

*Administration of Barack Obama, 2015*

## **Remarks Honoring Working Families Champions of Change"**

*April 16, 2015*

*The President.* Hey! Hello, everybody. Thank you so much. Thank you. Everybody, have a seat, have a seat.

Well, welcome to the White House, everybody. Picked a nice day to visit. [*Laughter*] And I want to thank Satya not only for the introduction, but also for the great work Microsoft is doing on behalf of working families. It is critical that we recognize that government has a role, but community, business, faith groups, civil society—we all have a part to play in making sure that everybody has got a fair shot in this society.

I want to thank all of our guests, including Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee, who is a long-time believer in these issues, from the great State of Texas.

Every so often, we bring together a group of ordinary people from across America who are making extraordinary contributions to their communities. They're not doing it with a lot of fanfare, but they are driven by a simple desire to make things better, one step at a time, and I suppose this is my bias, as somebody who worked in communities for quite some time, even before I went to law school: a strong belief that change happens not from the top down, but from the bottom up.

We say—we call these folks Champions of Change. You help us raise our own ambitions by showing us what is possible. You create models and templates for success in expanding opportunity or increasing equality or promoting diversity and tolerance. And as a consequence, we learn from your experiences, and we draw inspiration from what you've achieved. And days like this give us a chance to say thank you.

So today we honor 12 Champions who've helped make our Nation move forward in a particular area, and that is supporting working families in a 21st-century economy.

Now, in—thanks partly to the decisions that we made early in the worst financial crisis in our lifetimes, our businesses have now created more than 12 million new jobs over the past 5 years. Unemployment has fallen from a high of 10 percent down to 5½ percent. More kids are graduating. More folks are saving money at the pump because of increased fuel efficiency standards and greater energy production, doubling of clean energy production, reduction of carbon pollution.

More Americans know the security of health care: over 16 million people have health insurance. Our uninsured rate is the lowest that it's been perhaps since we started keeping the kinds of records we do about who's got health insurance and who doesn't. The recovery is reaching more Americans each and every day. More Microsoft stuff is sold, and more Patagonia coats are sold, and—[*laughter*]*—*which means that folks are interested in seeing how they can expand their businesses.

Now, the question we now face is, how do we make sure that this growth and the recovery benefits everybody and not just some? How do we make sure it's broad based and hence sustainable? Do we accept an economy where only a few of us do spectacularly well, or do we want an economy that generates rising incomes and chances for everybody who's willing to put in the effort?

And in case you weren't sure what the right answer was—[laughter]—I believe in the latter approach. I believe in broad-based economic growth with a growing, thriving middle class and ladders of opportunity for folks who are trying to get into the middle class. That's why we call it middle class economics: the idea that the country does best when everybody gets a fair shot and everybody is doing their fair share and everybody is playing by the same set of rules.

And I believe in this in my gut not simply because of ideas of basic fairness, not just because it's more consistent with our democracy, not only because, personally, I wouldn't be here had the country not given me opportunity and so I'm biased in that way, but because there's good, sound economic evidence that when everybody's incomes are going up and working people have more money in their pockets to spend, businesses do better. And we all prosper, and we all thrive, and we're less subject to the bubbles and the speculation, the ups and downs that can throw a modern economy off.

So a key part of middle class economics is helping working families feel more secure in a constantly changing economy. And we do that by bringing workplaces stuck into the last—in the last century into this century, and this is something that I've made a priority as President. Because our workplaces have changed, we have to change with them. So, for example, women now make up about half of America's workforce. More women are their family's main breadwinners than ever before. But our policies haven't completely caught up to that reality. We are still the only advanced country on Earth without paid leave. So when a baby arrives or—and I—there have been a lot of babies in the White House lately—[laughter]—see, we have another one coming right here, right in the front row. [Laughter]

So when a baby arrives or an aging parent gets sick, too often, workers have to make gut-wrenching choices about whether they can afford to be there when their families need them most. Too many women face unnecessary difficulties on the job, like the difficulty of being paid less than a man for doing the same work. That's a difficulty. Or being reprimanded or fired for taking too many bathroom breaks when you're pregnant. [Laughter] Clearly, that's a man making that decision, because they don't have a—5 pounds of kicks pressing down on their bladder. [Laughter] Or being forced to take leave when they're still being—perfectly capable of doing their work.

Women can't even depend, by law, on getting a paid day off to give birth. So yesterday I traveled to Charlotte for a conversation with working women about the issues they care about most, heard a lot about the wage gap and how it impacts families. And as I pointed out, ensuring equal pay for women is a no-brainer. There are some things that are really complicated. Satya and I had lunch before we came out here, and we were talking about some very complicated issues around sort of the future of technology. Paying women the same as men for doing the same job, that's not hard. [Laughter] That's not hard.

And it's not a women's issue. As I said yesterday, right now Michelle is not getting paid anything, and she points that out. [Laughter] But before we got to the White House, when she was working, I wanted her to get paid the same as a man did because if she was getting paid, that money accrued to our account. [Laughter] Just as her expenses accrued to our account. [Laughter] So this is a family issue. And obviously, as a dad, this is personal for me, because when Sasha and Malia start their careers, the idea that they'd be treated different as somebody's sons is unacceptable.

And in today's economy, having both parents in the workforce is an economic reality for many families. And yet, in 31 States, high-quality childcare costs are higher than in-State

college tuition. Down in North Carolina, where we were yesterday, average cost of childcare, \$16,000. If you're making 50, which is middle class, that's hard to manage. Mom and dads deserve to be able to focus on work when they're at work because they've got a safe place for their kids to learn and to grow and it doesn't cost them an arm and a leg.

So things like paid leave, paid sick days, childcare, equal pay—these are family issues, and these are economic issues. Sometimes in this town, they're treated as women's issues or side issues. We have to recognize them for what they are: They are national economic priorities. At a time when women are playing a bigger role in the economy than ever before, anything that holds women back holds back the entire country. When women succeed, America succeeds. That's my belief.

So that's why in my State of the Union Address I challenged Congress to take action on these issues. And I'm going to keep putting the pressure on, and I need you to join me, because America deserves a Congress that doesn't just talk about supporting working families, but actually supports working families.

And while we're waiting for Congress, a lot of Americans are saying, we're just going to go get stuff done on our own. You've got mayors and State legislators and Governors that are moving forward, passing paid leave, raising their State's minimum wage, ending pregnancy discrimination. And business leaders are joining them, because they know—as Satya said—that family-friendly policies are not frills, they are good for the bottom line.

So behind the scenes of all this progress are Champions of Change like the ones that we honor here today. Some have worked on these issues for years, far from the limelight, oftentimes against great odds.

Just to take—I'm just going to cite a few examples so you have a sense of who these people are. More than a decade ago, Netsy Firestein, where's Netsy? *[Laughter]* Raise your hand—there you go. Netsy led a campaign in California for paid family leave. People said it was a long shot. But in 2002, California became the first State in the Nation to guarantee that workers can take time off to care for family without losing their whole paycheck. And 13 years later, only two other States have done the same. But Netsy has proved that it's possible. California is growing; businesses are being created. Not only is it possible, it's the right thing to do. It's patriotic. We should learn from her example and get those numbers up. We need more States to join in.

Renee Stromme is here. Where's Renee? You're right there—there's Renee, right there. Renee lobbied North Dakota to require that employers extend reasonable accommodations to pregnant workers, like being able to sit instead of stand or take more frequent water breaks. And next week, she will watch that bill signed into law. Way to go, Renee.

A few years ago, ReShonda Young joined her family's business in Waterloo, Iowa. I've—I know Waterloo. *[Laughter]* First day of my campaign, or was it the second day? It was the second day. Second day of my campaign, I was in Waterloo, Iowa. It's a great town. *[Laughter]* I'm sorry, I got interrupted. *[Laughter]*

And so she discovered that the women were paid less than men for doing the same work. And so, as she puts it, she stuck her neck out, had some uncomfortable conversations with her old-school dad. And today, thanks to ReShonda, the family business pays workers fairly. And so ReShonda, right back here—and ReShonda, if I'm not mistaken, turnover has gone down, and employee loyalty is up since they made this change. And the business is doing well. Selling popcorn, right? *[Laughter]*

*Popcorn Heaven Founder ReShonda Young. [Inaudible]*

*The President. Yes.*

And as we just heard from Satya, Microsoft recently made history by announcing that not only does it already have family-friendly policies—sometimes, you hear the argument, well, it's big companies, we don't have to do the same thing—but now Microsoft says no, no, we want contractors to provide paid leave to employees if you want to do work with Microsoft. And for a company as big as Microsoft, that one change will mean greater security and peace of mind for thousands of families and, hopefully, inspire more companies to do the same for their workers.

But Microsoft is not the only company that is a change agent. We've got the CEO of Patagonia, Rose Marcario, who is here. Patagonia sounds like a cool company to work for, by the way. *[Laughter]* And you get—I assume you get a good discount on good, nice gear? *[Laughter]* But in addition to the nice gear, it offers its new mothers and new fathers 2 months of paid leave. And they have a childcare center on site at their corporate headquarters.

So employees can take paid time off to volunteer for a cause that they believe in. They can spend time at their children's school. People don't have to choose between paying the bills and seeing their kids shine in the class play. And that means that that worker will do whatever it takes to help the company succeed the next time out because they know that Rose and others at the very top are looking out for them.

So not only do we have grassroots activists as Champions of Change, we also have CEOs who are Champions of Change and small-business leaders who are Champions of Change. And I do hope that business leaders across the country follow their example. These companies are making the business case for supporting working families, showing that it's good for the bottom line.

The key to staying competitive in the global economy is going to be our workforce. And the government has a role to play in making sure that we're providing great education at the start, more affordable access to college. But family-friendly policies like these can attract brilliant, hard-working talent. We shouldn't have to choose between rewarding work and raising a family. And we've got to fight for that change. Right now there are too many talented people who are being sidelined, there are too many hard-working people being held back. We make it too hard to both work and have a family.

These Champions of Change have made a difference in this area. Netsy and Renee, they did not give up. ReShonda was willing to endure a little tension. *[Laughter]* Families across the country are better off because of their efforts.

So to all of you, these Champions on stage, we thank you for your commitment to American families. We thank you for your vision and your determination. And as long as I have the privilege of being President, I will be right there with you, shoulder to shoulder. And that goes for the advocates and business leaders and elected officials across the country who are, as we speak, working to give all of our citizens the chance to pursue their dreams. That's what this is all about. That's what I intend to keep fighting for. I could not be prouder of you. Give them a big round of applause once again.

God bless you. God bless America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:13 p.m. in the South Court Auditorium of the Dwight D. Eisenhower Executive Office Building. In his remarks, he referred to Satya Nadella, chief

executive officer, Microsoft Corp.; Netsy Firestein, executive director, Labor Project for Working Families; Renee Stromme, executive director, North Dakota Women's Network; and Levorn Robinson, father of Ms. Young.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : Working families, Champions of Change honorees.

*Locations:* Washington, DC.

*Names:* Firestein, Netsy; Jackson Lee. Sheila; Marcario, Rose ; Nadella, Satya; Obama, Malia; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha"; Robinson, Levorn; Stromme, Renee; Young, Reshonda.

*Subjects:* Business and industry : Corporate responsibility; Business and industry : Wage discrimination; Children and youth : Childcare, affordability and costs; Civil rights : Wage equality; Civil rights : Women's rights and gender equality; Economy, national : Improvement; Economy, national : Strengthening efforts; Education : Global competitiveness; Education : Postsecondary education :: Affordability; Labor issues : Minimum wage; Labor issues : Paid family and sick leave; Labor issues : Workplace flexibility, improvement efforts; White House Office : Champions of Change initiative.

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