

Remarks
Ambassador Michelle D. Gavin
Women's Dialogue – Inspiring Legacy Summit
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As Prepared for Delivery

Welcome

It is a distinct honor and a true pleasure to join you today, and I would particularly like to thank Kefentse for her gracious invitation.

The work of Women's Dialogue and the issues you address with and for women are very close to my heart, so I genuinely thank you for asking me to participate.

Making Responsible Choices

Today, on International Women's Day, it is entirely appropriate to celebrate the achievements of successful women – and I intend to do some of that this morning.

Here in Botswana, a country with an extraordinary record of success over almost two generations that is the envy of the developing world, we know that the country's success was built brick by brick by men and women. And while many of those women toiled out of the public eye, over the past 20 years or so, women have emerged in prominent public roles in Botswana as leaders and shapers of their communities.

It is also natural, on this day in particular, to remind ourselves of the serious challenges that women have faced in the past, and still confront today in every corner of the world. We know that Botswana's heroines have fought against discrimination – and triumphed. And we know that very real challenges remain, and that women lag behind men in access to land, credit, and decent jobs. They face greater health challenges, and they face a steady wave of violence. And we'll talk about some of the grim statistics that reflect these realities.

But I hope that today, we will do more than take stock of where we stand. I hope that we will really challenge ourselves to think about how our own behavior, our own choices -- the large and small ones that we make every day in our family life, in our workplace, and in our communities -- can either support and nurture the talents and dreams of the girls and women around us, or stifle and sideline them.

Because you don't have to go looking for opportunities to be discriminatory, or abusive, to be a part of the problem that still exists. You can simply be passive. You can look the other way when a young woman needs help. You can be too busy to listen to a girl talk about her ambitions. You can be too polite to speak up when someone is bullying, or being demeaning, to women and girls. You can decide that it's none of your business when you see instances of violence, or exploitation of girls. Those are choices NOT to act, and they make a big difference.

Or, you can make the deliberate choice to keep building a better future for our children. And that takes energy and courage and frankly, a lot of deliberate effort in the midst of our busy lives.

Examples of Amazing Women

Let's start with a bit of celebrating, because the list of amazing Botswana women is long, and it continues to grow.

From the wife of the country's first President who along with her husband stood up for her and her family's rights at a pivotal point in Botswana's history,
to the country's first female cabinet member,
to the first female Speaker of the National Assembly,
to the first female judge,
to a paramount chief,
to the first woman to publicly declare her HIV status,
to the Attorney General, Ministers and former Ministers,
to women opening doors of entrepreneurship and economic opportunity,
to women leading the fight against diseases in Botswana,
to Botswana's first gold medalist – for whom, incidentally, we have high hopes in London in the next few months.

Amazing women all, and eminently deserving of the highest regard in their own rights – but more importantly deserving of honor for the doors they have opened for other women across the land.

They disregarded the doubters. They rose above the undermining comments, the condescension, and the casually dismissive remarks that every successful woman has encountered at some point –and they focused instead on the kind of person they wanted to be, and on the contribution they wanted to make, to their community, to their country, and to the world. I met an extraordinary woman last year who I suspect few in this room know.

A humble woman, but in a deep way she embodies, in my view, not only what it means to face challenges and succeed, but more importantly in what it means to give back to her community.

I met her because she was thrust briefly into the bright light of international press and political attention – but I came to learn she was famous in her own small community long before she sold a few servings of chicken and chips to First Lady Michelle Obama and her family.

Lydia Kopong owns and operates the Borakanelo Restaurant in Mochudi – that is where the First Lady stopped in for a bit of take away as her family headed for a private overnight trip to Madikwe.

I wasn't there, but I can only imagine the scene as all the Botswana police cars and big black American SUVs and secret service officers in dark glasses and local and international press with lights and cameras descended on Lydia's restaurant. Facing that onslaught alone makes Lydia an amazing woman in my book.

But her story is much deeper. As a woman with a dream to operate a small business, Lydia, with her family firmly at her side, chased that dream.

Beyond building successful restaurant over the years, her business is now a thriving center of activity because Lydia saw needs in her community and filled them.

She offers the restaurant as a regular meeting spot for a group of retired women from around Mochudi, where they plan activities to stay engaged in and to benefit the community.

She is also a giving person. When I visited Lydia last year, she pointed out a mentally disabled gentleman whose family is no longer able to care for him – Lydia feeds him on a regular basis.

Granted, Lydia fed the wife and children of President Obama – which brought a pretty bright spotlight on her – but she is special in so many other ways that speak to us all. She shows us the possible, and how we can also answer the call of lending a helping hand.

I was so struck by her dignity, her decency, and the example she sets in her community.

Not only can we achieve our own dreams – but we can give back, we can choose to take action to build a better future for those around us as well.

Making the Wrong Choices

But Botswana's future can only be assured if women are equal partners in shaping it. No society anywhere can prosper if it neglects half the population. Let us be honest: some of the numbers are worrying. The devastating impact of HIV in this country is even more devastating to women.

More women are infected than men, and they face more complications related to the infection, such as cervical cancer. In many ways, women also have less control over their own ability to avoid infection.

Maternal mortality remains stubbornly high.

Teen pregnancy is a growing and worrying trend.

I also want to highlight something that I know will come up later in the day – and that is gender based violence.

There is nothing more destructive and disempowering for women than physical and sexual violence inflicted upon them, often by husbands or trusted authority figures.

Not only wrong at the deepest human level, physical and sexual violence prevents women from reaching their full potential due to the ongoing psychological effects: depression, low self-esteem, fear for personal safety, and simple shame.

According to a 2009 United Nations report, there were nearly 1,600 rapes in Botswana in 2007 – a 50% increase over the previous 12 years.

Between 2004 and 2007, the rate of murder against women doubled, and by 2007, one woman was murdered every three to four days.

Three out of five women in Botswana have been subjected to gender based violence.

Although the 2007 Domestic Violence Law was a step forward, women are still reluctant to report gender violence for a variety of reasons – reluctance to disclose family problems to outsiders, fear of being blamed for the violence or rape, fear of further violence on discovery that they have reported the crime, and fear of loss of economic support.

And I must tell you, I've made a point of trying to meet with young people wherever I travel in Botswana, and I have heard directly from girls as young as 10 about the constant pressure they feel to accept sexual exploitation in exchange for some reward – a few pula, or maybe some cell phone minutes.

They come to believe that what is valuable and important about them is simply how attractive they are to others.

They confuse the new clothes and fancy gadgets that result from these transactions with success – with realizing their dreams. It is heartbreaking, and as a mother, it makes me feel sick to my stomach when I hear these children – and that's what they are – talking so matter-of-factly about this constant feature of their lives.

If we want this to change, we cannot just passively disapprove. We must act to build a better future. And nowhere is this more critical than in cases of gender based violence and cases of defilement. We must speak up – women and men – when we suspect someone in our midst is being harmed. These are crimes.

Let me state clearly, **gender based violence in Botswana presents a major hurdle to the advancement of this society – and it will remain so until communities and the legal system take the necessary actions to stop it.**

I would like to touch on one more challenge that women face in Botswana – and that is political representation.

Thanks to many strong and dedicated women, this is ground that has been worked to some degree successfully – but there is much work left before Botswana can reap the vital harvest of full and equal representation for women.

It is particularly important that we highlight this message for young girls – while we see women leading in many sectors, they are still conspicuously under-represented in elected office – and according to recent figures women are increasingly **less** represented in elected office. **That is the wrong trend.**

It is not just about more women running for office or positions of leadership – it is about women helping other women succeed in this regard. Do not misunderstand me – I do not suggest this in any way to be discriminatory towards men, simply as a way to level a playing field that is today not so level.

Often you come to an event like this and leave inspired but wonder what can I do to make a difference – you can start by encouraging qualified women to run for elected office, supporting woman candidates whose positions correspond to your views, and by encouraging young girls to aspire to positions of leadership.

USG Activities

One of our key goals at the Embassy is promoting the leadership role of young people in their communities, and in ensuring they can live and learn safely.

In one program, we were fortunate to link up with Bogolo Kenewendo who, was selected last year to join First Lady Michelle Obama in South Africa for the Young African Women's Leadership Forum.

Soon after her return from South Africa, Bogolo initiated the "Molaya Kgosi" mentorship program in which she linked successful women from various walks of life with young women who were actively working to advance but who had expressed a desire for more direction and guidance. More importantly, she has now taken that initial group of young women being mentored and started a program where they go into schools to mentor younger secondary school students – a marvelous example of what has been termed "paying it forward" – the one-time beneficiary becoming the benefactor.

We also encourage women to take their rightful place in the economy. No one knows this better than Boitumelo Mthupa who will lead a session later today. As the Director of The Business Place, she sees every day the opportunities that exist for women but also the challenges that get in the way.

In an effort to link interested women entrepreneurs with others around the region, Boitumelo has begun work on establishing a chapter of the African Women's Entrepreneurial Program in Botswana.

This is a U.S. Government supported program to assist women entrepreneurs to gain strength and skills from each other. I would like to commend Boitumelo for the substantial success she has enjoyed in developing entrepreneurial spirit and skills for women and men in Botswana.

The lion's share of U.S. Government assistance to Botswana is focused on health, and our activities involving women are extensive, ranging from working on HIV prevention with vulnerable populations like commercial sex workers, to a substantial program to improve the livelihoods of households for vulnerable adolescents, especially girls and vulnerable women.

Our engagement in addressing gender violence is growing. Peace Corps Volunteers across the country are working effectively with organizations like Women Against Rape in Maun and The Women's Shelter in Molepolole to build the capacity of those organizations to respond to gender based violence.

We are working with Stepping Stones International in Mochudi in a program to support survivors of gender based violence and to strengthen adolescent girls' empowerment. The program will also address the harmful attitudes and behaviors that perpetuate gender based violence against women and girls.

Wrap-up

As the mother of a young daughter, I know what it is to look at a girl full of potential – a girl who is bright and kind and joyful – and to worry about what she might encounter in a world where women still face discrimination, from the glaringly obvious to the subtle and insidious.

They are issues close to the heart of the Secretary of State I serve, Secretary Hilary Rodham Clinton, one of the most powerful, admired, and respected women in the world.

And they are close to the heart of the President I represent, a President who wants to help build a world where his own daughters will thrive and flourish, where they will have the space and opportunity to make their own marks.

One thing that we have learned in our work to reach out to young people throughout Botswana and the rest of the region is that there is a strong sense of a generation gap between youth and the adults around them –

their parents and community leaders. Many young people tell us a lack of parental care, interest, and engagement and even teacher abuse are factors contributing to their problems.

Youth also say they do not trust that they will be taken seriously if they present their issues to elders.

We should all find this troubling. I challenge myself and us all not to lose sight of the undeniable fact and inevitable reality that today's youth are tomorrow's leaders. It's a cliché because it's inescapably true.

Young people – and certainly young girls and women – need more than food, clothing, and shelter. They need adults who listen to them, who help them think through the kind of person they want to be, and to help them make the choices that will allow them to realize that vision. They need adults who respect them as future leaders, and protect and advise them.

I am reminded of the remarks made by First Lady Michelle Obama last June when she spoke to a group of young women at the Women's Leadership Luncheon in Gaborone – some of you may have been there. She said,

“All of our journeys are shaped, in part, by people in our lives who love us, who believe in us, and who invest in us ... mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and uncles, caregivers, mentors and others ... we know that education is a family affair. It's a community affair, particularly when it comes to educating young women. It's about fathers who ask, “Why should my son go to school, and not my daughter?” It's about the grandmother who makes sure her granddaughter is dressed, fed, hair-braided, and out the door in time for school. It's about the mother who works long hours, maybe an extra job, so that her daughter can attend university and have opportunities that she never dreamed of. So to all of the family members and the loved ones who are here today, please make no mistake about it, that these young women are here today because of you, and who they will become in the future is because of you.”

Let me repeat those last words: **“Who they will become in the future is because of you.”**

That is a big challenge, but one that we all face, whether we are parents, teachers, community leaders, or just in a position to lend a helping hand. It takes more than just disapproving of discrimination. It takes action.

We all have to make thoughtful, deliberate choices to be allies, mentors, and positive role models who respect, protect, and encourage girls and young women, who take them seriously as the precious resource for this country's future that they are, who see their potential, and engage it.