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Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: Women's Economic Security Town Hall

Fairfax, VA | July 10, 2008

It's great to be back in Virginia today and to have this opportunity to discuss some of the economic challenges women are facing.

Now, I come to this conversation not just as a candidate for President, but as the father of two young daughters who will one day have careers and families of their own. I come to it as a son, a grandson, and a husband who's seen the women in my own life confront so many of these challenges themselves.

Growing up, I saw my mother, a young single mom, put herself through school, and follow her passion for helping others while raising me and my sister. But I also saw how she struggled to provide for us, worrying sometimes about how she'd pay the bills.

I saw my grandmother, who helped raise me, work her way up from a secretary at a bank to become one of the first women bank vice presidents in the state. But I also saw how she ultimately hit a glass ceiling – how men no more qualified than she was kept moving up the corporate ladder ahead of her.

And I've seen my wife, Michelle, the rock of the Obama family, juggle jobs and parenting with more skill and grace than anyone I know. But I've also seen how it tears at her. How sometimes, when she's with the girls, she's worrying about work – and when she's at work, she's worrying about the girls. It's a feeling I share every day – especially these days, when I'm away so much on the campaign trail.

It's something I hear all the time from working parents, especially working women – many of whom are working more than one job to make ends meet.

And then there are the jobs you have once the workday ends: whether it's cleaning the house or paying the bills or buying the groceries, helping with that science project or enforcing those bedtimes. The jobs you don't get paid for, but that hold our families together. Jobs that still, even in the year 2008, far too often fall to women.

But let's be clear: the issues we're talking about today are by no means just women's issues.

When a job doesn't offer family leave, that also hurts men who want to help care for a new baby or an ailing parent. When there's no affordable childcare or afterschool programs, that hurts children who wind up in second rate care, or spending afternoons alone in front of the TV. When women still make just 77 cents for every dollar men make, that doesn't just hurt women, it hurts families who find themselves with less income, and have to work even harder just to get by.

We take it for granted that women are the backbone of our families, but we too often ignore the fact that women are also the backbone of our middle class. And we won't truly have an economy that puts the needs of the middle class first until we ensure that when it comes to pay and benefits at work, women are treated like the equal partners they are.

So you'd think solving these problems would be one of our highest national priorities. But while some politicians in Washington make a lot of noise about family values, when it comes to what people actually need to support their families, and care for their families, and spend time with their families – they get



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awfully quiet, don't they? And year after year, it just gets harder for working parents – especially working women – to make a living while raising their kids. That's why it's time for Washington to change.

Now, Senator McCain is an honorable man, and we all deeply respect his service to our country. But when you look at our records and plans on the economic issues that matter most for women, it becomes very clear that he won't bring the change we need – while I will.

That starts with acknowledging the economic difficulties so many women are facing right now. Senator McCain, however, has said that we've made "great progress" on the economy. And Senator Phil Gramm, a top economic advisor to Senator McCain, just recently said that this is merely "a mental recession." Senator Gramm then deemed the United States – and I quote – "a nation of whiners." This comes after Senator McCain recently admitted that his energy proposals will have mainly "psychological" benefits.

Well, you know, America already has one Dr. Phil. When it comes to the economy, we don't need another.

Let's be clear, when people are struggling with the rising costs of everything from gas to groceries, when we've lost 438,000 jobs over the past six months, when typical families have seen their incomes fall nearly \$1,000 since 2000, this economic downturn isn't in our heads. It isn't whining to ask for more than just psychological relief.

And I think it's time we had a President who doesn't deny our problems – or blame the American people for them – but takes responsibility and provides the leadership to solve them. That's the kind of President I will be.

Senator McCain and I also have a real difference on the issue of equal pay for women.

In 2008, when 62 percent of working women in America earn half – or more than half – of their family's income, you'd think we'd be united in our determination to close the pay gap and ensure women are paid fairly for their work.

But Senator McCain thinks the Supreme Court got it right last year when they handed down a decision making it harder for women to challenge pay discrimination at work. He opposed legislation that I co-sponsored to reverse that decision. He suggested that the reason women don't have equal pay isn't discrimination on the job – it's because they need more education and training.

Well let's be clear: the problem in these kinds of cases isn't that women are somehow unqualified or unprepared for higher-paying positions. The problem is that some employers aren't paying women fairly. The problem is that too many women aren't able to challenge employers who are underpaying them.

And this isn't just an economic issue for millions of Americans and their families. It's a question of who we are as a country – of whether we're going to live up to our values as a nation.

That's why I stood up for equal pay in the Illinois State Senate, and helped pass a law to give 330,000 more women protection from paycheck discrimination. That's why I've been fighting to pass legislation in the Senate, so that employers don't get away with shortchanging hardworking women.

And that's why I'll continue to stand up for equal pay as President. Senator McCain won't – and that's a real difference in this election.

As the son, grandson and husband of hard-working mothers, I also don't accept an America that makes women choose between their kids and their careers.

It's unacceptable that women are denied jobs or promotions because they've got kids at home. It's unacceptable that 22 million working women don't have a single paid sick day. It's unacceptable that millions of working mothers could actually be fired for taking maternity leave – and that 78 percent of workers who have family leave can't afford to take it because it's not paid.

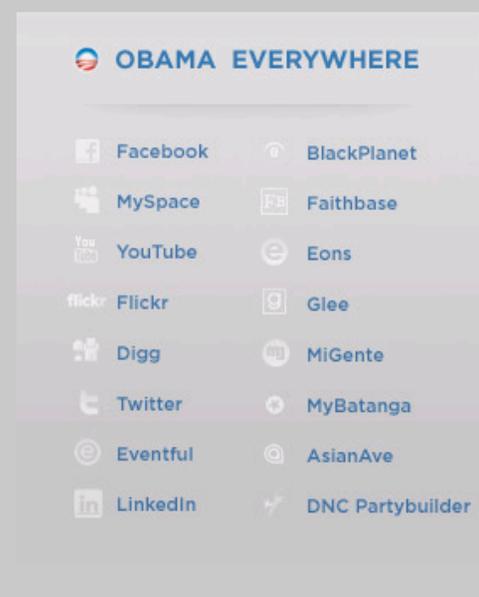
No matter what you do for living – I think we can all agree that raising our children and caring for our loved ones is the most important job we have. And it's time we started making that job a little bit easier, especially for working women.

That means giving folks a hand with childcare – from expanding the childcare tax credit to an additional 7.5 million working moms, to providing afterschool and summer learning opportunities for an additional three million children, to investing \$10 billion to give every child access to quality, affordable early childhood education.

It means dramatically expanding the Family and Medical Leave Act to reach millions of additional workers – and I'll ensure that it doesn't just cover staying home with a new baby, but also lets you take



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leave to care for your elderly parents and participate in school activities like parent-teacher conferences and assemblies.

It means standing up for paid leave – so I'll invest \$1.5 billion to help create paid leave systems across America – and I'll require employers to provide all their workers with at least seven paid sick days a year. Senator McCain has no clear plan to expand paid leave and sick leave – and that's a real difference in this election.

Finally, we've got to do more to help folks at the bottom of the ladder climb into the middle class.

So many working women today are living right on the edge. I met a woman a few weeks ago in New Mexico who told me she works two jobs – at a restaurant and a hair salon – but the last time she saw a doctor was ten years ago, because she didn't have insurance, and couldn't afford an appointment. She later said, "This is a pretty hard life. I just want to figure out how we get out of this box."

When you're working that hard, life shouldn't be that hard. You shouldn't feel trapped.

That's why, while Senator McCain wants to continue the Bush tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans who don't need them and didn't ask for them, I'll pass a tax cut of up to \$1,000 per working family.

And I'll expand the Earned Income Tax Credit so that no one working fulltime winds up living in poverty. That's what I did in the state senate, bringing together Democrats and Republicans to provide more than \$100 million in tax relief for struggling families across Illinois.

Unlike Senator McCain, I'll make sure the minimum wage rises each year to keep up with rising costs – it'll be \$9.50 by 2011, giving 8 million women a well-deserved raise.

Unlike Senator McCain, I'll work as a partner with our unions, because we know that when it comes to standing up for women's rights in the workplace, our unions are second to none – and it's time we starting giving them the support they deserve.

And unlike Senator McCain, I'll make sure every working woman has the chance to not just get by, but get ahead – to save, invest, build a nest egg, and provide a better life for their children. I'll cut the capital gains rate to zero to help women small business owners grow their businesses and create jobs. And for the nearly two-thirds of working women who have no 401(k), I'll provide automatic, portable retirement savings accounts that will help them build up the wealth they need for a secure retirement.

These are the real differences in this election. And my policies add up to real relief for working women. Here in Virginia alone, 2 million working women will get a \$500 tax cut; 215,000 will receive child care assistance; and 200,000 women entrepreneurs won't have to pay any capital gains taxes.

In the end, though, the conversation we're having isn't just about policies and plans. It's also about our most fundamental values – that when you work hard, you should be paid fairly and be able to retire with dignity; that we rise and fall together – and there are no second class citizens in our workplaces; that both work and family should be part of the American Dream.

As hard as it is for me to be away from my own daughters so much, that's what I think about when I have the chance to tuck them in at night. How I want my daughters – and all our daughters – to have no limits on their dreams, no obstacles to their achievement, no opportunities beyond their reach. That's why I'm running for President.

And I hope all of you will join our campaign. I hope you'll help us make calls and knock on doors and sign up today to be a precinct captain and leader in this effort. I can't do it without your help.

Thank you.

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