

Educational Empowerment: Michelle Obama's Advocacy for Girls' Right to Education

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Abstract: Michelle Obama, lawyer, writer, and former First Lady of the United States (2009-2017), has become a role model for women because of her beliefs in universal access to education. She has especially been a staunch defender of human rights and, in particular, of the rights of girls not only to access education, but also to remain in the system to access a university education that guarantees them a future and allows them to be independent. Unfortunately, this permanence in the educational system often entails a struggle against discriminatory social conventions based on gender, which lead girls to abandon their studies and, therefore, be relegated to the domestic-private sphere. In 2015, Michelle Obama and her husband launched *Let Girls Learn* to promote girls' schooling and raise awareness of their need for higher education worldwide.

Keywords: Education, gender, discrimination, rights, inclusion, investment, challenge, moral obligation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Following the disasters that occurred during the Second World War, the United Nations Organization was created in 1945, which later promulgated the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Resolution 217 A (III)) at the General Assembly held in Paris on 10th December 1948. This declaration, in its articles, established equality among all human beings without distinction of sex; therefore, the wording *human beings* referred not only to men or boys, but also to women and girls:

Preamble. [...] Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the *equal rights of men and women* and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom, [...]

Article 1. All human beings are born free and *equal in dignity and rights*. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2. Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. (United Nations 1948).

Considering that the influence of education on human development has evolved, generating significant impact on knowledge and growth, not only cognitive but also on improving people's lives, since the 1940s, it has become part of the agenda of most governments. It has also been emphasized that an educated country enriches not only the individual but also the surrounding society. Therefore, article 26 of this Declaration proclaims the right of education as a human right that must be guaranteed and protected due to its universal value. A right which should not make distinction between men and women; therefore, discrimination should be avoided:

26.2 Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

26.2 Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace (United Nations 1948)

Thus, focusing on children's rights, as early as 1924, the first text legitimating specific rights for

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children, as well as for adults, was signed. It was the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, adopted by the League of Nations, the precursor to the current United Nations. However, while this document represented recognition and social progress, it was not binding on states. Subsequently, the United Nations General Assembly approved the *Declaration of the Rights of the Child* (Resolution 1386 (XIV)) in 1959. Taking the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* as a starting point, it initially aimed to guarantee the general rights of children in a basic declaration consisting of only ten articles that recognized very general fundamental rights. In this sense, its Article 1 dealt with discrimination based on sex, whereas its Article 7 acknowledged the right to education as an indisputable universal right, to which every boy or girl, without distinction, should have the right to access and which should be guaranteed:

Article 1. The child shall enjoy all the rights set forth in this Declaration. Every child, without any exception whatsoever, shall be entitled to these rights, without distinction or discrimination on account of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status, whether of himself or of his family.

Article 7. The child is entitled to receive education, which shall be free and compulsory, at least in the elementary stages. He shall be given an education which will promote his general culture and enable him, on a basis of equal opportunity, to develop his abilities, his individual judgement, and his sense of moral and social responsibility, and to become a useful member of society. [...](OHCHR 1959)

However, given the inadequacy of the text, various world leaders gathered in 1989 to reach a historic agreement adopted the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Resolution 44/25), marking a milestone in the recognition of children's rights and their protection. This international framework not only provided coverage previously unavailable, but also a commitment from countries that had not yet signed the document. As of 2015, 196 countries had ratified and become State Parties to the Convention. Surprisingly, it is interesting to mention, given the case at hand and the dates we refer to, that the United States has not ratified the Convention yet (UNICEF 2015).

On this account, its articles specify the rights of children, in greater detail than in previous conventions, expanding from the ten principles mentioned above to 54 articles detailing, among others, social, economic, and political rights, and in which discrimination based on sex had no place. Therefore, this Convention recognized that both boys and girls are at the same level and all of them, without exception, have the same rights, the same protections, and must be guaranteed equal access to education without discrimination. According to UNICEF, non-discrimination is a key point in this Convention because, as it is stated, "everyone under the age of 18 has all the rights in the Convention" (UNICEF, 2015). Furthermore, it is specified on its website that the word "child" used encompasses both sexes without discrimination based on race, sex, religion, language, abilities, or status (UNICEF, 2015).

Within its articles, it specifically describes who is considered a child in Article 1; Article 2 specifies access to rights without discrimination of any kind, including discrimination based on sex, which is what this article confers; and, finally, Article 28 specifically mentions the right to education and non-discrimination based on sex:

Article 1. For the purposes of the present Convention, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.

Article 2.1. 1. States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status. [...]

Article 28.1. 1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular:

a) Make primary education compulsory and available free to all;

- b) Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need;
- c) Make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means;
- d) Make educational and vocational information and guidance available and accessible to all children;
- e) Take measures to encourage regular attendance at schools and the reduction of drop-out rates. (United Nation, 1989)

Within this international framework for the protection of children, this paper aims to analyse how Michelle Obama's speech tries to promote the idea of universal education for all children. Within her role as First Lady of the United States and as a woman of faith, she encourages and advocates at the institutional level that every child, without exception, must have the right to access education regardless of their origin, status, religion, or sex. Driven by a sense of justice and inclusion, she speaks out so that all girls in the world cannot only exercise their right to attend primary school but also continue their studies up to the university level in order to fully develop culturally, socially, and in the world of work, being competitive with their peers.

Unfortunately, many countries worldwide still do not recognize these rights for half of the population or only grant them access to a basic education. Subsequently, girls are being relegated to the private domestic sphere and deprived of their freedoms. Michelle Obama, in this sense, has been a pioneer in early childhood education, speaking up for those who do not have a voice, and recognizing and advocating for equality between boys and girls in education, development, and subsequent access to professional opportunities in the labour market.

The purpose of this paper is to examine some key research issues. On the one hand, what the objective is behind her words at the World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE) in 2015. On the other hand, why her discourse was so personal and approachable, and

finally, if girls' education has changed in recent years, or on the contrary the situation has worsened.

To be able to provide an answer to these questions, this article is structured as follows: In the Introduction, this article provides the historical context in relation to Human Rights after the Second World War, and, especially, about children and education, paying especial attention to wording. The problem statement begins with the adequacy to use the generalist word "children" to intrinsically and, subsequently, specifically include both boys and girls within the concept. Furthermore, the Analysis section covers Michelle Obama's background in relation to education, the importance of equality and access to this right, and the concept of discrimination which, later in her speech, she will develop. This paper concludes with a summary of her ideas in relation to education, and a comparative approach to how education, especially for girls, remains consistently embedded within the core dynamics of authoritarian governance.

2. MICHELLE OBAMA: THE IMPORTANCE OF EQUALITY IN EDUCATION

Michelle LaVaughn Robinson was born on 17th January 1964 on the South Side of Chicago, even though she also had roots in South Carolina. Fraser and Marian Robinson, her parents, showed both her brother Craig and her the importance of education. Because of her working-class origin, Michelle always remembers something her parents always instilled in her: "nothing in this world cannot be overcome if one puts his or her mind in it" (Bodden, 2010: 19) as well as "to speak their minds and pursue their dreams (Doak, 2014: 7). Her parents also told her that "one way to overcome prejudice was through education" (Doak, 2014: 10)

They appreciated the value of having an education and they encouraged their children to do their best. This is why, according to Paul McCaffrey's book *Michelle Obama: First Lady*, her parents' philosophy was that of being challenged: "If you aren't challenged, you don't make a progress" (McCaffrey 2011: 36), therefore, as Michelle's mother recognised "Michelle rose to the challenge [...] She always wanted to do her best, and I don't think it had anything to do with outdoing someone else. It's within her" (McCaffrey 2011: 37-38); as well as asking questions: "More important, even than learning to read and write was to teach them to think. We told them 'Make sure you respect your teachers, but don't hesitate to question

them” (McCaffrey 2011: 36-37) or “emphasized the importance of asking questions” (Bodden, 2010: 23) as a way of learning and developing critical thinking. Her brother, Craig stated that “our parents emphasized hard work and doing your best, and once you get trained like that, then you get used to it and you don’t want to get anything but As and Bs” (McCaffrey 2011: 37). Therefore, her family valued education significantly, and Michelle Obama has followed all these principles not only throughout her personal and professional life but has also tried to instil them in her daughters as life values.

Some of Michelle's personality traits that have followed her throughout her life are the following. On the one hand, perseverance and competitiveness, i.e., the ability and fortitude to do things well. This was already mentioned in school, and her brother reaffirmed it when he mentioned:

Michelle was a tough competitor [...] they had to let her win enough that she wouldn't quit [...] My sister is a poor sport. She doesn't like to lose. Michelle competitive streak was noticed by her mother as well. “She wanted to do the right thing all the time without being told, and she wanted to do the best at things [...] She liked winning” (McCaffrey 2011: 35)

On the other hand, her sense of fairness and her constant reluctant to injustice followed her throughout her life as well: “If somebody was shoving somebody or being mean, she'd tell them to stop. Michelle always had a strong sense of what was right and wrong, and sometimes she'd be a tattletale”, commented her friend Bryn Mawr (McCaffrey 2011: 37).

In order to understand and outstand this attitude within the historical context of the time in which Michelle Obama was born and raised, it is vitally important to mention that in 1964, the year of her birth, the *Civil Rights Act*¹ was passed in Congress in the United States and signed into law by former President

Lyndon B. Johnson². As early as 1960, the *Fair Housing Act* recognized significant racial discrimination in housing and education. In Chicago, the city where Michael Obama grew up, the system of segregation was visible, although nationally it was no less significant. Thanks to these laws, albeit very slowly, segregation began to be dismantled, paving the way for equal opportunities.

Michelle Obama grew up in this still discriminatory but hopeful environment. She attended Whitney M. Young Magnet High School, where talented and motivated African American students were provided opportunities to achieve their life goals by receiving the best education possible. This was a great opportunity, given the racially mixed school where Michelle worked hard and showed great discipline, as she had to prove her worth as much as the other non-African American students. Her brother remembers her time at the school this way: “I'd come home from basketball, and she'd be working. I'd sit down on the sofa and watch TV; she'd keep working. When I turn off the TV, she's still be working” (McCaffrey 2011: 44); everything to reach her objectives, to better herself, and to prove her validity.

In 1981, she enrolled at Princeton University, where she studied Sociology and African American Studies and graduated with honours in 1985. Her years at this university were complicated in relation to discrimination based on race. Out of the 1,100 students, only 94 were Afro American, which made her think that it was still a difficult period for racial relationship:

I sometimes feel like a visitor on campus, as if I really don't belong [...] Regardless of the circumstances under which I interact with Whites at Princeton, it often seems as if, to them, I will always be Black first and a student second (McCaffrey 2011: 49)

Kowing that she wanted to study law; her senior thesis was based on race. Her *Princeton-Educated Blacks and the Blacks Community* thesis regarded her experience at this institution and highlighted the continuous discrimination still existing. Even though she wanted to continue with her studies, she knew she had to make a choice between integration or segregation; however, she could not reject the

¹After the nationally televised speech given by John F. Kennedy on 6th June 1963 in which he stated the necessity to guarantee equal treatment to every American regardless of their race, in November he was assassinated. However, his proposal, after being passed in the Congress, was signed into law by his predecessor, President Johnson. This Law prohibited discrimination in public places, promoted the integration at schools and made discrimination at work illegal.

²Lyndon B. Johnson was John F. Kennedy's vice president (1961-1963), and after his murder, Johnson became the 36th President of the United States of America (1963-1969)

opportunity the system was providing her, and she was determined to help her community as well.

Michelle later enrolled the prestigious University of Harvard, where she graduated from Harvard Law School in 1988. During her time at Harvard, she again experienced many of the racial issues she had faced before. There was a political academic tension going on around the campus. However, she decided that she was not going to let this get in again and she was going to achieve her aim. Therefore, she started to participate in different political events claiming equality and avoiding discrimination based on race: "She participated in demonstrations to demand that the school admit more minority students and hire more minority professors" (Bodden, 2010: 37). She also joined the *Black Law Students Association*³, the *BlackLetter Law Journal* which addressed minority issues, and helped the *Legal Aid Bureau*, a multiracial association which shared common values, create opportunities to make a better world, and help those in need to pay for an attorney.

In 1988, after graduating, she accepted a full-time job at the Law firm Sidley & Austin where she met Barack Obama, her future husband and 44th President of the United States of America (USA). While working there, she gained reputation, and she was not afraid to get what she wanted, i.e., to change the world. After being working there for a while, and after her father and best friend passed away, Michelle started to reconsider her career. She realised that she wanted to help people, give back to her community, make a difference, and that she would not practice corporate law because she was not finding satisfaction on it. According to Bodden, "she wanted to feel passionate about her job" (Bodden, 2010: 50), hence she decided to work in the public service sector where she could help more people. As a result, she accepted a job as assistant to de mayor of Chicago, Richard M. Daley, from the Democrat party.

On 3rd October 1992, Michelle LaVaughn Robinson got married to Barack Obama, becoming Michelle LaVaughn Robinson Obama. A year later, she changed her job and became the executive director of a non-profit organisation called *Public Allies*, which aimed to prepare young people for leadership roles. She worked there for three years while her husband was starting to

be a recognised advocate and was active in the city's Democratic Party.

In 1996, wanting to be a mother, Michelle Obama joined the University of Chicago, where she established a community service programme. The objective was to recruit students from the university to volunteer in community services around the city. This programme still exists today and continues to provide coverage and help many people in the city of Chicago.

That same year, her husband decided to run for the Senate as a Democrat. Despite his busy schedule as a law professor at the University of Chicago, being in the process of writing and publishing his first book, and Michelle's dislike of the idea, she remained one of his most fervent supporters. She helped him in his campaign and was the image of his sympathies, winning the necessary votes with her participation that would lead Barack Obama to the Senate.

The year 1998 would probably be the most anticipated year of her life, as it marked the birth of her first daughter, Malia Ann. From that moment on, her professional life shifted from full-time to part-time due to her interest in raising her newborn, given that her husband's career and his absence sometimes prevented her from fully returning to her previous professional life.

The year 2000 was also filled with events that would transform not only the professional but also the personal lives of the Obama family. First, Barack Obama wanted to run for Congress; however, he failed in this attempt. Second, the birth of their second daughter, Natasha, meant that Michelle could not be as involved in the campaign and instead dedicated herself to the care and education of their two young daughters. In addition, she was beginning to accept the idea of her husband focusing full-time on his career as a congressman:

It wasn't that I didn't believe in my husband...I always thought, "Well, if I wanted somebody as my state senator, or as my US senator, or as my president, I would want Barack Obama (Doak, 2014: 23)

On November 2004, Barack Obama won the US senator seat, and he had to move to Washinton, however, even though he wanted his family with him there, they did not move to the capital, and Michelle returned full time to her work at University of Chicago

³This association had a social function. Michelle could talk about race freely there.

Hospitals. She got a promotion to vice president and a pay rise. Inside of her, she was starting to feel that, due to her husband's popularity, the running for Presidency was not just an idea but a prediction of her future. Then, in 2007 Barack set up his presidential explanatory committee, and in February 2008, Michelle had to take up a part time job at University of Chicago Hospitals to help her husband with his political campaign.

Education, which she has always considered the foundation of the system based on equality and in which discrimination based on race, sex, religion or status has no place, led her to give a memorable speech within the Democratic Convention that took place in 2008. Thanks to this speech, among other interventions, proposals and convictions of Barack Obama, he won the elections becoming the first president of African descent in the United States of America and, consequently, Michelle Obama became the First Lady of the country.

3. SPEECH AT THE WORLD INNOVATION SUMMIT FOR EDUCATION (WISE), 2015

Education as a personal, familiar, and social life project has been one of the pillars the American first lady focused on during Barack Obama's presidency from 2009 to 2017, believing that a country cannot function and develop without a quality education that guarantees access for all, regardless of race, sex, religion, status, among others. However, one of the issues she placed most emphasis on within and outside her country's borders was girls' education.

To address this issue and attempt to provide feasible solutions, Michelle Obama and her husband created the *Let Girls Learn* programme in March 2015⁴. The fundamental objective is to provide initiatives and financial support for the challenge of educating girls around the world. This program provides quality primary, secondary, and university education⁵ that will open the doors to the world of work and allow them to develop as women on equal terms.

With the intention of presenting her programme and raising awareness of the need to recognize this social scourge, Michel Obama attended the World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE), which took place from 3rd to 5th November 2015, in Qatar. Her opening speech at the conference is worth highlighting, as the messages promoted by the first lady did not go unnoticed by those present in the Middle Eastern country, nor did they go unnoticed internationally.

As protocol dictates, Michelle Obama began her message⁶ by thanking those present for the invitation to the event and the opportunity to address them on such important topics as education, because all of them, her included "believe that every child on this planet deserves the chance to fulfil their boundless potential" (lines 20-22). Therefore, learning stands are the pillar of human growth, offering individuals crucial skills and understanding throughout their existence. This powerful process reaches beyond academic institutions to build character and unlock potential. Education nurtures reasoning abilities, imaginative thinking, and wonder while preparing people for life's obstacles and possibilities. Continuous intellectual development from early life to maturity enriches personal satisfaction and promotes social evolution.

For this reason, Michelle Obama focuses her presentation on girls' education around the world, a topic that deeply concerns her, since girls are the ones who suffer the consequences of the system. She explains how, according to statistics, "62 million girls worldwide are not in school" (lines 27-28). Considering the UNESCO Convention Against Discrimination in Education (CADE) (1960), which entered into force in May 1962, it prohibits discrimination in all forms, including by gender, and addresses discrimination both in access to and quality of education recalling the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In this regard, she explains how, fortunately, gender parity has almost been achieved in primary school, while much remains to be done in secondary or higher education.⁷

⁴<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/photos-and-video/video/2015/03/03/president-and-first-lady-launch-let-girls-learn-initiative> (Accessed 21st August 2025)

⁵"[...] includes investments of more than \$1 billion dollars in new and ongoing programming by the U.S. Government in more than 50 countries, and has established nearly 100 private sector partnerships to promote adolescent girls' education around the world." <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/10/11/fact-sheet-let-girls-learn-comprehensive-investment-adolescent-girls> (Accessed 23th August 2025)

⁶The text used in this article can be found in <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/11/04/remarks-first-lady-world-innovation-summit-education-let-girls-learn>. Where analysis is undertaken, this author will employ this document as the principal source, referring to its lines. However, her full speech can also be seen in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Y7oQk_zm1M or find a summary written by the Atlantic on <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/11/girls-education-michelle-obama/413554/>

⁷In 2025, ten years after this speech, the situation has not substantially improved. According to UNICEF, "Despite a 39 per cent decrease in out-of-school girls in the last 20 years, 122 million girls remain out of school globally. Adolescent girls aged 15-19 in South Asia are three times more likely than

However, girls who have the opportunity to attend secondary school unfortunately run worrying risks, often putting their lives in danger. While secondary education should be a right that develops intellectually and cognitively, allowing them to enrich themselves culturally and later face adult life, many girls, simply for attending secondary school, find social exclusion, are undervalued, or lose their lives along the way. In this regard, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which entered into force in 1981, is a base for Obama's message of inclusion and promotion of gender equality from pre-school to higher technical education⁸. To illustrate it, Michelle Obama highlights recent examples that make those present reflect on the need for collective action on behalf of these girls. To this end, she cites representative examples such as Pakistan and Nigeria.

On the one hand, it is indispensable to remember Malala Yousafzai as an example of resilience and struggle to exercise her right to an education in Pakistan. However, due to Taliban extremism in the region, she was shot in the head in 2012, narrowly missing her survival, simply for defending girls' right to attend school ("La Increíble Historia de Malala, La Niña Que El Talibán No Quería Que Estudiara"⁹ 2013). On the other hand, it is also essential to highlight the case which took place in Nigeria, where more than two hundred girls, aged between sixteen and eighteen, were abducted from their school by the terrorist extremist Islamic group, *Boko Haram*, in April 2014. This jihadist group considers the education these girls were receiving as contrarious to their beliefs. As specified by the CNN reporter Aminu Abubakar in his article *As many as 200 girls abducted by Boko Haram, Nigerian officials say*, they believe that "western education is sin". Fortunately, some of them could escape or were rescued by the military; nonetheless,

others suffer sexual abuse, precarious and slavery conditions, physical violence or they died. According to Samira Daoud from Amnesty International:

Once abducted, most girls were then forcibly married. Child and forced marriage are common practices by Boko Haram, who generally consider girls to be "of age" to marry from early adolescence, or even before. Girls were used in a multitude of ways as "wives", including being made to serve their "husbands" in sexual slavery and domestic servitude. At least 33 survivors of forced marriage told Amnesty International that their "husbands" raped them [...]

These girls, many of them now young women, had their childhood stolen from them and suffered a litany of war crimes, crimes against humanity and other human rights abuses. They are now showing remarkable bravery as they seek to take control of their future (Amnesty International 2024)

In addition, the UN Resolution 69/156, which was described as the "historic resolution on child, early and forced marriage" and adopted in November 2014¹⁰

Urges all States to enact, enforce, and apply laws and policies aimed at preventing and ending child, early, and forced marriage and protecting those at risk, and to ensure that marriage is entered into only with the free, informed, and full consent of the intended spouses.

With this argument, Michelle Obama addresses those present, aware of their passion for education and with a common interest, and emphasizes, with an emphatic "we need", the necessity to invest specifically in girls' education, in building more schools that promote knowledge, in hiring more female teachers to serve as role models in the process and in their technological development, but also, and no less important, in the requirement for privacy for these girls on an intimate-personal level. In this sense, the construction of specific bathrooms for them is the foundation of their privacy, as well as providing them

boys to not be in school, employment or training. [...] Nearly 4 in 10 adolescent girls and young women globally do not complete upper secondary school, with girls from rural poor backgrounds and marginalised communities even less likely to complete schooling. [...] While the number of adolescent girls and young women who are illiterate has nearly halved in the last three decades, nearly 50 million adolescent girls and young women today are unable to read or write a simple sentence. [...] 9 out of 10 adolescent girls and young women in low-income countries do not have access to the internet, while their male peers are twice as likely to be online." <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/press-releases/fast-facts-30-years-uneven-progress-adolescent-girls#:~:text=Nearly%204%20in%2010%20adolescent%20girls%20and%20young,marginalised%20communities%20even%20less%20likely%20to%20complete%20schooling> (Accessed 1st August 2025)

⁸Articles 10, 11 and 13 <https://www.ohchr.org/es/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-elimination-all-forms-discrimination-against-women> (Accessed 28th September 2025)

⁹The Incredible Story of Malala, the Girl the Taliban Didn't Want to Study (translation by the author)

¹⁰<https://www.acnur.org/fileadmin/Documentos/BDL/2015/9953.pdf?view> (Accessed 27th September 2025)

with intimate hygiene products that normalize situations and do not stigmatize them. In this sense, Michelle Obama makes a self-criticism and urges countries to question themselves when she recognizes and highlights the gaps that the system still has in this regard (lines 46-50)

Furthermore, in addition to these shortcomings, the First Lady draws attention to another key point of her speech: social conventions and evolutionary beliefs. It is true to say that in virtually every country in the world in 2015, there was parity in primary school, and boys and girls had a place to go for education; however, it can also be said that, at higher levels, stereotypes, social conventions, and gender discrimination prevent many girls from accessing secondary school and university. According to the article by Nisha Varia, *Ending Child Marriage: Meeting the Global Development Goals' Promise to Girls*:

Roughly one in three girls in the developing world marries before age 18; one in nine marries before turning 15. Human Rights Watch investigations in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Malawi, Nepal, South Sudan, Tanzania, Yemen, and Zimbabwe have found that early marriage has dire life-long consequences—often completely halting or crippling a girl's ability to realize a wide range of human rights. Leaving school early both with tributes to, and results from, marrying young. Other impacts include marital rape, heightened risk of domestic violence, poor access to decent work, exploitation doing unpaid labour, risk of HIV transmission, and a range of health problems due to early childbearing. (Varia 2016:33)

The reasons that lead to girls' educational absenteeism in secondary education are varied. From a gender perspective, their development from girl to woman makes them, as noted, a target for a society that sees child marriage as a solution to its more than likely economic problems. But, beyond that, and taking the Human Rights Watch report as an example and understanding the message launched by Michelle Obama at WISE 2015:

Discriminatory gender norms in many places, including traditions that dictate that a girl lives with her husband's family, while a boy remains with and financially

supports his parents, contributes to perceptions that daughters are an economic burden while sons are a long-term investment. Poor access to quality education is another contributing factor. When schools are too far away, too expensive, or the journey too dangerous, families often pull out their girls or they drop out on their own and are subsequently much more likely to be married off. Even when schools are accessible, teacher absenteeism and poor-quality education can mean that neither girls nor their parents feel it is worth the time or expense. Girls may also be kept out of school because they are expected to work instead—either in the home, or sometimes as paid labour from young ages. (Varia 2016:36)

From all these drawbacks and social conventions mentioned, it can be highlighted that, when she emphatically and strongly mentioned "it's about whether", her message was proclaiming and demanding immersion, inclusion and, above all, the fulfilment of the human rights included in the articles mentioned in the introduction. In addition, she was raising awareness of the deficiencies in the countries' educational systems. Every country, including the USA, should make an internal act of conscience and study whether the treatment that society gives to women is discriminatory based on gender and, more intensely, in girls and in the education sector and access to quality jobs:

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 is, as full citizens, entitled to equal rights. So today, I want to talk to you [...] Because if we truly want to get girls into our classes, 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. (lines 57-66)

The words of profound need for change are being recognized by scholars dedicated to studying the

issues of gender and its development, as Mariam Ouattara, Purna Sen and Marilyn Thomson did in their article *Forced Marriage, Forced Sex: The Perils of Childhood for Girls* where, back in 1998, they included this statement in their conclusion:

If women's rights are to be effective, an assessment of existing traditional laws, and of who creates them and who implements them, should be carried out. This should involve women and girls who are affected by these laws. These assessments should screen the negative and positive effects of customs and practices, and facilitate a process of radical change, which will result in abandoning outdated laws and adopting practices which fit in with modern society. *Ad hoc* interventions are useful for urgent action, but we need long-term solutions, by working continuously on laws and implementation (Ouattara 1998: 32-33)

Other scholars such as Barbara Herz and Gene B. Sperling, in their book *What Works for Girls' Education Evidence and Policies from the Developing World* state that "Increased female education is one of the most powerful tools to empower women within the family and society" (Herz 2004: 5) and, therefore, to reach gender equality; or C. Grown at al who in their book *Seven Priorities, Seven Years to Go: Progress on Achieving Gender Equality* emphasise the idea that unfortunately progress in employment and reproductive health rights are still lagged behind (Grown 2008).

To illustrate all these statements, Michel Obama uses these discrimination situations as an example. Despite being born in the United States, this country has not historically been a country where racial or gender equality has prevailed. Therefore, it can be observed how she identifies two significant stages in her speech that demonstrate these disadvantages of girls compared to boys, of women compared to men, and the power of parents in their belief that their children, regardless of their sex, should have access to a quality education.

First, she refers to her mother and the era in which she lived, stating that, as in so many other developed countries, until well into the 1990s, women depended on their husbands, could not sign contracts without their husbands' consent, were relegated, in most cases, to the private family sphere, and their access to

education was limited. Regarding education, studying subjects or careers traditionally considered masculine was daunting, and access to university was almost non-existent, especially if you belonged to a minority and your social and economic status was substandard.

As for her own experience, as a black woman, she has suffered the inconvenient of a society that, at the time, did not believe in racial and gender equality, inclusion or in universal access to education:

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 [...] 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 the future. That I should do what I was told and not ask too many questions. (Lines 78-88)

Furthermore, she emphasizes that, despite her parents' lack of education, they always instilled in her the spirit of hard work, of fighting for her dreams, of excelling, and of achieving her goals, no matter who questioned her (lines 88-90), since throughout history there have always been women fighting for their rights and men who have supported them in achieving equality, the right to vote, and access to employment (lines 95-98). Therefore, although there is still much to be done, she shows statistics from US universities in which at that time "nearly 60 percent of American university students were women" (lines 99-100) and, specifically, at the prestigious Harvard University, the glass ceiling was beginning to be broken, with the Dean of the Law School being a woman, Mrs. Martha Minow¹¹.

In this regard, Michel Obama, as many scholars have done before him, emphasizes the indisputable

¹¹Martha Minow (1954-) was the 12th Dean of Harvard Law School (2009-2017) and taught at the Law School until 1981. She has been called "one of the world's leading human rights scholars". <https://hls.harvard.edu/faculty/martha-l-minow/> (Accessed 20th August 2025)

need to not separate two remarkable and illustrative aspects of discrimination in girls' access to education. On the one hand, the very fact of guaranteeing girls' access to higher education and how they are educated; and on the other, the way women are treated within society itself. Two elements that go hand in hand if a society wishes to advance inclusion, development, and gender rights. This is why she emphasises the fact that "we cannot address our girls' education crisis until we address the cultural norms and practices that devalue women's intelligence, the silence voices, that limit their ambitions" (Lines 109-111).

This requires a policy that condemns the impunity of perpetrators, transforms social awareness and taboos regarding issues such as the association of menstruation with sin, normalizes the physical and mental development of girls and eliminates their sexual objectification, genital mutilation, and, of course, educates families to eliminate barriers that prevent them from accessing and continuing their education in order to fulfil themselves, progress, and an equitable access to the workforce and to equal jobs (Lines 112-131). Because with these advances and a more open mentality "we'll ensure that girls are valued not just for their bodies, but for their minds, for their talents and skills and ideas" (Lines 131-133). Michelle Obama strongly urges that these changes should begin at all levels of society, and in every country from the largest city to the most remote villages.

As Nelson Mandela once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which we can use to change the world", and honouring this quote, Hertz analyses in his book how, by allowing education at all levels for girls, a country can be more productive, can advance politically, economically and socially and reach levels of equality not seen before because "Girls' education leads to increased income, both for individuals and for nations as a whole. While educating both boys and girls increases productivity and supports the growth of national economies, the education of girls may lead to greater income gains" (Herz 2004: 2-3) such as higher salaries, faster economic growth and more productive farms. Furthermore, this author also states that "women with more education have smaller, healthier, and better educated families (Herz 2004: 4), as Michelle Obama also mentions when she states that societies need a cultural shift.

In order to fulfil everything mentioned, Michelle Obama readdresses her project *Let Girls Learn* as a hope for many girls around the world, an investment for the future that needs to count on the help of local

leaders, families, in short, of men who value their wives and mothers to make them aware that they should invest in their daughters' education because it is a secure value in the development of a country (147-149).

In this sense, societies, especially in developed countries, are changing; the male mentality is also changing in the sense that more men are choosing to take care of their children, wanting to spend more time with their families and giving their daughters the same opportunities as their sons. However, in developing countries or those with fewer economic resources, the cultural shift has yet to occur because the roots of traditions and ancestral visions of gender are still very deep. Therefore, Michelle Obama emphasizes that this is not just a women's issue: "We must embrace the truth that issues like girls' education and workplace equality have never been and will never be just women's issues" (Lines 181-183). She urges those present to reflect on the issue, to take moving questions back to their countries of origin that generate change in women's rights, and to join her project, as other countries have already done. In this sense, it is specifically addressed to Middle Eastern countries, since WISE is being held in Qatar as an opportunity to advance women's rights in those countries.

The American First Lady ends her speech with a message of hope in which all those present can collaborate, continue researching and innovating, in which "our children - boys and girls from every background - can be provided with a future worthy of their talents and their dreams" (Lines 237-239). A message, on her first visit to Qatar on her solo tour of the Middle East, revealing, inspiring and feminist that would go around the world, leaving headlines recognising her passion and dedication to this cause. Headlines like the one provided by the agency EFE in Spain with *El discursofeminista de Michelle Obama en medio del tradicionalismo de Qatar*¹²; the article by Euronews *Michelle Obama ratificasuapoyo a la escolarización en la Cumbre WISE de Qatar*¹³; the article written by the reporter Lesley Walker in DohaNews entitled *Sheikha Moza, Michelle Obama urge collective effort to protect education*; or the article in the Gulf Times *Michelle Obama wants 'honest conversation' on girls' education*, among others.

¹²Michelle Obama's feminist speech amid Qatar's traditionalism (translation by author)

¹³Michelle Obama reaffirms her support for schooling at the WISE Summit in Qatar(translation by author)

Even though Michelle Obama was going to bring her message about education and her *Let Girls Learn* to Doha, Qatar, Amman and Jordan; unfortunately, due to weather conditions such a terrible sandstorm, she could not visit Jordan. Despite her disappointment at not being able to convey her message in Jordan, her work continued. Her dedication to better girls' conditions while accessing and receiving education continued until recent days.

Her message in Qatar had already been delivered in London in June 2015, but the WISE event was paradigmatic on this issue. However, the outcome is evident in her subsequent work, where on International Women's Day in March of the following year, she reiterated that gender inequalities in education are primarily due to "attitudes and beliefs" that keep girls from attending school. Hence, the slogan of her *Let Girls Learn* campaign was "Educating girls changes lives and communities" and provides multigenerational benefits¹⁴.

4. CONCLUSION

Far from understanding that education should be a stage in children's childhood and adolescence, during which their intellectual, cultural, and cognitive development flourish; far from being a stage in which positive memories are ingrained in their memories; and far from being a human right recognized by the United Nations, the significance that education has on their future lives, their behaviour, and how they relate to their peers should not be overlooked or undervalued.

However, neither should people assume that education is something that exists if you just take it because, unfortunately, nowadays, extremist and totalitarian governments view education as something to be suppressed, and even more so when it comes to girls. These governments often lack a sense of gender equality, and at other times, they find it difficult to shake off traditionalist messages that relegate women, both adults and minors, to a secondary, private role, in the shadows within the home where they have no decision-making power, depending on parents, brothers, or husbands, and where they dream of a life they can never have. At other times, when access to education is permitted, the risks to women are infinitely higher than if they were boys. In addition, we also face the social stigma associated with being a woman.

That is why the message delivered by Michelle Obama at the WISE opening conference is a necessary, hopeful, and forward-looking message. An inclusive but also participatory message, i.e., in which women have a place as transmitters, but men are undoubtedly necessary: parents, local leaders, governments, and institutions to break down traditionalist barriers and raise awareness that girls' education at all levels is necessary under equal conditions, as it contributes, in the medium and long term, to a country's political and economic development.

The First Lady of the United States' proposal to unite in Qatar, *Let Girls Learn*, is an innovative suggestion supported by the White House. Her speech in Middle Eastern countries was feminist, inclusive, refreshing, and full of emotion. A message that touches her personally because of her mother's story, her own, and because, as a mother of two girls, she wants them to be able to fulfil their dreams without anyone stopping them. An inspiring message for a generation rising in favour of freedom, and a role model for many women around the world.

A message that did not finish in Qatar or with Barack Obama's presidency in 2017, but continued in 2016 with the World Bank partnership bringing a powerful message to the atrium, with the African trip which took place between July and October 2016, and most importantly with the evolution of such a project into *Girls Opportunity Alliance* – to take action to help primarily adolescent girls and leaders working to educate them – operated through the private Obama Foundation, and therefore, through private philanthropy rather than the previous federal funding.

Even though ten years after this message the geopolitical situation sends us contradictory and unpromising messages, since conflicts such as the War in Ukraine or the already recognized by the UN used starvation as a war crime in Gaza¹⁵; the loss of rights by Afghan women since the United States left Afghanistan in 2004¹⁶; or in Haiti, Sudan, Congo or

¹⁴<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/node/323576> (Accessed 23rd September 2025)

¹⁵40,000 boys and girls reported killed since the beginning of the war, and by 13th August 2025 100 children have died from malnutrition and starvation <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/08/1165643#:~:text=At%20least%20100%20children%20in%20Gaza%20have%20died,enclave%20while%20also%20allowing%20more%20food%20to%20enter.> Also see <https://news.un.org/es/story/2025/08/1540356> (Accessed 25th August 2025)

¹⁶In Afghanistan girls are not allowed to go to school, they must wear the burka, and they have lost many rights. According to UNICEF, 22th March 2025, "[...] If this ban persists until 2030, over four million girls will have been deprived of their rights to education beyond primary school"

Siria, messages like this help raising the voice for the voiceless, primarily minors across both sexes. Therefore, they should be repeated with determination and force to raise awareness that rights can be lost more easily than they are won, that they cannot be taken for granted, and that therefore unity is strength. As Michelle Obama mentioned, and as other leaders, both men and women, have already done, education saves lives; education should be the foundation of a society; in short, education is a human right that must be guaranteed without any sort of exclusion, including discrimination based on gender.

Despite the difficulties of conducting a comparative analysis, the project's foundation in defending human rights, especially those of girls in education, has been highlighted. Supported by the UN, World Bank Alignment, UNESCO, UNICEF, Human Rights Advocates, and Feminist International Relations Theory, some criticisms have been made by other theoretical sectors that highlight its shortcomings. On the one hand, Neo-Colonial Feminism Critique, a precursor to post-colonial feminism, considers that Western-led initiatives perpetuate imperialist culture in the territories and impose Western educational models without considering local culture or teachings. On the other hand, from a Top-Down perspective, they emphasize that, in most cases, communities are not consulted in the design of educational programs and that they reject intrinsic educational values.

Fortunately, this project has the undeniable support of different approaches such as Liberal Feminism—which bases its theory on equality and works to establish an international institutional framework for achieving progress, especially in this regard—and the Human Capability Approach, pioneered by Martha Nussbaum¹⁷ and Amartya Sen. These approaches

<https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/new-school-year-starts-afghanistan-almost-400000-more-girls-deprived-their-right> (Accessed 30th August 2025). Since 2021, the loss of rights for girls and women is increasing. Examples of this growing deprivation of rights are, on the one hand, the Taliban leaders stating in the social network X that "women should cover one eye and see with only one eye, claiming it is based on Sharia law" and <https://deepnewz.com/education/taliban-restrict-afghan-women-to-one-eye-education-ban-persists-afghanistan-last-91017a8> (Accessed 25th August 2025); or, on the other hand, the article written by Sahar Fetrat for Human Rights Watch when she states that "This is part of a larger system Afghan women's rights defenders and United Nations experts call "gender apartheid." Women are forced indoors by being excluded from employment, education, and freedom of movement." <https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/07/27/afghan-women-continue-to-fight-for-bodily-autonomy> (Accessed 29th August 2025) Therefore, girls and women have been exponentially erased from public life and their consideration as human being is banished.

¹⁷Another shortcoming of approaches based on economic growth is that, even when distribution is factored in, they fail to examine aspects of the quality of a human life that are not very well correlated with growth. Research shows clearly that promoting growth does not automatically improve people's

support the project by focusing on the one hand, on the idea that human capabilities can be expanded through education and, on the other, that barriers to development—including gender-based discrimination—slow down or halt this process. Therefore, the awareness and sensitivity conveyed in Michelle Obama's message at WISE allows for the dissemination of projects that, with the participation of those who were present and those listening, will convey and disseminate the positive spirit of taking measures to support the inclusion of girls at all levels of education.

In conclusion, the messages transmitted by the First Lady of the United States in her speech serve as powerful manifestations of both optimism and steadfast resolve in the ongoing campaign to protect human rights. These communications demonstrate a particular commitment to children's rights and, most significantly, to advancing the specific rights and opportunities of girls worldwide. Therefore, it is essential to remember such messages, which serve the vital function of amplifying the voices of those who lack representation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no known financial or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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health, education, opportunities for political participation, or the opportunities of women to protect themselves from rape and domestic violence. So if we want to ask about how Vasanti is doing in an insightful way, we need to determine what she is actually able to do and to be. How have her circumstances, familial, social, and political, affected her ability to enjoy good health? To protect her bodily integrity? To attain an adequate education?" (Nussbaum, 212)

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