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Cluster Criticism Analysis

Beyond Promotional: Michelle Obama and the Let Girls Learn Initiative

In March 2015, Michelle Obama and President Barack Obama launched the initiative Let Girls Learn. The new venture collaborates with the Department of State, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Peace Corps, and the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) to enhance already existing programs present to support girls' education, as well as partner with nations across the world to form new educational opportunities for girls ("About Let Girls Learn"). Michelle Obama was the primary public figure of the campaign and visited various countries to promote the initiative and educate the public, not only about difficulties some girls face when attempting to receive a quality education, but also about the need for improvement of perception of the girls' worth at all levels beyond typical culture norms of their reproductive and caretaking abilities. During her visits, Michelle Obama met with country leaders and gave addresses about newly formed partnerships. In each speech, Michelle Obama went beyond promoting the Let Girls Learn initiative and used common structures and rhetoric tactics such as personal narrative, narrative of other girls, and relating equal education for girls as an injustice that affects all genders and nations to stress the need and importance of equal education for girls. In order to truly understand Obama's rhetorical methods used during her Let Girls Learn addresses, cluster criticism will be used to analyze common themes among Obama's three addresses in Tokyo, London, and Madrid. First, however, Michelle Obama's history and experience with girls' education will be addressed, the Let Girls Learn initiative will then be explained in more detail, and the current rates of equality for girls in Madrid, Tokyo, and London will be summarized to enable a better understanding of the topic and rhetoric analyzed.

During the three public addresses regarding the Let Girls Learn initiative in Tokyo, London, and Madrid, Michelle Obama narrates her own story to explain that she has personal experience with overcoming gender barriers to achieve her goals through education. “See, I grew up in a working-class neighborhood, a place where hardly anybody went to University...[a]s a young girl I was bright, outgoing, with plenty of thoughts and opinions of my own, but like a lot of young women, I was often primarily defined by my relationship to the men in my life” (Obama, 2015). While inspirational, this message is better understood when learning about Obama’s upbringing and her accomplishments as a prominent female leader in society.

The First Lady grew up on the South Side of Chicago and worked hard throughout her public school education to be admitted to study at Princeton University. She then continued her education and graduated from Harvard Law School before joining a Chicago based law firm, Sidley & Austin. After her work at the law firm, Obama served as assistant commissioner of planning and development in Chicago’s City Hall, became founding director of the Chicago chapter of Public Allies, worked as Associate Dean of Student Services at the University of Chicago, and was Vice President of Community and External Affairs for the University of Chicago Medical Center (“First Lady Michelle Obama”). As perceived by her education, as well as her history working to help others via her services in the Public Allies Chicago Chapter, the University of Chicago, and the University of Chicago Medical Center, Michelle Obama has always sought to support and inspire others around her; a value which she emphasized during her time as First Lady of the United States. As First Lady, Obama launched the *Let’s Move!* campaign, the Joining Forces initiative with Joe Biden, the Reach Higher campaign, and finally the Let Girls Learn initiative (“First Lady Michelle Obama”). With her previous experience in the workforce, her initiatives seeking to better the wellness, support, and educational benefits of

society, as well as serving as a leader for women around the world, it's no surprise she is invested in equal education for women as she credits her success and inspirational initiatives to her education "...I was able to achieve both personal and professional goals because of my education. My education was truly the starting point for every opportunity I have had in my life" (Obama, 2015). After understanding her personal history of hard work through education to achieve success, the phrases that she uses when narrating her personal experiences of gender inequality are better understood and can be further analyzed in subsequent sections of this cluster criticism.

An understanding of the Let Girls Learn initiative as a whole is also essential to better facilitate analysis. Let Girls Learn is a joint collaboration between the President, First Lady, and government agencies such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of State, the Peace Corps, the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), as well as other countries around the world. Specifically, the Let Girls Learn initiative improves and strengthens structures in place that aid education for girls around the world, such as those established by the USAID, the Department of State, the Peace Corps, and the MCC. The USAID helps to support girls' education by providing safe access to schools, rebuilding education systems, and creating alternative learning programs. The Department of State utilizes diplomacy and public outreach to assist in ensuring that girls have access to secondary education. The Peace Corps identify current barriers girls face when attempting to attend school and help to support projects that overcome these barriers, while supporting girls' education worldwide. Finally, the MCC invests in projects that foster economic growth and maximize opportunities for girls and women worldwide by improving quality and access to education, improving building structures,

training teachers and community leaders, and launching policy reforms (“About Let Girls Learn”).

In addition to partnering with already established government agencies driven to improve equal education for girls worldwide, the Let Girls Learn initiative partners with countries to specifically target and improve educational opportunities and cultural sentiments regarding the value of women globally. Japan was the first country to partner with the initiative in March 2015, stating that they would provide \$340 million toward girls’ empowerment and gender-sensitive education programs. Japan also promised to work with the Peace Corps on educating girls via their Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers. Another new partnership was announced a month later between London and the Let Girls Learn initiative. London officials agreed that the government would provide \$200 million for girl’s camps and community projects around the world, as well as a \$180 million partnership between the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development and the USAID to benefit girls in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. New efforts were also implemented in 2015 in Tanzania, Malawi, and Jordan, as well as a new commitment in coordination with the Pakistan Government to provide \$70 million in new and preexisting programs benefiting girls seeking education. Throughout 2016, the initiative has continued to improve education for girls around the world with an expansion of the Let Girls Learn program to 35 more countries, an investment of \$2.5 billion from the World Bank, and the reveal of a comprehensive strategy showing benefits of investing in adolescent girls’ education with more than five million dollars of commitments in the private sector to help overcome barriers that prevent girls from receiving an education (“Our Progress”). By coordinating with global efforts already in place, the Let Girls Learn initiative has made an impact on girls’ education, and as referenced by their comprehensive plan, will continue to do so.

With a basic understanding of the Let Girls Learn initiative and knowledge of Michelle Obama's background, the content in each of the three addresses will become more clear. However, a basic awareness of standard education conditions for girls in London, Tokyo, and Madrid is also necessary to fully understand why Michelle Obama chose to address audiences in each of these three cities and why she chose such similar phrases in the three speeches.

The first country that the Let Girls Learn initiative partnered with was Japan, and Michelle Obama and the Let Girls Learn initiative team promptly arranged an address for the public announcing the new partnership, while also educating audience members about a need for cultural and structural changes regarding equal education for girls. These changes not only need to occur in developing countries, but also in Japan and the United States, as Michelle Obama addressed in her Tokyo speech, “[a]nd if we’re being honest with ourselves, we have to admit that these kinds of challenges aren’t just limited to the developing world...women in both our countries still struggle to balance the needs of their families with the demands of their careers” (Obama, 2015).

Prior to Michelle Obama's address, Japan consistently struggled with improving gender equality and ranked 101 out of 145 countries with high rates of gender inequality by the World Economic Forum. While Japan's government had attempted to decrease the gender gap by setting goals to increase women held government leadership positions to 30 percent by April 2021, December 2015 surveys showed only 3.5 percent of leadership positions were held by women in the government, forcing the Japanese government to reduce their goal to a more realistic 7 percent (Moritsugu, 2015). Due to persisting gender prejudices shown by a slow rate of improvement of women held leadership government positions, women were still not equal among men in such a developed and prospering country as Japan, and for this reason, Obama

was likely committed to visiting the country and addressing audiences to bring light to gender inequalities that the Let Girls Learn initiative addresses among even developed countries.

A few months after her address in Tokyo, Michelle Obama gave another address to audiences in the United Kingdom. Michelle Obama's address was organized to introduce Julia Gillard, the former Prime Minister of Australia, who was responsible for hosting a question and answer session in which United Kingdom audiences could ask about the benefits of investing in Let Girls Learn to aid in enabling equal education for girls across the globe. In the address, Obama explains that she's visiting London because the girls inspire her. "I'm here because of you. I'm here because girls like you inspire me and impress me every single day. I am so proud of your passion, your diligence...your grit, your determination" (Obama, 2015). While her audience members may undoubtedly inspire her, the United Kingdom could also benefit from the Let Girls Learn initiative, as gender gaps within higher education leadership positions are still prevalent. According to Janet Beer in her address to 17th AUA Annual Lecture attendees, the male to female ratio for higher education enrollment is 1 to 1.08. However, only one in every eight higher education institutions is headed by a woman, despite the increase of enrollment of females in higher education (Beer, "Diversity in Leadership"). While the Let Girls Learn initiative primarily targets adolescent girls rather than women seeking success in higher education positions, the Let Girls Learn initiative also seeks to change stigmas of working women and equalize the "playing field" for all genders stating that "Let Girls Learn is employing a holistic approach to change the perception of the value of girls at the individual, community, and institutional levels..." ("About Let Girls Learn"). Similar to Japan, the United Kingdom is a developed and prosperous country in which many would not assume gender inequalities are prevalent. While the United Kingdom is doing substantially better than the United States and

Japan regarding the gender gap, as reported by the World Economic Forum ranking the United Kingdom as 18th out of 145 countries judged, even the World Economic Forum states that “...all countries can do more to close the gender gap” (“Global Gender Gap Report 2015,” 2015). This prevalent gender gap could be another reason why Obama sought to persuade audience members to realize the importance of equal education for girls in the United Kingdom beyond just “being proud of [their] passion...” (Obama, 2015).

In addition to her addresses in Tokyo and London, Michelle Obama also addressed audiences later in 2016 at the Matedero in Madrid, Spain. Obama states that she is visiting Spain because she had visited Liberia and Morocco earlier in the week and came to Spain to share the stories of struggling girls attempting to receive an education. “And that’s part of the reason why I’m here today in Spain after my visit this week to two countries in Africa, Liberia and Morocco, where many girls struggle every day to get an education. It is my hope that sharing their stories of struggle and triumph will inspire you and young women like you...to advocate for change” (Obama, 2016). Similar to Japan and London, Obama may have had an alternative reason in choosing to visit Spain, as the country also faces a substantial gender gap. As reported by the World Economic Forum, Spain ranked 29th out of 144 countries in 2016 (“Global Gender Gap Report 2016,” 2016). Interestingly, Anton et. al (2015) found that gender gaps are higher in the private sector of Spain versus the public sector, showing an improvement in wage gaps among genders in the public sector, but a greater difference in wages between males and females in the private sector (Anton, et. al., 2015). While the wage gap between genders in the public sector of Spain is improving, the still present dissimilarity in wages among genders in the private sector indicates that equality among men and women still needs improvement, which may serve as

another reason Michelle Obama and the Let Girls Learn initiative chose to visit the country and speak to audiences about equal education opportunities and gender equality across the globe.

With knowledge of Michelle Obama's background, a basic understanding of the Let Girls Learn initiative, and an awareness of gender gap situations in the countries Michelle Obama visited, the similarities among the three addresses in Tokyo, London, and Spain can be better established.

While Michelle Obama visited countries such as Liberia and Morocco in which there is a more common knowledge of gender inequalities, she chose to speak in countries in which gender inequalities are less prominent. In her address in Japan, Spain, and the United Kingdom, Michelle Obama mentions a short narrative of an inspirational girl that she met on her travels that struggles to access school on a daily basis. For example, in her speech in Madrid, Spain she states, "I want you to think about girls like Ralphina, who I met this week in Liberia. Ralphina has to wake up before dawn every morning...[b]ut Ralphina, she still manages to attend her class each day and study for hours each night..." (Obama, 2016). While the First Lady does not specifically mention Ralphina in her other London address, she mentions another inspirational girl, Malala Yousafzai, stating, "[g]irls like Malala Yousafzai who are assaulted, kidnapped, or killed just for trying to learn" (Obama, 2015). Similarly, she also references prominent Japanese female figures in her Tokyo address that would not have had the opportunity to improve Japanese culture without education; "I mean, just think about what we would be missing here in Japan if women were not educated. Just imagine if Sadako Ogata was never able to attend school and become one of the greatest diplomats of our time" (Obama, 2015).

Another common structure used throughout her three addresses is personal narrative and how her education helped her achieve success. In the Tokyo address she offers audiences a

longer narrative describing that she "...was bright, outgoing, with plenty of thoughts and opinions of [her] own...but was often primarily defined by [her] relationship to the men in [her] life" (Obama, 2015). She also states in her Spain address "[her] family didn't have a lot of money, so [she] worked [her] heart out to get [her] degrees" (Obama, 2016). And her United Kingdom speech explains that despite her hard work, she still faced prejudices against her goals "[b]ut despite my efforts, there were still people in my life who told me that I was setting my sights too high; that a girl like me couldn't get into an elite university" (Obama, 2015).

Finally, the third prominent use of repetition among her addresses is her use of relaying to audience members the impact that equal education opportunities, or lack thereof, for girls around the world affect whole communities, nations, even the world. For instance in her Tokyo address she states, "[b]ut when we do educate girls, when we truly invest in their potential, there is no limit to the impact we can have. Girls who attend school have healthier families. They earn higher salaries. And sending more girls to school can boost a country's entire economy" (Obama, 2015). Similarly in her Spain address she states, "[s]ee what we know is that when girls don't go to school, they earn lower salaries...[s]o when girls can't go to school that affects their families' health and the public health of their nations. It can even affect the strength of their economies and the security of their countries...all of that can affect the health, prosperity and security of our countries too" (Obama, 2016). Finally, in her London address Obama says "[a]nd this isn't just a devastating loss for these girls, it's a devastating loss for all of us who are missing out on their promise. One of these girls could have the potential cure to cancer, or start a business that transforms an industry, or become the next president or prime minister who inspires her country" (Obama, 2015).

Though the First Lady's address to Spain audience members in 2016 is more direct in specifically calling audience members to action with a heavier focus on improving cultural stigmas of the roles of women, the three themes of narrating the stories of girls who struggle to receive an education, giving audiences insight into her personal struggles in achieving her goals, and constantly tying the importance of equal education for girls around the world to the betterment of all countries are prevalent in the addresses and extend beyond any slight content differences. These common themes throughout her addresses are necessary because Michelle Obama must inspire audiences, relate to audience members, and prove the importance of the Let Girls Learn initiative. Initially, these methods seem like expected persuasive tactics in motivating the countries to support the Let Girls Learn initiative and communicate the importance of the initiative to others. However, when considering the countries that Michelle Obama is specifically addressing, Japan, Spain, and the United Kingdom, it can be identified that the First Lady is structuring her message to simply persuade audience members that inequality concerning education for girls is an issue at all. For example, when Michelle Obama narrates the stories of girls that she met while on her tour for the Let Girls Learn initiative, she describes stories of girls who struggle to access their school every single day. She does not narrate the story of how these girls are specifically helped by the Let Girls Learn initiative. By only focusing on the struggles that some girls must face rather than how the Let Girls Learn initiative helps them, it can be understood that the purpose of her address is not to promote the Let Girls Learn initiative itself, but to convince the public that gender inequalities are still present, as she is addressing countries in which gender inequalities are less known.

Michelle Obama also uses a similar tactic in describing her own narrative in each of the three addresses. Michelle Obama was a hard working student who achieved her success through

her education. She worked hard in the public school system to gain admittance to Princeton University, and then worked hard in Princeton to enable attendance at Harvard Law School. By narrating bits and pieces of her background in the educational system to audience members, she is demonstrating that even a successful woman such as herself struggled to achieve her goals and needed her education to be able to do so. The focus on her own struggles in overcoming stereotypes and finding success in the workforce via her education is another reminder to audience members that gender inequality is still an issue. Again, with this use of repetition she is not focusing on the Let Girls Learn initiative, but is focusing on the greater cultural issue that the Let Girls Learn initiative seeks to absolve. She is using the Let Girls Learn initiative as an opportunity to expose gender inequalities.

Finally, Michelle Obama remarks to audience members the importance of education for girls as their education affects all areas of the world. Whether that is health, the economy, or even inventing a cure for cancer, these are all impacted by equal education for girls. Stressing how the education of girls around the world can personally affect her audience members, Obama inspires audience members to act as the success of girls around the world enables success for everyone, even in countries in which the gender gap is less stark. With this tactic, she is making her argument personal and is proving to audience members that the current gender inequalities harm all genders and all populations. She is focusing less on how the Let Girls Learn initiative helps, but more on how individuals should realize the negative chain effect that gender inequalities have and, for this reason, should enact change.

The more subtle gender gaps found in Japan, Spain, and the United Kingdom require an address in which audience members realize the negative impact that gender inequalities have on all populations. Michelle Obama's addresses inspire people to enact change via inspirational

stories of women all over the world overcoming barriers with any means necessary and recognizes that gender inequalities are present everywhere, even among the most successful public figures and countries in the world. Michelle Obama also uses the Let Girls Learn initiative, not to promote the initiative itself, but to persuade audience members that education for girls is a major issue facing countries today and that we must work toward equality in the educational system because it is the cornerstone for personal success, economic success, and the success of all countries. Michelle Obama's use of the Let Girls Learn initiative as a public stage to address ever-present gender equalities in our society enables audience members to further critique the meaning behind many seemingly promotional addresses. A promotional address can contain so much more information about the speaker, the situation, and the audience, but in order to do this, one must first learn to look.

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