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Barack Obama

Congressional Black Caucus Phoenix Awards Dinner Address

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Hello CBC!

I guess I get the -- the fancier lectern here. Everybody please have a seat. Have a seat. I know it's late. You're ready for the after parties. I should have ditched the speech and brought my playlist. Everybody looks beautiful, handsome, wonderful. Thank you, Don, for that introduction. Thank you to the CBC Foundation. And thank you to the members of the CBC.

On the challenges of our times, from giving workers a raise to getting families health coverage; on the threats of our time, from climate change to nuclear proliferation -- members of the CBC have been leaders moving America forward. With your help, our businesses have created over 13 million new jobs. With your help, we've covered more than 16 million Americans with health insurance -- many for the first time. Three years ago, Republicans said they'd get the unemployment rate down to 6 percent by 2017. It's down to 5.1 right now. You didn't hear much about that at the debate on Monday -- on Wednesday night.



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The point is, though, none of this progress would have been possible without the CBC taking tough votes when it mattered most. Whatever I've accomplished, the CBC has been there. I was proud to be a CBC member when I was in the Senate, and I'm proud to be your partner today. But we're not here just to celebrate -- we're here to keep going. Because with the unemployment rate for African Americans still more than double than whites, with millions of families still working hard and still waiting to feel the recovery in their own lives, we know that the promise of this nation -- where every single American, regardless of the circumstances in which they were born, regardless of what they look like, where they come from, has the chance to succeed -- that promise is not yet fulfilled.

The good thing about America -- the great project of America is that perfecting our union is never finished. We've always got more work to do. And tonight's honorees remind us of that. They remind us of the courage and sacrifices, the work that they've done -- and not just at the national level, but in local communities all across the country. We couldn't be prouder of them. The heroes of the Civil Rights Movement whom we lost last month remind us of the work that remains to be done. American heroes like Louis Stokes, and Julian Bond, and Amelia Boynton Robinson.

Ms. Robinson -- as some of you know, earlier this year, my family and I joined many in Selma for the 50th anniversary of that march. And as we crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, I held Ms. Amelia's hand. And I thought about her and all the extraordinary women like her who were really the life force of the movement. Women were the foot soldiers. Women strategized boycotts. Women organized marches. Even if they weren't allowed to run the civil rights organizations on paper, behind the scenes they were the thinkers and the doers making things happen each and every day -- doing the work that nobody else wanted to do. They couldn't prophesize from the pulpits, but they led the charge from the pews. They were no strangers to violence. They were on the front lines. So often they were subject to abuse, dehumanized, but kept on going, holding families together. Mothers were beaten and gassed on Bloody Sunday. Four little girls were murdered in a Birmingham church. Women made the movement happen.

Of course, black women have been a part of every great movement in American history -- even if they weren't always given a voice. They helped plan the March on Washington, but were almost entirely absent from the program. And when pressed, male organizers added a tribute highlighting six women -- none of them who were asked to make a speech. Daisy Bates introduced her fellow honorees in just 142 words, written by a man. Of course, Marian Anderson and Mahalia Jackson sang. But in a three-hour program, the men gave women just 142 words. That may sound familiar to some of the women in the room here tonight. The organizers even insisted on two separate parades -- male leaders marching along the main route on Pennsylvania Avenue, and leaders like Dorothy Height and Rosa Parks relegated to Independence Avenue. America's most important march against segregation had its own version of separation.



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Black women were central in the fight for women's rights, from suffrage to the feminist movement -- and yet despite their leadership, too often they were also marginalized. But they didn't give up, they didn't let up. They were too fierce for that. Black women have always understood the words of Pauli Murray -- that "Hope is a song in a weary throat."

It's thanks to black women that we've come a long way since the days when a girl like Ruby Bridges couldn't go to school. When a woman like Amelia couldn't cast her vote. When we didn't have a Congressional Black Caucus -- and its 20 women members.

So I'm focusing on women tonight because I want them to know how much we appreciate them, how much we admire them, how much we love them. And I want to talk about what more we have to do to provide full opportunity and equality for our black women and girls in America today.

Because all of us are beneficiaries of a long line of strong black women who helped carry this country forward. Their work to expand civil rights opened the doors of opportunity, not just for African Americans but for all women, for all of us -- black and white, Latino and Asian, LGBT and straight, for our First Americans and our newest Americans. And their contributions in every field -- as scientists and entrepreneurs, educators, explorers -- all made us stronger. Of course, they're also a majority of my household. So I care deeply about how they're doing.

The good news is, despite structural barriers of race and gender, women and girls of color have made real progress in recent years. The number of black women-owned businesses has skyrocketed. Black women have ascended the ranks of every industry. Teen pregnancy rates among girls of color are down, while high school and four-year college graduation rates are up. That's good news.

But there's no denying that black women and girls still face real and persistent challenges. The unemployment rate is over 8 percent for black women. And they're overrepresented in low-paying jobs; underrepresented in management. They often lack access to economic necessities like paid leave and quality, affordable child care. They often don't get the same quality health care that they need, and have higher rates of certain chronic diseases -- although that's starting to change with Obamacare. It's working, by the way, people. Just in case -- just in case you needed to know.

And then there are some of the challenges that are harder to see and harder to talk about -- although Michelle, our outstanding, beautiful First Lady talks about these struggles. Michelle will tell stories about when she was younger, people telling her she shouldn't aspire to go to the very best universities. And she found herself thinking sometimes, "Well, maybe they're right." Even after she earned two degrees from some of the best universities in America, she still faced the doubts that were rooted in deep social prejudice and stereotypes, worrying whether she was being too assertive, or too angry, or too tall. I like tall women.



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And those stereotypes and social pressures, they still affect our girls. So we all have to be louder than the voices that are telling our girls they're not good enough -- that they've got to look a certain way, or they've got to act a certain way, or set their goals at a certain level.

We've got to affirm their sense of self-worth, and make them feel visible and beautiful, and understood and loved. And I say this as a father who strives to do this at home, but I also say this as a citizen. This is not just about my family or yours; it's about who we are as a people, who we want to be, and how we can make sure that America is fulfilling its promise -- because everybody is getting a chance, and everybody is told they're important, and everybody is given opportunity. And we got to do more than just say we care, or say we put a woman on ten-dollar bill, although that's a good idea. We've got to make sure they're getting some ten-dollar bills; that they're getting paid properly. We've got to let our actions do the talking.

It is an affront to the very idea of America when certain segments of our population don't have access to the same opportunities as everybody else. It makes a mockery of our economy when black women make 30 fewer cents for every dollar a white man earns. That adds up to thousands of dollars in missed income that determines whether a family can pay for a home, or pay for college for their kids, or save for retirement, or give their kids a better life. And that's not just a woman's issue, that's everybody's issue. I want Michelle getting paid at some point. We've got an outstanding former Secretary of State here who is also former First Lady, and I know she can relate to Michelle when she says, how come you get paid and I don't? How did that work?

When women of color aren't given the opportunity to live up to their God-given potential, we all lose out on their talents; we're not as good a country as we can be. We might miss out on the next Mae Jemison or Ursula Burns or Serena Williams or Michelle Obama. We want everybody to be on the field. We can't afford to leave some folks off the field.

So we're going to have to close those economic gaps so that hardworking women of all races, and black women in particular can support families, and strengthen communities, and contribute to our country's success. So that's why my administration is investing in job training and apprenticeships, to help everybody, but particularly help more women earn better-paying jobs, and particularly in non-traditional careers. It's why we're investing in getting more girls, and particularly girls of color interested in STEM fields -- math and science and engineering -- and help more of them stay on track in school.

It's why we're going to continue to fight to eliminate the pay gap. Equal pay for equal work.

It's an all-American idea. It's very simple. And that's why we're going to keep working to raise the minimum wage -- because women disproportionately are the ones who are not getting paid what they're worth. That's why we're fighting to expand tax credits that help working parents make ends meet, closing tax loopholes for folks who don't need tax loopholes to pay for.



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It's why we're expanding paid leave to employees of federal contractors. And that's why Congress needs to expand paid leave for more hardworking Americans. It's good for our economy. It's the right thing to do. No family should have to choose between taking care of a sick child or losing their job.

And just as an aside, what's not the right thing to do, what makes no sense at all, is Congress threatening to shut down the entire federal government if they can't shut down women's access to Planned Parenthood. That's not a good idea. Congress should be working on investing things that grow our economy and expand opportunity, and not get distracted and inflict the kind of self-inflicted wounds that we've seen before on our economy. So that's some of the things we need to do to help improve the economic standing of all women; to help all families feel more secure in a changing economy.

And before I go tonight, I also want to say something about a topic that's been on my mind for a while, another profound barrier to opportunity in too many communities -- and that is our criminal justice system.

I spoke about this at length earlier this year at the NAACP, and I explained the long history of inequity in our criminal justice system. We all know the statistics. And this summer, because I wanted to highlight that there were human beings behind these statistics, I visited a prison in Oklahoma -- the first President to ever visit a federal prison. And I sat down with the inmates, and I listened to their stories. And one of the things that struck me was the crushing burden their incarceration has placed not just on their prospects for the future, but also for their families, the women in their lives, children being raised without a father in the home; the crushing regret these men felt over the children that they left behind.

Mass incarceration rips apart families. It hollows out neighborhoods. It perpetuates poverty. We understand that in many of our communities, they're under-policed. The problem is not that we don't want active, effective police work. We want, and admire, and appreciate law enforcement. We want them in our communities. Crime hurts the African American community more than anybody. But we want to make sure that it's done well and it's done right, and it's done fairly and it's done smart. And that's why, in the coming months, I'm going to be working with many in Congress and many in the CBC to try to make progress on reform legislation that addresses unjust sentencing laws, and encourages diversion and prevention programs, catches our young people early and tries to put them on a better path, and then helps ex-offenders, after they've done their time, get on the right track. It's the right thing to do for America.

And although in these discussions a lot of my focus has been on African American men and the work we're doing with My Brother's Keeper, we can't forget the impact that the system has on women, as well. The incarceration rate for black women is twice as high as the rate for white women.



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Many women in prison, you come to discover, have been victims of homelessness and domestic violence, and in some cases human trafficking. They've got high rates of mental illness and substance abuse. And many have been sexually assaulted, both before they got to prison and then after they go to prison.

And we don't often talk about how society treats black women and girls before they end up in prison. They're suspended at higher rates than white boys and all other girls. And while boys face the school-to-prison pipeline, a lot of girls are facing a more sinister sexual abuse-to-prison pipeline. Victims of early sexual abuse are more likely to fail in school, which can lead to sexual exploitation, which can lead to prison. So we're focusing on boys, but we're also investing in ways to change the odds for at-risk girls -- to make sure that they are loved and valued, to give them a chance.

And that's why we have to make a collective effort to address violence and abuse against women in all of our communities. In every community, on every campus, we've got to be very clear: Women who have been victims of rape or domestic abuse, who need help, should know that they can count on society and on law enforcement to treat them with love and care and sensitivity, and not skepticism.

I want to repeat -- because somehow this never shows up on Fox News. I want to repeat -- because I've said it a lot, unwaveringly, all the time: Our law enforcement officers do outstanding work in an incredibly difficult and dangerous job. They put their lives on the line for our safety. We appreciate them and we love them. That's why my Task Force on 21st Century Policing made a set of recommendations that I want to see implemented to improve their safety, as well as to make sure that our criminal justice system is being applied fairly.

Officers show uncommon bravery in our communities every single day. They deserve our respect. That includes women in law enforcement. We need more of you, by the way. We've got an outstanding chief law enforcement officer in our Attorney General, Loretta Lynch. We want all our young ladies to see what a great role model she is.

So I just want to repeat, because somehow this never gets on the TV: There is no contradiction between us caring about our law enforcement officers and also making sure that our laws are applied fairly. Do not make this as an either/or proposition. This is a both/and proposition. We want to protect our police officers. We'll do a better job doing it if our communities can feel confident that they are being treated fairly. I hope I'm making that clear. I hope I'm making that clear.

We need to make sure the laws are applied evenly. This is not a new problem. It's just that in recent months, in recent years, suddenly folks have videos and body cameras, and social media, and so it's opened our eyes to these incidents. And many of these incidents are subject to ongoing investigation, so I can't comment on every specific one. But we can't avoid these tough conversations altogether.



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That's not going to help our police officers, the vast majority who do the right thing every day, by just pretending that these things aren't happening. That's not going to help build trust between them and the communities in which they serve.

So these are hard issues, but I'm confident we're going to move forward together for a system that is fairer and more just. We've got good people on both sides of the aisle that are working with law enforcement and local communities to find a better way forward. And as always, change will not happen overnight. It won't be easy. But if our history has taught us anything, it's taught us that when we come together, when we're working with a sense of purpose, when we are listening to one another, when we assume the best in each other rather than the worst, then change happens.

Like every parent, I can't help to see the world increasingly through my daughters' eyes. And on that day, when we were celebrating that incredible march in Selma, I had Ms. Amelia's hand in one of my hands, but Michelle had Sasha's hand, and my mother-in-law had Malia's hand -- and it was a chain across generations. And I thought about all those women who came before us, who risked everything for life and liberty and the pursuit of happiness, so often without notice, so often without fanfare. Their names never made the history books. All those women who cleaned somebody else's house, or looked after somebody else's children, did somebody else's laundry, and then got home and did it again, and then went to church and cooked -- and then they were marching.

And because of them, Michelle could cross that bridge. And because of them, they brought them along, and Malia and Sasha can cross that bridge. And that tells me that if we follow their example, we're going to cross more bridges in the future. If we keep moving forward, hand in hand, God willing, my daughters' children will be able to cross that bridge in an America that's more free, and more just, and more prosperous than the one that we inherited. Your children will, too.

Thank you CBC. God bless you. God bless this country we love.

Thank you.