

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the First Lady

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REMARKS BY THE FIRST LADY
AT WORLD INNOVATION SUMMIT FOR EDUCATION
ON LET GIRLS LEARN: EDUCATING ADOLESCENT GIRLS WORLDWIDE

Qatar National Convention Center
Doha, Qatar

9:35 A.M. AST

MRS. OBAMA: Thank you so much, Michal. Good morning, everyone. It is truly a pleasure and an honor to be here today for this year's World Innovation Summit for Education.

I want to start by congratulating Dr. Yacoobi on winning the 2015 WISE Prize for Education. That is such a tremendous honor, and we are all incredibly inspired by the work that you do and will continue to do. Thank you. Thank you so much. And congratulations. (Applause.)

I also want to recognize Her Highness, Sheikha Moza, for her outstanding work on behalf of women and children here in Qatar and around the world. (Applause.) The fact that two-thirds of university students in Qatar and nearly 40 percent of the Qatari workforce are women is no accident -- it is due in large part to her leadership. And I had the pleasure -- absolutely. (Applause.) And I had the pleasure of meeting with Her Highness yesterday, and I very much look forward to working with her and her Education Above All Foundation to help more children -- particularly adolescent girls -- in communities across the globe make that critical transition from primary to secondary education. (Applause.)

And most of all, I want to thank all of you. Your governments and organizations are improving education for millions of children. Your research and advocacy are transforming how we educate our next generation. And while you come to the issue of education from so many different perspectives, you're all doing this work for one simple

reason: because like me, you believe that every child on this planet deserves the chance to fulfill their boundless potential.

And that's why I wanted to be here at this important global summit, a gathering focused on impact and inclusive growth. Because we all know that right now, we are far from achieving the goal. And that's what I want to talk with you about today, especially as it relates to a topic that I care deeply about, and that is girls' education around the world.

Now, you all are familiar with the statistics -- how right now, 62 million girls worldwide are not in school. And while every developing region in the world has achieved or is close to achieving gender parity in primary education, when it comes to secondary education, girls still lag far behind.

And when girls do attend secondary school, they often do so at great risk -- as we saw in Pakistan, where Malala Yousafzai was shot in the head by Taliban gunmen; and in Nigeria, where more than 200 girls were kidnapped from their school dormitory by Boko Haram terrorists; and in countries across the globe where adolescent girls have been harassed, sexually assaulted, or doused with acid on their way to school. And even when girls do manage to finish secondary school -- even university -- in many countries, they graduate only to find that there's no place for them in the workforce, nowhere for them to use the skills they've worked so hard to develop.

So I think we can all agree that we need to make dramatic new investments in girls' education. We need to build more schools, hire more teachers for girls. We need to provide safe transportation and bathroom facilities and hygiene products for girls. We need to connect them with technology, with training for high-tech jobs.

And I know that many of you are already doing this kind of work, as am I. As First Lady of the United States, I've been working with leaders across the globe to spur new investments in girls' education. And these investments are absolutely critical, but if we're being honest with ourselves, I think we have to admit that these investments alone simply are not enough.

See, I don't think it's an accident that we've reached gender parity in primary but not secondary education. Because when girls are young, they're often seen simply as children. But when they hit adolescence and start to develop

into women, and are suddenly subject to all of their societies' biases around gender, that is precisely when they start to fall behind in their education.

So, yes, solving our girls' education crisis is definitely about resources, but it is also about attitudes and beliefs. It's about whether parents think their daughters are as worthy of an education as their sons. It's about whether our societies cling to outdated laws and traditions that oppress and exclude women, or whether their view of women are, as full citizens, entitled to equal rights.

So today, I want to talk with you not just as experts in your governments and organizations, but as thought-leaders and opinion-shapers in your countries. Because if we truly want to get girls into our classrooms, then we need to have an honest conversation about how we view and treat women in our societies -- and this conversation needs to happen in every country on this planet, including my own.

You see, I say this as someone whose country has undergone a long and difficult struggle for women's equality -- a struggle that is still going on today. When my grandmother was born, women couldn't vote. When my mother was a young wife, women couldn't open credit cards in their own name; they needed their husband's permission. And when it came to education, their options were very limited.

Back then, girls were discouraged from studying subjects like math and science and from pursuing professions like law and business and medicine. In fact, just 50 years ago, there were so few women at Harvard University's Law School that some professors used to have what they called "Ladies Day." That was the one day a year when they would actually call on the women in their classes.

So back when I was a girl, even though I was bright and curious and I had plenty of opinions of my own, people were often more interested in hearing what my brother had to say. And my parents didn't have much money; neither of them had a university degree. So when I got to school, I sometimes encountered teachers who assumed that a girl like me wouldn't be a good student. I was even told that I would never be admitted to a prestigious university, so I shouldn't even bother to apply.

Like so many girls across the globe, I got the message that I shouldn't take up too much space in this world. That I should speak softly and rarely. That I should have modest ambitions for my future. That I should do what I was told and not ask too many questions. But I was lucky, because I had parents who believed in me, who had big dreams for me. They told me, don't ever listen to those who doubt you. They said, just work harder to prove them wrong.

And that's what I did. I went to school. I worked hard. I got good grades. I got accepted to top universities. I went on to become a lawyer, a city government employee, a hospital executive, and -- the most important job I've ever had -- a mother to two beautiful girls. (Applause.)

And as I moved forward, so did my country. In each generation, brave women and men fought to end gender discrimination in the workplace, to pass tougher laws against rape and domestic abuse, to ensure equal access to education for women. And while we still have work to do to achieve full economic, political equality for women in the U.S., today, nearly 60 percent of American university students are women. And as for the law school at Harvard University -- which I actually got my law degree -- the Dean of the school is now a woman, as are half the students.

So I know from my own experience, and that of my country, that we cannot separate the issue of how we educate girls from the issue of how we treat women more broadly in our societies. So I would argue that the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals that you all will be discussing -- goals like ensuring "inclusive and equitable quality education" and achieving "gender equality and empowering all women and girls" -- those goals cannot be achieved separately. I would argue that we cannot address our girls' education crisis until we address the cultural norms and practices that devalue women's intelligence, that silence their voices, that limit their ambitions.

So, yes, we need to provide girls with safe transportation to school, but we also need to confront the cultural norms that make girls unsafe in the first place -- the belief that survivors of rape were somehow asking for it, or that it's perfectly acceptable for a man to rape his wife, or that young girls who have survived sexual assault are somehow damaged

goods, unfit for marriage, when -- with few prospects for their futures.

Because if we truly want to keep girls safe, we need to transform this culture of impunity into a culture of consent. And we need to condemn sexual assault for what it is: a violent crime that has no place in this world.

And, yes, we need to provide school bathrooms and feminine hygiene products for our girls, but we also need to confront the taboos that say menstruation is harmful or shameful. We need to confront the myths about women's sexuality that are used to justify horrific practices like genital mutilation and cutting. Because if we truly want to empower girls to learn, then we need to ensure that their bodies are a source of pride, not pain or shame. (Applause.)

And, yes, we need to help parents afford school fees and uniforms and supplies for their daughters, but we also need to ensure that once they're educated, women can join the workforce and support their families. Because that's how we'll persuade parents that education is a better investment than forcing their daughters into early marriage or consigning them to household labor. And that's how we'll ensure that girls are valued not just for their bodies, but for their minds, for their talents and skills and ideas.

And make no mistake about it, these changes need to happen at every level of our societies -- in parliaments, and boardrooms, and courtrooms, but also in homes and in schools in big cities and remote villages across the globe. That's why, earlier this year, the United States government launched Let Girls Learn. It's a new initiative to help adolescent girls worldwide go to school.

Through Let Girls Learn, we're investing in girls' education in conflict zones because we know that girls in these areas are twice as likely to be out of secondary school. We're funding programs that address poverty, HIV and other issues that keep girls from being educated. And we're supporting hundreds of new, hyper-local girls' education projects -- projects that are driven by community leaders, parents and the girls themselves -- things like girls' mentoring and leadership camps that they help run, new school bathrooms and libraries that they build.

Because we know that ultimately, that is the only way to change hearts and minds -- by empowering local leaders, by training local educators, by inspiring new conversations with families about the value of investing in their daughters.

And in my travels around the world, I have seen firsthand that when families and communities make those investments, girls thrive. I've met so many girls who wake up before dawn, who travel for hours to attend a school -- bare concrete classrooms with nothing but a few rickety desks and some faded posters on the wall. Let me tell you, those girls, oh, they're so hungry to learn. They're reading every book they can get their hands on. They're studying for hours every night. They're raising their hands so hard in class that they almost fall off their chairs.

And when we truly start to value their minds and respect their bodies and give them the education they need to fulfill their potential, that doesn't just transform their lives, it transforms their families and their countries too. The research is crystal clear: girls who are educated marry later, have lower rates of infant mortality. They're more likely to immunize their children; less likely to contract malaria and HIV. Girls who are educated also earn higher salaries -- 15 to 25 percent for each additional year of secondary school. And studies have shown that sending more girls to school and into the workforce can boost an entire country's GDP.

And I really want to emphasize that last point about bringing women into the workforce. This is critical for countries around the world -- including my own -- that seek to modernize their workforces for the information age. Because let's be clear: A country cannot successfully make this transition if it disregards the talent and potential of half its citizens.

And we cannot build a modern workforce with outdated laws and attitudes that keep women from entering and thriving in our workplaces. We're actually dealing with this issue in the U.S., where too many women still struggle to balance the needs of their family with the demands of their careers. We still struggle with outdated beliefs that a woman cannot be both an accomplished professional and a devoted mother; that she has to choose between the two.

But fortunately, in recent years, more and more men have been challenging this belief. Because the constraints we put on

women limit men too. It turns out that many men want more time with their families. They want their wives to be fulfilled at their jobs. They want their daughters to have the same career opportunities as their sons. That is why we must embrace the truth that issues like girls' education and workplace equality have never been and will never be just women's issues.

So today, to all of the men here, I want to be very clear: We need you. Yes, we need you. (Applause.) As fathers, as husbands, and simply as human beings, this is your struggle too. We need you to speak out against laws and beliefs that harm women. We need you to ask hard questions in your workplace, like where are the women? Why aren't there more women in leadership roles here? Why don't we provide more maternity leave, even paternity leave?

We need you to push other men to hold the same dreams for their daughters as they do for their sons. And we need all of you, men and women, to really think about the needs of women and girls with every program you create, with every policy you craft, with every project you undertake. And you can start right now, right here at this summit.

For example, if you attend the session on conflict zones, ask about issues like sexual assault and forced child marriage. In the session on teacher quality, ask whether we have enough female teachers in our schools. If you're in the sessions on higher education or the skills gap, ask how we can help girls actually use their education in the workforce.

And when you return home after this summit, I hope you will keep on asking those questions and seeking new answers in your organizations. And I hope you'll urge your governments to increase investments in girls' education and to change laws and policies that limit women's rights and freedoms.

Through Let Girls Learn, countries like Japan, the U.K. and South Korea have already committed hundreds of millions of dollars to send girls to school. And last month, we announced major new investments in girls' education in Pakistan. And we need more countries here in the Middle East and across the globe to join us in these efforts.

Because we know what's possible when we empower women and girls and give them the opportunities to develop their promise. We see it in the story of women like Farah Mallah from Jordan, who's here as part of this year's Learners' Voice

Cohort. Farrah earned her degree here in Qatar from Georgetown University, but she wasn't content just to get her own education; she also spent countless hours recruiting classmates to join her in teaching English to migrant workers on campus and integrating them into their community.

We see the power of education in the story of Varsha Thebo, who's also here through the Learners' Voice Cohort. Varsha grew up in a rural area in Pakistan where the local schools were often abandoned. But she studied hard. She earned a scholarship to university. With that education, Varsha founded a study circle for girls in her village. She's helping girls in Cambodia write their stories. She's working on public health issues across the globe. And she's planning to pursue a master's degree in education policy.

These stories are everywhere. And that story about the transformative power of education, that's my story. It's my family's story. And I'm sure that for many of you, it's your story too.

My education opened up opportunities that I never could have dreamed of as a young black girl from a working-class family in a big American city. My university degrees transported me to places I never could have imagined -- to boardrooms and courtrooms, to the White House -- where my mother now lives with our family -- and we're raising our daughters just steps from the Oval Office. (Applause.)

This is such a long way from the tiny apartment where I was raised. But that's the thing about education -- it can carry our children such great distances, and bring the most impossible dreams within their reach.

So I hope you all will keep working as hard as you can to educate every child on this planet. I hope you will keep innovating to achieve the impact and sustainable growth that we all seek. Because if we do, I am confident that we can give all of our children -- boys and girls, kids from every background -- a future worthy of their talents and their dreams.

Thank you all so much. (Applause.)