more fully in our economy.

So earlier today I met with a group of women business owners and working moms and Lisbeth and your president here, and they were sharing stories that probably sound familiar to a lot of people: studying for finals after working a full shift, searching for childcare when the babysitter cancels at the last minute, using every penny of their savings so they can afford to stay home with their new baby.

And so I kept on hearing my own story. I kept on hearing about my mom struggling to put herself through school or my grandmother hitting that glass ceiling. And I thought about Michelle, and I told some stories about when Michelle and I were younger and getting started, and we were struggling to balance two careers while raising a family. And my job forced me to travel a lot, which made it harder on Michelle, and we would feel some of the guilt that so many people feel. We're working, we're thinking about the kids, we're wondering whether we're bad parents, we're wondering whether we were doing what we need to do on the job. That's the catch-22 of working parents: We wanted to spend time with our kids, but we also wanted to make sure that we gave them the opportunities that our hard work was providing.

And then, of course, I think about my daughters. And the idea that my daughters wouldn't have the same opportunities as somebody's sons, well, that's unacceptable. [*Applause*] That's not acceptable.

So I say all this because, to the men here, we all have a stake in choosing policies that help women succeed. Women make up about half of America's workforce. For more than two decades, women have earned over half of the higher education degrees awarded in this country. And you look at RIC's student body, almost 70 percent women. In colleges nationwide, there are more women graduating than men, which means that for the first time, America's highly educated workforce will be made up of more women than men.

But here's the challenge—that's all good news—the challenge is, our economy and some of the laws and rules governing our workplaces haven't caught up with that reality. A lot of workplaces haven't caught up with that reality. So while many women are working hard to support themselves and their families, they're still facing unfair choices, outdated workplace policies. That holds them back, but it also holds all of us back. We have to do better, because women deserve better. And by the way, when women do well, everybody does well.

So women deserve a day off to care for a sick child or sick parent without running into hardship. And Rhode Island's got the right idea. You're one of just three States where paid family leave is the law of the land. More States should choose to follow your lead.

It was interesting talking to some of the small-business owners in the meeting. They were saying how the Rhode Island law actually helped them do a better job recruiting and retaining outstanding employees. And so that shows you something: that this is not just a nice thing to do; it's good policy. It's good for business. It's good for the economy.

Without paid leave, when a baby arrives or an aging parent needs help, workers have to make painful decisions about whether they can afford to be there when their families need them most. Many women can't even get a paid day off to give birth to their child. I mean, there are a lot of companies that still don't provide maternity leave. Of course, dads should be there too. So let's make this happen for women and for men and make our economy stronger. We've got to broaden our laws for family leave.

Moms and dads deserve a great place to drop their kids off every day that doesn't cost them an arm and a leg. We need better childcare, daycare, early childhood education policies.

In many States, sending your child to daycare costs more than sending them to a public university.

*Audience member.* True!

*The President.* True? *[Laughter]* And too often, parents have no choice but to put their kids in cheaper daycare that maybe doesn't have the kinds of programming that makes a big difference in a child's development. But—and sometimes, there may just not be any slots, or the best programs may be too far away. And sometimes, someone, usually mom, leaves the workplace to stay home with the kids, which then leaves her earning a lower wage for the rest of her life as a result. And that's not a choice we want Americans to make.

So let's make this happen. By the end of this decade, let's enroll 6 million children in high-quality preschool, and let's make sure that we are making America stronger. That is good for families; it's also good for the children, because we know investing in high-quality early childhood education makes all the difference in the world, and those kids will do better. So we need family leave, we need better childcare policies, and we need to make sure that women get an honest day's pay for an honest day's work.

About 28 million Americans would benefit if we raise the minimum wage to \$10.10 an hour, like Sheldon Whitehouse and Jack Reed support. And let me say this: Minimum wage—those aren't just teenage jobs that are impacted. We're not just talking about young people. I mean, my first job was at Baskin-Robbins. And I got paid the minimum wage, and it was okay. Wearing that hat and the apron was—*[laughter]*—yeah.

But that—the truth is, the average worker who would benefit from an increase in the minimum wage is 35 years old—35. A majority of low-wage workers are women. A lot of them have kids. Right now somebody working full time on the minimum wage makes \$14,500 a year—\$14,500. If they're a parent, that means they're below the poverty line. Nobody who works full time in America should be below the poverty line. They should not be raising their kids below the poverty line. I am not going to give up this fight. And we need Republicans in Congress to stop blocking a minimum wage increase and give America a raise.

And if a woman is doing the same work as a man, she deserves to pay—get paid just like the man does. Even though it's 2014, there are women still earning less than men for doing the same work. And women of color face an even greater wage gap. And at a time when women are the primary breadwinners in more households than ever, that hurts the whole family if they're not getting paid fairly. Again, men, I just want you to pay attention. When Michelle and I were starting off, there were stretches of time where Michelle was making more money than me, and I wanted to make sure she was making every dime that she deserved. *[Laughter]* Right? I don't know how I benefit by her getting paid less than a man. Right?

*Audience members.* Right!

*The President.* Okay! Men, I just want you to be clear. *[Laughter]*

And it starts with recent college graduates. Women often start their careers with lower pay, and then the gap grows over time, especially if they get passed over for promotions and then they get fewer raises, or they take time off to care for family members. So they—you get a situation where women doing the same work as men, but the structure, the expectations somehow is, well, they'll take time off for family, and well, once they take time off that means that they're—it's okay to pay them a little bit less. And that builds up over time.

And we've got to have a reversal of those kinds of policies and that kind of mindset. We've got to catch up to the 21st century. We need to pass a fair pay law, make our economy stronger. It will be good for America, and it will be good for all families and good for all kids.

While we're on the topic, women deserve to make their own health care choices, not politicians or insurance companies. And that's why the Affordable Care Act is so important. Insurance plans—because we passed the Affordable Care Act, insurance plans now have to cover the basics, including contraceptive care and prenatal care and maternity care.

That means a working mom doesn't have to put off the care she needs just so she can pay her bills on time. Tens of millions of women have new access to preventive care like mammograms with no copays, no out-of-pocket expenses. It means that a cash-strapped student doesn't have to choose between the care that she needs and the cost of textbooks.

So—and because of the Affordable Care Act, because of Obamacare, no—because of that law, no insurance company can deny you coverage based on a preexisting condition like breast cancer or charge you more for the same care just because you're a woman. That's the right thing to do.

So no matter how many times Republicans threaten to repeal this law, we're going to keep it in place, because it's working. Not only is it covering more people, not only is it protecting women and people with preexisting conditions from discrimination, but it's actually been part of the trend that's lowering health care inflation. We're actually saving money because the system is getting smarter and there's more preventive care instead of emergency care, and we're changing how health care is delivered, which is why I'm pretty sure that in 10 years, they're not going to call it Obamacare anymore. *[Laughter]* Republicans will be, like, oh, I was for that, yes. *[Laughter]* That's how that works.

*Audience member.* We'll remember. *[Laughter]*

*The President.* You'll remember though. You'll remind them.

Now, to really make sure that women are full and equal participants in our economy, we can do some of this administratively. But it requires not just changing laws, it requires changing attitudes. And more and more companies are changing attitudes. And this is really good news.

JetBlue, for example, has a flexible work-from-home plan for its customer service reps. They've found it's led to happier, more productive employees and lower costs. Google increased paid leave for new parents—moms and dads—to 5 months. Five months. And that helped cut the rate of women leaving the company by half. And when I was having a conversation with some of the women business owners before I came out here, they were saying it's really costly when you lose a good employee and you've got to train somebody all over again. It's much more sensible from a business perspective to invest in them and make them feel like you've got their backs, and they'll stay with you.

And it's not just these big corporations that are embracing these policies. So Cheryl Snead, who is the CEO of Banneker Industries—where's Cheryl? She was here just a second. There she is back there. So Banneker Industries, a supply chain management firm, is based in North Smithfield. And when Cheryl was in college, she studied mechanical engineering. At the time, there weren't that many African American women in mechanical engineering. There still aren't. *[Laughter]* We're working to change that.

Cheryl wants to do something about that. Her company has made it a priority to find talented young women and minority students, encourage them to study science and math in

college, hire them once they graduate. And what Cheryl was explaining was that having a diverse workforce, having more women in the workforce, all that makes her a stronger company. And it's not just good for the workers, it's good for business.

So if large businesses like Google, small businesses like Cheryl's, all see the wisdom of this, let's join them. Let's encourage more women and more girls into fields like science and technology and engineering and math. And let's work with those companies to ensure that family-friendly policies can support more women in that workforce.

Ann-Marie Harrington—where is Ann? Ann-Marie is right here. So Ann-Marie, she's the president of a company called Embolden, based in Pawtucket. And it provides web services to community foundations and nonprofits. Small business—about 20 employees; 21 I think she said. She just hired somebody, must have been. *[Laughter]* But she lets them work from home and keep a flexible schedule when they need to. And she says that's increased her company's productivity.

So I'm taking a page from these companies' playbooks. This summer I directed the Federal agencies in the executive branch to put flexible workplace policies in wherever possible, make it clear that all Federal employees have the right to request them. We want the best talent to serve our country, and that means making it a little bit easier for them to maintain that work-family balance.

But these are issues that are too important to hinge on whether or not your boss is enlightened. We have to raise our voices to demand that women get paid fairly. We've got to raise our voices to make sure women can take time off to care for a loved one and that moms and dads can spend time with a new baby. We've got to raise our voices to make sure that our women maintain and keep their own health care choices. We've got to raise our voices to basically do away with policies and politicians that belong to—in a "Mad Men" episode. "Mad Men" is a good show, but that's not who we want making decisions about our workplaces these days. When women succeed, America succeeds. And we need leaders who understand that. That's what we need.

So if you care about these policies, you got to keep pushing for them. This shouldn't be partisan. Republicans and Democrats should be supportive of all these issues.

I was talking to Tom Perez; he had just come back from Europe. He was talking to chambers of commerce and conservative politicians. They were all supportive of family leave, supportive of childcare, because they understood it actually made the economy more productive. This isn't a liberal or conservative agenda.

When I talk to women, like the ones I spoke to earlier, when I hear folks' stories from across the country, and when I think about my own mom and how she made it all work, or my grandmother, nobody is looking at these issues through partisan lenses. We're not Democrats first or Republicans first, we are Americans first. And as Americans, it's up to us to protect and restore the ideals that made this country great.

And that is that in this country, no matter who you are, what you look like, where you come from, whether you are male or you are female, here in America, you can make it if you try. That's the promise of America. That's the future I'm going to fight for. I want you to fight there with me.

Thank you, everybody. God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:24 a.m. In his remarks, he referred to Lisbeth Avalos, student, and Nancy Carriuolo, president, Rhode Island College; Amalia M. Perez, daughter of Secretary of Labor Thomas E. Perez. He also referred to his niece Leslie Robinson, nephew Avery Robinson, and sister Maya Soetoro-Ng.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : Rhode Island College in Providence, RI.

*Locations:* Providence, RI.

*Names:* Avalos, Lisbeth; Carriuolo, Nancy; Cicilline, David N.; Harrington, Ann-Marie; Langevin, James R.; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha “Sasha”; Perez, Amalia M.; Perez, Thomas E.; Reed, John F.; Robinson, Avery; Robinson, Leslie; Snead, Cheryl W.; Soetoro-Ng, Maya; Whitehouse, Sheldon.

*Subjects:* Business and industry : Small businesses :: Promotion efforts; Children and youth : Childcare, affordability and costs; Civil rights : Wage equality; Economy, national : Economic concerns; Economy, national : Improvement; Education : Early childhood education programs; Employment and unemployment : Job training and assistance programs; Health and medical care : Health insurance, protection of coverage; Health and medical care : Women's health issues; Labor issues : Minimum wage; Labor issues : Workplace flexibility, improvement efforts; Labor, Department of : Secretary; Rhode Island : President's visit; Rhode Island : Rhode Island College in Providence.

*DCPD Number:* DCPD201400805.