

Administration of Barack Obama, 2015

Remarks on the "Let Girls Learn" Initiative

March 3, 2015

The President. . Thank you so much. Everybody, have a seat. Everybody, have a seat. Thank you, Charlene, for that terrific introduction, for everything that you've done to help those young girls in Liberia and all the young women I hope that are inspired here in the United States by seeing your example. We couldn't be prouder—except for your mom. She's prouder. *[Laughter]* Mom is here. So—and we know that you're just getting started, so you're going to do amazing things in the future.

I want to thank the Members of Congress who are here today, including Congresswoman Kay Granger, who's a leading advocate for development done right. Where is Kay? She was here just a second ago. She had to run back to vote on Homeland Security. So we really wanted to get her there on time. *[Laughter]*

I also want to mention Congresswoman Nita Lowey, who is also in the midst of this Department of Homeland Security vote, but has championed the cause of global education for over 20 years. We are looking forward to working with all of you on this initiative in the months ahead.

Now, my job is pretty easy. I am here to introduce her. *[Laughter]* An extraordinary woman—*[laughter]*—a passionate advocate for girls in the United States, around the globe—and in the Obama household. *[Laughter]* Michelle Obama. *[Applause]* Yay!

And in just a minute, she's going to announce a piece of this new initiative, which is sure to make Charlene and her fellow Peace Corps volunteers excited to get back to work. But before I turn it over to Michelle, I figure, you need a man's perspective. *[Laughter]* So I want to talk a little bit about why we all need to care about letting girls learn.

Now, I wish I could just say, because they've got the same potential as boys. It's pretty straightforward, and we could just stop there. This really should not be complicated. Wherever they live, whoever they are, every girl on this planet has value. Every girl on this planet deserves to be treated with dignity and equality. And that includes the chance to develop her mind and her talents and to live a life of her own choosing, to chart her own destiny. That may be obvious to us, but we know it's not obvious to everyone. Sixty-two million girls around the world who should be in school are not. That's not by accident. It's the direct result of barriers, large and small, that stand in the way of girls who want to learn.

In some cases, their families can't afford the school fees. In some cases, the only local school doesn't have a girls' restroom. Maybe the risk of being hurt or kidnapped or killed by men who will do anything to stop girls from learning is just too great. Maybe girls aren't in school because they're expected to get married and become mothers while they're still teens or even earlier. Even today, in too many parts of the world, girls are valued more for their bodies than for their minds. That's not just antiquated. It's not just a bad strategy for any country that's serious about growing their economy or promoting stability. It is just plain wrong. And we have to do more to stop it.

Now, I'm proud to say that the United States already does a great deal to support girls' education around the world. But what we do we tend to do quietly. It doesn't get a lot of publicity. And what we determined—what she determined—*[laughter]*.

The First Lady. We all determined.

The President. What we all determined is that we've got to take this work to the next level and tie all our different programs together in a single, coordinated strategy. And that's what this initiative is about.

Our diplomats and development experts are hard at work. We're making it clear to any country that's our partner or wants to be our partner that they need to get serious about increasing the number of girls in school. We are looking for every opportunity to put our partnerships with NGOs and businesses and foundations to work every day on behalf of girls everywhere. So this will be, yes, a focus of the First Lady's, but it's also going to be a focus of the President of the United States. And we expect results, because this matters to all of us.

And just to be clear, I come to this issue as a concerned citizen, but also as the leader of the world's largest economy and the Commander of—in Chief of the world's most powerful military. And I'm convinced that a world in which girls are educated is a safer, more stable, more prosperous place.

And the evidence is compelling. We know that when girls are educated, they're more likely to delay marriage. Their future children, as a consequence, are more likely to be healthy and better nourished. Their future wages increase, which, in turn, strengthens the security of their family. And national growth gets a boost as well.

From a political standpoint and a security standpoint, places where women and girls are treated as full and equal citizens tend to be more stable, tend to be more democratic. So this is not just a humanitarian issue, this is an economic issue, and it is a security issue. And that's why it has to be a foreign policy priority.

Now, I will confess, I also come to this as the father of two fabulous, extraordinary, awesome young women. [Laughter] They've got a lot to offer to the world. And what we know is, is that everywhere, there are girls just like Malia and Sasha. They're funny, and they're caring, and they're inquisitive, and they're strong, and their heads are buzzing with ideas. And they're constantly changing their minds about what they're going to do when they grow up because there are just so many things they could be doing and want to do and want to explore.

What an extraordinary privilege it is to be the father of those two girls, to watch them learn and grow and become strong and capable women. And I want to make sure that no girl out there is denied her chance to be a strong, capable woman—woman with the resources that she needs to succeed, that no girl is prevented from making her unique contributions to the world. Every child is precious. Every girl is precious. Every girl deserves an education.

And that's the message that we want to deliver here today and we're going to sustain over the next 2 years and beyond: Let girls learn.

Now, to say more about why and how we're going to do this—[laughter]—let me step aside for a very strong and capable woman: the First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama. [Laughter] Thank you. Yay! [Laughter]

The First Lady. Thank you all so much. Thank you, guys. Thank you.

President Obama. Yay!

The First Lady. Yay! [Laughter] Well, you guys, thank you. We are excited. This is good stuff. And I want to thank Barack Obama for that—[laughter]—for that wonderful introduction. He doesn't always get to introduce me a lot, so I like to watch him say good things

about me. *[Laughter]* It's a really nice thing. But as you can hear from his passion, I'm just so grateful that he is such a champion for our girls—all our girls—not just for Malia and Sasha, but for every girl. And he does it every day as President, and he does it even better as a father. And I am proud of him.

I also want to recognize Ambassador Rice and Representatives Granger and Lowey, who had to leave; Valerie Jarrett for her tremendous leadership on this issue. I want to also thank Charlene for her great work, just an inspiring young person doing terrific things. Just an example of why this initiative is so important, all the outstanding work she's doing to give girls worldwide the education they deserve.

And I want to thank all of you for the work that you all are doing. For years, you all have been working at the grassroots, one family, one community, one girl at a time. And you've been driven all along by a fundamental belief about how change really happens, a belief that Barack and I share: that true change doesn't happen from the top down, it happens from the bottom up

And as I've traveled the world over the past 6 years, I've seen time and again how our young people—particularly our girls—are so often pushed to the very bottom of their societies. Everywhere I go, I meet these girls, and they are so fiercely intelligent and hungry to make something of themselves. These girls are our change makers, our future doctors and teachers and entrepreneurs. They're our dreamers and our visionaries who could change the world as we know it.

Just take the example of Malala Yousafzai. All it takes is 30 seconds in a room with this young woman to realize what a blessing she is to our world. And Malala would be the first to tell you that she is not unique, that there are millions of girls around the world just like her. These girls know they have the spark of something extraordinary inside of them, but too often, that spark is snuffed out by circumstances of their birth or the norms of their communities.

And that's where this issue becomes personal for me and for Barack, because I see myself in these girls. I see our daughters in these girls. And like all of you, I just can't walk away from them. Like you, I can't just sit back and accept the barriers that keep them from realizing their promise. So I know that I want to use my time and my platform as First Lady and beyond to make a real impact on this issue. I want to lift up the extraordinary work all of you have been doing long before I came to this issue, and I want to bring new resources and new partners to this effort.

And in recent years, I've worked with my staff, and we've consulted with so many of you, to ask how I can be most helpful. And folks from CARE and Brookings, the Global Partnership for Education, the National Peace Corps Association, and so many others—you guys have stepped up. And time and again, you have told me that whether—whatever these obstacles these girls face—whether it's school fees or violence or cultural beliefs that girls simply aren't worthy of an education—you've said that these problems will not be fixed from on high, that these are community challenges that call for community solutions.

And that made a lot of sense to me, and it made a lot of sense to my husband, because that's the kind of work we did long before we came to the White House, back when Barack was a community organizer and I was running a little nonprofit AmeriCorps program in Chicago.

So with the help of many of you in this room, and in collaboration with the Peace Corps, I am thrilled to announce that as part of "Let Girls Learn," we're going to be launching a new community-focused girls' education initiative across the globe. This effort will draw on the

talent and energy of the nearly 7,000 Peace Corps volunteers serving in more than 60 countries.

Through this effort, Peace Corps will be supporting hundreds of new community projects to help girls go to school and stay in school, everything from after-school mentoring to girls' leadership camps, to entrepreneurial projects like Bosh Bosh that Charlene talked about, and many more.

And I want to emphasize that these programs will be community generated and community led. They'll be based on solutions devised by local leaders, families and, yes, even the girls themselves. And you can learn more about these projects and how to support these efforts at letgirlslearn.peacecorps.gov.

As part of this effort, the Peace Corps is also going to be eventually training all of its volunteers about gender and girls' education. So even volunteers who are focusing on other issues like health care or agriculture can also help support girls' education on the ground.

In other words, Peace Corps will soon be bringing new expertise and leadership on girls' education into every single community they serve. So while the focus of this effort will be local, because of this work, the scope will be global and the impact will truly be generational.

I mean, if you think about what the Peace Corps means to so many, just think about the many leaders in developing countries—businesswomen, politicians, activists—who can trace their journey back to a Peace Corps volunteer who inspired them and invested in them. And think about the kind of daughters these leaders are now raising. Think about all the other women and girls these leaders are inspiring today. That's the kind of impact that this initiative can have.

And I am so excited to kick this effort off with a trip later this month to Japan and Cambodia. I'll be starting with a visit with Mrs. Akie Abe, the wife of Japan's Prime Minister, who also shares our passion for girls' education and is eager to partner with us in this work. I'll also be meeting with our Ambassador to Japan, Caroline Kennedy, who just happens to be the daughter of the President who started the Peace Corps. And in Cambodia, I'll be meeting with Peace Corps volunteers and visiting a school where community-driven solutions are changing girls' lives.

But while the focus of this work is international, I just want to be clear that for me, "Let Girls Learn" isn't just about improving girls' education abroad. It's also about reminding our young people of the hunger they should be feeling for their own education here at home.

You see, through "Let Girls Learn," I hope that more of our girls—and our boys—here in the U.S. will learn about the sacrifices girls worldwide are making to get their education, how they're pushing forward in the face of poverty and violence, death threats, and so many other horrors. I want our young people to be awed by these girls. But more importantly, I want them to be inspired and motivated by these girls.

I want our kids to realize that while their own school may be far from perfect—and believe you me, this guy here is working hard to fix that—they still have an obligation to show up every day to that classroom and learn as much as they can. I want our kids to understand the transformative power of education. That's something that Barack and I understand from our own experiences. That's our life story: how a good education can lift you from the most humble circumstances into a life you never could have imagined.

And finally, I want our kids in this country to be citizens of the world. I want them to connect with and learn from kids in every corner of the globe.

That's why, when I travel abroad, I use all kinds of social media and technology to reach back here to young people at home. And I'm going to be doing so again during my trip to Asia, working with PBS and Girls Rising and Girl Scouts and—yay!—[*laughter*—so many other great partners because I want our young people to learn about the world and dream of being Peace Corps volunteers and diplomats and international business leaders and more. I want all our young people here in the U.S. and around the globe to dream big dreams, as my husband always says, dream big dreams for themselves. I want them to have big, ambitious futures.

And I know that's possible, no matter what obstacles they face, because I've seen it again and again in the most unlikely places. The Martin Luther King Girls Secondary School, which I visited last year in Senegal, is a wonderful example. The school was concrete floor classrooms, rooms containing little more than desks and a few faded posters. But, oh, those girls, man, they were fierce, ambitious, confident. They had serious dreams for their future.

One of the girls wrote a poem about those dreams. And she said it was about a world free from pollution and global warming, a world where violence and wars would be replaced by mutual acceptance and tolerance and love. The poem ended with this line: She said, "I have a dream that one day, the Martin Luther King Girls School of Dakar, my school, will be as prestigious as Harvard and Princeton Universities." [*Laughter*] Yes.

So we owe these girls, and girls like them across the globe, an education worthy of those dreams. So I am so proud to join this movement. I'm honored to learn more from all of you. I am inspired by you. And I'm excited to roll up my sleeves and work hard with you over the next few years and beyond. So let's get to work.

Thank you all.

President Obama. Yay! Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:02 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Charlene Espinoza, volunteer, U.S. Peace Corps. The First Lady referred to National Security Adviser Susan E. Rice; and Nobel Prize winner and education activist Malala Yousafzai.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : "Let Girls Learn" initiative.

Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Espinoza, Charlene; Granger, Kay; Lowey, Nita M.; Obama, Malia; Obama; Obama, Michelle; Obama, Natasha "Sasha".

Subjects: Civil rights : Women's rights and gender equality; Developing countries : Economic growth and development; Foreign policy, U.S. : Democratization; Foreign policy, U.S. : Women and girls, education status, strengthening efforts; Homeland Security, Department of : Funding; Peace Corps, U.S.; Women and girls : "Let Girls Learn" initiative, White House.

DCPD Number: DCPD201500146.