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Barack Obama

Address at the United State of Women Summit

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Can you please give it up again for Mikaila [Ulmer]. What an amazing young lady. I will be back on the job market in seven months, so I hope she is hiring.

I was just told backstage, when she was asked to introduce me, there were some folks who were organizing this amazing event that said, is she going to feel a little nervous speaking in front of 5,000 people? And so they asked her and she said, oh, no, I just spoke to 11,000 last week. So we were looking backstage -- she was on her tippy-toes with her entrepreneurial self.

So I know you're really here to see Michelle. Or Oprah. Actually, they're together, so you're here to see both of them. I cannot compete with them. But I did want to stop by and make one thing very clear -- I may be a little grayer than I was eight years ago, but this is what a feminist looks like. Of course, in my household there's no choice.



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It is great to be with so many friends. One of my first acts as President was to establish the White House Council on Women and Girls, led by Tina Tchen and Valerie Jarrett, and they've worked with a lot of you very closely. We're so appreciative of those of you who helped not just make this event possible, but have guided a lot of our thinking across our Administration.

We've got some outstanding members of Congress -- of course including my dear friend and one of the finest Speakers we've ever had, and hope to soon have again, Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi. And I want to thank all of you who worked so hard to make this event happen. Because this is an opportunity to reflect on how far we've come, and why it is we've got to keep going.

It was almost 100 years ago that Alice Paul and her fellow suffragists were arrested for picketing outside the White House for the right to vote. Today, women make up more than half of the electorate. For the first time in history, a woman is a major party's presumptive presidential nominee. And we are here, at the first-ever White House Summit on the United State of Women.

Because of all of you, over the past seven years, we have significantly improved the lives of women and girls not just here at home, but around the world. And I could not be prouder of what we've accomplished. I want to talk about why it matters, and why we've got to do more.

Some of you may know that on Friday, my older daughter Malia graduated from high school. And I sat in the back and wore dark glasses. And only cried once, but it was -- I made this weird sound because I was choking back -- and people looked at me, people sitting in front of us turned back. And then I suppressed it. But I was thinking about how she is graduating at this extraordinary time for women in America.

The year I was born, in 1961, women made up less than 40 percent of college students. Today, you earn almost 60 percent of college degrees, make up roughly half of the workforce. Back then, the pill was still illegal in some states. And today, thanks to the Affordable Care Act, birth control is free. In the old days, women actually needed a husband to open a credit card. Today, more women are choosing to be single -- and all Americans are able to marry whoever they love.



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Fifty-four years ago, Katherine Johnson did the behind-the-scenes math to put a man in orbit. Today, almost 60 women have blasted into space themselves. When I was growing up, fewer than 300,000 girls played high school sports. Today, because of Title IX, more than 3 million girls are on the field. Women are leading America at every level of society, from Hollywood to Silicon Valley, from the c-suite to the federal bench to the Federal Reserve.

And that is progress. It's real and we have to celebrate it, but we also have to remember that progress is not inevitable. It's the result of decades of slow, tireless, often frustrating and unheralded work by people like Dorothy Pittman-Hughes and Gloria Steinem, who is here today -- people who opened our eyes to the discrimination, both subtle and overt, that women face. People like Pauli Murray and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who insisted on equal justice under the law. People like Wilma Mankiller and Patsy Mink, who redefined what leadership looks like. And, yes, people like Hillary Clinton who've raised the expectations of our daughters -- and our sons -- for what is possible.

In other words, our progress has been the result of countless ordinary women and men whose names will never be written into the history books or chiseled on monuments, but who dedicated their lives to ensuring that America lives up to its promise of liberty and justice for all.

What's also true is, is that despite all that incredible progress, we are living in a time of great change, a time where people are economically anxious. Unemployment has dropped below five percent. Wages are growing again. But while we've made progress in narrowing the gap between rich and poor, it is still too big and the trend lines, because of globalization and automation, are still upon us.

You hear politicians peddle the fiction that blocking immigrants or cutting off trade or "big government" are all to blame, but we know what the causes are. The rise of global competition, the weakening of the labor movement and participation in unions, the automation of more jobs, the race of technology -- all these trends have the potential of leaving workers behind. They let a few at the top do even better. And we see some of those divisions not just between groups, but within groups. There are women who have never had more opportunity, but there are a lot of women who are still stuck in the toughest of economic circumstances.



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There is an important reason that so many working families feel like the system is rigged, and it's because the economy hasn't caught up to some of the enormous changes that have transformed America over the past 50 years. Those days when the average family was a dad who went to work every day and a mom who stayed at home and did all the unpaid labor -- that's not what our economy looks like anymore. Household and work arrangements come in all shapes and all combinations, and yet, our workplace policies still look like they're straight out of Mad Men.

I will tell you, a lot of the problems that cross my desk are really hard to solve. If they end up on my desk, it's because other people couldn't solve them. But this issue of how we support working families, the policies that we could put in place that would make a meaningful difference, here we actually have solutions right in front of us. Just as we know what the problems are, we know what some of the solutions are.

We need equal pay for equal work. We need paid family and sick leave. We need affordable child care. We've got to raise the minimum wage. If we're truly a nation of family values, we wouldn't put up with the fact that many women can't even get a paid day off to give birth. We should guarantee paid maternity leave and paid paternity leave, too. That's how you value families. That's how employers retain great workers. And it's good for women -- because when childcare falls disproportionately on mothers, as it often does, it makes it that much harder to advance in their careers.

So we've got to retool our system so that modern families and modern businesses can thrive. And let me be clear, this is not about big government, or expanding some fictional welfare-and-food-stamp state, the 47 percent mooching off the government. It is accounting for the realities of how people live now, today -- the necessities of a 21st century economy.

We've gotten some things done through executive actions. When we had a cooperative Congress, we got a whole lot more done. So far, a lot of Republicans in Congress have been unwilling to act on these agenda items that I just mentioned. But we just keep on looking for ways to get stuff done. They keep on waiting for this whole lame duck thing to happen. Let me tell you, it will happen as soon as I've elected a really good successor to carry on our policies. But until then, we're working pretty hard.



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But we've made progress. The first bill I signed into law was the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act. And I know some of you have seen Lilly here today. We passed the Affordable Care Act to give more Americans the security of health care coverage so that not only people without health insurance could finally get it, but people who had health insurance were treated fairly, so that, for example, no insurer could charge you more just for being a woman. Dry cleaners are next. Valerie, we need to work on that, don't we? Those little blouses of yours -- I don't know why they charge so much.

So my Administration has taken what action that we can. And we've strengthened equal pay protections and paid sick leave for federal contractors, enhanced work flexibility for all federal employees, raised the minimum wage for federal contract workers, extended overtime-pay protections to over four million workers across the country. We try to set a good example providing my staff with 12 weeks of paid parental leave. And by the way, we've been having a lot of babies -- I've noticed -- in the White House. Which I'm happy about -- I love babies. They bring them into the Oval Office and they make me feel good.

This is the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do. And the great news is, we're not the only ones doing it. You've got cities and states and businesses across the country that are adjusting to meet the needs of today's workers. In fact, today we can announce that 28 of America's leading businesses are committed to closing the gender pay gap. We should encourage more businesses to join them. We should shop and frequent those companies that are doing the right thing because the truth is, most folks agree with each other on this. We don't have to have Congress agree with us -- we can go ahead and make progress without waiting for them. They'll catch up eventually. They're usually a lagging indicator on these issues.

If we really want workplace policies that work for everybody, I will say, though, it would help if we had more women in Congress. It would help if we had more women in the corner suite. I have a corner suite, by the way. Just making that connection for you.

If we are going to truly change our policies and our politics, then we're also going to have to change something else, though. We're going to have to be honest with ourselves. We're going to have to change something else. We're going to have to change the way we see ourselves.



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And this is happening already, but I want us to be more intentional about it. I know I'm preaching to the choir here, but we're still boxed in by stereotypes about how men and women should behave.

As the great Shirley Chisholm once said, "The emotional, sexual, and psychological stereotyping of females begin when the doctor says, 'It's a girl.'" And that has consequences for all of us, whether we're men or women, black, white, gay, straight, transgender or otherwise.

We need to keep changing the attitude that raises our girls to be demure, and our boys to be assertive; that criticizes our daughters for speaking out, and our sons for shedding a tear.

We need to change the attitude that punishes women for their sexuality but gives men a pat on the back for theirs. We need to change an Internet where women are routinely harassed and threatened when they go online.

We need to keep changing the attitude that congratulates men for changing a diaper, stigmatizes full-time dads, penalizes working moms.

We need to keep changing the attitude that prioritizes being confident, competitive, and ambitious in the workplace -- unless you're a woman.

We need to keep changing a culture that shines a particularly unforgiving light on women and girls of color. About how they look, about how they feel, about what they should or should not do. Michelle will talk about this in a little bit. She's talked about this. Despite her extraordinary achievements and success, the fact that she is -- she is an American original, she is unique, but she still had times where she's had doubts, where she's had to worry whether she was acting the right way or looking the right way, or whether she was being too assertive or too angry. You remember that?

So we've been working to change these stereotypes. That's why we're encouraging more girls to pursue their love for science, and technology, and engineering, and math. That's why we've highlighted women trailblazers, and encouraged media to depict more examples of women in STEM -- because it's hard to be what you can't see.



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It's why we've launched a movement of women and men to fight campus sexual assault -- because it's on all of us to stop it.

It's why we're changing the culture in our military, from the top down, to take this issue seriously. It's why we're working with communities, and businesses, and foundations to rethink workplace policies, and fund women entrepreneurs, and expand female leadership, and create more opportunities for girls and women of color -- everybody has a role to play in America.

And even as we make progress at home, we look abroad and we know that any country that oppresses half the population -- that doesn't let them go to school or work, and does not give them control over their own bodies -- that's a society that will not work over the long term. It will not reach its potential. And this is a national security issue. As Commander-in-Chief, I've seen how the ideology that leads Boko Haram to kidnap schoolgirls, and leads ISIL to enslave and rape women is the same ideology that leads to instability, and violence, and terrorism. There's a connection there.

So we need to be clear about what we're about, what we stand for. Because organizations and ideologies that are repressive and cultivate violence and anger -- those are -- there's a running thread, and it's dangerous, and poses a threat to pluralism and tolerance and openness.

So I've made advancing gender equality a foreign policy priority. And we've implemented a comprehensive strategy to end gender-based violence around the world, from prevention, to treating survivors, to bringing perpetrators to justice. And we're helping to remove barriers that prevent women from participating fully in their societies. We're empowering the next generation of women by investing in adolescent girls and advancing the Let Girls Learn initiative to get 62 million girls into schools.

This is the future that we're building, one where all of us here at home and around the world are free to live out our dreams. Where our children's aspirations aren't segregated into pink and blue. Where working families don't have to choose between taking care of a loved one and earning a paycheck. Where women and girls, no matter where they live, are free from fear of violence -- including gun violence.



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Where hatred against women, or hatred against the LGBT community, that doesn't neatly fit into some predetermined notion of how people should be or how they love -- where that is no longer the operative rule in any society. A future where women lead half our businesses, make up half of Congress. Where our girls know they can hold any job, and run any company, and compete on any field, and perform on any stage, and science the heck out of any challenge. That's the future we're trying to build.

And the good news is this is the future my daughters' generation already believes in. They believe every door is open to them. They're not engaging in any sort of self-censorship. They're not going to hold themselves back. It couldn't occur to them that they couldn't rise to the top of whatever field they choose. It wouldn't occur to them not to accept all people, no matter how they identify or who they love. They think discrimination is for losers. They think it's weird that we haven't already had a woman President. They expect the world to catch up to them.

They expect the world to catch up to them, and I have no doubt that we will. It will take leadership. It will take the right policies. It's going to take creating more opportunities. It requires us telling each other and our children the right stories -- because the stories we tell matter.

We admire the men who shaped our country, and rightfully so, the men we see as heroes -- from Alexander Hamilton to Muhammad Ali -- for their confidence and their courage in believing they could change our nation, this idea of self-creation, that there's nothing holding us back. In them, we see America itself, constantly reinventing itself, fearless, looking out over the horizon at the next frontier.

But our country is not just all about the Benjamins -- it's about the Tubmans, too. We need all our young people to know that Clara Barton and Lucretia Mott and Sojourner Truth and Eleanor Roosevelt and Dorothy Height, those aren't just for Women's History Month. They're the authors of our history, women who shaped their destiny. They need to know that.

A woman did not magically appear on a space shuttle. It took Sally Ride's relentless commitment, Mae Jemison's boundless courage to shatter that glass ceiling. A group of California farm workers -- they weren't just handed their rights. It took Dolores Huerta organizing and mobilizing, fighting for the dignity and justice they deserved.



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Rosa Parks wasn't simply a tired seamstress who sat down by accident. She was a civil rights leader with the eye of a strategist and the heart of a warrior. She had the confidence to board on that bus, the courage to risk her own life and liberty for the sake of ours. History did not fall into her lap -- she seized that moral arc and she bent it with her bare hands in the direction of justice.

That's the story that's still being written, today, by our modern-day heroes like Nancy Pelosi or Sonia Sotomayor or Billie Jean King or Laverne Cox or Sheryl Sandberg or Oprah Winfrey or Mikaila Ulmer or Michelle Obama -- the countless ordinary people every day who are bringing us closer to our highest ideals. That's the story we're going to keep on telling, so our girls see that they, too, are America -- confident and courageous and, in the words of Audre Lord, "deliberate and afraid of nothing."

That's the country we love, and I've never been optimistic -- as optimistic as I am now that we're going to create a country where everybody, no matter who they are or what they look like or where they come from or who they love, can make of their lives what they will. And together, we can build a world that's more just and more prosperous and more free. That's a job for all of us.

God bless you.

God bless the United States of America.

Thank you.